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Chapter 2 - Making A Proposition

Planet Fenris A Month Later

EIGHT WEEKS after the decision to use Katherine's program had been implemented, the clan representatives from O'Teague, Yang and DeMedici from the Committee for Restoration and Immigration arrived on Fenris. The next day they met with the base commandant, one Admiral Noel Harris, who had been handed the unrewarding job of finding placements for thousands of returning soldiers whose planets had been burned off.

Fenris had set up re-location depots in the old military bases from which combat ready warriors had departed for the war. The bases had the advantage of meeting all the basic needs of anyone who stayed there, food dispensers and housing which although utilitarian was clean and functional. The planetary government had plans to convert these bases into low-level hostleries to attract tourists as soon as they could rid themselves of all the returning ex-military. Some of the Clan leaders preferred to stay in the resort hotels for which Fenris had once been famous. However, Katherine and Corrine had chosen to take up residence in the main base so they could have easy access to the bases' computers, which were an essential part of

Katherine's plan. She would need to set up her program to accept the chosen men's information so it could begin matching them with the Vensoog women.

Clan O'Teague had already decided that if possible it would be best to go with a single unit or two who were willing to re-locate and met their requirements. Today Katherine would start her interviews with the officers in command of the various groups who had expressed interest in finding a new home as a unit.

"Are you ready for this?" Corrine inquired.

Katherine blew out a breath. "I have to be, don't I?" She treasured a private hope that among the soldiers she would find the soul mate she had almost given up hope of finding. Now that the end was in sight, she was a bundle of nerves.

For maximum impact, she had dressed carefully in the full outfit a Clan Lady of Vensoog would wear for an important meeting. A semi-transparent loose linen blouse and pants in bright colors, topped with a tight fitting leather vest rounded to cup her full breasts, and cinched at the waist with bright colored ribbons. The long sleeves and pant cuffs were gathered at the wrist and ankles. Her low-heeled shoes were mesh on top with crisscross ties running up the outside of her calves and tied off under the knees. A tall, flat crowned, wide-brimmed hat with a veil that could be brought down to cover her face completed the outfit. Although normally she would have taken the hat off indoors, she wore it now for the full impact. Sooka, her pet Quirka, leaped to her shoulder and clung to the straps on the padded shoulders of the vest. Katherine reached up and stroked her absently.

Corrine studied her and then made a twirling motion with her finger. Obediently, Katherine turned in a circle so Corrine could see the full effect.

"Well?" she asked impatiently.

Corrine chuckled, "Oh, Honey, they're sure not going to have any

trouble deciding marriage would be no hardship with you.”

Katherine frowned. “Too much?” she asked.

Corrine shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. Remember we are asking them to make quite a few concessions about their way of life. They need a place to go, but it may be hard for them discount the rumors about Vensoog women and to change how they view their rights under our laws. They need to see an attractive package to make that change more palatable.”

Katherine grimaced. “Especially when I inform them about the re-education and sleep learning you mean?”

By noon, Katherine had interviewed five Majors and one Colonel and she was beginning to think she would not find what she was looking for here. As yet, she had only one possibility and that one was doubtful at best. She had yet to explain the full program to any of the potential candidates because her little inner voice kept saying “no”.

Smiling graciously at Colonel Tomas Lewiston, she thanked him for his interest in the proposal and sent him on his way. She couldn’t put a name to her reluctance, but she had absolutely no intention of considering him or any unit he commanded. On the surface, he was an impressive enough specimen. He was tall, with almost perfectly chiseled features, he had a well-built body, and a decided air of command. He also had a smooth manner verging on oily. If she hadn’t had the underlying feeling that he had another agenda, she might have given him more consideration. Besides, Sooka, whose judgment of character was usually excellent, had hissed at him and he couldn’t quite conceal his distaste of her pet.

Katherine was using one of the auxiliary conference rooms on the base. After he left, she rose and went to the wall of windows looking out over the city. The view was spectacular. To the left was a magnificent view of high snow-capped peaks, the tall spires of the city and a white strip of

beach next to an azure ocean. The beach was sparsely populated in comparison to the thousands of tourists who had clustered there before the war made interplanetary travel dangerous. The empty beach was testament to Fenris' urgency in getting their planet back to becoming a "destination" for tourists.

