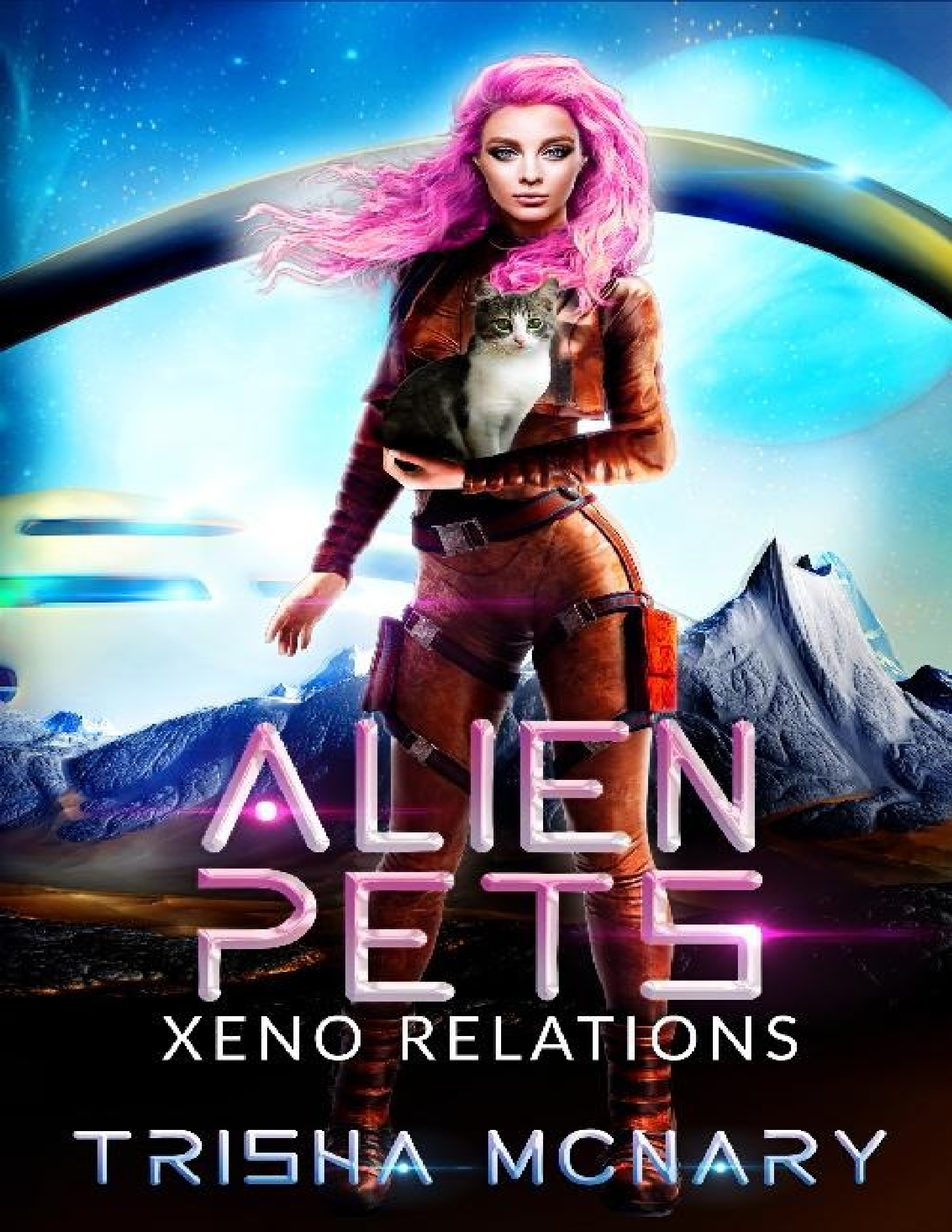




ALIEN PETS

XENO RELATIONS

TRISHA MCNARY

Alien Pets

Xeno Relations

By Trisha McNary

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Formerly, Pets and Masters in Space: Part 1: The First Journey

by Elfa Tordai (a pen name of Trisha McNary)

Cover art by Heather Hamilton-Senter

Includes:

hypnoSnatch, chapter 1

by Trisha McNary

Have Teeth, Will Bite, a cozy vampire mystery, prologue

By LD Marr (a pen name of Trisha McNary)

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Chapter 1

A few short weeks after she graduated from space school, Antaska stood in front of a clear barrier, waiting and hoping to be selected. She held her small gray and white cat Potat in her arms. Energized with excitement and high-strung nerves, Antaska watched the gigantic green alien Verdantes. Crowds of them walked in the curved corridor outside her “viewing room.”

The aliens, Antaska’s prospective employers, looked in at her and the other humans in similar “viewing rooms” built by the Verdantes to suit their purposes. The walls on the sides of her viewing room blocked Antaska from seeing the other humans and which aliens were taking an interest in them.

Now one of the aliens looked at Antaska and paused. The eight-foot-tall giant approached and stopped right in front of her. Antaska looked up to see enormous slanting green eyes staring down at her. Above the eyes, green curly hair covered an enormous cranium. The alien lifted a large six-fingered hand and waved at her. Antaska waved back and smiled.

Maybe I'll be selected already! she thought.

“Grrrr!!” she heard and looked down.

Potat stiffened in her arms. She hissed and spat at the Verdante in front of them.

The big eyes of the alien got bigger.

“Stop that!” Antaska said to Potat. “Shush!”

But the tiny cat wouldn't stop.

"Rrrrrrrrrrrrr!" Potat let out an endless angry meow.

The alien shrugged big shoulders and shook his head. He lifted up his hands as if to say, “What can I do?” and walked away.

Potat stopped meowing and settled back down in Antaska's arms.

“What is wrong with you?” Antaska asked the little cat.

She didn't expect an answer, of course, and she didn't get one.

“Are you crazy? You might have just blown our only chance to go to space! My life’s dream! Don’t you dare do that again.”

Antaska talked out loud to the cat. It was a habit she’d got into. Sometimes, it almost seemed like Potat understood what she was saying.

This had better be one of those times, thought Antaska.

She felt a slight movement and looked down to see the Potat cleaning a snow-white paw.

Antaska looked up. Another alien, this one female, was standing in front of the clear barrier. She wore the same bright blue space suit as the males. But she had a smaller, more delicate feminine body and features. Shiny bright-green hair brushed her shoulders. Large pale green eyes crinkled up as she looked down at Antaska and Potat.

Maybe Potat will like this one better, Antaska thought.

Antaska smiled up at the alien and waved. The female alien waved back and then made signals with her hands. She pointed at herself, then at Antaska and little Potat, and then up toward space.

Antaska nodded and gave her a thumbs up.

Yes! she thought.

“Grrrrr!” Potat started growling.

“Oh no! You bad cat! Not again!” Antaska admonished her.

But the cat paid no attention.

“Reyowwwrrrrroowwwww!” Potat let out her endless howl.

The Verdante female’s smallish mouth formed an “O” shape. She shook her big head from side to side.

“No! No! Stop! Stop!” Antaska pleaded with her cat.

But of course, Potat didn’t listen.

The alien lowered her chin and closed her eyes for a moment. Antaska read that as disappointment. Then the large green female turned and walked away.

Antaska’s hopes took a dive. She turned, walked a few feet back, and plopped down on the couch built into the back wall of the small viewing room.

“Are you trying to stop me from going into space?” Antaska asked Potat as she set her down on the couch.

Potat, now calm and settled, looked up at her with innocent gold eyes.

Maybe cats just aren't adaptable to new things, thought Antaska. Maybe they're just not that intelligent.

A tiny paw reached out and slapped her leg kind of hard.

“That wasn't nice!” Antaska told her.

“Am I going to be stuck on Earth with a crazy cat?” she said out loud to no one in particular.

Potat ignored her and began to take a bath.

Antaska sighed and leaned against the back of the couch. With dimming hope, she watched the large aliens walking past outside her viewing room.

A few minutes later, the nutty cat jumped off the couch and walked to the front of the viewing room. Potat sat down there and watched the Verdantes passing by as if she were the one they might pick. Then she looked back and stared hard at Antaska.

I think she wants me to go over there now, Antaska thought. Or maybe this cat has finally drove me crazy.

Grumbling about the problems with cats, Antaska got off the couch and walked over to Potat. She picked up the tiny cat and whispered in her ear.

“OK. You've got your way once again. As usual. I hope you're happy, whatever you're up too.”

Potat purred back in her ear.



Among the other Verdantes, lanky, thin M. Hoyvil took long strides around the circle of rooms containing Earth humans. It was his second or third time circling around. So many of them! How was he supposed to choose? The humans stood near the front of their viewing containers, watching the passing Verdantes with

wide, round eyes. Except at a few of the containers.

Some have been taken already! Hoyvil thought. *I'd better pick one before they're all gone.*

He walked past an empty spot to the next one where a male human was performing martial arts moves. The red-haired male was stockier than the usual design for space travel, with cool genetically designed tattoos along his arms and chest.

M. Hoyvil stopped in front of the Earth man and watched him. The man smiled and kicked high in the air.

Hmm. It might be fun to have someone to practice fighting with, thought M. Hoyvil. *Of course, it would all have to be pretend. They're so much smaller and weaker and slower. I could easily kill him by accident if I wasn't careful. That wouldn't be good.*

M. Hoyvil stood there watching, trying to decide whether taking this one would be a good idea or not. Out of nowhere, he heard the sound of a small female telepathic voice.

"Here! Over here!" said the voice repeatedly and insistently.

Who's that? he wondered.

He looked around, but there were no female Verdantes close by. And those walking by weren't paying any attention to him at all. They might have been interested in the human male, but they wouldn't approach the container when another Verdante was already there. That rule stopped people from fighting over the same pet.

No. The strange, tiny voice wasn't a Verdante, and it seemed to be coming from the direction of the cube next to him. M. Hoyvil looked over. Now a human female stood there. She held a teeny, tiny gray and white cat in her arms.

Could that Earth female be telepathic? M. Hoyvil wondered. *No. That's not possible.*

M. Hoyvil lost interest in the martial arts man. He walked over to stare at the young woman with the cat. The tiny voice stopped.

Did I really hear that? he wondered.

He shook his big green head. The pink-haired Earth female smiled up at him.

This is the one! M. Hoyvil suddenly knew it for sure without knowing why.

He made the hand signs asking the human if she would like to go up to space with him.

She didn't answer right away. She lifted her cat, stared at it, and talked to it.

Could that cat be sentient? M. Hoyvil wondered. *No. That's not possible either.*

But the young woman seemed to be asking the cat's opinion. The cat leaned toward M. Hoyvil behind the clear barrier and reached out her paws toward him. Then the Earth female nodded her head and gave him a thumbs up.

M. Hoyvil placed his palm on the pad outside her viewing container to select her.

Chapter 2

From the moment she landed the job that would take her away from Earth for the rest of her life, Antaska had been thrilled and excited. Now she felt nervous. She stood at the entrance to the space ship. The door slid silently open. M. Hoyvil, her new employer, stood there. He looked down at her, but he didn't greet her. He didn't smile or change his expression. But his enormous upward-slanted green eyes slanted up even higher.

Hmm. He seemed friendlier when I met him in the viewing room. Was I imagining that? Antaska wondered.

M. Hoyvil stepped back from the door and motioned Antaska inside. Then he turned and took off walking fast. Antaska followed him as fast as she could through the bare, high-ceilinged, curved hallway that circled the space ship's outer rim.

Never once looking back in her direction, M. Hoyvil walked fast, taking huge strides on his much longer legs. Antaska brushed away the pink hair that kept falling across her almond-shaped gray eyes as she rushed after him with high bounding steps on the spongy floor.

She hoped nothing would fall off the floating cart she pulled behind her. All her few possessions were on the cart and also Potat. The small cat was tranquilized and sleeping to protect her from the shock of this drastic change to her living situation.

Antaska walked as fast as she could, but she fell farther and farther behind M. Hoyvil. In the distance, she saw M. Hoyvil stop and open a panel high in the side of an inner wall. Another tall, thin alien male approached him and stopped about five feet away.

In contrast to M. Hoyvil's dark, almost-black green hair, this man's hair was a light lime green shade. Their features were different, but they both had the green skin of their species. They looked kind of like Earth humans. But the tops of

their heads were bigger in proportion to the rest—faces with large foreheads and huge eyes that narrowed down to pointed chins.

As Antaska walked toward the two men, she slowed her pace. Her eyes grew large and round with a curiosity that went unnoticed.

M. Hoyvil stopped what he was doing. He turned and stared at the other man, who returned his silent stare. Antaska knew that the Verdantes were telepathic, and she guessed that they were talking.

Still, Antaska felt an inner chill while she waited and watched the two large beings stare at each other in silence. Antaska couldn't hear their mental talk, but she had a strange feeling of coldness that wasn't caused by the cool but comfortable ambient temperature of the space ship hallway.

Now Antaska caught up with M. Hoyvil. She stopped a few feet away from the two men. The strange cold feeling seemed to warm and melt away. The second alien turned and looked down at Antaska. The corners of his eyes lifted up too, but he didn't say anything to her. Then he turned and walked away.

This job seems strange already, Antaska thought. Will it be like this for the next 300 years?

Her new employer looked down at her and then continued on his fast walk. Antaska sped after him. He stopped in front of what seemed to be a tall, narrow doorway. It was unmarked and only distinguishable as a door by the seam around its edges. Still ignoring Antaska, M. Hoyvil pressed his large palm against the wall in a spot that seemed no different than any other spot. A panel opened up at his chest height, which was just over Antaska's head.

M. Hoyvil lifted his arms and began waving the long six fingers of both hands against something inside the recessed opening. Antaska couldn't see in from her much shorter height. He finished what he was doing, and the panel closed.

A chime sounded, and the door silently slid up and open. M. Hoyvil went though without stopping to wait for Antaska. The door began to slide back down. She rushed in after him, pulling her cart with the still-sleeping Potat behind her. Thinking of Potat calmed some of Antaska's nervousness.

The Verdantes let me bring my pet I'm so attached to on their space ship, so they must be a compassionate species, she told herself.

More Verdantes passed by as Antaska and M. Hoyvil walked along, some also followed by humans pulling luggage carts. Antaska and the other humans exchanged glances as they passed. A quick breathless smile, a wave of the free hand.

They're all nervous too, Antaska realized.

Etchings of tall, narrow doors appeared at random intervals along the interior corridors. The high doorways rose to a dizzying height of about fifteen feet within the even higher hallways. The doors seemed to dwarf even the eight-foot-tall M. Hoyvil.

Antaska tilted her head all the way back to look up. She felt unbalanced by the view of the walls and door markings curving gradually in toward the ceiling.

The behavior of M. Hoyvil was even more unsettling. It was true that their only meeting had been brief, and they had spoke only with sign language. But even with the clear barrier between them in the viewing room, Antaska had thought he was warm and friendly. Now on the space ship, M. Hoyvil seemed like a different person. His continued silence and blank expression seemed to show a complete lack of interest in her.

Antaska had learned in space school classes to expect long periods of silence from her Verdante employer. But the actual experience of being treated as invisible was disturbing. And now, she noticed that the tan ship suit she had been so happy with—made of comfortable stretchy fabric—was the exact shade of the walls. All of the Earth humans wore ship suits of the same color.

M. Hoyvil and the other Verdantes they passed all wore fitted ship suits designed like Antaska's. But theirs were a bright blue color that showed up in the tan hallways. Both the males and females were around eight feet tall. All of their faces wore the same blank expression as M. Hoyvil's. Like Earth humans, their hair colors, textures, and eye colors varied, but they all had an un-humanly green shading in their skin and features.

They walked along, and Antaska noticed that M. Hoyvil sometimes looked at the others, but he didn't acknowledge them. They looked at him but also said nothing.

Of course, they could be speaking telepathically, she realized.

They passed more Verdantes, and still no one spoke out loud. But they didn't walk in complete silence. Since boarding the space ship, Antaska had noticed a low, soothing humming noise.

It must be the ship's machinery or ventilation system, she thought.

In silence, M. Hoyvil led Antaska down more long, tall hallways that curved endlessly in toward the space ship's center.

What do I really know about him, and what have I gotten myself into? Antaska asked herself. *In any case, there's no way I'm staying on Earth. This trip has been my dream for my entire life. A little nervousness would be normal for anyone leaving on a life-long journey into the unknown, working for an alien on an alien space ship.*

In her mind, Antaska pictured the images of star systems and galaxies she had spent so many hours studying. Once more, she was filled with the familiar longing to see them up close and to explore their planets.

Antaska stopped worrying about M. Hoyvil's behavior. Like most Earth humans, she had always accepted the superiority of the Verdantes. Wasn't that proved by their advanced technology, medical knowledge, ability to travel through space, and mental telepathy?

Anyone would feel intimidated by all that, she told herself.

Chapter 3

Antaska was breathing fast and her leg muscles were burning when M. Hoyvil at last stopped at the tall, narrow etching of a door in the wall. She smothered a sigh of relief.

Strange alien symbols marked the door. At the height of M. Hoyvil's chest, a raised circle glowed dim in the well-lit hallway. He pressed his large palm against it. The door slid silently up, and he walked through. Antaska followed, with her luggage and Potat, into a circular open space.

A curved Verdante-sized dark green couch rested against the far wall. A large elliptical table, anchored to the floor, stood in front of the couch. Soft dark-brown plush material covered the floor. Instead of the tan shade of Antaska's uniform, the walls were colored a soft blue. She tipped her head back to see where the walls curved in to form a domed ceiling several feet above M. Hoyvil's head.

There were no visible light fixtures, but bright but not harsh light glowed uniformly from the walls and ceiling. Two doors led from this big circular main room.

After his long silence, M. Hoyvil spoke to Antaska.

"That door leads to your room," he said, pointing to one of the doors. "You can go in there and get settled. I'll get you at 1800 hours when it's time for dinner in the space ship's dining hall. Place your palm here to open and close your door. It's coded to your hand print."

Antaska went into her new quarters, pulling the cart in with her. She sealed the door closed behind her. This round room was smaller than the outer room. Walls in the same blue color curved up to a much lower dome-shaped ceiling. M. Hoyvil would have to bend down to fit in here, Antaska realized. She felt a sense of relief and comfort to be in an Earth human-sized room, with human-sized furnishings.

A round bed filled about a fourth of the room. Another door led to a small bathroom. Antaska lifted Potat out of her travel cage and gently placed her on the bed. Then she flopped down beside Potat and stared at up the domed ceiling. Her mind turned back to what she had been taught in space school to expect from this job.

“You might experience culture shock when you first go to live with the Verdantes. That’s normal, and it will pass when you get used to your new surroundings,” her teacher had said.

“What I’m feeling is normal,” Antaska said to the sleeping Potat.

The idea of living in shared quarters with her employer had seemed strange when Antaska first learned about it. But that was the usual arrangement for Verdantes and the human assistants who worked for them. Antaska was used to living alone in her dorm room with Potat for many years. But as an assistant, she would need to be close by when needed.

“It’s like being a live-in house servant, except your position will be more administrative,” her teacher had said. “And you’ll have your own room and bathroom.”

It had seemed normal when put that way. But now that Antaska was here, she felt a bit uneasy at the thought of sharing a common household with an alien being.

“This is strange, but I still don’t want to go back,” she told herself and Potat, who continued to sleep.

A runt among her species, Potat was larger than a kitten but only about half the size of most adult cats. She lay curled up tightly in a small ball—her snowy white belly fur surrounded by darkening shades of gray. A wide, dark stripe flowed down from her ears and ended just before the white tip of her tail.

Antaska felt a sudden stab of guilt that Potat had no choice about being moved from the home she was used to into this new and different environment.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She hoped Potat could understand her even though, of course, that was impossible.

Experiments had shown that domestic cats had evolved and were far more intelligent than their early Earth ancestors of a million years ago, but they had no language and were not sentient beings, Earth biologists insisted.

Antaska got up from the bed and explored her new quarters. A miniature alcove contained cat food and water in small bowls. In the bathroom, Antaska found a cat litter box as well as the standard human plumbing fixtures. She experimentally pushed the small brown button above the litter box. It sunk down and disappeared under the floor, which closed over it. Antaska heard a dumping noise and the sound of more litter filling the box, and then it reappeared.

“Fantastic!” Antaska said out loud.

An hour later, she had stowed most of her belongings and the floating cart. Potat woke up, but she was still groggy. Antaska sat next to her and told her that this would be their new home. The small gray cat didn’t seem frightened. She rubbed against Antaska and purred. Then she sat and stared up at her.

In times like these, Antaska could almost believe that her pet wanted to tell her something. She hoped it would be something like, “Don’t worry about me, my home is where you are.”

Potat looked up at her with what looked disturbingly like an amused cat smile.



Potat gazed with affectionate frustration at her pet Antaska. She lifted a tiny white paw to scratch at high speed behind one ear. Potat knew Antaska could hear her mental speech, but she refused to listen. At times, this could be a problem. Like today, when Antaska insisted on giving her a tranquilizer for this trip.

“Don’t drug me. I don’t need that. You need it more than I do,” Potat had tried to tell her telepathically.

But Antaska had stuffed the pill in Potat’s mouth, held it shut, and rubbed her

throat to make it go down. The memory brought up some resentment.

I guess she needs punishment for that, Potat thought.

She reached out a paw and swiped it hard against Antaska's leg, pulling her claws in at the last second.

I really don't like hurting her, I guess, Potat realized.

"What are you slapping me for, you crazy kitty?" Antaska asked her.

"You know what for," Potat answered her mentally.

Antaska shook her head but acted like she didn't hear anything. Pink hair floated and wiggled in the air.

So annoying, but so shiny! thought Potat.

The little cat felt thirsty from the affects of the drug and the unnatural induced sleep. She sniffed the air for water. Luckily, some water was nearby, so Potat didn't have to cry and whine until Antaska figured out what she wanted.

Potat hopped down from the bed unto the cushioned flooring. She headed straight to the alcove that had her water and food in it.

"Oh, right. There's water and food over there," said Antaska a bit too late.

As Potat slurped down the water as loud as she could to show how terribly thirsty she was, she heard a small plop sound from behind. She straightened up and twisted her head all the way around to the back. Antaska had flopped down on the bed. She was staring at the holographic image of stars displayed on the ceiling.

"Right. Just abuse me, and then ignore me," Potat said to her telepathically.

She didn't expect an answer, and she didn't get one. But Potat felt irritable, and she felt the need to get rid of that feeling. Taking off at high speed, she rushed in circles around the small room. Again and again.

"You crazy cat," Antaska judged her while still lying on the bed.

This room is too small for a good workout, thought Potat.

She added some intensity to her run by jumping up on the bed and running across Antaska.

"Ouch! Stop it!" Antaska said each time Potat ran over her.

So this was a little better. About five more times, and then Potat stopped on the bed next to Antaska. Time for a bath. She lifted a paw and began washing herself.

Antaska turned her head to look at Potat.

“Are you mad about something?” she asked.

Potat ignored her but couldn't stop the satisfied purr that escaped from her throat.

Chapter 4

At exactly 1800 hours, M. Hoyvil sounded the chime on Antaska's door, and she palmed the pad to open it.

"It's time to go to dinner. Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes," Antaska answered. "Goodbye," she said to Potat.

In much less time than it had taken to board the ship and reach their quarters, they reached a large, dome-shaped entrance. Antaska followed M. Hoyvil into an enormous room holding over fifty dining tables. Over one hundred beings—Earth human and Verdante—sat at the tables, walked around, or stood in the line at the food counter at the far end of the room. The domed ceiling soared more than twenty feet at its highest point.

Except for the space ship's ever-present faint humming sound and the tapping of dining utensils, the vast room was silent. Suddenly, Antaska felt the silence like a cold, heavy weight pressing inside her head. She began to feel dizzy and nauseous.

I hope I won't humiliate myself and my new employer by passing out or, even worse, vomiting in front of so many people, Antaska thought.

Trying to regain her equilibrium, Antaska looked down at the floor in front of her. She focused on M. Hoyvil's large feet moving forward and followed him across the big room. Antaska felt steadier when they reached the entrance to the food counter. One at a time, they walked through an archway formed by a looped silvery tube attached to the floor. When they passed, an orange light glowed in the archway's inner plane.

There were no workers at the counter. It consisted only of three long metallic shelves attached to the wall. One was at Antaska's chest height, one was at M. Hoyvil's chest height, and an even higher shelf was near the top of M. Hoyvil's head. They stepped up to the lower two shelves, and two panels flush with the wall slid up and open. Two trays that held food and beverages slid out from the

openings on the two shelves at their respective chest heights. Then the panels slid closed.

The foods on Antaska's tray were different than those on M. Hoyvil's tray, and she wasn't able to identify any of the foods on either tray. His tray held four large tubes of light green-colored liquid compared to just one on her tray. Antaska was surprised to see that he had less food despite his much larger body size.

They lifted their trays from the shelves, and Antaska followed M. Hoyvil to the center of the large hall. As she entered the midst of the silent diners, the feeling of cold pressure in Antaska's head increased. She was relieved when M. Hoyvil stopped at an empty table. He set his tray down and sat in a large Verdante-sized chair on one side of the table. Antaska put her tray down on the other side of the table. To sit, she had to climb up a staircase attached to a raised chair that resembled a large high chair used by babies and toddlers on Earth.

Antaska felt like a child sitting in the raised chair and was embarrassed. The other humans wore tan ship suits like hers that matched the colors of the walls, floor, and furniture. So Antaska had to look twice to see them sitting in similar high chairs. The others also sat across from Verdantes dressed in the more visible shade of blue.

Remembering from her training for this assignment that the Verdantes didn't speak during meals and considered that extremely rude, Antaska remained silent. M. Hoyvil also remained silent.

The combination of the uncomfortable, strange setting and the cold, heavy feeling in Antaska's head took away most of her appetite. But she put a small amount of bright green, mushy food on her fork. She chewed it without paying much attention to the taste.

Then Antaska looked around. Close by Antaska and M. Hoyvil, Verdante males and females of his size sat with their Earth human assistants at tables for two. The tables were spaced about six feet apart. Some of the Verdantes stared at M. Hoyvil, and he stared back but said nothing. The humans ate with stiff

movements. Antaska felt stiff too.

She knew the Verdantes didn't speak during meals, but Antaska felt a strong sense of discomfort and awkwardness. As if she was the object of the silent attention of many people. The feeling of cold pressure grew more and more oppressive.

Then M. Hoyvil looked up, and Antaska looked up in the same direction. Something large and bright red was in front of her. She tipped her head far back and saw the face of the largest being she had ever seen looming over their table.

Now Antaska felt the cold pressure like a painful headache. The gigantic alien standing there was over ten feet tall. He wasn't thin like M. Hoyvil but solid and muscular. Similar to M. Hoyvil, his skin was the same color as the green grass of Earth.

This man wasn't dressed in blue. He wore a form-fitting ship suit in bright red. His enormous upward-slanted green eyes looked down at Antaska. Then he looked into the eyes of M. Hoyvil, who stared back without blinking. Antaska felt rude for staring. She lowered her head from its uncomfortable bent-back position. She down looked at the plate of food in front of her but didn't eat.



M. Hoyvil didn't notice Antaska's discomfort. He stared up at Master Meepp wondering why his primary male gene contributor had come over here to the adolescent area of the dining hall. The others were watching and listening. M. Hoyvil's green skin blushed darker, but M. Hoyvil spoke to Master Meepp with the traditional respect.

"Greetings, Master Meepp," said M. Hoyvil in silent mind speech.

"Greetings to you, young one," answered the huge alien. "Today is an exciting day for you and the others who have reached the age of pet ownership. You have your new pets aboard the space ship. I became curious when I heard so much talking from all the way across the room, so I came over to see your new

Earth pet.”

“Yes, this is my new pet, Antaska,” said M. Hoyvil, with somewhat embarrassed pride.

He waved a few long green fingers in her direction.

“I picked her because I liked her unusual coloring and her gentle personality. And she scored high on our genetic diversity scale,” M. Hoyvil added as an additional selling point.

Master Meepp directed his gigantic eyes down for a closer look at Antaska. She was staring down at her plate.

“Yes. Her coloring and features indicate an unusual diversity of Earth genes. That’s always a valuable addition to the splicing supplies in our birth labs. You’ve selected well. Still, I can’t help but notice that she looks a little peaked and perhaps unhappy. I don’t mean to criticize, but have you been giving her all the care and attention she needs?” Master Meepp asked.

M. Hoyvil lifted the corners of his dark green eyes in surprise.

“What makes you say that? She looks fine to me,” he answered.

“The emotions of Earth humans can be read on their faces,” explained Master Meepp, “but they display different than on the faces of Verdantes. We don’t use our mouths much except to eat and drink and sometimes to communicate out loud with non-telepathic humanoids. The mouths of Earth humans and other non-telepaths are bigger because they use them more often to communicate. And they eat much more food than we do. They also use their mouths to express a wide range of emotions including happiness, sadness, and anger.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that,” said M. Hoyvil.

“Notice how the corners of her mouth are drooping down. When you see that, it indicates unhappiness or some other negative feelings. And see how she is just picking at her food? Loss of appetite is another sign that something is not right,” said Master Meepp.

The corners of M. Hoyvil’s eyes drooped a bit in dismay.

“I thought I was doing everything I needed to. I passed all my human care

classes with high scores. And I watched tons of their ancient videos,” M. Hoyvil protested.

“Taking classes and watching videos is not the same as providing for the needs of Earthlings in real life,” replied Master Meepp. “Maybe if you tell me what you’ve done so far, I can tell you if she’s lacking something she needs. I can give you advice based on more than a thousand of years of successful pet ownership. But I have to admit that I made some mistakes in the beginning too.”

“Well,” began M. Hoyvil, “First of all, I met her at the door of the space ship with a big smile on my face. She said ‘hello,’ and I said ‘follow.’ Then I led her all the way through the ship to our rooms. When we got there, I showed her the door that led to her room, and I told her I’d get her at dinner time. She went in with the small animal she has for a pet and closed the door. Then later, I told her it was time for dinner, and I led her here.”

“Well, I’m not saying you’ve done anything wrong, but I can give you some tips that will help you form the strong bond that makes for a lasting and happy owner-pet relationship,” said Master Meepp in a gentle telepathic voice.

“OK,” said M. Hoyvil.

