



# EXCERPT

# TO LOVE &

# HONOR

The Handfasting Series – Book 5

Lucinda was a "designer child". Given genius level intelligence in an embryonic Thieves Guild lab, she learned survival in a harsh world. At twelve, she was rescued and adopted into a loving family. As an adult Lucinda chose to fight her former masters by joining the police force. She works hard to earn her place among Vensoog's law enforcement community. On her first assignment, compassion impels her to protect an alien mother and daughter fleeing off-planet bounty hunters. To ensure their safety, she must defeat a deadly Soturi warrior in hand-to-hand combat. Then she rescues a 'designer child' who is a younger double for herself from a sex trafficking ring. To solve this case and rescue the other children trapped by those same criminals, she must capture a vicious Thieves Guild assassin. But even with the help of the best private eye on Vensoog, these are tough cases for a rookie cop.

[gaildaley2955@comcast.net](mailto:gaildaley2955@comcast.net)

## *Sister, Sister*

IT WAS MIDNIGHT and Lucinda nursed a cup of Cafka as she waited for the time to report in for her first shift on Port Recovery's Security forces. Agra, her Dactyl, snuggled with her littermate Saura in the fur-lined nest made especially for them. Dactyls were six-limbed flying mammals native to Vensoog. They came in all sizes, from creatures large enough to hunt the Water Dragons living in the rivers and along the channels between the Equator Islands, to miniatures like Agra and Saura who were tiny enough to hold in your hand. Although tiny, they possessed all the characteristics of their species: limitless curiosity about the world around them, wings covered with long lint-like hair, a fluffy, down-coated body, talons on the rear feet, and arms with hand-like paws. Humans fell in love with them because of their soft coats, large ears, big dark eyes and pointed noses.

In the wild, Dactyls depended on their lightning fast flight speed to escape from predators. Like the Quirka, another native pet adopted by the settlers, Dactyls were empathic, bonding in love with their chosen humans.

Domesticated dactyls were rare; they were shy and seldom tamed unless taken as kits. Several years ago, Lucinda and her foster brother Rupert had been on a plant foraging expedition and found four orphaned, hungry Dactyl kits and adopted them into the family. The two males had bonded with the girl's foster brothers, Roderick and Rupert.

Because she intended to keep Agra with her while on duty, Lucinda and the dactyl had undergone specialized training as to how the dactyl should behave during the times when she accompanied Lucinda to work.

Lucinda was not yet a full-fledged officer in the planetary police force; all cadets had to do a three-month stint under a trainer before transitioning to a qualified officer. Cadets like Lucinda, and Agra in this case, remained on probation until their trainer was satisfied with their on-the-job performance.

Lucinda was excited to begin, although she let none of her anticipation show in her face, not even to her sister Juliette, sitting across from her in a night robe. The sisters looked nothing alike. Juliette was tiny, with a thin body, green eyes and a long, curly mane of red hair, while Lucinda was tall and full-bodied. Her white-blond hair, cut to chin length, fluffed around a heart-shaped face with red, cupid bow lips, a short nose and light grey eyes.

When Juliette and Lucinda were twelve and their younger sister Violet was ten, Lady Katherine and Lord Zack had come to the center looking for Lord Zack's orphaned nephews Rupert and Roderick.

Discovering the illegal nature of Grouter's operation, the couple had made sure Grouter was arrested for his part in the child sex trade. They adopted Lucinda, Juliette, and Violet as well as Zack's nephews. Although the three girls considered

themselves sisters, they were 'designer children' who had been ordered to specifications. They had been born in a laboratory on one of the moons of Fenris and later lived on Fenris in a child placement center run by Hans Grouter. Grouter hid his identity as a lieutenant in the local Thieves Guild by posing as a dedicated government official, existing in an uneasy alliance with Jerry Van Doyle, who ran the Guilds prostitution business. Over Grouter's protests, Van Doyle recruited much of his "new meat" for the child prostitution arm from the Fenris Child Placement center.

Grouter had plans of his own for the girls, so he protected them from being used by Van Doyle. However, their life was by no means an easy one. From the first day they arrived, they had been subjected to harsh training methods to enable them to utilize their programmed genetics for the Guild's criminal purposes. By the time Lady Katherine and her husband had rescued them, the girls were already an accomplished team of thieves who raided the rich of Fenris at Grouter's request.

Five years after coming to Vensoog, Juliette and Lucinda were just a few months away from receiving their Match Lists. Under Vensoog law, receiving your first List made you a full adult. The Match Lists had been created to help preserve the biological diversity of the human population. Traditionally they were issued by the Makers and given to all young people who came of age during Festivals in the spring and fall of each year. Varying opinions as the usefulness of the lists abounded among natives to Vensoog. Some like Laird Genevieve thought them simply useless, others believed you always found your true love on your List. But that was for the future; right now Lucinda was more concerned with her present situation.

For the next three months she would be on her own in the apartment because Juliette was leaving later that morning on an expedition to the largely unexplored northern continent of Kitzingen.

As Lady Katherine's First Daughter and direct heir, Juliette was learning her trade by shadowing her mother when Parliament was in session. Juliette was destined to be heavily involved in politics; Lady Katherine wasn't only the next in line to rule Veiled Isle, she was Clan O'Teague's Parliamentary Representative. However, Parliament only met three times per year, and Juliette was taking advantage of the free time to go out with one of the exploring expeditions to Kitingzen, the closest of the four largely unexplored continents.

"There is just one *tiny* favor I need you to do while I'm gone," Juliette said.

