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ACORNA'S TRIUMPH

THE BREATHTAKING CONCLUSION
TO THE ADVENTURES OF
THE UNICORN GIRL



**ANNE MCCAFFREY
AND ELIZABETH ANN
SCARBOROUGH**

ACORNA'S TRIUMPH



*In fond memory of Connie Johnson:
math teacher; bibliophile, adventuress, and friend*

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One

Acorna moaned. She struggled desperately to regain control of herself. As always, she was powerless. She could only watch as the room changed and the time portraits swirled around her like dervishes.

The white lights symbolizing Linyaari blurred, blinked out, returned. Vhiliinyar's panorama changed from lush to blighted, then became fertile again in a dizzying kaleidoscope of shape, color, time, and place. The images shifted to the deafening *boom-boom boom-boom boom-boom* of drumbeat.

It doesn't really move that fast, she thought in an oddly detached way. *And where are those drums coming from?*

Then she knew that the drumlike booming was the frenzied pounding of her own heart. Her blood seemed to be trying to leap out of her skin with each beat of her pulse. She struggled upright and reached for the door but something felt odd. She looked back to see herself still lying on the floor in the ancient time laboratory. *How strange,* she thought. Her hands twitched as she tried once more to rise. She had to get to the door.

Aari would be coming through it soon. Coming with her. And the danger. She could not remember what the danger was, but she knew it was something horrible and unexpected, even though she realized that she had been through this same sequence countless times during many other sleep cycles. She knew what the danger was. She just didn't remember it.

Didn't *want* to remember it.

But she had to. If only she could open the door quickly enough, get herself through it, get *him* inside, and close it fast enough and hard enough, the terrible thing wouldn't happen.

The room stopped spinning, and time stood still. She rose.

Where is the door? she thought. Then she thought, *What door?* She could see grass and river craters and furrows, mountains and trees, but no door. *But there has to be a door...*

And then she walked through the wall, coming into the room. She wore a shipsuit and helmet and she was covered in something green and slimy. Right behind her came Aari.

That was it. That was when she had to shut the door. *But there was no door,* she thought. She struggled to reach out again, but then realized she was still lying on the floor.

Klik-klak, klik-klack. The sound entered the room with her ship-suited self and Aari. It was like the beating of her heart, but a different tone. Its volume increased, and the regular beat quickened and loosened into an overwhelming cacophony of *klikity-klak-klakklikity-klak-klakings*.

She reached for Aari. He didn't seem to see her. He turned and raised his arms.

~~Behind him, Khleevi swarmed into the room, their mandibles and pincers *klaking*, their antennae rubbing, their immense jaws devouring the floors and walls. Once more, the insect race was bent on destroying Vhiliinyar and the Linyaari who had returned to populate it.~~

Acorna felt rather than saw something looming over her. Just as she was sure her death was certain, she was grabbed and shaken.

“Khornya, Khornya, wake up! What's the matter?”

Acorna opened her eyes and looked up into the concerned face of her young friend Maati. They were both inside the time lab within the great ruined office building that was among the remains of the lost ancient city of Kubiilikaan. This city was the original home of the shape-shifting people who were the forebearers of Acorna and Maati's race, the Linyaari, along with the unicorn-like Ancestors. Long buried and forgotten, the city was the only part of the Linyaari home planet that had escaped the depredations of the Khleevi invasion safe within its sophisticated shields beneath the surface of Vhiliinyar.

The walls of the time lab were not spinning now, but as usual the static maps of the planet were dotted with small points of white light that indicated the places where Linyaari personnel were located. Many teams were back on the planet's surface, mapping, surveying, and otherwise planning each phase of the planet's renewal by regional applications of the terraforming process.

“Khornya, are you all right? You look funny,” Maati said.

“I had a bad dream. That's all,” Acorna assured her. Dream fragments filled her head. She looked around for the phantom door that had haunted her dream, but of course it wasn't there. The room was vast and spartan and very clinical-looking. Only Acorna's bedroll and the pool of water in the center, from which a beam of energy rose to pierce the ceiling and each story above it saved the chamber from the sterile ambience of a typical research facility.

“What kind of dream?” Maati asked.

“I can't even remember what it was about now. Something about the Khleevi.”

“No wonder you were crying out and trying to run in your sleep,” Maati said. She laid her hands gently against Acorna's head to soothe her friend and heal her of the residual effects of the dream.

“Thanks,” Acorna said. “But I'm fine now, really.”

“You shouldn't be spending all your time down here alone,” Maati scolded. “You can't *pull* Aari out of that machine, you know.”

“I know,” Acorna admitted. “It's not that I expect that, it's just that now that I know that Aari is with one of the Ancestral Friends, and they're using the device to cross time and even send messages back, I want to figure out how they're doing it. And I *might* find Aari in the process,” she finished hopefully. “You never know.”

Maati sighed. “I miss him, too, Khornya. I barely got to know my older brother before he disappeared on us. But staying down here all the time is just plain unhealthy. That's probably why you're having all these bad dreams. Really, you should come up to the surface just for a little while.” Maati coaxed. “You haven't been up in ages and ages, and you won't believe the progress we've made with the terraforming.”

“Of course I would,” Acorna said, but her attention was elsewhere. She rose to inspect a hole in the wall behind one of the great maps showing the time and place of each person on the planet's surface. For a moment the hole gave her an odd turn, reminding her of something terrible in her dream. But that was silly. It was just a dream. And she had put the hole there herself—though with much trepidation.

She'd wanted to see the workings of the map or whatever it was that was driving the time machine. “I can see everything that's going on up there on the maps,” she told Maati. Returning to

attention to the pictures on the surface of the wall, she gestured to the appropriate image as she spoke. “~~The watersheds are all exactly where they ought to be now, the streams are flowing, the rivers are~~ their currents are behaving properly, the tides are turning the seas at the correct times, the waterfalls are falling, and even the rain is coming at the correct appointed intervals. All that water must be making everything quite green.”

“Yes, but you don’t care about that at all,” Maati said. “You can’t fool me. You only know about the waters because they’re needed for the time travel. But honestly, Khornya, you’ve done so much to make Whiliinyar live again. It isn’t just the planning and the exploration. You made it happen. It was all because of you that we got the catseye chrysoberyls.”

“I wasn’t exactly alone on that journey. Anyway, it’s only because of Captain Becker negotiating such a good price with Uncle Hafiz that we ended up out of debt and with credits to spare to fund the rebirth of this planet.” Captain Becker was her good friend, Jonas P. Becker, pilot of the *Condor*, flag and only ship of Becker Interplanetary Salvage and Recycling Enterprises, Ltd.

Becker, a canny businessman himself, was undaunted by the bargaining skills of Acorna’s adoptive uncle, Hafiz Harakamian, the semiretired former head of the also interplanetary enterprise of House Harakamian. Unlike Becker’s business, Hafiz’s boasted many ships, flitters, and other vehicles, a portion of one moon, and all of another.

“It was pure good luck that we found the catseyes just when we needed to refine our terraforming process, so that we could restore sections of the planet instead of doing everything at once.” Acorna was fully awake now and ready to return to her investigations. Maati and the others who had already voiced similar concerns about her only fussed because they cared, Acorna knew, but it was distracting. If she was going to justify spending all her time in the time lab, she had to make it pay off by conducting real research.

With a pointed glance at Maati, she pulled down her goggles, turned on a special saw, and with the whirring of the blade enlarged the hole she’d made so it was big enough to stick her head through.

