

Chapter One

Advena watched from the tree shadows as the round craft rose rapidly into the blackness of the night and became as one of the stars. The night breeze chilled her and she shivered slightly. They will be back tomorrow night, she thought, I heard Rom and Enger discussing it. She shivered again. I should have worn my winter suit, but there was no time, and anyway Rom would have noticed and confined me.

Gravel crunched on the road behind the trees where she was standing, and a tremulous whistle sounded on the autumn air. She peered through the branches. It was a man! One of theirs! Had he seen the craft? Did he know she was there? Of course not! she chided herself. If he had, he'd not be on this road. They experienced fear in the dark, so Rom said. The young man passed her and the faint odour of perspiration, beer, and something else was carried to her slight nostrils. It suddenly became important to follow him.

She crept out from behind her tree and stepped onto the road. Her light step disturbed the gravel and the man's whistling stopped in mid-phrase. He turned slowly and stared back the way he had come. "Who's there?" His voice sounded rough and unpleasant to Advena's sensitive ears. As she moved into a patch of moonlight her silver jumpsuit shone in the faint light. The man took a step backward.

"Who are you?" He was staring at her. His glance seemed blunted and dull compared to Rom's.

, she replied in her mind.

The man did not seem to understand. "Who are you?" he asked again. Advena could now smell fear mixed with the other odours.

, she repeated in her mind.

"Can't you talk?" The man took a step toward her.

Advena blinked and took a step backwards. He was so much larger than Rom. ! she shouted mentally.

A strange look crossed the young man's face. "Wow! How'd you do that?" He took another step toward her and held out his hand. The smell of fear was gone now and Advena held her ground.

"My name is Jim," he reached for her hand. Gathering all the power from the alien part of her nature she stared hard at him and he dropped his hand. The smell of fear came back. She held his gaze for a moment then released him from her mental grip.

"Okay, okay, so you're the boss," he said retreating a few steps up the road. "What're you doing here? What do you want from me?"

Advena blinked slowly. What did she want from him? She wasn't sure. It just seems tremendously important that I make contact with someone on earth and very soon. Strange things have been happening to my body lately and none of the others understand. At least I found that paragraph in one of their books explaining a little. As I understand, this is normal for humans but we have lost this bit of

biology. It does not happen to males and all the crew are males so I have no one to ask. The bleeding is the worst of all. They attribute the changes to my hybrid nature and keep a closer watch on me.

They can see what was changing on the outside, she thought, but I could not seem to make them understand that there were things happening on the inside too. The terrible pressure that comes and goes in my chest when I visit the nursery with its banks of containers where developing hybrid fetuses float in their murky green liquid. It was just as intense as the pressure I feel when Rom and the others have earth men on board and are doing their experiments on them. I can smell their intense fear, and their thoughts of horror and outrage reverberate so loudly through my mind that sometimes I have to retreat to my bunk and close the hatch to escape the pain.

This pressure tonight was different from those other pressures. It was akin to the pressure she experienced when she visited the nursery, but it was more like an itch. She blinked again and began pulling down the neck of her jumpsuit. It seemed to be the right thing to do and her sense of urgency increased.

“Hey, now,” said the man softly as she stepped out of the confining garment and stood shivering in the night air. He took a step toward her. She halted him with a glance, then took his arm and led him in a trance-like state under the trees.

Advena stared at her reflection in the curved wall of her bunk. That was eight months ago, she thought. I never saw Rom as angry as that before. He thought he had lost me and it frightened him. It seemed like the pressure I sometimes feel in my chest was gathering in his and he did not quite know what to do with it. I wonder if that is what emotions are. Whatever they are, they are in scarce supply where we come from. I do not think we even had a word for them until the space travellers made one up to describe how earth people behave, she thought. Rom said we have spent years observing humans in their natural environment trying to understand how emotions work. We finally had to cross-breed humans with some volunteers from our own planet. That is why you were developed, she remembered him saying. You were our first attempt to generate emotions in one of our own. I donated my own seed to the experiment.