Lucinda eyed her suspiciously. Juliette's designed genetics made her naturally manipulative, and while Lucinda's had given her genius level intelligence, as a child she had more than once been tricked by her sister into doing something she hadn't intended to do.

"What kind of favor?" she asked.

"I got tapped for helping with the plans for the Harvest Festival and I need you to stand in for me." Seeing the refusal in her sister's face, she rushed on, "it's not a big deal; I'm not in charge of anything. It's mostly showing up at a few meetings

to vote on what the committee decides and going to the reception for the Free Traders when their delegation arrives. Please?"

Lucinda scowled at her. "I might be on duty when they have their meetings. Police work isn't like a regular job; there's a lot of unscheduled overtime."

Juliette smiled winningly at her. "It's okay if you have to miss a couple of meetings because of work. I cleared that with Duchesse St. Vyre, the head of the committee. She won't mind, as long as you let her know."

"What about this reception? Is it formal?"

"Well, yes, but you have that lovely new dress you got for Jayla's wedding. It's a shame to let it sit in the closet."

Trapped, Lucinda gave in. "Oh, alright, just let me know when these meetings take place. You owe me though."

Her sister jumped up and gave her a big hug. "I already uploaded everything to your calendar. You are the absolute, *best* sister. Anything you want, I promise."

"I'm the best patsy, you mean," Lucinda snorted.

The house alarm chimed, signaling her it was time to leave for her shift. She hugged Juliette again and stood up to put on her jacket. "C'mon, Agra, it's time to go," she told the Dactyl, who reluctantly left the warm nest and fluttered over to her shoulder, yawning.

Knowing Juliette would have left for Kitingzen when she came back from work, Lucinda stopped and looked at her. "You be careful out there, okay?"

"I promise," her sister said. "Besides, thanks to Dad, I've got Bridge and Terrence Mann along as minders, remember?"

Lucinda laughed, hugged her again, and left. She opened the garage section attached to their apartment and rolled out her air sled. Agra obediently settled into a made-to-order Quirka Seat attached to the dash. With so many Vensoogers having Quirka, the Quirka Seats, which resembled an upside-down helmet with a glass faceplate, had become popular.

Agra, being about the same size as a Quirka, fit into the seat just fine, her wings taking up the same space as a Quirka's plummy tail. Mini Dactyls such as Agra and Saura came in all colors. Agra's fur was a mixture of pale green, red and yellow, the skin on her face, feet and hands was a pale tan, shading to a darker shade outlining her eyes and on her nose. Dactyls were magpies and loved glittering jewelry, which Agra usually wore in the form of a bracelet around her neck. Tonight, Agra's neck adornment was a braided tan and brown leather collar to match Lucinda's Security uniform. Although plain, Lucinda had added several shiny flat metal bars etched with her badge number.

Settlers had adopted the Dactyls and Quirkas because both animals were small, affectionate and avid hunters of household vermin, which crept into human dwellings despite the best efforts of modern technology. The Quirka's and Dactyls had returned the favor because humans provided a mutually satisfactory love bond, and a ready source of edible goodies.

Lucinda threw a leg over the seat, strapped on her own helmet and fired up the sled. There was still some traffic out because Port Recovery, the capital of Vensoog, never really slept, but this section of the city was quiet as most residents who lived in the girl's neighborhood were in bed.

The apartment was located over a shop near their cousin Jayla's in a high-end merchant section of town. The two-story domed buildings, a necessity because of Vensoog's seasonal hurricane winds, were mostly dark because of the late hour but as she neared the center of town more lights showed in the windows. As she moved toward the core of the island where the city government offices were located, she could see the tips of shuttle noses at the spaceport peeking over the tops of the large government buildings.

When the Clans first landed on Vensoog, the huge city domes had been used as shelters. As the Clans moved to their permanent territories, the domes had been converted to government and commercial uses.

Lucinda parked her sled in the security employees parking lot, showing her brand-new ID to the gate guard, who nodded, grinning at her, and she and Agra went inside for roll call.

There was a mixed assortment of officers waiting in the roll call room: young, old, male and female. Lucinda took a seat by her trainer, Sgt. Mira Forest. She knew she had been lucky to draw Mira, a twenty-year veteran of the streets with a reputation as the best trainer in Port Recovery. One look at Mira and people immediately knew she was a cop from her short pepper and salt hair, tough, blocky build and most of all, the look in her eyes. She was a dead shot with both a pulsar rifle and pistol. Mira had been offered promotions to detective grade numerous times and refused. She preferred to stay on the streets and train young recruits.

Although she was the only one with a Dactyl, Lucinda was relieved to see that about a third of her fellow officers had a Quirka perched on a shoulder. About the size of a human fist, Quirka's faces resembled an Old Earth hedgehog. Quirkas had a squirrel-like body, hand-like paws and feet, a pointed nose and small upstanding ears. Their primary defense against predators in the wild, venom tipped quills, ran along their spine from their shoulders to their plummy tails. Like the small Dactyls, they were omnivores.

Lucinda had been a little worried Agra's presence might cause issues. Officers who were accompanied by Quirka or Dactyls were required to take special courses with them in how the animals should behave while on duty. She had been relieved when Agra easily passed the course. If she had failed, she wouldn't have been able to join Lucinda on duty until she passed.

Lucinda glanced at her mini-porta-tab to ensure she had received the list of the latest B.O.L.O. (Be On The Lookout) updates. A rash of break-ins along the waterfront shops had been happening, some vandalism by persons unknown in a couple of commercial sled parks, there was a list of stolen air sleds, and a peeper had been reported in a couple of neighborhoods.

