

Leona Bestolie #5 Tanzina

I. Christie

Chapter 1

The Ranch Almhomena

Lonnie and M'boto's two-week flight aboard *Zane* was without incident. The crew was made up of space veterans that worked in space longer than anyone Lonnie knew. M'boto settled in *Zane's* hydroponics bay where the crew had their favorite fruits and vegetables growing. They were familiar with Zophos and in addition to entertaining Lonnie and M'boto with stories of the Zophos they knew of, they had a lot of stories about other species that experienced the mass migration urge, some no longer found in their space quadrant.

Lonnie entertained everyone with her music to cover her restlessness, but on day eight she broke down and sent a communication off to Kali, the cause of her restlessness. The communication reminisced shamelessly about their off-ship adventures. The communication had been rewritten many times without really saying anything until M'boto told her to just say she missed her and send it. It sounded simple and if she didn't think about the consequences, it was simple. She also sent Muto a message that she was all right and thanked him for his services but made it plain she needed to learn to protect herself.

At the Immigration Check-In Station in Tanzina, M'boto was picked up in an official vehicle for an interview with someone in the Department of Agriculture. He didn't want Lonnie to wait around for him since he didn't know what the outcome of the meeting would involve. Lonnie gave him Cora's ranch Almhomena in Ambleton as her destination in case he needed help or an address if the agents wanted to know where he was going. She also gave him a credit voucher for transportation.

The Immigration Terminal was also the main space debarking terminal and it was being remodeled with hundreds of travelers weaving around obstacles and adding to the construction din. The auto-cabs were queued up with auto-porters moving efficiently from the baggage area to an available auto-cab with the owners trotting closely behind so as not to lose sight of their possessions in the crowd.

Lonnie watched the auto-porter store her bags and musical instrument cases into her waiting ride. Cora and her staff had an emergency and would not be able to meet her. Since her

staff was also her medical team Lonnie understood why she was not met. For seven years she had been visiting Cora at her ranch, Almhomena, in Ambleton. It offered her a variety of activities from mountain climbing to counting wildlife during the annual tabulation of the populations on the protected wildlife lands around Cora's ranch. Right now, she was looking for some quiet time to regroup, while waiting for her own home to be completed on another planet, Terrian 4S. She had sent a message to her builders that she liked the plans and they could start work on her castle in a mountain.

Leaning back in the cab Lonnie was finally able to relax and notice the differences since her last visit. The most notable was that the cab was more lavish, starting with seats that offered different positions, warmth, and vibration. It also had a snack bar and an entertainment center available for an additional fee.

Traffic and a growing population attributed to the length of time it took to get to the open lands but even that scenery had changed. Fences where they had not previous been, neatly separated fields and disappeared over hills. Advertisement signs were setup so that anyone that took the time to glance out the window would know what to buy next time they were in a store.

"Nothing stays the same," Lonnie said to herself. She thought back to when she and Cora had first met. Then she was working on her first cruise liner that had since changed name and ownership. Cora was on a honeymoon cruise. She was walking the decks to cool off from an argument with her new wife and Lonnie was cooling off from a late-night workout. At the time it was her way of handling her claustrophobia from the confines of a spaceship. Their conversation was brief, but entertaining. Aliana, Cora's new bride, broke up the conversation with her sudden appearance, distraught that Cora not only left her but would not give in to a demand of hers. If Lonnie was the type to offer free advice or otherwise, she would have told Cora there would be little peace in her household as long as she was with Aliana. Lonnie's experience with people of privilege and entitlement was that they didn't feel they needed to expend their energy to make anything work.

After that meeting, she saw the couple at all her performances during their cruise, with Aliana wearing a bored expression, unless she was talking. For three years Cora and Aliana booked a two-week cruise on the space liner that Lonnie was on to see her perform. The fourth year Lonnie was pleasantly surprised to get an invitation from Cora to come climbing at her

ranch when the space liner docked at Wenachacha. Cora had sent pictures of the mountain she knew would get Lonnie to visit.

Lonnie's eyes blinked open from the change of speed. Peering out she could see the once neat rows of crops were replaced with neat rows of architectural identical homes. The cab stopped abruptly at a gate to a new fence that went for a long distance either way. The arch above the gateway announced Almhomena was private property.

Dr. Cora named her ranch after a healing herb, Almhomena. It was the main cash crop of the farms the houses replaced. Once she was identified the gate swung open. The cab glided up to the front veranda and came to a halt. No one came out to greet her.



Lonnie surmised the emergency was still in progress. Once she unloaded her gear the cab turned around and left the ranch. Aliana appeared at the top of the stairs with a drink in hand. When Aliana drank, she was argumentative and unpredictable. Lonnie thought she had given up her drinking as a condition of the last big fight Cora and she had.

"So, the wandering dancer has returned," she said sarcastically. "Don't expect to be setting down roots here." With that said she turned unsteadily, using the wall for support, and retreated into the dark interior of the ranch house.

"Thanks for the helping hand," Lonnie muttered. Parked in the entrance hallway was the auto-butler. Lonnie activated it. It lifted all her luggage and effortlessly moved up the stairs leading her to her room, the same one she always stayed in. She was surprised when the butler had to unlock it. Peering inside suspiciously, Lonnie looked around before stepping in.

While the butler efficiently unpacked her bags, Lonnie stored her instruments herself. A light was blinking on the bedroom comm. Pushing the button she sat on the bed to listen.

"Lonnie, if you're hearing this and I'm not there, I'm really sorry. We had a commuter transportation vehicle crash in the town nearby and every available medical team was called in to assist. Watch out for Aliana. She's not being friendly, if you haven't already run into her. Keep Butler Bill around you. He'll keep you safe from her. She's supposed to be off the property by tomorrow. This accident came at a bad time. I hope to see you soon, my friend."

"Open balcony door," Lonnie ordered. The warm afternoon heat came quickly wafting in with the smell of dust and the Formica trees that shaded the house. The view was her favorite of

the mountain. It was on that mountain she and Kali Maxine had become something more than dancing partners. Melancholy began to set in and not wanting any of it, not yet anyway, she unpacked her sitar.

Sitting cross legged on the floor with her sitar, she closed her eyes and began to do warm up exercises, imagining her teacher, then a middle-aged Gaholi, patiently teaching her the spiritual as well as physical lessons of playing the sitar.

Gaholi was at the cross-roads of his career, suffering extreme burnout and using a year hiatus to determine if he wanted to return to performing in public. Her dancing inspired him, and he became another fan turned friend. Of the many adventures they shared on shore leave, he loved his lessons on hang gliding. Three years later he died while hang gliding off a cliff no one with his experience would have done unless they really wanted to end their life. The ocean breezes are too unpredictable along the cliff face just before a storm. Lonnie had heard he was heartbroken when his wife left him with their children to return to her family. Gaholi's wife's family was from old wealth and didn't approve of their daughter marrying a musician, no matter how famous he was. During the divorce he was prevented from seeing his children and dragged out his petition to a court to have a hearing on the matter.

