

I. FLIGHT OF FANCY



Beyond the moist, vibrant Earth and pocked Mars; past wild Jupiter and its veiled living stepchild, Varok; far from the cold regions of skirted Saturn and tiny Pluto flies a hot, watery planet. Rudely kicked out of the Oort Cloud into a 12,000-year orbit around Sol, it hides buried in the midst of the hollow black void between the Kuiper belt and the Oort cloud. The planet grew large enough to glow dimly in the deeps with its own internal warmth. Luckily, it stayed small enough so that powerful creatures could evolve out of its mild ooze to lounge and play in its weighty waters. Ells they called themselves, handsome creatures who toyed with time as nature toyed with them, enlarging their wit to ridiculous extremes and adding unnecessary but charming decorative touches. They became creatures with an enormous capacity for joy, and sometimes for much more.

Occasionally an elll like Conn came along. . . .

TO TRUST A STRANGER

High above the North American Spaceport, a sleek parachute deployed. A humanoid shape with large flat feet hung from the rig, landed with a thump, then disappeared into the desert, mumbling to himself.

"If this isn't the goofiest stunt we've pulled! If I didn't trust Jesse Mendleton so much, I'd never have agreed to do this interview."

The elll Conn stopped for a moment and allowed himself to enjoy the darkening turquoise sky. The half moon shone with a warm tone, and he thought of his colleagues up there beneath the d'Alembert Mountains at the Elll-Varok Observation Base, swimming and fooling around in the base pool.

"Who do I think I am? Super-elll? Is the water in this nasty isolation suit going to last the evening? I'm in the middle of the flattest, driest, emptiest piece of real estate in the solar system, and I've got to walk another kilometer to the Spaceport. I'll tear every toe-web to shreds before I get there. And what if Jesse's human scientist lady doesn't show?"

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The previous day microbiologist Tandra Grey received a voice call.

"Tandra Grey here."

"Tandra, it's Jesse Mendleton. Clear your calendar for this weekend. You're needed at the spaceport."

Tandra tucked the communicator into her shirt pocket and sat down next to her adopted two-year-old girl sitting on the floor. Three-D puzzle pieces lay in heaps around them.

"Here, Shawne," she said to the child, "look for blue on the edge, like this one."

The child took the piece and started hunting for another.

"Okay, Jesse," Tandra said. "What's this really about?"

"Someone wants to interview you for a . . . project."

"At the spaceport? They must have money. I wouldn't get along with their clients."

"I know, but this is not about spaceport clients. Money is not . . . part of the deal. It's a project that requires your skill as a microbiologist."

"I'm busy teaching, Jesse."

"I know that, but this is a chance you don't want to miss. It's right on target for what you care most about."

"Shawne."

"And her future. They need your expertise, Tandra."

"In germs? Have your friends at the CDC told you something I should know? Have the die-offs spread, Jesse?"

"No, it's not that. I mean, yes, there's another outbreak, but this is something different. You've got to trust me. Just come to the spaceport cocktail party Saturday night."

Tandra sighed. She had no wish to spend her Saturday night at some stuffy marketing party, away from Shawne.

"It's the opening of their Spacewalk Expo. Their sales team is showing off all the newest safety gadgets and trying to attract a few more clients. The vendors will have new gadgets on display—the usual spacesuits, cameras, all that. You'll be interested in the isolation suits. The spaceport is serious about avoiding outplanet contamination."

"C'mon, Jesse, find someone else. I've got midterms to grade, and I just got back from collecting the latest designer germs in Darfur. I really don't want to be away again so soon."

"It's just this one Saturday. My friend has a proposal you won't want to refuse. Anything that comes after the party will be up to you. And Shawne can be a part of it. It could change her life, Tandra, and yours."

Tandra hesitated.

"I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't know you so well."

"So when are you going to pick me up? I'd rather not drive all the way down there alone."

"How about two p.m.? Get a baby-sitter that will stay all night. You may not want to leave."

"You're serious." Tandra reached into her pocket to stare at the face on her com. "You'd drive me? That's a six-hour trip."

"Or more." Jesse's image looked back at her with steady eyes. There was no hint of jest on his rugged face. "I'd drive to the moon and back to be sure you showed up."

"Okay. Deal. How fancy is this? What do I wear?"

"Something comfortable. It's warm desert, you know, but bring a sweater for the evening. Slacks are fine. There will be all kinds of people there."

"I can't leave before three—naptime for Shawne."

"See you then."

"This better be good, Jesse. I don't like to lose my Saturdays with Shawne." *Or a night of sleep.*

Tandra sank back to the floor and set Shawne on her lap. "Try this one," she said, placing a puzzle piece in the toddler's tiny hand.

"Dat's too broad, Mommy. This one here." She reached for another and fit it into place.