When she joined Mira in the locker-room, she found the older woman frowning at her own porta-tab.

"Is something wrong?"

Mira tossed her a crystal DNA key for her official sled. "That is for your sled. If you've got one of those fancy Quirka seats for—Agra, is it? You can snap it into place. I'm afraid you'll have to use your personal one. Command hasn't gotten around to issuing them for the rank and file yet."

Lucinda caught the key easily and pulled the Quirka seat out of her locker. Tucking it under her arm, she followed her trainer out to the sled park.

"Why were you frowning just now?"

Mira shrugged. "Nothing really, I heard a few rumors there is some smuggling near the docks."

"Isn't that our area?"

"Uh-huh. This is your first night, so stick close. Don't go chasing off when you see something without telling me first. I'll do the same for you."

Lucinda activated the key and pushed it into the waiting slot on the dash of her sled. The DNA encoding meant that from now on, she would be the only one who could start it. When she gripped the handlebars the sled purred into life. She followed Mira out the gate of the secure lot and the pair of them rode side by side toward the docks and warehouses. There were few homes in this area, just manufacturing, small shops serving the offices and the warehouses who needed access to the ships bringing in meats, fish, harvested crops, and other raw materials from the outer islands.

Lucinda and Mira stopped their sleds at the edge of the district and dismounted, parking the sleds in the designated area saved for official vehicles.

"A map of our patrol area should have been downloaded to your sled controls. Set the monitor to meet us at the warehouses in an hour," Mira instructed.

Several storefronts selling paper, tools and a few all-night eateries serving simple, fast food and Cafka lined both sides of the street leading down to the docks.

"We do a foot patrol from here," Mira told her. "Keep your eyes open for anything unusual."

"That one looks as if there are workers inside," Lucinda said, gesturing to a lighted warehouse with its own attached dock.

Mira consulted her tab. "That belongs to Medford textile. They are supposed to be getting in a shipment of dragon silk to ship off world. We'll swing by there on our beat. We start here; we each take one side of the street. Check the windows and test the shop doors. If you find one open, tag me."

# *Domestic Disturbance*

The street was quiet. At first, Lucinda had been a little nervous, but her nerves soon smoothed out. At least until she found the open door on a shop specializing in small hand tools.

She tapped her shoulder com. "Mira, I've got an unlocked door here."

"Okay, wait for me before you go in," Mira instructed, calling it in as she crossed the street.

Once there, she shone her light on the lock. "Doesn't seem to have been forced," she said. "Okay rookie, this is how it goes down. Draw your weapon. We enter and check each side of the store for someone who shouldn't be there. I'm going in high, you go in low. Try not to shoot any shop owners who just forgot to lock up."

They were moving cautiously through aisles of small tools when they heard the hullabaloo start at the back of the store.

"You cheating bastard! I come down to bring you dinner because you're working late, and I find you boinking this slut!" A woman's voice shouted, and there was a splat as if something messy hit a solid object.

Lucinda turned the corner of an aisle in time to see a man with his trousers partially undone wiping the remains of a messy take-out box dripping sauce and noodles off his face. Just as she arrived, the woman who had obviously thrown it jumped on another woman sitting half-dressed on the low counter. The two went over backwards, pulling hair, kicking and biting.

'Hey, no!" the man cried, and jumped in to separate them.

"PRS! Freeze!" Lucinda shouted. Seeing this had no effect, she holstered her gun and grabbed the nearest combatant, who happened to be the man, and pulled him out of the fight.

In the meantime, Mira had arrived and dived into the roiling mass of flying fists and kicks behind the counter. She separated the half-dressed woman from the pile, dragging her around the display case where there was more room to handcuff her. Climbing over the countertop the wife leaped to attack again, landing on Mira to reach her prisoner. The three careened around the area between the sales counter and a tool display, slipping in the spilled sauce and noodles, as they knocked over stands of products.

Mira ended up on her butt underneath the fighting women. The wife had the advantage now because of the younger woman's cuffed hands, and she used it mercilessly, landing several fist blows and kicks on the other woman's face and breast. She also managed to raise a lump over Mira's eye when she missed her target and got Mira instead.

Shoving the husband down in a seated position against a wall, Lucinda told him sternly, "Stay there," and rushed to help her trainer.

She grabbed the wife by the back of her hair and heaved her off Mira and her captive. She forced the woman down on her belly and pulled her hands behind her to apply restraints.

Disobeying Lucinda's order to stay where he was, the husband got up to help his girlfriend. Agra flew at his face, talons on her hind feet extended. He ducked Agra's charge, but he needed to get by Lucinda to reach Mira and her captive. Her hands busy restraining his cursing wife, Lucinda used her boot to shove him away. He slipped in the spilled dinner again, and ended up on his rump covered in sauce and noodles.

"I told you to stay where I put you! Go sit down!" Lucinda yelled.

Agra flew in his face again, this time hissing a threat.

Eying the Dactyl warily, the man dropped back down.

"You okay?" Lucinda asked Mira, who had staggered to her feet, dragging her captive with her.

"Just dandy," Mira said, swiping a smear of sauce off her chin and then wiping her hand on her captive's still undone blouse. "Welcome to patrol work, rookie." She looked down at the sauce and noodles spattered on her uniform and scowled. "I ought to charge the three of you for my cleaning bill."

"What do we do with them?" Lucinda asked.

Mira studied the three combatants. "Depends if they want to press charges or not."

"I do!" the half-naked one said. "She assaulted me!"

Mira sighed. "Okay, that's one. Anybody else?"

"Yes! I want to exercise *Code Duello!*" the wife snapped. "She's attempting to break up my home."