I am a hybrid, she thought, and I do not feel emotion, whatever it is. I guess the experiment was a failure. For a long time I was the only one like me here, she thought. I wonder if my mother was that woman they brought on board when I was five. They brought her in and told her to hug me and she began screaming at the sight of me. I only saw her once after that. Rom had her in very tight control that time and she did hug me, but it was like she was in a trance. It was after that that I began getting this terrible pressure in my chest, and my body started changing. I wonder if she did something to me.

She thought again about all the fetuses floating in the green liquid and the pressure in her chest came again. Maybe that's what's wrong with me, I am neither one thing nor the other. She stared at her reflection with its thin black hair which did not quite cover her scalp. It has grown thicker these last few months, she thought. Ever since Jim. She remembered the strange urgency that had forced her to seek him out. Maybe it is because I am a hybrid that I have this pressure inside me. She thought about the night she had spent on the earth. It was so important that I do that, I just could not have stayed away.

She ran her hands down her slender body. I have changed a lot since that night, she thought. I am fatter than I used to be. I look more like one of them. I used to look like Rom, kind of thin and wispy. She patted her belly. I do not think I like this, it feels as if there's something in there. A whisper of touch on the inside of her belly made her shiver. She pulled the sheet up to her chin and stared again at her reflection. Her dark eyes stared back at her. Maybe I should have stayed with Jim, she thought, but he ran away screaming as soon as I released him. She settled herself for sleep.

She did not sleep well that night. Her bunk seemed lumpy and uncomfortable and she tossed and turned in her sleep. The pain woke her abruptly. She cried out for Rom. The strange pressure was in her chest again too, but she had to ignore it to concentrate on the pain that seemed about to burst inside her belly. Rom and Enger and the others ran around and did things to her and about her, but the pain never ceased. Every few minutes another rending, stretching pain would assail her belly and her back and she would cry out for relief. All Rom's skill with mind control couldn't ease it.

At last, as the earth moved out of the sun's path and morning light flooded the room, the pain changed and moved downward and the stretching began between her legs. After a few minutes she heard a thin cry and the pain ceased. The crying continued. She reached for this thing that had come from inside her and cradled it in her arms. She stared at it. It looked like her except for its hair which was dark and thick. The baby stared back at her sucking noisily on its fist, its eyes large and dark with infant wisdom.

Advena felt the pressure in her chest grow and warm. Suddenly she understood. This pressure was emotion and she could feel it and Rom could not except in extreme circumstances. It was how she was different and how her baby would be different. It was her human part emerging. The feeling grew and swelled and warmed her as she stared into her daughter's violet eyes. I will call you Nova, she whispered.

Nova had grown quickly. She had "talked" early much to Rom's distress. He didn't like noise and Nova babbled and talked constantly. She is different than we are, thought Advena, more nearly a complete combination of both races. She understands us in her mind when we think at her, but she makes sounds at us like the earth man. She could be bilingual quite easily.

Advena thought back the ten earth years since her adventure with Jim. I remember how angry Rom was when he discovered that I was missing. They were half way to Andromeda before they missed me. By the time they got back to get me I had already had my encounter with Jim. Advena chuckled within herself. Poor Rom did not know what to do with the sensation. He had never felt like that before. I remember he could not even think at me and he spouted colours from his ears I did not know existed. I think he has come to approve of Nova since he has calmed down. He spent a few days resting in his bunk after they found me. They were concerned for his life that time. Advena felt a falling sensation in her chest at the memory. An unfamiliar wetness always overran her eyes when she thought of those days. I did that to him, she thought, and the falling sensation became even heavier. I wish I knew what that was. It happens every time I think of those days. True humans would have a name for it, I think.

She watched Nova tease Rom as he tried to write his Leader Log. Rom does not understand, thought Advena. Neither do I. It must be something humans do. Nova does something odd with her mouth too. Kind of stretches it upward at the corners when something interests her. Not that she has much mouth.