“It sounds like you haven’t spoke more than a few words to her yet. But the most important thing for you to do is communicate verbally. That’s the way humans bond. Just spending time with them and providing for all their needs isn’t enough to make them become attached to you. I know how tedious verbal communication is. But in the beginning, it’s the only way to let them feel that they know you. They also have a need to talk to you—it’s part of their bonding ritual. They can’t read our facial expressions or sign language and, of course, they can’t understand mental telepathy,” said Master Meepp.

M. Hoyvil felt confused. “But they didn’t teach us that in human training classes,” he protested.

“No. They don’t teach that,” said Master Meepp in a conciliatory tone. “I know they only taught you the basics of pet care—limited to providing food, clothing, medical care, and shelter. I’m giving you this advice based on my own

personal experience. As you know, I have a close, affectionate relationship with my own two pets, Vorche and Tabxi.”

M. Hoyvil looked over to the Verdante adult section of the dining hall where Master Meepp’s two elderly pets were sitting among the other adults and their humans. At this distance, their tan space suits blended into the furnishings. But M. Hoyvil’s super-human vision gave him a sharp view of their gray-haired heads. Both humans waved at him and tiny smiles lit up their dark space-tanned faces.

M. Hoyvil waved back. Then he turned and looked up again at Master Meepp.

“I believe that when you adopt humans, you’re also responsible for their happiness,” said Master Meepp. “She’ll be spending almost all of her time with you for the rest of her life. In order for her to be happy, you must develop a close, affectionate relationship. This is what we call ‘bonding.’ Spending time with her, sharing meals, and taking her places are some of the building blocks of the bond. But at the beginning, as I have said, it also requires a lot of verbal communication.”

“OK, I’ll do that,” M. Hoyvil agreed with determination, “but what should I say when I verbalize with her?”

“To start with, ask her how she’s doing, if she needs anything, and if she has any questions. This lets her know that you care about her well being. If she lifts the corners of her mouth, that’s a sign that she’s starting to feel comfortable with you. Take the time to answer any questions she may have. Fortunately, you’ll only need to perform this excessive vocalizing until a strong bond is formed and she learns to read your facial expressions and some of our sign language. At that point, you won’t need to communicate as much in this tiresome manner,” said Master Meepp.

“And how long will that take?” asked M. Hoyvil.

“It can vary from a few years to almost a hundred years for some pets,” was the answer. “The important thing is to form a strong bond as soon as possible.

Then she'll be comfortable with long periods of silent companionship even if she hasn't learned to read your facial expressions or understand any of our sign language. You can cut down on your verbal communication when you're certain that the bond has been formed."

"Very well, I'll get right to work on that," said M. Hoyvil, "but how I will know when the bond is formed?"

"Ah yes, a very good question," answered Master Meepp in the tone of voice the Verdante adults often used when they wanted to sound all-knowing and mysterious. "The only answer to that question is that when the bond is formed, you'll know."

M. Hoyvil gave a silent sigh, and Master Meepp laughed indulgently. "I'm sure you'll do a wonderful job caring for her. I have the utmost confidence in you, my son," he concluded.

"Thank you for your most helpful advice, Master Meepp," said M. Hoyvil with appropriate deference.



Antaska had felt miserable the entire time that the two aliens stared at each other. She assumed they were having a long telepathic conversation. As they continued, the cold pain in her head grew more and more uncomfortable. She felt as if harder and harder blows were being struck against the inside of her head. Antaska fought the urge to hold her hands against her head and cry out in pain.

An almost unbearable hard thump crashed inside her head, and then the painful blows stopped. Antaska still felt a deep coldness, but the pressure was gone. Strangely, she could now hear the voices of two men whispering. One had a deep bass voice, and the other had a higher-toned tenor voice.

Relieved of pain, Antaska tried to understand what she was hearing. But despite her hardest efforts, she could only make out a few words: "pet" and

“care.”

Antaska looked up to see the giant alien bowing over her. The large mass looming above her head was frightening, but she was sure this was some form of politeness. The giant bowed next to M. Hoyvil, who nodded his head but didn't rise. Then the giant turned and walked away to the far side of the room.

He sat down at a table in a group of similar gigantic green-skinned aliens sitting with more Earth humans.

Why do these aliens have two different sizes who sit apart from each other? Antaska wondered. Do they have two separate species? Do the big ones have more power than the smaller ones like M. Hoyvil?

Then Antaska thought about the bits and pieces of words that had just been in her mind. Could those strange words really have been part of a telepathic conversation between the two aliens?

No. I must be deluding myself by imaging that I can understand mental telepathy, she thought.

She looked back across the room at the group of gigantic aliens. Most of these larger aliens sat in pairs of two across from two or more Earth humans. But a few large aliens sat alone across from a human or two. The humans sat on chairs that were like the one Antaska sat on but raised much higher to the height of the larger tables.

The huge aliens were similar in appearance to the one who had just visited M. Hoyvil. Antaska's eyes were drawn by the red ship suits they wore. They created a bright area of rippling color distinct from everything else in the dining hall. She realized that she must have been too distracted to notice them till now. The skin of the gigantic aliens, in shades from lime green to dark green, contrasted sharply with their red clothing.

Antaska stared and grew embarrassed when some of them looked her way. But she couldn't stop looking. The big male who had just left them sat at a table next to a gigantic female alien and across from two Earth humans—a man and a woman, both elderly. Antaska had to look hard to see the two humans. Their

faces and hair were blots of gray and brown floating above their camouflaging ship suits.

At the next table over from those people, another gigantic Verdante male and female sat across from two much more noticeable humans. This male and female pair sat facing toward Antaska. They were unusually tall and unusually attractive. Even at this distance, the toned muscles of both pale-skinned blondes showed under their tight-fitting ship suits.

As Antaska's gaze passed over the face of the male, she froze in surprise and embarrassment. He was staring back boldly and fixedly at her from across the large room. As if caught by a hypnotic force, Antaska found herself unable to look away.

Wow! He is the most attractive man I have ever seen! she thought in awe and wonder.

Antaska shook her head to clear it. She remembered that she was with her new employer. He needed to be impressed, especially on their first day together. She turned and looked up at him. Fortunately, M. Hoyvil didn't seem to notice that Antaska had been staring at the beautiful Earth man.

She couldn't resist looking back across the room. Antaska's eyes caught in the gaze of the man still staring at her! She pulled her eyes away only to meet the angry glare of the beautiful human female sitting next to him.

Appalled, Antaska looked away and down at the plate in front of her. She tried to hide the riot of conflicting thoughts and emotions that swirled through her. Antaska looked up at M. Hoyvil again. She hoped he wouldn't see her skin turning a redder shade of tan. Seeming not to notice, M. Hoyvil continued to eat his food. While eating and drinking, he also looked around at the other nearby Verdante diners and waved his six-fingered hands at them.

They must be communicating, Antaska thought.

She picked at her strange food. Her thoughts focused on the attractive male.

What just happened? she asked herself. *It's so flattering to get the attention of such an unbelievably gorgeous man, but it's obvious he's involved with another*

woman. And she looked so mad that he was looking at me. But that doesn't matter, right? On Earth, we were encouraged not to get attached. Because everyone would be leaving to outer space with the Verdantes, so it's bad to get stuck in a relationship. So I would be doing her a favor to break them up, right?

In her mind, a small voice broke into her thoughts.

"Wrong! Wrong! You're not on Earth anymore!" said the voice.

What the heck is that? Antaska asked herself. *Am I really going crazy today?*

Then an image of her small cat Potat appeared in her mind.

No! Antaska told herself. *My cat isn't talking to me, and I'm not telepathic. I'm just imaging things because of all the stress and drama today.*

Her thoughts rattled on and on.

Maybe that man wasn't really even looking at me. I'm just imagining all kinds of things. Obviously, I'm so ordinary and average looking that he wouldn't be interested in me," she told herself.

Now Antaska felt embarrassed by her assumption.

Anyway, I'm not likely to meet those people up close. They belong to another group that seems to be segregated from this one, she thought.



M. Hoyvil ate his dinner and thought about his new pet. Antaska had spent most of her life in the Earth human space training school. She had passed all the tests the Verdantes gave to her trainers to screen for those humans fit to live among them. Antaska had scored well for the potential to act as a contact with new species. Most sentient humanoids in the galaxy were similar in size to Earthlings, so they were useful as first communicators. The Verdantes were much larger than other humanoids, both telepathic and non-telepathic. And smaller humanoids were often frightened by their sudden appearance on their planets.

An even more compelling reason to believe that Antaska would make a good

companion was the fact that she had a small pet of her own. When Earth humans kept their own pets like cats and dogs, that showed skill in communicating and bonding with other species.

At just over fifty Earth years old, Antaska was a young adult and would live for at least another one hundred and fifty years. Or even much longer now that she was in the care of the Verdantes. Her diet, determined by a full body scan before each meal, would be the perfect nutritional balance for her health needs at that moment. It would include powerful life-extending nutritional supplements.

Antaska would have advanced medical care superior to what Earth could provide. M. Hoyvil would also make sure she had regular, healthy exercise, a necessary key to longevity. Even with the superior diet provided by the Verdantes, a sedentary lifestyle could shorten her life by many years.

M. Hoyvil remembered that Master Meepp had noticed Antaska picking at her food.

“Eat all of your food, or you’ll lose weight,” he told her. “It’s the perfect dietary balance for your needs.”



Antaska wanted the approval of her new employer, so she tried some orange and crunchy round slices. They were slightly spicy and actually tasted good. Then she bravely ate some more of the mushy green food. It had a light, clean vegetable taste that went well with the orange chips. She took a sip of the green-colored liquid and concentrated on finishing her food. A blue, sweet pudding-like food seemed to be dessert, so she ate that last.

Making an effort to put the handsome human male out of her mind, Antaska finished her meal. She noticed that she was in a better mood and feeling more energetic than when she had first started eating.

“How are you feeling?” asked M. Hoyvil.

“Very well now, thank you,” she answered.

“A good meal of healthy food is what you need to feel well both physically and mentally,” he said.

A suspicion entered Antaska’s mind that there could have been some mood-altering chemical in the food, but she was now in too good a mood to worry about it.

What possible reason could there be for that? she asked herself.

She happily followed M. Hoyvil back to the area with the food service counter. They set their trays on another set of counters that was off to one side. Two panels slid up in the walls behind their empty trays, and the trays were transported through them. Then the panels slid back down.

Together, Antaska and M. Hoyvil made their way to the exit from the dining hall. Just before the doorway, Antaska couldn’t resist turning back for one last look at the muscular blonde human man. A pleasing jolt of some undefined emotion went through her—he was still staring straight at her with an intense gaze in an otherwise expressionless face.

I think he is interested after all! she thought.

Once out in the hallway, Antaska walked along next to M. Hoyvil in a zombie-like daze. She didn’t noticed the humming noise or the whispering sounds that came when any of the Verdantes came near and then went away when they were gone. All her thoughts returned to the attractive man from the dining hall.

Should I be disturbed by his bold and maybe weird behavior, or should I be flattered? she kept asking herself.

Chapter 5

Potat was waiting for Antaska and M. Hoyvil when they came in the door to their shared quarters. She lay stretched out on her back on the soft floor covering in the center of the main room. Her tiny golden eyes stared up at them.

It took them long enough, Potat thought.

“Hi kitty,” Antaska greeted Potat.”

“Where have you been?” Potat asked her telepathically, although she knew the answer.

Both Antaska and M. Hoyvil shook their heads a bit, but neither answered her. Potat gave Antaska’s mind a quick scan.

Antaska was thinking, *Why do I keep imagining my cat is talking to me? and I wonder if I’ll see that guy again?*

And then Potat saw an image of the hunky guy in Antaska’s mind. His shirt was unbuttoned, and his muscular chest was bursting through.

Hey! He wasn’t dressed like that when I saw him in Antaska’s mind in the dining hall! Potat thought.

She was annoyed. The little cat grumbled to herself. *Antaska ignores my advice again! I think Antaska needs to learn a lesson about that and about leaving me here all alone.*

Potat flipped off her back and up onto her feet. Then, like a furry gray and white streak, she dashed through the door to Antaska’s room and dived under the bed. From there, she crouched and peeked out behind the edge of a blanket.

I’m ignoring you, Potat thought at her.

But Antaska didn’t seem to get the message. The corners of her mouth turned up, and she had that look of someone trying not to laugh. Potat flopped down under the bed and grumbled some more.

“Is she OK?” M. Hoyvil asked Antaska out loud.

At least someone cares, thought Potat. *I did a good job when I picked that*

one.

She thought about reading M. Hoyvil's mind too. He was her new pet after all.

No. I don't know him well enough yet. That can wait for later, she decided.

"Potat's fine," said Antaska, answering M. Hoyvil's question. "Probably just nervous in a new place."

Potat sighed a big telepathic cat sigh.



M. Hoyvil looked around in confusion. He thought he had just heard someone sighing telepathically. A small female sigh.

Could that have been Antaska? he wondered.

He looked down at her, but the corners of her mouth were turned up. M. Hoyvil interpreted her expression correctly as a smile.

Maybe I imagined that, or maybe I heard someone walking by in the hallway, he thought.

M. Hoyvil knew that he needed to make up for his neglect earlier in the day, so he decided to talk to Antaska as Master Meepp had suggested. His vocal cords and the muscles of his mouth were already tired from the unaccustomed use of talking to her at dinner. But he was willing to sacrifice his personal comfort for her well being.

"Do you need anything, or do you have any other questions for me?" he asked.

"I think I have everything I need right now," Antaska answered. "But I was wondering about the larger-sized man who came to our table at dinner and the other group of bigger people. I never saw any Verdantes that big when I was in space school on Earth. Are they the same species as the Verdantes, or are they a different species?"

The answer to this question was not restricted information. But it sometimes

came as a shock to Earth humans. Most new pets did not ask it on their first day. M. Hoyvil decided to answer anyway, at least part of the truth.

“The larger humanoids are Verdantes too, but they’re much older than me—that’s why they’re so much bigger. Ours is a long-living and tall-growing race. We live to the age of 5,000 or more and grow to over ten feet tall by about 900 years old. I’m 650, and I’ll grow to about that size in around 250 more years,” he told her.

M. Hoyvil hoped this explanation would be enough. His voice was getting scratchy and hoarse, and he didn’t think it could stand much more use. He pressed his palm against a round, slightly raised glowing green circle on the side of the wall. A sliding panel opened, and a compartment appeared. Inside were several tubes of chlorophyll water. M. Hoyvil pulled out a tube, and the compartment closed again.

Antaska looked at him with her head slightly tilted to one side while he drank thirstily. Soon, his throat felt better.

He looked down to see the little cat Potat creeping out into the main room.

Her curiosity must have overcame her shyness, thought M. Hoyvil.

The corners of his big green eyes lifted in amusement.

Potat sat behind the edge of the couch, as if hiding, and watched him and Antaska.

Antaska covered a yawn with one hand.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I guess I’m really tired from all the excitement of my first day away from Earth. Thank you for explaining about the bigger Verdantes. I don’t have any more questions right now.”

“OK. That’s great,” said M. Hoyvil. “You should rest and get settled in your room tonight. Tomorrow, I’ll take you and Potat to the space ship’s doctor for checkups to make sure that you’re both in perfect health for space travel.”

“Is the doctor able to treat cats as well as humans?” Antaska asked with wide eyes.

“Oh, sure,” M. Hoyvil told her. “Dr. Daji is a great veterinarian.”

“Goodnight, then,” Antaska said.

She walked toward her room, and little Potat streaked in through the door ahead of her.

M. Hoyvil stood unmoving and still looking in when Antaska pressed the button to close the door. He watched the lowering door slide all the way down.

OK! I think I've got this, he told himself before walking away to his own room.



Inside her room now, Antaska thought about M. Hoyvil. She was more confused than enlightened by his explanation of the larger aliens. Antaska knew that the Verdantes who came to Earth to hire humans were much older than the oldest-living Earthlings. So to learn that M. Hoyvil was 650—a very old man—didn't surprise her. But the oldest of his race lived to be thousands of years old after growing to the height of small trees. That idea was hard to absorb.

Antaska was worn out from her first day in a strange environment. She decided she could think about all this later. She walked to the bed and flopped down on her back. Potat was alert and sitting up on the bed. Antaska rolled to the side and pulled her into a gentle hug.

“How are you? Are you okay in our new home?” she asked the small cat.

Potat made no answer except for a contented purr. Antaska stirred herself to visit the small bathroom and brush her teeth. She changed into the tan sleeping clothes she found in drawers built into the walls of her room. Returning to the circular bed, she felt more awake again and sat up next to Potat.

Antaska took a closer look at the consoles built into small tables on either side of the bed. She reached out a hand and wavered it over the many possible choices of buttons to press.

Potat was watching Antaska. She jumped smoothly away to the soft, spongy floor material in a clear demonstration of disapproval. Potat sat as far from the

bed as possible in the small room, cleaning between her toenails.

Antaska ignored Potat's behavior.

I'm sure M. Hoyvil would have warned me if something harmful could happen from pushing these buttons, she thought.

There were so many rows of different-colored buttons! Which to push? Antaska randomly pressed a deep blue one. The room darkened. A holographic image appeared, filling the entire room with a slow-moving view of outer space accompanied by sound.

Mesmerized, Antaska watched thousands of stars revolve gracefully on all sides of her while listening to the sound of space. A humming similar to what she had been hearing all over the space ship plus soft whooshing noises. The combined sounds were harmonious and soothing.

"It's almost musical," Antaska said to Potat.

The tiny gray cat had climbed back onto the bed. Antaska turned to look at the Potat. She was now lying on her back too, looking up at the ceiling. Her legs and tail stretched out straight, and her arms spread out to her sides.

"Aw! You look so cute like that! Almost like a tiny human!" Antaska told her. Then Antaska seemed to hear a small female voice talking in her head.

"Please don't compare me to a human," said the voice.

Antaska looked back up the ceiling.

Just another crazy thought after many today, she told herself. *At least I was smart enough to never tell anyone on Earth that I thought I could hear my cat talking to me. They would have never let me take this job! And now I have to do the same thing. I can't tell anyone I think I hear the Verdantes talking,* she told herself.

With that decided, Antaska put it out of her mind and focused on the twirling show of planets up on the ceiling and walls. The familiar desire to travel to the farthest reaches of space returned.

And now, I'm really going! she thought.

Any uncertainty or confusion about her new work situation melted away.

Then Antaska was slowly lulled to sleep by the relaxing sounds that called to her in some deeply instinctive way.



After Antaska and Potat had gone into their rooms, M. Hoyvil stood unmoving for several moments. The excitement of the day and the strain of verbal communication had almost drained him of energy. He thought more about Antaska.

It seems weird to call her a pet when she's definitely a humanoid, he mused. She's just like a small person, only less green and with only ten fingers. Just because she's not telepathic doesn't make her an animal or some kind of lower life form.

He shook himself out of his stillness and walked into his room.

I'm starting to act like the adults, he told himself, standing rooted to one spot, staring at nothing.

It had been a busy day, but M. Hoyvil still had some homework to finish up for his galactic politics class. He sat at his computer console typing his assignment—give arguments for or against some of the most controversial laws that govern the discovered and undiscovered planets of the Milky Way. M. Hoyvil was tired, but this was one of his favorite subjects. He was soon absorbed in his work with renewed energy.

A few hours later, M. Hoyvil finished his homework and emailed it to his teacher. Then, after getting ready to go to sleep, he pressed the blue button on a console in his room. Like Antaska and Potat, he also fell asleep listening to soothing space sounds, to dream of new discoveries and adventures.

Chapter 6

The next morning, Antaska ate another meal of different good-tasting but still unidentifiable foods in the dining hall. She was thrilled to see the unbelievably handsome human male staring at her again. The same female sat next to him glaring at Antaska. And the same tiny voice spoke in her head telling her to look away. But Antaska didn't.

Then M. Hoyvil took Antaska back to their quarters to get Potat for their visit to the doctor. The small cat was waiting in the main room.

"We're both going to the doctor for a checkup," Antaska announced.

With fur fluffed high, Potat walked on stiff legs back to their bedroom and jumped up on the bed. She dug her claws deep into the bedspread and left them there. Antaska was not surprised by this behavior.

"It looks like she'll have to ride in the carrier," she said to M. Hoyvil.

Antaska walked to the bed and lifted Potat up in the direction that would extract her claws without pulling on them.

Did she hear the tiny voice speaking in her mind again? "You overbearing bully! Do realize how rude this is?"

Just imaging things again! thought Antaska.

She scooped the cat up and placed her in the carrier. Then she zipped it up with the quick efficiency of a person experienced in avoiding scratches.



A long walk down curved, outward and upward slanting hallways led to a tall door toward the outer part of the ship. M. Hoyvil stopped and placed his palm on a gray circle about twice the size of his hand. The circle began to glow and brighten, and then the door slid silently up and open.

"Come right in," rumbled a deep voice from inside the door.

Antaska, pulling the floating cat carrier, followed M. Hoyvil into a large,

circular room with a hard white floor and bare white walls. A gigantic-sized deep green-skinned alien stood next to one of four medical examination tables. He was heavier and much taller than M. Hoyvil, but not as tall as the giant alien who had stood next to their table in the dining hall.

This alien also looked much older, with wrinkles and a head of close-cropped graying green hair. Instead of the bright red ship suit worn by the other large aliens, he was dressed in a white medical jacket, white pants, and shoes. A few medical instruments Antaska was unfamiliar with were attached to his jacket and hanging around his neck.

“Who do we have here?” inquired the enormous doctor as he bent down to look in Potat’s cage.

“I’ve brought Antaska and her cat Potat for their checkups,” M. Hoyvil replied.

“Ah, yes! Hello, I’m Dr. Daji. Please be seated on the table with Potat so we can begin,” the doctor said to Antaska.

She lifted the carrier with Potat up onto the five-foot-high examination table. Then she opened the door and reached in to get Potat. The little cat scooted to the back of the cage and growled.

“If she could speak, she would be saying ‘bad man,’” thought Antaska.

Dr. Daji said nothing, but he stared at Potat, and Antaska heard faint whispering, as if from very far away. One of two whispering voices was a very deep bass-pitched male, and one was a much higher-pitched soprano female.

Antaska wasn’t sure, but she thought she heard the male voice say the words, “won’t hurt.” The whispering continued for a minute, and then Potat stopped growling and stepped calmly out from the carrier.

The corners of M. Hoyvil’s eyes lifted high. He turned to look at the doctor. They stared at each other in silence for several minutes while Antaska sat waiting. She had accepted these strange staring sessions as normal for the telepathic Verdantes. So she waited, and her thoughts drifted back to the disturbingly attractive man from the dining hall.

Antaska heard more whispering, but she didn't pay much attention to it. The male and female whisperers she had heard before were now joined by a higher-pitched tenor male voice. In the midst of her musings, Antaska thought she heard the words "intelligence" and "toddler." But the words didn't make any sense, and they were much less interesting than the man who was on her mind.

If Antaska had fully understood the silent telepathic conversations that just had taken place, she might have been more interested.



M. Hoyvil, on the other hand, was very interested in the ongoing conversation. First, he heard Dr. Daji talking to Potat.

"Don't be afraid, little one, I promise I won't hurt you," Dr. Daji had assured Potat. "I only want help you and your friend."

"My pet, my pet," Potat had answered possessively.

"Yes, or course, she is your pet, please forgive my mistake. I only want to help you and your pet. Will you please come out?" the large doctor had asked in his deep but gentle telepathic voice.

"Not hurt?" Potat asked again.

After further assurances from the doctor, she had been convinced, and she stepped out of the cage.

Then M. Hoyvil spoke telepathically to Dr. Daji.

"Can these small creatures really understand and speak the telepathic language when they are pets of the non-telepathic humans?" M. Hoyvil asked, unable to keep the shock out of his voice.

"Why yes," was the reply. "Although these creatures have the intelligence of a young toddler, they are telepathically sentient. But because Earth humans aren't telepathic, they aren't aware of this. And because cats don't have the vocal cords to express themselves in a way that would be understandable to them, the humans believe that cats don't have language and aren't even sentient. It is really

quite amusing that both species think they are the owner, and the other is the pet,” the doctor concluded with a rumbling chuckle.

M. Hoyvil watched Antaska take the cage off the table and climb up the steps to sit next to Potat.

“We’ll start with a scan,” said Dr. Daji, speaking out loud.

He pressed a black button on the side of the table, and Antaska and Potat were surrounded by blue light. Then a wide holographic screen appeared from floor to ceiling on one side of the examination table. The screen was filled with slowly scrolling symbols and pictures. The huge doctor read the screen, occasionally pushing a button to stop and then to continue the information flow. After a few minutes, the last of the symbols rose up to disappear at the top of the screen. Then the screen itself disappeared.

Dr. Daji spoke to M. Hoyvil telepathically while Antaska and Potat sat waiting.

“As we expect with pets from Earth, they both have some cellular damage from the radioactive wastes that still remain on the planet,” the doctor explained. “Fortunately, in the 10,000 years that we’ve been caring for humans, we’ve cleaned up much of the waste left from their prehistoric wars. The cellular damage we see in humans has been decreasing. And when we take them as pets, we can give them medical treatment to repair their cells. I’ll begin the cellular repair today. With the medicines they’ll receive in their food, this problem should be fixed in less than a year.

“As suggested by your human’s appearance, her DNA contains genes from both of the two separated Earth populations that survived the prehistoric nuclear and environmental destruction of most life on the planet. This includes a fine mix of the ancient races that covered the Earth in pre-apocalyptic times.

“If you’ve been studying your ancient Earth history, you may recognize some of the names of the tribes that contributed to her genetic makeup. Most of her genes are from the humans who survived in the North Pole area. These include the peoples who were known as Irish, Chinese, German, and a few others I am

not able to identify. Thanks to the genetic variance and improvement program we've provided humans, her DNA also includes some of the ancient tribes from south of Earth's equator.

"Obviously, that material was contributed from the gene labs of Earth's South Pole government. It's a very strong mix that will be a nice addition to the DNA of your own future offspring.

"If you'll just sign this release form giving me legal permission, I'll extract the standard genetic material for storage including one thousand of her eggs, which she won't miss. This will provide you all the future DNA you could possibly need plus extra amounts you may choose to contribute to the Verdante planet-wide genetic supplies for the benefit of our race.

"I'll also collect genetic material from the cat, which is rare and hard to obtain away from Earth. They don't live long, and many of our human pets become distraught at their loss. Providing them a new copy is often just the thing to cheer them up again.

"Of course, I don't need to remind you that we strongly advise against the same practice when it comes to replacing Earth humans. I understand that human pets have a much shorter lifespan compared to ours, and their owners often become extremely attached to them. But even a young child knows that a clone is not the same person. To recreate a new life as a twin of a preexisting life goes against our knowledge that evolution depends on achieving ever-greater genetic diversity. Don't you agree?"

M. Hoyvil had waited politely during the doctor's long speech. The oldest of the Verdante adults were the longest talkers, he had found, but they were also due the most respect. M. Hoyvil spoke in what he hoped was a polite manner.

"Actually, I've been thinking about this, and it seems strange to call Antaska a 'pet' when she's really a person. I think I'd rather call her my companion instead. After all, she is a sentient humanoid, not a mere animal."

Potat turned toward him and let out a small hiss, and he paused in surprise.

"My apologies," he addressed the words telepathically to Potat and then

turned back to speak silently to the doctor. The revelation of Potat's telepathic abilities had given birth to a new and even more disturbing concern.

"Her cat is telepathic. What if Antaska becomes telepathic too and finds out that we Verdantes take humans as pets—we don't hire them as they're told? I'm sure she'd be offended. And anyway, I don't think it's ethical to take her genetic material and use it without her permission—or her pet's DNA," he added.

"I don't mind calling Antaska something else besides 'pet' since someone else has claimed prior ownership," said the big doctor.

He glanced at Potat with amused, upward-titled eyes.

"But I can assure you it's very unlikely that one individual will suddenly become telepathic. It just doesn't happen that way. You should know from your anthropology classes that a species as a whole becomes telepathic gradually over what could be millions of years.

"However, I would argue that our taking her DNA is not unethical since it's no different than the current practices of her home planet. As you know, the North and South Pole Earth governments have complete control over human reproduction. All new humans are created in the birth labs from government-approved genetic mixes. In addition to sterilizing Earth humans at birth, their scientists collect much more material than what we take from our human passengers.

"We understand that this practice is just one of many population-control measures the Earth humans put into place after the near loss of all life on the planet. They control their populations to avoid the possibility of another apocalypse and the return of their civilization to a stone age, or worse. So they developed rather extreme controlling governments in both poles.

"Even though she is now legally your pet, she actually has much more freedom while living among us. On Earth, she would never be allowed to reproduce her own children if she wanted them. But we allow the humans who travel with us to make that choice. Our collecting her DNA now will allow her to have children if she ever decides she wants them. The veterinarian on the next

part of your voyage will only be an apprentice and won't have the capability to extract her DNA. And if you wait till she returns from the hundred-year trip, her eggs may no longer be usable.

"Also, you should really think about your own future children. As you know, the Verdante gene pool is limited. We need to add material from Earth humans to ensure the continued viability of our own race."

M. Hoyvil was not really thinking much about his future children at this point in his life. That wouldn't happen till at least 300 years from now. It seemed like an impossibly long time to a Verdante of his age. But he wanted to give Antaska the choice of having her own children in the future. He also wanted to give her the choice of cloning Potat, even though he found cloning somewhat distasteful in general.

"Very well, you've convinced me. I'll sign the release form for both of them," he said with a telepathic sigh of resignation.

"Finally," continued the doctor, "they're both malnourished due to that ghastly excuse for food they eat on Earth. The humans living on Earth continue to resist our attempts to improve their diets by insisting on eating harmful garbage," he fumed.

"There will be no more of that now that they're in my care," said M. Hoyvil with an air of responsibility. "I can already see an improvement from just the few healthy meals they've had so far on the space ship. They seem perkier and more alert."

"That's wonderful," answered the doctor. "I'll keep them here overnight, and you can get them in the morning. Since you'll be traveling through deep space, I'll put locator chips in their ears in case they get lost or stolen."



Antaska was relieved when the two aliens finally stopped staring at each other, and M. Hoyvil turned and spoke out loud to her.

“Dr. Daji wants you both to stay here overnight for treatment. He needs to do some minor cellular repairs. It will be painless, and you’ll sleep right through it. Will that be OK?” he asked her.

Antaska agreed somewhat nervously. The large alien doctor pressed another button on the exam table, and Antaska and Potat were surrounded by soft orange light.



