

EARTH
STAR

Also by Janet Edwards

Earth Girl

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an imprint of Prometheus Books
Amherst, NY

Published 2014 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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First published in 2013 by Harper Voyager, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London W6 8JB.

Cover photo © Himitsuhana

Cover design by Nicole Sommer-Lecht

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18 17 16 15 14 • 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Edwards, Janet, 1958-

Earth star / Janet Edwards.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-61614-897-3 (hardback)

ISBN 978-1-61614-898-0 (ebook)

1. Children with disabilities—Abuse of—Fiction. I. Title.

PR6105.D825E29 2014

823'.92—dc23

2013040057

Printed in the United States of America

PROLOGUE

Issette says I can go totally wild sometimes. We're both 18, and we were in Nursery together and had neighbouring rooms all through Home and Next Step, so Issette knows all the mad things I've done ever since I was two years old and locked evil Nurse Cass in the linen store room.

I did some crazy things at the start of 2789, and I wrote a book about it for the norms, the ones who can portal to any world in any sector, to tell them what it's like to be me. I'm among the one in a thousand who lost out during the roll of the genetic dice. We're the Handicapped, born with an immune system which can't survive anywhere other than on Earth. We get portalled there at birth to save our lives, and 92 per cent of parents turn their backs and walk away, leaving their reject kid to be raised as a ward of Hospital Earth. We're in prison and it's a life sentence.

I used the Handicapped word there. That's what the polite people call us, but others use words like ape, nean, and throwback. The Handicapped have a rude word for norms too. We call them exos, after the people who headed for the stars during Exodus century and left Earth to fall apart.

So, I wrote a book about how I lied my way into a class of off-world pre-history students who were on Earth for their compulsory year working in the ruins of the ancient cities. I convinced them I was a norm, fell in love, got caught up in the rescue of a crashed Military spacecraft during a solar super storm, and was awarded the Artemis medal.

When I stood in the middle of Earth Olympic Arena, with the Artemis medal on my shoulder, I thought that was the end of my story, but it turned out to be only the beginning of something much bigger. Military Security have stolen my first book and locked it away in some highly restricted section of Military records. They may eventually decide it's safe to let that much go public, but I'm absolutely sure they won't let people know the whole truth about what happened next. I'm still going to write about it though.

I know it sounds completely stupid to waste my time writing something that no one except stuffy generals will be allowed to scan, but I'm a history student and what happened is part of history now. In a few centuries time, another historian may be scanning this, finally learning the full truth behind the reassuring official announcements, and discovering the living and breathing people behind the names.

I'm Jarra Tell Morrath, I'm an Earth girl, and this is my story.

CHAPTER ONE

“Jarra, Jarra, Jarra!” Issette’s face on my lookup screen wore her best buggy-eyed, astonished expression, the one she’d been practising ever since we were in Nursery together. “Why are you calling me now? Isn’t it the middle of the night in Earth America?”

I giggled, set the lookup to project her image as a holo floating in midair, and sat on the edge of my bed facing it. Only Issette’s head and shoulders were visible, but that was enough for me to see she was wearing a scanty sleep suit with a trimming of glitter-strewn lace. Issette was on a Medical Foundation course in Earth Europe, the home of interstellar standard Green Time, so it wasn’t quite eight o’clock in the morning there.

“I’m not at the New York ruins any longer. My class has just moved to Earth Africa, so I’m on Green Time plus two hours.”

Issette yawned. “Why didn’t you choose something civilized for your Foundation course? You could have stayed in one place and had proper accommodation, instead of moving round dig sites and being wedged into primitive domes with a lecturer and twenty-nine other students. You even have to share bathrooms. It’s not hygienic!”

I didn’t reply, just pulled a face at her. Issette was my best friend. I’d explained to her hundreds of times how much I loved history, especially the days of pre-history when humanity had only existed here on Earth instead of being scattered across more than a thousand planets in six different sectors. I’d told her about the thrill of excavating the ruins of the ancient cities, never knowing whether you’d find a stasis box containing treasures from the past, or clues to the knowledge and technology that humanity lost in the mad rush off world in Exodus century and the resulting Earth data net crash. Issette never really understood, any more than I understood her interest in medicine.

