

1



HER chest tight with dread, Lileela opened the closet.

She could only bring one outfit. One outfit? How insane was that? No way in Karkar could she narrow her wardrobe to one item. It was almost enough to make a girl scream. But, tempting though it may be, fifteen was a little old to be throwing a tantrum like a toddler.

She chewed her lip, trying to think.

It should be a multi-piece ensemble. Though technically one outfit, she could wear separate parts on different occasions, making it seem like more.

But she'd have to coordinate it with something Gannahan, and that would putrefy the entire look.

She'd never survive this.

Swallowing a sob, she climbed the stepstool to reach the control that activated the display. One by one, each item in her closet appeared on the screen, then faded away to reveal the next.

This was going to be a tough decision.

"Lileela?"

Great. Aunt Skiskii was here already.

"We need to get to the shuttle bay."

Ignoring her, Lileela watched the delicious parade of apparel march past her vision. If she took the knee-length brushed yueeed jacket and the Eutarian silk blouse – no, not that silk. The paler one, with the little flecks of – no, maybe the solid would be better.

"What's this?" Skiskii's voice could cut through glass.

Lileela limped down from the stool and exited the closet, leaving the display running. "What's what?"

"These cosmetics in your case. What are they doing here?"

Lileela tipped her head back to look her aunt in the pale yellow eye. "I'm taking them. What else would they be doing there?"

Skiskii's ears tilted back. "Weren't we told they don't wear cosmetics on Gannah? And you've scarcely left room for clothes. You said you were bringing one civilized outfit, but I don't see it."

"I haven't packed it yet." Lileela slipped between Skiskii and the suitcase. "Still trying to decide which one I want."

Skiskii's exasperated sigh reverberated around the room. "What have you been doing all day, buying every eyeliner on the ship? You've got a lifetime supply in there."

"That's the plan. If they don't wear cosmetics on Gannah, that means I can't buy it there, which means I'll have to bring my own. Because I'm not about to walk around with a naked face the rest of my miserable life."

Skiskii's lips parted as if she was about to shriek again, but then her ears tipped outward. "Well. Well. I suppose it can't do any harm. But we do need to get to the shuttle bay, so let's grab whatever else you're bringing." Two swift, long-legged steps put her in the closet. "Let's see..." Pressing an icon, she changed the display to one that showed thumbnails of the entire contents.

Row after row of miniscule images filled the wide screen. Lileela was proud of her wardrobe, but it did make choosing difficult.

She watched her auntie – actually, her cousin; Skiskii was her father's first cousin on his mother's side – scan the selection. She'd miss the old thing. More than she cared to admit. That was one reason she had such a hard time deciding what to bring. It wasn't just clothes she'd be leaving behind.

"Here." Skiskii pressed a selection. "This is perfect." She chose the very jacket Lileela had been thinking of, along with fashionably snug trousers and a filmy but triple-layer ruffled blouse, the color of which picked up the mauve of the jacket's piping. To Lileela's delight, she added a floor-length skirt besides.

Lileela couldn't have chosen better herself. "Oh, grab that cream-colored sash, too. And I've got the most darling bangles to match the jacket buttons." She scurried to her jewelry armoire and flung it open.

That was another thing she would sorely miss. What sort of accessories would she find on Gannah? Trying to remember if her mother wore jewelry, all she could recall was a ring. The signet of her authority as toqeph.

The closet rack whirled as it spit out the clothes Skiskii selected. While she removed them from their hangers and folded them, Lileela boxed the earrings and brooch, along with a neck chain.

Her hands trembled, and she took a slow, deep breath, trying to calm herself. The breath turned into a sob.

Skiskii left her folding and reached for Lileela, pulling her into a long-limbed embrace. The grinding noise in her throat was supposed to be comforting, and to a Karkar child, it might have been. But it only made Lileela's tears flow more freely. She was no longer a child, though on Skiskii's planet she was the size of one. And she was only one quarter Karkar, though she could barely remember living anywhere else.

"I don't want to go, Auntie!"

Skiskii's dinner-plate-sized, six-fingered hand stroked Lileela's dark, curly-bobbed head. "I know you don't, dear one." She crooned like a Cephargian alley cat yowling in pain. "I know you don't. But Gannah is your home. You were born there, your family's there."