A rapping on her door had Lonnie putting up her sitar. It had grown dark outside. She touched the view screen to see who was on the other side. Unlocking the door, she flung it open and gave Cora an enthusiastic hug, displaying more emotion than she was in the habit of. Surprised at her own display of emotion, Lonnie stepped back. While her dancing centered her and gave her a steady rooted feeling with her emotions, her music opened her up and left her vulnerable.

"That was beautiful!" Cora said. "We came back about an hour ago, but we didn't have the heart to interrupt you, but dinner is getting cold and we're about to fall asleep."

Cora patted Lonnie's grumbling stomach. "Come on. Cookie prepared a feast for you. All your favorites." Then she added in an undertone. "Aliana has been locked up in her room. Tomorrow she'll be gone."

"You don't sound all that sad about Aliana," Lonnie said.

"I'm not. She's been threatening me for years that if *I* divorce her, she'll clean me out and make it so I can never practice medicine legally again."

"Why would it make a difference to her?"

"Ego and entitlement. Her new threat is she'll sell Almhomena to her father's contractor, who has been following me around and pestering me to sell directly to him. He wants to build expensive houses that are exclusive to only the rich having access to the wilderness habitat."

"I thought there was a wilderness protection act that doesn't allow private interests to take possession of protected areas."

"In Aliana's case, socialites that have had their entire life made easy with robot maids and family lawyers, care little about the details. When her family's stable of lawyers try and take this property they're going to find out it will take more than a dozen of years and therefore lots of money, to change laws, public opinion, and political hacks that make Preserve the Wilderness Areas their platform. Harry O will love to drain her and her family's money. He hates the Obermans."

"I remember him. He used to be Harry Oberman until *those* Obermans took him to court saying he couldn't use *their* family name because it would be confused with theirs and they had a reputation to uphold."

"Good memory. You should have been behind the curtains to catch the melodrama from her family. I couldn't believe how insulted they were that a distant relative they considered below them had the nerve to carry on the family name. Gods but I'm so lucky she had me sign a prenuptial that our estates were to remain separate. The courts can't break that part of the agreement. What she's trying to sue me for is mental cruelty over having to live out here."

"I didn't realize he was your lawyer. With all her Oberman power, why didn't she just move?"

"Common causes bring all sorts of people together, thus Harry O in my life. I could have called her on her threat and divorced her when I realized what she was about, but I kept thinking she would grow weary of living here."

As they walked down the stairs Lonnie could hear laughter coming from the dining room.

"Running the ranch and the clinic kept my staff and I busy so Aliana's presence wasn't that much of an inconvenience...in fact, it didn't start to take on a dark twist until they started to build the tract homes."

"Lonnie!"

Lettie and Bella both jumped up from the dining table and rushed to give her hugs. They all looked weary. Bea, Elma and Ang joined them, taking turns giving Lonnie welcoming hugs.

"Pretty bad mess?" Lonnie asked.

"We were lucky all the medical teams came with medical supplies and medbots. Our biggest problem was the sight seers. The surrounding townspeople had to see the grisly mess, and that brought another set of problems," Bella explained.

"Do you know the cause of the accident?" Lonnie asked.

"According to the security cameras, a group of bored youngsters high on drugs, thought it would be fun to see who could stay on the track the longest. Four of them died derailing the commuter train," Lettie said.

"Their parents bring them to the rural towns to get away from the temptations of city life and bring with them the drugs and a whole set of other temptations their parents have no idea about," Bea said.

"All this building and mass exodus of city folks to the farmlands happened since I was last here," Lonnie said surprised. "That was fast."

"The houses are cheap prefabs. I expect they won't stand up to the first bad winter weather. They'll either collapse or not keep those inside warm. There are manufacturing plants two hours on the other side of the mountain. That's what is attracting this exodus of people from the overcrowded cities, looking for a new life," Lettie said.

"Since these miniature cities have been popping up, we've been getting a lot of vandalism and burglaries when people are out working," Bella said. "That's why the security fence around the clinic."

"It was the same day you left that four farms sold out to a construction firm," Bea said. "They wouldn't come to a community meeting and tell us why they sold out. Ambleton has a fund specifically for buying out or loaning money to farms to stay in business or to keep the lands as farmland. I don't understand why they didn't use the funds."

"I hope you brought some gris gris to put a hold on all this trouble," Cora said.

"I'm finding it difficult to believe all this *suddenly* happened," Lonnie said.

"Well, I believe the Obermans or someone in the family has been working for a few years on a plot to take over the lands along the wilderness preserve to build exclusive homes with private access to our mountain and all the other things this wilderness area provides," Bea said.

"Only they'll sanitize the wilderness," Lettie said. "The problem I have with that theory is if it's exclusiveness, like Bea said, they made a mistake with the prefab houses that will be too close to their private world."

"Unless they expect the tornadoes that occasionally come through here will clear out the area, leaving it ripe for them to take the land back," Lettie said.

"How does Aliana fit in it? Legally, and by her choice, she has no say in the ranch," Bella said softly, looking around to make sure Aliana wasn't around to hear that.

"Aliana was committed to our relationship for the first three years. I think her family wore her down."

"One can't love and be wise," Bella said.

"What happened with Aliana," Lettie said, "is she became lazy, bored and grumpy. Her idea of a relationship is that of a spoiled child who sees those around her should entertain her. I'll give her credit for becoming a nurse, though she spent her time in the office dispensing drugs and keeping books. When she and Cora got together, that was ..."

"I was idiotic, and love struck," Cora said. "I've taken responsibility to being short-sighted and rushed into our relationship," Cora said.

Lonnie looked at Cora then at the others. "I've only seen Aliana for a few hours at a time and that was mostly on the cruise liner. She did what most passengers did, she would drink a lot and carry on. Cruising isn't for everyone."

"Drugs as in chemicals, Lonnie. Her family is notorious for being behind the drug deals of the illicit type. None of us realized how involved she and her family were into the drug business until she became too dependent on them and was stealing from our clinic supplies when she ran out of her private stash," Bea said.

"Why does she stay?" Lonnie asked.

"Ego. Did you know that Aliana is the only family member that has been off this planet and her family gave her so much grief about mingling with peasants on the cruise ship, we stopped going?" Cora said.

"The good thing is..." Bella said with firmness, "if she doesn't leave tomorrow morning, the sheriff will be hauling her out."

"Let's talk about nicer things," Cookie said, adding dessert dishes on the table. "You can't enjoy my labor with all this negative energy in the air."

"Are you going out to the Northend tomorrow?" Ang asked, following her mother's direction."

"I'd love to. That stream still running through the riverbed?"

"It's dried out at this time of year unless we have a freak rainstorm, but there's some real nice things to see on the walk there. You've never been out this time of season." Cora said.

"That's true."

"Will you play for us after dinner? Ang can accompany you with her violin. Lettie is good with her harmonica, Elma drums, Bea sings," Bella asked.

"I would like that. You and Cora can dance for us."

"So can Cookie. She does a mean foot stomp," Bella said.