In what seemed like the next moment, Antaska opened her eyes to find herself lying on a round bed with white bed covers in a small, round white room. Potat was curled up asleep by her side. A chime sound came from the door to the room, and it opened.

“May I come in?” asked Dr. Daji.

He peeked his enormous green head around the edge of the door.

“Yes,” Antaska answered.

The noise had woke Potat, and she looked up groggily.

“M. Hoyvil is here to take you back to your quarters now,” said the doctor. “Your treatment is complete, and you are both in good health for the voyage. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, we’re ready,” Antaska answered for both of them.

She got up and found the cat carrier on a nearby table. M. Hoyvil entered the room and looked at Potat, and Antaska heard some more whispering sounds.

“I think she wants to walk,” said M. Hoyvil.

“We can try that,” Antaska answered doubtfully.

“Meroww, mrow, mroww!” said Potat.

Then Antaska heard that small voice in her head again.

“Don’t put me in that cage like a prisoner! I want to walk! And stop pretending like you don’t hear me because I know you do.”

The medical treatment has left my head fuzzy and groggy. It’s making me

imagine stuff again, Antaska told herself.

M. Hoyvil placed Potat on the floor. Much to Antaska's surprise, the little cat followed them down the hallways of the space ship all the way back to their quarters. And she didn't run off or stop to sniff and scratch at anything.

Antaska considered the possibility that Potat could be more intelligent than she had given her credit for. She knew that cats in these modern times were more evolved and lived much longer than the house pets they had been in Earth's ancient days. History books said that before the great apocalypse over one million years ago, unlike the ancient dogs, cats couldn't be trained to perform tasks helpful to humans. In the case of Potat, Antaska didn't think she was showing that she could be trained, rather that she preferred to walk.

As they traveled through the hallways, they passed Verdantes of various sizes, some accompanied by Earth humans. Antaska heard faint whispering whenever they drew near. The humans stared with interest, some with big smiles, at little Potat rushing along beside them with quick movements of her short legs. The tall Verdantes waved their fingers and stared silently at M. Hoyvil but didn't seem to notice the small cat.



Back in their quarters, M. Hoyvil noticed that Potat was tired out from the long walk. She headed straight to Antaska's bed for a nap. M. Hoyvil felt recovered from his last big vocal conversation with Antaska. So he decided to work on some more bonding with her as Master Meeepp had recommended.

"Would you like me to tell you some details about our voyage?" he asked her.

"Yes, please," she answered.

"Our first stop will be the Verdante home planet, located in the KOI-351 star system. On our way there, we've already passed some of the solar systems closest to Earth: Proxima Centauri, Rigil Kentaurus, Barnard's Star, Wolf 359, etcetera. It'll take about a month to complete the trip to the home planet, and

we'll stay there for about a week. When we land, some people will leave the ship and some will board, and we'll load up with supplies for our hundred-year journey."

M. Hoyvil's vocal chords felt a little strained, but he looked down at Antaska and saw her staring up at him with interest, so he continued.

"Then, before heading out on our exploratory mission, we'll make one more stop in known space at the Tri-Galaxies Space Station. It's about three months' ship travel time from my home planet. We'll spend about a week at the space station, uploading the latest information on new solar systems that have been discovered. The ship's crew will plot and register our course with the intergalactic space travel authorities."

M. Hoyvil paused to grab a drink tube from one of the panel openings in the wall. Antaska walked over and climbed up to sit on the room's big couch. He took a long sip and then walked over to stand next to the couch. Then he continued.

"At the space station, we'll get off the ship and stay in special accommodations for Verdantes and Earth humans. The time will go fast with exploring tourist attractions and socializing. Then we'll take off for deep space—on our way to increase our knowledge of the Milky Way galaxy and discover new sentient beings. That's the basic overview of our trip," he concluded. "Do you have any questions?"



The description of the trip was all that Antaska had dreamed of. All her life, she had longed for the coveted assignment of traveling to deep space working for the Verdantes. Forgetting about the tall Earth man who had been so much in her thoughts for the last two days, Antaska was filled with a new energy and enthusiasm. She wanted to get started with her new work right away.

"Can you tell me what my job responsibilities will be as your assistant on the

trip?” she asked M. Hoyvil.

“Sure,” he answered. “Today is your first day as my assistant, and you’ll experience the regular routine of a workday. After breakfast, we’ll start every day with strenuous exercise in the gym. You’ll be in a class with other Earth humans. I know you exercised every day when you were in space school on Earth. But this will be much more intense.”

“Why’s that?” Antaska asked.

M. Hoyvil explained. “It’s because the life-extending diet supplements you’re getting in your food only work when combined with exercise. As you probably know, exercise lengthens your telomeres—the DNA molecules that affect aging. Cells die when your telomeres get too short to be able to divide, and then you get old and die. Exercise alone will only extend your life about ten to twenty years, but the supplements enhance and increase the effect.

“We give a weaker formula of these supplements to the Earth governments to add to their populations’ food, and we encourage Earth humans to exercise regularly. This has allowed your species to approximately double its life expectancy. But we can’t give humans on Earth the complete formula because some of the ingredients are dangerous if taken without enough exercise. And we can’t monitor the exercise habits of everyone on the planet.

“Now that you’re living with us, we monitor your health and fitness level every day. This lets you take the strongest-possible formula in each meal because we measure your body composition right before you eat. So now you can expect to live at least one hundred years longer than you had planned, or even more if you exercise strenuously.”

Antaska’s eyes widened.

“Don’t worry. We won’t force you to exercise if you don’t want to. It’s up to you,” M. Hoyvil said.

He waved his large green hands in a calming motion.

Antaska giggled. *He must think I’m really lazy*, she thought.

“I’m not worried. I’m just surprised,” said Antaska. “I’d like to live longer,

and I'll try to exercise hard if that's what it takes."

"That's great," said M. Hoyvil. "Anyway, after the gym, I have meetings before and after lunch. These might be boring for you, and you won't have to go to the meetings if you don't want to. I'll take you today, and you can decide. In the late afternoon, I do work on my computer in our quarters. We have two days of rest after every five days of work.

"Of course, our most important work won't begin until we discover new planets with humanoid species on them. At that point, you might be asked to act as our point of contact. How does that sound?" he asked.

"It sounds fine, but is there other work I can do until then? It could be many years before I'm needed for that." Antaska asked.

She didn't want to seem pushy, but she didn't want to feel useless for most of the journey.



M. Hoyvil looked down at Antaska. He thought for a moment about how to answer her question. He eased his parched throat with another sip from his beverage tube, then spoke.

"Yes, there is something else you'll do to help me on this trip," M. Hoyvil began.

He knew that Master Meepp would disapprove of what he was about to tell her.

"Most of the time, your role will be something like a travel companion. I'll explain to you why this is so important. You know that the Verdantes are telepathic, but you probably don't know the problems this ability creates for us."

"Problems?" Antaska asked.

"Yes," said M. Hoyvil. "On the plus side, it makes communication faster and clearer. Sometimes words can have more than one meaning, and it can be difficult to express an exact meaning within the limitations of a spoken language.

But there are very few misunderstandings when someone is able to read your exact thoughts.

“On the minus side, being telepathic can be very disturbing. Other Verdantes can read my thoughts, and I can easily read theirs. But I don’t want them to know what I’m thinking all the time. And I definitely don’t want to know what they’re thinking. It’s worst when we’re physically near each other. That’s why we sit apart in the dining hall and usually stay at least five feet apart, except for the permanently mated adult couples.”

He saw Antaska’s eyes widen again. “So that’s why,” she said.

“That’s right,” said M. Hoyvil. “You probably saw the adult couples sitting on their side of the room. They don’t seem to have any problem with always knowing what the other one is thinking. It’s also not as much of a problem with family members we grow up with, and children don’t care who reads their thoughts. Unless they’re hiding something.”

He chuckled, remembering a certain time.

“But when we reach adolescence, it can be annoying. And when we leave home to go on a long space trip, it becomes a big problem,” M. Hoyvil finished.

His vocal cords and mouth muscles felt strained from the long explanation. He swapped his empty drink tube for a full one from the compartment in the wall and paused to gulp thirstily. He saw that Antaska was looking at him. She still seemed to be interested, so he continued.

“There’s a way to block others from reading our thoughts. We can hold a mental wall around our mind. But it’s tiring, and we can’t do it all the time. So we have to stay apart a lot of the time to be comfortable.

“Now because the galaxy is immense, and we can only travel so fast through it, our space exploration trips are at least a hundred years long. That means spending a lot of time either alone or with other Verdantes. Either way, most space explorers in the past ended up with severe mental problems after making these trips.”

Antaska’s wide eyes got even wider.

I hope I'm not shocking her too much, M. Hoyvil thought. But Master Meepp said I should tell her about myself too, didn't he?

M. Hoyvil knew that in reality, Master Meepp would most likely not approve of sharing this information, but he continued anyway.

“Being alone was a problem because all humanoids have a natural need to be around others in order to be emotionally healthy. And I’ve already explained why being close to people who can read your thoughts is a problem.”

He looked at Antaska for confirmation that she understood, and she nodded.

“We kept sending volunteers into space anyway because our species has a strong drive to discover and understand new sentient species. But the explorers came back with emotional scars that couldn’t always be healed.

“All that changed about 10,000 years ago when we contacted Earth humans and offered them our assistance and protection. Of course, we knew you were there for a long time before that, but until then, we didn’t have legal approval to contact you. The galactic authorities gave us that approval when we proved we had a genetic link to your species.

“At first, we wouldn’t take humans into space because we thought it might be dangerous, and they might be harmed. But the Earth humans were mad to get into space, if you’ll excuse that term. Thousands of them practically begged us to take them and swore that any consequence, including death, was a small price to pay for the trip.

“Finally, we relented, and a complicated legal agreement was drawn up between us and both your North and South Pole governments.”

He didn’t tell Antaska the terms of the agreement. It stated that Earth humans who went with Verdantes would become legally owned by them, relieving the Earth governments of any legal liability. M. Hoyvil decided to not mention that yet.

“The first trip was amazingly successful,” M. Hoyvil continued. “None of the Verdantes who took Earth humans with them returned with any mental problems at all. They said that Earth humans were perfect travel companions. They were

friendly and sociable. The Verdantes could be close to them without knowing what they were thinking and vice versa. And the rest is history.”

M. Hoyvil finished with a slump of his shoulders and an exhausted droop of his eyes. His powerful hearing detected a tiny sound, and he looked toward Antaska’s room. Little Potat stood in the doorway looking back at him. He lifted the corners of his enormous green eyes in a friendly smile.



From the doorway, Potat, still unnoticed by Antaska, stared at M. Hoyvil. What he just said interested the tiny cat.

I wonder what else he’s not telling us, she thought. I should read his mind to check, just in case there’s anything I need to know. After all, he’s my pet too now. But first, I should find out what Antaska thinks about all this.

Antaska was sitting quietly looking still looking at M. Hoyvil. As she had done countless times before, Potat easily focused on Antaska’s mind.

Wow! This weakness that M. Hoyvil just revealed is astonishing! Antaska was thinking. I’m so surprised to hear that these technologically superior, telepathic aliens are so dependent on Earth humans.

Potat detected the swell of Antaska’s ego. Then it returned to its normal level when Antaska thought, *That’s true, but without the Verdantes, humans wouldn’t be able to travel in space at all. Our technology for space travel is still limited to Earth’s own solar system.*

At least she’s not thinking about that big hulky guy for a change, Potat thought.

She wiped a paw across her head to straighten down a few hairs.

Antaska still hadn’t noticed Potat. She spoke to M. Hoyvil again.

“Thanks for explaining so much,” Antaska said to M. Hoyvil in her polite voice. “I’m ready to get started on my first day as your assistant.”

Potat switched over to reading M. Hoyvil’s mind.

I'm so relieved that Antaska didn't seem to be at all bothered by what I just told her, Potat read. And I'm glad she's so eager to get out and about the ship. So far, she's met all my expectations for the ideal pet—I mean companion. One who would be active and go with me around the space ship and space station, not one who would spend most of her time resting in quarters.

Well, that's kind of offensive! thought Potat. *Doesn't he know that cats need seventeen hours of sleep a day to be healthy? But I guess I can forgive him since he's only thinking about Antaska this time.*

Thinking about sleep made Potat tired. She turned and went back inside the room and then jumped up on the bed. Potat curled up fast asleep on the round pillow, working on achieving the total sleep hours that felines of all sizes needed each day.

Chapter 7

After breakfast, M. Hoyvil took Antaska to the gym for her first workout. It was located between their quarters and the dining hall. An open archway led into an immense room the size of an Earth football field. Its tan-colored walls curved inward and upward to a domed ceiling about thirty feet above its deep-cushioned tan flooring. On the side of the room nearest to the door, Verdantes close to the size of M. Hoyvil exercised in two separate groups with two of the larger and heavier aliens as instructors. Males were in one group, and females were in another.

M. Hoyvil led Antaska to the back of the gym. A group of about twenty humans dressed as she was in tan t-shirts and exercise shorts stood facing their instructors. Antaska was shocked to see that the trainers were the attractive couple she had seen in the dining hall.

Up close, their defined muscles rippled underneath tight, form-revealing gym clothes. At about seven feet tall, they towered over the Earth humans in the class. Both appeared to have north European ancient Earth genes—high cheekbones, light skin, pale eyes, and blonde hair—and something else Antaska couldn't identify.

They both turned to stare at Antaska as she approached. Long gold-toned hair flowed to the waist of the female. Her light-blue eyes shot ice fire at Antaska. The male stared with undisguised interest in his light gray-green eyes. He ran a hand through his straight platinum blonde hair.

M. Hoyvil spoke to Antaska.

"This is your class," he said in a scratchy voice.

Then he walked back toward the front of the room.

For a moment, Antaska was frozen in her tracks, but she made an effort to stir herself. She joined the other students and stood among them looking at the trainers for instructions.

The two tall humans stared back unsmiling for a minute or two, looking over all their new students. Antaska felt grateful for the looseness of her clothes when she felt the eyes of first one, then the other, raking her body from top to bottom.

The stares of each of them made her uncomfortable but in different ways. A powerful thrill that somehow combined desire with fear twisted through her when the man's eyes moved slowly up her body. His face wore a slight, somewhat lecherous smile. The woman's cold, hard stare followed soon after, with her mouth set firm in a tight line. Finally, they finished their visual inspection, and the female spoke.

"Welcome new students. I am Tilde, and my partner is Eegor. I see that most of you aren't used to a regular, intense exercise program. Starting now, that's going to change. In the three months you'll be in this class, we will work you hard. You will sweat, and you will strain. We will push and push you until you are in the best shape of your life. Do not even think about resisting; we are experts in what we do."

Antaska was trying to pay attention, but Tilde's first words distracted her.

She just called him her partner. Does that mean teaching partner or something else? Antaska wondered.

"You will do intense cardio to burn off your extra fat and train your body to run fast if you need to," Tilde was saying. "You'll lift heavy weights to build up your puny muscles, and you'll learn martial arts for self-defense. You're about to go on a trip into unknown space where unexpected things can happen. You can count on your Verdantes to keep you safe. But they want you to be in top physical condition and to be able to defend yourself in case of an unlikely emergency. Now we'll get started."

For the first hour, the instructors had the students alternate ten minutes of running around the gym or jumping in place with ten minutes of lifting weights. The two trainers circulated among them. They corrected their form and demanded that they work faster or harder. Anyone who slowed down in their running or lifting got embarrassing personal attention. Either the male or the

female trainer would stand directly in front of the slacking exercisers shouting into their faces.

“Why are you stopping, you weak, pitiful excuse for a human? Keep moving, or I’ll throw you on the floor and knock the wind from your body, and your Verdante will thank me for it.”

This motivation was effective, and Antaska was relieved to see that, so far, no one had ended up on the floor gasping for breath. She exercised as hard as she could to avoid personal attention. But she still found the male instructor standing in front of her when she was doing shoulder presses—lifting a heavy bar above her head twelve times without stopping.

“Your form is all wrong. I, Egor, will show you how it’s done,” he said in a thick, rough voice.

He struck a pose to display his muscular arms and chest, and Antaska’s mouth dropped open. Then he took the bar from her hands and easily lifted it above his head.

“Now you try,” he said.

He walked behind her and stood inches away from her back.

Antaska was stunned by his overwhelming attractiveness and flustered by this sudden unaccustomed, uninvited physical closeness, but she obediently raised up the bar. Her mind seemed to go completely blank as she lifted and Egor pressed up next to her. He placed his large, firm chest against her back while grasping her forearms in his hands.

Egor guided her arms up, saying, “Yes, this is the way.”

It didn’t seem much different from what she’d been doing, but Antaska didn’t say anything. She was both relived and disappointed when finally he moved away from her. Looking to the front of the class, Antaska met the narrowed, angry eyes of Tilde. She looked down in guilty confusion.

The second half of the class began. The trainers demonstrated basic kicking and punching moves and made the class repeat them many times each. Anyone who got tired or winded and stopped to rest was subjected to the intimidation of

the trainers. Antaska was exhausted, but she kept going with the right-foot kick the class was practicing. In spite of her best efforts, she looked up to see seven-foot-tall muscular Tilde glaring down at her.

“You are wrong, I will show you,” said Tilde in a hostile, clipped tone.

Displaying perfect form, Tilde bent one knee to support the weight of her body as she leaned to that side. Then she swung and kicked her powerful opposite leg hard into Antaska’s rib cage. Antaska fell backward to the cushioned floor and curled up into a fetal position, clutching her stomach. She lay there momentarily unable to move from the painful blow. The instructor looked down at Antaska with a satisfied expression.

“That was my warning shot,” said Tilde.

Then she turned and walked away.

Antaska groaned. She felt her sore ribs. Were any broken? She had no idea how to tell that.

The woman who had been exercising next to Antaska stepped close to her and looked down at her with concern. She was short and slightly plump with bright red hair, pale skin, and freckles.

“Are you okay?” she asked in a soft, concerned voice.

Tilde spun around and faced her.

“Do not talk in class, or you will join her on the floor,” she said gruffly.

The small red-haired woman returned to her place.

Antaska wanted to stay down on the floor, but she pushed herself to sit up.

What is her problem? she thought about Tilde. *That female has some real jealousy and anger issues! Obviously this relationship isn’t healthy for her. Or that poor guy. I would be doing them both a favor to break them up, right?*

“Wrong! Wrong!” a tiny female voice spoke in her mind, accompanied by the image of Potat.

Antaska felt her head.

I must have banged my head when I fell down, she decided. *Anyway, back on Earth, people were always grateful to get broken up. Because we were taught not*

to get attached. Because we would all have to go our separate ways with the Verdantes. It's kind of like that now, right? she asked herself.

“No! No!” said the unwelcome voice in her head.

Ignoring the voice, Antaska stood back up and got back to kicking and punching, feeling the painful burn in her ribs with every movement.



During the workout, M. Hoyvil had been anxiously watching Antaska, and he saw when Tilde kicked her. Then he kept watching after that to make sure she was OK.

Should I go over there? he kept asking himself.

“I know you students are distracted on your first day in the gym with your new pets,” the gigantic adult trainer Master Mytaar addressed M. Hoyvil’s class. “But I warn you that distraction is a weakness that will be exploited by your opponents. And to prove my point and teach you this lesson, I will take advantage of that weakness right now.”

Master Mytaar looked around at the class. But M. Hoyvil wasn’t paying attention to the master. The big adult was more heavily muscled but shorter than most adult Verdantes, and he moved surprisingly fast for a being of his enormous size and bulk. He attacked M. Hoyvil in a blur of motion. He dropped M. Hoyvil to the floor with a kick to the legs, similar to Tilde’s kick to Antaska’s ribs but less painful.

That got M. Hoyvil’s attention. He looked up almost ten feet at Master Mytaar. The master was staring down at him with a stern expression. But the lifted corners of the huge green eyes in his broad-featured dark green face indicated some amount of amusement.

“Of all the students today, you are the most distracted by worry for your new pet,” said the master telepathically. “Your concern is a sign of great strength of character, but it can also become your greatest weakness if you let it.”

M. Hoyvil stood up to face Master Mytaar, decreasing their height difference to less than two feet.

“I understand that, but I can’t help being worried about her. It looks like her instructors have singled her out for their personal attention. In fact, I would call it bullying. I think you should talk to them about that. And also, I would prefer if you call her my companion, not my ‘pet,’ if you don’t mind,” M. Hoyvil asked with some courage.

It was not the place of the student to instruct the master in what he should do.

The gigantic Master Mytaar chuckled. Then he spoke in the prophetic manner that was often used by the adults and that M. Hoyvil found so annoying.

“You are a brave and passionate one. I see that you are destined for greatness. Whether that will be great success or great suffering will depend on your actions and your reactions. Looking at the smaller picture, I don’t have a problem with calling her your *companion*,” he answered, pronouncing the word with extra emphasis.”

“Thank you, master,” M. Hoyvil replied with a nod of his head.

“I don’t really care what she is called,” the master continued. “But those two fitness instructors are my personal pets—my most perfect creations—and I won’t interfere with their classes. They are the product of genes I carefully selected from the most athletic of the human pets I’ve had for over a thousand years. During that time, I chose only Earth’s top athletes to join me as my pets and as physical trainers for the Earth humans who travel to deep space.

“My life partner wanted beautiful pets, so I allowed her to design their physical attractiveness chromosome mixtures using DNA she selected from the most beautiful of Earth humans. The final result is what I believe to be the two most physically powerful and beautiful humans who have ever lived,” said the master.

M. Hoyvil rolled his large green eyes, but Master Mytaar didn’t seem to notice.

“Over the hundred years Tilde and Eegor have been working with me as

trainers, their unorthodox methods have proven successful and beneficial to the human pets they have trained. I designed them as the world's two most attractive humans with the intention that they would become a romantic couple. And they are truly fond of each other, although their relationship has its rough spots," said Master Mytaar.

"Oh. Rough spots," said M. Hoyvil.

"That's only to be expected from humans. As you know, they don't have our ability to form deep bonds between life partners. Still, there are a few human couples who have stayed constant to each other while living among us as pets. Perhaps the influence of our positive example is what has made this possible for them," said the master.

M. Hoyvil shuffled his feet. He felt like this explanation was more information than he needed, but the student did not interrupt the master.

"In any case," said Master Mytaar, "I don't think you realize that your *companion* also played a part in this drama. In your excessive observance of her today, didn't you notice that she encouraged the advances of my pet Eegor. Or at the least she didn't discourage him? If she hadn't shown such a weakness, Tilde wouldn't have become jealous and felt the need to defend her territory."

"Huh!" At a loss for words, M. Hoyvil let out an exclamation of offended indignation. "Are you saying that Antaska is responsible for the bad behavior of your pets?"

M. Hoyvil's resentment of Tilde and Eegor overcame any objections he had about calling them pets.

"I'm not trying to blame or criticize Antaska. After all, she's no more flawed than any other Earth human, and even among the Verdantes, we have our faults. Can any humanoid ever be perfect?" the master asked. "What I'm trying to say is that if my pets have singled out Antaska for their special attention, it's a sign that she needs that attention. The universe always provides us with what we need, but we must be willing to accept that help in whatever form it is given."

"Huh?" said M. Hoyvil again.

“Yes,” said Master Mytaar. “Be warned that your *companion* will have even greater challenges to face in the future. Be grateful that she’s being forced to learn to defend herself against much stronger forces that may threaten her. And the universe is not providing this lesson for her benefit alone. It’s clear that there’s something you also need to learn from this experience in order to face what lies ahead of you.”

M. Hoyvil wasn’t pleased by this explanation, but he bowed appropriately and answered, “Yes, instructor.”

As Master Mytaar walked away, M. Hoyvil’s thoughts about him were less than appropriate.

I wonder if he’s just making excuses because he doesn’t want to upset his precious pets. The adults always claim to have superior knowledge because they talk to the trees. I guess the trees are experts on this situation, M. Hoyvil thought sarcastically.

The large instructor turned back and looked at M. Hoyvil with the corners of his eyes lifted in a smug smile.

“Do not ever assume that I don’t know what you’re thinking,” he said.



A loud but melodious gong sounded throughout the gym.

“Time for exercise is over!” Tall, beautiful Tilde shouted at the class of Earth humans.

Antaska was relieved. The room darkened, and the occupants of the gym, both Earth human and Verdante, all sat down for a final stretch and cool down. After ten minutes, the gong sounded again, and the light in the room brightened. They all stretched and rose to their feet, and the Verdantes came to collect their human companions. Antaska slowly stood back up, pushing against her body’s aches and stiffness.

She was still in the painful process of straightening back up to a standing

position when M. Hoyvil reached her side.

“Are you OK? Do you need a hand getting up?” he asked her.

His enormous eyes were wide with what she recognized as concern.

Antaska was touched, and she wanted to grab onto the big green hand. But she looked over and saw the two fitness instructors watching her.

If he helps me up, they’ll see that as a sign of weakness, she thought. And Tilde will think she’s beaten me down.

“Thank you, but I’m fine. I can get up by myself,” said Antaska.

“OK. If you’re sure,” said M. Hoyvil.

He dropped his hand back to his side and waited. Then they walked together out of the gym.

As each of the students exited, a blue light filled the entranceway. M. Hoyvil paused to let Antaska go through first, then he followed.

Just outside the door, a disembodied voice spoke out loud.

“Four of the left ribs of this human are badly bruised but not broken. Place a cold pack on the ribs for twenty minutes.”

A small compartment opened up in the wall on the side of the doorway. Inside was a round, soft-looking liquid-filled object. M. Hoyvil reached in and removed the cold pack. He handed it to Antaska, and the opening in the wall closed again.

“I’m relieved to hear that nothing is broken. Hold this on your ribs, and it should help you feel better,” M. Hoyvil told her.

Antaska placed the pack on her sore ribs, and it did seem to help. She walked slowly, distracted more by thoughts of Egor than by the pain.

I guess this is proof that he really is interested in me, she thought giddily.

Similar thoughts about Egor swirled uncontrollably through her mind, accompanied by visual images of his physical perfections.

Up close, he was even more beautiful than I imagined, almost like a work of art. Perfectly sculpted cheekbones and straight nose—not too small, not too big. The power of his intense gray-green eyes was irresistible. He really is the most handsome and physically fit man I’ve ever seen. How could he even notice me

when it seems like the world's most beautiful woman is his partner? Antaska asked herself with a pleasurable surge of vanity.

M. Hoyvil was walking at a slow pace that was easy for Antaska to keep up with. He didn't speak until they were inside their main room.

"Are you OK?" he asked again looking down at her. "Do you want to see Dr. Daji? Those trainers were much too rough on you."

Antaska could sense some emotion in his facial expression and his words, and she was touched by his concern. At this moment, the beginning of a small but very real bond between them began to form.

"I'm sore, but I don't need to see the doctor. The voice at the gym door said nothing is broken. Thank you for asking," she answered.

In Antaska's mind, the thrill of Eegor's interest far outweighed the price of pain she had paid. She felt a strong urge to tell someone about what had happened but definitely not her new employer, M. Hoyvil.

"OK, but tell me if they get too rough, and I'll do something about it," M. Hoyvil promised. "Would you rather stay in the rooms and rest now instead of going to the meeting with me?"

"No, I want to go to the meeting," Antaska answered.

He nodded, and they both went into their separate rooms to shower and change into their ship suits.

In Antaska's room, Potat was still asleep on the round pillow on the round bed in the exact position she had been in when they left. Antaska sat next to her on the bed, and Potat opened her tiny golden eyes to stare up at her. Then Potat got up and rubbed softly against Antaska's bruised side, purring loudly. Antaska petted her lightly but felt too sore to pick her up.

Bursting with the need to talk about her experience in the gym, she spoke to Potat.

"Something really interesting has happened. The most gorgeous, most buff man you've ever seen was looking at me in the dining hall, and today he came right over to me in gym class. I think he's interested in me. Even though he

might already have a partner, who is amazingly beautiful. Well, sometimes people change partners. That happens all the time. That's how it was on Earth. Maybe their relationship is ending, and he's looking for a new partner. What do you think?"

Of course, Potat didn't answer. She didn't seem to be interested in the story at all.

I must have been crazy to think this cat was talking to me before, Antaska thought. She doesn't care about my love life!

"I care, but you don't listen," Antaska imagined that Potat was answering her.

"Yeah, I must have hit my head too," Antaska said.

Potat looked up at her and meowed.

"Hello!" Antaska imagined the cat voice was saying.

She bent over painfully to give Potat a small hug. Then she sat back up with a groan.

"I have to shower and get ready for the meeting now," Antaska told her. "I'd like to take you, but I don't know if that would be allowed. I'll ask M. Hoyvil about it, and maybe you can go next time."

Potat continued to circle around her, purring and pressing against her sides.

"I'm fine," Antaska insisted.

She stood up slowly, still feeling the pain in her ribs, and got ready for the meeting.



M. Hoyvil waited for Antaska in the main room. He carried his backpack and computer. They were really going to one of his classes, but he had told Antaska it was a meeting. He wasn't sure if she was ready to find out yet that he wasn't really an adult, and this wasn't really a job.

Antaska came out with Potat right behind her. But instead of standing next to the door and meowing like she did the last time they went out, Potat stopped in

the middle of the room.

She must not want to go with us this time, M. Hoyvil thought.

Potat looked up at him and blinked. A low female voice seemed to echo in his mind, but he couldn't make out the words.

"I'm sorry, but I can't hear you very well," M. Hoyvil apologized to her telepathically.

Potat blinked at him again. Then circled around the main room and headed into his room through his open door.

"That's not your room!" Antaska called after her.

M. Hoyvil's eyes curved up in a smile.

"It's fine," he told Antaska. "She can't break anything in there."

"Knowing Potat, she might try. She loves to rip up couches and chairs," said Antaska.

"Oh, that's OK," said M. Hoyvil. "All the furniture is self-repairing."

He palmed the door opener, and they went out and on their way.

On the way to class, M. Hoyvil thought about what had happened to Antaska in the gym. It didn't escape his notice that she was probably interested in the un-Earthly attractive male trainer, but she was an adult of her species. The rules for the treatment of humans didn't allow him to interfere with their mating behavior. He could give her advice, but he was sure that she would resent it. In any case, he really didn't want to talk about it.

Still, he was worried. What if something worse happened next time? He didn't know what he could actually do, but he was determined to protect her.