Lileela pulled away. "You're family, and you're not there. I don't remember my parents anymore, and I've never seen my younger brothers and sisters. Why do they even want me?"

Skiskii's ears wobbled. "Your parents love you. They've missed you. The family's not complete without you."

"That can't be." Lileela pulled out a tissue and wiped her eyes. "There's got to be some other reason."

Skiskii sat on the vanity bench, but she still had to look down at Lileela. "They do love you. You've been gone for so long, and they want you home so they can get to know you again."

For a moment, Lileela felt her auntie's sorrow at never having had a child of her own. But that moment was short, fleeing before her greater self-pity.

"Your neurological treatment has been a considerable expense to them, you know."

Lileela pouted, a feat that never failed to impress the blank-faced Karkar. Especially when she managed to produce a few tears in the corners of her eyes, like she did now. "Why should that worry them? They're rich, they own all of Gannah, but people there don't use money. It wouldn't burden them to keep me on Karkar the rest of my life."

Skiskii's answer was cut short by an urgent beep followed by a whistle from the speaker above the door. Then an electronic voice intoned in tinny Karkarish, "Lileela Pik. Please report to Shuttle Bay Three immediately. Lileela Pik. Shuttle Bay Three."

Skiskii hopped up and turned back to the half-packed suitcase. "We've got to scoot. We should have been there a quarter hour ago."

Lileela slammed the jewelry box into the bag. "All right. If you don't want me any longer, I'll go down to that awful planet. But —"

"That's not the case, and you know it." Skiskii's ears twitched in irritation. "Stop acting like the spoiled brat I've allowed you to become." She snapped the bag shut.

Lileela let out a shriek. "Wait, I need shoes!" As fast as her labored, deliberate gait allowed, she moved to the closet and up the stepstool. "I know which ones I want, it'll only take a sec."

When the shoes she selected emerged, she tossed them to her auntie, who stuffed them into the suitcase and closed it again with swift movements.

Skiskii snatched the case with one hand and ushered Lileela out the door with the other. Lileela went, but she scowled all the way. "This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of. Just one decent outfit, one real pair of shoes, and no cosmetics. They're going to make me dress like a barbarian—"

In the hall outside, Skiskii slid the bag into the rack in the back of the scooter. "Yes, yes, just get in. I'll drive."

"Oh, my tote!" Lileela limped back into her room, grabbed her purse and returned to the scooter while continuing her rant. "A barbarian, I tell you. They'll have me dressing in scratchy old sacks and eating with my hands."

The cart lurched forward, slamming Lileela into the seat. "Eating nasty roots dug out of the filthy, wormy ground, and then picking my teeth with a stick. After all you and Uncle Ogliziizl have gone through to teach me how to be civilized, they're going to want me to go back to—"

"That's enough, Miss Lileela." Skiskii's stern voice would have sent Lileela cringing to the far side of the scooter if she hadn't known her auntie was all bark and no bite.

Skiskii pulled the horn, and people in the hall moved out of her way. "I know you don't want to go, but we have no choice. The arrangements have been made, and it's out of our hands."

Lileela crossed her arms and scowled at her shoes. They were cute shoes, too. She was certain never to find anything like them on Gannah. "So what am I, a commodity to be traded by agreement between planets?"

Skiskii sighed. "We've been through this, Lileela, and I won't explain it again. You finally come up with the means of paying for your care. And it's a king's ransom. You should be touched that they'd—"

"Pay so much for my release? Some release. They're buying me from Karkar so they can use me for a slave. My father used to beat me, did you know that? He beat me with a rod, then made me sit in a drab, gray room for hours on end, just because he didn't like the way I was dressed, did I ever tell you that?"

"He did not. Don't expect me to believe that."

"He did! And I was little then. How do you think they'll treat me now? They're Gannahan, they'll do terrible things to me!"

Skiskii cornered a little too abruptly, and Lileela had to grab her tote to keep it from flying out of the cart.

"They're your parents, they love you. The League of Planets has ordered us to turn you over to them now that they're able to pay off their debt. I have no doubt you'll be well cared for there."

"Humph." Lileela smoothed a curl back from her forehead. "I'll remember you said that when I'm imprisoned and forced into hard labor."

Skiskii negotiated another turn, a little more carefully this time, onto the last hall before the shuttle bay elevators. "It will be nothing like that, and you know it." She patted Lileela's leg. But her worried ears and tearful eyes belied her comforting words.