She groaned. “I know, I know. You’re obsessed with history and dig sites. You always were and . . . Wait a minute. If it’s ten o’clock in Earth Africa, shouldn’t you be doing something hideously dangerous and uncomfortable on a dig site, or listening to some boring lecture? You keep telling me your lecturer is a slave-driver.”

I grinned. “We should be, but Lecturer Playdon had to delay starting work. He’s lost twenty-six of the class.”

A disembodied hand appeared in the holo image, offering a glass of fruit, and Issette grabbed it and started gulping it down. The hand withdrew and was replaced by Keon's head.

"How does a lecturer lose twenty-six students, Jarra?" he asked. "I know you're in a class of off-worlders, but surely even they can stroll through an inter-continental portal to Africa without getting lost."

I was grazed at the sight of him. Keon and Issette were part of my substitute family; the nine of us who'd grown up together through Nursery, Home and Next Step after being abandoned at birth by our parents because we were Handicapped. We'd all turned 18 last Year Day, and these days Keon and Issette had a Twoing contract, so I wasn't surprised to find them together. My shock was because of Keon's clothes.

"Why is the legendarily lazy Keon Tanaka awake and properly dressed before eight in the morning?" I asked. "Those are new clothes, aren't they? You've even combed your hair!"

He groaned. "That's your fault, Jarra. Issette wants me to show my light sculptures to someone."

I frowned. "I don't see how that's my fault."

"She was copying the way you order everyone around, so it was less effort to agree than to keep arguing with an imitation Jarra. I don't know how your boyfriend stands it."

I was indignant. "I don't order anyone around, and especially not Fian!"

"Of course you do; now answer my question."

I've learnt over the years that arguing with Keon is a bad idea. Most of the time, he ignores you. The rest of the time, he comes out with a single devastating sentence that proves he's about ten times smarter than you are. Like the time our scary science teacher at school ranted at him for fifteen solid minutes for not doing his homework, and he finally yawned and said he'd been confused by the difference between the fundamental equation of portal physics stated by Wallam-Crane back in 2200, and the one she'd written at the start of the homework. Then he asked if it was simply a mistake, or if she'd made a key discovery that contradicted all the portal theories accepted by every scientist for nearly six hundred years.

It's much more fun to watch that sort of thing than to be Keon's target, so I didn't argue, but it took me a second to remember what his question had been. "Oh, the lost students. When we left New York, we had four days break before starting work here, so most of the class portalled off world to visit their families. We were all supposed to arrive at our new dig site dome

between seven yesterday evening and ten this morning Earth Africa time. Fian and I were the only ones to show up yesterday, and only Lolia and Lolmack have arrived so far today. It's weird. When Fian and I went into the hall for breakfast, we were expecting everyone to be there, but it was just like the Marie Celeste."

"The what?" asked Issette.

"A famous mystery from back in the days of pre-history. They found a ship, the Marie Celeste, in mid-ocean about nine hundred years ago. It was in a perfect state but the crew were missing and . . ." I stopped talking because Issette had her fingers in her ears.

"Bad, bad, Jarra," she said. "No history lectures!"

I sighed. "I wasn't lecturing. I was explaining. Anyway, Lecturer Playdon says he can't start classes for at least a couple of hours. Fian's gone to the store room to pick out the best impact suit in his size before the rest of the class arrive. I don't need to do that because I've got my own suit, so I thought I'd give you a proper call for once instead of just exchanging mail messages. I couldn't risk leaving it any later because you'd be doing your horrible medical things."

Issette nodded. "My class has started our three weeks practical introduction to regrowth and rejuvenation techniques. They showed us someone in a tank yesterday and I fainted. They were regrowing his kidneys, so they had his stomach open and . . ."

I shuddered and used her own complaint ritual against her. "No! No gory medical lectures. Bad, bad, Issette."

She giggled. "Half the class fainted. Our lecturer says we'll get used to it." She turned to Keon. "You'd better get back to your own room and set up your laser light sculptures. You mustn't be late for this."

He sighed. "Work. Work. Work. I don't know why I signed up for a Twoing contract with you."

Issette gave him a wicked grin. "You go and be nice to that man. Remember what I promised if you do this properly."

I didn't dare to speculate about what Issette had promised, but it must have been good because Keon actually did as he was told. Once he was out of the room, Issette turned her attention back to me.