Maati made a face. “It’s nice to know that you’ve been listening to what we tell you when we come to visit you. But you can’t fool me. It’s not like you’ve seen anything up there for yourself. And this is a feast day. The best grasses of the season are all ready to harvest. Please come up and graze with us. Everyone will be there.”

“Not everyone,” Acorna said.

“Not Aari, I know,” Maati agreed reluctantly. “I’m sorry. I know how hard it’s been on you. I know that you feel like you’ve missed contact with him while others have received telepathic inquiries from him.”

Acorna frowned and withdrew her head from the hole in the panel. “You didn’t tell me that when I talked to you from Makahomia. You said ‘indications.’ You didn’t say ‘telepathic inquiries.’ ”

“Okay, I didn’t. But it was no big deal. Aari’s communications were very sporadic and scattered, and no one was really sure what they meant until they talked to each other and to you,” Maati protested. “This has been frustrating for Mother and Father and me, too. At least you were doing something useful on Makahomia. That’s why we decided to join you. And Aari’s okay. You found that out yourself when you heard that message from him that the priest gave you down on Makahomia. You know very well that if...no...*when* he comes back it will be at some wildly romantic moment when you need rescuing or help fighting some horrible enemy, and the rest of our people are being too analytical and fair-minded to be of any help at all.”

“You have a very big imagination, Maati,” Acorna said, dusting off her hands. “We’ve finished off the Khleevi. I can’t think of any other horrible enemies standing in line to be vanquished at the moment. And I think my own fair mind has just about analyzed this contraption. I’m beginning to understand how it works.”

“Really?” Maati was actually very interested in the time machine, so Acorna’s ploy was successful. ~~Maati crowded closer to see what Acorna was doing.~~

“Yes, and the better I understand it, the more it explains a few things to me. Like the thought messages from Aari. I have entered all of the instances reported to me. I found that, far from being random, they fit a definite pattern—the same pattern that the time/space mechanism follows. Only certain intervals are there connecting ladders between the time and place Aari occupies and our own time and space. Though he has made a couple of jumps.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ll show you,” Acorna said, and passed her hand across a section where the column of liquid light rose from floor to ceiling. At once a familiar shape appeared in that unfamiliar place. It was a double helix, a shape typical of the cellular blueprints comprising most life-forms.

“What is that?” Maati asked.

“Time,” Acorna said. “And space also. Or a road map through both of them. Where the helix twists we intersect, but otherwise we travel separately. I’ve labeled the intersections between Aari and us in this interaction. There, and there, and there. See how they form a pattern?”

“Yeah,” Maati said. “How did you find all that out?”

“Mostly by accident,” Acorna admitted. “But after a couple of those accidents, things began to make more sense to me. And if the pattern holds, we’re about due for another contact with Aari. So I’ve got too much work to do down here to spare the time to go to the surface.”

She waved her hand again, and the column shimmered and turned back into its amorphous self.

She crossed to the map of Vhiliinyar, which dominated the wall with the hole in it. While Acorna concentrated on her excavation work on the wall, Maati noticed that some white dots flickered near the underground lake, a couple of blocks downhill from their position. When white dots appeared on one of these maps, they indicated the presence of Linyaari in that location.

Acorna noticed the dots, too. There was a breathless catch in her voice as she inquired, “Do anyone come with you when you came through the tunnels?”

Maati shook her head. “No.”

To reach the underground city from the surface, people had to enter through the labyrinth of caves occupied in ancient times by the Ancestors and their attendants. The caves led up into the building through an opening a few feet from the door of the room she and Acorna were in.

Because of many previous accidents caused by malfunctions of the time device that had resulted in the disappearances of various beings, Aari among them, access to the area was carefully controlled, if not completely restricted. There shouldn’t have been any Linyaari there to make those white dots on the map.

“We’d better see who it is,” Maati said, but Acorna had already passed her and run out the door.

With Maati at her heels, Acorna took off, running so fast that she all but teleported herself to the shores of the lake.

Acorna had had a premonition the moment she saw the white dots. Maybe, after all this time, Aari had returned. There was an Aari feeling to those dots, and she just suddenly *knew* that he had returned. And then she saw him, standing with another Linyaari beside the underground lake. It was unmistakably Aari, though he looked more erect and confident, and his horn was beautiful and gleaming, unbent, no longer stunted, just as it had been in her dream back on Makahomia.

She was down the hill in an instant. Then her arms were around his neck, her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder, just as she’d wanted to be since the day he’d gone missing. Except that *his* arms did not embrace her back, though one hand did tap against her shoulder in a sort of awkward pat.

Behind her, Maati cried, “Aari? Is it really you? Your horn is fixed! When did that happen? Where’ve you been? What—”

Aari held up his hand to stop Maati's stream of questions. "Greetings," he said. "Yes, it is I. At least, I am Aari, and this is Laarye, and we have just arrived. If Grimalkin's calculations are correct, you would be"—he juggled Acorna aside slightly to hold his wrist to one ear—"oh, yes, our beloved little sister Maati, unknown thus far to Laarye. And this affectionate lady"—he patted Acorna's shoulder again—"is my own lifemate, Khornya."

A sour taste rose in the back of Acorna's throat. Though Aari was here, something was terribly wrong. This wasn't the Aari that she knew and loved!

"I have received much data concerning you both," Aari said. "It is a pleasure to...er...renew our acquaintance, I'm sure."

(Acorna?) Maati thought. (What is going on here?)

(I don't know. Maybe he's been recaptured by the Khleevi, and this time instead of torturing him physically, they brainwashed him,) she told Maati telepathically.

(I assure you that is not true, Khornya,) Aari told her. (Grimalkin helped me navigate time so that both Laarye and I avoided the Khleevi altogether. Once I found Laarye, he and I jumped here. I confess it's extremely disorienting. I have in my recorder notes from myself about my capture on the other timeline, the torture, the death of my brother, and the realization that our homeworld had been destroyed. I have recorded meeting Captain Becker and Riidkiiyi, also meeting you and my sister, and also my healing. I have many other events recorded, but the one that truly causes me pain—is it true that in this timeline, Grandam Naadiina has died?)

(Yes, that's true,) Acorna said. (She died saving her people. I'm glad you've taken good notes on your life in our timeline. I take it since you identified me as your lifemate, you also recall our joining?)

(I have it recorded as a most profoundly enjoyable experience,) Aari replied with a lusty gleam in his eye that reminded her of Thariinye. (I hope that soon we will have occasion to refresh my memory in this timeline to add verisimilitude to the recorded memory.)

Maati, who had been talking earnestly with Laarye, telling him about her childhood after the parents' disappearance and her role in their recovery, felt emanations coming from Acorna such as she had never felt when her friend was among only other Linyaari. Dangerous emanations. Highly combustible.

She didn't even have to eavesdrop on their thought-talk to hear it. Aari was putting up no shield as if he was carrying on a casual conversation among a group of friends, as she had been told her people often had before the Khleevi came. Khornya was broadcasting on all frequencies, loud and clear enough for anybody to read.

Acorna recoiled from Aari's light embrace as if she were a Khleevi and he was coated with the Khleevi-killing plant slime that had helped them destroy their enemy. "Perhaps you should have chosen that time to return," Acorna suggested in an overly calm voice. Maati noticed that Acorna was now speaking aloud and guarding her thoughts. It seemed that this Aari was a stranger to her.

