

EARTH  
GIRL



Janet Edwards

# EARTH GIRL



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# Chapter One

It was on Wallam-Crane day that I finally decided what I was going to do for my degree course Foundation year. I'd had a mail about it from Issette that morning. It showed her jumping up and down on her bed in her sleep suit, waving a pillow, and singing: "Make your mind up, Jarra! Do it! Do it! Make up, make up, make up your mind girl!" She was singing it to the tune of the new song by Zen Arrath. Issette is totally powered on him, but I don't think much of his legs.

Issette is my best friend. We're both 17 and we'd been in Nursery together, and had neighbouring rooms all through Home and Next Step. She'd put in her application for the Medical Foundation course months ago. Issette is organized and reliable. I'm not. Most of my other friends had made their decisions too, except for Keon who was planning to do absolutely nothing. He'd been doing that all through school and I had to admit he was good at it.

I didn't fancy being another Keon, so I had to decide what to do, and I had to do it fast. The deadline for applying for courses was the day after the holiday.

Wallam-Crane day is a holiday on Earth, just like on all the other worlds, but in the circumstances we don't have celebration parties the way they do. Thaddeus Wallam-Crane invented the portal and gave humanity the stars, but we on Earth are the one in a thousand who missed out when he created the ticket to the universe.

One of my private fantasies is inventing a time machine and travelling back in time nearly six hundred and fifty years to 15 November 2142. I would then strangle Wallam-Crane at birth. If it wasn't for him, I'd be normal instead of labelled a nean, a throwback. Yes, I'm one of them. The polite people would call me Handicapped, but you can call me ape girl if you like. The name doesn't change anything. My immune system can't survive anywhere other than Earth. I'm in prison, and it's a life sentence.

If you're still scanning this, I expect it's just out of shock that an ape girl can write. "Amaz! Totally zan!" you will cry to your friends in disbelief, but you know that I'm just the same as you really. It could have been you here on Earth, and me travelling between worlds, if only the dice had fallen

differently. When you have a baby, it could turn out like I did, and have to be portalled to Earth in minutes or it dies.

My psychologist says you people are scared of us. He says that's why you call us names and have your little superstitions. We see it all on the vids. Portalling between worlds late in pregnancy turns the baby into a nean. Don't eat Karanth jelly when you're pregnant or the baby will be an ape. The latest scare is plastered all over the newzies, and everyone throws out their Karanth jelly, and it makes no difference at all.

It's all rubbish. The best scientists have been researching this for hundreds of years and they still don't have a clue. Every other handicap can be screened out or fixed, but not this one. Whether you eat Karanth jelly or not, it can get your baby just the same way it got me. Maybe they'll find a cure one day, but with my luck I bet I'm dead by then. I expect I'll die the day beforehand, so fate can enjoy a last big laugh at my expense.

My psychologist also says I still have a lot of unresolved bitterness and anger. He's right. You've probably already noticed it. I was feeling especially bitter on 15 November 2788. I was due to meet Candace in half an hour and tell her my decision on my course, my career, my whole future life. I still hadn't made up my mind, and really needed to do some hard thinking. Naturally, I was avoiding doing that by watching the vid.

The vid info channels were all packed with special anniversary programmes. Half of them were showing that old footage of the first experiment that everyone has seen a thousand times. Wallam-Crane smirks at the camera and says: "One small step for a man, one giant leap for humanity." Do you know he stole that line from the first moon landing? Do you even know that they went to the moon by rocket long before they portalled there? Probably not. Well, that's a fascinating bit of pre-history for you, totally free of education tax.

The rest of the info channels were either showing bits about the first interstellar portals, or the Exodus century that emptied Earth. I switched to the vid ent channels, but they were all showing vid stars getting drunk or powered at huge parties. I spotted the male lead out of that new vid series *Defenders*. Arrack San Domex. Now there's a man with good legs. I'm a big fan of those scenes where he's looking sexy and heroic in his tight-fitting Military uniform, saving humanity from the mythical menacing aliens that we still haven't discovered. I stopped a moment to listen.

". . . great tragedy that genius Thaddeus Wallam-Crane died so young, before he could even portal to another planet himse . . ."

I turned off the vid before Arrack could demonstrate his stupidity any further. Nice legs, not much on the brain cells. I shouted my frustration at the blank screen. “Don’t you know that the genius was already 64 when he got that first portal working? He didn’t die young; he lived to celebrate his hundredth! It took them another hundred years before anyone portalled to another habitable planet. Work out how old he would have needed to be to go there, nardle brain!”

It annoys me so much when people don’t know their history. I have a passion for facts and . . .