"So, what did you do during your four day break?" She pouted. "You didn't come and visit us."

I groaned. "I couldn't. You know Fian's parents came to Earth for the medal ceremony last week?"

“Yes. I saw them talking to you and Fian afterwards.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get the chance to talk to you as well.”

She grinned. “Well of course you had to pose for the vid bees so Earth Rolling News could take their pictures. I was utterly, utterly grazed! You’d told me all the archaeologists involved in rescuing the Military from the crashed spaceship were going to get a new medal, the Earth Star, so I knew you and Fian would both get that, but you didn’t say a word about the Artemis! Were you sworn to secrecy?”

“Sworn to secrecy? I didn’t know anything about it! When Fian and I went up and got our Earth Stars, I thought that was it. When the Military called the injured tag leaders up again at the end to give us the Artemis . . . Well, if you were grazed, think how I felt.”

“It was totally zan!” Issette’s face radiated her delight.

“It was.” I paused for a moment to indulge myself with the memory. The Artemis, the highest Military honour, had been awarded to civilians for the first time. I was one of the despised Handicapped, born with a faulty immune system that meant I could only survive on Earth, but I was also one of only eleven living people entitled to wear the Artemis medal. It was an amaz thought.

“Anyway,” I continued, “Fian’s parents said they’d stay on Earth until our four day break started, so Fian could go back with them to Hercules. Fian said he wanted to stay on Earth with me, but they were really disappointed.”

Issette frowned. “So what happened? Did he go or . . . ?”

“He stayed with me. Fian can be incredibly stubborn.”

Her frown vanished. “That’s good.”

I shook my head. “Not entirely. His parents decided to stay on Earth with us during our break.”

“Noooo!” Issette ran her fingers through her frizzy hair. “Was it dreadful?”

“Well, they did their best to be friendly, but . . .”

“But?”

I sighed. “They were being far too carefully polite all the time, and there were a lot of awkward silences. They said some nice things to me, but . . .”

Issette wrinkled her nose. “You don’t think they meant them?”

I tried to be fair about the situation. “It’s not surprising they’re unhappy about their son having a Handicapped girlfriend. I can’t leave Earth, which means Fian’s tied to Earth as well.”

“Fian doesn’t seem to think that’s a problem,” said Issette. “He says he wants to specialize in pre-history and spend a lot of time on Earth anyway.”

“Fian may think that, but his parents must feel it’s already causing trouble. If I’d been a norm, we could have all gone to Hercules for a few days. And it’s not just the practical problems, it’s the stigma. Fian’s parents politely call me Handicapped, but what do their friends say to them? Their son has a Twoing contract with an ape, a nean, a throwback. That must be horribly embarrassing for them, so naturally they wish he’d picked a norm girl instead.”

Issette pulled a face. “So what did you do during the break? You were stuck with Fian’s parents the whole time?”

I nodded. “The four of us visited lots of places. Stonehenge. Pompeii. The Spirit of Man monument. The Wallam-Crane Science Museum. The Green Time exhibition at Greenwich.”

Issette groaned. “It sounds like a list of our most boring school trips.”

“I didn’t mind Stonehenge and Pompeii, but we spent an entire day at the Wallam-Crane Science Museum, including four ghastly hours looking at the technical displays on the history of portal development. Fian’s parents do some sort of scientific research at University Hercules, so they were fascinated, and Fian seemed to understand it all, but you know me and science.”

She nodded. Issette knew exactly how much I hated science lessons at school, because she’d sat next to me during them and suffered my constant moaning. “My poor Jarra.”

“If I ever get my hands on a time machine . . .”

She grinned. “I know. You’d go straight back to 2142 and strangle Wallam-Crane at birth so he can’t invent the portal. You’re always saying that. It’s a stupid idea, you nardle brain! Would you really want to have to drive everywhere on hover sleds, instead of portalling around Earth?”

I giggled. “Maybe not. I like ordinary portals. It’s just the interstellar ones that . . . Anyway, the worst bit was staying in the hotel.”

“What’s wrong with a hotel? Surely it was nice to have your own bathroom for a change.”

“I may be obsessed with history, but you’ve got obsessed with bathrooms since you started your Medical Foundation course.”