"Oh, I couldn't have done that," Aari said. "This is really the first opportunity to cross over to this side without contaminating any major part of what's gone on already: the only change, as Grimalkin explained this thoroughly to me—I wish he were here to explain it to you, but he has pressing business elsewhere—the only change is that I don't actually remember anything from the time Laarye and I left home together until now. It's an awfully big chunk of time, but Grimalkin thought it would be best if in this timeline, the capture by the Khleevi never happened. So he rescued both Laarye and me—or rather, he assisted me as I rescued both of us."

"How thoughtful of him," Acorna said. "It's a pity he couldn't have spared the planet the whole of the Khleevi catastrophe and let us all just skip that part. It would have saved a fortune in terraforming expenses."

Aari had been chattering happily up to this point, but now he stopped and regarded Acorna more thoughtfully. “You’re upset,” he said with some surprise. “Why are you upset, Khornya? According to my records, you love me. I would think you’d be happy I’d found a way to return to my people with my brother alive and without having had to endure that endless torture.”

“And all it cost you was the couple of *ghaanyi* of memories of our life together,” she said. “I can easily see why it was worth the trade to you.”

Acorna was struggling to be reasonable and keep the hurt out of her voice, but it wasn’t working. Then she amazed Maati by employing one of Captain Becker’s favorite curse phrases. Acorna *never* cursed. “Frack it all, Aari! I have searched through time on this world. I have caused the Ancestors to put a stop to the wholesale terraforming to return Vhiliinyar to its original state in case you returned to an unstable world. I have traveled to Makahomia, where all of us could have been killed by people who worshiped you and your friend Grimalkin as some sorts of deities. I got the message you left for me. But then...you...sounded like you. And now you’ve returned a stranger.”

He held up his wrist and listened to it again, then said, “Oh, yes. That. Well, I left the message for you on Makahomia, but that was *before* the crucial jump. I appreciate all of your trouble, Khornya, but really, I was fine. Grimalkin and I just had to wait for the proper moment, as I believe I said in my note.”

Aari clearly didn’t understand why she was so upset—maybe because Acorna didn’t understand herself. She knew that if someone had offered her the chance to make Aari’s torture vanish, and her brother Laarye live, all at the cost of Aari’s memories of their love, she would have willingly agreed. Grabbed at the chance, even. But...she hadn’t been consulted. And those memories had been a central part of her life, too. Now, looking into Aari’s beautiful but emotionally distant eyes, those precious memories felt as if they were part of some sort of dream, or maybe of a vid she’d seen. Or as if the shared experiences and emotions—some of the most beautiful in her life—hadn’t really happened.

She felt discarded.

She knew that feeling was not exactly logical and reasonable. She should be happy that Aari was whole again. She should be ecstatic that he was no longer tormented by memories of what the Khleevi had done to him. She should be thrilled that he had even managed to save the life of his brother—Laarye’s death had haunted him and left him wracked with guilt. But the way he had done it made her feel as if she was irrelevant in his life. And what was worse was that it felt as if, somewhere in his voyages in time, the Aari she knew and loved had melted away to be replaced with this...this...infuriating stranger. Even worse yet, her own Aari had cooperated in the destruction of the person he had been. He’d allowed their love to fade from his mind and heart.

She was a stranger to him. And *this* Aari was very much a stranger to her.

Maati was apparently taking all this much better than Acorna was. But Aari was only Maati’s older brother, not her lifemate. And now Maati had her other brother back, and could get to know him. Maati had been born after Aari and Laarye were stranded on Vhiliinyar, where Laarye had starved to death while he lay injured in a cave and Aari had been captured and tortured by the Khleevi. The only family Maati had known as she grew up was Grandam Naadiina, who had died heroically during the Khleevi attack on narhii-Vhiliinyar. After Aari was rescued, he and Maati had helped to save the parents, and now they had their *other* brother back. Maati’s family was finally complete, so of course she was rejoicing. Maati loved Aari, of course, but she naturally did not know him as Acorna did—she had.

But for Acorna, this new twist on her relationship with Aari was just one thing too much. She had in fact moved mountains and oceans and the rivers of time to find him. Now that he was back, he had forgotten all that they had shared. Aari looked at her like she was someone he’d met at a party once, not the love of his life. For Acorna, it was past bearing.

Acorna excused herself with a mumbled apology and returned the way she had come. Aari didn't even call after her—he started talking with Maati as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened. Acorna kept on walking as she passed the room containing the time machine; for the first time in months she felt no urge to go inside it. Instead, she followed the hallway to the trapdoor leading to the cave connecting the abandoned underground city of Kubiilikhan with the surface.

She needed someone to talk to, preferably someone who could not read minds, since hers wasn't fit to share with company at the moment. She wished Nadhari Kando was here. Acorna needed to talk to someone who could understand what she was feeling. Nadhari had seen and done so much that nothing surprised her or shocked her anymore. Nor was she one to *tsk-tsk* over the expression of negative emotions. When Nadhari felt negative emotions, whoever was causing her pain usually got to share that pain, and often got flattened in the process.

But Nadhari was back on Makahomia right now, too far away and much too busy to serve as Acorna's confidante. Acorna thought she would be able to confide in her aunt Neeva, but Neeva and her spaceship, the *Balakiire*, were on the Moon of Opportunity, known as MOO to its tenants and to those who loved it. Neeva was consulting with Linyaari scientists regarding the terraforming process. She, too, was busy with important work. Acorna would have to find someone else to talk to. But she couldn't think of anyone who would believe her, much less understand.

As she emerged from the cave into the open meadow made deliciously fragrant by sunshine and recent rain, courtesy of Dr. Hoa's weather wizardry, the *Condor's* shuttle settled onto the surface.

Acorna smiled broadly. That expression might be interpreted as an aggressive act by the Linyaari people, but Acorna knew that Captain Jonas P. Becker would see her human-style grin and correctly deduce that she was overjoyed to see him arrive. Becker and Maak—the android who affected a fake artificial horn attachment while on Vhiliinyar to spare Linyaari sensibilities about outsiders landing on their planet—and RK, the *Condor's* feline first mate, all disembarked. Acorna had never been so happy to see a group of beings since the day her human foster fathers had pulled her out of her castaway life-support escape pod.

Acorna ran to meet her friends. Becker took one look at her face, and said, "Acorna! Princess! What's the matter? You look like you've lost your best friend." That was all it took. Acorna fell into his arms and, in a big rush, poured out what had happened and how she felt about it all. At the end of her story, Becker let her weep on his shoulder while Maak patted her head awkwardly and RK twined around her ankles mewling anxiously, just as if he didn't know how to thought-speak, though Acorna knew all too well that he did.

"Captain, I know it's silly," she said, drying her eyes and wiping her nose inelegantly on his sleeve since she lacked a handkerchief. "All I've done since he went missing is try to get him back. Now he's back, but—"

"Silly? Naah, it's not silly. Sounds to me like Aari is suffering from a bad case of mistaken identity—he doesn't know who the heck he is. You know, maybe Karina Harakamian can sort him out. She's the kind of person who is always trying to help the kind of people who are trying to find themselves."

"Maybe. I suppose he'll have to figure that out on his own, though," Acorna said, thinking that the problem from her point of view was more that Aari didn't know who *she* was. "He doesn't seem to need any help from me. Maati, at least, seems to be just fine with him."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Becker said. "He just got here. These things take time. You're not the only one who will have to adjust to the new Aari."

"There may be more to adjust to than Aari's changed personality," she said. "Aari's experience with the time device and Grimalkin brings up many new questions about the time shift equipment's capabilities."