Chapter 8

Antaska walked with M. Hoyvil into the circle-shaped meeting room, and she heard more of the now-familiar whispering sounds. The room held about thirty large desks placed so they curved around and faced a larger desk placed at the back. The ceiling was higher than the one in the main room in their quarters but lower than those in the dining hall and gym. It had the same domed shape Antaska had seen so far in all the rooms in the space ship.

Verdantes who were the same size as M. Hoyvil—some accompanied by Earth humans, some not—entered the room and sat at big desks. Each desk had at least two chairs: one large Verdante chair and one or more smaller human-sized chairs with attached step ladders.

M. Hoyvil first led Antaska to a side wall. He opened a compartment and handed her two drink tubes. Then he took four more for himself, easily holding two in each of his six-fingered hands. Then he led her to an empty desk. He pulled a computer tablet from his backpack and placed it on the desk before sitting down.

Antaska was temporarily distracted from both her sore ribs and her thoughts of Eegor by the sound of loud whispering. She climbed the steps to her chair and sat down. Then she looked around the room and recognized some of the humans from her exercise class but not all of them. Antaska wondered if the rest of them had stayed in their rooms resting and recovering from the intense, unaccustomed workout.

The red-haired woman who had spoke to Antaska in the gym was sitting a few seats over. She smiled and waved when Antaska looked her way. Antaska smiled and waved back.

“It’s nice to see how you humans can socialize so easily,” M. Hoyvil said.

Antaska smiled up at him. She remembered what he had told her about the Verdantes social problems, and for the first time, she felt kind of sorry for him

and his species.

The room was quiet except for the voices whispering in Antaska's mind. She ignored them.

I know it's from that bump on the head, she told herself.

Now that she was sitting still, the pain in Antaska's ribs came back. Her body and all her muscles were exhausted from the hard workout. She tried to keep her back up straight, but the effort was too much, and she slumped.

M. Hoyvil was still looking at her.

"The dark green drink will help you recover from the workout and get stronger," he said.

Antaska suddenly felt very thirsty. She took a big drink from the dark green beverage tube.

"That one not only has fluid to rehydrate your body but also protein, simple and complex carbohydrates, and a small amount of healthy fat—everything your body needs to build new muscle tissue," M. Hoyvil said.

Then he also lifted a tube of dark green liquid to his mouth and took a long drink.

Suddenly, the whispering noises stopped, and the room became absolutely silent. One of the larger-sized Verdante males entered the room. He walked to the big desk at the back. At under ten feet, he wasn't as tall as the largest of the aliens Antaska had seen so far. And he seemed to be older, with graying green hair and deep wrinkles on his dark green-skinned face. Bushy gray-green eyebrows topped enormous slanted eyes.

Before sitting down, the huge green man stood and silently looked around the room. Then, the whispering sound was back—a low and rumbling deep male voice. All through the meeting, no one spoke out loud. Antaska assumed the large man was speaking telepathically to the group. The Verdantes sitting at the desks stared toward the front of the room at the larger man. He said nothing but looked back and occasionally waved the six fingers of both hands.

Many of the Verdantes typed on computer tablets like M. Hoyvil's. Every so

often, one of them would raise up a hand. The big man would look over and sometimes point with his own wavy-fingered hand. At those times, Antaska heard the whispering of higher-pitched male or female voices. As much as she tried to deny it, Antaska couldn't help but wonder if she was hearing parts of the Verdantes' telepathic speech.

Could it be possible? she asked herself. *But M. Hoyvil said humans don't have any telepathic abilities. That's what makes us useful in space as companions. If I were telepathic, then I wouldn't be able to go on this trip.*

Antaska's anxiety grew stronger.

I'm not telepathic; I can't be telepathic! she insisted to herself. *Whatever I'm hearing is my imagination, and I won't pay any more attention to it.*

Blank expressions began to appear on the faces of the Earth humans who sat sipping from drink tubes. Antaska might have been bored by this meeting too, but her mind turned to thoughts of Egor. Physically, she was starting to feel better, and she was content to sit sipping her drink and take comfort in the large presence of M. Hoyvil.

After about fifteen minutes, the meeting became more interesting, and thoughts of Egor fled from Antaska's mind. An enormous floor-to-ceiling, 3-D holographic image appeared in front of the large alien's desk. A planet floated in space with strange symbols written in the air above it. The giant man stood up and walked around inside of the image. He wagged his arms and fingers about and pointed a long wand at various features shown in the hologram.

The panoramic image zoomed in to show features of the desert planet's geography. Then closer and closer to show trees and buildings, and then some odd-looking humanoids. They wore long, dark midnight blue cloaks that partly hid their dark blue faces. The camera zoomed in to show sharp-planed but otherwise humanoid faces and heads. Their metallic skin reflected light and was difficult to focus on. Pale white clouds floated and swirled in their strange eyes.

Antaska felt the tension in the room increase as the big man continued to wave his hands and wand at the holograph. It showed more images of

humanoids, animals, and other life and non-life forms on the same planet. The Earth humans no longer looked bored. They stared intently at the moving images along with their Verdante companions. Again, many green hands were raised, the big green man would point at one of the hand raisers, and the hands would go down.

During this time, something familiar about this meeting began to nag in the back of Antaska's mind. But her interest in the holographic images kept her from focusing on that familiarity. Finally, after almost an hour, the holograph faded. The gigantic alien seemed drained of energy. He walked with heavy steps back behind his desk and sat down. His huge green head rotated from one side to the other as he stared at the meeting attendants. Then he sat still, seeming to look at nothing in particular.

This meeting was really more like a lecture, Antaska thought.

She watched many of the Verdantes get up to leave with their human assistants. A few others left their human assistants sitting at the desks and walked toward the large alien at the back of the room. The smaller body size of the Verdantes in the audience compared to the lecturer now reminded Antaska of a classroom of younger students and an older teacher.

But how could that be possible if M. Hoyvil is a full-grown adult man? she asked herself.

Wondering about this strange similarity, she looked up at M. Hoyvil.



Class was over, and M. Hoyvil stood up.

"It's time for lunch now," he told Antaska.

He waited for her to climb down from her chair.

Normally, he'd go to the teacher's desk and ask some more questions about the subject of this lecture—the treacherous Woogah species. But today, he didn't want to make Antaska wait in the chair any longer than necessary.

They left the lecture room and walked to the dining hall. M. Hoyvil adjusted his stride to Antaska's much shorter one. She was going even slower than usual, and he worried that she might still be in pain.

After they were seated with their meals in the dining room, M. Hoyvil was ready to talk vocally to Antaska again. He thought he was getting quite good at it, and he was learning to eat and drink in between talking, so it wasn't disruptive to his meal.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked.

"I'm still a little sore and tired but mostly feeling better," Antaska answered.

M. Hoyvil was relieved. "Do you have any questions about the meeting?"

"Yes, I do have some questions," she answered after a moment. "I was wondering about that. It seemed more like a lecture than a meeting. Is that right?"

"You are exactly right!" said M. Hoyvil, pleased by her astuteness.

He took another bite of his food.

Antaska continued. "In some ways, it reminded me of my classes in school, with the teachers much larger in size than the students. I think you said that the bigger Verdantes are much older, and that you'll get taller when you're older. Does that mean that you're a child?"

Antaska she sat back in her chair, looking at him and waiting for him to answer.

M. Hoyvil took a big drink from his beverage tube before replying. He hadn't been expecting this question so soon. In fact, many Earth humans never got around to asking it. Sometimes, much older humans figured this out. But they were usually closely bonded by then and not too upset by the revelation.

M. Hoyvil worried not only about Antaska's reaction but also about the other humans sitting near them who might overhear his answer. Maybe because of his unusual behavior in speaking vocally to her during the meal, the two of them were even now the object of the attention of many of the other Verdantes and their human companions.

“I’ll answer that question when we’re back in our quarters,” M. Hoyvil said at last. “It needs some more explanation. But this isn’t the place to talk about it because others might be listening. Those who have not asked the question or even thought of the question aren’t ready to hear the answer.”

M. Hoyvil was somewhat embarrassed to find himself talking in the manner of the adults. But Antaska just nodded her head in agreement and went back to eating her food. They ate the rest of their meal in silence, but M. Hoyvil carried on conversations with his friends, both telepathically and by using sign language.

The other Verdantes were both impressed and concerned to hear that Antaska had asked him about school and their actual relative ages. Many suggestions were given about how he should answer, along with warnings not to give out too much information.

After lunch, M. Hoyvil and Antaska walked back to their quarters. This time, M. Hoyvil walked slower because he was thinking about the discussion they would soon have. Although the time they had been together so far was not long, he realized that owning her had already provided many unexpected challenges. He didn’t believe everything Master Mytaar said. But it seemed likely that in the future, she would provide even more tests for him as the person legally responsible for her.

M. Hoyvil looked down at her—a small figure walking by his side—as he thought about this possibility, and he had no doubts that he had made a good choice. The trip through space could get dull while traveling long distances between inhabited planets, and it would be more interesting with a challenging companion.

Chapter 9

Back in the main room of their quarters, Antaska sat next to M. Hoyvil on the big curved couch. She felt like a child again as she swung her dangling feet. She also felt somewhat foolish for thinking that this very large man might be a child.

“Mew!” Antaska heard from across the room.

Potat walked confidently out of M. Hoyvil’s room with her tail lifted high. She crouched low. Then she sprang up in the air several times higher than the height of her body and landed on the couch in between the two humanoids. Potat sat up straight and alert, as if waiting for the conversation. Her ears were open wide for maximum reception.

M. Hoyvil began his explanation. “You’re right that the much larger Verdantes are full-grown adults, and those of us who are smaller are not yet fully grown. However, that doesn’t mean we’re children.”

“Baby, baby!” Antaska heard that small female voice talking in her head again.

“I am not a baby!” Antaska heard the voice of M. Hoyvil answer back in her head.

Antaska shook her head trying to clear it.

No, she told herself, I did not hear anything.

M. Hoyvil lowered his eyes to frown at Potat. Then he continued talking out loud.

“My physical growth stage is actually at the point of just starting adolescence, but I’m 650 years old. My comparative mental age is much older than the longest-living Earth human.”

He looked at Antaska waiting for her response.

Again Antaska thought she heard the small voice of Potat repeat the word “baby.”

Antaska ignored the voice. She was stunned to hear her suspicions confirmed

by M. Hoyvil.

“But most of the Verdantes on Earth who help our species are smaller than you and younger than you? I heard they’re between 400 and 600 years old. Are you saying that our planet has been overseen all this time by children?” Antaska asked.

“Physically, the Verdante supervisors on Earth may be children, but their mental capacity is beyond that of your oldest scientists,” M. Hoyvil answered. “They understand and provide your race with the technological and medical advances that have more than doubled your lifespans from what they were when we first made contact with you about 10,000 years ago.”

“I guess,” said Antaska. “But they’re still children really, right?”

“Here’s another comparison. Take the example of your own age of fifty,” M. Hoyvil said. “Physically, you’re now a young adult. Before the Verdantes started helping Earth humans, a woman your age would have been in her late middle ages, soon on her way to old age. Just a few hundred years before that time, most Earth humans didn’t even live to be your age. And if the life expectancy of your species doubles again in the future, a woman your age will just be starting adolescence—at the same growth stage that I’m at. So if you were a member of a species with a lifespan that was twice what you have now, would you think of yourself as a child?”

Antaska thought about M. Hoyvil’s somewhat confusing explanation. In a weird way, it made sense. But on the other hand, it stirred up even more questions in her mind.

“I understand what you’re saying,” she said finally, “but I don’t understand why you would send children among us to act as our trainers and supervisors instead of sending adults. It seems like the adult Verdantes were hidden from us. Why?”

“There’s a very simple answer to that question,” said M. Hoyvil. “Our children are closer to your species in size than our adults and, therefore, less disturbing. Our sociologists studied the Earth humans for some time before the

first contact. They determined that your people would be frightened by a much larger, alien-looking species. Actually, most humanoids are.”

Antaska turned and down looked at tiny Potat by her side. The little cat didn’t seem frightened at all. She was calmly washing first one paw and then the other.

“Anyway, as you probably learned when you studied your history in school, the humans of Earth were quite violent at the time of our first contact,” M. Hoyvil went on. “They frequently used deadly weapons if they felt threatened. Of course, our superior technology would have prevented them from harming us. But our goal was to establish a peaceful, harmonious relationship and to be seen as your benevolent helpers. It was decided that the quickest way to do that was to send those of us most similar in appearance to your race—our children—as our representatives.”

“Are you saying that your people left children alone on another planet unsupervised, trusting them to supervise the planet’s inhabitants?” Antaska asked.

She still wasn’t able to entirely grasp the logic of what M. Hoyvil was telling her.

“Oh no, they were never left alone,” he assured her. “Many full-grown adults as well as various adolescents have been living on Earth with the children from the beginning. But they never show themselves to the Earthlings. The adults stay inside the restricted area we set up on your planet, but they’re always there monitoring and directing things. Believe me, you can’t get away from them wherever you go.”

M. Hoyvil finished speaking with what sounded like resentment in his voice. Then he flopped backward and rested against the back of the couch.



After this long amount of use, M. Hoyvil’s vocal cords started to feel the strain. He paused, pulled out two drink tubes from the wall cabinet, and offered one to

Antaska. M. Hoyvil took a big drink. He drank thirstily from his tube and watched Antaska drink from hers too. M. Hoyvil hoped it was a sign that she was getting tired of talking too. But he looked at her, waiting to see if she was going to ask him anything else.

I'll keep talking if I have to, he told himself.

Antaska was silent for a moment. Now M. Hoyvil wondered if she was disturbed by what he had told her. He had been warned not to say too much, after all.

"Are you upset by what I told you?" he asked.

"No. It's just very different than what I thought I knew about the Verdantes," Antaska said, "but I guess it's not a problem for me. I need some time to think about this. Then, I'll probably have some more questions, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all," answered M. Hoyvil.

He was relieved that he wouldn't have to keep talking.

"There's just one thing I have of to ask of you," he said. "Please don't give this information to the other Earth humans. As I said earlier, we believe that the only time to answer such questions is when they're asked. When the truth is right in front of someone's face, and that person doesn't see it, that's a sign of not being ready for the truth. If you give people the answers before they're ready to hear them, it can be very disturbing and lead to possible emotional problems. I'm sure you wouldn't want that to happen."

"I won't say anything," Antaska agreed to his request.

"You need to start seeing the truth soon," M. Hoyvil heard a soft female telepathic voice say.

He looked down to see Potat sitting on Antaska's legs and staring up into her eyes.

A deep chiming noise sounded, coming from no particular direction or device in the room.

"It's time for my next class—astronomy," said M. Hoyvil.

He felt relief at not having to continue the pretense of going to business

meetings.

“Would you like to go with me, or would you rather stay here and rest? I know you’ve had a hard day already,” he said to Antaska.

“I like astronomy, and I’d really like to go, even though I am kind of tired,” she answered.

She took the news very well, thought M. Hoyvil with relief.

He stood up and walked with Antaska toward the door. He hadn’t admitted to himself how worried he’d been that she might experience some type of emotional or mental breakdown.

By showing herself to be resilient and adaptable, she has once again confirmed my superior abilities in choosing a good companion, he silently congratulated himself.

When they reached the door, M. Hoyvil heard a small “meow.” Potat had followed them and seemed intent on going along with them to class. M. Hoyvil looked down at her, forgetting his former feelings of resentment. It was difficult for him to stay mad at such a cute tiny creature.

“I’d like to take you along, but I don’t know if the instructor will allow non-humanoids in class.” M. Hoyvil chose his words carefully and spoke out loud for Antaska’s benefit. “I’ll ask the instructor if we can bring you next time,” he promised.

“I’d really like to take you,” Antaska said too.

But Potat turned without another look at either of them and walked on stiff legs back toward the door to Antaska’s room. She seemed to communicate displeasure by bristling her fur and switching her gray-ringed tail rapidly back and forth. Its cottony white tip pointed accusingly from side to side.



M. Hoyvil’s astronomy class was taught in the same room as his last class, which Antaska learned had been galactic politics. A similar amount of male and female

Verdante students filled the room. But less Earth humans were present than had been in the last class.

Antaska wondered if they were exhausted from the hard workout too and resting in their rooms. Or had some been bored by the long presentation they could see but not understand? Antaska was tired too, but she was curious.

As soon as she entered the room, Antaska heard whispering voices. She remembered what M. Hoyvil told her about building a mental wall, and she tried it. She concentrated on blocking out the whispers by picturing a wall in her mind between her and the sounds. Suddenly, the whispers were gone. It worked!

The instructor of the astronomy class was a ten-foot-tall, green-skinned female with large light green eyes and shoulder-length light green hair. Her bright red ship suit emphasized her green coloring. And she was clearly younger than the political science teacher, with very few lines on her large, heart-shaped feminine face.

A holographic display of the galaxy appeared above the raised platform at the back and center of the room. Antaska sat up straight in her utilitarian chair and watched in fascination. The view zoomed out to show the Milky Way as a part of its local galactic group. Then it zoomed out even more to where it became too small to see as part of its local supercluster.

The instructor pointed her wand to a spot within the supercluster. Antaska wondered if she was showing them the space ship's approximate location of the Milky Way. The hologram changed and displayed more astronomical features. Antaska thought she recognized some but not most of them. She felt a longing to understand what was being taught.

"Maybe I could understand some of this if I stopped trying to block it out," she thought.

But as the idea grew more appealing, another part of her brain protested and quickly shut down this line of thinking. And with that, a dark cloud seemed to descend in Antaska's mind. She found herself numbly watching a rotating 3-D view of what looked like black holes and ignoring the whispers for the time

being.

Into her mental numbness, thoughts of Eegor returned. Antaska felt a compulsion to solve the riddle of his true intentions toward her and the solidity of his relationship with Tilde. Intriguing questions and possible answers circled endlessly through her mind, causing her to experience mingled feelings of guilt and pleasure.

When the holograph faded, and the teacher sat down, M. Hoyvil told Antaska he would be right back. He walked to the back of the class and stood at the end of the short line in front of the teacher's large desk. The teacher and each of the students stared silently at each other for a few moments, then the students turned and walked away. Absorbed in her mental fantasy world, Antaska waited patiently as M. Hoyvil moved up in line to take his turn.



M. Hoyvil spoke to his teacher. "The lecture today was fascinating," he said, beginning the telepathic conversation with a compliment. "In addition to my human companion here today," he said with a snaky wave of his six-fingered hand toward Antaska, "I have another pet in my care. She's actually the pet of my human, a small feline, and she's very interested in astronomy. She expressed the desire to attend classes with us. Would you mind if I bring her to the next class?"

"Are you asking me if you can bring a non-humanoid animal into my class?" asked the instructor in amused disbelief.

"Well, yes. They're actually sentient, you know. She's very well behaved," he said, stretching the truth a bit, "and she won't be any trouble in the classroom."

The enormous light green eyes of the big teacher crinkled up high and seemed to glow with bright amusement. She laughed loud but unheard by Earth human ears.

"I'm very sorry, but I can't allow that. It's critical to your upcoming travels in

space that you and the other students develop a thorough understanding of this complex subject. Even a well-behaved animal would prove to be a distraction to the serious learning that is the purpose of this class.”

M. Hoyvil hadn’t expected her to agree, and he accepted this answer gracefully. He bowed his goodbye and returned to Antaska. She climbed down the steps from her chair, and he told her he’d asked the teacher if Potat could attend class, but she wouldn’t allow it. Antaska nodded vaguely. M. Hoyvil noticed that she seemed distracted. He wondered if the class had been boring for her.

It’s too bad she can’t understand the teachers, he thought.

When they got back to their quarters, M. Hoyvil spoke to Antaska again.

“I need to do some homework till it’s time for dinner.”

“OK,” said Antaska. “I’m really tired now. I think I’ll take a nap till then.”

M. Hoyvil looked into Antaska’s room and saw Potat asleep on the bed. He was relieved that he didn’t have to tell Potat yet that the teacher wouldn’t allow her in class. He knew it would be a disappointment to the little cat.

Maybe there’s somewhere else I can take her.

He thought about some possible options.

“I’ll get you when it’s time for dinner,” M. Hoyvil told Antaska, and she walked away to her room.

Chapter 10

At dinner, Antaska felt an undeniable curiosity to learn whether Eegor was paying any attention to her. She still couldn't believe that such a superbly shining star of a male could really be attracted to her. Antaska looked his way and was shocked. He was looking directly at her with the same intense stare as on the previous day.

Tilde, sitting next to him, was also looking at her through narrowed, hostile eyes. Relieved, thrilled, and ashamed all at the same time, Antaska looked away quickly. She looked down at her plate and began to eat her food in slow motion.

Breaking through the usual silence at meals, M. Hoyvil spoke to her out loud.

"You look very tired," he said. "It's been a long day. I'm glad you were able to go with me to my classes, but maybe you should get some more rest after dinner."

"That sounds like a good idea," Antaska agreed.

After that, she was silent, and M. Hoyvil didn't speak to her again. Antaska knew he was talking telepathically to his friends. He ate his meal while speaking both mentally and with finger waves.

Again, Antaska heard words, but she stayed firmly in denial.

I'm just tired, that's all, she told herself. *I'm human. I can't be telepathic.*

"She's tired...game rooms...space viewing lounges," were some of the words Antaska told herself she wasn't hearing.

In fact, Antaska really was tired. She was hungry, but she couldn't remember having ever been this tired. The lunch she ate earlier, and now this dinner, was more food than any of her previous meals on the space ship. Because of her strenuous workout, the scanner that measured the exact amounts of food and nutrients her body needed had determined that she needed more.

Dinner was an even bigger meal than lunch to provide the extra protein and carbohydrates her body would use during sleep to rebuild new, bigger muscles.

Antaska ate the large meal ravenously and drank up all her beverages, including an additional drink tube containing a light, bubbly red liquid that tasted like raspberries. She began to feel in a much better mood—still sleepy but very calm and relaxed.

When Antaska's mood improved, her curiosity about Eegor returned. Again, she felt the irresistible urge to find out if he was still looking at her. But she didn't want Tilde to see her looking. Clandestinely, Antaska turned her head only partly toward the group of largest aliens among whom Eegor and Tilde sat. Then, without turning farther, she shifted her irises to the side, which allowed her to see Eegor without turning to face him.

In her side vision, it looked like both Eegor and Tilde hadn't moved since Antaska last looked at them. Both were still staring at her—Eegor with an intensity that could possibly be interpreted as lust, and Tilde with undisguised contempt.

Antaska was struck by sudden dizziness, either from her convoluted eye movement or perhaps from the sight of Eegor and Tilde. She straightened her face and her eyes back in front of her, but she couldn't resist one final look when she finished eating. This time, she was not really surprised to see both of them looking, as if frozen in that position.

A sneaking but unwanted suspicion entered her mind that Eegor's behavior, in particular, might not be normal. Antaska had never seen this type of behavior from any of the Earth human males or females in space school.

On the other hand, Antaska told herself, slipping back easily into infatuation, I've seen all those stories in videos about love at first sight. Maybe being struck by that is the reason why he can't stop staring at me.

"Are you ready to leave?" asked M. Hoyvil, interrupting the train of her thoughts.



Potat sat staring at the door, waiting for the two humanoids to return. The door rose up just when she expected it to.

“It’s about time!” she said telepathically.

Do they even hear me? she wondered.

Maybe they did. They both looked down at her. The little cat glared back up at them.

“Do you know how boring it is to be stuck inside here all day, everyday?” she asked them mentally.

“Have you been bored?” M. Hoyvil asked her. “Maybe you can go out with me somewhere tonight.”

“It’s about time,” said Potat.

M. Hoyvil walked across the room and sat down on one end of the couch. Antaska followed him and climbed her stairs to sit on the other end. Potat tried a high jump to get up on the couch. This time, she didn’t make it to the top in one jump, but she dug in her claws and climbed up the top foot or so.

Potat sat next to M. Hoyvil in her alert listening position. She rotated her small face back and forth from him to Antaska as they spoke to each other.

M. Hoyvil started the conversation.

“After dinner, I sometimes go out to the game room or to one of the space-viewing lounges that are around the outer rim of the ship. I’d like to take you tonight, but I can see that you need to rest. I think it would be best if I go by myself tonight. I can take you tomorrow night or when you’re feeling more energetic and used to the daily routine.”

Potat could hear the relief in Antaska’s voice when she answered him.

“Yes, I’d like to go with you tomorrow night, but I’m looking forward to going to sleep now.”

It’s time to make my intentions clear, Potat decided.

She climbed all the way up M. Hoyvil’s side and sat down on his shoulder. He didn’t seem to notice her tiny claws digging in on the climb or now digging into the material covering his shoulder.

But Antaska noticed and said, “Get down from there. It’s time to go to sleep.”

M. Hoyvil chuckled out loud, surprising Potat. She dug her claws in deeper.

“I’m staying up here,” she said telepathically.

“I think she wants to go with me, and that’s fine,” M. Hoyvil said out loud.

He turned his giant head sideways and looked at Potat—his face bigger than her entire body.

“The astronomy teacher said you can’t go to her class, but I don’t have to ask anyone’s permission to take you to the social venues. I’m not leaving right this second. I have to get ready first. Can you meet me back here in about thirty minutes?” he asked.

Potat jumped down from his shoulder to the couch and began washing herself, starting by licking a paw and rubbing it on her face.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Antaska looked back and forth between the two of them with doubt in her voice and on her face.

“She’ll be fine with me. The ship is perfectly safe, and I’ll watch her at all times,” M. Hoyvil assured her.

Antaska still looked concerned, but Potat could tell she was too tired to put up much of an argument.

“You stay out of trouble!” Antaska warned Potat.

The little cat ignored her and lifted a leg up straight and high to clean between widely spread toes.

“Goodnight then,” said Antaska to both of them.

She turned to walk into her room.

“Goodnight. Sleep well, and don’t worry about her,” M. Hoyvil said.

Potat didn’t say anything. She was too busy getting ready to go out.

Chapter 11

The next morning, Antaska woke up feeling refreshed, with a clear mind and renewed energy. She sat up in bed and stretched, disturbing Potat, who had been curled up asleep at her side. Without opening her eyes, Potat lazily uncurled herself and rolled over onto her back, with front paws bent up in the air and back paws stuck out straight. Her curled tailed seemed to be the only thing balancing this awkward position.

“What were you up to last night? Were you out late at a party?” Antaska didn’t expect an answer and didn’t get one.

Sighing, she got up, got ready for another day, and went out to join M. Hoyvil in the main room.

After breakfast, M. Hoyvil spoke to Antaska on their way to the gym. “Do you think you’ll have more problems with your trainers today?”

He seemed worried, but Antaska was thinking dreamy thoughts about Eegor.

“I feel much better. I’m sure that everything will be fine today,” she assured him.

“I hope you’re right about that. Call me if you need my help,” M. Hoyvil said.

“Thank you,” said Antaska, appreciating his concern.

Then they entered the gym and separated and go to their classes.

On the previous day, the Earth human class had lifted weights to work their arm and shoulder muscles. On this day, the instructors had them work the muscles of their legs by doing squats, lunges, and toe lifts while holding a weight bar across their shoulders. The class also did leg lifts with ankle weights to strengthen the backs and sides of their legs. Again, the workout took the form of circuit training, and in between sets of weightlifting, they ran around the gym or jumped rope.

Today Antaska was more used to the intense workout, and she was able to look around at the other groups of exercisers as she ran past them with her class.

At the front of the gym across from M. Hoyvil's class, there was a class of Verdante adolescent females. Antaska ran past them and headed back toward the back of the gym. There she saw another class of Earth humans that included both males and females.

On her long trip around the huge gym, Antaska had time to look over and observe both of these two classes. Instead of running, these humans and the Verdante females were dancing to music, and their workouts didn't seem very grueling. They lifted only light weights, and their instructors were joking and laughing with them. As time went on, the distinction between the two groups of light exercisers blurred. Some of the Verdante females wandered over to join the human class, and some of the humans joined the Verdante class.

When Antaska ran past M. Hoyvil's class, she noticed only adolescent male Verdantes in the class. They strained to lift heavy weights, climbed up and down rope ladders that hung from the ceiling, and also ran around the gym or jumped in place. Antaska recognized some of these male Verdantes from the dining hall and from classes. She realized that all of their human companions were in her gym class.

Is this some strange form of gender bias? she wondered.

With sore legs and heaving breath, Antaska's class finished running and returned to its usual spot in the back of the gym. Their instructors stood looking at them with grim faces. Then Egor spoke.

"I saw you looking with envy at the other class when you should have been focusing on your exercise. Maybe you were thinking, 'Why can't I be in that other class that looks so fun?' The answer is that you are the chosen ones, and they are not. Yes, it is true, puny weak examples of humanity that you are. Don't envy them. You'll be traveling into deep space, and they won't. They'll be getting off the space ship on the Verdante home planet—not even going as far as the space station.

"Because they'll spend the rest of their lives in a protected and safe environment, their needs won't be the same as yours. You'll travel into unknown

parts of the universe, and you must be strong and prepared for the unexpected. Your Verdantes have entrusted us with the responsibility of preparing you. We'll change you from the weak, powerless creatures you are now into strong fighting machines. Be grateful and rejoice that you will have the benefit of our training."

Eegor stopped talking and stood glaring at the class. His contempt for the Earth humans in the class was clear. Then Antaska heard him mutter in a lower voice.

"You weaklings get to explore deep space, while superior humans like me and Tilde only go back and forth between Earth, the Verdante home planet, and the space station."

Tilde spoke to the class next.

"You must learn that in battle, there's no room for emotions, there's no room for distraction. These are weaknesses your enemy will exploit. Because you're beginners, I'll give you this one warning. But the next time we see you distracted by emotion or not paying attention for any other reason, you'll be attacked. Now get back to work. You have no time to waste. Attach your ankle weights, and begin your leg lifts."

Antaska did as instructed. Over half an hour passed, and neither of the trainers had paid her any particular attention, but that was about to change. She tried to focus on lifting her left leg as high as possible behind her while keeping the rest of her body straight. But she noticed in her peripheral vision that the large, pale Eegor was working his way in her direction.

An uncomfortable mix of anticipation and dread made Antaska's pulse race, and she switched legs just when he reached her side.

"You must not bend your hips when you lift your leg, or you won't fully activate your leg muscle," Eegor told her.

He turned around to display the bulging muscles on the back of his own thighs, running a hand slowly down one for emphasis. Then he stepped close to Antaska. He pressed one hand against her hip and the other against the back of her leg while she continued to lift it. Bending his head down, Eegor spoke with a

deep, slow drawl into her ear.