Chapter 2

Strong Fences Make for Good Neighbors

Lonnie was up just moments before sunrise as was her practice when on land. She liked to run early in the morning hours when it was just light enough to see where she was placing her feet. Peeking out her balcony door to get a hint of the weather, the cold air brought the scent of flowers that the sun had warmed from the higher elevations.

As she ran downstairs two of Cora's dogs scrambled to their feet at the sight of someone up.

"Good morning, you two. Sorry I don't remember your names. Want to go for a run?"

The dogs ran out the door when she opened it and out of sight. She closed the door quietly behind her and noticed one of the small security drones came active.

The dogs ran back to her and then headed down a trail with Lonnie trailing them. Her eyes were focused on the path that was still covered in shadows, but her other senses were noticing what was around her; small creatures calling to each other, the humming of a water pump nearby, and the dogs sneezing as they passed herbal plants that lined the beginning of the trail. By the time it was light enough for her to notice the detail of her surroundings she was alongside of the fence that bordered the tract homes. Lonnie could see a private vehicle parked up against the fence as if the truck was used to climb onto Cora's property.

"Poachers?" Lonnie wondered aloud. "No matter where I go these days there's something illegal going on. Friends aren't going to be giving me open invitations if this trend continues."

Slowing her pace, she studied the vehicle, knowing the security drone would also be relaying the information back to Cora's security system.

Shading her eyes, she looked for the security cameras that were on each fence post. They should have alerted Cora that she had visitors. They were there and looked active. *Someone has a gadget to bypass the energy signal between the cameras, no doubt.* That was taking things to a higher level of harassing a neighbor, Lonnie thought. *Why can't people respect the No Trespassing signs?*

The dogs continued along the animal trail that veered back into Cora's property. Lonnie remembered the path had once wandered over her neighbor's farmland.

The drone beeped a warning and both dogs and Lonnie stopped. A sudden boom rocked the ground beneath her, and the concussion sent her flying. Dirt, water and rocks rained on her and the dogs. Three figures came running out of the dust cloud looking scared.

"Hey!" Lonnie yelled shakily, picking herself up and dusting off some grass clinging to her arm. One of the figures pulled something from his hip. Lonnie didn't wait to find out if it was a weapon but dived back to the ground, yelling unnecessarily at the dogs to lie down. They had not gotten to their feet after being knocked down. She would have to rely on the drone to protect them.

An energy field surrounded her and the dogs and the three people held their hands over their ears as the drone emitted its paralyzing sound. It would immobilize them until help arrived.

Lonnie stayed seated on the ground, not trusting her legs, waiting for help to arrive. The dogs appeared dazed and were content to lie down, watching the intruders, though, Lonnie didn't think they would be able to run after anyone if they had to.

Cora and Bella arrived ten minutes later. The ranch hovercraft stopped just outside of the drone's energy field.

"What happened?" Cora demanded. "We heard an explosion and the security alarm went off. Luca! Quick! Bella, please check the dogs. Lonnie, are you all right?" Cora helped her sit in the hovercraft to gather herself.

"They came running from where the explosion was and pulled a weapon on me." She clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking. "The vehicle on the other side of the fence may be their vehicle. They have a signal squelcher directed at your security camera."

"This is the first time the vandalism has escalated to this level," Bella said. "Luca and Quich are stunned but they'll be okay."

The dogs were nervously pacing around Bella and Cora.

Cora took Lonnie's hands and pressed on energy points on her hands and arms.

"This group doesn't belong here," Cora said. "Look at their clothes."

They were all wearing camouflage outfits like they were more than vandals. The siren of a police vehicle announced its arrival.

"Doggone, Cora. These towners are carrying this feud too far!" an angry sheriff announced as he and his deputy alighted from their vehicle. "Abie, call the van to incarcerate them. Impound that vehicle parked along the fence." He looked around for anything else he could charge his prisoners with and then his eyes rested on Lonnie.

"Well, I'll be a hog in a tree! I didn't expect you to be around this time of year. Helen said she got a cryptic message from you last night. How are you doing, Leona?"

"Fine, Uncle Bo," she greeted fondly. She got out of the vehicle and hugged her uncle. He was the only one in her family she kept in touch with. Like her, he was ostracized, but unlike her, he took it further by changing his name. The family didn't do well with members that didn't follow the family program. Everything was for the family, much like the Obermans. Bo Miller Bestrolie Junior changed his name to Miller Ward. Ward was his wife's family name.

Miller had moved to Ambleto after Lonnie had sent him glowing reports of how beautiful the land was around Cora's ranch. He settled with his young family and took a job as a deputy. At the time there were only two that policed an area that took two days to cover on a hovercraft. When the sheriff retired, he encouraged his deputy, Miller, to apply for the job.

Miller held his niece for a long moment, picking up on her feelings just as easily as Lonnie could his.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"I'm doing fine," Lonnie said, knowing he wasn't just talking about the explosion.

"I heard you were getting attached to that diva...Kali Maxine," he said concerned.

"Uncle, I'm all right. It's just getting used to the civilian life. It's a big change for me not to be traveling on a cruise liner with all that free traveling," she said.

He studied her at arm's length knowing that was not the entire story.

"Well, let me see what damage these vandals did this time. Are you staying around longer this tour?"

"For a few weeks or as long as Cora doesn't throw me out," she said.

"If she throws you out, you come over to our place. Helen would love to see you." He pointed to his deputy. "Abie, come over here and meet my niece, Leona Bestrolie. She actually kept the family name," he said. "You'll never see a better dancer. She plays a mean guitar too," he said.

"We heard her play the sitar yesterday. Took me back to when she was playing with the master. Remember?"

"We didn't see much of her around that time," he smiled regretfully. "Abie is my daughter in law. Melon's wife."

"Melon married?"

"Yep. Ten months ago," Abie said. "Roped myself quite a guy and now I have a nice friendly family around me too."

"She means she doesn't have to do housework," Miller explained. "We were moving her and Melon from Greenbroro to live with us when you were last here. Abie was working in law enforcement in that college town. Melon was doing the landscaping for the college where they met and boom...fell in love. They married and decided to move here where they know they have grandparents to babysit when they have kids."

"I missed a lot," Lonnie said.

"You didn't miss much. We didn't have a wedding party," Abie said. "There wasn't time and we're saving money for our own place. We'll have a party for the birth of our first kid."

"Let's get this investigation over with," Miller said. Drones accompanied Miller and Abie to the site of the explosion. One of the drones remained behind to watch over the prisoners.

Since it was a crime scene Cora had to remain with the vehicles; however, she did send her drone to inspect the area. Cora was sitting in her vehicle studying the images the drone was sending back.

"That's not ordinary damage to a water hole," Cora reported.

"How's that?" Lonnie and Bella looked over her shoulder.

"If it were meant to destroy the waterhole, they should have used a bomb with a wider explosion dispersal and not deep. Look closer at the debris that's scattered about. It's dirt from layers down."

"Layers down," Bella repeated thoughtfully. "Like the explosives the well diggers were using when they were drilling for our summer well?"

"Yes."

After an hour Miller and Abie returned. The vandals held captive by the drones were marched into the sheriff's van and hauled off to jail.