"*Code Duello* is a civil matter," Mira told her firmly. "You'll have to file that with your Clan Liaison." She looked over at Lucinda. "Call it in rookie."

Lucinda swallowed, and tapped her com, trying frantically to remember the codes for a domestic disturbance and assault.

The rest of the night was uneventful; sort of. They arrested three half-lit tourists serenading what one of them mistakenly thought was the home of a pretty girl he had met in a bar. They couldn't carry a tune between them and the din roused the neighbors as well as the homeowner and his wife. The justifiably annoyed homeowners had called in the disturbance and the irate husband had dumped a bucket of water on them. The neighbors had come out to watch.

"Call the wagon," Mira told her as they rode up, "and then shut them up." She indicated the trio of drunken singers. "I've got the homeowners."

"He didn't need to call you guys; we didn't know she was married," the first singer protested, when Lucinda identified herself to them.

"I don't think that's her," one of his friends whispered loudly.



"Yeah," the third drunk opined. "Where did she change her clothes?" He pointed at Lucinda. "That looks like a uniform."

"You're lucky you didn't get shot," Lucinda told them in disgust while Mira calmed the irate husband. "This neighborhood has reported a peeper these last few nights. Sit on the curb and we'll arrange a ride for you."

"Just go back to bed, sir," Mira told the husband. "We'll handle it from here."

"I hope they lock you up and throw away the key," he yelled, before he slammed his window shut.

Apparently losing interest in the couple, the first singer complained, "I'm hungry. How come you smell like Chinese noodles?"

"We broke up a fight. One of the weapons was a box of take-out," Mira said dryly.

"Hey, I'm hungry too. Can we stop on the way and pick some up?" asked one of his buddies.

"No," Mira replied.

"Hey, where are we going anyway?" the third one asked. "What kind of party are you girls taking us to?"

"Oh, you'll like it," Mira said. "There's lots of people in your condition there."

"You guys are keeping us busy tonight," Kneckie the Patrol sled driver, told Lucinda as they pulled up in front of the dome.

When he opened the door to the sled, the aroma of noodles and sauce wafted out, along with the miasma of vomit and sour booze.

"Don't you ever wash this thing out?" Mira demanded, as she helped Lucinda herd the three drunks inside.

"Why? We don't have to smell it. It's sealed off," the driver retorted. "What have you got for us Sarge?"

"Drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace. The homeowner and his wife will be in tomorrow morning to sign a complaint. In the meantime, throw 'em in the drunk tank."

"Sure thing. There you go, upsy-daisy," he told the last man, as he boosted him up into the sled. When the drunks sat down, the sled's bench cuffs snapped into place. "See you back at headquarters, Sarge."

Mira rolled her neck. "Sure thing Kneckie. C'mon rookie, we've got reports to write."

Returning home, Lucinda parked her sled in the unused storage space on the ground floor. She glanced at the empty storefront, wondering who Jake Reynolds, their new landlord and cousin Jayla's husband, intended to rent it to. Because the girls were upstairs, he was being very picky about the tenants.

Opening the upstairs door to the apartment, she was struck by a sense of loss, as she realized she was going to be spending her first ever night alone. At Grouters, and later in Lady Katherine and Lord Zack's home one of her sisters had always been near.

Agra chirped comfortingly in her ear, and rubbed her cheek against Lucinda's, emitting reassurance and love.

Lucinda reached up and stroked the Dactyl, who purred at her. "Just us tonight sweetie. Let me get out of this smelly uniform and you and I'll take a shower and get something to eat."

Stripping off her uniform, which gave off a faint odor of soy sauce, she examined it for stains. Programming the clothes fresher for stain and odor removal as well as cleaning and pressing, she tossed in her uniform.

She had no fear of the stains not coming out; as a housewarming present, Jayla had sent Martha, her house-bot over to set up the house comp, which included programming the clothes fresher. Looking at the menu in the Robo-Chef, Lucinda realized the ever-efficient Martha had not only stocked it, but loaded it up with her recipes, which were far superior to the standard ones it came with.

Afterwards, Lucinda did a quick clean-up of the kitchen. The apartment came with a weekly cleaning service, but she hated the smell of dirty dishes. She and Agra tumbled into bed and slept dreamlessly.

It was late afternoon when she woke to the sound of her com chiming. Looking at the display, she saw calls from both her sisters. Setting up for a multi-vid call, she slipped on a robe and wandered out to the kitchen to program a pot of Cafka for herself.

"How was your first day?" Violet asked. That far south, the sun was just coming up over the horizon. She and Jelli, her sand dragon, were on the cliffs above the Dragon nests on Talker's Isle. Lucinda heard the ocean waves crashing on the rocks in the background.

"You look like we woke you up," Juliette commented. She was sitting outside her pop-up dome on Kitingzen, with Saura sleeping on her lap.

"You did," Lucinda laughed. "It was different. We broke up a fight over a man, got slopped with Chinese noodles and arrested three drunken tourists. How was your trip?"

"A bit crowded, and Jorge isn't happy to have me here. I think Dad must have threatened him if something happened to me."

Violet nodded. "He did that at Jayla's wedding. He was in full protective papa mode that night. I saw him talking with Tom Draycott too, and I know he laid down the law to poor Silas Crawford. It was kind of sweet really."

Juliette snorted. "He thinks Jorge is a risk taker. That's why Bridge and Terrence are getting a vacation on Kitingzen."

"Is Jorge reckless?" Lucinda asked, frowning.

Juliette shrugged. "I don't have a way to judge. We haven't really gotten started yet."

