

# I. A Troubled Homecoming



The soul emerges distorted, unrecognizable,  
when actions do not swim  
with the good currents nature defines.

—*Leyoon, Great-fish*

## Bothersome Greetings

*Tandra—2051 CE Earth, approaching Varok*

“Push off and sail up here, Tandra. You need to hear this.”

I didn't like the elll's uncharacteristic dry tone. My soul-brother, the aquatic member of our new family, Conn had not spoken English since we left Earth's moon. Goose bumps surged up my arms.

“We have a personal message from Varok,” Orram said. “It's coded ‘urgent,’ but I'll bet a *kaehl* egg it's not, considering the source.” The varok also spoke English, trying his best to sound reassuring.

As I glided to the flight deck, Conn reached back and wrapped my hand in the wide fins between his six fingers. “Where are the kids?” he said. “Are they sealed in?”

“They're fine,” I said. “Is something wrong up here?”

Ahead, Jupiter appeared in the ship's main viewing screen, its deceptive beauty roiling with stripes of gorgeous pastel colors.

“We don't need this distraction now.” Conn scowled at the maser radio. “We've got the magnetosphere to avoid.”

The radio hacked and coughed up a silken feminine sound in Varokian, unlike anything I had heard other varoks produce. “Orram? Mahntik speaking. Welcome home.”

Conn's knuckles went bright green, and overtones in Mahntik's voice set off something worse than goose bumps across the back of my neck. The regard, the respect for life, so obvious when I met Conn and Orram, was missing. Now, the two exchanged the kind of look only a varok and an elll on close terms could manage.

“An urgent welcome, Mahntik?” Orram said, rolling his eyes—an expression he'd picked up from our adopted daughter, Shawne.

Mahntik's voice oozed through the ship's speakers. “I am inviting you to Lorkah, Orram, before Global Varok schedules all your time.”

Conn glanced back at me. His huge dark eyes flashed with bright green sparks I hadn't seen since our last day on the moon, when human bureaucrats made an empty threat to take three-year-old Shawne away from our mixed family.

“Get off the transmitter, Mahntik darling,” Conn snarled. “We've got a ship to navigate.”

"Is that you, Conn?" Her words suggested claws, unsheathed.

"My family now includes this rude eIII, Conn," Orram interceded, "and the two beautiful humans, Tandra and Shawne Oran-elConn-Grey. I will share all personal transmissions with them."

"Of course, most messages would normally include your family." Mahntik sounded very different now, almost seductive. "But not this time, Orram. You and I have business of a personal nature."

Orram smiled. "I doubt that, Mahntik." He stretched his long legs under the control panel and let his lean torso sag against his restraints. His smile morphed into a laugh almost edged with pride.

I couldn't believe it. He was flattered—or something I misunderstood from reading his mood. A wave of jealousy crashed over the caution Mahntik's voice had triggered in me. *Who is this person? Old friend? Home-wrecker?* I didn't know all the rules, but I was determined that no one or nothing would disrupt our family.

"I'm sorry I can't accept your invitation Mahnate Tikahn," Orram continued, "but thank you for your welcome. It will be good to be back, if Conn can remember how to nudge this ship into orbit."

Conn pulled my hands to the swirling green lumps atop his head, ignoring the open radio. "I've always wished I could move my sonic melons around a full half-circle, like rhinoceros ears—you know, aim them better, for better navigation under water. Can you wiggle your ears, Tan?"

I smiled and almost laughed. "No, not at all."

"They're gorgeous tiny ears anyway, my delicate human." He raised our hands palm-to-palm, and his temper came down a notch, taking my fear with it. Orram joined Conn's high-five so our family rings clinked together. We made a teepee of our hands—Orram's smooth, bronze and powerful from his youth working the web fields, mine brown and freckled from studying in Earth's sunshine, and Conn's green and webbed for swimming the seas of Ellason.