Fenris had been named before the early explorers had actually set foot there and discovered how inappropriate naming the planet after the devouring wolf of Ragganok had been. The name certainly hadn't described a world of pristine, snow-capped peaks excellent for winter sports, bucolic countryside ideal for gentle activities or the white-sandy beaches with just enough waves for surfing or sport fishing. Unfortunately, Fenris was woefully short of heavy metals, but the Fenriki had quickly overcome this disadvantage by developing the world into a vacation destination for the rich and famous of the Confederated Worlds. Fenris' strategic location had also made it ideal as a staging area for the military to collect and send out their forces for the war. Now that the war was mostly over, The Fenriki were scrambling to return their world to its former status as the foremost resort planet and trade center in the depleted Confederated Worlds.

Katherine took a deep breath and set up for the next interview. Some of the commanding officers Katherine had interviewed had come alone, some with support personnel. It was obvious the three men who entered this time were a unit, and a military one at that. There was only a superficial physical resemblance between them; the oldest was tall and wide, with a pleasant face topped with a shock of blond hair streaked with white. In fact, Master Sgt. Vernel Thomas resembled a kindly grandfather until you met his eyes directly and saw inside to the tough soldier he really was. Colonel Gideon Michaels was shorter than Thomas but his smooth-shaven, square-jawed face held strength and determination. Although his loose civilian clothing helped to disguise the real muscle in his lanky body, it didn't hide

the smooth power with which he moved. His tanned face was in sharp contrast to his keen green eyes and pale blond hair and eyebrows set over a jutting beak of a nose. Lieutenant. Zachary Jackson was around medium height and his brown eyes were on a level with Katharine's. He had the wiry, powerful build of a trained hand-to-hand warrior built for speed and maneuverability rather than bulk. His smooth olive complexion and thick shock of brown hair was worn a little long and showed his Black Irish Old Earth ancestry. He too moved with the effortless ease of a man used to physical activity. What marked the three men as a unit was a similarity of expression and attitude. These men were obviously used to depending on each other.

Everything in Katherine stood up and paid attention, and her intuition, which given out a constant litany of No, or Never! at the other candidates suddenly shouted Yes! at her when she met Zackery Jackson's eyes. She looked them over more carefully.

All three men bowed as they entered, and Colonel Michaels said politely, "How do you do Lady Katherine. I am Colonel Gideon Michaels, of the 10th Infantry volunteers, Planet Moodon. This is my 2nd Officer, Lieutenant Zachary Jackson and my leading Master Sgt. Vernel Thomas."

The window behind Katherine had put her face in shadow, but it gave her an excellent view of the three men's expressions as they got their first good look at her. Stunned relief would have been appropriate. She smiled a little to herself. Corrine had been correct; the over-the-top outfit had been worth it. Rumors of why the delegation from Vensoog had arrived were already rife, and by this time Katherine had endured some less than respectful attitudes from some of the men she had interviewed. This was the first group who had used her title without being prompted. She also detected none of the leering postures caused by her "husband hunting" displayed by some of the previous candidates.

"Please be seated gentleman," she indicated the chairs opposite her. "Allow me to present my condolences on the loss of your homeworld."

"Thank you," Michaels responded. "We offer our condolences on your losses also, M'lady."

Just then, Sooka, who had quietly gone unnoticed by most of the other candidates, hopped off Katherine's shoulder and bounced over to Lieutenant Jackson, springing up onto the arm of his chair. Startled, he jumped "Well, now, who are you?" he inquired, with just the right note of amusement to please Katherine.

"That is Sooka," Katherine replied. She is a Quirka. Many of us keep them as companions. They are empathic. Apparently, she approves of you. You can pet her as long as you stroke downward on her fur."

"Why she's changing color!" exclaimed Vernal.

"Yes, they have chameleon-like qualities," Katherine replied.