“There’s more to adjust to than just that. I came to bring you some good news. Rafik is coming MOO.”

“When?”

Becker gave one of his usual “precise” replies. “Pretty shortly. If you hop aboard and we take off now, we can probably get back there by the time he arrives. That is, if you want to see him, of course.”

He was teasing. Acorna wasn’t in the mood to laugh at his little sally, but she smiled politely, and said, “I certainly do.”

“That’s great. It will do you good to see one of your foster dads again.”

Acorna felt the gloom that had settled onto her lighten just a bit. “It will indeed. I would love to see Rafik. The break will give me time to think about my situation. In the long term, I believe what we really need to do is to continue to educate myself about how the time device works. Perhaps the new—perhaps Aari can help me with some of the insights he has gained into its process while time-traveling with his friend. I can’t help but believe there must be a way to regain my Aari without losing Laarye or making Aari undergo Khleevi torture again.”

“I’ll say this, Princess, if anybody can do it, you can.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other for a moment, then said, “If you want to wait out here, I’ll just go in and say hi to Aari—even if he probably doesn’t remember me.”

Acorna waited with less patience than she usually exhibited, but occupied herself with admiring the changes wrought on Vhiliinyar’s surface. She’d been so busy in the underground city that she had not taken the time to appreciate all the changes on the planet’s surface. A majestic mountain range rose where once hills of rubble stood. Wildflowers sprinkled the meadows and grew in such profusion that at the base of the distant foothills that the brilliant blossoms shone like stars against a background of a thousand shades of blue. Streams and rivers ribboned through the periwinkle meadows and a wide lavender lake that in time would become an inland sea spread between her and the mountains. She grazed thoughtfully on the delicious grasses provided.

But in a shorter time than she expected, Becker and Mac reemerged, trailed by Aari, Laarye, and Maati.

Becker looked very uncomfortable. “Hey, Princess. What a treat! Maati and her brothers want to ride back to MOO with us to see their parents. Won’t that be exciting?”

“Oh,” she said. She wished she could change her mind about going, but the plea in Becker’s eyes for her to accompany them was too strong for her to resist. She had hoped to have time to talk with Becker in the familiar surroundings of the *Condor*. She truly did not want to be closed up in the tight confines of the *Condor* with the new, remote Aari.

However, she reminded herself that Rafik was coming to MOO. Her aunt Neeva was already on MOO, along with her uncle Hafiz and his wife. She could look forward to seeing them. She would find the time and space and people on MOO to confide in. But still her spirits sank as the new Aari beamed brightly down at her. It was going to feel like a long, long space voyage.

Her silence was not too noticeable, since Aari chatted in Linyaari to Becker about the things his recorded memory told him about the *Condor*, and Becker asked Aari about his adventures with Grimalkin. Becker also filled Aari in on the trip he, Mac, Nadhari, Acorna, and particularly RK had taken that landed them accidentally in Makahomia.

RK, who had always been very fond of Aari, held back from the new, improved version of his friend. When Aari reached out to stroke the cat, RK sniffed at his fingers, hissed, and batted them away. Then the cat jumped onto Laarye’s knee to sniff him instead.

Maati was talking to Laarye about the rescue of her parents that she and Thariinye had staged.

Laarye kept nodding as if that was familiar to him, and Maati said, “You know all about it?”

“Yes, Aari filled me in. His account varies in some small details from your own story but

essentially the same.”

“How is it different?”

“Aari told how he saved everyone and how he and Captain Becker cleverly devised a way to destroy the exoskeleton of the Khleevi using a plant toxin. This enabled him to save you and Khornya and Thariinye. Then he also located your parents.”

Maati frowned. “Yeah, that’s different,” she said in a noncommittal voice.

Docking with the *Condor* saved Maati from making further explanations.

Once aboard the ship, as if by mutual consent, the Linyaari spread out. At Becker’s suggestion Laarye and Aari took Maati’s LAANYE, the Linyaari language decoding device, and retired to the “library.” This was a cabin that had once been stuffed with hard-copy books Becker had salvaged from dumps and landfills on various worlds. Mac had installed a vid screen and also patches to the main computer for those wishing to play vids, of which the library also boasted a considerable number. The current version of Aari had not been exposed to Standard Galactic, the human tongue through most of known space, though he knew that he was supposed to know it. This was, in fact, recorded in his memory storage unit. But Grimalkin had not recorded any clues to the language itself in the memory unit, and so Aari would have to relearn it. Since Standard was the language of MOO and much of the multiverse, Maati suggested to Laarye that he, too, needed to become fluent in it.

Acorna left them to it and sought out a place where she could be alone on the ship. She thought that Maati would go to the library with her brothers to coach them and point out the really *good* books and vids, but instead the young Linyaari girl sought Acorna out where she was tending the hydroponics bed.

“Can I help?” Maati asked.

“I thought you’d want to help your brothers,” Acorna said, wondering how weeds managed to creep into even the most controlled environments.

“I thought you wouldn’t want to spend a minute away from Aari,” Maati retorted, more sharply than she had ever spoken to Acorna before. “But I don’t feel that way. I thought they needed to proceed with all that learning stuff on their own.”

Acorna said nothing in reply, but kept weeding.

Finally, Maati could stand it no longer, and said, “You know about ghosts?”

“Yes, I’ve heard of them,” Acorna said. “I am surprised that you have.”

“Those stories are weird, but I like them—especially the ones where the atmosphere is sort of scary but the ghosts are nice. Ever since I read the first one, I’ve liked the idea that something of the spirit of someone who dies can stay with people they care about. But now I’m not so sure. Talking to Laarye is a lot like talking to a ghost. Talking to Aari—well, I keep thinking of him as Aari Whole-Horn, because he doesn’t seem like the same person as *our* Aari. He’s more like a visually enhanced holo or something. Do you know what I mean?”

Acorna nodded. She straightened slowly up from the garden, offering a handful of grass to Maati who was still standing. “Yes, I know exactly what you mean. It’s as if he is a shell that looks like Aari, walks and talks a bit like him, but that’s where the similarity ends. And yet, he is a person, just as much as *our* Aari, and probably just as lovable if we give him a chance. Maybe when your brothers meet your parents again, and we see them in the context of the family members they already knew, they will begin to seem more real.”

“Oh, sure,” Maati said. “Of course they will. But it’s funny, Khornya. I always thought my parents were dead, but when they came back I never felt about them the way I do about Laarye and Aari Whole-Horn.”

“You need to stop calling him that or he’ll read you and be offended,” Acorna cautioned. “He may be stranger than we wish he was, but he still reads thought-talk.”

“Maybe we should wear horn-hats until we get used to the boys,” Maati suggested with a giggle, referring to the sometimes rather comical creations intended not only to costume and ornament Linyaari horn for a dance or other festive occasion, but to shield some of the wearer’s most spontaneous thoughts as well.

“I’ll bet Eedi saved some of them from that party when I first arrived on narhii-Vhiliinyar,” Acorna said mischievously. “We should borrow some from her. I want the one with the pink pom-pom on the end.”

“No fair,” Maati said, giggling. “I wanted that one!” And off they went, talking of commonplace and silly apparel and other nonstressful things until the voyage was nearly over.

When they finally docked on the MOO, Becker looked out the viewport, and said, “Damn. They forgot the brass band. Everybody else seems to be here though.”