“There, do you see how it is done? The muscles on the back of the leg are the most neglected in the human body. I can see that yours have been very neglected. Would you like me to help you change that? I can meet you outside of class for a personal session,” Egor offered.

Antaska experienced an overpowering rush of desire and was about to agree, but she looked over and saw the dagger-like eyes of Tilde. She decided that she needed more information about his relationship with Tilde before accepting his offer.

“What kind of session are you talking about?” Antaska asked, “and would it be a problem for your partner?”

Egor shook his head irritably before answering.

“My partner...yes...this does not concern her. I’m a professional trainer, and it’s not her business if I offer private classes to certain special students like yourself.”

He finished his explanation with a sensual pout of his lips and lowered eyelids.

That short answer roughly pulled away the veil of Antaska’s illusions about Egor. It revealed the truth not only about his relationship with Tilde but also about his interest in Antaska. He wanted to mess around with Antaska, but he wasn’t going to leave Tilde. Still, Antaska was reluctant to let go of her fantasies.

“I’ll think about it and let you know,” she answered noncommittally.



Egor was only slightly disappointed by this response. He was sure Antaska would soon fall for his irresistible charms, as they all did. Her initial resistance would only make her eventual surrender that much sweeter. Egor had also noticed Tilde’s angry glances. His thoughts churned back to their relationship

and its problems.

Well, good. Tilde needs to know how this feels, he thought. How it feels for me every day to have my life mate being ogled by other males, and then to have her ogling them back! Just because she's taller than the Earth humans. Just because our skin looks greenish in certain lights, and she's incredibly beautiful, she gets the attention of the male Verdantes. But she should know they would never take her for a mate, as an equal. They're just playing with her. She should think about how her flirting with them makes me feel. But she doesn't care. Unless I make her care.

Eegor looked over at Tilde and was pleased to see that she was still fuming. His over-the-top attention to a female student had once again made her insanely jealousy. In fact, Tilde's response seemed much stronger than her usual reaction to the women he selected as the object of his attention on almost every trip. The intensity of Tilde's angry stare sent a powerful thrill rippling through him.

Success! he thought.

With an innocent smile in Tilde's direction, Eegor let go of Antaska's leg and stepped away.

"Lucky for you, I'm here to help you on this voyage," Eegor said to Antaska. "We'll have many helpful times together," he said clumsily, at a loss for further flirtatious words.

But Eegor knew that it didn't really matter what he said. These women always dropped into his hands like the luscious ripe fruit that fell from the cranapple trees on the planet of his birth—the Verdante home planet. With a final flex of one and then the other of his massive pectorals, Eegor turned and walked away to join the fuming Tilde at the front of the class.

The second half of the class began, and Eegor knew Antaska would be in for trouble from Tilde. Luckily for her, the self-defense skills they were working on that day were methods to use to avoid attack. With Tilde striking and Eegor evading, the instructors demonstrated to the class how to duck and bob when punches or kicks were thrown at them.

Egor was excited by Tilde's aggressive efforts, but he was skilled at evading her blows. He could tell she was trying hard, and he smiled each time she missed, which seemed to increase her anger and decrease her accuracy.



Tilde burnt with rage fueled by Egor's most recent betrayal. She longed for the pleasing thud sound and the satisfying feeling of her hands or feet smacking into another body, particularly a body that deserved her retribution.

If I can't hurt him, then I'll have to hurt his latest little slut, she decided. Like usual. When will they learn not to mess with me? When will he stop insulting me like this. As if these females are better than me!

She growled, but no one seemed to notice.

After shocking the class with a particularly furious demonstration of the art of evasion, Tilde stood panting. Egor, with a big smile on his face, instructed the class to practice bobbing and ducking movements. A few minutes later, Tilde recovered her breath, and she headed Antaska's way. She looked back and saw Egor watching, but she knew he wouldn't interfere. He never did. Tilde stopped in front of Antaska.

Antaska continued to duck and bob, but she looked up into Tilde's face. Tilde glared down at her from a foot above. She stood still and watched Antaska, not bothering to mask the growing anger from her expression. Then Tilde leaned in closer and noticed Antaska try to bob and duck faster and farther away.

Ha! That's not going to work, Tilde thought.

With superhuman speed, Tilde shot out a large hand aimed toward Antaska's stomach. But Antaska not only weaved but also dropped down toward the floor in an unexpected move they hadn't taught the students yet.

The blow missed its intended target but still struck hard against Antaska's right shoulder. It shoved her backward and knocked her all the way to the cushiony floor. The blow was hard but not as hard as the blow Tilde had landed

the day before. Antaska managed pull herself up onto her knees. She held her opposite hand on her bruised shoulder.

Tilde stared down at her, only partly mollified by the hit. She considered striking again, but she noticed the sudden stillness around her. Looking about at the class, Tilde saw that everyone had stopped exercising. They were all staring at her and Antaska with shocked looks on their faces. Could that really be an expression of disrespectful scorn that she was seeing on the face of the red-haired human female on Antaska's left? Tilde turned her angry attention in the woman's direction.

"You! Move yourself to the other side of the class. I'm tired of looking at your face!"

The red-haired woman quickly picked up her equipment and drink tube and left.

"And the rest of you, if I ever see any of you stop again without my permission, each and every one of you will personally show me your skill at evading my blows."

With the exception of Antaska, the class energetically resumed their practice. Tilde returned her attention to Antaska.

"As for you, worm, you're obviously a very slow learner. I suggest you learn quickly, or you'll suffer for it."

Tilde turned her back on Antaska and left her kneeling on the floor. She felt a little better but not completely satisfied.

"Oh well, tomorrow is another day," she thought, consoling herself with thoughts of future opportunities for revenge as she walked away.

When she joined Eegor at the front of the class, he smiled at her affectionately.

I know he cares about me, thought Tilde, and he doesn't care about these other women, or he would stop me from beating them up. But why does he keep humiliating and betraying me? We're two of a kind, but maybe there's something wrong with him. Maybe he's not the right guy for me?

Her thoughts turned to one or two of the young Verdante men who had been flirting with her that morning. She smiled at Eegor. He smiled back.



Besides Antaska, at least one other person in the gym wasn't smiling. M. Hoyvil, despite the warnings from his own instructor, had been watching during both of her encounters with her aggressive human trainers.

His gigantic Verdante teacher had tried to take advantage of his distraction when Eegor was holding Antaska's leg, but this time, M. Hoyvil's guard was up. He swerved and evaded his teacher's kick by a hair's breath.

He was less successful during Tilde's attack on Antaska, which proved to be too distracting. Master Mytaar struck without warning, kicking M. Hoyvil's legs out from under him and dropping him once again to the floor. The large green man had looked down at him with upward smirking eyes.

"I guess I've proved my point. Your concern for your *companion's* well being has become your weakness. But you can't protect her if you can't protect yourself. Once you become emotionally attached to another being, your effectiveness in battle is compromised. You must learn to control your emotional response to a threat to her and also trust her to defend herself," said Master Mytaar.

M. Hoyvil looked up at the master. He listened politely, but his thoughts about him were less than polite.

"There will be times when you should act on her behalf, and there will be times when you should not," Master Mytaar continued. "Knowing the difference is critical. Learn this well, or I predict that you will both suffer."

M. Hoyvil had pulled himself back up to his feet during this telepathic communication. He suppressed the urge to reply with anger to what he felt was undeserved criticism from Master Mytaar. Surely, the two fitness trainers and Master Mytaar as their responsible owner were more at fault than he was. He

took a deep calming breath before speaking.

“You’re telling me that letting my emotions control my actions is a weakness, but the actions of your two pets are motivated by their emotions. Doesn’t this mean that they’re not fit for their important role as trainers? Doesn’t this mean they’re more likely to harm their students than to help them?”

“The first part of your argument is correct,” Master Mytaar answered. “Their behavior toward your *companion* is motivated by their uncontrolled, inappropriate emotions. Do you believe that all the alien life forms you’ll encounter in space will behave with their emotions fully under control? These instructors, ‘unfit’ as you call them, will provide the best training your *companion* could have in how to protect herself from the unexpected behavior of unknown species.”

M. Hoyvil doubted that Antaska would ever be in that kind of danger, but he kept quiet and listened with the appropriate deference.

“Yes, they’re emotionally unstable, but they know the limits I’ve set for them. They won’t not hurt her beyond some bruising,” Master Mytaar said. “Only a very few of the human pets they’ve taught have ever needed to see Dr. Daji for the mending of a broken bone.”

That’s comforting, M. Hoyvil thought with sarcasm.

The master kept talking.

“You, on the other hand, will be less fortunate than your *companion* in your learning opportunities on this voyage. Because we Verdantes are self-controlled, especially by adulthood, you won’t be able to experience the benefit of learning to defend yourself from a larger, out-of-control aggressor. But I’ll do the best I can to constantly exploit your weaknesses and, perhaps, even turn them into strengths if that’s possible. Your lesson will be to master the ability to stay calm and effective when your *companion* is in danger and to then make intelligent decisions with a clear head. Whether you are successful will be up to you. It will depend on your attitude as well as your resourcefulness.”

M. Hoyvil was not surprised by this answer. *Never a straight answer to a*

plain question, he thought.

Then he quickly stopped thinking and made his mind blank in case Master Mytaar was truly able to read his thoughts as he had implied earlier. M. Hoyvil waited for his irritation to pass and then politely asked for more clarification.

“I really don’t understand why you keep insisting that Antaska will need to defend herself against violent aliens. We train our companions to defend themselves as a routine safety precaution, but I’ll be there to protect her. And an entire shipload of Verdantes will be there. In almost 10,000 years of our space travel with Earthling companions, I’ve never heard of any of them having to use that training to defend themselves.”

Master Mytaar spoke in the mysterious manner that usually signaled that the end of a conversation was near.

“There’s always a first time for everything, and the trees have been whispering of changes to come. However, I’m a compassionate man. I’ll offer you and your *companion* a choice in this matter. If at any time during this trip either of you decide that my pets’ class is too difficult for her, she won’t have to stay in their class. I’ll transfer her into the easier class given to the pets of females.”

M. Hoyvil was not sure whether to be appeased or somewhat insulted by this offer, but he bowed to indicate his thanks and thought about it while he continued his workout. His emotions urged him to remove Antaska from her class. But perhaps Master Mytaar’s offer was also a lesson for him in controlling those emotions.

Putting emotions aside, M. Hoyvil realized that he would like to protect Antaska, but this was a choice she would have to make for herself. If he made the decision for her, he would be treating her like a pet, and she would know it and resent it.

After Tilde knocked Antaska down, M. Hoyvil had seen her stand up and continue with her workout.

She must be OK, but I bet she’s in pain, M. Hoyvil thought.

He continued to keep an eye on Antaska. The second half of her class passed without another visit from either instructor, and to his relief, the class was finally over. After the usual stretching, M. Hoyvil was at her side to take her back to their quarters.



The concern in M. Hoyvil's eyes was clear to Antaska, but all he asked was, "How are you?" when he reached her side after the stretch period ended. Thinking that a display of weakness would only further encourage Tilde, Antaska just answered, "I'm fine," and they left the gym together.

Antaska passed through the blue-lit doorway, and they paused to wait for that day's prognosis.

"This human's shoulder is bruised but not broken," said the robotic voice. "There are no internal injuries. Apply a cold pack for twenty minutes and rest as necessary."

The small compartment in the wall to the side of the door opened again, and Antaska reached in to take the waiting cold pack and place it against her shoulder.

They didn't talk much until they were back in their quarters. M. Hoyvil sat on the large couch, and Antaska climbed up to sit there too. She folded her legs underneath her instead of dangling them.

Their entrance to the room had woke up Potat. She came out of Antaska's room and walked with slow, stretchy steps over to the couch. Then she sprang up and sat in between them, looking ready to participate as an active listener in their conversation.

"I saw that your instructors are still being rough on you," M. Hoyvil said to Antaska. "I know the door scanner said you aren't badly injured, but are you sure you're OK? I'm starting to get worried about you, actually."

Antaska felt confused by her conflicting emotions about Eegor. She definitely

wasn't happy about the situation with Tilde. Physically, however, she was feeling better than the day before.

"I'll probably have another bruise on my shoulder, but I'm fine," she told M. Hoyvil. "She didn't hit me as hard today as she did yesterday."

"I saw what happened, and I talked to my instructor about your trainers again today," M. Hoyvil said. "He still claims that you'll learn some important lesson from this hardship. And he said you might get into some danger when we're out in deep space, and this class will teach you how to defend yourself from it. That might be possible, but it's hard for me to believe. No Earthling who has ever traveled with us has been harmed by contact with any of the new life forms we discovered."

Antaska heard a low growl down by her side. She looked down, and Potat blinked up at her. Antaska gave her a quick pat on the head.

"It's OK," she told the tiny cat. "I won't be in danger."

"That's right," said M. Hoyvil. "Anyway, Master Mytaar said that if you want to leave your class, you can switch to the class for the humans who'll be staying on the Verdante planet. They aren't taught much self-defense or fighting moves—just dancing, yoga, light weightlifting, and cardio. It looks like a more fun class, and the instructors won't bother you."

M. Hoyvil made the easier class sound appealing, but Antaska wasn't sure she wanted to change.

And Eegor won't be teaching that class, she thought.

The small cat voice spoke again in her mind. "Would you just forget about him? He's not for you."

Potat climbed up on Antaska's lap and purred. Antaska scratched her dark gray ears and under her white chin while she thought for a moment. That voice was probably right about Eegor, but that wasn't the only consideration. Then she looked up at M. Hoyvil and answered him.

"My class has been difficult and painful, and it's true that I would probably enjoy the other class a lot more. But what if Master Mytaar is right? Maybe I do

need to learn to be super-tough to face something that I'll need to deal with out there."

She pointed toward the roof to mean outer space.

"Those trainers are being hard on me, and I'm starting to wonder if they're both mentally unbalanced. But if I make it through this class, I'll be stronger and ready to fight back if I ever need to," Antaska said.

"Your trainers have hurt people with more than just bruises," M. Hoyvil warned her. "They've broken students' bones too. Master Mytaar says they know their limits, but I think they're ruled by their emotions. I think that in a moment of passion, which they seem to have many of, they could do harm beyond what is supposed to be their limits."

"I agree with you about that, but I still want to stay in the class for now," said Antaska.

"OK, but if you change your mind at any time, you can switch. Just let me know," M. Hoyvil said. "Do you feel up to going to astronomy and political science classes with me today?"

Chapter 12

Antaska was eager to see what holographic displays would be shown in M. Hoyvil's classes that day. She went to both classes and sat next to him. His teachers silently pointed out alien planets, life forms, and other features of outer space that she had never seen in Earth space school. Antaska sat peacefully, putting the problem of her fitness trainers out of her mind. She remembered her decision to ignore the whispering sounds, and she tried to pull up the mental wall to block them. It had been easy the day before, but today it wasn't working—as if the muscles of her mind were worn out from the previous day's use.

"I'll just have to ignore them today," she thought.

Oddly, the act of ignoring the whispers made them louder and clearer. Antaska could now hear whole strings of words instead of just individual words. Phrases like "Ophiuchus constellation, the lost thirteenth sign of the ancient Earth human zodiac," and "there will be a quiz on Friday" came into her mind, but she didn't pay attention to them.

Later at dinner, Antaska told herself that she wouldn't look at Eegor. And she continued to ignore the whispering noises, even though longer and longer strings of words and even sentences now flowed through her head.

In the dining hall, there seemed to be many voices coming from all directions and all talking at once. The jumble of words and phrases was much more confusing and seemed to make even less sense than what Antaska had heard in the class. So it was easy for her to ignore them, even though she was still couldn't put up her mental wall to block out the sounds.

As usual, M. Hoyvil ate and talked telepathically and with hand signs to his friends all at the same time. Antaska ate her food and looked around with interest at the other nearby diners. At each of the two tables on one side of her, adolescent Verdante females sat with two or three Earth human companions each. Three large, light green-skinned Verdante males of M. Hoyvil's size sat at

tables on the other side. They had one human companion each.

Antaska recognized many of the humans from the gym and M. Hoyvil's classes. They smiled and waved, and she waved back.

Surrounded by friendly people and filled with a nutritious meal, Antaska felt happy and confident about dealing with her gym instructors and about the trip into space in general. In her relaxed state, despite her intention to ignore the whispering sounds, she found herself fascinated by a strange conversation taking place between two female voices.

"Are you going to breed your new pets when we get back home?" asked the first voice.

"Of course, what else is there to do for 300 years while we wait to be old enough to create our own children? I picked out one with green eyes and one with blue especially for a new look I am planning. The pet geneticist told me it's possible to produce a baby with one green eye and one blue if you tweak the DNA just right."

"That sounds really cool," said the first voice. "Can I have one if you end up with extra?"

"Oh, definitely," answered voice number two.

Antaska tried to tell herself that she had imagined the conversation, but discussions about pets usually caught her attention. The one she had just heard was particularly thought provoking. On Earth, pets like cats and dogs, even the so called pure breeds, were allowed to reproduce as they would in the natural animal way.

Antaska had never heard of anyone creating genetically designed pets in vitro in the same way that humans were created by the Earth governments' scientific baby labs. Shockingly, it sounded like the genes of these pets were being combined and designed not in the interest of health, evolution, and genetic diversity, but for more superficial entertainment reasons.

Then Antaska's thoughts turned to Potat. If the Verdantes practiced production of pet babies from mixed genetic material, she wondered if someday

she could get a new kitten created from Potat's DNA. That possibility had never occurred to her before.

Antaska knew that she had only a short time to be with Potat. The cats of that time in history had a very short lifespan, only forty to fifty years, and Antaska didn't know how old Potat was.

She thought about how much she would like to have a kitten made from Potat's genes to be her companion and remind her of Potat after she was gone. Then she felt guilty about having those thoughts. As nice as it would be to have a kitten who looked like Potat, it wouldn't be the same cat. No cat, however cute and smart, could ever take her place.

"Is something bothering you? Are you worried about gym class tomorrow?" M. Hoyvil asked her.

In a short time, it seemed like M. Hoyvil had become quite good at reading Antaska's facial expressions.

"I wasn't worrying about the class, I was thinking about Potat. I know it sounds silly, but I was feeling sad thinking about how short her life will be," Antaska answered.

"That doesn't sound silly at all," said M. Hoyvil. "I understood exactly how you feel. Would you like to go out with me tonight to the game room and space viewing lounges? That might cheer you up. Potat can come along again too."

Antaska felt energetic and agreed to the plan.

They finished eating and carried their trays over to the drop-off counter. Despite Antaska's best intentions, her thoughts turned back to Eegor. She couldn't resist a last look in his direction. With a thrilled mixture of excitement, relief, and shame, she saw that he was again looking her way.

As usual, Tilde was looking too. Antaska's face flushed with heat. She wondered for the first time if other people in the room, especially M. Hoyvil, noticed this embarrassing scene. Antaska looked up at M. Hoyvil, but she saw with relief that he seemed to be looking everywhere but at the two trainers.

Chapter 13

That evening, Antaska and M. Hoyvil, with Potat in his pocket, passed through the wide, high entrance to the game room. They walked part of the way across the curved foyer that led to the various parts of the big room. Dim lighting made it impossible for Antaska to see its far walls. Round tables, each softly lit by a blue light focused down from a point on the ceiling, were scattered about one section of the room.

Verdantes of various sizes and Earth humans sat at the tables sipping from drink tubes of many colors. Some played card or board games. Behind the small round tables, more humanoids stood at larger rectangular tables playing games Antaska didn't recognize. Turning to face the center of the room, she saw an empty dance floor with a spot-lit bar counter and bar stools placed far behind it.

Antaska turned again and looked to her other side. She peered into a much more dimly lit area and froze in shock.

"What is that?" she gasped.

It was a vision that could have been right out of one of the Earth-made horror movies about aliens. These movies were still popular after many thousands of years, although the Verdantes had attempted to persuade the humans not to watch them.

Earth humans were eager to adopt most of the helpful information and technological advances that the Verdantes provided, but in the case of movie viewing, the warning message had the opposite of the desired effect. The forbidden nature of the movies only increased their popularity. Curiosity kicked in, and almost everyone, including Antaska, wanted to know what they were being warned about.

In one common movie theme, a more powerful alien race captured humans and stored them in some vast facility. The stored humans believed they were still living their lives, but they were actually in a dream state enclosed in eggs or

other containers. Often, tubes were attached to them to suck out their mental or physical energy.

Now, Antaska was horrified to be faced with a similar scene directly in front of her. Hanging from the ceiling from harnesses were more than a dozen humanoids covered from head to toe in a tight casing. Its shiny black material glowed out eerily from dark shadows that enveloped the area. There were no eye openings in the black encasements. Sensors stuck out all over the heads and other parts of the bodies, attached to wires that led to the ceiling high above the floaters.

Most disturbingly of all, the humanoids weren't making full movements, but the muscles of their arms, legs and bodies were twitching. They twitched like Potat did when she was dreaming and thought she was running or jumping. Mixed in between the occupied suits were many empty ones that seemed to be waiting hungrily to encase and feed on their next victims. Antaska didn't know the real purpose of these suits. But she thought these humanoids must be in a dream state, experiencing some kind of illusory reality.

Antaska instinctively backed away from M. Hoyvil. Reflexively, he lifted and waved the six fingers of his hands in a gesture protesting his innocence. But she didn't understand Verdante sign language, and she backed away even more.

Could the energy taken from these humans be what they use to power the ship? Antaska wondered creatively.



When M. Hoyvil saw Antaska's reaction, he felt as if he had suddenly developed the supposed mind-reading powers of Master Mytaar. Hoping to reassure her, he spoke out loud.

"It's not what you think! These are virtual reality suits, and these people are playing games in them. They aren't trapped in there. There's a virtual control function that lets them get out of the suits whenever they want to. If you look

closer, you'll see that it's not just Earthlings in the suits. There are just as many Verdante adolescents, if not more. If these suits were for capturing humans, why would we put our own people in them? Not that we would ever do that, of course."

M. Hoyvil kept his eyes on Antaska while he was speaking. He was relieved to see that she looked calmer. But with his sharper-than-human eyesight, even in the dark room, he also noticed a red color changing her tan skin to a deep copper shade.

She must be embarrassed, M. Hoyvil thought.

"I should have warned you about this, but I didn't know you'd watched those Earth alien movies. Actually, the truth is that I was preoccupied with thinking about a lot of other things," M. Hoyvil admitted. "I should have remembered Potat's extreme reaction when I brought her in here last night. I felt something poking into my shoulder, and when I looked over, she had grown to twice her size. Her fur was sticking straight up, and her back was curled up too. But once she realized it was harmless, she got interested. She tried to slap and claw at the players. I had to take her away before she messed up someone's game."



Antaska looked up at Potat. She sat on M. Hoyvil's shoulder calmly washing her white paws, clearly taking no interest in the discussion. Then, something new happened among the silent and barely moving hanging black figures. Two of them lowered to the ground. Their black casings opened. One released a male Verdante of about M. Hoyvil's size. The other released an Earth human male who Antaska recognized from her gym class. They walked over to M. Hoyvil and Antaska.

The two Verdantes stood staring silently at each other, and Antaska heard whispering, but she ignored it. The male human spoke to Antaska. He was about her height with brown curly hair and large dark-brown eyes.

“Hi, I’m Pablo. I’ve seen you in gym class,” he said.

A reddish flush appeared on his face, and he looked down at the floor. Antaska felt a sudden stab of embarrassment.

Is he thinking about what’s going on in gym class with me and Eegor and Tilde? Antaska wondered. *But it’s not that different than how people acted on Earth. We were taught not to get into exclusive relationships. So no one would have cared who I flirted with.*

“But this isn’t Earth,” the tiny voice in her head said again.

This time it seemed to come from close by. From up on M. Hoyvil’s shoulder. Antaska looked up to see Potat staring down at her.

Antaska shook her head.

No. I’m not hearing voices, she told herself. But I’m starting to think that voice might be right. This situation with Eegor and Tilde isn’t like anything from Earth. It seems to be out of control, and it might be dangerous. And it’s embarrassing. From now on, I’m going to make it clear to everyone in that class that I’m not interested in Eegor, Antaska decided.

Pablo stood waiting. Antaska realized she had been just standing there thinking.

“Hi. I’m Antaska,” she said in a friendly tone. “What happens in those suits you were just in? I thought for sure when I first saw them that they were some kind of energy-draining device, but I guess I was wrong about that.”

Pablo’s face lit up with enthusiasm.

“Oh, they are fantastic!” he said. “You move around, and it’s like you’re really there but you’re not, and you can’t get hurt. You can do all kinds of things like skiing on a high mountain, white water rafting, or horseback riding. You can even going on a mission as a character in an adventure story.”

“Wow! Really?” said Antaska.

“Yeah,” said Pablo. “There’s thousands of sports and games in there. All kinds of things people used to do on Earth before the apocalypse and all kinds of strange alien things too. I didn’t try those yet, but I’m going to. And I’m going to

try some of the ancient Earth-style fighting and martial arts programs, maybe even against some aliens.”

“That sounds great! I’d like to try it too,” said Antaska.

She looked up at M. Hoyvil. He had stopped staring at the other Verdante and was now looking her way. A plan was forming in her mind. Maybe she could learn some new defensive and fighting moves from the virtual suits to help her fight back against Tilde. Even without the psychic abilities of Master Mytaar, she was sure that more encounters with the two trainers were in her future.

“Pablo was just telling me about the virtual suits. Can I try one of the martial arts games?” Antaska asked M. Hoyvil.

“Sure. I’ll show you how to set up the programming,” M. Hoyvil said.

He bowed a goodbye to his friend and to Pablo. The other alien and Pablo bowed to M. Hoyvil and Antaska.

“See you tomorrow in class,” Pablo said to Antaska.

“See you then,” she said. “Thanks for telling me about the suits.”

Antaska and M. Hoyvil turned away and walked into the darkness of the virtual reality area. M. Hoyvil still carried Potat up on his shoulder. They stopped in front of an empty human-sized suit, and Antaska reached out a hand to feel its material. It was soft and smooth, almost skin-like, and it felt very light when she lifted it.

“This suit is made from bioengineered smart fabric,” M. Hoyvil explained. “To put it on, you pull the hood part over your head. The rest of it will shrink and expand to fit itself to cover all of your body. It covers your mouth and nose, but you won’t have a problem breathing because the material allows air to pass through.”

Antaska felt a little nervous about that part, but she was still interested.

“Once you’re inside, a screen appears with instructions for you to select and start a game,” M. Hoyvil continued. “It tells you to push buttons. When you do, and when you make other movements in the games, you’ll feel like you’re moving. But you’ll really only be twitching like all these people around us.”

Antaska looked around again at the humanoids hanging nearby in their suits. Close up, the twitching looked even more creepy, but now she knew why they were doing it.

“If you’re playing a fighting game, when you get hit or kicked, the suit will press the contact spot, so you feel the blow, but it won’t hurt,” said M. Hoyvil. “If your opponent scores a certain amount of hits on you first, your avatar—you in the game—will die. Then the game is over, and it asks if you want to play again. Or else, if you score more hits, then your opponent dies, and the game is over.”

Antaska didn’t think that was going to happen today, but it could happen someday. She looked around at the humanoids who were completely encased in material that seemed to have a mind of its own. Antaska started to feel claustrophobic.

“How do I get out if I want to stop playing?” she asked.

“You can stop playing between games, and there’s a virtual button you’ll see in there that will let you stop any time you want,” said M. Hoyvil. “If you keep going, it’s set to stop after an hour and let you out so you don’t end up staying in longer than you realize. It’s easy to lose track of time in there. It can actually be very addictive if you don’t watch out.”

M. Hoyvil sounded like someone who might have had personal experience with this problem in the past.

“Mew!” said Potat from up on M. Hoyvil’s shoulder.

She bent her body to peer down and wink her golden eyes at Antaska. Then she watched with alert interest.

“No swatting at her when she’s in the suit,” M. Hoyvil told her sternly. “That’s bad.”

Potat answered with a small sniffing sound.

“I guess I’m ready to start,” said Antaska with determination.

She stepped under the floating suit and placed the hood over the top of her head. The soft material began to slowly compress itself tight against her hair and

skin. It produced a creepy, tingly suction feeling that started at her scalp and spread from there.

Antaska resisted the urge to pull the suit off as it covered her first her eyes, then nose, then mouth. Panicked by the covering of her air holes, she drew in a big breath and noticed that it was still easy to breathe. With that realization, Antaska relaxed and didn't mind the weird feel of the suit as much while she waited for the rest of it to encase her.

After what seemed like a long time but was really about a minute, the encasement was complete. Antaska no longer felt the tingly touch of the suit. In fact, she could no longer feel the suit at all.

She found herself standing on a hard, shiny black floor in a vast room. There was nothing in sight except for an enormous pale dome that encased the flooring and towered high above her head. A bright orange sky was partially visible through the opaque dome.

From nowhere, words written in the galactic humanoid language appeared in the air in front of her. A title and directions topped a long alphabetical list of general categories that seemed to go down into invisible depths.

“What type of game would you like to play? Press to select a category. Point to scroll down and see more categories.”

Antaska didn't see martial arts, so she pointed to the bottom of the list. The spot she pointed to rose up to her eye level. When she moved her hand to point, it looked and felt just like moving her hand always did. It seemed hard to believe that she wasn't actually moving. The list had scrolled to show the “M” section, but she still didn't see martial arts, so she scrolled the list back up to look for fighting. She found it and pressed it with a finger.

The printed characters that made up the list stretched sideways and flew away, and another long list of subcategories appeared. Antaska wasn't familiar with most types of fighting and didn't recognize any of the names, so she randomly picked one. She pressed the words that said, “ancient Earth kick boxing.” More words appeared.

“What level would you like? Beginning, Intermediate, Advanced, or Very Advanced?” That decision was easy. Antaska touched the word “Beginning” without hesitation.

Instantly, Antaska’s surroundings shifted queasily from the domed room to a primitive outdoor setting. She recognized it from historical photos as somewhere on ancient Earth before the apocalypse.

Antaska stood in one corner of a square area, barefoot on hard-packed dirt enclosed by crude ropes. These were tied to wooden posts stuck into the ground at a distance of about twenty feet apart.