"Right." Tandra gave her a squeeze. *How lucky to have found you*, she thought, remembering the agonizing wait for the adoption authorities to accept her application. *Nothing Jesse can imagine will steal more time away from you. Promise.*

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The drive down the length of New Mexico on US 25 with Jesse Mendleton gave Tandra a chance to finish grading midterms. The miles disappeared as she sat with a vintage keyed-screen in her lap, thankful that Jesse was not one to require conversation.

They stopped for dinner in Truth or Consequences and arrived at the spaceport's cocktail party an hour later. A crowd of paid passengers and prospects already filled the hangar and adjoining rooms. Some of the guests trying on space suits had escaped to the weightless training pool to cool off.

"Look for someone in a full isolation suit," Jesse said. "I've got to go—the exobiology session is scheduled for seven-thirty. I'll find you here or on the patio no later than nine."

"So how will he-she-it know me?"

"It will." Jesse actually laughed.

Tandra socked his shoulder.

"I described you as a beautiful young woman of nondescript ethnicity wearing long cool hair and slacks."

"Thanks a lot, Jesse."

He took her by the shoulders and put on the fatherly look that always got her attention. "This will demand everything you've got, Tandra. Don't blow it. I didn't mean to make light of it."

She watched him disappear from the main hangar into a smaller

conference hall. Then she walked outside a short ways to get a feel for the spaceport campus. The launch pad was visible in the distance as a smooth spot in an endless landscape dotted with waist-high creosote bushes. The sky surrounded her with a magnificent dome of deepening turquoise, and the moon, like a golden jewel, filled her with its beauty.

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Just after sunset, the elll Conn reached the spaceport, checked his parachute backpack at the booth near the hangar entrance, and busied himself ambling through the crowd, studying the postures and mannerisms of those wearing isolation or space suits. Trying to imitate them, he almost missed the warm (brown, humans would say) delicate beauty with the cold, probably black, long hair and slacks.

This had to be Tandra Grey, the microbiologist. She was dressed more simply than most, and was busy studying the suited guests and vendors. Her sweater was a medium bright, the color of the early evening sky. He followed her at a distance as she looked over the crowd, obviously concentrating on those demonstrating isolation suits. Finally she made her way to the periphery of the crowd on the patio.

Like a cat on padded flippers, the elll moved toward the shadows at the far corner of the patio. There, he waited his chance, enjoying the colorful variety of passers-by.

When no one was facing his direction, he moved toward the woman. He bumped her arm gently in passing, and assumed a casual slouch by the punch bowl.

“Excuse you,” Tandra said and smiled at him.

No one else had noticed him amidst the jumble of bright and dim clothes. Most of the space suits on display were probably safe in a vacuum but inconveniently bulky.

He poured a glass of punch and offered it to Tandra, as if disinterested.

She took it, said thanks and moved a few steps away.

He looked longingly into the liquid in the punch bowl. Where was Ellalon right now? Probably in the pool with Killah. *Ae-o-o*, wouldn't that feel good? On the other hand, Killah rarely had a chance to get away from Moonbase, poor *eloid*. He'd like it down here. Good to be

surrounded by living things again. Beats that *kaehl-din* hot dust and dry rock up there.

A tall man and a woman in brightly patterned cloth approached Tandra as if they knew her. *Yes. They used her name. Good.* Now he could be sure she was the right person.

Someone pushed passed him, mumbling, “Scuse me, skin diver,” and the elll saw Tandra glance up at him. Was that an invitation? He wandered closer and listened. Apparently the older couple had engaged her in an argument.

“There is nothing in evolution’s rulebook that says accumulated knowledge will lead the human species into a more sane social order,” Tandra was saying. “Distortions in human thinking can be unbelievable. Our misguided priorities are leading us straight over the cliff. We need to respect our natural gifts.”

“You mean you intend to raise that adopted baby of yours like a wild animal?” said the large man.

“I trust her God-given instincts. She’ll need them.”

“You’ll produce a spoiled brat and a social misfit, if you ask me,” said the woman in bright cloth.

“I don’t think so. I teach her that she must never impose herself on anyone—that she never hurt any living thing, physically or emotionally. She’s got to decide for herself the best way to live. I want her to grow up trusting her own integrity.”

“That’s crazy. There are proper ways, time-tested ways, of raising children—for very good reasons.”

Conn could no longer remain silent. “And what are they?” he said, stepping into the group.

“Restraint, for one,” the woman said, giving Conn a look, “not just following every impulse to act, or speak. Don’t you think so, Tandra?”

Tandra looked more closely at Conn as she answered.

“Children need lots of unconditional love and consistent limits,” Tandra said. “I’m sure we could all agree—spaceman. Is your suit one of the new spaceport designs? I’m not familiar with spacesuits, but that looks more . . . flexible than most others here.”