“Bathrooms are very important,” she said. “Do you know how many different sorts of bacteria live in the human digestive tract?”

“No, and don’t you dare tell me! The problem with the hotel was that Fian’s from a planet in Delta sector.”

Issette gave me a look of total incomprehension. “So?”

“Everyone knows planets in Beta sector are the most sexually permissive. Gamma sector customs are similar to Earth, but Delta sector is really strict.”

Issette caught up with what I meant. “You couldn’t share a room with Fian?”

“Share a room? I’m surprised his parents allowed us to have rooms in the same hotel! We couldn’t even hug each other.”

“Things can’t really be that prudish in Delta sector. Fian’s always seemed very . . . affectionate to you.”

I grinned. “Fian’s an incredibly badly-behaved Deltan, but his parents are traditionalists. Since we’re only on our first three-month Twoing contract, they barely approved of us holding hands. Fian said it would save arguments if we followed their rules while they were around.”

Issette rolled her eyes up towards the ceiling as she pulled an expressive face of disbelief. “And you were happy with that?”

“Not exactly happy, but I don’t want to cause trouble between Fian and his parents. I’ve no idea what it’s like to have a real family, and it’s hard to discuss it with Fian because . . .” I shook my head. “You understand.”

Issette gave me a sympathetic look. The parent issue was as emotionally explosive for her as it was for me. A few brave parents move to Earth to be with their Handicapped child, but most never even consider it. They just hand the throwback over to be a ward of Hospital Earth and forget about the whole embarrassing affair.

Kids like Issette and me grow up knowing we’re rejects, envying the children we see in the off-world vids who have real families. Most of us spend our time in Home dreaming of the day we’ll be 14, and have the option to get information on our parents and try to contact them. We have wildly unrealistic fantasies about how they’ll regret dumping us and want us back. By the time we’re actually 14, we know exactly how unlikely that is to happen, but most of us can’t let go of the hopeless dream and still go ahead and try to make contact.

Issette was a classic case. She was desperate for acceptance and a real family, so she contacted her parents, but she just got more rejection. I was the opposite extreme, much too bitter at 14 to take up my option. I didn’t want acceptance from my parents, I wanted revenge for the way they’d abandoned me. When I was 18, I decided to get that revenge by pretending I was a norm and joining a class of off-world history students who were on

Earth to work in the ruins of the ancient cities. My idea was to prove I was just as good as they were, then tell them I was an ape girl. I'd laugh at their shocked faces, scream my anger at them, and walk away. That didn't work out as planned, because I discovered the off-worlders, the exos, weren't as bad as I thought.

That was when I finally took up my option to get information about my parents. I found out they were Military, so when I was born they had to decide whether they should abandon their Military careers and come to Earth with me. I don't know what they'd have done if I'd been their first child, but they had two older kids so . . .

So, yes, they'd dumped me, but when I contacted them . . . Eighteen years of anger at their rejection. Eighteen years of refusing to let myself indulge in nardle hopes like the other kids. Eighteen years of pretending I didn't care. It had all culminated in the happy ending all ape kids dreamed of, but so few actually got. My parents had wanted to know me, had been going to come to Earth to meet me. It had been more than amaz, and beyond zan, and then the dream was shattered by a Military General calling to tell me they'd died trying to open up a new colony world for humanity.

Any mention of my parents still started a whole mess of raw emotions churning round inside me. Not just about their death, and the dream of having a family that had died with them, but about my Handicap and the Military career I could never have because I couldn't leave Earth. Fian and I were carefully avoiding the whole subject. I'm never any good at discussing emotional stuff, and Fian seemed scared to push the issue after the way I'd reacted in the past.

I couldn't face talking about this with Issette any more than with Fian, so I was relieved when the door opened at this point. Fian came in carrying a black impact suit. His long blond hair was in such a mess that I guessed he'd tried on half a dozen of the protective suits to see which fitted best. He saw the floating holo image and stopped to wave.

"Hello, Issette."

Issette waved back at him. "I must go now. I need to get dressed and check Keon is ready to give his demonstration. Wish us luck."

"Good luck." Fian and I obediently chorused the words.

Issette's image vanished as she ended the call, and Fian looked at me in confusion. "Good luck with what?"

"I'm not sure. Issette's talked Keon into showing his light sculptures to someone."