An Earth male whose genetic composition was strongly if not fully ancient Earth Asian stood in the opposite corner. He was muscular but lean and wore white baggy pants that reached just above his knees, but he wore no shirt or shoes. More humans of clear Asian genetic makeup stood on all sides of the rope looking at Antaska and her opponent. They gestured effusively and spoke loudly in a language she couldn’t understand.

Antaska looked down at herself. She also wore white baggy pants and a loose white tunic. The bone structure and skin coloring of her hands and feet were not her own.

Am I Asian too? she wondered.

But there was no way for her to see her own face.

Antaska looked up to see two distinct graphic images floating in each corner of her vision. On one side, her name floated in the air over a row of green-lit bars in between the words “health” and “fatality.” On the other side, the name “Chan” floated over a similar graphic.

A third small graphic image floated right in front of her. The round red button said “STOP GAME.” It moved when Antaska did so that it was always within close reach.

Looking straight up, Antaska saw puffy clouds floating across an endless expanse of clear blue sky. The familiar Earth sun, slightly smaller at a million years younger, shined down bright from almost straight up above her head. A

warm, gentle breeze softly ruffled her hair and clothes and caressed her shin. Looking beyond the spectators to one side of the ring, Antaska saw tall, snow-capped mountains in the far distance.

In the nearer distance, a small village of straw huts and dirt roads was next to long curving rows of bright green rice paddies that climbed the side of a mountain. For the first time since she had left Earth, Antaska felt a nostalgic longing for her home planet—confusingly, not for the Earth she had known but for the Earth that had been lost so long ago.

From nowhere, a gong sounded, “Booonngg!!”

Then a voice shouted in the modern humanoid language, “Round one, fight!”

Chan walked toward Antaska with a fierce expression on his face.

It’s just a game, it’s just a game, she repeated to herself.

Antaska fought against the overwhelming realism, which threatened to make her forget that this was only a simulation. She stepped a few cautious feet forward to meet the other fighter. He began to bob and weave, and Antaska began to make the bobbing and weaving motions she had learned in gym class.

Chan moved in closer with shuffling, sliding movements she wasn’t familiar with. He suddenly jumped up in the air toward her. Antaska expected a kick, but instead, he thrust his right leg out behind him and threw a punch that landed on her chest.

The crowd roared loud, with a mix of boos and cheers, and Chan smiled.

Another loud sound, “Ding!” came again from nowhere, and one of the green lights on Antaska’s health bar turned red.

Antaska’s first thought was: *Why did he punch me? I thought this was kickboxing!*

Then she noticed with appreciation that unlike in gym class, even though she had felt the punch, it didn’t hurt. Antaska faced Chan again with the increased confidence that came from knowing she wouldn’t be hurt in this fight.

They both bobbed and weaved, and Antaska attempted one of the kicks she’d practiced in class. Chan easily evaded her kick as he twirled his body around and

landed his own kick on the side of her head.

“Ding!” The bell sounded again, accompanied by more noise from the crowd and another of Antaska’s green bars turning red.

Chan said something that could have been a joke in the incomprehensible language, and the crowd laughed loudly.

The fight continued in the same way, with Antaska receiving kicks and punches but not landing a single blow. Finally, she had only one green bar remaining. Chan lunged up. He threw a leg over her head and then brought it around to smack against her neck.

Without feeling any pain, Antaska fell to the floor and lay there unable to move.

“Fatality! Chan wins Round one!” said the voice to the unanimous cheering of the crowd.

The broad-smiling Chan raised up his arms and shook them in an unmistakable gesture of victory.

The loud gong sounded again, “Booonngg!!”

Antaska found herself instantly back up on her feet in her corner of the ring without having moved there.

“Round two, fight!” The next fight started.

Antaska tried harder and began to anticipate some of the kicks and punches. She fought through round two and then round three. The time between Chan’s successful blows on her increased somewhat, but she still couldn’t get past his defenses.

After her avatar’s death in the third round, Antaska found herself standing back in the domed room where she had first entered the game. More words appeared in the air in front of her.

“Would you like to play again?”

“Would you like to play another game?”

“Would you like to stop playing?”

Like many first-time virtual reality gamers, Antaska had been hooked by her

first experience. Thinking *I'll keep going until I land at least one strike*, she pressed the words to keep playing the same game.

As the game went on, Antaska wasn't aware of how much time passed. She improved her ability to evade Chan's punches and kicks. She got very close to hitting him, and even touched him, but she wasn't able to make even one of his green lights turn red.

Players didn't get tired in the virtual world, and Antaska kept going, determined to achieve her goal before quitting the game. But suddenly, in the middle of a round two, she was transported from the fight back to the game entrance room.

"Your time is up," said the voice from nowhere.

Antaska felt the creepy, tingly suit on her body again as it began to peel open starting at her toes.

"No!" she cried out loud.

Antaska thought she heard M. Hoyvil chuckle telepathically from somewhere nearby. She heard Potat hiss, and she thought she heard a tiny whispered laugh. But her mind was still focused on the game, and she ignored those sounds.

"I wasn't done!" Antaska complained when the suit finally released her completely. "I was getting better. I know I could have hit Chan if I played just a few more rounds."

She looked up at M. Hoyvil. The corners of his eyes twitched as if he was trying to hold them down.

What does that facial expression mean? Antaska wondered.

"You can do that next time, but it's been an hour, and it's not a good idea to stay in there for too long," said M. Hoyvil. "And remember, we were planning to go to the space viewing lounge next. Do you still want to go?"

Antaska was surprised that so much time had passed. It had seemed like only a few minutes at the most.

"I guess I got really involved in that game," she said. "It seemed so real. I felt like I could stay in there forever. But I definitely want to see the space viewing

lounge now. Let's go!"

Chapter 14

Six space viewing lounges were located around the outer rim of the globular space ship: two on its north and south poles and four spaced evenly around its equator. Each of the lounges was a circular open room separated from space only by a high transparent dome. From the game room, located deep in toward the space ship's core, Antaska, M. Hoyvil, and Potat were suctioned outward in a vacuum-powered elevator. They exited the elevator on the enclosed outer rim level and walked to the door of one of the lounges.

M. Hoyvil paused outside the open doorway and spoke to Antaska.

"I'm sorry I didn't warn you about the game room, but at least I've remembered to give you an advance warning this time. You won't see anything unexpected or shocking in this room. But some people experience dizziness or nausea the first time they go in here. The dome that covers this room is made of organic film material. It's transparent, and it looks like you're walking on the outside of the ship with nothing between you and outer space. Potat was very scared by this room when she first went in."

Potat growled. She forcefully dug her claws all the way through the material of M. Hoyvil's ship suit jacket and into his shoulder, but he barely felt the tiny pin pricks.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," M. Hoyvil apologized.

He reached up and lightly scratched her behind both dark gray ears at once with two of the six fingers on his left hand. The growling transformed to a soft purr, and the claws were pulled back in.

Antaska cautiously approached the door to the lounge. A stairway led up from the doorway. Forewarned of what to expect, she crept slowly up the stairs.

Antaska didn't experience the full effect of the sudden exposure to vast open space until she reached the top. She stepped forward into the lounge and revolved in place while looking up, down, and around.

An amazing and stunningly beautiful view of unfamiliar stars was on display in almost every direction from where she stood. From this vantage point, standing on the top edge of a ball-shaped object, incredibly small in relation to the vastness of outer space, Antaska felt as if she had been thrust out into space and could easily float away.

Swaying, she clutched M. Hoyvil's right arm, slightly jolting Potat on his shoulder. Potat batted at her with a closed-clawed paw, and Antaska let go of the arm. The moment of vertigo passed, and she looked around again. Now she could appreciate the view of bright-colored stars, asteroid and dust clouds, and other features glowing like jewels in the deep endless blackness of space.

Round, dark green sofas made up of Verdante-sized chair modules joined in a circle were scattered around the room. The adjustable backs on the modules lowered loungers partly or all the way back to view space from an reclined position. Earth humans and Verdantes of M. Hoyvil's age, and some extra-large adults, strolled about or sat in various inclined positions on the round sofas.

M. Hoyvil led Antaska to an empty sofa. He sat down, and she climbed up a step to sit in the chair next to him. Potat climbed down from his shoulder and sat between them. She fit easily in the extra space around Antaska, who was much smaller than the large seat. Potat began to kneed the soft fabric with her paws and outthrust claws.

"Stop that!" said Antaska.

She grabbed Potat around the middle and tried to pull her off, but Potat dug her claws in deep and held on tight. Antaska had to choose between letting go or possibly hurting her.

"Don't worry, it's fine," said M. Hoyvil. "You can let her do that. She can't hurt it. The fabric is self-cleaning and self-repairing, like all of the furniture on the ship."

Antaska let go of Potat, and the two humanoids lowered the backs of their chairs all the way down to get the widest possible view of the stars around them. Potat stopped kneading and clawing and rolled over on her back to look up too.

She seemed to be as mesmerized by the celestial panorama as Antaska. Once in a while, she reached up a paw as if to point or reach for a certain star.

As Antaska, Potat, and M. Hoyvil lay in silence gazing out at space, Antaska became aware of soft, melodious whooshing and humming sounds. She recognized the same sounds that accompanied the holograph program she watched in her room—the music of deep space. But instead of being a recording, this was real. And it was even more relaxing and calming.

Antaska's thoughts drew away from her personal problems. Instead, she thought about the vastness that now surrounded her. The vastness that had, in fact, always surrounded her. As Antaska looked and listened, she thought she recognized a pattern, but it was so intricate that it was impossible to say that for sure.

More Verdantes of about M. Hoyvil's age and their Earth human companions filled the empty chair modules in the sofa they reclined on. In her absorption with the sky outside, Antaska was only partly aware of them as the others sat down and reclined the backs of their chairs.

Soon, however, she heard more noises in addition to the sounds of space—the whispering of young male and female voices. Antaska didn't pay attention to the words. But she noticed that these sounds, although more simple and less beautiful, seemed to harmonize with the space noises.

The space viewing lounge turned out to be even more fascinating than the virtual games, and again, Antaska lost all track of time. A tap on her shoulder from M. Hoyvil pulled her out of an almost dreamlike state.

"It's getting late, and we should go now. Tomorrow is another full day of gym class and school. Are you ready to leave?"

With some regret, Antaska raised the back of her chair.

"Yes, I'm ready, but it's even harder to leave this place than it was to leave the fighting game. I'm just glad I didn't stay in that suit all night," she said.



On the way back to their quarters, M. Hoyvil talked to Antaska about the virtual game and how she might be able to use it to fight back against her fitness trainers. Egor hadn't made any violent moves so far, but M. Hoyvil was sure that she needed to be prepared to defend herself against him as well.

"If you want, I'll take you to the game room every other night when I don't have to study. On nights when you aren't using the virtual suit, I'll get you some holo-movies of martial arts fights. You can play them in the main room of our quarters and practice the movements along with the holo-fighters. That will give you the experience of moving your body. That's important for building the muscles, strength, and speed you need in reality, not just in your mind."

"That sounds great," said Antaska.

"My last piece of advice is this," M. Hoyvil continued. He spoke from the experience of hundreds of years of martial arts practice. "Use the defensive moves you learn, like evasion and blocking, but don't use any offensive moves against your trainers unless it's absolutely necessary. They're very aggressive, and they'll get aggravated and hurt you back harder if you hit or strike them. Learn and practice offensive moves, but make them your secret weapon. And remember that a secret weapon loses power once it's revealed."

M. Hoyvil enjoyed playing the role of martial arts master, but he stopped talking when they entered their quarters. He saw Antaska cover the wide opening of her mouth with a hand. She made a soft yawning sound that he understood meant tiredness or boredom.

Then it almost seemed like Antaska knew what he was thinking because she spoke to reassure him.

"I'm not bored, but I'm completely exhausted and starting to fall asleep. I think it's a great plan. And I really appreciate that you're helping me with this. I'm actually looking forward to trying out some of the defensive moves I learned in the virtual suit tomorrow, but I need to go to sleep now."

Antaska reached up and lifted Potat, who was asleep again, off M. Hoyvil's shoulder.

“Goodnight then,” said M. Hoyvil.

Antaska said “goodnight” too and went to her room.

Then M. Hoyvil went to his room. He was pleased with how the day had gone, but he was very tired too.

Chapter 15

The next day in gym class, as Antaska expected, Egor made his visit to her side. She was lying on her back on a raised platform doing bench presses. He stood close behind her head and placed his hands on top of hers on the bar to guide it up and down. Egor spoke to her as she lifted.

“I know by now you’re wondering when I’ll get together with you outside of class,” he said.

Antaska kept lifting the heavy bar and didn’t say anything in return. A day ago, she would have been thrilled to meet with Egor. But now, even though she was still aware of his physical perfection, she felt only bothered and embarrassed by his closeness.

Egor seemed to realize that she was resisting his charms because he abruptly changed his attitude.

“I’m a very busy man, so you’ll have to wait till I have time for you,” he said. “I promise it will happen before the ship reaches the Verdante home planet, but it’s good for you to have time to think about me and long for me. And you’ll be in better shape in a few more weeks. So you’ll be more worthy of me than you are now. This will motivate you to exercise harder.”

Is he trying to use that lame tactic of playing hard to get combined with a small put down to get me to appreciate his obvious superiority and desirability? Antaska wondered. *Does he really think I’m that stupid?*

Antaska burned with irritation, but she still didn’t answer Egor. She tried to look away from him. That was difficult because he was so close and so large. She completed eleven repetitions of her set. Then on the twelfth, Egor let go of her hands and walked away just when the weight got too heavy to lift.

With her chest muscles almost spent, Antaska strained to lift the heavy bar on her own. The weight wobbled. Fear that she would drop it on herself broke Antaska out in a sweat. But at last, she placed it back on the supports built into

the platform.

Antaska heaved a big sigh of relief that included relief that Eegor was gone. She knew a confrontation with Tilde was coming, and she found herself actually looking forward to trying out the defensive moves she learned in the virtual game. But as Hide approached, clearly angry and clearly the superior fighter, Antaska knew she didn't have a chance. Then a new inspiration hit.

Maybe if I explain to her that I'm not interested in Eegor, we can avoid all this unnecessary violence, Antaska thought.

Tilde stopped in front of her. Before Tilde had time to lift an arm or leg in preparation to strike, Antaska spoke quickly.

"I guess you're upset about the attention your partner has been giving me. I want to reassure you that I'm not at all interested in him. You don't have to worry about anything happening between us. The next time he asks me to meet him outside of class, I'll tell him no. I promise," Antaska told her.

She up looked hopefully at Tilde. But she was baffled and also frightened to see that her words seemed to have had the opposite of her desired effect.

"What insult is this?" Tilde shouted. "You are nothing! My partner would never stoop so low as to your height! And you dare to tell me he doesn't interest your nothingness! These are the lies of a lying snake!"

Well, that didn't work, thought Antaska. *Her relationship is really messed up, and I need to stay out of it. What was I thinking about even looking at Eegor? He's nuts. I can't believe I almost fell for a handsome face and a hunky body.*

Antaska didn't have time to think much more because Tilde struck out with a punch toward her chest. To the great surprise of both them, Antaska blocked it with an out-thrust arm. Then she lunged to the side to avoid the kick that followed. Tilde landed a furious kick on the back of Antaska's upper leg. Her legs were still sore from the previous day's workout, so the kick was quite painful.

Antaska sunk down to the floor. She grasped her leg and moaned in pain. She looked up at Tilde and saw her smug but fake-looking smile. Then Tilde turned

and walked away.

This time, it didn't take long for the pain to fade from the kick to Antaska's leg muscle. As she felt better, she also felt a sense of having won a small victory. She looked across the room and saw that M. Hoyvil was watching. Antaska gave him the thumbs up sign. He made the thumbs up sign back at her with one big green hand.



Starting that night, as he had promised, M. Hoyvil gave Antaska holograph videos of fighting for her to practice along with.

The next three weeks passed fast. Antaska settled into the routine of going to gym class, M. Hoyvil's school classes, and nighttime fighting practice. They made trips with Potat to all six of the viewing lounges on the ship. On the two days of rest each week, they visited M. Hoyvil's friends, and Antaska spent time with and got to know many of the other Earthling companions.

As time went on, Antaska and M. Hoyvil began going to the game room, viewing lounges, and other places around the ship in groups with several Verdantes and humans. Antaska was so busy that she would have completely forgot about Eegor if he didn't still pay her his now unwelcome visits each day in gym class.

Daily hard workouts made a steady improvement in Antaska's physical fitness. Fat melted from her body, and her muscles grew much stronger. Her speed and stamina increased, and she learned new fighting moves. Antaska didn't just feel physically stronger. She noticed that her mind seemed clearer, and she was able to concentrate and focus better than ever before. Emotionally, she felt happier and more relaxed. The super healthy food and intense exercise were starting to make a big difference.

After about two weeks of practicing in the virtual suits, Antaska was able to beat Chan in every game in the beginning level of the martial arts game. And

after she progressed to the medium level, it became harder and harder for Tilde to land blows on her in gym class.

The something else changed. It seemed like Tilde was getting frustrated and embarrassed because she couldn't hurt Antaska anymore. Now when Egor gave Antaska attention, Tilde didn't come after her. Instead, she started hitting and kicking the other humans in the class. And they didn't have the fighting skill to avoid her or to fight back.

Antaska talked to M. Hoyvil about it one day when they were in their quarters after class.

"I'm relieved that Tilde has stopped bullying me. But I feel upset and guilty because now the other humans in the class are getting hurt."

"You've become strong, and she's the kind of person who picks on the weak, but that doesn't mean you caused her bad behavior," said M. Hoyvil. "You can't change her, but maybe you can help the others to learn how to fight back too."

"You're right. I'll do that," said Antaska.

Antaska went into her room. She was only partly relieved by his assurances. Deep down, she believed that she wasn't completely without guilt. She confessed her feelings to her most impartial and understanding confidante, Potat, as they sat together on the round bed.

"M. Hoyvil thinks I'm completely innocent. I'm not going to argue with him about that, but I know that's not true," she began.

Potat looked up with ears pointed toward her and opened to their fullest, as if to say, "I'm all ears."

"I'm sure that things wouldn't have got this far if I hadn't kept staring at Egor in the dining hall. Once I saw him with Tilde, I should have ignored him, and I should have said something to him in gym class like 'please stop bothering me.' But I kept fantasizing about him, and I didn't do anything to discourage him. Even though I knew he had a partner. I guess that was pretty crummy of me," Antaska said.

She looked down at Potat. The little cat expressed her judgment by purring

and rubbing her head against Antaska's hand. Antaska was comforted, but she didn't really believe that Potat understood her.

Maybe she understands on some level, she thought hopefully.

"I knew that I shouldn't be thinking about him. And I knew that I should discourage him, but it was hard for me to do that. He was the most attractive man I've ever seen—almost impossible to resist. I hope I've learned something from this. I'd like to say that I'll never do anything like that again, but I'm afraid that I might. You understand that, don't you?" Antaska asked as she lifted Potat up into a hug.



Potat purred loudly. She understood more than Antaska realized. She knew that Antaska, like all humanoids, had flaws, made mistakes, and basically, wasn't perfect. But luckily, a more intelligent and perfect being—Potat—was close by to look out for her.

Once again, Potat tried to talk to Antaska telepathically, even though she knew that Antaska would tell herself something like, "Oh, I'm just imagining that a cat is talking to me."

"I know you'll make more mistakes, but I'll be here to tell you what to do. If only you would listen!" said Potat in an amused and exasperated mental voice.

As Potat expected, Antaska said, "All this stress is making me imagine things again. Now I'm imagining that you're saying exactly what I want to hear."

She put Potat back down and went to get ready for M. Hoyvil's next class.

"So stubborn!" Potat said telepathically.

But Antaska was pretending not to hear her again.

Chapter 16

The next day in gym class, Antaska told the other human students about the training she'd been doing and asked if they wanted to train with her. M. Hoyvil showed Antaska how to set up holo-movies in the gym at night when no one was there so they could practice as a group. Some of the humans joined her in the gym and on trips to the game room, but some declined.

"That's too much exercise!" they told her. "The gym class is already bad enough."

The students who practiced with Antaska got better at fighting back against Tilde. And as time passed, Tilde's behavior changed again. She spent more time fighting with the male humans who were best fighters, but her fighting was becoming more playful. Now she looked like she was having fun.

"What's up with that?" Antaska asked dark-haired Pablo one night when they were all practicing in the gym. "Tilde seems to be after you more than anyone else now. Is that bothering you?"

"Nah, it's OK. I don't mind," Pablo answered. "She's kind of hot."

A few of the other humans hooted. Pablo's face turned red, but Antaska was relieved to hear that.



But one person was not happy with the changed situation—Eegor. Antaska was giving him the brush off, after she had teased him in the beginning. This had never happened in the hundred years that Eegor had been a fitness trainer. And now Tilde wasn't just flirting with Verdante men, who Eegor knew weren't serious about her. She was flirting with the Earthling men in class too. And they looked like they liked it!

This is not the way things are supposed to work! Eegor thought.

He stood watching Tilde. She was in close contact with the one of the males

in the class. She seemed to be taking a lot more time than she needed to demonstrate the fighting move to that guy. And Egor knew that move didn't usually involve so much grabbing and grappling.

His anger grew in a slow, steady burn. Egor's mind turned back to Antaska. He looked over at her. She jumped high in the air and performed an almost perfect kick. Her shiny pink hair flowed enticingly when she jumped up and down. There was something about Antaska that attracted him more than any of the other Earth women had. Especially now that she had become so fit.

He wanted her, but Antaska was making it clear that she didn't want him. And in two days, the space ship would land on the Verdante home planet. His chance of getting her would be gone. Egor's mood grew dark with a dangerous level of dissatisfaction. His thoughts grew dark too.

What can I do about this? he asked himself.

That day in the weightlifting and cardio part of the class, Egor didn't go near Antaska. He stayed at the front, while Tilde circulated among the students. Again, Egor was annoyed by her attention to the males. It was shockingly similar to his own behavior toward Antaska and the other women he had singled out on previous voyages.

Some of the male Earthling showed signs of obvious nervousness such as trembling, sweating, and stammering when Tilde got close enough to touch them. But Egor noticed that the human Pablo, much shorter than Tilde but apparently fearless, flirted shamelessly with her. Egor decided that he was going to do something about this.

It was time for the second half of the day's class. Egor stood at the front and spoke.

"Today, I'll introduce you to the form of fighting called wrestling."

Tilde looked at him in surprise, but he continued.

"Usually, we don't teach this kind of fighting until we're on the trip between the Verdante home planet and the space station. But I've decided that some of you need to learn your lesson sooner."

Egor swept the class with an icy, malevolent glare of his pale gray-green eyes. He included Tilde in his glare, but she didn't look frightened, only confused. Then Egor went on.

"Today, you'll learn how to escape when you're pinned down under your opponent. I'll demonstrate this for you with Tilde."

Egor dropped to the mat on his hands and knees. He lifted one hand to gesture for Tilde to approach. They had given this demonstration many times, and Tilde knew what was expected of her. She knelt down behind Egor and grasped him around the waist, covering him with the weight of her body.

"Now," said Egor, "I'll show you how to free yourself from this hold."

He thrust a leg out diagonally behind him, bending his knee and planting his foot firmly on the ground. Tilde made her usual next move in the demonstration. She shifted her weight to bear down on the leg Egor had just moved. But even though their heights were about equal, his heavier weight and superior strength made it easy for him to escape.

When Egor's foot was locked into position, he curled his body down into a crouch, supporting his weight with the planted foot. Then he stood up fast. As he rose, he grabbed Tilde's arm and flipped her over his back. He tossed her up high in the air and then down to the floor with much more roughness than usual. The human students gasped.

The powerful throw would have badly hurt or possibly killed any of the Earthlings in the class, but Egor wasn't worried about Tilde. She was super strong, and she knew how to land in a way that would cause her the least physical harm. Plus the gym floor was deeply cushioned.

Tilde's body hit the floor, and she lay on her back, momentarily unmoving. She looked dazed. Egor ignored her and addressed the students.

"OK. You've seen how it's done. First, you'll practice the escape move without an opponent trapping you. Then you'll practice escaping from an actual opponent. Now all of you get on your hands and knees and move one leg, then the other, as I've shown you."



Stunned by the display of extreme fighting, the students, including Antaska, were quick to obey him. They began practicing the move as instructed.

Antaska practiced the move, but she felt a growing sense of dread. She noticed Egor circulating ever closer to her—shark-like—through the class. Occasionally, he stopped to correct one of them, but he didn't touch anyone. At last, her fears were confirmed. Egor came to a stop next to her. He turned to address the class.

“Now you'll team up with another student and practice the move with one person trapping and the other attempting to escape. I'll team up with this lucky student.”

Egor turned to Antaska. “Because you've become so advanced in this class, you have the great fortune of getting to practice with me.”

Antaska had squatted back on bent knees while Egor was talking. He crouched down behind her and easily shoved her forward into the hands and knees position. Then he lunged over and covered her completely with his much larger body. He supported himself on his own hands and knees.

Egor wrapped an arm under Antaska's body and across her chest. He pulled her toward him while supporting part of his weight by leaning on her.

“Now, we'll see if you can escape from me,” he said in a low, menacing tone.

Antaska stuck her right leg out diagonally behind her. She tried to push up on it since Egor's right side was less supported. But she couldn't budge even a single muscle of his vice-like posture.

Uselessly, Antaska tried the other leg, then the first one again. She rotated back and forth between legs and picked up speed, but she was imprisoned in the cage of his body.

Egor seemed pleased by her discomfort. He laughed softly and unpleasantly into Antaska's ear, which was disturbing close to his mouth. Panicked thoughts

began to race around in circles in her mind.

I can't get out of here. I'm trapped. I've never practiced anything like this. I don't know how to get out of this. I'm trapped.

The thoughts kept coming, Antaska's heartbeat and breathing grew more rapid, and her panic increased. She twisted and squirmed with her whole body trying to escape in any way possible.



While Antaska struggled, Egor was thinking too. But his thoughts were quite different than hers.

I like this. It's kind of fun. I could do this more often, and similar thoughts circled through his mind.

In the midst of his enjoyment of Antaska's fear and useless squirming against him, Egor looked over to the front of the class to see if Tilde was watching. But instead of looking his way, her attention was on one of the male humans. She still sat on the floor, and instead of exercising as instructed, Pablo was sitting next to her. He was talking to her while the rest of the class practiced the escape move.

Cold rage flooded Egor as he kept his firm grip on Antaska. His dominance of her suddenly lost its playfulness. Her continuous, futile movements directed his attention back to her, but now he considered her in a much darker light. For almost a month, he had given her the benefit of his attention, but she had never responded like the others.

Antaska's distant, uninterested attitude had seemed like an exciting challenge. By now, she should be warming up to him and showing her desire. Instead, she was showing an insulting lack of interest by fighting furiously to get away from him. It was like she was repelled by his very touch. All the resentment Egor had just felt toward Tilde and Pablo shifted to Antaska.



As if she sensed Eegor's hostility, Antaska's desperation to escape from him increased, but her efforts were useless. He tightened the arm that clasped her around the chest. He squeezed hard with powerful arm muscles, and she felt like she couldn't breathe.

Antaska panicked and tried to scream, but her lack of air only let out a low, squeaky "help!" The sound was muffled by her position underneath Eegor's large body.

In her terror, Antaska didn't notice the large speeding blur of blue and green that traveled from the area of M. Hoyvil's class to just a few yards away from her. It was followed by a larger speeding blur of red and green. And she didn't notice the heavy thump sound of two huge bodies landing on the cushioned floor. Eegor didn't seem to notice either. His grip on her didn't loosen.

"Enough!" a loud deep bass voice boomed from behind Antaska.

Eegor froze and then let go of Antaska. He dropped away from her, and Antaska turned around to look behind her. There, pinned to the floor under the massive weight of his gigantic green-skinned adult Verdante instructor, lay M. Hoyvil.



M. Hoyvil couldn't move because the much more powerful Master Mytaar held his arms in a tight restraining grip.

"I'll let you go if you promise not to break any galactic laws on the treatment of protected species," Master Mytaar said to him telepathically "Can I trust you now?"

"Yes, I promise." M. Hoyvil answered.

Master Mytaar released him. M. Hoyvil sat up and looked at Antaska. He saw her taking some deep breaths. He knew it wouldn't be appropriate for him to

speak to her vocally now. For the first time, M. Hoyvil wished that Antaska could somehow understand telepathic speech.

Antaska looked at him and smiled. Once again, unknown to M. Hoyvil, the mysterious bond of affection that can exist between two members of two different species had been strengthened by his actions, and words weren't necessary.

"The exercise portion of class is over for today," announced Master Mytaar to the entire gym out loud in his resonating deep voice.

Antaska's classmates stood looking with wide eyes and open mouths at the sight of the gigantic blue-green man in their midst.

"As for you," said Master Mytaar, turning to M. Hoyvil and speaking telepathically, "I hope you appreciate how fortunate you are that I stopped you when I did. Instead of continuing on your trip from the home planet to outer space, you could be on your way to Central Planet for a long, drawn-out court case. As you know, those often last a lot longer than a mere one hundred years."

M. Hoyvil answered his Master's criticism. "The laws about protected species say we must protect them before our own species, even before our own children. That's exactly what I intended. I knew that my action could result in legal penalties, but Antaska called for help. I put her well being before my own."

"In a way, that's quite admirable," said Master Mytaar, "but as I have told you, my pets are well trained to know their limits. She isn't hurt, and she wouldn't have been hurt in excess of what can be expected in martial arts training. I would order you not to interfere again, but I know you won't listen. In fact, I'm not sure how to advise you."

The master paused for a few moments.

"I'll have to meditate on this situation," he said finally.

At that moment, the gong announcing the end of class chimed loudly.

In M. Hoyvil's opinion, what Eegor had done *was* more than what should be expected in a martial arts class. He didn't say that to his teacher. That would be disrespectful. But he thought some less than respectful thoughts.

It's so annoying that the adults must always think about a problem forever before they take action. Can't they see that bad things can happen while they're sitting around thinking?

M. Hoyvil was so bothered by what had happened to Antaska that he didn't really care if Master Mytaar heard these thoughts. Still, he kept his mental shields up, as was expected when around others of his species.

"Well, everyone has calmed down here, so I'll be on my way," said Master Mytaar out loud.

The gigantic instructor turned and walked to the other side of the gym.