Though he was exaggerating slightly, Maati’s (and Aari’s and Laarye’s) parents Miiri and Kaarlye, and the Harakamians and their entourage of servants and security personnel awaited their arrival in the lavishly appointed terminal. Rafik Nadezda’s vessel had set down just before the *Condor* did. He, too, was waiting at the terminal to greet them.

On Acorna’s last arrival on MOO, not more than two months ago, the terminal had consisted of a com shed in a temporary building. The new building was spacious and full of glass and plant life, artwork, and deep, comfortable seating. The Makahomian catseye chrysoberyls had enriched both the Linyaari and Hafiz immeasurably, and the improvements on both MOO and Vhiliinyar were the result of that influx of wealth.

Miiri and Kaarlye rushed forward to greet their children, and Acorna stepped aside, only to be swept up in a big hug by Rafik. One of her triad of foster fathers, the three asteroid miners who had rescued her infant self from her escape pod, Rafik was now the active head of House Harakamian enterprises. Rafik’s uncle Hafiz had named him as heir in preference to his own son. These days Hafiz claimed to be retired, and loudly extolled his nephew’s business sense and stewardship. MOO and the rehabilitation of the Linyaari worlds were Hafiz’s idea of a retirement sideline.

Acorna returned Rafik’s hug enthusiastically.

Finally, Rafik held Acorna at arm’s length and looked her over with a paternal eye. “I didn’t think it was possible but, yes, you’re even prettier than you were the last time I saw you. How *are* you, Acorna?”

Rafik was a little gray at the temples, but it suited him, and his dark eyes, thickly fringed with curling lashes, were as shrewd and merry as ever. Though his waistline remained trim, Acorna noticed a family resemblance between Rafik and Hafiz that had not been as obvious to her previously.

“Just fine, now that you’re here,” she said, linking arms with him. “It is so good to see you again. You must tell me what brings you here. And I want to hear all about Calum and Gill and the Kendon sisters. And Pal, too, of course.”

“There is much to tell. You’re going to have a half brother or sister pretty soon, for one thing,” Rafik said. “Mercy is pregnant.”

“Wonderful! Calum must be over the moon. He loves children so. He will love having a baby of his own to coo over.”

“He’s happy as a hungry Linyaari in the height of grazing season. Gill and Judit have been spending most of their time at Maganos Moonbase. I don’t get up there very often, but I hear from them by com unit quite a bit. We all miss you, of course.”

“I miss you all, too.”

“But we’ve been worried about you. Aari, your lifemate, we heard that he disappeared?”

She took a deep breath and nodded.

“Well, yes, he did. It’s been a long, hard time for me. But I have news, as well. Aari seems to be

back, sort of. That's him there with his family. I'm keeping a little distance from him right now." She nodded to where Aari, with great poise, was telling his parents how he and Grimalkin had located Laarye in time to prevent him from starving to death and brought him back through time to restore him to the family.

"He just got back, and you're already estranged?" Rafik asked, shocked. "I thought you would shake the universe apart looking for him. What happened?"

But before she could tell him, they met Hafiz and Karina Harakamian. Hafiz wore his usual robes embroidered with gold and glimmering with jewels, while Karina, also as usual, was floating on an oceanic drift of lavender, lilac, violet, and purple draperies, the colors subtly blending with each other in a beautiful whole, the layers difficult to sort out. What was not subtle was the jewelry she currently sported. Gone were her amethysts and tanzanites, and in their place was a collar of perfectly matched orchid-hued golf-ball-size catseye chrysoberyls.

Becker did a double take that Acorna could sense even though her back was to him. "Wow! You are wearing enough power there to terraform a galaxy, lady."

"I know," Karina said, stroking her necklace in a pleased fashion. "Lovely, isn't it? It was difficult to choose the right ones from all of those you brought home, but when I saw these in my colors, I just knew I had to have them. Especially after what you told us about the reverence in which these sacred stones are held, and how only the most devout priests and priestesses wear them. Hafiz was a bit stuffy about it at first, but I pointed out to him that as the panspiritual leader of our little colony, I have a certain image to maintain. That means such powerful talismans as these should at least be represented by a few little samples in my personal collection. So he had that adorable Rocky Reamer design this necklace for me and gave it to me as a gift for our two year, four months, three weeks, two days, five hours, and six minutes anniversary. Unfortunately, Rocky hasn't yet finished the matching earrings, bracelet, and ring, but the necklace makes quite a statement on its own, don't you think?"

"Statement! It's an entire library, and then some," Becker said.

Karina looked crestfallen and frowned slightly. "You don't think it's a bit plain on its own like this?"

Acorna felt that she could sincerely say, "You would be the hit of any Linyaari ball with that Karina. It really is stunning."

"I know they only wore one gem at a time on Makahomia, but their culture was rather primitive from what you say. And they didn't have the means to set gems properly, as Rocky does," Karina said. "And then, too, they were not—from what you say of the high priest—truly evolved and enlightened beings. I doubt many of them could have maintained their sanity, much less control, in the presence of such powerful talismans as these. I myself must struggle as I wear it to remain in charge of the stones to channel their emanations, and it is only because of my years of dedicated study and self-discipline that I am able to succeed."

"Yeah, well," Becker said, stifling a smile, turning away, and looking desperately for an excuse to end the conversation.

Rafik took his aunt's hand and kissed it, saying, "And the power becomes you mightily, treasure of my adopted father."

Acorna wanted to giggle. Rafik's manners were now—or perhaps it was here—so different than they had been aboard the asteroid mining ship where he, Calum, and Gill had raised her from babyhood. He couldn't have picked a better time to show up. Having him here steadied her and lessened the emotional vertigo she experienced from dealing with the new Aari.

She was also very tired from keeping her thoughts shielded from everyone. She should be—was—glad to see her lifemate alive and well again. And not everyone had the chance to undo such

horrible chapter in life as Aari's torture by the Khleevi. She felt, if not guilty, at least as if her fellow Linyaari would not easily forgive her selfish unhappiness in the face of Aari's unexpected return.

Hafiz beamed at her and sandwiched her hands between his own. "You have much cause to celebrate today, granddaughter of my heart. Rafik is here and also your own lost husband."

"Lifemate, dearest," Karina whispered out of the side of her mouth, which she hid with the edge of a heavily be-ringed hand. "The Linyaari have lifemates, not formal marriages."

He waved her objection away. "It is all the same. Better in fact, since Linyaari remain faithful throughout their lives to one beloved spouse."

Becker cleared his throat. "Uh, Hafiz, could I speak with you privately for a minute?"

"What is it, you wily camel trader, you?" asked Hafiz, waving his plump forefinger under Becker's nose in a jovial fashion. Hafiz referred to the deal Becker had made on behalf of the Linyaari for the cats-eyes. The old man had paid almost current market price for the precious and highly useful gems before realizing that the Linyaari and Becker were carting home enough to drive the price down significantly should they all become available at once. Furthermore, since the Linyaari had been heavily into debt to Hafiz for his help in fighting off the Khleevi and rebuilding their devastated worlds, very little money had changed hands.

Still, Hafiz consoled himself with the thought that, though the Linyaari debt was wiped out and they had sufficient future credits granted for the remaining processes that would be required to revive both planets, Hafiz himself was able to make a handsome profit by selling some of the unusually large and fine cats-eyes he acquired at well above the usual rate. He was also making deals to sell others in the future. And under his capable and profitable guidance, the market would not be flooded, because the bulk of the stones were safely stored in one of the Harakamian warehouses on MOO, ready to be released at the whim and will of one Hafiz Harakamian. When the time—and the price—was appropriate, of course.