Fian shrugged and changed the subject. "Dalmora's back."

Fian and I were both members of our class dig team 1, and the other three members of the team, Dalmora, Amalie and Krath, were our closest friends. "What about Amalie and Krath?" I asked.

Fian shook his head. "Dalmora's the only one so far."

He hung up his impact suit and combed his hair back into a semblance of order, then we headed out of our grey flexiplas walled room, and along a grey flexiplas corridor to the grey flexiplas hall, which was the only room in the dome that could hold more than half a dozen people. We found Dalmora there, an anxious expression on her beautiful dark face, and her waist-long black hair uncharacteristically tangled, desperately apologizing to Lecturer Playdon.

"Normally I can just portal to Danae Off-world, walk up to an interstellar portal and dial Earth. This morning there were huge queues. There were block portal windows scheduled for the most popular planet destinations, but nothing for Earth, so I had to wait in the main queue for over three hours before I . . ."

Lecturer Playdon gave up waiting for a chance to speak and firmly interrupted her. "Calm down, Dalmora. I got your message explaining the delay, and anyway you're the first one back."

"Really? I saw Lolia in the corridor."

"Lolia and Lolmack stayed on Earth to spend time with their Handicapped baby," said Playdon. "Fian and Jarra stayed here as well, of course, and I was visiting friends at the New Tokyo Dig Site. You're the first to get back from off world. Apparently, there are major delays on all interstellar and cross-sector portal traffic."

"Oh." Dalmora seemed to relax a bit.

"Earth is in the centre of Alpha sector, so you just needed an interstellar portal," said Playdon. "The rest of the class are coming from planets in other sectors and will have to travel cross-sector to Alpha sector first. Amalie will have to portal cross-sector twice to get here from Epsilon sector, so I've messaged her to say I understand she'll be especially late."

Dalmora went off to her room, followed by a trail of bobbing hover bags, and Playdon turned on the huge wall vid at the end of the hall. The Earth Rolling News banner appeared above a scene of the Solar 5 spaceship lying in the bottom of a giant crater with its shields glowing against the rubble. The shields suddenly vanished, the escape hatches opened, and figures in Military blue impact suits started climbing out.

I groaned. “Not again! It’s been five weeks since the solar super storm and the rescue. I know Earth Rolling News don’t often get exciting news stories of their own, they mostly pick them up from the sector newzies, but really . . .”

Playdon laughed. “They started showing all the rescue coverage again after the medal ceremony. Haven’t you been watching yourself on the newzies, Jarra?”

“I’ve been avoiding them, sir. It’s embarrassing.” I saw the picture change to an image of Earth Olympic Arena, and cringed. First, there was a view of the audience, and then an image of five people, each wearing the Artemis medal on their shoulder. I was the one on the far left, trying to hide from the vid bees and failing. “Can we please change channel?”

Playdon seemed amused but changed to Gamma Sector News. After a sports report, it started showing massive queues of people.

“Serious congestion continues at all Off-worlds and Sector Interchanges. Portal Network Administration apologizes for portal delays due to limitations on traffic flow during an upgrade of the major portal relay hubs. They request people to postpone non-essential journeys where possible.”

Coverage swapped to a series of people complaining bitterly about how long they’d been waiting. Lecturer Playdon turned off the sound just as a bunch of eleven students from Asgard in Gamma sector entered the hall, followed by a whole fleet of their hover luggage. Our class was being run by University Asgard, so there were a lot of students from that planet.

Krath was at the front of the group, and he immediately burst into an outraged tirade. “You wouldn’t believe how long we were waiting at Asgard Off-world. Four hours! Our block portal got rescheduled twice because of congestion in Gamma Sector Interchange 6, and when we finally got there the cross-sector portal to Alpha was . . .” He finally noticed the images on the wall vid and trailed off with a disappointed air. “Oh, you know.”

Playdon nodded. “I suggest you go and unpack. I won’t be starting classes until everyone’s back, so you’ve plenty of time.”

The new arrivals went off to unpack and Fian took out his lookup. “I’ll call my parents and check they got back to Hercules safely.”

“You do that,” I said. “I’ll go and finish my unpacking.”