"I thought you would be mapping the area outside the new village," Violet remarked.

"Originally, we were going to do that, but apparently, Jorge saw something resembling buildings further along that mountain range on the vids the first-in scout made. He thinks it's an old city, and the council gave permission to go and look, so that is where we are heading."

"Did Mom and Dad know about this?" Lucinda asked.

"I don't know. I just heard about it in the shuttle on the way over to our first base camp. Today we unloaded our stuff out of the shuttles and set up for the night. Tomorrow most of us will spend the day going through our equipment to make sure we have everything we are supposed to have is here and organizing it for the trail. Jorge will be taking our mapmaker and the geologist up into the hills to try to scout out the easiest path to that old road he thinks he saw. When he returns we head up the trail into unexplored territory. We will be out of com touch a lot of the time, and we could encounter anything."

"Well, you be careful," Lucinda said.

"I could set it up through the link for all of us to know if one of us is in trouble," Violet offered.

"Judging by last night, mine could show trouble a lot though," Lucinda protested. "Violet, I can't have you two panicking whenever I have to chase someone or break up a fight."

"It can be fixed so we can talk to each other through the link," Violet promised.

"Okay, I guess," Lucinda agreed. "If Juliette is going to be out of com reach we need it."

"What are you going to be doing the rest of the day?" Violet asked Juliette.

Juliette made a face. "I've been told we will have a camp meeting after supper to arrange camp chores and go over the route and safety rules."

"That doesn't sound as if Jorge is taking unnecessary chances," Violet remarked.

"I doubt if he is as careful as Mom on the trail though," Juliette replied, and all three girls laughed. Lady Katherine had justly earned her reputation as an over-protective mother; she had once been tried for killing a woman who had threatened one of her children. The subsequent Clan trial had declared it a justifiable homicide, of course. Any attempt to harm children was taken very seriously on Vensoog.

"We do have a real greenhorn with us this time," Juliette admitted. "Our mapmaker, Isaac Jordan has never even been camping. I had to help him with his pop-up dome, and those things practically set themselves up."

Picking up something in Juliette's voice, Lucinda asked her, "Is he cute?"

"How old is he?" Violet seconded.

Juliette's fair skin flushed a little. "He is about our age. A year older than Luce and me."

"You didn't say if he's cute or not," Lucinda pressed.

"Oh, there's the dinner gong," Juliette said hastily. "I've got to go. Later guys." She dropped out of the link.

"She didn't answer you," Violet said.

"I noticed that," Lucinda agreed. "She likes him though."

"Attracted," Violet corrected. "Couldn't you feel it through the link?"

"I felt something," Lucinda admitted. "Did you manage to do that while we were talking? You are getting really good with this link stuff."

Violet nodded. "Drusilla is a good teacher. I've learned so much since I've been studying with her."

## *Home Alone*

When Lucinda turned off the vid com, she was feeling restless. Looking at the time, she decided her cousin Jayla was probably getting ready to close her shop about now. "C'mon Agra," she told the Dactyl. "Let's take a walk over to Whimsical."

Wayne, Jayla's sales-bot was up on the lift changing a light crystal when Lucinda entered. The sales-bot had been designed with a slim, toned body, light hazel eyes, and medium shaded brown hair. Wayne's costume today was a black and white striped skin suit topped with a soft flat cap of brilliant red. He was always a hoot and had a wide variety of costumes he wore in the shop. Jayla allowed it because she claimed the bizarre outfits helped him make sales.

Lucinda found Jayla in the back room of the shop, checking inventory. Ghost, her white Quirka, bounced over to Lucinda, chirping happily, before she and Agra went into a complicated dance routine as they greeted each other.

"Did you get Wayne a new outfit?" Lucinda asked. "I don't think I've seen that one before."

Jayla grinned at her. "I told him to pick three out of the catalog. We did so well on sales this last month I could afford it. How was your first shift?"

Lucinda laughed. "Crazy, tiring, and fun. I talked to Juliette and Violet this afternoon. It turns out Juliette is going to be off the grid most of the summer. The Leader, Jorge Carmody talked the Exploration Committee into allowing them to try and reach the ruins of a city he found on one of the First-In Scout vids."

"It sounds as if your dad knew what he was doing when he sent bodyguards out with her."

"Yes, it does. We don't like not being able to reach each other though so Violet set up a special link with the three of us, that way we will all know if one of us runs into trouble."

"A sensible precaution," Jayla agreed. "I don't know much about this link thing. How does it work?"

"It's a little like a combined *Push/Pull*," Lucinda said. "Drusilla and Lucas discovered it when they opened a channel into that stone his grandfather gave him."

"But you can talk to each other through it?"

"Violet says so, and she usually knows what she's talking about."

"Would have been handy to have when that idiot from Aphrodite kidnapped me," Jayla said wryly.

"It sure would," Lucinda agreed, remembering the panic that had ensued when Jayla disappeared on her way home from the last Harvest Festival.

"Would you like to stay for dinner? I think Jake should be home shortly."

"Thanks, I will. I guess you can see I was feeling a little lonely when I got home; the apartment felt empty today," she said ruefully.

When they arrived upstairs, the enticing smell of baked Ostamu wafted toward Lucinda. Ostamu were the large flightless birds bred by the Clans as a food source. "Umm, that smells good," Lucinda said. "Hi Jake," she said to Jayla's new husband.

"Hey kid, how was your first day?" he asked, as he came over and kissed his wife hello. Shade, his Quirka, immediately bounced over to Ghost, joining in the greeting ritual. Unlike Ghost who was almost pure white, Shade was all shades of brown and grey.