ADAM watched through the glass as the last truck pulled up behind the others at the edge of the landing field.

Try as he might, he couldn't grasp why those rocks dug out of the ground were so special. Why the League had refused to allow his sister to come home until Gannah agreed to provide a sufficient amount of them.

Nor why they were worth a man's life.

In all his twenty years, he'd never known anything so perplexing.

The drivers left their trucks and crossed the grass to the building where Adam and the others waited. Steamy air poured into the lobby as they filed in through the entrance.

One of them approached Adam's mother and bent forward in a respectful bow. "It's all here, Madam Toqeph. Five tonnes of raw zahab ore, five tonnes of nechosheth, and a hundredweight of uncut green keliystone."

"Thank you, Jax. The transport is expected in ten minutes, so you're here in good time." Emma turned from Jax and looked up at Adam. "Do you hear anything from your sister?"

He shook his head. "She doesn't seem inclined to communicate with me."

Adam glanced at his father by Emma's other side. Abba's waxen Karkar face revealed nothing, but his ears quivered with suppressed anticipation, and tension radiated from his whole being in almost visible waves.

It was Abba who had put Lileela on that starship for Karkar after her spinal cord injury, and it was Abba who felt responsible for her return.

Adam and his sister had been close as children, and their separation had been difficult to adjust to. But at least he had the ability to maintain contact with her through what Abba called meah telepathy.

Adam wasn't sure if telepathy was the right word, because there was nothing extra-sensory about it. But since only native Gannahans possessed the gland that performed the function—and since only Emma and her children were native Gannahans—and since Emma's meah had been damaged in an accident—it was, in fact, a rare ability.

An ability that Lileela lately chose to not use.

She didn't want to come home, that much was clear. But Adam didn't mention that to his parents. Since he didn't understand her reluctance, he couldn't explain it to them.

Why would anyone not want to live here? Yes, Karkar was the planet of their father's birth. Beside the superior medical services she'd been sent there for, it had many other interesting things to offer. But when he tried to imagine being cut off from his beloved Gannah, Adam felt suffocated. Lileela should be eager to return and breathe freely again.

The trucks' drivers mingled in the lobby, their voices joining the other eager murmurs humming throughout the room. A visit from Outsiders was a rare event, and never had they brought such precious cargo.

He reached in his meah toward Lileela, but she still shut him out. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been fighting for her life, breathing with the help of a respirator, a terrified five-year-old who'd never known anything but Gannah. Now she was, under Gannahan law, only a few months away from the age of adulthood, and with Outerworld experience that Adam could only imagine. Was that why she was cutting him off? Was she ashamed of his ignorance, embarrassed by his provincialism?

Or was she once again a frightened little girl facing a great unknown?

He wished she would let him in. He wanted to comfort her like he used to, help carry her fears. He was also eager to learn from her, for the things she'd seen in the past ten years could be a great benefit to Gannah.

After more than twice the ten-minute estimate, a rumble filled the ears, first of the native Gannahans with their keener senses, and then the others as well.

No one spoke as the ship drew closer. No one could have heard their words if they'd tried. Before the gigantic vehicle began its final, hovering descent, many covered their ears with their hands, even though they'd all inserted earplugs as the transport's approach grew louder.

The thunderous noise, the ground-shuddering vibrations, the massive size and flashing lights of the mechanical monster that eased itself onto the landing pad in clouds of smoke and flame both excited and repulsed Adam. This beast was a marvel of engineering, nearly magical in its abilities, but it was a dirty, foreign thing. A violation of Gannah's air and soil, a threat to the purity and stability of the planet.

But it carried Lileela home. For that, he would forgive it anything.

2



CLENCHING her teeth against nausea, Lileela avoided looking out the triple-paned porthole.

Entering the atmosphere was more stressful than she'd expected. The jostling and slamming of her strapped-in body seemed calculated to beat her into submission before she ever set foot on this forsaken place.

But she wouldn't let it. Closing her eyes and controlling her respiration, she endured the abuse without a murmur—as she would continue to do until she found a way to escape. Among the Karkar, she was vocal, because the Karkar were vocal. On Gannah, she'd be stoic as a Gannahan. But in no case would she surrender.