I hurried off. I’d done all my unpacking, but I’d just suffered four solid days of Fian’s parents and didn’t want to smile dutifully while he called them. Once I was in the corridor, I nearly bumped into one of the arrivals from Asgard. She gave me a look of pure disgust.

"I see the ape girl is back. That explains the bad smell around here."

I bit my lip. I'd barely noticed Petra's existence at the start of this course, but I'd certainly noticed her since my classmates found out I was Handicapped. Once they got over the initial shock, most of them treated me just the same as when they thought I was a norm. Not Petra though. She'd gradually persuaded several of her friends from Asgard to join her in a campaign of furtive insults. Her plan was to make the throwback girl leave the class, but I wasn't going to be driven out by a few nasty words. I kept the problems to a minimum by avoiding the ape-hating clique, so I tried stepping sideways to walk past Petra.

She promptly dodged sideways herself to block my way. "You shouldn't be here. You should be on a Foundation course run by University Earth like the rest of your kind!"

I tried moving to the other side, but Petra blocked me again. If I turned round and went back to the hall, she'd jeer at me for running away. I gave up the nardle dodging from side to side and faced her.

"I've as much right to be on this course as you. The only difference between us is my immune system can't cope with other worlds. That isn't a problem because this course spends the whole year here on Earth."

"Yes, the nuking rules for studying history say I have to waste a year on Earth before they'll let me learn the modern history that really matters. That's bad enough without being forced to share a dig site dome with one of you subhumans as well!"

I'd tried to stay calm, but now I was losing my temper. "Odd that you never noticed my subhuman looks and intelligence when we started this course. You believed I was a norm until you were told I was Handicapped. This course is governed by the Gamma sector moral code, which says you have to treat your fellow students with respect, so why don't you be a good little Gamman and leave me alone. If Playdon spots the way you're behaving, he'll hand you a bunch of formal conduct warnings."

"He should be giving you the conduct warnings," said Petra. "You lied to us when you joined this class. Pretended you'd been to a Military school and were human like the rest of us. You didn't even have the courage to tell us the truth yourself. You had to get Fian to do it for you."

"That wasn't my idea!"

Petra had hit a sore spot. While I was in a hospital regrowth tank, getting my leg fixed after the rescue of Solar 5, Fian decided to tell the class I was Handicapped. He refused to say exactly what happened then, but

people would obviously have been shocked and angry about the lies I'd told. Playdon would have kept things under control, but still . . .

Well, Fian faced the class for me back then, which was truly zan of him, but I'm the sort of person who prefers to fight their own battles rather than cower behind someone else. That was why I was hiding the Petra situation from him now. If he knew what was going on, he'd want to get involved and we'd start arguing. I wasn't in a regrowth tank now, Petra was my problem, not Fian's, and I'd deal with her.

"I'm surprised you haven't gone crying to Playdon yet," said Petra. "He's made it clear he's an ape lover. Of course, if you do go whining to him, it's just your word against several of us and . . ."

She broke off and turned to look down the corridor. I saw Joth was walking towards us and relaxed. Petra was far too cunning to say anything nasty in front of anyone except her fellow ape haters, so she'd have to shut up now.

Joth reached us and Petra turned to smile at him. "Smelly round here, isn't it? Why don't you tell the throwback to get out of our way?"

I stared at her in disbelief, and saw her smile widen. What was going on here? I turned to Joth and his eyes evaded mine.

"Get lost, ape," he said. "You should be kept outside in a cage so real people aren't bothered by the stink."

He brushed past me and hurried off down the corridor. I turned to gaze after him in disbelief. Back at the start of the course, Joth had done something incredibly stupid during an excavation and nearly injured me. Once I realized he was simply clueless at practical things, rather than a homicidal maniac out to deliberately kill me, we'd become friends, though I still felt he couldn't be trusted to pick up a knife and fork by the handles instead of the sharp ends. Joth had remained my friend even after he found out I was Handicapped, but now he'd . . .

My face must have given away my hurt feelings, because Petra gave a triumphant laugh. "Joth's asked me to Two with him."

She chased after Joth and he put his arm round her. The situation was brutally clear now. Joth and Petra were the heavy lift operators for team 4. They spent a lot of time together, and Joth had got involved with her. Either he was fool enough not to realize how nasty Petra was, or he knew what she was like and didn't care as long as he got to tumble her. It didn't matter which. Petra wanted Joth to insult me, so he'd done it. A friend had just become an enemy.