"Tom was reporting to Uncle Max when I got there, so I brought him home for dinner," he told his wife, indicating Tom Draycott, the Duc d'Orleans top investigator. Draycott was around Jake's age, a little taller than Lucinda, with a hard-bodied, powerful build. He had dark brown hair and cynical brown eyes in a wedge-shaped face. A blaster scar ran across one cheek.

"And as you can see, I took him at his word," Tom said. "I don't live in the compound on Versailles Isle anymore, so I don't get home cooking much."

"As long as you don't expect me to be the one who cooks it," Jayla replied, laughing. "That is why we have Martha."

"Jake said you were reporting to the Duc," Lucinda remarked. "Can you tell us about the case?"

Draycott shrugged. "It isn't a secret. Max thinks there is some smuggling going on. I spent the last five days working on the docks. If smuggling is going on, I didn't find out who was doing it. I'll move on to the spaceport workers next."

"What if someone from the docks recognizes you?" Jayla asked.

He grinned at her. "I wore a disguise on the docks. My own mother wouldn't have recognized me."

"Do you always wear a disguise when you go undercover?" Lucinda asked.

"Most of the time. A couple of years ago I spent some time establishing some unsavory cover identities. They come in handy for undercover investigations."

Lucinda was fascinated. "How many do you use on a single case?"

"As many as I need. Want to learn how to set one up?"

"Yes, I do. It sounds like a lot of fun."

The four of them spent a pleasant evening talking over old times. When it turned nine o'clock, Lucinda noticed Jayla yawning.

"Guess I'd better let you get some sleep," she told her cousin as she got up. "I forget not everyone is on the same schedule I am."

"Me too," Draycott agreed. "Why don't I give you a ride? I've got my sled here."

Lucinda collected a sleepy Agra who had snuggled into Shade and Ghost's nest, tucking her inside her windbreaker before mounting behind Tom on his sled.

When he dropped her off, they arranged for him to stop by and give Lucinda the basics of creating a disguise.

## *Makee-Learnee*

Unlike a few of the more technological oriented societies that made up the Confederated Worlds, the Clans of Vensoog preferred to teach their children a profession by having them apprentice under a more knowledgeable mentor. Lucinda spent most of her first month on the job on patrol and answering calls under Mira's supervision.

"We switch shifts next week," Mira told her after she had been on the job a month. "Starting tomorrow, we will trade areas with Sargent Murtaugh and his trainee. Philips, I think is his name."

"Oh," Lucinda said. She had begun to feel proprietary about the area near the docks and was surprised at her reluctance to switch. "What area do we get?" Lucinda asked her.

"We've got the spaceport. Sorry I know it's going to disrupt your sleep cycle after you've just begun to settle in it, but we switch times too; They have Swing Shift. Things are slow right now," Mira told her. "We need to take advantage of it to get you rookies as familiar with every part of the city that we can before the Harvest Festival starts and we get swamped with drunken tourists. During the Festivals, we get almost 100,000 extra tourists coming in to celebrate with us, plus the visiting merchants and Free Traders."

The Planting and Harvest Festivals were held each Spring and Fall, and everyone who could get free usually tried to attend. During the festivals, some events like the Introductory Balls, where newly recognized adults received Match Lists, were only open to the Clans, but there was plenty of other entertainment for visitors. Port Recovery, because of the spaceport, was thrown wide open to off-planet visitors and merchants and the city took steps to entertain them royally. The Clans brought in native-made goods and Free Traders from all over the Confederation came to buy and sell their wares.

Lucinda rolled her eyes. "We can barely keep up now," she protested. "How do we handle that many extra people?"

Mira shrugged. "A lot of us work double shifts; or extra half shifts. The Clans send a portion of their home security forces to help out as well."

Dawn was breaking, and the sky had started to lighten when Lucinda heard the screaming.

"I think it's coming from down by the boats," she told Mira, and the pair took off running. Agra fluttered over Lucinda's head, making excited noises. Even tiny Dactyls like Agra could fly faster than a human could run, but she kept by Lucinda as she had been taught.

Mira had turned on her headlamp and used it to look around. "PRS!" she shouted. "Where are you?"

It was still dark enough that the moored boats cast dark shadows on the wharf. Long plastacrete ramps extended out over the channel. Agra's acute eyesight spotted something at the base of the farthest ramp, and she gave a shrill keen and dove toward it.

"Over here Mira!" Lucinda called.

When she arrived at the ramp, she found Agra hovering over the body of a woman. "Good girl," she praised the Dactyl, who preened in response, perching herself on her mistress's shoulder and looking down with interest. Dactyls were inherently curious, and part of the training she and Lucinda were given had included not touching a body without permission. Lucinda ran her Porta-tab over the body, scanning for life signs. She found none.

"She's dead," she reported looking up at Mira.

"Damn!" the other woman said. "Well, call in our sleds, and let's get this crime scene sealed off. Then we should inspect the area around the body while we wait for the coroner to get here. Document anything you find that looks as if it doesn't belong, but don't move it."

Their sleds arrived just as Mira finished calling in to report the body. Agra watched as Lucinda opened the side of her sled and pulled out the compressed privacy screens. Jamming one end into the ground near the ramp, she pulled on the loose end and made a wide circle around the body as the screens decompressed and grew to full size.

It was about a half hour before sunrise but they had drawn a few spectators from a nearby warehouse.

"Hey, what's going on kid?" An older man with an air of authority asked.

"What is your name?" Lucinda asked him.