Auntie's ears were still flat against her head from terror, but she'd ceased her shrill keening by the time Lileela opened her eyes to the Gannahan sunlight sifting through the soot-dimmed windows.

Lileela swallowed hard. "I'm about ready to throw up. I don't blame Uncle Ogliziizl for not coming to the surface with us."

Skiskii grabbed a bag from the seat pocket and noisily emptied her stomach into it.

Lileela wrinkled her nose and stared out the porthole until Auntie's retching ceased.

Some ten meters above the ground, the window provided a fine view despite the film of grime. The land spread toward the hazy horizon in gentle waves of green. Dark stripes that Lileela knew to be roads, though they wouldn't be deemed that by civilized folk, marked the fields into plots shaped more by the lay of the land than by any intelligent designer.

In the far right corner of her view, barely seen, sprawled what appeared to be a jumble of rock. Lileela, however, recognized it as the architectural disaster known as Gullach. Designed to blend in with the landscape, the former palace of the toqeph was now the home of the New Gannahan settlement and the place of her birth.

"It's not the travel sickness." Skiskii wiped her mouth on a napkin. "Your uncle just couldn't bring himself to set foot on Gannah. No offense to your people, my dear, but—"

"None taken." Lileela studied the tiny moving figures in the scene below. Like it or not, they were her people. As the smoke and dust from the landing cleared, she could see them moving toward the airfield from different directions. Coming to greet her, she assumed. Great. She'd rather they'd ignore her, as she planned to do to them.

"—but it's hard for him to overcome his ingrained prejudices."

Once Skiskii disposed of her bag of nastiness in the nearest refuse tube, Lileela turned toward her. "I know, Auntie. It was generous of him to take me into his home the way he did."

"I left him no choice." Skiskii downed the remainder of the nutrawater in her bottle. "I'll admit, it did bother him at first. But you're family, and after your grandfather died, I wasn't about to leave my cousin's child in an institution, to be treated to who-knows-what indignities professional caregivers might give a mongrel such as yourself. I simply would not allow that to happen."

Though Lileela knew the Karkar way of expressing a thought without regard to how hurtful it might be, the words stung like a slap.

Unmindful, Skiskii patted Lileela's leg. "Karkar professionals are the finest in the galaxy, of course. But personal prejudices can taint even the best. And with that curly hair and those glowing green eyes, not to mention your silly lack of digits, you do look rather frightful until one gets used to the differences."

Reminding herself of her vow to keep her dignity, Lileela forced a smile. "I appreciate all you've done for me, Auntie. And I've enjoyed getting to know you."

Skiskii's ears lifted in the Karkar excuse for a smile. "Ogliziizl and I have both enjoyed the experience as well. You've become very dear to us."

Lileela was tempted to ask, "Then why can't I stay?" But she knew the answer. Her cousins were citizens of some influence, but the decision had been made above their heads. Instead of complaining, she rubbed her forearm against Skiskii's in a Karkar gesture of affection. "You're dear to me as well."

The transport pilot's squawking voice over the intercom interrupted, obviously reading from a script. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are now on the planet of Gannah. As you know, this planet is not a member of the League of Worlds. If you choose to disembark, you will be an alien here with no protection or rights under League Statute. However, the government of Gannah has extended us the freedom to set foot on the planet, communicate with the residents, and travel about as we choose."

"This freedom comes with some warnings. The food and water are pure and untainted. Nevertheless, ingesting it is known to cause intestinal distress for those who aren't accustomed to it, and you are advised to limit your consumption to things you have brought with you."

Lileela yawned as the Karkar voice shrieked on. "No part of the planet is off-limits during your visit. You may browse in the local stores, but be aware that Gannah does not follow the League Standard monetary system. It is illegal for any male to touch a female, even to shake hands, unless they are related by blood or marriage. No alcohol or spirits in any form are permitted anywhere on the planet. Failure to comply with these laws will result in immediate expulsion."

Skiskii looked at Lileela, ears stiff. "What's all that about?"

Before Lileela could answer, the pilot continued. "That's the official statement. Personally, and on behalf of Karkar Space Aeronautics, I would like to thank you for allowing us to transport you to this exotic place. Enjoy your visit, but please be sure to follow the guidelines they suggest so you can return safely. None of us, I'm sure, wants our journey to end here.