"Do you think they're looking for minerals?" Cora asked him.

"There aren't any mineral veins here otherwise it wouldn't have been designated a wilderness area."

"What if a rumor was started?" Cora persisted.

"The satellite pictures of this entire planet with mineral content are available to the public. Even if it suddenly had a water table underneath, due to earthquakes, it wouldn't be enough to change its designation of protected wilderness."

"Do you think the Oberman's are behind this?" Bella asked.

"Maybe. Is Aliana at your place?" Miller asked.

"She was when we left. When I heard the explosion, I locked her in her room," Cora confessed. "She's probably still passed out from her nonstop drinking, or whatever drug she's on."

"It's within your right," Miller said. "Her overstay was a month ago and her past actions have proved she does vandalize your property. Since we're out here, might as well take care of that too."

They all piled into the vehicles. Lonnie opted for returning with the dogs. She would rather miss the drama that was going to unfold, in fact, she would have liked to finish her run, but the day was already beginning to heat up and she didn't think to bring water. She started back along the path and watched the dogs veer away from a scraggly bush that was hanging over the path. Lonnie stopped abruptly. It was not there when she came by earlier.

"M'boto, is that you?" she asked hesitantly.

Before her eyes the shape morphed into a tree-like figure. The colors and movement had her closing her eyes briefly.

"Hi," M'boto said.

Lonnie looked at him carefully. "You've changed? The explosion?"

The figure nodded.

"Are you all right?" Lonnie asked concerned.

"A night with plants will help. I've been looking for you. People here don't like M'boto."

"Who told you that?" she demanded.

"The Director of Land Management. I was told Zophos aren't welcome for homesteading."

"What fools! I'm glad you found me. I have land that you are more than welcome to homestead at. Come and meet Cora and her staff. They would all love to meet you. Cora and Cookie are avid gardeners. They have an arboretum with prize herbs and vegetables."

By the time Lonnie and M'boto arrived at the house the police vehicle had left, and the other dogs were hanging out in the shade of the veranda. Lonnie took their presence as a sign Aliana was gone. M'boto gravitated to the back of the house where the plants were. Lonnie entered the house through the kitchen, expecting to see everyone seated for breakfast.

"Hi, Cookie. Do you mind if my friend M'boto hangs out with your plants?"

"Good morning, Dancer...Why?" she asked.

"He's a Zophos and needs some rest. I was thinking your plant beds would...."

"A Zophos! No need to say anything more. I would love to have him in my garden. I'll welcome him myself. You go on in and get your breakfast. I have freshly steamed apples with cloves for you." She turned to enter the arboretum.

"Where is everyone?" Lonnie called after her.

"On the veranda."

Lonnie ran up the stairs to her room and cleaned up. She was back down in half an hour.

"You're looking nice," Cora said on seeing her. "Your friend, M'boto is very nice to offer to work on our plantings. We've heard about Zophos but never met one. Standing near him makes me as giddy as a young girl on her first date."

"Thanks for making him feel welcomed. He was told by someone in the Department of Land Management he wasn't wanted."

"I don't believe that's the case in rural parts. Someone is just trying to put roadblocks in his way. His help in any farming community would profit one group and cut into another's profits."

Lonnie eyed her steamed apple. She could smell the cinnamon and cloves. "Are these apples from your orchard?"

"Different looking, no?" Cookie asked, walking in with a pitcher of juice. "It's from Abazon. They're very good when baked with cloves. Bitter otherwise."

"So, what do you have planned for the day?" Bella asked as she took another helping of apple pancakes.

"I thought I would go into town, check my mail and see what other changes have taken place," Lonnie said.

"Expecting something special?" Cora teased.

"Maybe," Lonnie responded.

The others exchanged knowing looks.

"What are you all up to for the day?" Lonnie asked.

"I'm heading to the hospital to relieve Kimi Lieu. Most of the staff doctors take summer off for vacations and I step in to help. Bella will be working the clinic here in case any emergency calls come in, and Ang has farm chores," Cora answered.

Ang wrinkled up her nose. "I can honestly say I have the lighter of the jobs. The barn-bots do most of the stuff while I get to go around and coo over the little animals and pet the big ones that don't bite and just make sure everything is fine."

"Want some company on your stroll around town?" Cora asked Lonnie.

"Who?" Lonnie asked.

"You do have family here. Helen is probably bored out of her mind since she quit her job at Hutinc's."

"She quit? I thought she wanted to make manager."

"She made manager, and then found out what they expected her to do. You know how she hates politics. I think your family ruined her on it. She would make a darn good mayor."

"I was planning on visiting her. I'll give her a call first thing, then."

Chapter 3

Family Ties

Helen was taller than her husband and much taller than Lonnie. Their children, the twins didn't resemble each other but were psychically close as if they were identical. Personality wise, they were a nice blend of the two parents.

Lonnie and Helen walked along the walkway sharing each other's presence with little conversation. Both were studying the bustling businesses that were not what Ambleton used to be like. Lonnie noted the new shopping mall and how the old stores that might have closed up, were sidewalk cafes and reading rooms that had a view of the mountains. There were more gardens and trees along the walkway than Lonnie had last seen. Some of the stores became apartments with small areas set aside for gardening. Ambleton was a farming community foremost, with fresh vegetables grown in one's own yard.

"What's that shop about?" Lonnie asked of a dark purple building that looked squeezed between its neighboring buildings.

"Herb shop. If you did more than visit Cora's farm when you drop by once a year, you'd have noticed it," Helen said.

When *Earl Gray* docked for three days, Lonnie's visits were limited to two days and she usually packed her hours off ship with physical exercises to relieve her stress of being cooped on board a spaceship. Helen and Miller would stop over at Cora's to visit her, with the twins that were growing into adults. However, her last visit missed Helen and Miller since they were out of town helping their son Melon and his wife Abie move.

"The manager imports from other planets and buys domestic supplies too. Cora is one of his local suppliers. The college community has grown, and with the building of the new homes it's bringing in more people. Some I wish we could turn right around and boot them back to where they came from. Miller's been telling the counsel that he's shorthanded and buying more security robots is not enough. He wants a dozen new sentient hires."

"A dozen only?" Lonnie teased.

"Some of the new towners don't think he should be their law enforcement officer. After all, he's only worked on small town problems," Helen mocked.

Both laughed. Miller had left the big city headaches in law enforcement for a small town with less conflict. He had plenty of experience and that was probably what bothered the ones that had malicious intent in mind. He knew their games before they could get them implemented.

"I don't recall the college attracting so many students," Lonnie mentioned. "What's so special about this college?"

"There's a lot of people that prefer the country atmosphere. Open land further than the eye can see with farming and horticulture its strong points. Mayor Motock has been for holding the growth down. Once the town counsel realized the error of their ways in allowing a certain company to build homes in place of the farms, he's had better support. Motock plans to retire next month. oLon Halley, one of the new residents is planning on taking his place. He wants to open up everything for development with no regulations on landmanagement. He owns the local real estate development company."

"Isn't that conflict of interest?"