I retreated to the nearest bathroom, stripped off my clothes, and stepped into the shower. Comforting warm water poured over me while I thought things through. If Petra and Joth were Twoing, there was no hope of regaining Joth as a friend. I just had to accept the situation. The usual insults would have an extra painful sting when they came from Joth, but I'd cope with it. I was used to insults. I'd spent all my life watching the vids made on the sector worlds, never knowing when one of the characters would suddenly make a joke about dumb apes like me.

I had to forget Joth now. He was just another of the pathetic people calling me names. I should focus on the good things, on the friends who'd stuck by me when they found out I was Handicapped. Dig sites were dangerous places and I was tag leader for dig team 1, so I was the one standing in the middle of the excavation work and taking most of the risks. It was vital to be able to trust the other members of my team, and I'd been very lucky with all four of them.

I turned the shower to dry mode, and jets of air blasted at me while I fixed my thoughts on the people who'd forgiven my lies and accepted me as if I was another norm. Dalmora, our sensor sled operator, was the only Alphan in the class. When we first met, I'd expected her to be a spoilt brat, because she was the daughter of Ventrak Rostha, the famous maker of history vids. Instead, she was one of the kindest, most thoughtful people I'd ever known.

Amalie and Krath were our two heavy lift operators. Amalie was a quiet, solid, and totally dependable girl from a frontier world in Epsilon sector, and Krath . . . well, he could be a bit of a nardle socially, but he was good at practical things and an amaz heavy lift operator.

I'd been confident both Dalmora and Amalie would give me a chance when they knew I was Handicapped, but I'd expected the worst from Krath. His father helped run an amateur vid channel, *Truth Against Oppression*, and Krath had kept quoting his stupid conspiracy theories and nasty comments about apes. Once the class knew I was Handicapped, I'd been braced for insults from him, but he'd startled me by grinning and announcing that if Jarra was an ape, then apes were pretty good after all. When Krath bothered to think for himself, instead of repeating his father's ideas, there were definite signs of hope for him.

And then, most importantly of all, there was Fian. We weren't just Twoing; he was also my tag support, constantly watching for danger, ready to use his lifeline beam to snatch me to safety. Fian hadn't just accepted me;

he'd even said we could both transfer to a University Earth course if there was too much prejudice from the rest of the class. I was determined not to do that, because it would mess up our studies, but it proved Fian was truly zan.

I was dry now, so I stepped out of the shower. Yes, it would be nice if everyone accepted me as a real human being, and I wasn't the target of insults whenever I walked down a corridor alone, but that was never going to happen. I'd deliberately chosen to gatecrash a class of norms, I'd had the worst possible motives for doing it, and the current situation was far better than I deserved.

I got dressed again, headed back to the hall, and opened the door to find Krath standing in front of the big wall vid. He'd set it back to Earth Rolling News, and the picture showed dazzling white sparks streaking across an area of rubble. A lifeline beam yanked an impact suit clad figure out of their path, just as the sound of screaming sensor sled alarms was drowned by a loud explosion. There were people shouting and a female voice yelling in pain. That voice was mine.

For a second I was back in time, reliving the accident during the Solar 5 rescue that had earned me the Artemis medal. There was even a shooting pain in my leg. I dragged myself out of that, back to reality, and yelled at Krath.

"Turn that off!"

"What?" He gave me a wounded look. "I was just . . ."

"Turn it off, Krath." Playdon's voice interrupted him. "Jarra doesn't want to keep watching an accident where she was seriously injured."

"Sorry," said Krath. "I should have thought."

I shook my head. "No, I'm just being a nardle. I've seen that vid a dozen times already, so I shouldn't react this way."

The rest of the class gradually trickled into the dome during the afternoon, all making loud complaints about queues. Fian, Krath, and I spent a lot of time trying to talk sense into Dalmora, who was still worried about being late.

Krath shook his head. "It wasn't your fault. Why are you so upset about it?"

"On Danae, being late is considered a serious social failing," said Dalmora. "My family would be horrified to hear I'd been disrespectful to my lecturer and classmates by being late returning to my course."