"I'm Jesse Sanders. I'm the supervisor over at Maclin enterprises," he said, gesturing to the only lit-up warehouse in the area.

"I'm Officer Lucinda O'Teague," Lucinda told him. "Did you or any of your workers see or hear any noises out here tonight?"

"I sure didn't," Sanders answered. "It's pretty noisy inside though. We wouldn't have noticed if Dori hadn't stepped outside for some fresh air. She came running back in, screaming about dead people. Took me a while to calm her down. Do you want me to ask my men?"

"Thanks for the offer," Mira answered him, "But I'm afraid we have to do it."

"What happened?" he demanded again. "Dori ran into the warehouse yelling about dead bodies."

"Yes, there has been a death. Would you mind going with Officer O'Teague to see if you recognize the body? In the meantime, I'll need to start interviews with your people."

"Uh—well, okay," he said, reluctantly.

When he saw the state of the body, he turned green, and covered his mouth with his hand. Recognizing the signs, Lucinda hastily got him away from the immediate area around the body before he barfed, and held out an evidence bag for him to up-chunk into.

Handing him a wipe for his mouth, she waited until he had settled a bit before asking, "Do you know her?"

"No," he said, swallowing. He looked around for somewhere to dispose of the wipe, and she held out the open evidence bag.

"Thanks," he said. "It looked like she was wearing a ship's uniform of some kind. What was left of it."

"Did you recognize it? Do you know what ship?"

He shook his head and swallowed again. "Can we move further away? I can still smell—"

"Sure. Why don't you come and sit down over here? The detectives may have more questions," she suggested.

The detectives arrived at the same time as the coroner's big sled.

Lucinda was glad to note that this time Gorsling wasn't one of them. When she had been interning in the Coroners' office, he had investigated the murder of Sara Lipski and there had been an unpleasant encounter, ending with Dr. Ivanov throwing him out of her lab.

"I'm Detective Jeness, and this is my partner, Detective Wilson. What do you have for us? It's officer O'Teague, isn't it?" The elder of the two, a tall, full-bodied woman with dark, curling grey hair asked.

"Yes," Lucinda answered the first question. "This is Jesse Sanders. He's the foreman in charge of the warehouse. One of his crew went out for a break, and came back in screaming about dead bodies, so he came out to investigate. My partner Mira and I heard the screams and were already on site by the time he came out."

"How did you locate the body?" Wilson asked.

Lucinda smiled. "Agra did that. A dactyl's smell and night vision are much better than a human's, you know."

"Ummn," Wilson looked Agra over speculatively. "Did she touch the body?"

"Of course not," Lucinda said, offended on her pet's behalf.

The Dactyl made the small snorting noise Lucinda knew meant she was irritated, and Lucinda reached up and stroked her soothingly. When the Coroner's



sled pulled up she was surprised to see Doctor Ivanov hop out. She turned to her with relief. "Hey, since when do you work the night shift?" she asked.

"Lucinda! It's good to see you again." The Coroner gave the girl a hug. The doctor was a short, dumpy little woman, the top of her head barely reaching Lucinda's shoulder.

When Agra fluttered over to her, demanding her share of the attention, Dr. Ivanov laughed. "Yes, Agra it's good to see you as well. Your new collar and badge look very good on you. Dr. Glassen called in sick," she responded to Lucinda's question. "One of his kids is running a fever and he's quarantined his house until they figure out what it is. We've missed you in the lab. The cadet who replaced you isn't nearly as good. How are you liking your first weeks on the job?"

"It's been interesting," Lucinda admitted.

"Do you need her for anything else?" Dr. Ivanov asked the detectives. "If not, she can come and help me with the body. I'm short-handed tonight."

Wilson made a shooping motion with his hands. "By all means go with her officer."

Lucinda followed her, and while the Doctor was checking time of death, she bagged the hands under Agra's critical gaze.

"Humm," Ivanov was talking to herself. Lucinda knew the spoken notes would be logged on her department recorder, and given for transcription to the hapless cadet who had taken her place in the lab.

"Female, lying face down, approximate age late twenties, with multiple lacerations on her upper torso. Clothes are partially shredded, looks like the remains of a ship's uniform. DNA sample running through the Planetary database for ID. Mixed Race, thin, scan shows bones typical of someone who spends a lot of time off-planet. Death approximately four hours ago. Corpse is just going into rigor. Help me roll her Lucinda."

They turned the body over. "Same lacerations on her front. Lacerations would have hurt, but none of them are deep enough to cause death," Dr. Ivanov continued. "Death most likely was caused by the garrote around her neck. I'll know more when I get her on my table. I see you bagged her hands. Good girl. You're always thinking ahead. Get the body bag out of the sled, please."

When she returned, Lucinda lowered a specially made lift, shaped in a rectangle with rounded edges and straps to hold the body bag. She helped Dr. Ivanov move the body into it. She fastened the straps to hold it in place and towed it behind her to the Doctor's sled. Agra perched like a small gargoyle on top of the bag during the ride. Once inside the sled, she snapped the fasteners holding the lift in place.

"C'mon Agra, get off there. I need to turn on the stasis," she told her pet, holding out a small treat. Spying the cookie, Agra flew off the bag and eagerly took it. "You did great tonight girl," Lucinda crooned to her.

"You always talk to her like that?" inquired Wilson. "Like she's a person?"

"She is a person," Lucinda told him, her voice cool. "Not human so she can't speak our language, but she understands it very well. She can pick up feelings from me, but my tone of voice reinforces it."

"I've never worked with a Dactyl," Wilson observed, "but I've worked with detectives who had Quirkas. They didn't take to me, the Quirkas, I mean."