"His line is that we've had a mayor with a small mind whereas he has vision. No one wants to run against him because he manufactures and exaggerates the faults of anyone that may want to run. He tears people down before they file."

"Is that why you're not running?"

Helen looked at her startled. Then she smiled. "Everyone I've been meeting lately has been trying to give me all sorts of reasons why I should run. I just don't like politics," she informed her.

"Hm," Lonnie intoned.

"All right. Come on." She grabbed Lonnie's elbow as she suddenly changed directions and headed for another part of town.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to register as a candidate. Let's see what he can dig up on me, though he's going to have a fight on his hands." Their progress was suddenly halted when a young mother and her child came out of a store. "Hi, Mlear. Oh, he's so cute in that outfit." Helen stopped to speak with the Erudian and coo over her child.

Lonnie smiled at Helen's natural warmth for people.

"When are you going to take that watercolor class at the college?" Helen asked the young mother.

Mlear blushed. "I'm really busy with Dlie. He's got more energy than I thought a kid his age would have."

"They have free babysitting services at the college. You really have great artistic talent. You can make a living from it. You just need some polishing up on some techniques, and some business courses so you can manage your finances for starting up a business. If you need a break from Dlie, my offer is still open. Then there's Abie too. She and Dlie have loads of fun together."

"I know. And don't think I don't appreciate it Helen. I just don't want to wear out my extra help."

"Listen, I had Miller helping me with our two kids and let me tell you, I could not ask for a more dedicated helpmate, but we were tuckered out at the end of the day with the twins. Here you are alone raising this young one and trying to hold down a job. We've always been a supportive community, Mlear and these newcomers aren't going to change that, not if I have a say."

"You should run for politics, Helen. I know that guy, oLon Halley, is boasting he'll turn this town into a profitable city, but no one I know wants to vote for him. I hear the majority of the Towners don't like him, either. Most of them like the open lands. It's just those people he's been offering cheap housing to that are making trouble."

"Well Mlear, that's what I was just about to do, register for the mayor's race."

The young girls face lit up. "Wait until I tell the others at the coffee shop. I know more than half the town would vote for you." She leaned closer to Helen. "I hear a lot of the conversations while I'm managing the place."

Helen nodded. "You pass it around."

"You go, Helen," Lonnie cheered softly.

Helen gave her a pained look. "I think I may be biting off more than I want to chew."

"Whatever he accuses you of, face it head on. Answer it and take the subject back to what is important. You can do it, Helen. You speak softly and carry very big sticks...honesty and truth."

Chapter 4

Under Seige

Lonnie left her plant purchases in the arboretum. The herbologist reassured her a Zophos would find them refreshing to connect with. M'boto was in a meditative state, replenishing his life force, so she left him to his meditation.

Cora was just coming in when Lonnie walked toward the stairs. She looked tired.

"Hi. Long day?" Lonnie asked.

"Hm." She held up an official looking notice to Lonnie. "I've been served at the hospital in the middle of an emergency. So, like the Obermans. They're officially charging me with mental cruelty to Aliana and defamation of the family."

"Something you were expecting," Lonnie said. "Looks like progress to get this over with in front of a judge."

"That is a relief. Thanks for reminding me. I hear Helen is running for mayor. That's going to be a plus for the community. How's M'boto?"

"He looks okay."

The two women climbed the stairs together.

"I suggested he visit my place and see if it suits him to settle. No one is there to give him grief."

"If a Zophos likes a place, how would they go about purchasing land so no one can challenge their presence?" Cora asked.

"Zophos have a covenant with the Plantian. They're one of those species that others don't want around so the Plantian takes up their cause."

Cora looked surprised. "Why on earth not? They don't eat their neighbors, they nurture plant life, they're nonaggressive...I mean, they're positively good neighbors. I can already feel a difference in the energy around here, and not just in the arboretum. My herbs and plants will be the envy of every grower. I would like to see some pictures of your place. If it's that remote and great, I may move there myself. So, how was your day?" Cora asked.

"I'm ready for some music. You still have that flute?"

Cora laughed. "I haven't played that thing for ages."

"Bring it out. We'll make noise and dance."

"Sounds great to me."

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Lonnie felt something around her but didn't know what it was. It was just enough to wake her. Before opening her eyes, she let her other senses read what was around her. Picking up nothing that would hurt her, she rose to one elbow and looked around. It was still dark outside. Throwing the covers back, she walked across the floor to the double doors that opened to the balcony.

"Open doors," she commanded.

"Security has been activated. All openings to the exterior have been locked down. Only an authorized person can override the security," the house security warned her.

Lonnie turned and raced out of her room. Dim lights came on as she rushed down the stairs to the arboretum.

"Emergency! Wake Cora!" she shouted to the butler that moved to assist her.

Lonnie could not enter the arboretum.

Cora came rushing into the kitchen with Bella and Ang in their sleepwear. Lonnie could hear Cookie shouting something and Ang turned quickly and left to see what it was about.

"What's wrong?" Cora demanded.

"Security has locked us inside. I can't get out to see if M'boto is okay."

A loud boom shook the building. Not built like other homes, the house didn't crumble or set off any interior fires, but it shook everyone up.

"I'll bet it's Aliana's doing!" Bella shouted angrily.

"What happened to my security?" Cora demanded.

Cookie and Ang came stumbling back to the others. Everyone was terrified.

"It's working," Lonnie said, struggling to stay calm, prioritize, and to take deep breaths. "It's keeping us from going outside where something is happening," Lonnie said. "We need to look at your security screens."

Cora led the way to a doorway that opened to a bank of screens that were showing red alarms and over a dozen views of her property. Smoke was coming from the barn, but it was from a fire being put out by the automated fire protectors. There were two huge holes in the ground.

"Okay," Lonnie said, "your little army is hard at work. If this is Aliana's doing, wouldn't she know about your security?"

"No. I had the work done little by little when she would leave to visit her family."

"Hold up, everyone," Cookie said. "I want you all to rethink this. Every time something happens bad, we automatically think it's Aliana. *This* isn't Aliana business, nor the Obermans." Cookie tucked her robe around her. "This type of violence will bring in state law enforcement. What advantage would that be to the Obermans? None."

"Then who?"

"Who would gain from you losing this place...financially?" Cookie said.

Lonnie snapped her fingers. "And have explosives on hand."

"The building contractor," Bella said.

"The building contractor," Cora agreed. "He's been telling me that I'm going to lose the property in the end, so why not sell it to him so I can keep the money. Hide it in an account the Obermans don't know about."

"Like he's not going to tell them that you have a secret account?" Ang mocked.

"You have to wonder about him because this is a wilderness area and whoever owns the land can't develop or have any traffic that will prove detrimental to the habitats..." Bella said.

A loud alarm sounded from outside. They all breathed a sigh of relief.

"Miller is here."

A phone jingled. Cora picked it up. "Yes, Miller. We're all okay.... Yes, of course. We won't go anywhere." Cora hung up the phone. "Miller has the crime bots inspecting the outside area and doing crime scene scans. He wants us to sit tight and wait."

"What about M'boto?"