"You brought a pet along on an interstellar trip?" asked Zack incredulously.

"It was necessary," Katherine responded. "She is not exactly a pet. A Quirka's empathic attachment to their chosen human is very deep. A separation of so many months would have caused her to go into a depression and she would have starved herself to death in my absence. She was no real trouble on the journey; Quirkas are omnivores and with a box of sand in my quarters as a toilet, all I had to do was order the appropriate food from the dispenser."

She watched Sooka carefully as the small creature leaped from one of the men to the other investigating each one carefully, before returning to Zack's lap.

"So tell me Colonel, what are your plans for the future?" she asked.

Gideon looked up from watching Zack play with Sooka. "Most of the men in my command are from Moodon, like me. As you know, Moodon was

one of the worlds burned off by the enemy. I would like for us to be able to find a new homeworld where we could all settle together."

"And why is that?"

"Well, most of my unit entered the service as a group and we've served together so long we have become each other's family. If we hadn't been together when we heard Moodon was destroyed, I don't think some of us would have made it."

"How do you feel about taking orders from women?"

He shrugged. "I don't see a problem. On Moodon we considered men and women to be equals; women as well as men give orders."

Katherine turned to the Vernel. "And you, sir, how do you feel about that?"

"I do my job. I take my orders and carry them out. Doesn't make me any nevermind who gives them. I'm not a leader."

"Lieutenant Jackson?" she asked.

Zack rubbed his nose. "Everyone has a different idea of how folks should behave."

"I'm afraid that isn't quite good enough. I require a full answer. On Vensoog, our men only hold property through their wives and daughters and they can't hold an office except as a deputy for a wife or daughter. How do you feel about that?"

"To answer that question properly, I would need to see the text of the law so I can determine how fair it actually is," he replied.

"That," replied Katherine, rather pleased, "is a very good answer. I would have been disappointed if all of you had simply given me a flat yes. It would have shown duplicity."

"Are you saying we would be second class citizens?" Michaels asked, "Because that is not something I find acceptable."

"Not at all; you and your men would be full members of the Clan

O'Teague. Traditionally most of our law enforcement and defensive offices have been held by men. It is simply that due to the war most of these offices are currently held by women and of course, Clan leadership, property and inheritance are held in the female line."

Michaels nodded. "Okay, I think we all need to see the actual terms of the bargain you want us to agree to before we go any further."

"I agree," Katherine said. "But perhaps you would like to provide me with a text of what you desire for your new homeland as well, that way when we meet tomorrow, we can see if we want to take this any further?"

She stood and took three data crystals from her belt pouch and handed them to each man. "Here is the contract you and your men would be required to sign in order to become members of Clan O'Teague, as well as a text of our laws and privileges. May I hope you will send me your requirements by this afternoon?"

All three men had risen when she did. "I actually brought that information with me," Michaels replied and offered her a data crystal in return.

Katherine took it, smiling. "I like a man who comes prepared," she remarked. "Why don't we agree to meet over lunch in the canteen tomorrow for further discussion? You will be able to meet my chaperone and mentor, Lady Corrine then."

The next day at noon, Corrine and Katherine programmed their meals in the robo-chef on the side of the canteen away from the windows and then took their food trays to an unoccupied round table in one of the alcoves. They were joined a few minutes later by the three men. The canteen was in a bulky plastacrete building designed to feed large groups of people. It had privacy alcoves with large windows for officers and others who needed to discuss matters they didn't wish broadcast wholesale. The portable chairs and tables could have (and had) served ten thousand diners at a sitting.

Now it appeared to be only about a third full.

All three men were a little taken aback to discover that the Quirka were apparently dining with them. Katherine and Corrine had provided small bowls of finely chopped raw meats and vegetables for each pet as well as a small finger bowl of water. The two Quirkas perched on their haunches on the table beside the women and waited patiently for the meal to begin. Unselfconsciously, Corrine bowed her head and said a quick Grace. There was trifle awkwardness in the beginning of the shared meal, but Corrine and Vernal soon provided an opening for normal table conversation.