"I see," Lucinda nodded politely.

"You don't seem surprised," Wilson said. "Why is that?"

Lucinda hesitated, then said, "Quirkas and Dactyls read emotions the way a Dragon Talker does. They probably sensed that you don't really like them."

She was relieved when Dr. Ivanov returned to the sled with her kit. "Mira's looking for you, Lucinda."

"Thanks, Doctor Ivanov," she said. "C'mon Agra. We need to get back to work."

"Wilson giving you a hard time?" Mira asked when she returned.

"Not exactly; he had a lot of questions about Quirkas and Dactyls. Lab protocol says I couldn't leave the body unattended until Doctor Ivanov got back to the sled anyway. Sorry, I didn't get back sooner."

Mira nodded understandably, "One of the penalties of being uniform, I'm afraid; everybody and his brother gives us orders. Now our next job is to try to get names and addresses from everyone in the crowd for the detectives."

Lucinda had just about finished her share of this chore when she thought she recognized Tom's familiar stance on one of the men watching the crowd. She was so surprised she stopped and stared, Tom, if it was him, was wearing one of the disguises he'd told her about. The man in question had black, slicked back hair, and a neatly trimmed beard. He was also wearing a black skin-suit and high heeled black boots.

"Something the matter?" Mira asked, joining her.

Lucinda jumped in surprise. "Not really. I just thought I saw someone I knew over there. He's gone now though."

The Sun was well up by the time they finished getting ID information from the warehouse crew. Lucinda dictated her report into her com on the way back to headquarters. When they arrived, she read through it, initialed her DNA signature, made two copies, one for her personal file and one that she sent on to the detectives after Mira looked through it.

Agra had fallen asleep in her Dactyl seat when Lucinda drove into her storage area. Gently she pried the little creature out of it and carried her upstairs where she set her in her comfy sleep basket. Stripping off her uniform and Agra's collar, she tossed them into the clothing recycler before slipping into a loose shirt and shorts. She tumbled into bed already half asleep.

She had set her alarm to wake up a little early, so she was up, dressed and enjoying a second cup of Cafka while Agra sulked over her breakfast of chopped nuts, fruit and fish flake, when Tom knocked on the door.

"Let him in," she told the House Comp getting another cup out of the cupboard.

"Cafka?" She asked, holding up the cup.

"I'd love some," he told her. "I've been up all night. Good morning, girl," he said to Agra, who ignored him. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's missing Saura, her littermate," Lucinda explained. "Saura went out to Kitingzen with Juliette."

"Do you have sweetener?" He asked. "I need the boost."

"Well at least you've taken off that lounge lizard disguise," Lucinda remarked, handing him the sugar bowl.

"You *did* recognize me. I thought you might have. What gave me away?"

She lifted her shoulders. "It was a good disguise, but I recognized the way you stand. You always stand like you're ready for a fight."

He stared at her, and slowly sat down in a chair. "I fooled both the Duc and Jake with that one once. You're going to make a damn good cop someday."

"Thanks," Lucinda felt her face blushing. "I bet you haven't had anything to eat either, have you? I'll dial up one of Martha's specialties."

He caught her hand and kissed it. "Bless you, I'm starving."

Lucinda watched, amused as Tom inhaled her food. "Don't think you are going to get away without telling me why you were there," she said. "I'm assuming this is a part of your investigation. How is that going by the way?"

He poured another cup of Cafka and sipped it before he answered. "Not as well as I hoped," he admitted. "Did you identify her?"

"Not yet, but the Doc thinks she spent a lot of time in a ship and not on-planet. Why?"

He sighed. "If she is who I think she is, she was my first real lead in this case."

She frowned at him. "What kind of information? Is the Duc running one of his private investigations again?"

"Him and the rest of the Security Council. After Jayla's kidnapping, they decided they needed to do something about Thieves Guild activities in Clan territories. Max has several other operatives besides me working on this. All we've found out so far is that something worth big credits is being brought in and smuggled onto Free Traders here in port."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Not a clue," he said in disgust. "Jora was my first real lead. She was supposed to give me the names of the ships and captains who are a part of it."

"Jora? You know her name?"

"Jora Loman off the Free Trader Saucy Suzie. She went into the Guild as a young girl and she wants—wanted out. The Council agreed to help her, give her a new identity and stuff."

"Does Port Recovery Security know the Council is poking its nose into this?"

He shook his head. "Nope, and we'd prefer it not be spread around. We think we cleaned out all the cops on the Local Mob's payroll, but we can't be sure."

"But Tom," she protested, " Her folks need to be notified; I need to tell them who she is at least."

"Can't you just say it was a rumor?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "I suppose I could say I heard about a missing crewman off that particular ship."

By this time Agra had imbibed enough Cafka to recover from her sulks and fluttered over to Tom's shoulder and nuzzled his ear.

"Oh, so now you're talking to me?" he asked the Dactyl.

"She likes you for some reason," Lucinda said. "Usually she's a little more standoffish."

He handed Agra a wedge of fruit he hadn't eaten, and she gobbled the wedge of melon with delicate greed. "That's because she knows she can bum food, isn't it, cutie?"

The fruit Tom gave her had been very juicy. Since Dactyls were not nearly as fastidious as Quirka's, Agra had managed to smear it liberally all over her face. She transferred the stickiness to Tom by nudging his jaw with her messy nose when she finished.

He got up and put his dishes in the recycler, wiping his face with his napkin.

"Thanks again for breakfast," he said. "Do you think you could let me know if it turns out it is Jora?"

"I suppose," she answered.

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