"Oh, I was going to tell you this morning. He wanted to visit the groves. That's up toward the mountains. I'm sure he's safe there."

"Okay. That is a relief," Lonnie said.

"I'll go fix some refreshments," Cookie said.

"I'll get my guitar. I need to keep busy," Lonnie said.

Two hours later, Miller knocked on the door.

"Well," he said looking around the interior of the house. "It looks like you didn't even feel a thing in here."

"It shook the house like an earthquake, but it held up good," Cora said.

"I called in the State Police. I wanted to let you know first. Someone is using military grade weapons and that's against the law for any private party to own. They'll be able to pinpoint

where the shot was taken from and who did it. I think after today, everyone's going to want their house built from whatever material you have here."

"It turned out to be a great investment," Cora said. "Who would be crazy enough to do some fool thing like that?"

Miller shook his head. "We have a lot of newcomers that I haven't gotten a handle on their personalities and just what will push them over."

Abie knocked on the door that was left open. "The SPs are here, Sheriff Miller. Hey, are you all okay? The two shots put huge holes in your yard. If you want an outdoor pool, it's a good start."

"Is it all right if I go out and look?" Cora asked.

"No, not until after the SPs clear it," Miller said. "Let me get this investigation moving on to the next level."

"I can make breakfast if anyone's hungry," Cookie said looking around.

Cora sat down in her favorite chair and looked sadly at Lonnie. "I need to get out of here before someone gets hurt. I don't know what's going on."

"There's plenty of land where I'm settling. Leuwig and Herling are planning on stopping by tomorrow night to discuss progress on my place. They're knowledgeable about Terrian 4S and the best places to settle. Ask them about the planet."

"I will. They'll be pleased to know their house that was made to withstand the worst storms as well as the occasional tornados, survived a canon attack," Cora said.

Chapter 5

Making Plans

Lonnie went in search of M'boto when the SPs left. He was in a grove of fruit trees conversing with nature. He shimmered which Lonnie took to mean he was happy.

"Hi, M'boto."

"Greetings, Lonnie. I'm glad no one was hurt."

"You know then."

M'boto gestured to the mountain behind him. "I felt the intent and the shift in the air from the firing of the weapons."

"Who would do something like that?"

"You know who. You all do."

"The contractor?"

"Family can sometimes be its worst enemy. If family neglects or denies a member his or her place, there will be consequences to pay even if it's down the generational line."

"An Oberman fighting an Oberman," Lonnie said thoughtfully. "Cora said their leadership is being hit on different sides by lawsuits and having to raise prices of their products as well as laying off workers."

"It's amazing what plants pick up about people," M'boto said.

"I'll remember to think kind thoughts around my garden," Lonnie teased.

"You have a garden?" he asked surprised.

"I'm sure at least a kitchen garden. Leuwig and Herling are planning on stopping by. Speak to them about planets they've visited. They're nomad builders."

"I will. They sound like a good resource," M'boto said.

"Cora is having a gathering this evening. I'm sure you'll be pleased in joining us. We'll have plenty of music. Their daughters play instruments, and Cora, Bella and I'm sure others that will be there. Maybe we can coax Cookie to sing."

"I will return in time for the gathering. There are many spaces here that are not doing well and need help. The water is not good."

"I'll tell Cora. She can have a team out here looking into it. I'll see you after dark, then."

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"Hi, Ang. Is Cora around?" Lonnie asked.

"Cora's in the clinic. Four hikers are ill."

"I'll bet it's the water if they drank from any of the streams."

"Everyone knows not to drink from the streams without treating the water first," Ang said.

"I mean the water may have been poisoned. I spoke with M'boto. He said there are patches of plant growth that are sickened from the water."

"Now doesn't that beat the stuffing out of that pompous water management representative."

"What does that mean?" Bella asked joining them.

"Remember the City Council objecting to the way the construction company was setting up their waste disposal and the water management rep said it's been cleared, and we need to stop trying to hold back progress?"

"And?"

"Lonnie here says M'boto feels the water table is polluted and it's affecting the plants."

"Well that just about makes the entire Building and Property Management Department under suspicion."

"Ang said you have some hikers sick. If they drank from the same water source, that could be where the problem is from."

"Let me start our investigation before we get the BPMD out there," Bella said. "It just doesn't make any sense why so much damage is being done so they can take over land."

Lonnie went in search of Cookie.

"Good afternoon, Cookie. You look happy. What's happening?"

"Leuwig and Herling are arriving this evening. They always bring me new herbs. I'm going to prepare a nice feast with their favorites. We're going to have a party."

"Would you mind if I invite my Uncle and his family?"

"I already invited them. He's bringing some SP people that are interested in what the house is built of."

"That's great. M'boto will be here too. He's going to talk to Leuwig and Herling about planets that would support Zophos. It would be nice if he settled on Terrian 4S, where I'm setting up my home."

"Now that's the first time I've heard a wistfulness in your voice when you say home. It sounds like you're ready," Cookie nodded her head as she rolled up another wrap and carefully placed it next to the others on a baking sheet.

"I am," Lonnie said, sounding surprised even to herself.

"Are you going to tell me what it's like or are you going to tease me?" Cookie asked.

"It's built in a mountain."

"Yep, that sounds like you," Cookie chuckled.

"Leuwig and Herling will have pictures of what they've done so far and what's to still be done. It's self-sufficient no matter the weather outside and defensible should... well."

Cookie hummed, while sliding the baking sheet into the refrigerator. She pulled out a bowl and began something else. Then spoke up, "That's just the place Cora needs to hole up in until this mess clears up. It's hard to say who is shooting at her," Cookie said.

"Hm. That's what I wanted to talk to Cora and Sheriff Miller about."

"It involves us all. I trust Cora and Sheriff Miller will know just to do," Cookie said. "But you do what you need to do."

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Everyone was tired from all the excitement of the day and had napped before the final preparations for receiving guests was made.

Lonnie watched the first of the vehicles arrive and from her bedroom window. It was Miller and Helen without Adie and Melon. Adie was on duty with the three prisoners and Melon didn't want Adie to be sitting duty alone.

Picking up her guitar she headed to the stairs where she met Cora who was looking nervous.

"Are you nervous because of the party?" Lonnie asked.

"No. It's my first party where the SPs attending, think I'm the one responsible for all this."

"Not a chance," Lonnie said. "I think it's members of the Oberman family line that are like Harry O, outcasts. I plan on bringing up to Miller, that I think it's more than one person involved and that they should be looking at Oberman's family tree of the branches that were cut off."

"That's a wild idea, Lonnie. I like it."

"It brings in a lot of suspects but the way these attacks have been, it makes sense. Hi, Uncle Bo, Aunt Helen."

"Hi Miller. Congratulations Helen on putting your name in for the mayor's race," Cora said.

Cora and Helen moved to a corner of the room to talk about Helen's move to enter the race, while Miller and Lonnie moved to their own space for Lonnie to tell him her idea of who may be attacking Cora more openly.

Others started to enter the property, some that Cora had not invited, but since it was going to be more than a party, it made sense that the City Council would be coming.