"Lady Katherine said you keep these as companions?" Vernel inquired, pointing with his chin at the two Quirkas.

"Oh, yes," Corrine replied, "but they are also avid hunters of household vermin, and in fact prefer to hunt live prey. They are quite valued for their ability to keep homes and other buildings clear of pests."

The rest of the dinner conversation concerned the animals and plants native to Vensoog. At the end of the meal, Vernal was delighted when the Quirka fastidiously washed their paws and muzzles in the fingerbowls.

Once the dishes had been removed and sent to the recycler, Katherine raised the subject that had been foremost on all their minds.

"I looked over your requests for accommodation, and I see no issues we would have difficulty filling." She began, "as long as those of your unit who don't wish to be a part of the matchmaking program are comfortable in providing sperm or ova for the DNA banks, they would receive the same full Clan rights as those who are handfasted."

"From my viewing of the data you provided, I noticed you required everyone to take part in the compatibility testing even if they aren't planning on being matched. Why is that?" inquired Zack.

"We use compatibility and personality evaluation quite extensively on Vensoog to determine what training and professions a person is cut out for.

It will help with the placement of your unit in professions best suited to them. The evaluations also help to bring to notice issues that might require counseling or re-training. This is going to be a difficult undertaking for us all. I want to catch any problem areas early before they grow.”

“If a problem shows up on someone’s evaluation would that be cause for not accepting them as an immigrant? Some of our men suffered extreme losses, and a few have PTSD issues and won’t show up as ‘normal’ on evaluations,” Thomas stated.

Corrine reached across the table and patted his hand. “Vernal, that type of issue isn’t what the evaluations are designed to weed out. More specifically, it flags traits that would lead to pathological criminal behavior; you know serial killers, child molesters, and stuff like that. I’m sure none of your men have personas with those markers.”

“Soldiers are trained to kill,” Gideon pointed out.

“Yes, but there is a difference between someone who has been trained to kill for a reason and those who just do it for their own gratification. The personality markers do actually look quite different. If I find anyone who does show up with those markers, you will be allowed to speak for them and we will then make a decision. Will that be sufficient?” Katherine asked.

“Well there is one more thing that puzzles me, why are we all being required to do sleep learning about the planet? Soldiers are trained to learn to survive in different environments quickly without any extra crutches like sleep learning.”

Katherine responded “With all due respect Zack, we are attempting to integrate your men into our society as smoothly and as soon as possible. When you were dropped on strange planets to fight, you weren’t also learning to adapt to a completely new set of laws and customs as well as recognizing dangerous plants and animals. It’s a lot to take on at once and we will only have about three months from the time I start running the

program until we arrive. I hope to have all the data entered so everyone who wants a spouse will know who their handfasting partner is going to be before we take ship."

"Are you part of the program?" Zack inquired.

"Yes. My sister Drusilla is too young for Handfasting; she is only sixteen, but both our Laird Genevieve and I have entered our data for Handfasting," she responded. "My sisters and I feel it is important to show we believe in this program by participating fully."

The three men exchanged looks, and finally Zack and Vernel nodded to Gideon who said, "If it is acceptable to you M'lady, we will bring this to our men and have an answer for you tomorrow."

"Thank you Gentlemen, I hope you will join us for breakfast with good news." Katherine watched as the three left the canteen.

She looked over at her aunt. "Why do I feel as if I just stepped off the Glass Cliffs?"

"Cause we have," retorted Corrine. Absently she ran a finger down Divit, her Quirka's head. "In point of fact I'm pretty favorably impressed by those three. I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting, but if they are an indication of the quality of the new clan members we'll be getting, this is going to work. You did good, girl."

Katherine grimaced. "I wish I could say that about my trip to the orphanage. They have unclaimed children, but don't seem to want them to be adopted. And something smelled off, you know? Juliette, one of the children I met seemed to be afraid and she tried to tell me something bad was going down but we were interrupted before I could find out what. I did manage to find out the Administrator's schedule while I was there, so I think I'll make a return trip when he is out of the office."