She is like me in that. She still has her thick dark hair. That is like Jim's hair. It's soft too, like his was. I wonder where Jim is now. Does he even remember me? He was pretty scared when I released him from mind control.

A strong sensation in her chest suddenly overtook her. It is like I want nourishment, she thought. I feel as if I am starving. She tried to identify its source. It is associated with thinking of Jim, she thought. She relaxed her mind and let the feeling come. The meaning hit her mind with force. I want to see Jim. The energy of the thought was so strong she had to sit down and breathe for a moment. Could I even find him again, she wondered. What if he has a family? What if he does not want to see me again? These humans have funny ideas about themselves and what is theirs. What if I scared him so much that he has made himself forget all about me? The biggest thought of all finally struck: what if Rom would not let me?

The last thought superseded all the others in importance. I have to develop a plan, she thought. One that can include Nova. She should at least set eyes on her biological father once in her lifetime. Maybe she is too young to understand yet. Our years are different than earth years so here she is still a young child; on earth she would be a preteen.

Advena considered her daughter's level of maturity for a moment. Perhaps it would be better to introduce them now while she's still young enough to absorb it without too much psychological damage. It will take me awhile to formulate a plan and then to convince Rom.

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Six months later, after thorough preparation, Advena and Nova were just completing their work when Rom entered the small study. He sat down in the armchair opposite the narrow desk. He looked at Advena and Nova for a long moment then thought: Tomorrow we will be entering orbit around earth. Tomorrow evening we will be dropping you off in a park. In the early morning Jim usually goes running around the edge of the pond and then breakfasts on his deck, weather permitting, and you can meet him there. He has already been prepared for your appearance and is sort of expecting something to happen soon. Are you ready to go?

Advena and Nova looked at each other. We are ready, they chorused in thought.

I do not know how much more ready we can be, thought Advena. We have studied all the available information about earth. We have watched all the films we had on hand. Short of being born there I do not know what else we can do.

Then you are as prepared as we can make you. You know what to do if you get into serious trouble. You know how to contact us should you need to. We will be keeping watch on our monitors. Do not let anyone but Jim touch you. If anyone tries to guess who you are and where you come from, brush them off. Outright lies and half truths told sincerely work well, as earth people cannot read minds. Expressions either, for that matter. Try not to get side-tracked from your mission. And try not to scare the neighbours.

Advena and Nova laughed in their minds. Never! they thought.

Rom rose to leave. I will see you in the morning. Do not stay up too late, you need your rest. He went out closing the door behind himself.

Advena and Nova looked at each other. So the big day is finally here, thought Nova.

Are you ready? thought Advena.

I guess so, thought Nova. I do not know how much readier I can be. After tomorrow we will have to be speaking out loud instead of thinking our conversations.

We will have to be vigilant about that, thought Advena. It would be a real clue to our differentness if we were to slip up there.

Maybe, thought Nova. They do not know that we can do that so they may not see it happening and just think we are rude in not answering them. We will just have to learn to cover well if it occurs.

Advena rose from her seat at the table and gathered up the study materials they had been working on. I am off to my bunk. I will see you in earth morning time.

The next day was a busy time for Advena and Nova and the crew. They were strapped into their bunks while the ship was brought into earth's orbit at a safe distance from earth's radar and observation satellites.

We will be using the small shuttle to carry us to the park, thought Advena.

We are going to miss the little things we rely on, thought Nova. I hope it will not be too unbearable.

I will miss having Rom so nearby, thought Advena. He has been a presence in my life ever since before I was taken out of the jar. I remember him coming in and just standing there looking at me as I developed. It was kind of nice. Of course, at that time I did not know that he was biologically a part of me. He became important to me over the terms and then he told me that he had donated the seed that made me and that I was part human. That came as kind of a shock. I had to get used to that idea.

At least I know my mother, thought Nova. And I will soon know my father.

Mother and daughter talked far into the night because despite their tiredness they could not settle themselves for the excitement. At last, just before dawn, they fell asleep and slept through the general arousal time as a consequence. Rom woke them by rapping on the lids of their bunks.