Yes, I admit it. I’d known what course I’d take all along. You’ve probably already seen I’m a natural historian. I was just rebelling against it because being a historian is like giving in to what fate has done to me. Everyone knows Earth is for the triple H: Hospital. History. Handicapped. There are other careers you can follow on Earth—we need the entire infrastructure any world has—but our two big speciality areas are medicine and history.

So it boiled down to this. I could be a dutiful stereotype Handicapped and become a historian, or I could rebel by not studying something I loved. Great choice. Then I thought of a third possibility. I could do it if I was crazy enough or angry enough. I was grinning like a maniac as I went out of my room and headed down to the portal in the entrance hall.

I met Candace in the huge tropical bird dome of Zoo Europe. They have an even bigger one in Zoo Africa of course, but cross continent portalling is more expensive than local and you hit time zone problems. You probably didn’t know that, since Earth is the only world with more than one inhabited continent. Another tax-free fact for you.

Candace was sitting on the bench by the guppy pool. I sat next to her, and for a moment we just watched the tiny shimmering crimson, electric blue, and emerald tails of the male guppies as they showed off to the drab females. Overhead, there were flashes of iridescent feathers from birds in flight. I loved this place, with its rampaging plants, humid jungle smells, and the constant bird song. Candace and I had been meeting here for years and I still never tired of it.

“So, I suppose you’re still thinking things over,” Candace said. “I hate to nag, but we have to get your application in by tomorrow.”

“You can nag,” I said. “You’re my ProMum. It’s your job.”

I bet you’ve never heard of a ProMum. ProParents are what you get if your real parents don’t want to know about a Handicapped baby. In 92 per cent of cases, it takes parents less than a day to register consent to make their

embarrassing throwback a ward of Hospital Earth, give notice to dissolve their marriage or other relationship, and head in opposite directions while each screaming the throwback genes belonged to the other party.

My parents were in the 92 per cent. I'd had the right to attempt contact with them when I was 14, but I hadn't bothered. The exos threw me away, and I sure as chaos wasn't chasing after them and begging!

I used the exo word there. Us apes call people like you "norms" when we're being polite, and "exos" when we're not. I don't feel I have to be polite about parents who dumped me.

I mentioned that my psychologist thinks I still have a lot of unresolved bitterness and anger, didn't I?

Instead of parents, I have Candace for two hours a week. She is ProMum to ten of us. I don't know who the others are and I don't want to. I also don't want to know about her own kids. She must have experienced at least one serious relationship, and have at least one child of her own, because it's a prerequisite for being a ProParent.

So, I know about all the kids who are my competition, but I prefer to ignore them and think of Candace as being mine and mine alone. She may only be mine for two hours a week, but unlike all the other adults that come and go in my life, Candace is two hours a week for ever. ProParents are for life. She'll be there to advise me when I get into a relationship, or have kids of my own, or strangle Wallam-Crane at birth. I have a ProDad too, and he was great until I got to be about 11. Since then we haven't got on so well.

I've run into a couple of the kids with real parents who moved to Earth to take care of them. I think I prefer ProParents really. They only bother to make you do something if it's really important, and if you're in trouble they're like superheroes. I mean, seriously, they have huge powers. If they suspect one of their kids is being badly treated, ProParents can wade in, claim advocate authority, and get Homes inspected, closed, anything they want. They can walk right into the board meeting of Hospital Earth if they feel it's necessary. Now that really is totally zan!

It's always been nice to know Candace had that sort of power and was on my side. I'd never needed her to use her authority before, but given what I was planning I might need it now.

It was time to break the news to her. I took it by gentle stages. "I want to go history, so I need to start with Pre-history Foundation Year."

"Well done," said Candace. "You've been working towards it for years, and it's obviously right for you, but the way you've been delaying the deci-

sion had me worried. I was afraid you'd have one of your moods and bite off your own nose by choosing something else. I've got your application ready; we just need to submit it."

"It could be a bit more complicated than that," I said. "I want to apply to an off-world university."

Candace closed her eyes for a few seconds. I swear she even stopped breathing. Finally she opened her eyes again. "We aren't going back to the denial phase are we? You went through the whole thing about how they must have made a mistake in your case, just like all the kids do. You elected to take up your option to portal off world on your fourteenth birthday. You went into anaphylactic shock, the medical team shipped you back, and you took a week to recover. Surely you remember that."

"Yes," I said. I'd been dying. I'd been terrified. It wasn't something I'd ever forget.

"Then you know it's not a mistake. If you go off world, you'll die. You can't go to an off-world university!"

"But I don't have to go off world." I grinned crazily. "All Pre-history Foundation Year courses are held on Earth. I can transfer back to University Earth after that for the main degree."

She tried all the sensible arguments. "University Earth does exactly the same Foundation course. They use the same facilities, the same dig sites, and the teaching is as good or better."