Becker suspected Rafik might have come not only to see Acorna, but also to take possession of more of the stones to market on Kezdet.

Karina linked arms with her husband, not wanting to be left out of possibly profitable discussions, for despite her well-cultivated ethereal airs, she was as canny in her way as Hafiz.

This left Acorna more or less alone with Rafik, if she didn't count Aari's family and the security personnel.

Acorna realized what Becker was doing and was grateful for the opportunity to confide in Rafik. She pulled her adopted father aside and quietly explained about Aari and Laarye and the time machine, along with the little she had learned about Grimalkin, Aari's companion on his voyage through time.

As they conferred, they walked out of the terminal toward the guest quarters where Hafiz usually lodged his most important visitors. To get there, one walked through Hafiz's ornamental gardens. The moment they stepped into the bubble, the exotic fragrances assailing their nostrils told Acorna, even before she saw the brilliant blossoms, that the garden had been revived. The flowers were bigger and brighter than ever, and more fragrant. Here and there along the path elaborate fountains radiated fine sprays of moisture to cool the faces and throats of passersby.

Only a short time ago the surface of MOO had been barren, the irrigation systems ripped up to provide conduits for the waters of Vhiliinyar. To free up the supplies needed to revive the battered planet, Karina and Hafiz had instituted water rationing on MOO, and had themselves submitted with fortitude that amazed everyone who only knew them as luxury-loving potentates of their own private moon. During the hard times, Hafiz had softened the austerity of the ruined gardens to some degree with extravagant holograms that he created for that purpose, but they naturally did not emit the same perfumes or cooling spray that the real gardens did.

Acorna and Rafik slowed as they strolled, both to secure the necessary privacy and to enjoy the beautiful surroundings. ~~“You’ve heard my problems,” Acorna said when she had finished relating them to her adopted father. “Now tell me to what we owe the honor of your visit? Is it the catseyes?”~~

“Partly, yes. And partly for other family reasons. I am so relieved that you came when you did and with a development dramatic enough to distract Hafiz from his current campaign to find me a wife. Now that I am his heir, he says, it is time I married and provided him with little heirs and heiresses. He dismisses my argument that you are an appropriate heir for us both. He tells me that you, my dear, have other falafel to fry. I’m just glad I’m not neo-Hadithian after all, or he’d probably try to get me to marry four women at once to improve my chances of fathering his ‘grandchildren.’ I can’t understand him, Acorna. He is twice my age and had only one son—whom he couldn’t stand. Now, all of a sudden, he’s acting like a mother with a virgin daughter. And it’s *my* life he’s arranging for me.”

Acorna laughed, “Don’t you want to find a wife, Rafik?”

“Yes,” he said. “*I* do. I don’t want Hafiz to find one for me. And I don’t want to find just any nice girl with a nice family that has a nice fortune that goes with her. I don’t want to be an intergalactic playboy like Hafiz was in his younger days. I want to find *my own* wife, someone as special to me as Judit and Mercy are to Gill and Calum.”

“Well,” Acorna said ruefully. “If you find her, take my advice and don’t let her get involved with time travelers.”

“Poor Acorna.” Rafik put his arm around her slim shoulders and gave her a hug. “It’s going to be all right, you know,” he told her. “You and Aari fell in love with each other once, and you will do so again. However much he has changed because of experiences he’s had or hasn’t had, he’s the same person inside and will be drawn back to you. And once the strangeness goes away, you’ll get to fall for him all over again.”

“Do you think so?” she asked, hoping against all logic that, because of the closeness of their relationship, somehow Rafik knew things about her she herself didn’t know.

“I do,” he said.

Two

Dinner was a lavish affair. Hafiz's kitchens prepared a very good simulation of a fatted calf for the return of the prodigal heir. The Linyaari, of course, followed their own dietary agenda and dined on the beautifully arranged buds and grasses in the floral centerpieces while the other diners enjoyed gourmet delicacies from more substantial dishes.

The *Balakiire* landed while the feast was in progress, but Neeva, Khaari, and Melireenya were a bit too space-weary from their journey to join in the feast.

They'd come through a meteor shower on the way back, and had had a very tense time of it.

(We just wanted to stop and say hello,) Neeva told

Acorna through mind-speech as Melireenya and

Khaari, slightly behind her, yawned and gave perfunctory waves of their hands to her and the other diners.

(We'll graze later. I see you have someone more interesting to talk to than your old mother-sister anyway. It is well that you are together with Aari once more,

Khornya. I am pleased for you.)

Clearly Neeva's tiredness kept her from picking up on Acorna's inner conflict.

Nevertheless, Acorna did her best to seem pleased, too. Under her family's watchful eye, she tried to be more welcoming to Aari.

"Can you tell us something of your experiences before you met up with Laarye again?" she asked. "I have been studying the time device, and I think I've begun to understand how it works. But I admit I am still curious about why you and Grimalkin traveled to Makahomia."

"Yes, Aari, I should very much like to hear that for myself," Hafiz said. "I trust you had some other plan in mind than that generations later your contributions to the history of that planet would eventually cost me my security chief." He inclined his head toward a tall uniformed man scrutinizing the area from the perimeter of the bubble. "The new fellow, Smythe-Wesson here, is a former Red Bracelet himself. While I find that somewhat reassuring, he does not inspire the same sort of confidence I had in Commander Kando." Hafiz sighed a deep, put-upon sigh.

Thrilled as he was about the catseyes and the immense profits they would bring him, Hafiz had yet to forgive Acorna and her friends for allowing Nadhari Kando to remain on Makahomia.

Aari cheerily waved a dahlia through the air as he flung his hands wide, and said, "Oh, that! Well, Grimalkin, as you seem to have gathered, Khornya, is a feline shape-shifter. He is an empath and

therefore much less egotistical than others among the Friends, but he shares Riid-Kiiyi's belief that those who are not cats are less fortunate than he. He was very happy to help me with my mission to rescue Laarye, but said we had to wait for exactly the right time and place to intersect with our home dimension so that I would be there to save my brother without falling prey to the Khleevi again. Even though he time-travels a lot, Grimalkin does not like to *waste* time, so he insisted we begin positioning ourselves by journeying to Makahomia, where he knew from the journals Nadhari would someday write that we were needed. It was also an excellent opportunity to refashion some of the inhabitants there in his own image. I don't actually remember any of it, mind you, but I have it all here in the recording he helped me make so I would remember myself from the other timeline."

"That sounds *confusing*," Maati said.

Aari shrugged. "Perhaps it was, but he understood it. He is far older and wiser and much more brilliant than I, of course, but I trust his interpretations."

Acorna felt peeved all over again. If Grimalkin was so much older, wiser, and brilliant than Aari—and presumably, herself—why couldn't he have returned Aari to her with his memory intact? Aari spoke of Grimalkin so enthusiastically that she thought that maybe he regretted returning to her. Perhaps her lover would rather be with his new friend.

Though Acorna carefully shielded these thoughts, Maati laid a hand on hers consolingly.

Hafiz had also grown bored with Aari's explanation of Grimalkin's explanation of time and space. Karina yawned and stretched, burped, and covered her mouth delicately with two fingers.

Hafiz then tapped his wineglass with a jeweled dagger. "And now, honored guests, a special surprise. I have engaged something special for your enjoyment tonight. It is not a hologrammatic entertainment. Tonight you will see actual human performers of great skill and talent, and not incidentally, beauty, imported at enormous expense from the Akemilisan harems. Prepare yourselves to appreciate the astounding aerial acrobatics of Aziza and the Ornaments of Akemi!"