"Humm," Corrine considered. "Well, just be careful. On a brighter note, I made contact with Captain Hidelberg of the Dancing Gryphon. You

may remember him; his family runs a free trade line out of N'Jamacia. His ship was commandeered as a troop transport during the war, but he is getting it back as soon as the military removes the weapons, and he is anxious to resume trade. He agreed to give us transport home at a reduced rate in return for a favorable trade contract with the Clan to supply power stones and Dragon Nest silks for the next five years."

"And long term? What will he be bringing to trade for those items?"

Corrine shrugged a shoulder. "He has seeds, tools, techy items like computer quartz grinders, all kinds of stuff. The real profit is he agreed to give Clan O'Teague first crack at any items he brings in for trade for the next five years."

Katherine looked in awe at her aunt. "Wow. How did you manage that?" She eyed her Aunt suspiciously. "I remember Hidelberg as being a tough customer at the trade table. You didn't *push* to get him to agree, did you?"

"Of course not," Corrine retorted. "He knows too much about Vensoog for me to try something like that with him. Besides, I didn't need to. I did some research on the way here and discovered that N'Jamacia really suffered from a lack of trade during the Wars. Remember, they export mostly luxury and high-tech goods. The military commandeered or paid low-ball prices for the tech stuff during the Wars, and the luxury goods sat in the warehouses, since most of the trade ships were converted to troop transports. They need us."

Sunrise on Fenris was certainly beautiful, Katherine reflected. Several days had passed since she had accepted Gideon's unit for the program and the men were busy entering their data and playing the shooter/treasure hunter game she had provided. The game actually was an essential part of the program because it recorded each player's responses, reactions and decision making to various situations and integrated them into the

personality profiles.

She and Sooka had cleared out of the apartment allocated to them by base command because Corrine was a late sleeper and complained they woke her moving around, no matter how quiet they tried to be. Since she and Sooka virtually had the dining hall to themselves this early, they had commandeered a table in an alcove that gave a view of the city and the pristine beaches. The rising sun turned the unspoiled beach to a ribbon of white edged by sparkling aqua waters. It also made the multi-colored city buildings look as if they had been stained by a child's bright crayon.

"May I join you?"

She looked up to smile at Zack. He also was an early riser apparently and had taken to joining them for breakfast.

She made a welcoming gesture to the chair opposite. "Of course."

"Well, that's a relief. After you turned down my dinner invitation last night—"

"Well, breakfast is much more informal and less likely to cause talk."

He cocked his head at her "Why are you worried about causing talk?"

"Lieutenant—how shall I say this? When we arrive on Vensoog, you will be handfasted with someone and so shall I. This program is very important to my people; I need to show I believe it will work in order to convince them to try it. I would prefer there be no gossip about our relationship on Fenris if we are matched with other people when we arrive home. It will make everything much smoother."

"I see. But breakfast is okay? How about lunch? I'm not giving up, you know."

Katherine smiled in spite of herself. "Breakfast is fine. At lunch we probably will have the others joining us." She was surprised to find herself a little flustered by the obvious masculine approval she read in Zack's eyes. When the war had started, she had been too young for any serious

relationships, and later when she was old enough, the majority of the young men who would have courted her were off planet.

“Beautiful isn’t it?” Zack remarked, nodding to the view out the windows.

“Oh, yes. It almost reminds me of home, except this doesn’t look quite real.”

Just then, Zack’s com chimed softly. He frowned at the telltale on the indicator and said, “I’m sorry, I have to take this,” and invoked the privacy mode. A shielding cocoon formed around him, making it impossible to see or hear to whom he was talking.

Katherine looked over at Sooka, who was industriously finishing off a very large helping of breakfast. The Quirka seemed to sparkle in the sunlight that was beginning to edge in the window. Katherine sniffed experimentally, and immediately noticed a faint musky odor.

“Uh-Oh,” she grimaced. “It does come inconveniently for us girls doesn’t it Sweetie? I hope you and Divit like each other, because I’m afraid you won’t have much choice when the time comes.”