However, one person had not calmed down. Egor acted calm, but he burned with rage after the embarrassing intervention of Master Mytaar. He added his master and M. Hoyvil to the list of people he was mad at.

Someone's going to pay for this, he told himself. Someone's going to pay with some broken bones. At least. But who?

He thought about Master Mytaar and M. Hoyvil.

No, that won't work. M. Hoyvil's only a foot taller than me, but they're both way too much stronger than me. Supernaturally strong. Like punching a tree. It wouldn't be a fair fight, he decided.

Egor looked over at Tilde. She sat surrounded by three of the Earthling males—taller, blonder, and gorgeous—chatting away. It was like she hadn't even noticed what just happened.

What about Tilde? he wondered. She's really pissing me off right now. She's a good fighter, but I'm stronger than her. Hmm. Nah, maybe not. She's tough enough to hurt me back, and the master and mistress will get mad at me if I do anything to her.

That left Antaska.

Yep. She's the one, he decided. She's a lot weaker than me, and the master

never cares if I break a few bones. Or do other stuff. All I need to do is get her alone.

After class, Egor hovered several feet away from Antaska and a group of her friends. They were making plans for later that night. Egor's genetically enhanced hearing was superior to theirs. He could hear what they were saying from a farther distance than they would expect.

"Are we meeting to practice tonight?" Pablo asked Antaska. "Will you be up to it after what just happened with Egor?"

"Yes, for sure," Antaska answered him. "We need to start practicing some wrestling moves too. I'll see you all back here tonight at 1900 hours."

Got it! thought Egor.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a big blue and green blob moving closer. The Verdantes were coming to get their humans. Egor turned and walked away.

Chapter 17

After dinner that night, back in the main room of their quarters, Antaska and M. Hoyvil sat on the large couch with Potat in between them. M. Hoyvil noticed the little cat's loud purring. She flicked her tail against first one and then the other of the humanoids. But M. Hoyvil was too distracted by what Antaska was saying to pay much attention to Potat.

"I'll be going out to the gym soon to practice with the other humans in my class," Antaska told both M. Hoyvil and Potat.

M. Hoyvil felt uneasy about that. He hadn't stopped worrying about Antaska since Egor's aggressive behavior in gym class. Now he was convinced that Master Mytaar was in denial about his human pets. Things could only get worse before they got better.

Even though M. Hoyvil was against calling human companions "pets," he thought that Egor and Tilde's animal-like behavior had earned them that title. But M. Hoyvil respected Antaska as a sentient humanoid. He wouldn't give her orders as if she were a pet. Still, he tried to talk her out of going.

"Are you sure you're up to that tonight after what happened today?" M. Hoyvil asked her. "I'm kind of worried about you. Maybe it would be better for you to stay here and rest tonight."

"After what happened today, I have to go," Antaska answered.

M. Hoyvil could hear the determination in her voice.

"The others are being targeted too, and someone else might get hurt tomorrow. I could never forgive myself if that happened, and I could have made a difference. I know there's only so much we can do if those trainers really want to hurt us, but learning some defensive moves seems to help."

M. Hoyvil sighed in resignation. But Potat growled and dug her small claws into Antaska's leg.

"Ouch!" said Antaska.

M. Hoyvil watched her gently removed the claws and stand up. Then she went into her room to change into exercise clothes.



Antaska had always felt safe walking alone through the tall, curved hallways of the space ship. The Verdante space ship was enormous, and it was a long way from their quarters to the classrooms and gym. Usually, Antaska liked the exercise on the long walk. But on this night, a nervous chill crept up her spine.

She told herself that M. Hoyvil and Potat's behavior had spooked her, and there was nothing to worry about. She tried to calm down by focusing her mind on the soothing humming noise that was always heard softly throughout the space ship.

The hallway was empty. Antaska tried to ignore the feeling of increasing dread that tightened her chest. She approached a dark shadow along the wall.

That's nothing. It's just the door to the astronomy classroom, she told herself. *It's always open.*

Antaska passed by the doorway. She turned and peered nervously into the darkness. But nothing was visible except the vague outlines of empty desks.

Suddenly, a large figure erupted from the doorway. With superhuman speed, Egor, who had been hiding behind the inner edge of the door, lunged out at Antaska. He wrapped both of his long arms around her. At first stunned, Antaska overcame her shock and began to yell, kick, and twist, but he easily pulled her into the classroom.

"Yell as loud as you like. No one will hear you," Egor said in a voice that made her feel sick.

Antaska stopped screaming, but she continued to fight uselessly. Egor dragged her past the desks to the clear space at the back of the class. It was well out of the sight of anyone who might pass by, although that was unlikely at this time of night.

Egor pushed Antaska down on her hands and knees. He bent himself over her, taking the same position they had been in earlier in gym class. Antaska felt and smelled his hot breath. Egor spoke with a panting voice into her ear.

“Things will be different this time, now that your Verdante is not here to help you.”

Antaska swooned in terror and disgust. She felt overwhelmed by the repeating nightmare she found herself in. She had escaped from Egor earlier that day, but now she was trapped again. And this time, the situation was a hundred times worse.

Just before Egor tightened his arm around her chest, Antaska shouted as loud as she could. “Help!!”

Back in the squeeze of Egor’s vice-like arm, Antaska once again experienced a terrifying shortness of breath. But through her pain and fear, all she noticed—strangely—was the clear sound of a woman’s voice saying, “bite, bite.”

If Antaska wasn’t so overwhelmed by her situation, she would have told herself, as usual, that she wasn’t really seeing Potat’s face in her mind. But there was no place for the luxury of denial in this situation. Then Antaska saw Potat’s small mouth open to reveal tiny, sharp teeth.

“Bite, bite,” Antaska heard the words again.

Antaska was desperate, and she didn’t hesitate. She turned her face up toward Egor’s closest available skin surface. It happened to be near the underarm, revealed under his short-sleeved workout top.

All the fear and other negative emotions that swirled through Antaska’s heart and mind focused into her intention. Then Antaska bit with all her strength into Egor’s pale, white skin. She was surprised that his skin was so soft and easy to pierce.

Something wet dripped on Antaska’s mouth. She noticed the metallic smell and taste of blood. That was quickly followed by the release of Egor’s grip around her chest.

“Arghhh!” He pulled away with a loud cry of rage and pain.

Antaska spat repeatedly. Then she wiped her mouth roughly on the short sleeve of her tan workout t-shirt.

Egor dropped down onto the floor. He moaned and glared at Antaska as he cradled his left underarm in his opposite hand. She stood up and backed away from him.



Egor wasn't used to being on the receiving end of pain, and he didn't handle it well. He sat on the floor recovering and thinking about the best way to punish Antaska.

He heard the sound of rapid pounding feet out in the hallway. The sound grew louder, closer, and Tilde came flying through the door of the classroom.

Oh, great. Just what I need, thought Egor. I thought she seemed suspicious of my reason for going out tonight.

Dressed in his gym clothes, he had told Tilde that he wanted to go to the gym and work out alone to calm his mind. He had used this story many times before when he was going out to meet another woman. But in the past, she had always believed him or acted like she did.

Why would she come looking for me this time? She's been so busy flirting with the Earth males in class. She's been acting like she doesn't care what I do. Could that be an act to make me jealous? he wondered. Yeah, that must be it. She seems to hate Antaska more than the others. She wouldn't just stop caring. And this shows that she hasn't.

Egor smiled and waited to see what Tilde would do next.

Just inside the door to the classroom, Tilde paused to look around. Her beautiful face twisted in fury.

“What!” she shouted at Antaska. “You have harmed my mate? You inferior Earth woman?”

Still sitting on the floor, Egor held his upper arm and moaned. Tilde charged across the short distance to where Antaska stood. The enraged Tilde stopped in front of her, grabbed Antaska's upper arms in her powerful hands, and shook her roughly.

"You! You! You!!" she shouted. "You slut! I can't decide whether to punch you or kick you because the urge to strangle you is so strong."

Tilde's tight-squeezed, twisted mouth marred the beauty of her fine-boned face. Her eyes pushed together, making a deep indent in her forehead.

Egor sat watching and waiting. Antaska looked drained. She stood still as if frozen.

She must realize it's futile to struggle, thought Egor.

Finally, Tilde made her decision. She released one of Antaska's arms. Then Tilde pulled back her own powerful, lean-muscled arm. She balled her hand into a fist and aimed it straight for Antaska's nose.

Chapter 18

Shortly before that time, back in their quarters, Potat had become more and more worried about Antaska. She had tried to tell M. Hoyvil that Antaska was in danger, but his intelligence was limited. He could only understand a few words of the cat telepathic language.

“My pet is in danger! We must go get her!” she told M. Hoyvil.

“Did you say, ‘Get pet, get pet?’” he asked Potat. “I’m worried about her too, but I can’t just go out and force her to come back. She’s got the right to make her own decisions, and I’m not going to treat her like a pet.”

“She’s my pet, and she is in danger!” Potat insisted. “Someone’s hurting her! We have to go get her!”

“Did you say, ‘My pet. My pet. Get my pet?’” M. Hoyvil asked. “I’m not saying that she’s not your pet. But even if she is, I still can’t go get her. That would be treating her like she was my pet. She’s not going to believe that I was just doing what you told me to.”

Potat grew frustrated at his obstinacy. It was clear that he didn’t understand the seriousness of the situation. So she used the same drastic measures that were often necessary to get Antaska’s attention.

Meowing loudly, Potat stuck her claws as hard and deep as she could into M. Hoyvil’s thigh. He didn’t seem to feel the claws, but at least he heard the meowing.

“It’s okay, little cat,” he said.

I know he doesn’t really believe that, Potat thought.

M. Hoyvil lifted her up and hugged her.

Potat kept meowing and struggled with all her might. Then she attacked M. Hoyvil with a whirlwind of all four scratching paws. He let her go, and she dashed to the hallway door. She stood up on her back legs and scratched the door furiously with her front paws.

“Bad boy! Bad girl!” she shouted at M. Hoyvil telepathically, hoping he would finally get the message.

At last, M. Hoyvil gave in. “Since you insist, I guess it won’t hurt for us to at least go check on Antaska. I won’t tell her she has to come back, I’ll just say you seemed worried.”

He opened the door, and Potat ran out and down the hallway toward the gym. But M. Hoyvil was much faster. He scooped Potat up, dropped her in his pocket, and rushed toward the gym in a blur of speed that was faster than even the most powerful Earth human.

Finally, he gets it, thought Potat.

Chapter 19

Back in the classroom, the sound of more pounding feet came from the hallway. Then a big green and red blur flowed into the room, stopped, and appeared as a gigantic male Verdante. But Antaska didn't pay any attention to that. All her attention was on Tilde's rage-fueled fist. Frozen in time, Antaska watched the fist move as if in slow motion toward her face. Antaska knew there was no escape this time. She closed her eyes and waited.

"Thud!" Antaska heard the sound of Tilde's fist hitting something hard. But she didn't feel anything. Not even the slight thump she would have felt in a virtual game. Antaska opened her eyes.

M. Hoyvil was standing between her and Tilde. He rubbed a big green hand on a spot in the middle of his chest.

"Ouch!" he said loudly but telepathically.

Antaska heard but pretended not to. She peered around M. Hoyvil and saw Tilde standing there rubbing her bruised fist with her other hand. Tilde's mouth was clenched shut, and a drop of wetness appeared in the corner of one eye.

Egor was still sitting on the floor looking up with wide eyes and a wide-open mouth.

A loud, deep male voice came from the middle of the room. "What is going on here?" demanded Master Mytaar.

The gigantic green man stood there dressed in the usual bright red ship suit worn by Verdante adults. He'd arrived in the room just in time to watch Tilde throw her punch. Master Mytaar towered over them all in the middle of the room.

"Master Mytaar!" said Egor and Tilde out loud.

And M. Hoyvil said the same thing telepathically.

"Tilde! Why did I just see you aiming a punch for this human's face?" Master Mytaar said with a gesture toward Antaska. "And Egor, why are you there on

the floor? And you, M. Hoyvil, what are you doing here?”

Tilde and Eegor both lowered their heads, but M. Hoyvil, even though he was two feet shorter than the big man, kept his head high.

This was all very dramatic, but Antaska looked over to the front of the room and saw someone who was even more important.



Potat stood on the desk where M. Hoyvil had carefully placed her when he dashed into the room. Her back was still arched to its highest, and her fur extended in sharp spikes. She hissed and spat.

When Potat saw that Antaska was safe and finally noticed her, she started to calm down. She sat down on the desk and began smoothing down her fluffed up gray and white fur. Good. Antaska was on her way over.

“Are you OK?” asked Antaska. “What are you doing here? This isn’t a safe place for a little cat like you.”

Potat was happy to see that her pet Antaska had the right priorities.

“I’m fine,” Potat answered her telepathically. “Can you hear me now?”

Antaska didn’t answer, she just winked at her. Potat knew why. If the Verdantes found out Antaska was telepathic, they wouldn’t let her travel to outer space with them.

Potat looked back over at the others. M. Hoyvil stood with arms across his chest glaring down at the two big humanoids.

That’s good too, thought Potat.

Then more pounding feet were heard outside in the hallway. Everyone turned to look at the door. An Earth human male of Antaska’s size rushed in. He braked to a stop in the middle of the room.

“Pablo!” said Antaska and Tilde at the same time.

“What’s going on in here?” asked Pablo, looking around the room.

He walked over and stood next to Antaska.

“Yes, what is going on in here?” asked someone else.

Another large presence had entered the room unnoticed by everyone except Potat. A cat notices everything.

Master Mytaar’s life partner, Mistress Moneeka, stood just within the doorway. Standing in the dimly lit room, Mistress Moneeka seemed to be surrounded by a golden aura, perhaps caused by the soft shine of her lime green skin and hair against the glow of her shiny red ship suit. Her large eyes scanned each person in the room as if seeking the answer to her question.

Mistress Moneeka’s large-eyed gaze moved around the room from Eegor to Tilde to M. Hoyvil to Pablo and then to Potat. All the others looked down under the almost supernatural force of Mistress Moneeka’s stare, but Potat stared right back at her.

Of course, the giant humanoid woman looked away first.



When the heavy weight of Mistress Moneeka’s probing gaze settled on Antaska, she felt as if all her deepest and darkest secrets were being revealed and judged. Antaska looked up at the large Verdante woman with confused feelings of shame, fear, and resentment. Mistress Moneeka met her eyes and held them, and for a few moments, Antaska was unable to look away. After what seemed like an eternity, the huge emerald green eyes released their hold on her.

“That was kind of invasive, don’t you think?” Antaska heard M. Hoyvil say telepathically.

Mistress Moneeka ignored his question. She walked over to stand next to Master Mytaar.

“Come over here and join us,” said the gigantic lime-green woman out loud to Antaska. Her voice was gentle but compelling. “We must hear from you what happened, and then we’ll decide what to do about all this.”

Antaska walked over and stood next to M. Hoyvil.

“I’m fine. I’m not harmed,” Antaska insisted in a calm but shaky voice.

“You say you’re fine, but in this situation, we must find out what happened. If someone broke our laws and the galactic laws, that must be punished,” said Mistress Moneeka.

She looked down at Antaska from four feet above.

“A record must be made for legal purposes. Luckily, there are many witnesses here. We will hear everyone’s stories, starting with yours,” said Mistress Moneeka.

Master Mytaar remained silent and stood with downcast eyes, apparently letting his mate handle things.

Antaska didn’t argue with Mistress Moneeka. She told them all what had happened, starting from when Egor grabbed her in the hallway.

Pablo gasped when Antaska got to the part about Tilde swinging her fist toward her face. He didn’t say anything. But Antaska saw Tilde turn to look at him with an expression that Antaska couldn’t read. Antaska ended the story when she opened her eyes and saw M. Hoyvil standing in front of her.

“Thank you,” said Mistress Moneeka . “You may wait with your friend over there.”

She gestured with a gigantic green hand toward Pablo and Potat. Antaska wasted no time in going back to them. Wiry, dark-haired Pablo was leaning against the big desk that Potat was on, and Antaska joined him there.

“Are you OK?” he asked in a whisper. “You didn’t show up for practice, and I got worried.”

“Yes,” Antaska whispered back.

Then they both turned and listened to Mistress Moneeka.

“Egor, your turn is next,” the big alien woman said. “You know I care about you, and I don’t mean to sound harsh. But if you lie to me, I’ll know, and your punishment will be worse.”



Egor frowned, but he stood up. His thoughts about Antaska were resentful.

I don't see why we have to wait here talking about a foolish Earth woman's so-called 'injuries.' A scar will form on my skin if it isn't seen to soon. She won't have any scars. Surely they can see who's the real villain here. We all know that Master Mytaar and Mistress Moneeka won't interfere with my mating habits. They'll let me keep doing what I've always been doing. What a joke this is!

He knew he had to tell the truth though. Egor had lived with Mistress Moneeka all of his life, and she wasn't kidding about knowing when someone was lying.

But how can I make them understand my side of the story? he wondered.

"Well, it's like this," said Egor. "This Earth female acted like she was interested in me. She kept looking at me in the dining hall, you know. So even though she's not up to my usual standards, I decided to give her some attention since she wanted it so bad."

Egor heard some gasps and grumbles from Tilde and others around the room. He didn't look at Tilde. It was awkward. He'd always lied to her in the past, but that wouldn't work this time.

Instead, Egor looked up at Master Mytaar. He expected to see the usual amused but understanding look on his master's face. The look Master Mytaar always had when Egor told him about his exploits. But Master Mytaar wasn't looking at Egor. He was looking down at the floor.

Odd, that, thought Egor.

He continued his story.

"I asked her if she wanted to meet outside of class, and she said 'no,' but you know how females always say 'no' when they mean 'yes,' right?"

Egor looked at Master Mytaar again for confirmation, but the big alien still didn't look back at him.

"So anyway," said Egor, "I heard she was going to the gym tonight, so I waited in here for her. Then when she walked by, I grabbed her and pulled her in. Because like I said, we all know Earth females want it, but they always say they

don't. It's part of their species mating habits. I mean my species. Right?"

He looked again at Master Mytaar. Still not looking back.

Could he be acting like this because Mistress Moneeka is here? Egor wondered. He's always fine with whatever I do with these females. He always says, "The mating habits of your species are very interesting, Egor," or something like that. But now he's not backing me up. Hmm.

Egor got a bit nervous. Would he really get some kind of punishment for this? He finished his story in a rush.

"So I pushed her down on the floor and tried to give her what I know she wanted. And then she bit me! Can you believe that? If anyone needs to be punished, it's that bit... inferior female."

He looked up at Mistress Moneeka. But she wasn't looking at him. She was staring at Master Mytaar. That tall, skinny adolescent troublemaker M. Hoyvil was staring at Master Mytaar too.

Then Mistress Moneeka turned to Egor.

"You may go back to your room and tend to your wound, Egor," she said. "We'll let you know what we decide to do about this."

That's a relief, thought Egor.

He was eager to escape the uncomfortable atmosphere of the room. On his way out the door, that bitch Antaska and her stupid human friend and her stupid cat all moved sideways away from him. Egor glared at them. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't with the master and mistress standing there. The stupid cat hissed and waved a tiny sharp-clawed paw at him.

Ha! Like that could hurt me, Egor thought.

Then weirdly, he thought he heard a tiny female voice speaking in his head.

"I will hurt you," said the voice.

Egor shook his head and kept going down the hallway. Thoughts of Antaska returned. The feel of her shiny pink hair, her soft tanned skin pressed against his. He shook his head again.

No. After what she did, that inferior female doesn't deserve any more of my

attention. I'll have to pick a new one, he decided.

With that decision made, Eegor cheered up. He mentally reviewed the various charms of the other women in the gym class.

Yah, things will be back to normal by tomorrow, he thought.



Back in the classroom, Potat listened and watched with interest as Tilde told her version of the story. Tilde looked Mistress Moneeka in the eyes as she spoke. A pinkish tinge bloomed under her pale skin.

“I was in my room waiting for Eegor to come visit,” said Tilde. “I knew Antaska was ignoring him in class, so I didn’t think he would be meeting her. Then he told me he wanted to go to the gym and work out alone. But something about him seemed weird. One of his eyes kept twitching. I wondered if he was lying to me.

“So after he left, I kept thinking about it. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Then I thought maybe it was just an act. Maybe they were trying to trick me, and Antaska was just pretending she didn’t like him. I got mad, and I ran down the hall looking for them. And then I found them.”

Tilde stopped and hung her head down.

Well, at least she seems to know she did something wrong, thought Potat.

“And then what, Tilde?” Mistress Moneeka pressed her to go on.

“Then I came in this room and found Eegor on the floor holding his neck, and Antaska standing there over him. I didn’t know what happened. But I knew someone had insulted me, and I just lost it. I had to punch someone. So I tried to punch her, but M. Hoyvil got in the way.”

She turned and looked up at M. Hoyvil. He was shorter than the big adults but still a foot taller than her. He looked down at her with huge eyes that were stony green slits.

“I’m sorry, M. Hoyvil,” said Tilde. “I’m very sorry that I hit you and that I

tried to hit Antaska. I'm just glad that you stopped me."

M. Hoyvil's expression softened only a bit. Potat knew he was waiting for something more. Tilde turned around slowly to face Antaska.

"I'm sorry, Antaska," Tilde's words stuttered out. "I'm very sorry for everything I've done. I blamed you for something that wasn't your fault. I hope I'll know better in the future, and I hope you'll forgive me some day."

Potat noticed Tilde looking from Antaska to Pablo as she spoke.

I think she's more worried about what Pablo thinks, Potat thought.

But Antaska didn't seem to care about that.

She smiled at Tilde and said, "Yes, I forgive you Tilde. Thank you for apologizing. And thank you for inspiring me to get in shape and learn martial arts."

Oh, sheesh! thought Potat. *No cat would ever be that forgiving. Well, at least Tilde apologized.*

Tilde turned back to face the three giant Verdantes.

"Thank you, Tilde," said Mistress Moneeka. "I appreciate your honesty. Now the three of us need to discuss this." She indicated the other Verdantes. "You can go join the others. I see that you want to."

Pale-skinned Tilde flushed pink again. She turned awkwardly and looked at Pablo. He smiled at her.

Humanoids! thought Potat.

Potat sat on a big Verdante desk between Antaska and Pablo. Tilde walked over with slow steps and stood facing Pablo. Potat listened to their conversation. Of course Antaska was listening too.

On the other side of the room, Potat could hear the three Verdantes arguing telepathically. But she was more interested in the vocal conversation of the nearby humans. So Potat recorded the Verdantes' conversation in one part of her brain. She'd listen to it later if she wanted to.

"Are you mad at me?" Tilde asked Pablo. "Will you ever want to talk to me again?"

“I’m a little mad,” said Pablo. “But I’m glad you apologized, and I still want to talk to you, yes.”

Potat heard Tilde breathe a quiet sigh of relief.

“But I’m really glad you didn’t punch Antaska. If you had, I probably wouldn’t want to ever see you again,” Pablo said.

Tilde was silent for a few seconds.

“Does that mean you like *her*? Like Egor, you like her too? Is that why?” Tilde asked him.

“No! I don’t like her like Egor does!” Pablo insisted. “She’s my friend. We train and fight together, but I’m not romantic about her. Right, Antaska?”

He turned toward Antaska.

“Right,” Antaska said. She made a thumbs up gesture.

Pablo turned back to Tilde.

“Actually, there’s someone else who I feel romantic about,” he said.

“Really?” asked Tilde in a breathy voice.

Oh no, thought Potat. I know what’s coming now. That nasty mouth rubbing stuff humanoids do.

“Yes, really,” said Pablo.

Pablo and Tilde moved in closer to each other. But lean-muscled Pablo was a foot shorter than the beautiful seven foot tall Tilde.

Phew! I guess that’s not going to happen, thought Potat.

But Pablo was resourceful. He grabbed the high Earth human chair from the side of the desk and put it next to Tilde. Then he climbed up two of the steps. When his face was at the same height as hers, he leaned forward. Tilde leaned forward too. Their lips met and locked. Their arms encircled each other. Their firm, fit bodies pressed together. Hairless skin rubbed against hairless skin.

Ew! thought Potat.

Then there was a lot of groping. Potat heard some funny noises like sighing and moaning.

“Aw! That’s so sweet!” said Antaska.

Potat didn't share her opinion.

"Would you mind? Would you please stop that? There are others here who don't need to see this!" Potat protested in her loudest telepathic voice.

"Who said that?" asked Mistress Moneeka telepathically from across the room. "Did someone say, 'you stop?'"

The gigantic green woman stared over at Antaska and Tilde with disturbing curiosity in her eyes.

"Oh, that was Potat the cat," said M. Hoyvil. "Cats are sentient and telepathic, you know."

"Really?" said Mistress Moneeka. "That tiny thing? I didn't know that. But I guess Tilde wouldn't have said 'you stop.' And of course, it couldn't have been Antaska."

What's that supposed to mean? Potat wondered. *She'd better not be putting my pet Antaska down!*

"In any case," said Mistress Moneeka, "maybe they are getting a bit out of control over there."

She spoke out loud to Tilde from across the room. "Tilde! I think it's time for you to go to your room now."

Tilde let go of Pablo and turned around to face her. She brushed a hand through her long blonde disheveled hair.

"Yes, mistress," she said demurely.

"We'll let you know later what we decide. I'm afraid there will have to be some punishment for you as well, but yours will be lighter than Eegor's. Especially since you seem to understand that you did something wrong. Most likely it will be some amount of confinement in our residence on the Verdante home planet when we get back," said Mistress Moneeka.

"Thank you, mistress," said Tilde.

She started walking out of the room. As Tilde passed from the dim classroom into the brighter hallway, Potat saw a faint glow of green in her skin tone. Pablo followed her.

What kind of punishment is that? Potat wondered.



After Tilde and Pablo left the room, the Verdantes' telepathic conversation caught Antaska's attention.

Master Mytaar spoke to M. Hoyvil.

"Nice block, by the way," said Master Mytaar.

"Thank you, instructor," answered M. Hoyvil in a respectful telepathic voice.

Mistress Moneeka spoke up again. "I think we've all agreed about Tilde's punishment, but what about Egor? M. Hoyvil wants the heaviest punishment possible, but you want the lightest, Master Mytaar. In this case, you know that's not possible. To sexually violate another person or attempt to do so is one of the highest crimes of galactic law. I know he's more than just a pet to you, but why do you insist we let him go unpunished?"

"Yes, why?" said M. Hoyvil.

Antaska was curious too, but she pretended she didn't hear their telepathic speech. She didn't know everything about the Verdantes, but one thing she did know was that they took humans along to space with them only because they weren't telepathic. Trying to look casual, Antaska leaned back against the desk and scratched Potat behind the ears. The small cat purred and leaned against her.

Master Mytaar sighed telepathically and answered the question with partly shut eyes.

"Egor doesn't deserve this punishment because it was also my fault. I must take part of the blame. I failed in my responsibility to control my human pets. Yes, I know that Egor will have to be confined at home for some amount of years, but I will stay confined too."

"Well, in that case, M. Hoyvil is to blame too," said Mistress Moneeka. "Because he didn't control Antaska. She flirted with Egor."

Potat growled, and Antaska twitched a bit, but no one seemed to notice.

“What? That’s ridiculous!” said M. Hoyvil. “Since when is flirting a crime?”

“Well, it can’t be Master Mytaar’s fault,” said Mistress Moneeka.

“Yes, it’s both of your faults because you not only allowed this behavior, you encouraged it, both of you,” said M. Hoyvil.

“What are you saying, young man!” said Mistress Moneeka.

But Master Mytaar, still with downcast eyes, said nothing.

“You treat Eegor and Tilde like pets,” said M. Hoyvil. “You command, and they do your bidding. But when they misbehaved, you accepted that. You said, ‘That’s just how Earthlings act. They’re an inferior species.’ But they looked to you for guidance because you took away their ability to act as individual sentient beings by making them your pets. And your guidance was bad.”

Mistress Moneeka gasped. “How dare you speak to us this way! We’re adults, and you’re just an adolescent! I will report this behavior to your primary gene contributors!”

Antaska’s eyes widened, but still no one noticed her.

“No. No. He’s right,” said Master Mytaar, finally speaking up. “As I said, this is partly our fault. It’s true that we accepted behavior we knew was wrong. We could have easily put a stop to it.”

“But they’re only Earthlings! They’re like barbarians compared to us,” said Mistress Moneeka. “And that’s how everyone treats them, all the Verdantes, not just us.”

“If they’re like barbarians compared to us, it’s because we’ve kept them down,” said M. Hoyvil. “We say we don’t want to interfere with their evolution, but almost everything we do keeps them from evolving. Why is that? Is it because we’re so dependent on them? Because we can’t travel in space without them along? Are we afraid that they’ll become telepathic too, and then we’ll be stranded?”

For several moments, there was complete silence in the room.

Finally Master Mytaar spoke again. “Young student, it’s true that we failed to provide proper guidance to our human pets, but what you’re suggesting is

preposterous. Do you really think there's some kind of conspiracy among our race to keep the Earthlings from evolving and becoming telepathic? So we can make use of them to meet our needs?"

"No. I don't think it's necessarily a conspiracy," M. Hoyvil answered. "People might be doing this without thinking much about it. But it's happening. And it's wrong. I don't like it, and I'm not going to treat Antaska like that. She's just as sentient as any of us."

Antaska hid her smile. She was impressed by M. Hoyvil.

Mistress Moneeka gasped again.

"I think we've talked enough about this tonight," said Master Mytaar. "We'll punish Tilde and Egor, and I'll stay at home for some time too. That's all you need to know. Your behavior has gone beyond what's acceptable for a student speaking to a master. But I'll let it pass this time because of the upsetting circumstances that were partly my fault. Besides, you're only 650 years old. People your age sometimes have wild imaginations."

He paused as if waiting for M. Hoyvil to say something.

Like an apology? Antaska wondered.

But M. Hoyvil stayed silent.

"Anyway," said Master Mytaar, "You won't see me or Egor again on the trip to the space station. I wish you the best of luck on your voyage. But I must warn you that your troubles with this Earth human may just be starting. Beware, and be safe!"

That was kind of rude, thought Antaska.

"Thank you, instructor," said M. Hoyvil.

Then he walked over to Antaska and Potat, and the three of them left together.

Chapter 20

Later that night, Potat and Antaska lay on their backs on the round bed in their room.

It's really my room, but I'm willing to share it with my pet, thought Potat.