Time to get up. There is a lot of work left to do, he thought into their dreams.

They woke slowly, then realized what an important day it was. Advena leapt from her bunk and hurried to the cleaning room. Nova followed at a slower pace. I hope they have lots of vegetables on earth. I am hungry already, she thought. She dawdled through the day almost wishing that she hadn't agreed to go with Advena, and wanting mostly to just stay on board where it was familiar. It was not possible, she knew. It really had not been possible for some time now, as Rom had kept reminding them. The project has gone too far forward to just stop it. Besides, she reminded herself, I get to meet my biological father. I hope he does not go screaming away in total fear when he sees us. All these stray thoughts she kept to herself. It took all the courage she had not to cry, something the others wouldn't understand. Indeed, she had no word for it herself. I don't even know if Advena would

understand, she thought. She is so brave. I did not know how unbrave I am until now. I will not give in, she thought, and clenched her jaw with determination.

At last, well after sunset, and after careful reconnaissance of the landing area, the tiny shuttle landed with no more than the lights necessary to be safe. They instantly extinguished them on landing. Advena and Nova picked up their packs and slipped silently into the night, their goodbyes and best wishes already said.

I wonder where we are exactly? thought Nova.

They stopped and looked around themselves. The moon was just beginning to rise. It illuminated a path across Hyde Pond and silhouetted Nova and Advena in its light. A stifled cry in the undergrowth alerted them that they had already been discovered. The pair of teenagers who were out long past their parental curfews had been loitering in the grass enjoying what little privacy they had found in their limited world. Too young to drive, they were left on their own most evenings, each by a parent who worked a twelve hour night shift and so couldn't enforce the prescribed curfew. After homework was completed they were free to roam the community of Cornwall keeping a low profile and avoiding possible trouble with adults and the Mounties. Aside from the curfew violations they were basically good children.

Advena dropped her pack and advanced toward the sound. The children scrambled to their feet and ran, trailing various bits of untucked clothing as they went. They were too scared to even scream.

Oh, dear, thought Advena. So soon. I will have to do a couple of bedroom visitations tonight and clear their minds so they will not remember this at all.

No, you will not, thought Nova, and froze them in their dash for safety. Do it now. It will only take a moment.

What will we replace it with?

How about a lovely little fawn at the water's edge getting a drink, suggested Nova.

The procedure was done in an instant and Nova then released them from mind control. They wandered away tucking their untidy garb more neatly as they went. The boy reached up and brushed some twigs from the girl's hair. The girl slipped her arm around him and they kissed lightly, then disappeared into the shadows.

That was quick thinking, thought Advena. I am proud of you.

Oh, Advena, that is what earth mothers say when their children have done well. We do not say that, thought Nova.

I am your mother, thought Advena, and this is earth. We have to begin behaving in whatever passes as normal here. We do not want to be discovered. Let us see what those children were up to. She headed toward the bushes.

I believe they have been nesting, thought Advena. They left their blanket behind. She stood looking at the cozy hollow covered by the red plaid blanket still warm from the tryst. We can use this shelter for the time being and return it in the morning.

Do you know where they live? thought Nova. She settled herself on the blanket to wait out the remainder of the night.

They have a very distinctive odour, I should be able to follow it later. We will leave it before anyone stirs in the morning.

Nova wrinkled her tiny nose. They do smell funny, do they not?

Advena sat down on the blanket beside Nova. I noticed that about Jim too. It changes with their emotions. Fear is a very noisy odour. She sat silently watching the moon make its path on the water of the pond. She followed it toward its source. At the edge of the moon a small bump appeared. It glowed briefly white and then changed colour to red and then green. Rom is keeping an eye on us, she thought at Nova. The light moved across the face of the moon and disappeared behind it only to reappear a few minutes later on the opposite side.

Why does he not put up the invisibility shield? thought Nova.

He wants us to know that he is watching out for us, thought Advena.

Will he always be nearby?

I don't know. He said he would be here immediately if we got into real trouble and had to call him, so I suppose he will not be far.