Before they got down to business, Lonnie entertained with her guitar playing, Cookie sang old songs from her childhood and that encouraged others to add their own songs. M'boto met Leuwig and Herling with their four daughters. The daughters attached themselves immediately to M'boto and amazed him with stories of their travels.

While the music and dance went on M'boto positioned himself near a corner where Cora had an indoor herb bush growing. Lonnie thought she heard him gruffly tell one of the party goers that dumping his uneaten food in the plant pot would get him an escort out the door. Poor fellow didn't know where that voice came from but obediently disposed of his food properly and he left the party. The property security was busy with seeing that those not in the house were not up to mischief. The departing guest was escorted to the gate, which closed behind him.

Lonnie, Ang and M'boto laughed.

"Townners," Ang said. "They have no manners. I think the schools should be teaching manners, besides other basics. We're a multicultural planet. We should have classes teaching about everyone's place of origin and cultures as part of the curriculum."

"Bell," M'boto said.

A dong sounded, halting conversations and music.

"Everyone that's here, we are going to begin a discussion on the recent vandalism that has been disturbing our beautiful county," Mayor Motock announced. "Everyone find a seat."

SP agents were silent through the whole meeting and if they took notes, Lonnie knew they would remember to underline the names given as being involved in a Land Management scam, or that's how everyone believed it to be. Then that meeting also came to an end.

As Cora was closing up the house from the last person to leave, Lonnie thought she looked frightened.

"What's wrong?" Lonnie asked.

Cora looked around to see if anyone else was within hearing. She gestured for Lonnie to follow her into her security room.

"M'boto and Leuwig and Herling's girls told me they overheard a conversation between the SPs. I'm on some gang's hit list. That's what their interest in all this is about. Why didn't they tell me?"

Lonnie took a deep breath as her own fear threatened to overshadow her concern for Cora.

"I'm just a pawn in someone else's game," she lamented.

"You, Aliana, and her parents. If Uncle Bo can get the right people involved, they can investigate the possible people involved in this family feud. How attached to your life *here* are you?"

"Not anymore."

"My place isn't finished by a long shot, but Leuwig and Herling had said if I needed to live there now, I could. Do you want to move...now?"

Cora looked undecided for a few moments. Glancing at the screens that had various shots of her property she sighed.

"I've been saying I need to move. This is it."

"M'boto is going too. How long will it take you to pack?"

"How long can I put it off?"

"A few hours," Lonnie said.

Cora nodded. "Even when I know I need to move now...I'm finding it difficult to leave all this."

"Let someone else handle it."

"Henry O could...."

Lonnie shook her head. "That free ride cost you. Call up someone with a reputation and pay them."

Cora nodded. "Right."

"I'm only going to tell Leuwig, Herling and Uncle Bo. The less people that know the less chance we'll be tailed. I'm serious, Cora. I learned the hard way. Use my experience."

"Okay. What are they going to do when they find me gone?"

"Uncle Bo will handle it."

Lonnie left the room to start her own actions to protect Cora. By the time the sun was rising, Lonnie had her bags and Cora's packed aboard *Kromeg* the Leuwig's shuttle. The four girls were pacing anxiously, while their parents were prepping the shuttle for takeoff.

"It's not feeling good around here," Lin one of the girls said, which the others echoed.

"We're leaving now," Herling said. "*Travelors*, our freighter, is scheduled to leave in ten minutes from the docks. We're cutting it close, but even if the freighter leaves on autopilot, we can catch up. It's better it's on schedule. Did you reach Sheriff Miller, Lonnie?"

"I sent it via an encrypt. It's something that will take him by surprise, but he'll know what to do."

"I feel really rotten about not saying anything to my friends," Cora said.

"You can apologize next time you see them. When you'll all still be alive," Leuwig said.

"Can I bring the dogs? At least the younger ones," Cora said.

"It probably would be better since we don't know what more damage will be done here," Herling said.

With the girls helping, three of the dogs were loaded into travel cages with food, and the shuttle lifted off.

Chapter 6

Saying Good By

Their shuttle banked to the right and arched around to the *Travelors* bay doors that were slowly opening.

"Looks like we have company waiting for us," Herling said over the com. Her tone wasn't worried but Lonnie distrusted surprises when she was running away from trouble.

"It's a police vessel," Cora said, her voice rising. "Am I being arrested?"

"No. Not at all. We shouldn't have tried to surprise you," Herling said. "Helen and Miller wanted to say goodbye to you all without trouble following them."

Their shuttle smoothly landed next to the smaller police shuttle.

As they were exiting down the ramp the police shuttle door opened. Down the ramp Helen and Miller came and met the others where everyone shared hugs.

Helen gave Cora a hug whispering near her ear, "I didn't want you to go and feel like you were deserting us. Miller's right. You have to leave before they kill you in this power game of theirs. To them you're an expendable pawn. Gods but we're going to miss you all. We've had some wonderful get-togethers."

Cora hugged her back, shedding tears. "I'll miss everyone and for sure our parties. But I'm glad I'm getting out of this Oberman problem, especially since it means I'm starting my life over."

"I'm glad you're finally doing it. Not a moment too soon. Did you get in touch with someone to handle what you've left behind?"

"I hired Buddy Gin to represent my estate. I met him at one of the land hearings and he seemed a sincere and honest person," Cora said.

"We'll connect with him. We've got plenty of evidence that's been certified," Helen said. She turned to Lonnie. "We always seem to be waving to each other. You take care of yourself and my very good friend Cora." Helen wiped her tears quickly. "Gods Cora, but I'm going to miss our talks. I'll do my best to save Aliana. When you two were first together, you really were a lovely couple."

"Don't risk yourself for her, Helen. She'll always run back to her family even if she gets cleaned up. I thought I could save her too."

"We've been given the clear to move up in line," Leuwig said. "It would be safe to leave now. You don't want to get caught in the lane."

Lonnie hugged her uncle. "I left you a message, Uncle Bo."

"Alright. See you when we see you. Cora, listen to Lonnie. She's had a lot of experience traveling around the galaxies."

"Like it does me any good," Lonnie said.

"Be safe, Lonnie," Helen told her.

Helen and Miller returned to their shuttle and left quickly as the autopilot on the freighter moved to launch.

M'boto was settled in a cargo bay used for storing agricultural supplies. Humming from that bay let them all know that M'boto was happy with his accommodations.

"We'll be at the first gate in 15-S minutes. Have a seat in the lounge area."

Lonnie sat back in her seat and turned her thoughts to their next stop...her new home planet. The property Lonnie had purchased on Terrian 4S covered four days of travel on foot by a biped six feet tall. That was twelve lots of land to be divided between three people. Eight of the lots had Lonnie's name, until Aliana was out of the picture. On the other side of the mountains, or bordering Lonnie's property to the north, was an expanse of land Maltieani Co, head of security aboard *Earl Gray*, and his lifemate, Jol Hrorian the Chief Purser of Entertainment, purchased for retirement.