They both watched the slow-moving hologram of space displayed on the ceiling.

Potat spoke to Antaska telepathically.

"So, if I talk to you now, are you going to listen? Or are you going to keep pretending that you don't hear me?"

"No. I hear you. I can't deny it any more," Antaska answered her out loud. "My cat talks to me. I might be crazy, but I won't pretend I don't hear you."

"Right. But will you listen when I tell you what to do?" asked Potat. "Because I'm always right. You know that, right?"

Annoyingly, Antaska didn't answer that question. She changed the subject and said, "I hear the Verdantes talking too. Do you think I should tell M. Hoyvil about that?"

"No! You can't let them find out you're telepathic now!" Potat insisted. "You heard them saying they value humans as companions because they're not telepathic. If the Verdantes find out about this, they might not let us travel with them."

"Would they send us back to Earth!" Antaska asked.

"No, I don't think they'd do that," said Potat. "But we might have to stay on the Verdante planet with all those strange giant adult people."

"That would be awful!" said Antaska.

"So don't tell him yet," Potat advised. "Do you want to be stuck on one boring planet for the rest of our lives?"

"OK, I'll wait, but I hate deceiving M. Hoyvil like that," said Antaska. "I hate hiding it from him. I was so proud of him tonight, and I know we can trust him."

“Yes, I picked the right one, didn’t I?” said Potat.

“What are you talking about?” asked Antaska.

“You know. Back on Earth when we were picking out our Verdante. You were going to pick those other two, but I made you wait to get the best one,” said Potat. “The same way I’m trying to make you wait for the best mate. I told you not that Eegor, but you didn’t listen at first. At least you figured it out after a while.”

“You’re right,” said Antaska. “I do need to wait to get the best mate. Maybe I’ll meet a hot alien guy in outer space when we get there.”

She reached over and petted the striped gray fur on the top of Potat’s head.

“Be careful what you wish for,” said Potat. “Anyway, don’t tell M. Hoyvil yet. You’re not deceiving him, you’re just waiting till the time is right—like as soon as we get moving in warp space away from the Verdante planet,” said Potat.

Potat didn’t worry about Antaska telling M. Hoyvil. The little cat knew she would get her way. Potat had always been able to persuade Antaska to her point of view even before Antaska became telepathic.

Then Potat thought about M. Hoyvil, her new pet. It would be extra work for her to care for two pets, but Potat had decided to adopt him anyway. He’d proved his worthiness by protecting Antaska, although he’d been slow to understand that there was a problem. Of course, like all humanoids, M. Hoyvil had some weaknesses. Like Antaska, he needed a cat to look after him and provide guidance.

It wasn’t long before Potat could tell that Antaska was asleep. She waited a few minutes more. Then she padded over and curled up next to Antaska’s fluffy pink hair. The little cat settled in and was soon asleep too.



In his room, M. Hoyvil stayed awake longer than Antaska and Potat. He lay in

his larger Verdante-sized bed and stared up at a holograph display that was similar to what played in Antaska's room.

With his super-powerful hearing, he had heard something puzzling a while earlier. It had sounded like two women talking—one out loud and one telepathically. M. Hoyvil remembered his wish that Antaska was telepathic.

Could that be possible? he wondered. *I know Potat is telepathic, but everyone knows Earthlings aren't. But then, all humanoids evolve toward telepathy at some point. Could Antaska be at that point now?*

M. Hoyvil thought about the implications of that possibility for a moment. His eyes followed the colorful stars and galaxies that flowed around him, but his mind was somewhere else. He knew that if Antaska was telepathic, it would be dangerous for her to go into space.

It's my responsibility to keep her safe. What should I do? M. Hoyvil asked himself.

He pondered the possibilities.

Should he tell the adults and ask for their advice? No! That would be the worst possible thing to do. The adults would make Antaska stay on the Verdante planet and probably dissect her to further their knowledge of Earthlings. They might dissect Potat too while they were at it. Then they would tell M. Hoyvil he could just pick out a new pet and go to space with that one.

Some people might be OK with that, but I'd never do that, M. Hoyvil realized.

Or the adults might say, "because you're so attached to your human pet, we'll be compassionate and just give her a lobotomy instead of dissecting her."

M. Hoyvil had heard about that before. Sometimes on the trip from Earth to the Verdante planet, humans did things that bothered their new owners or the adults. A quick brain "improvement" procedure was performed on those humans while on the Verdante planet. Then, subdued and submissive, they took off to space with the adolescent Verdantes.

M. Hoyvil shuddered at the thought of that. Antaska had already come under the adults' radar! It was clear that they thought she was flawed, and they blamed

her for what had just happened with Eegor.

No! Never! There's no way I'd let them cut out part of Antaska's brain! thought M. Hoyvil. *I can't go to the adults. I'll have to figure this out on my own.*

If traveling in outer space was as dangerous for telepathic females as people said it was, should he keep Antaska on the Verdante planet and stay there with her? It would be a sacrifice to wait 300 years—the rest of her life—to go to space. But M. Hoyvil would make that sacrifice if it was best for her. But was it?

If she's telepathic, it would be hard to keep that a secret from the adults for 300 years, he realized.

M. Hoyvil's primary gene contributor, Mistress Bawbaw, was particularly astute about finding out things like that.

No. That's no good, he thought. *But then the only option left is taking Antaska to outer space. And that's dangerous, right? I'd have to protect her from the Woogahs if any showed up. Would I be able to do that?*

M. Hoyvil tossed and turned on his bed. The glow of the holographic star view floating around him had grown steadily dimmer all this time, but he hadn't noticed. It was timed to fade to complete darkness during regularly scheduled sleep hours. But M. Hoyvil still couldn't fall asleep.

Now that his eyes had less to focus on, M. Hoyvil noticed another source of sensory input. The low, comforting hum of the telepathic trees that were planted in the center of the space ship. He'd heard this familiar sound as background noise all of his life, either on the Verdante planet or on space ships.

"Too bad I can't hear you trees talking, like the adults say they can," he addressed the trees telepathically with only half his usual sarcasm when speaking about this subject. "What should I do, trees?" M. Hoyvil continued. "Should I stay on the Verdante planet? Or should I take Antaska to outer space?"

It was the first time he had ever spoke to the trees. M. Hoyvil felt kind of silly and was glad there was no one around to hear him.

Can they even hear me? he wondered. *Can they only hear adults? The adults say the trees talk at a rate of one word per hour. Am I talking too fast for them?*

Why do I expect that I'd be able to understand them anyway? Everyone says only the adults can hear them.

But M. Hoyvil didn't give up easily. He focused his mind on the low telepathic humming noise, trying to make some sense out of it. After a few minutes, he began to hear something distinctive within the steady hum. A tone that he focused on. And as he focused, the tone developed into something that sounded like the beginning of a word.

Now, instead of a static-filled buzz, M. Hoyvil heard, "Taaaaaa..."

Could that be part of one of their one word per hour words? Or am I just fooling myself because I want to hear them talk to me? he wondered.

M. Hoyvil didn't know the answer to that question. But he knew that if the trees were really talking, it would take hours for them to speak even a short sentence. He kept listening. He focused on the sound and waited for the next word. As he listened and waited, he fell into a deep sleep.

In that sleep, M. Hoyvil dreamed he was back on the Verdante planet. Not underground where the Verdantes lived but up on the surface standing beneath its towering trees. A gentle wind cooled his face and ruffled his hair. In the whisper of the wind, he heard voices. Many voices that spoke the same words but in different tones that harmonized with each other. The musical message wasn't delivered one word per hour. It was slowed down just enough that M. Hoyvil could understand.

"TAAAAAAKKE...HERRRRRRR...TOOOOOOO...SPAAAAAAACE."

End of Alien Pets



hypnoSnatch (chapter 1)

Xeno Relations

by Trisha McNary

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Cover art by Heather Hamilton-Senter

Chapter 1

Several hours later after the space ship landed, Antaska sat engulfed in the deep cushions of an enormous blue chair. Three other humans sat facing her in similar chairs arranged around a floating stone table. Flickering flames crackled in a huge stone fireplace nearby, muffling their voices. The chairs faced the far side of the large, cavernous room. There, ten-foot-tall, beautiful, and pale green Mistress Bawbaw lounged on an enormous adult Verdante-sized divan.

The three resident humans kept their words soft and sparse, and Antaska took a cue from them, answering and speaking in the same way. The conversation moved at a slow pace. Many pauses to sip a hot brown liquid from delicate but hard plasti-mold cups. More pauses to nibble crumbly food items provided on small plates on the floating table.

“So tell me my dear, have you bonded yet?” Tabxi, an elderly human female, asked Antaska.

Antaska considered the question. ‘Bonded?’ She looked toward Tabxi and Vorche, an elderly man sitting next to Tabxi. On Vorche’s other side was a younger man, Zapop, whose soulful golden eyes were focused across the room on Mistress Bawbaw. Antaska’s turned to look at each of the humans. Her slight movement swished and rustled satiny petticoats under a voluminous gray skirt.

She thought about her regulation tan space ship suit with regret. *So comfortable, so quiet.*

But her telepathic cat Potat had insisted that she could not wear it. “No! You can’t go to this party in your ship suit!” Potat had said. “Wear the weird dress they left in here for you, or they’ll be offended.”

Antaska’s thoughts returned to the present question.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t quite understand what you mean,” she finally answered.

“Let me explain,” said Tabxi, leaning forward. “I’m talking about that

mysterious bond that happens when two beings of two entirely different species meet for the first time and become so attached to each other that they stay together for the rest of their lives--the life of the shorter-lived one anyway. I mean that kind of bond.”

“Oh! I know exactly what you mean,” said Antaska with quiet excitement in her voice. “When I first met my cat Potat, right away, I felt so attached to her that I wanted to keep her with me forever. But I knew I was going to space, and it was best not to take a cat along. I kept planning to take her to the shelter, but for some reason, I could never do it, and we ended up staying together. So yes, I have bonded. I bonded with my cat.”

“She means, ‘have you bonded with M. Hoyvil yet,’” said Zapop in a loud whisper.

“M. Hoyvil? Why would I bond with M. Hoyvil?” Antaska asked in confusion.

She turned toward Zapop, again with a rustle of skirts. But his eyes were already back on the gigantic Verdante woman. Without removing his eyes from Mistress Bawbaw, he lifted his cup to his lips. He sipped and sighed, Antaska already forgotten.

Tabxi resumed the conversation. “Well, you did agree to be M. Hoyvil’s companion for the rest of your life didn’t you? After just one meeting?”

“Yes, I did, but...” Antaska began.

“But there’s nothing wrong with that. That’s what all Earth humans do when they’re adopted by a Verdante, and that’s not a problem. The reason I’m asking you this is that sometimes some humans take the bonding too far, in my opinion.”

A snort escaped from the somewhat large nose of Zapop, who sat slouched back in soft tan pants and a brown knit sweater. He pulled his attention away from Mistress Bawbaw for just a moment and absently scratched the furry chest hair that showed at the top of his comfy sweater.

“Yes,” said Tabxi, “many humans become so attached to their Verdante

Master or Mistress that it interferes with their forming a normal human relationship.” She looked meaningfully at Zapop. Antaska looked at him too. Zapop looked at Mistress Bawbaw.

“Zapop!” Tabxi addressed him sharply but quietly.

“Huh?” he asked, vigorously shaking the shaggy brown hair on his head as if to clear it.

“Doesn’t Antaska look lovely tonight in her becoming gray dress?” Tabxi asked him.

Zapop turned toward Antaska and looked her up and down.

“Why, yes she does. As you know, that dress is one of my favorites. She wears it well,” he answered before his eyes pulled back to the enormous green voluptuous sight of Mistress Bawbaw.

“So, Antaska, do you think you might be interested in forming a romantic bond with an affectionate but lonely human male here on the Verdante planet before you take off into space?” asked Tabxi.

Antaska froze. Her gray eyes narrowed, and her kicking feet stiffened.

“Someone to think about on the long, tedious days of the voyage. What do you say?” Tabxi pressed.

Antaska looked at Zapop again. He didn’t seem to be paying any attention to the conversation. Antaska’s mind felt blank. She could not think of a good answer.

What is going on here? Antaska wondered.

She felt uncomfortable.

I wish Potat were here. She’d know how to handle this, she thought wistfully.

At that moment, the little gray and white cat was fast asleep on a pillow on Antaska’s round bed in her round dome-covered room.

Just before going to sleep, Potat had complained to her telepathically. “Those annoying trees are sending me another message! It’s less of a bore to hear it from dreamland. That booming collective one-word-per-hour voice is too tedious! Don’t they know cats live and think at seven times the speed of an Earth

human?”

A telepathic sigh.

“Oh well. I’m five hours short of my seventeen hours’ sleep today anyway. Sorry I can’t go with you, but I think you’ll be safe enough without me this time. I smelled some evil reptiles when we landed on this planet, but they aren’t close by right now.”

Then Potat had curled up in a small furry ball, asleep in an instant.

Once again, Antaska pulled her mind back to the present to answer Tabxi. “Well, I don’t really know what to say,” she said lamely.

“Ah! That means you might consider bonding.” Tabxi’s soft voice held the satisfied tone of one who had scored a victory.

Vorche’s space-tanned balding head nodded as if pleased, and Zapop’s younger brown-haired head nodded too, his attention back on the humans. Zapop uncrossed his legs and leaned toward Antaska.

All three humans looked at Antaska, as if waiting for her to say more.

“Well...well...,” she began, “actually, thank you, but we were encouraged in space prep school not to get involved romantically because I’ll be in outer space for the next hundred years, you know, and that kind of involvement would only result in a painful separation,” she finished in a rush, proud of herself for being so diplomatic.

“But maybe the Verdantes would let you take him along with you,” Tabxi pressed. “I’m sure M. Hoyvil wouldn’t mind.” Vorche smiled and nodded in agreement.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” said Antaska.

“Well, of course he won’t mind. You know he’ll be out every night this week at the Verdante adolescent social events looking for his future life mate. That’s all he’ll be thinking about,” said Tabxi. And Vorche, Zapop, and Tabxi all chuckled.

“That’s not what I meant,” said Antaska. “I meant I just don’t know about that.”

“Well then, what do you know about?” asked Zapop with a slight growl in his voice.

Suddenly, Antaska felt even more coldness in the room. Extreme coldness. Emotional coldness.

The other humans sat silent, waiting for her answer, sipping and nibbling. They didn't seem to notice the coldness. Tabxi straightened her already straight dark blue fabricated-wool skirt. Her wrinkled hands, darkened almost black, evidenced a long-time spacer's exposure to starlight. Smooth-skinned Zapop scratched behind a large ear, absently twitching a foot at the same time, and then turned back toward Mistress Bawbaw.

Antaska looked across the room. Master Meepp and another enormous Verdante man had entered the room and were storing large unidentifiable objects in compartments in the walls. They kept at least six feet apart, but they had raised the mental barriers that blocked them from reading each other's thoughts.

Instinctively, Antaska rubbed the tawny skin on her bare upper arms, but it made no difference. The movement tracked Zapop's eyes sideways from Mistress Bawbaw to Antaska's toned arms. Then up to shapely shoulders and bright pink hair, lustrous in the fire's glow, that brushed the shoulders. Small dusky mouth, pointy nose and chin. Just for a second or two.

Antaska, unaware of Zapop's brief stare, looked at Master Meepp, in brown work clothes instead of the bright red ship suit that adult Verdantes always wore on space ships. Lethal muscles bulged under plain brown cloth. From this distance, she could see the sharp features in his deep green face, large upward-slanted blue-green eyes now hard and narrowed. For once, he looked less like an eleven-foot-high mountain and more like a humanoid--a dangerous humanoid.

The Verdantes far surpassed humans in technological and physiological advancement. But to Antaska, seeing them so silent, huge, powerful and brooding, tense with unspoken emotions, gave them the feel of humanoids at a barbaric phase of development. Raw, earthy and animalistic. Culture shock threatened to raise its dizzying head. Antaska took a deep breath and pushed it

away.

Across from Master Meepp on her humongous divan, un-Earthly beautiful Mistress Bawbaw stretched perfectly shaped large pale green arms above her head. Alabaster statue-like sensuality in tints of green. Lips like slices of ripe avocado.

Antaska thought about her. *Mistress Bawbaw looks so happy and content, but is she really happy stuck on this planet, always waiting for Master Meepp to return? she wondered. Never to explore new worlds? Never to discover unknown and bizarre species?*

Antaska sighed, once again attracting the attention of Zapop.

Then Master Meepp looked at Mistress Bawbaw, light green skin covered only where propriety demanded in filmy deep green fabric. An intense, unreadable look. Static electricity sizzled through the coldness.

The other humans were still waiting for Antaska to answer. Tabxi nudged Vorche, who was leaning back in his chair with eyes closing. Zapop covered an enormous yawn with a large, somewhat hairy hand.

“Dear?” Tabxi prompted.

Antaska returned her attention to Tabxi. The tense chill remained. She tapped nervously at the hems of her petticoats with the pointy toes of black lace-up ankle boots.

I don't really know to say without offending these people, she thought.

Her training in protocol for interacting with alien cultures had not prepared her for this situation. She crossed her arms and tried to hide her discomfort.

“I’m sorry, but must I decline your kind offer,” she said to Zapop at last.

“Tut, tut,” said both Tabxi and Vorche not quite in unison.

And Zapop said, “Did you really think I wanted to go to outer space with you? You’re much too skinny, and you’re much too short.”

“Now, now,” said Tabxi.

“I’m not short! I’m six feet tall!” Antaska answered, beginning to raise her voice.

“Whatever!” said Zapop, also getting louder.

“Shush!” said Vorche and Tabxi, and both made downward waving motions with their hands.

Zapop sucked in an offended breath. “Don’t you shush me!”

“You should know better, Zapop,” said Vorche. “She’s new, but you know we’re not supposed to disturb the Master and Mistress.”

“Now, now, it’s quite all right,” Tabxi said, patting Zapop’s arm. “They haven’t noticed, so there’s no harm done. But we need to drop this subject that’s getting everyone so worked up. We tried, but this young female has told us her preference, and we have to accept that.”

Zapop turned and snarled at Tabxi, and she removed her hand from his arm.

“Once again, you have tried, but you have not helped me at all,” he said. “I’m not sure why you keep trying to interfere in my life.”

“I’m sorry, my dear,” said Tabxi. “You know we’re concerned about you, and all we want is for you to bond normally with a person of your own species.”

“Now you’re saying I’m not normal!” Zapop criticized Tabxi in a whispery irritated voice. “You’re the one who’s abnormal. A freak of nature who left your Verdante Mistress for Vorche!”

Antaska’s almond eyes widened in surprise.

“Ah, that was an exciting time,” said Vorche, breaking into the conversation with his memories of the past. “The scandal--the tears--the eventual outcome of young love conquering all!”

Vorche and Tabxi turned to look at each other and shared a secret smile.

“You’re the ones who are abnormal,” grumbled Zapop, “and this woman is abnormal too. Bonding with a cat!”

“Don’t mind him, dearie,” Tabxi spoke aside to Antaska. “He gets a little grumpy when the Master is home. Unfortunately, as I was saying, the affection some humans feel for their Verdantes sometimes becomes more like obsession.”

Zapop muttered under his breath as Tabxi kept talking.

“But it only causes heartache for these humans. The Verdantes are only

attracted romantically to other Verdantes. The affection they feel for humans is exactly what a different and very superior species would feel for a much lesser species they might adopt for companionship. Like what you feel for your cat, for example.”

Antaska didn’t reply. If Potat somehow found out that Antaska claimed to be a superior species, there would be trouble.

Zapop resumed his low-voiced rant. “Anyway, you two feel sorry for me because you think I’m bothered by Master Meepp being here, but I’m not. Here’s only here for a few weeks out of every year. It’s Mistress Bawbaw’s other pets that bother me. You know, her ‘special creations’ she keeps down below in her personal chamber. She spends more and more time with those freaks and less and less time with me.”

“Well, they’re what worries us too, actually,” said Vorche. “In fact, we think it would be much better for you to get off this planet. And with those, ah...beings, in the mix, your relationship with Mistress Bawbaw is freakish by anyone’s standards.”

Zapop’s face flushed red. “Oh really!” he said. “What makes you the relationship expert, Vorche? Flying around in space with Master Meepp for the past two hundred and fifty years is all you’ve done. What do you know about life and love? What do any of you know? You’re the freaks, all of you. So I guess this new one who claims to be bonded with a cat will fit right in. I’m the only one here who’s normal,” Zapop’s voice rose. “I’m the only normal human in a household full of freaks.”

Antaska and Tabxi both gasped, and Vorche muttered something incomprehensible.

Then Vorche spoke again. “What I’m trying to say is we don’t think it’s healthy for you here. Don’t you think we old people might have learned something in 300 years? I’m an old man, and my gut feeling, intuition if you will, tells me there is danger here.”

“Oh please! Danger on the Verdante planet! Right. And so nice of you to

care!” said Zapop, no longer trying to keep his voice down. He leaned forward on the edge of his chair and swayed toward each of them while he spoke to the group.

“For your information,” said Zapop, in an intense voice that rose louder and louder, “I will never run off to space and abandon Mistress Bawbaw in order to escape from any danger, real or imagined. Especially if there may be danger, I will stay by her side. She needs me! No one cares about her more than I do. Not Master Meepp. He takes her to Earth sometimes, but most of the time, he’s going back and forth to the space station where she can’t go, and she’s left alone here. He doesn’t have to do that. Most Verdante men his age stay on the home planet.

“And I doubt if those Eeepps really care about her. They’re barely humanoid after all. But no matter what happens, I will stay by Mistress Bawbaw’s side. No matter what the danger. I would descend to the deepest depths of this planet for her, no matter what evil lurks there! I would lay down my life for her in an instant!”

“Oh, that is so sweet! So noble!” said Antaska, clapping her hands together and also forgetting to keep her voice down.

Tabxi sniffed and dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

“Bravo!” shouted Vorche, pumping an elderly fist in the air.



“Darling, I think the humans are getting agitated,” Antaska heard a loud and powerful male telepathic voice say. She recognized the voice of Master Meepp. “Should we send them out of the room?”

Antaska looked over at Master Meepp and Mistress Bawbaw. The other Verdante man was gone. Master Meepp was sitting across from Mistress Bawbaw in a gigantic chunky chair made from fabricated wood slabs. The two Verdantes were staring into each other’s eyes. Mistress Bawbaw’s body was

tilted toward Master Meeepp.

Mistress Bawbaw's telepathic voice spoke. "No, I don't have the heart to do that to Zapop. He gets so jealous of the time I spend with my other pets as it is. Let me handle this another way."

Then Antaska heard Mistress Bawbaw's voice again, but now it was speaking inside her head!

"You are getting very tired. Relaxed and tired. Your eyelids are getting heavy. Very heavy. They are closing."

The telepathic voice was gentle, soothing and insistent. Antaska looked at the other humans. They were leaning back in their oversized chairs, heads resting against the upholstered wings, eyes closed. Small snores escaped from the noses of Tabxi and Vorche, and all three appeared to be asleep.

Antaska, so relaxed and comfortable, started to feel tired too. Her body grew limp. She leaned over sideways and rested across her chair's ample side wing. Her eyes closed, and she saw darkness. Into the darkness, a pale green mist appeared and solidified. Sea green foam floated in the side of her mind nearest to Mistress Bawbaw. Inside the green foamy mist, a woman's face formed and then pushed forward deeper into Antaska's mind.

"You are tired. You are sleepy. Sleep now. Sleep," said the face.

Mistress Bawbaw is using telepathic suggestion to put us to sleep! Antaska thought fuzzily.

She wrestled against the irresistible crush of sleep. But she fought in vain. Sleep was closing in.

"Sleep, sleep, sleep," the face of Mistress Bawbaw repeated over and over in her mind.

Wait a minute! Something is familiar about this! Where have I seen this before? Antaska wondered.

A suspicion began to form in her mind. Her mind sharpened and focused on the suspicion, and the sea green foam faded and vanished.

Antaska's mind was wide awake! She jolted up out of the chair, but her body

wasn't fully awake, and she landed on the cushiony floor with a muffled whump. Now her body was awake too.

She didn't look over at the two large Verdantes, but she heard their mental speech.

"There's something odd about M. Hoyvil's new pet," said Mistress Bawbaw. "She didn't seem to respond normally to my sleep orders."

"Oh, I'm sure you're imagining that, my dear," said Master Meepp. "She's just very clumsy, constantly fainting and falling down. She probably fell asleep too close to the edge of the chair."

Antaska got up and began to stomp toward the exit. The floor's deep cushioning muffled her stomping. She stomped harder, but her swaying skirts rustled louder than the stomping.

"You're right, she seems to have many flaws, and she makes a lot of trouble. Do you really think she's the best human for M. Hoyvil to take to space?" asked Mistress Bawbaw.

"I have my doubts too about her, but it's M. Hoyvil's choice. We can't make it for him, but of course, we can try to influence him," said Master Meepp.

"Yes, we'll have to work on that," said Mistress Bawbaw.

Antaska heard the fading telepathic voices as she stomped away down a long, curved hallway.

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The book cover features a purple background with a large, full moon in the upper right. A black silhouette of a person's legs in high heels is positioned on the left, with a black cat jumping up towards them. The cat has bright yellow eyes. A bright starburst is located near the cat's head.

A Cozy
Vampire
Mystery

*Have Teeth
Will Bite*

L D M A R R

Have Teeth, Will Bite

(Prologue)

*by LD Marr,
a pen name for Trisha McNary*

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Prologue

London at midnight, 1886.

The tavern door blew open, letting in chill wind and an even colder customer. Natasha, a voluptuous blonde spilling out of a lightweight black cloak, stepped in. The door slammed shut.

The bartender looked up and frowned. He met Natasha's gaze across the smoky, dim-lit distance. Then he turned away fast and began furiously wiping the rough wood bar.

Natasha sniffed the air, and her red lips curled up. She wove toward the bar through mostly empty tables with a strange sinuous grace for a woman so large.

When she reached one end of the bar, Natasha began to walk along its length. One by one, she scanned the occupants of each stool. In turn, they met her eyes, and she moved on, leaving the mark of varying degrees of nervousness or fear on their faces.

Finally, Natasha found an appealing target. She stopped at the side of a young pale-haired man. A roughly dressed workingman—big-boned, baby-faced, and reeking of innocence and purity. Natasha glanced once at the older man on the next stool, and he silently vacated it.

She sat down and tossed off her cape, drawing the young workman's eyes to flowing blonde curls that brushed overflowing cleavage. Her impossibly tight girdle created an hourglass figure with a tiny waist. Not having to breathe had its benefits.

Natasha stared into the young man's eyes. He seemed nervous, but he couldn't break away from her gaze.

His pale skin became paler and somewhat clammy. She heard his heart rate speed up, and his breathing become fast and shallow.

"I am Natasha," she purred. "And you are?"

"I am Sam," he answered in the toneless voice of a person under compulsion.

“Come along, Sam.”

Natasha rose from her stool in one smooth motion and glided out of the bar. She didn't stop to pick up her cloak from the floor. It was just a bothersome disguise anyway. Natasha didn't feel the cold, but her husband, Dr. Vandergreest, insisted she wear it. Why go to so much trouble anyway? It wasn't as if these people had the power to do anything to her even if they suspected what she really was.

Her husband's tiresome rules were hard to live with—or be undead with—so much of the time. Was it any wonder that she needed a little fun in the evenings?

A black carriage waited in front of the tavern. The black-cloaked coachman and two enormous black horses blended into the night's dark shadows.

On Natasha's approach, the coachman climbed down from his seat and opened the carriage door. Sam had followed her out as commanded. Natasha turned to him. Sweat dripped down his face in the icy-cold London night. She lifted a pale, shapely arm and gestured toward the complete blackness within the open carriage.

“Get inside. I hunger!” she ordered.

Now Sam began to moan, but his feet took slow, shaking steps forward as if against his will.

Natasha sighed her irritation. Her victims didn't usually resist her supernatural charms.

“Can you speed it up? I haven't got all night,” she said. “Or you don't anyway.”

Finally, after a most annoying delay, he climbed the steps to the carriage and got in. Natasha flowed up after him, and the coachman shut the door behind her.

Later that evening.

In comfortable chair by the fire, Dr. Vandergreest waited with tireless patience for his wife's return. Just after 3:00 a.m., he heard her enter the door to their townhouse, two floors below. When he heard the sound of her attempting to

creep past his sitting room, he called out to her.

“Ah, my dear, you have returned. I have not seen you these long hours. Please join me for a few minutes before you retire.”

A pause in which he knew she was trying to think of some excuse. The ever-so-light sound of wiping. Then the door opened, and her beautiful blonde head peeked through.

“Come in, come in. I would see your lovely face this night,” the doctor insisted.

Natasha approached slowly, her face stained with guilt and microscopic blood cells.

“Tut, tut. There is blood on your face again, my dear! And it is the blood of the innocent!”

He sighed a huge sigh.

“I thought we had reached an agreement about the need to control your cravings. That you understood that preying on the pure of heart draws attention—negative attention that might be hard to deal with. But it appears that you have turned a deaf ear to reason.”

Another sigh.

“I have grown sick of your rules!” Natasha answered with spunk and defiance. “I am a powerful being, and I will take what I want. And what I do not want is the foul-tasting nasty blood of evildoers and criminals. I hunger for sweet delicious blood! Why should I starve myself because you are a coward?”

“But my dear,” answered the doctor, “you are certainly not starving. You are consuming much more blood than you need.”

“Huh! How dare you!” Natasha sputtered and fumed.

“Hark!” said Dr. Vandergreest. “I hear the shuffle of many feet approaching, the sound of shouts, the crackle and smell of burning torches!”

The base of a felled tree boomed against the downstairs door.

“Protect me!” cried Natasha.

“Au revoir, my darling,” said Dr. Vandergreest.

Then he lightly kissed her lips and disappeared.

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Strange visions point me to the kidnapper and the disturbing truth about what's really happening. So I have to go back to Club Cain and into the past I want to forget.

Time flows in a different way now too. I'm having weird mental experiences, but I don't tell anyone. It's hard enough to convince people I'm not crazy. I can't let anyone stop me from looking for the missing teenagers, but a hot but wrong guy keeps distracting me.

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A note from Trisha

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading Alien Pets. If you enjoyed this book, and you'd like to be on my mailing list, please email me at PetsAndMastersInSpace@gmail.com.

May your world one day know peace,

Trisha