Sooka made a whuffling noise as if she agreed. Katherine was never sure how much the little creature actually understood of her conversation. They were empathic but not telepathic. Quirka’s did not usually make permanent bonds with their choice when mating unless their human partners were involved. However, both sexes cared equally for the pups until they were old enough to bond with a human.

Zack finished his conversation and shut down the privacy cone, but he continued to scowl fiercely and drummed his fingers on the table.

“Is something the matter My Lord?” Katherine automatically gave him the courtesy title he would be accorded on Vensoog.

“What? No. Yes, by the Void, there is. In the last battle, my best friend, Timol was killed. He died saving my life. He left behind two boys,

twins, here on Fenris. Their mother is dead and I promised him I would take care of them. I've been trying to gain custody, but I am running into roadblocks put up by the placement center. I just heard back from the Child Placement Center where they sent them. Now they're claiming that another relative has come forward to demand custody of them. Damnit, Timol didn't have any relatives! That's why he asked me to take his boys."

"Are you certain he didn't have any relatives? What about the mother?"

Zack made a rude noise. "The mother's dead. Some wasting disease I think. She only had one sister and she was killed a few months before the war ended and no grandparents. That's why the boys ended up in that Center. Timol was raised by the State."

"Humnn. What is the name of the relative that came forward?"

"Jerrod van Doyle."

Katherine looked sharply at him. "Are you sure that's the name?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because I do think you have a problem. I had reason to check out the name of Jerrod van Doyle in regards to three other children at that Placement Center I tried to adopt. He's listed as their next of kin also. Juliette, one of the girls told me she is afraid of him so I checked with a friend in the interplanetary police and I discovered he's on a watch list for trafficking in children."

Something cold rose up and died behind his eyes. "Well, he's not getting Timol's boys."

"No. I agree with you and I think you and I might just be able to help each other out with this. Come up to my office where we can talk privately. There won't be anyone around this early."

As they left, neither of them noticed the expression of the tall woman who had started toward their table. She wore a Lieutenant's uniform. Her

white-blond hair, cut short in a style favored by the military, framed striking, well-cut features. Just now, her red, bow shaped lips were set in an angry scowl.

Once in her office, Katherine pulled up the virtual screen and pointed to a line of code. "You see this? This shows where the children's records have been altered to show van Doyle as a relative. It's not the only time he's done it either. There's a record of this type of alteration of children's records going back to before the wars. The only really recent changes though are to these five records. Timol's two boys and these three girls. I spoke to the oldest girl the last time I went out there. Her name is Juliette. When I congratulated her on finding a relative, she was the one who clued me in on what was about to happen. She is a very clever little girl. I promised her I would help her."

"Help her? How" Zack questioned.

"There are only two ways to remove a child from that Placement Center. They can be adopted, which we already tried and were turned down, or they can be claimed by a relative. It doesn't have to be a really close relative either. How would you feel about gaining a couple of nephews and three girl cousins?"

"And when they find out you've altered the coding to show I'm related to them? I assume that's what you are talking about."

Katherine laughed. "Well, it is, but nothing as crude as what I just showed you. I assure you that I am a much better programmer than whoever designed this package. What's more I can make their changes so obvious no one could miss them."

He sat frowning at her. "Are you really that good?"

"Yes, I'm really that good. I may as well confess to you, that I was planning to do this anyway, but I was going to use the name of clan a member who was killed in action. The program has already been dropped in

the database. All I need to do is substitute your name for his and activate the code."

"Lady, you are piece of work," he said, half admiringly, half horrified. "Let's go for it."

"Wonderful! Meet me in front of the gate at 1400 hours. We have a meeting with the City Mayor to discuss this issue this afternoon. Wear your uniform, so you look heroic, and leave the talking to me. A live hero showing up in person always harder to ignore than a dead one anyway," she added.

Zack shook his head. "I hope I'm not going to regret this," he remarked.