“It’s designed to secure microbial isolation,” he said, “while we . . . do whatever we need to do.”

Conn’s isolation suit, designed by varoks, was sleek and trim, as if tailored to fit his lean body. Only on its small, slightly squared helmet

were there hints of electronic gadgetry and hardware. The suit's material, a fine, natural cloth, was randomly marked with muted colors that served as excellent camouflage for Conn's long torso and limbs.

As Tandra's appraisal lingered over the nonchalant newcomer, she thought she saw him smile. Too bad she couldn't see the man's face through his faceplate. She concluded he was her intended contact. *Where could he be from?* She had never heard such a melodious, strangely accented voice. She imagined men of Slavic tongue imitating Japanese language students speaking English. Though his syllables were slightly angular, they slid over each other in a charming progression.

"I don't think we know all the proper ways of doing things," Conn said. "At least, I don't—other than not hurting others, as Dr. Grey has suggested. Theories of how best to raise children seem to keep changing every ten years."

Tandra laughed. "I've been reading some of those old books since I adopted my baby. Once in a while they actually agree."

"Oh, you know what I meant," said the lady in bright patterns.

Conn moved close to Tandra. "Seriously, I'm interested in Dr. Grey's thesis. I've often wondered if the wisdom of genetic instinct is more ancient, perhaps more to be trusted, than the current trends in human society."

"So we should revert to our animal nature?" the man challenged.

Conn let out a hoot of laughter. "But we *are* our animal nature," he said. "You couldn't possibly escape that fact."

His comment delighted Tandra, but sent the lady off in a huff. Her companion shrugged and walked away, leaving Tandra alone with Conn.

Tandra felt bright with expectation. Here was someone she could talk to. *The conversation could have gone nowhere with those people*, she thought. *Why couldn't they argue sensibly without getting so emotional? Why did it matter so much?*

"The term 'human society' is a semantic myth," Conn continued with mock stiffness in his voice, "certainly not an absolute reference for good conduct. The phrase merely refers to the habits, good and bad, of the current swarm of *Homo sapiens*. Don't you agree, Dr. Grey?"

Tandra laughed, entering Conn's light mood. "I don't believe I know you," she said, offering her hand. "You talk as if your mouth were connected to your brain."

"I'm afraid it's connected to more than you'd like to imagine," Conn muttered.

"I doubt that's possible."

Conn looked at her closely, remembering Jesse Mendleton's warning that she could be idealistic. "How possible?" he asked.

"Im-possible, after what you've just done for me. That argument could have left me stewing all week. Besides an understanding heart, your mouth could be hooked up to sixteen crossed eyes and great hairy teeth, and I wouldn't mind a bit."

An easy laugh tumbled out of Conn's helmet. "I'm not that weird."

"How weird are you? Jesse Mendleton insisted I meet you here, but I can't guess who you are. Do I know you?"

The eIII hesitated. "You will, I think," he said.

"I'm correct? You wanted me to meet you here, for an interview?"

"I am interviewing you."

"O-o-okay. I see."

An insistent beat began to tease from the patio loudspeaker.

"Can you dance in that suit?" Tandra asked.

"It's designed not to slow me down."

He took her hand.

"We spacemen pull . . . eh . . . a mean beat, lady," Conn said as casually as he could. "Think you can keep up?"

"Try me."

They began to move rhythmically to the music, and Conn gradually coaxed the quiet, soft woman into his arms, imitating other couples dancing on the patio. To his delight, he found he could easily cue her responsive body with gentle nudges and tugs as he followed the beat. Soon they were sensing it as one. They floated together on the thread of sound in a harmony so complete they lost awareness of everything but the matched and answering movement of their bodies submerged in the rhythm.

"Where did a lady scientist learn to dance like that? You speak the language of eIII's."

"Are you an eIII?" Tandra tried unsuccessfully to match the sound Conn made for the word. "You couldn't be a man; your dancing is . . . almost meaningful."

"Almost? Don't belittle such meaning, my lovely *kaehloid*. You may have need to understand it some day." Conn paused, suddenly tempted

to take her from the party and reveal who he was. She seemed ready to accept the fact of his alienness. She seemed even to want it. Then he noticed her broad grin. "Are you laughing at me?" he asked.

"I've never been called that name—kiloid?—before. Where does that expression come from?"

"It's Varokian, but I enjoy using the colloquialisms and slang of human languages, too," he said. "They are a hobby of mine."

"Will you tell me where you're from? I can't place the accent."

"I am from Ellason," Conn said. "I am an elll." The rolled *ll* was a tuneful, lapping sound and the rolling triple *lll* made Tandra laugh. "I am an elll," he repeated, "and my name is Conn."