We explained to Dalmora about ten times that Playdon understood it wasn't her fault and wouldn't complain to her family. We finally managed to divert her with a discussion into differences between the various sectors and planets.

"I've got a cousin on Jason in Gamma sector," said Krath. "I wore a green top when I went to visit him, and I wasn't allowed out of Jason Off-world until I changed into something else. They think green is a terribly unlucky colour."

"You should always look up a world's social conventions before you go there," said Dalmora. "It's terribly easy to make a mistake and upset someone. My father was dreadfully embarrassed on Persephone when . . ."

She broke off, and started a new sentence. "Jarra, Fian, I need to ask you something. My father plans to make a vid about the solar super storm and the rescue of Solar 5. He'd like to use some of the vid sequences actually taken during the rescue, and of course those show you both. Are you comfortable with that? I could ask my father not to use the coverage of Jarra's accident."

"You're the one who got hurt, Jarra," said Fian. "Your decision."

I was totally grazed. I'd been a fan of Ventrak Rostha's famous *History of Humanity* series for years. It was amaz to think I'd be included in one of his vids.

"Your father can use any sequences he likes, Dalmora," I said. "Ventrak Rostha including the accident in one of his history info vids is very different to seeing it constantly replayed on the newzies. I'd be honoured to . . ."

Krath interrupted me, standing up and hastily running his fingers through his dark brown hair in an ineffective attempt to tidy it. "Amalie's back!"

A hot and tired looking Amalie hurried into the hall, which meant the whole class had finally arrived. Playdon gave her a few minutes to have something to drink, before getting us to set up the chairs in orderly lines and going to stand at the front of the room.

"Welcome to Eden Dig Site in Earth Africa," he said. "I want to at least give you a brief introductory talk today before we stop classes for the evening. I will begin by repeating what I said when we started this course at New York Dig Site. All of humanity's worlds have been carefully selected and prepared to be safe for colonization by the Military Planet First teams. Every world except one. Earth wasn't entirely safe even in the days before Exodus century, but now some of the abandoned areas are highly dangerous."

He paused for a second for emphasis before continuing. "Construction methods and materials kept improving until the start of Exodus century, so the ruins of Eden are in a much better state than those of New York, but don't make the mistake of thinking that means they're safer. They aren't.

They're also in a much more dangerous area because the rainforest edge reached Eden forty years ago. There'll be a series of safety lectures before you can go outside the dome, but I'll begin with a basic introduction to Eden."

A holo image of a city appeared on the vid screen behind him, a glowing dream of a place with totally zan twisting skyscrapers linked with bridges across the sky. I'd seen vids of it before at school, but the beauty of it still stunned me. Playdon gave us a second to absorb the glorious sight before he continued speaking.

"Eden was built five hundred years ago. It was the last city built on Earth, and the last to be abandoned in Exodus century when . . ."

Playdon was interrupted by the sound of two lookups chiming to warn of emergency incoming mail. He sighed and looked round for the guilty parties. I realized one of the chimes had been mine, and fumbled for my lookup. Fian was grabbing for his as well. Playdon pulled a long-suffering face and pointedly drummed his fingers on his leg as he waited.

I read my mail in disbelief. "Oh nuke that!"

Playdon folded his arms and glared at me. He usually approved of me and Fian, because we truly loved history, but any lecturer would object to a student screaming the "nuke" word in the middle of a class. Despite Playdon's threatening body language, I spared a second to glance at Fian. He looked like he'd been hit in the face by a transport sled, so he must have got the same mail message as me.

"Jarra," said Playdon, "if you don't have an extremely good reason for that outburst, I must give you an amber warning under the Gamma sector moral code for using unacceptable language."

"Sir," I said, "I apologize. I was very shocked to hear . . . I respectfully request you to let me and Fian explain this to you somewhere private."

Playdon frowned and beckoned us to follow him out of the hall. Once outside in the corridor, he shut the door behind us. "Well?"

"Sir," I said, "we need to be very private. I'm ordered to remind you that as part of your training in dealing with stasis boxes you took the Security Oath."

Playdon looked grazed by that. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and led us down the corridor and into his own room. He gestured to us to sit down. "Well?" he repeated.

"Sir," I said, "this information is classified security code black. Alien Contact programme has been activated. Fian and I . . ."

"We've been drafted by the Military!" said Fian.