"Are you there, Orram?" Mahntik insisted. "My invitation is for you alone. Please come here to Leahnyahorkah before you go to the great-fish Leyoon. I have things to show you. I have made great progress with my recombination research at Global Varok's Genetics Laboratory."

"Now that's a first, Mahntik," Conn said. "I never thought I'd hear you say *please*."

She laughed, a real varokian snortful laugh. "You're still too

annoying, Conn. I've missed you terribly, but don't come with Orram when he visits me."

The transmission ended, and Conn signaled the elll at the communications console to shut the radio off. Killah knew us well.

"Nice work, my dear elll," he said to Conn. "You're getting as good as Orram at reading Tandra."

"Of course he is," I said.

Our family bonds were working, weaving us ever tighter as a team. Orram was my soul-mate, joined with me in mind, fulfilling his deepest varokian need. And Conn—what can I say about an aquatic biped who can bat his billiard ball eyes like that? As always, he let the air out of my inflated worries without saying anything direct.

Had it been less than one Earth year since we met? Only one year since Shawne and I were quarantined and housed by Elll-Varok Science, schooled, and given work to do on Earth's moon? As a microbiologist working with Killah, I had enjoyed the challenge of studying microorganisms across species. Our vaccines had worked. We stayed alive, even healthy, when we finally made physical contact.

Then Conn, Orram and I connected in surprising ways as we worked through the differences that defined our species. It took time, but at last I awoke to Conn as the the caring, free-schooling person I could call brother. Orram took a more direct route to my psyche. He was so like us humans, he had to awaken me to his varokian nature. Shawne, then two years old, acted as delightful glue among us three. Though humans share no DNA with ellls or varoks, our brains were wired to connect. We became family.

My full Varokian name is Tandra Oran-elConn-Grey. Oran is Orram's family name. He comes from a long line of distinguished varoks, the dominant bipedal species native to Varok. ElConn refers to the Ellsonian school that raised Conn. Like most aquatic species, he is a master of three-dimensional space, hence a talented space pilot. Grey was my human family name. Was. I have no ties left on Earth.

As family, Orram, Conn, Shawne and I are a legal entity defined by Varokian law, a committed economic unit that creates a secure foundation for social stability on Varok. Forget fertility and other biological constraints. Varok doesn't issue licenses for mating behavior, which is considered none of the government's business. Reproduction is another matter. Both the law and deeply ingrained ethics limit progeny to

self-replacement only. Varok's history burned the necessity for population stability onto the genetic imperative of every varokian man and woman. The biological drive for family in varokian society comes from mental, more than sexual, union.

The colorful ribbons of Jupiter's vast storms were still in view, and I wondered what it would take to adjust to Varok—its violent skies, its deep dark in the shadow of Jupiter, its Mahntiks. *Where have I heard the name Mahntik before?* I glimpsed a vague answer in Orram's memory, then he told me.

"Mahntik was a student at the Concentrate when Conn was studying Earth. She's a specialist in genetics, now Director of Genetic Research on L'orkah."

"She talks as if she knows you well, Orram," I said.

He took my hand and placed it on the side of his whiskerless face. "She doesn't know half of me," he said, and his forearm found mine. I noticed, as if for the first time, that our hairless skin was about the same shade of red-brown, but very different in texture. Of course. In the microscope, varokian cells were hexagoal, like some plant cells on Earth.

"What do you think she wants?" I asked.

"I don't know. And I don't know why she assumes I will go to Leyoon. He is *ll-leyoolianl*, one of many great-fish who ply the oceans and lakes of Varok."

"Great-fish," I mused. *Aliens, creatures not evolved on Earth, are supposed to be so weird we humans could never understand them, much less relate. Nonsense. Earth's ocean deeps produce stranger critters than anything on Varok, though the great-fish come close.*

"Of Varok's many intelligent, conversant beings," Killah said, "those most tuned into the complexities of life are the immigrant great-fish from Ellason. Their talent for inspiring awareness among species long ago won the respect of their fellow immigrants, us ellls, as well as the native varoks."