I kept grinning. "I want a course run by an off-world university."

"You're guaranteed to get a place on a University Earth course. You need the right grades to get on an off-world course."

"I have great grades, you know that."

"What about cost? Any education you want is free here but . . ."

Yes, I get educated free. Are you jealous? Being an ape has certain advantages. We get guaranteed places to study anything we want, and we never have to pay education tax at the end of it. We get a guaranteed job in whatever field we like. If we don't want to work we have a guaranteed basic income. That's how my friend Keon was planning to live—by lazing around for the rest of his life. Every inhabited world contributes generously to care for the rejects of humanity. It's guilt money to ease their consciences. You lot pay up, so you can dump your reject babies on Earth and then forget about them.

"Does it actually say anywhere that my free education is limited to University Earth and not any other university?" I asked.

"I'll have to check. No one has ever thought it relevant so . . ." Candace was clearly cracking in the face of my determination. "You do realize that the other students will be . . . difficult. They may not like you being on their course. Is that the idea? You want to vent your anger?"

"That's not the idea. Not to start with anyway. I don't want them to know what I am. I want them to think I'm one of them. Normal."

"You *are* normal, Jarra. If you'd been born before the invention of the portal, no one would ever have known there was a problem with your immune system."

This fact was recited to me regularly. I was normal. I wasn't to think of myself as a reject. I was to value myself. All the irritating repetition achieved was to make me briefly try fantasizing about being born six hundred years ago. Then I remembered all the wars and famines in pre-history, decided I preferred modern civilisation, and went back to fantasizing about strangling Wallam-Crane.

I shook my head at Candace. "People keep saying that to me. My psychologist says it, you say it, but you're Handicapped too so it doesn't help. I need the normal people to say it. I want to go on this course and have the real people think I'm one of them. It doesn't matter if I don't manage it for a whole year, even a few days would work. That would really mean I'm worth something."

There was more to it than that. At the end, when I'd fooled them all into thinking I was a real person like them, then I was planning to tell them what I was. One of the neans, one of the people whose existence they ignored, had forced herself into their cosy little lives. I could watch the shock and embarrassment in their eyes, when they realized they'd been fooled into thinking a throwback was one of them. I could yell at them, let out all the anger and resentment, and walk away laughing. It didn't seem a bright idea to tell Candace about that bit of my plan though.

"If this would help you value yourself at last . . ." Candace sat there thinking this through. "It would be hard to fool the other students, Jarra, but you won't even get the chance to try. Your application will come from an Earth school, and they'll know what that means. Children born here without the condition commute to off-world schools, and their applications come from those."

Yes, I know you're staggering at the thought of the expense of portalling between worlds every day just to go to school. It's true though. Even if both parents are Handicapped, nine out of ten of their kids will be able

to portal off world. The guilt money of humanity pays for them to portal to normal schools to aid their assimilation into “real society.”

Did you know, at one time they tried swapping babies? They took away the normal baby of Handicapped parents and gave them a Handicapped baby from off-world instead. They did it by force. I bet they never taught you that in your off-world school. My psychologist says I should forget about it because it generates hostility, but you shouldn't forget history; you should learn from it.

“The staff may know,” I said, “but that's my personal data!”

“You're right!” Candace was in ProMum mode now, fighting for her kid's rights. “Staff can only access personal data for professional purposes. Your school's planet of origin implies your handicap; therefore it has the same protection status as medical data. We can make that clear on your application. The staff may know, but it's professional misconduct if they tell the students. What university do we go for?”

“Errr . . . Asgard.” I picked it at random because it was the home planet of that nardle-brained vid star I had a crush on. Arrack San Domex. The one with the legs.

“Asgard . . .” Candace took her lookup from her pocket and typed a question. Data flooded the screen and she nodded. “That's a high-rated history department. Good choice.”

It was, was it? “Are my grades good enough? Will I get in? Should I pick somewhere easier?”

“You have great grades, Jarra, and your relevant experience section can't be beaten. You've visited more history sites in a year than their other applicants will have visited in their life time. I'd bet most of them have never even set foot on Earth. If they turn you down, they had better be able to prove every student on that course has better grades or I'll file a legal challenge from Hospital Earth on behalf of their ward.”

“Yay!” I just love having a ProMum with super powers on my side.

“As for the cost . . . It won't be more than if you go to University Earth. If anyone argues, then I'll take it as high as necessary to get it authorized.”

I got a lot more than my statutory two hours of Candace that day, because we sent off my application. When University Asgard got back to work after the holiday, they were going to have a shock waiting for them. They were the first off-world university to ever get an application from an ape student, and they were going to have to accept me or Candace would go legal and tear them to shreds.