Gestuv Yance, The City Mayor, was short, round, and already going bald. He was plainly overwhelmed to be rubbing shoulders with a member of the royal family of another planet. He was also thrilled to be invited to the Planetary Governor's Ball to be given in honor of the exalted visitors from Vensoog and several other visiting dignitaries. It was obvious dreams of advancement and influence danced in his head. Zack watched with hidden amusement as Katherine not quite flirted with the Mayor. Today, she had also dressed to impress; the outfit clung lovingly to her, and Mayor Yance was so busy trying to see through her transparent blouse and not get caught doing it that he signed and sealed the custody papers without even reading them.

The robocar that met them outside the Mayor's office was built to carry at least ten passengers. Somehow, Zack was unsurprised to hear Katherine give the address of the Child Placement Center. Obviously, she had been prepared to move quickly.

"You had this plan already ready to go," didn't you," he remarked. "I'm impressed".

"The administrator is gone this afternoon," she explained, "It's his regular mid-week appointment in the city. That assistant of his is too used to

rolling over for authority figures. I plan for us to have those children safe with us before he returns from his afternoon sex appointment.”

“And just how, may I ask, do you know he will be gone?” Zack inquired skeptically.

She shrugged. “Juliette seems to know everything that goes on in that place. I had quite a conversation with her when I saw her last week.”

She took out her com. “There is one more call we need to make. I want to let Commander Veratos know that we are going to remove the children. She’s in charge of the IPP task force on human trafficking here on Fenris. She contacted me when I put through a query about van Doyle.”

Zack was rapidly gaining considerable respect for Katherine’s preparations. She had planned the entire operation out like a military campaign. As she had predicted, the Administrative assistant left in charge sputtered in distress when they collected the children, but Zack and Katherine were in and out of the facility accompanied by five children, luggage and personal possessions inside of fifteen minutes.

As their car pulled away, Zack noticed that a bright red robocar pulled into the compound they had just left. “That’s van Doyle’s bus,” Juliette warned. “He’ll be having a fit when he finds us gone.”

Her voice was quiet, but Zack could read the underlying tension in it. She was a thin child, with bright green eyes and a shock of brilliantly red hair. Zack judged her age to be around ten years old. Katherine patted her hand “don’t worry about that,” and she handed Juliette a copy of the papers signed by the mayor, which Juliette scanned with every appearance of comprehension. Maybe she was older than ten. It was hard for him to judge girl children’s ages unless they had entered puberty.

“Meet your new Uncle, “Katherine nodded to the boys, “and your third cousin girls, Zack Jackson. He now has custody of you five and as an accepted immigrant to Vensoog, he is entitled to take his family with him. I

don't think there will be difficulties; unless I miss my guess, Grouter and van Doyle are about to be up to their ears in trouble with IPP."

"The program!" Zack exclaimed. "Will the changes you made stand up to a police inquiry?"

Katherine shrugged. "All I did was make their alterations more obvious. My changes are going to look like new information written into the database as a result of records entered after the war."

She smiled at the children. "Juliette and I have met, but since the rest of you don't know me, I am Lady Katherine of Clan O'Teague. Why don't you introduce yourselves to your new Uncle and tell him a little bit about how you came to be at the center?"

The twin boys, age ten, looked at Zack with identical measuring stares. "Are you really our father's brother, sir?"

"In a manner speaking. Timol was my blood brother and best friend from the time we were children. We were raised in a placement center after both of us were orphaned. We adopted each other, entered the service together and served together. I was with him when he died and I gave him my word to look after you and teach you how to become men."

He looked at the bigger twin "Rodrick, right? And you would be Rupert? Welcome home boys."

They nodded silently. Katherine decided that the boys' dark hair, eyes and skin from their mixed race heritage would pass as a family resemblance.

The girls, on the other hand didn't resemble Zack at all. Violet was the youngest and she plainly showed her mixed Asian ancestry. Lucinda the next oldest of the girls, had a pale complexion, ash blond hair and grey eyes. All the children looked underweight a trifle but none of them looked malnourished, and they wore clean if worn clothing. Mentally, she judged their sizes. A visit from the tailor was going to be in order, she decided.

"Where are we going?" inquired Juliette.