"And now, in the time-honored custom of my people I say"—and he clapped twice, sharply—"bring on the dancing girls!"

In a rainbow cyclone of veils and gauzy gaudy gold-encrusted split skirts and puffy pants, the bosoms and hips adorned by silk clothing heavily encrusted with jangling gold coins and jewels, the dancers whirled from the taller bits of shrubbery onto the patio where the diners sat digesting the superb meal.

Their feet were bare, except for tasteful toe rings and little chains of coins worn as anklets, and were their midriffs.

"Nice," Becker whispered to Hafiz. "Are they just visiting or did you persuade them to be your in-house troupe?"

"They were on their way to another engagement when their ship developed trouble," Hafiz whispered back. His right eye acquired a twinkle as the left one winked shut, as if he was enjoying a joke that was still a mystery to everyone else. "One of our—associates—evacuated them to her vessel and then persuaded them to come here. Lovely, eh?"

Becker didn't respond because his jaw had dropped too far to make speech possible.

The ladies appeared boneless. Not for them the skeletal look popular in some of the human ports. Their smooth, rounded flesh undulated effortlessly in time to a drumbeat that varied so that it made Acorna think at some times of a stalking tiger, at others of a cornered gazelle. Their eyes were lined with a black substance that made them look huge, while veils first concealed the lower part of their faces, then were whipped away just as, with an explosion of frothing cloth, the women turned to show the serpentine movements of their backs and shoulders.

She heard Hafiz say to Becker, "The Three Prophets teach that a woman should be modest. So how modest they are, with their veils concealing their identities? And, yet, how lovely. And I do think

that to be a good wife, a woman should be well versed in the womanly arts.”

~~“You’re not thinking of taking another wife, Hafiz?”~~

Karina’s complacent smile faltered a bit, and she speared her husband with a rapier glance. He licked his lips and drummed his fingers on the sash around his paunch in time to the music. “No, no,” he said with just a touch of regret. “Such barbaric customs are practiced only by blasphemers of the true path, such as the Neo-Hadithians. My interest in these ladies is for the sake of my heir. It is time Rafik began to think of finding a wife. A man’s life should not be all business and good works. He should have a family as well. I once believed that it was important to have sons, until I had one, and he was worthless. On the other hand, I adopted my beautiful granddaughter, who is a jewel beyond price, so I am thinking Rafik must father many children of both sexes, so that he has many heirs to choose from and I have many grandchildren to comfort me in my advancing years.”

“I’ll comfort you, my dynamo of the desert,” Karina whispered.

“And I you, O pearl of pulchritude, and our grandchildren shall comfort us both.”

The drum tempo changed again, and the troupe split off to leave a single dancer, her gossamer veils folded over her body like the wings of a sleeping butterfly. She emerged slowly, stretching backward, elongating her torso and extending her head back toward her ankles. Just as they thought she was going to do a backbend, she simply rolled her torso backward and then up again. Then she raised her arms above her head, facing them, her head moving back and forth like a snake’s. Her feet rose above the ground and she rolled forward. It was not a tumble, simply a leisurely roll. She repeated these maneuvers in time with the music, her weightless body making lazy, graceful figures of eight arcs through the air.

As the music picked up, her movements, while grounded, and those in the air grew faster and more acrobatic; and then suddenly the rest of the troupe joined her, all spinning madly, the large faceted jewels in the middles of their coin belts flashing as if lit from within with each turn. And they were like the fluff of seedpods twirling in a high wind, each dancer in turn swept her hand before her body and spun up into the air, the soles of her feet nearly a meter off the ground.

Karina clapped her hands delightedly.

“Oh, Haffy, this is a truly inspiring performance! Even I, who have studied the sacred erotic dances of ancient Babylon and Nineveh with high priestesses channeled from those cultures, have never seen such steps.”

“Truly they make an artistic tool of the simple antigravity belts they wear beneath their coins,” Hafiz agreed.

The girls spun downward again and, with their feet firmly planted on the ground, swept the veils before them and split off into the shrubbery to leave the stage to another soloist.

Becker was immediately enthralled by the new dancer. She was swathed in veils and skirts that whirled and shifted with her movements rising and falling, appearing and disappearing. The space was reminded of one of the clear-faceted kaleidoscopes you could buy at nanobug markets. The kind that took their colors from whatever was around them. If you looked through one of them at a sunny coastal morning, sky blue, sea green, sun yellow, and spun it around and around, he thought maybe you could come close to the effect the dancer created. But, of course, it wouldn’t be nearly as tantalizing as the flashes of pale skin and bright gold-green eyes glimpsed among the veils and her long, butter yellow hair. Her head was crowned with a circlet of coins that held a green veil whose top covered her lower face, but there was something familiar about her.

As the tempo picked up, she suddenly approached and cast one of the veils around him. The fixing him in a green gaze made more exotic than it might have been by the kohl surrounding her eyes, she waggled her eyebrows up and down at him. Lifting one hip, then the other, she slowly worked her way into a shimmy, the coins at her hips flipping and clanking. She crooked her finger, beckoning, and

he stood up and shook his lower half, too, though it didn't have the same effect.

~~Laughing, she pushed him back down and deposited her harem-pants-clad behind on his lap.~~
"Better stick to salvage, Becker," she said in unexotic Basic.

"Andina! When did you get here?"

"I would have come to meet you, but I didn't want to spoil the surprise," she told him.

"I didn't know you performed. I thought you were in the cleaning business."

"I am. But these girls got stranded on a backwater asteroid populated by uncouth space bums n unlike you. I gave them a lift, and they gave me lessons for part of their fare. I persuaded them to l me bring them here instead of to the gig they were headed for when their ship began acting up. figured Hafiz would pay them enough that they could reimburse me for the trip and fix their ship well."

"And if they couldn't fix it, you knew they could always sell it to me for salvage," Becker said.

They said a lot of other things, as well, things that Acorna was too polite to listen to.

It appeared that Andina had started a trend when she got Becker up to dance with her, and som of the other dancers began to do likewise. Each dancer swooped, using her veils like wings, to th table, picked up a wineglass, set it on her head, lowered herself to the floor, did a lot of astounding muscular contractions with her abdomen and a few flips, rose again, wineglass still balanced, whirle into the air with it still on her forehead, then, without spilling a drop, whirled back to the table, gav each glass to its owner, and made a gesture that they were to down the contents, then whipped a silke veil around the party in question and dragged him (and sometimes her) out onto the dance floor. The repeated this until each diner had a turn, each glass of wine had been aerated, and most of the dine were on their feet and laughing.

As the gentleman at the head of the table, Hafiz would have been chosen first, except that when a lissome, sloe-eyed beauty undulated toward him, Karina sprang into action, placing herself betwee the dancer and her husband and waving her lavender draperies in a comparatively graceless an unprofessional but nonetheless effective fashion. The dancer applauded Karina with the ululating c called a *zaghareet*, bowed to them both, and did her trick with both of their wineglasses. Hafiz an Karina were by then so absorbed in each other that they barely noticed. Still, they dutifully quaffe their wine when the dancer returned it to them, then they left the party with their arms as far aroun each others' convex waists as their ample bodies would allow.