I shook my head in disbelief. "How do the great-fish get such a wide view of things?"

"Two ways," Conn said. "They manage the infrastructure alert system, the sensing devices all over Varok that pick up changes in light, temperature, vibration—that sort of thing. They also stay in contact with everyone, create a vast network of ellls and varoks, light-hoppers, and probably ahlork. Even the daramonts go to them with their complaints."

"You may have your answer about the great-fish soon, Orram," said Killah. "Another transmission is coming in now. It's a message from the Council of Species."

Orram put on the headset and let the council's message run its course. He closed with, "I will consult my family," before shutting off the radio.

My eyes met his deep oval blues. They were troubled. I loved this talented giant—his long humanoid body, his face made of angles polished with rounded edges. I sensed that he didn't like what the message implied.

"The Council of Species requests that I accept an appointment as Governor of Living Resources," he said.

It sounded like an honor to me, but Conn burst out with his laugh-like elllonian trill. "Just what you need—a desk job counting all the weird beans of Varok."

Killah was not amused. "The council must have been following your work analyzing the carrying capacity of Earth. There must be new beans that need counting on Varok."

I knew that the councils of Global Varok monitored the entire resource and population inventory, recommending limits to the mining of non-renewables and running auctions for their development, or finding renewable substitutes. When necessary, they enforced quotas, chosen by a two-thirds vote of the sentient populations.

I studied Orram's face. Normally his features could easily be mistaken for human—except for the thought-sensing patch organs behind his ears. I missed the usual look of mischief in his eyes; the smooth planes of his placid exterior hid waves of intense emotion seething beneath.

"I cannot be Governor of Living Resources. My former position as Director of Scientific Operations on Earth's moon does not even begin to qualify me for that job. I have no idea what's been happening on Varok for the last Jovian year. I have been gone too long."

Our fellow travelers gathered at the deck and responded to the news with objections that Orram shrugged off. The varok Junah, the elder elll Artellian and the ellls' first human contact, Jesse Mendleton—all had unquestioning faith in Orram's genius and integrity. They had served under him on the Elll-Varok Observation Base on Earth's moon. All agreed with Conn and Killah, however, that the job as Governor of Living Resources was a bureaucratic nightmare, prestigious though it may be.

"Can't you see me climbing into ahlorc caves," Orram said, "recorder in hand, asking them how many ilara eggs they had for breakfast?"

"What is your answer, Orram?" Killah asked. "Are you refusing? You've got to make it official."

"I'll answer for you," Conn said.

"You should have the honor, Orram," Artellian insisted. "You agonized over Earth's dilemma and learned the hardest of lessons—you knew when to back off."

"Oh, that's a good one," Conn said, "as if you'd ever give up on Varok."

"We haven't given up on Earth, either." Orram looked at me, sensing my agitation. "Tandra, tell us what you are thinking."

"I don't know enough to influence your decision, Orram. Would taking this position help us or get in the way?" I felt inadequate to give him the support he needed, and he read it in me. Earth had given me no experience of what it takes to maintain a robust steady state like Varok's, only book knowledge of selective technology and minimal throughput. "I do need to learn about Varok's steady state in order to provide Earth with an example it could use."

My home planet was imploding with all the stress that overuse, debt, and overpopulation generate, yet my family and alien colleagues watching from Earth's moon had no longer been able to get headlines—not even as fellow natives of the solar system who could help find solutions. We had decided that the best way to make our urgent messages heard on Earth was to demonstrate with living proof—live from Varok—that an intelligent society could live in comfort sustainably, for the long run. I would be the foreign correspondent, reporting with a human perspective.

"We made the decision to leave Earth as a family," I said. "We believed Shawne would be safer growing up in a stable society. I'll support whatever you feel is best for her and for Varok."

Orram held my gaze with well-concealed dismay. "I may not be able to do what is best for both, Tandra. You know that, don't you?"