"We are going back to the base. We have quarters there until the Dancing Gryphon is ready to leave. Since Zack is billeted with his unit you five will be staying in my quarters with my Aunt Corrine and me. We were allotted a General's accommodations so we have extra bedrooms and a recreation room."

"I'm hungry," Violet announced.

Katherine smiled at her. "As soon as we get your gear dropped off in our quarters, we'll head down to the commissary for a snack," she promised. "What kind of foods do you like to eat?"

The dinner table that night was quite crowded. Corrine had suggested that the three men begin joining them for meals shortly after choosing their unit. With the addition of the children, it made the meal almost feel like home, Katherine realized. At Glass Castle, as well as a table for the Laird's family, the dining room was often crowded with visitors to the clan and students of various ages.

Katherine rapidly discovered the drawbacks to being thrown into the deep end of the motherhood pool; being responsible for selecting healthy and suitable nutritional foods for five children and a Quirka was very time consuming. By the time she was finally able to sit down at the table with her own meal, she had settled two wrangles over who got to sit by Sooka, showed Roderick and Juliette how to use the selection buttons on the robochef and persuaded Rupert that a few vegetables wouldn't poison him. She hoped it would grow easier once she and the children learned each other's food preferences.

Once everyone was occupied with filling their bellies, Katherine was able to address her own needs. Becoming the mother of five children all at once was a new and worrisome experience. She also knew she had a long way to go to win the children's trust. Juliette, while grateful for the rescue from van Doyle's clutches, was still wary of her intentions and she had a

powerful influence on the others.

Gideon cleared his throat, "Um—Lady Katherine, I have a favor to ask."

"Yes of course if I can. What can I do for you, Lord Gideon?"

He looked a little self-conscious at the title. "I too have a couple of wards that I desire to take with me to Vensoog. Lucas is sixteen. His grandfather sent him to me when Gwynedd was overrun. He is old enough to stay with me in the barracks, but my niece Jayla is only thirteen and for obvious reasons, I would rather she not be quartered with the unit. My brother and his wife had sent her off planet when they learned Moodon had become a target. After Moodon was destroyed and they were killed, she became my ward. She and Lucas will be arriving on the nineteenth. Would it be possible to make room for Jayla in your quarters?"

"Of course. As you may know, we've been given a General's lodgings and have plenty of bedrooms. Also, there are always those handy portable walls! It might be possible for Lucas to stay with Corrine and me also. We'll figure something out."

They were just cleaning up the table from the meal when they were approached by a tall, athletic blond woman who greeted Zack with enthusiasm. Hastily disengaging himself from her attempted embrace, he introduced her as Lieutenant Darla Lister from Colonel Lewiston's command.

"Don't be so formal Zack," Lieutenant Lister said. "I'm sure your new friends can spare you long enough to spend the evening with an old friend."

Zack sent Katherine a harassed look. She responded immediately, "It is nice to have time to visit with old friends, isn't it Lieutenant? I'm afraid though, that Zack has some other duties this evening. This is a new place Zack and I'm sure your new wards would appreciate your being on hand to help them get settled in for the night."

Zack smiled quite naturally at Darla. "Yes, I'm sure they would.

Perhaps some other time?"

A spark of red anger showed in her eyes at his rejection, but she was too well trained to let it be noticed. "Why Zack, you didn't tell me you had gotten married. And to a woman with so many children too!"

"Actually, although I will be getting married shortly, I don't have the name of my bride as yet," he responded coolly. "These are my nephews and cousins. I've just taken custody of them from the Placement Center. They will be accompanying me to Vensoog."

Darla watched the group leave with narrowed eyes. "Trouble in paradise?" inquired Colonel Lewiston's smooth voice from behind her.

"O'Teague, that's the clan you applied for first, isn't it? She retorted with just the right touch of mockery. "I hear she didn't like you."

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, Lister." He shrugged. "Clan DeMedici will suit us just as well, and I'm finding Donna Sabina easy to control. She finds me very attractive. And that will get us free passage to Vensoog where we can implement the rest of the plan."