The youngest member of the troupe was the daughter of one of the dancers. Like the othe dancers, she seemed fascinated if somewhat confused by the Linyaari, who ate the centerpieces an drank only water. The other dancers avoided eye contact with the Linyaari diners, but finally th young girl's curiosity overcame her reserve, and she chose Maati to dance with her. Maati jumped enthusiastically and imitated the girl's movements. Both of them giggled at the Linyaari girl awkwardness. The dancer giggled even more when she realized Maati was female. "What is yo name?" the girl asked as she whipped a veil off some part of her costume and handed it to Maati showing her how to tie it around her haunches.

Maati told her, and added, "It means harmony, like in music."

"Ah, my name is Layla. It means evening, in case one is living someplace where that makes a difference," Layla replied. She then did an aerial flip, after which she extracted a belt from beneath the coins at her waist and handed it to Maati.

Layla made a little circle in the air with her upraised index finger.

Maati nodded excitedly and clasped the belt in place just below her waist. She spun as the litt dancer directed, making one or two complete revolutions before she got dizzy and stumbled upward putting one foot out to catch herself and meeting only air. She was almost a full meter off the ground. Her new friend steadied her and pulled her back down. Maati returned the antigrav belt, but sh

seemed sorry to have to do so.

~~Then she saw Laarye laughing at her and Layla, so they pulled him up to join them. He shifted from one foot to the other, watching them with a studious expression, then burst into a sort of prance as he circled them, holding one end of the veil until they were both entangled in it.~~

Rafik, whose wineglass was upside down beside his plate, was pulled from Acorna's side when the lead dancer, clad in crimson-and-teal paisley velvet pants and a great deal of clanking gold, dived her handsprings up to him and captured him with a red veil.

(Culturally fascinating, don't you think?) Aari asked, using thought-talk. (I wonder if those concealing cloths they wear over their faces and wave around themselves serve a function similar to those horn-hats. Do you know?)

(I don't think the purpose is the same,) Acorna replied politely, if a little stiffly. (I believe these veils are part of a tableau re-creating a historical mating ritual.)

"So are horn-hats," Aari said, as if reminding her. "It seems to me, and of course, in this timeline, this is the first encounter I have had with human culture, that the cloths they wave—"

"Veils," Acorna supplied.

"*Vaals*," he repeated obligingly, if inaccurately. "I think they are intended to increase the magnetic field around the dancer's body, thereby attracting more potential mates, whereas the *vaals* covering the mouths of the dancers serve to intensify the psychic vibrations emanating from the ocular organs. Of course, I could not actually make out what the message was supposed to be, but I feel sure it had something to do with mating."

"Actually," Acorna said, "from what I have read of the culture Uncle Hafiz comes from, the dance was originally performed by females encouraging other females when they are in labor with their young. The female about to give birth is supposed to emulate the abdominal movements of the dancers in order to hasten her baby's entrance into the world. Practicing the dance from the time they are young girls strengthens the muscles required to give birth as well."

"Ahhh," Aari said. "I felt sure there was some deeper meaning. Do the acrobatic feats and the airborne activities also play a role in human childbirth?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Acorna said, suppressing a smile in spite of herself. This was starting to sound like Aari after all, with his rather whimsical interpretations of other cultures. "I believe the only function of those movements is to enhance the performance of the entertainers."

She found her feet tapping and her hands patting her thighs as she listened to the music. Watching Laarye and the girls cavort, with Maati following Laarye's prance and the dancing girls joining in as if it was a new step, Acorna jumped to her feet, grabbed Aari's hand, and pulled him into the dance, too. The dancers shimmied and undulated for a moment or two while looking askance at the high-stepping Linyaari, then shrugged and fell in behind, so that Laarye was leading a line of dancers that soon took in the entire audience.

For the first time since Aari's arrival, Acorna's tension vanished, a thing of the past as if each dance step kicked it farther away. Aari capered and kicked behind her, and she sensed his own relief. He truly had not meant to hurt her—he didn't even know her. Perhaps Rafik was right—they needed to get to know each other all over again, then everything would be fine.

Finally, the giddiness of Acorna's relief turned to weariness. She said good night to Rafik and her friends and sought her usual sleeping mat in Hafiz's guest quarters.

Tired as she was, she hoped she'd sleep well. The sleep Maati had interrupted had been unsatisfactory, plagued as it was by dreams that in some way involved the Khleevi, from what she could recall. She did not wish to return to that kind of sleep again, but she told herself the bad dream only came when she fell asleep in the time lab.

Hard as she tried to reassure herself, she could not find a comfortable position on the mat. Other

thoughts, disturbing in a much pleasanter way, kept intruding, adding to her restlessness.

~~Aari's presence stirred her on a number of levels, including the most basic physical ones.~~ She had become *used* to responding to him, and now, even though her mind was telling her it wasn't a good idea, her body still wanted to. She wondered again if there was a way the time device could be used to integrate her original Aari with the current one—so that memories of her and his other friends were not merely hearsay to him, but experiences he had been a part of, that had moved and changed him emotionally.

She had to admit, though, that the new Aari sure could dance.

But something else bothered her too much to allow her to sleep. While dancing with the entertainers, she had caught random snatches of thought from those around her.

“After...find out where...back to ship...”

Those thoughts, especially in a group of space travelers such as those at the dinner, could have been perfectly innocent. But she was almost certain she'd picked up the words from the dancers. And she felt that there was something secretive behind them, just as there was something profoundly unfriendly lurking behind the women's professional smiles.

Perhaps it was nothing. Maybe it was simply that the dancers had led rather difficult lives and feared to trust the people they met on their travels. The young girl Layla had seemed to like Maati. Those feelings had been genuine, Acorna was sure. Layla had gone out of her way to be amiable to the young Linyaari girl. Of course, Maati was easy to like.

It was certainly true, in Acorna's experience, that many humans found the Linyaari comforting to be around and enjoyed their company.

But the soothing Linyaari aura had not seemed to affect these dancers in the same way it did ordinary humans.

Acorna tossed and turned restlessly for perhaps two hours of Standard time. Maati was not sleeping on the pallet beside her as she usually did when they both visited MOO. Perhaps she, too, had been troubled by the thoughts of the newcomers.

Acorna finally decided that, between her thoughts and the energetic dancing, she was too stimulated to sleep. She got up from her pallet and quickly dressed. She would go for a walk in an attempt to calm herself into sleep mode.

Night and day were engineered events on MOO, so there were activities available for people whose bodies were on other schedules than the one programmed into the enormous envirobubbles housing each major area of MOO's multitude of domestic quarters. She might go to the lab, see Aari's parents were working there, and get their impressions of their newly returned sons. Or perhaps she'd look for Maati. The girl was fond of hanging out in the com shed and talking to others who were the human equivalent of her age. She had made friends with many of the Moonbase students and the denizens of the *Haven* when they were in port.

Acorna walked out of the guest quarters and stepped onto the pedestrian thoroughfare connecting the various envirobubbles with each other. The terminal and docking bays were in one direction, the laboratories in the opposite one. She closed her eyes and conducted a mental search for her friends. She didn't call to them. She simply tried to locate them by tracking their auras. Her mental powers had grown tremendously since she first rejoined her people. The earliest glimmer of psychic ability she had demonstrated, the power simply to look at an asteroid through a com screen or view port and discern its mineral content, had matured into a sort of mental sonar that allowed her, when she concentrated, to discern many details about her environment and to locate specific features contained within it.

Never before had she attempted to use that sense in this particular way, but now, in her indecision, she searched for people as naturally as she would grasses or metals or other aspects of her

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