Once Lonnie's home was finished Leuwig and Herling would begin working on the design and building of a dude ranch for Co and Hrorian. A natural year-round mineral spring and a lake for fishing added to the value of the land as a dude ranch. Buttressed to the east of

Lonnie's land was what would be Cora's land. It had the promise of good farmland with fertile soil to grow her crops. There were other scattered plots of land about them but none as substantial as the three owners. After Cora's experience on her land, the three didn't want to be put in the underdog position of politics, therefore bought the greatest amount of land a single person could purchase, and grateful they could.

Cora listened to the girls as they talked excitedly of Lonnie's home. Pulling out pictures to show the entrance to Lonnie's rock castle, they laughed at Cora's expression.



"When you said you wanted to blend in with the scenery you weren't exaggerating," Cora said. "So, what do you tell visitors when you're giving directions? Find the cliff face with a tall tree on the right side of the doorway?"

"That's the landing bay for transportation vehicles," Lonnie said.

She shifted through some of the other pictures the girls had of the interior and of the land around the cliff.

"Here, check this out," she told Cora, sliding over a photo.

"Can you see where my place is, or should I say our place?" Lonnie asked.

Cora leaned closer to the picture looking for a hint.

"Where am I sleeping?" Cora asked mystified.

Lonnie laughed. "In a room fit for a princess, snug and warm and the view is gorgeous. You've always liked that view from the Maga Cliffs, now you have one similar. It snows heavily during the winter months and it's breezy most times. I can image how beautiful it is covered in snow. Because the residence is deep inside, I don't have to heat or cool the place. There's a natural water fall inside, and it flows onto your property, Cora. On the other side of this cliff is Maltieani and Jol's place. There's a collection of mineral springs that run along the cliffs. Herling believes there's more. It's great for their dude ranch." The more she spoke of her new home, the more she was looking forward to settling in.

"Just how isolated is this?" Cora asked.

"There's a town about an hour's drive from the castle by speeder," Lea, said.

"They have a movie house, some game rooms...not a safe place if you go alone, and a few places to shop but they don't have all that great a selection," Lin added.

"But you can order anything on The Galaxy Web," Libby mentioned. The other three nodded. "They make daily runs. Beshire's Floating City has a smaller satellite mall off Ballantine about two hours from here. Only we can't go."

The other three nodded their head in agreement. "Mom doesn't think ten-year olds should be hanging out at malls," Lin said with exaggerated seriousness.

"And we're not going to a mall with Mom hanging around us," Lea informed everyone solemnly.

The others gave a dramatic moan.

"So where is the hospital I'm working at?" Cora asked. The aerial view of the area around their land didn't show a town.

"It's small," Lea said.

"But it's going to get bigger," Lin said.

"Doctors and other people will go to school there," Liz said.

"You mean they're going to build a teaching hospital?" Cora asked.

The four nodded.

"They had a contest for design and..." Libby began.

"Da and Mom won," the four chorused. The girls grinned at each other.

"When is all this going to happen?" a worried Cora asked. Her intention was to work in a small hospital away from being accidentally spotted.

"Next year. Da said it's better to wait a year because a new wall design is coming out."

"Oh," Lonnie and Cora mouthed as if understanding fully.

"It generates its own energy," Lin explained.

"What happens if someone crashes into it?" Lonnie asked.

The girls looked at her puzzled. "Who's going to do that?"

"So, what's this room?" Cora asked pushing forward a picture of a wall that disappeared into a ceiling of darkness.

"It's the climbing cavern," Lea said.

"Brother fell off it when he was testing it out."

"Monte was lucky he had a soft fall," Libby said seriously.

"He fell on da," Lea giggled. They then all broke into fits of hysterics.

Herling came back to see what the laughing was about.

"How is everyone doing? It'll only take us a day but you all must be tired."

"A day? I thought it was longer than that." Cora glanced at the star chart on the bulkhead.

"We're using the jump gate at Orian so we can cut our journey by days. Leuwig's brother is manager of the gate and gives us a family discount."

Lonnie nodded. "I could use a few hours of sleep time."

"A nap would be nice," Cora agreed.

"Can we play with your dogs?" Libby asked.

"If they don't mind it," Cora smiled. "But make sure they get plenty of water. Like us they get dehydrated in space."

"Where are they going to go to the..." one sister started and looked at her siblings. They all giggled.

"Take them to the second bay where M'boto is. We have stacks of grass for one of our projects. Leuwig saw a good deal and thought of a great place for it in your stone castle," she explained to Lonnie.

"I was curious how you got some of the plants cleared for importation," Lonnie said as she walked with Herling to their quarters.

"Each planet has a list of what they will allow imported. Some want you to bring fresh saplings or what they already have only a new strain. Bugs get used to what's on the planet and decimate entire groves. All the plants we bring have been passed by the import inspectors at the beginning of the trip and then tested again on our arrival. Between transporting one set of plant life to another, the ship is debugged."

"So, we have nothing to worry about."

Herling smiled. "You wanted ten different types of apple trees, sixteen variation of *the* bean, twenty..."

Lonnie held up her hands laughing. "Okay, so you had to order from a lot of other planets."

"It wasn't a problem. The Terrian 4S agriculture board passed them all with excitement. They don't have any of the varieties you wanted to plant, and they are more than happy that someone wants to grow them. Remember, this planet is just a baby. The authorities are determined not to sacrifice the wonders of nature that will attract tourists for the sake of developers. They want to keep large open tracts of land between each city and town. They also have limits on the size of farms and ranch land that each individual or company can have in each area, not wanting to have too many animals in one space. Pollution."

"Exactly why I chose to live here." Lonnie nudged Cora. "You'll love the land I purchased for you. Tomorrow I'll sign over the land to you under your new legal name, and I'll purchase more land. Sheri bought land also, so between the four of us, we'll pretty much be able to preserve a large area against land grabbers or city planners."

Cora reached over and held Lonnie's hand. "I really appreciate all that you're doing for me. I don't know how you managed to get all the legal stuff done so fast but thanks."

"It wasn't just me. And I owe you so much, Cora. You've given me a haven of peace and quiet for so many years. I'm happy to be able to return the favor."

"Well, here's your quarters for a short time." Herling waved them in. "It bunks four in a pinch. A bit small but I'm sure Lonnie is used to it. It's only for sleeping not for socializing as you notice."

Cora smiled. "I remember my time aboard a liner. It's okay for a short time. Where's the lo?"

Lonnie opened a small door. "Here's shower and lo." She pointed to the seat and the hose attached to the wall.

"I can't wait to get to your place," Cora said. "At least we can bathe in the river. Are you going to be able to adapt from your previous residence? Where was it again?"

Lonnie smiled. "The house I shared with Shari was a house built into the cliff that overlooked the ocean. You could feel the waves crash against the cliff. I can't wait to see what winters will be like here."

"Warmer than in Ambleton, I hope. If I'm changing planets, then the weather needs to be less harsh," Cora mentioned. "Did you notice that you have this thing for cliffs?" Cora dropped into a bunk. "Just give me two hours," she whispered and fell asleep.

Lonnie lay down but it took a longer time to go to sleep as she thought of her new home.

End

To be continued in Leona Bestolie - #6 Home