"This transport's departure is scheduled for three days from now, at 0800 on the twelfth of Sjklxxk, or League Standard Date 2923.05.12. The cabinets on the lower level are stocked with ample beverages and travelations for the duration. You may return to this ship whenever you choose, for as long as you choose. The seats convert to cots, if you wish to spend the nights here. However, the people of Gannah have indicated that accommodations are available for any brave souls who choose to use them.

"You are now free to disembark. Watch your backs, ladies and gentlemen. This might be the New Gannah, but it's still Gannah. Again, thank you for your patronage, and enjoy your stay."

The flight carried few passengers. Most Karkar had better sense than to visit the land of the galaxy's most fabled villains. The only people who shared the transport with Lileela and her aunt were the shuttle crew and attendants, a geologist who was to inspect the ores being exchanged in payment for Gannah's debts, two finance ministers, and two League advisors who were authorized to oversee and certify the exchange.

They unfastened their safety restraints at the close of the announcement, chattering at shrill Karkar levels. "No alcohol?" "What was that about not touching a female?" "Shop without money, how does that work?" "I wonder what language they speak here." "This is a city? Where are the buildings?" "For that matter, where are the people?"

Lileela listened mutely to their jangling. She enjoyed knowing more about Gannah than the most educated among them. But the thought that they would be leaving in three days while she must remain put a damper on any gloating.

She and Skiskii waited in their seats until all but the attendants had exited the transport. Then they rose. Lileela, heavy with dread, moved more stiffly than usual as they made their way to the gaping mouth of the doorway.

"Are you all right, dear?" Skiskii asked.

Lileela nodded. "I've just been sitting too long. I'll loosen up soon."

Hot, moist air wrapped them in smothering arms as they approached. Lileela thought she remembered summer's heat, but its oppressiveness took her by surprise as she descended the steps to the sizzling tarmac.

Skiskii gasped. "By the blessed Kankakar Jewels, what's wrong with their climate control?"

"Auntie, there is no climate control. This is weather." She answered absently, hardly hearing Skiskii's sputtering as her attention seized on the group assembled to meet them.

A faceless rabble of drably clad bodies peppered the area, but four at the center drew her eye.

A tall blond man towered above the rest, of Karkar size but with the grooming of a savage, clad in the long skirt and coat that on Gannah passed for formal attire. That would be Abba.

On his right stood a younger man, not quite as tall but similarly bearded and dressed, with the face of her brother Adam, now grown. Lileela greeted him in her meah and his meah responded with joy.

On Abba's left stood a small, sturdy woman with black hair braided and wrapped around her head. Her emerald trousers and tunic intensified the color of her eyes, which were the same brilliant green as Lileela's. And though those eyes were fixed on the delegation that preceded Lileela and her aunt, Lileela knew the woman's focus was on her and her alone.

Lileela's head swam and her legs felt weak. The pavement beneath her radiated the heat of the sun overhead, making her sympathize with a patty on a grill press. But the woman in green—her mother—drew her onward. Despite her mother's damaged meah, she connected with Lileela in a way no one else ever had, nor ever could.

Walking beside Lileela, Skiskii tamed her shrieking complaints to a croaking stage whisper, then quieted altogether as they drew nearer at a dignified pace. Even she felt the power of the toqeph of Gannah.

Emma greeted the officials with a smile and a bow. Abba touched fingertips with them in a twelve-point, the Karkar equivalent of a handshake. Adam bowed like a Gannahan and performed a twelve-point as well.

Emma directed the Karkar visitors to follow two other men—who were they? One looked vaguely like one of the councilmen who used to meet with her parents, but who was the other? Was it that ship captain who took her to Karkar when she was injured? What was he doing back here on Gannah? Once the officials moved away, the toqeph turned her piercing green gaze on Lileela.

No breeze stirred to cool Lileela's perspiring forehead as she forced herself to look her mother in the eye. "Hello, Emma."

Abba and his cousin Skiskii exchanged greetings in their native language. The Outlandish display probably drew almost as much attention from the onlookers as did Emma's and Lileela's long embrace.

"Welcome home, my daughter," Emma murmured in the Standard tongue. "We've missed you so."

"Thank you. It's good to be back."

Wrapped in her em's arms for the first time in more than ten years, Lileela felt a sharp stirring within, like a hammerstrike to her conscience. She'd just lied to her mother. And a Gannahan didn't lie.