

# Approaching Varok

## *Tandra—moments later*

“I’m shutting down the ship’s gyros so you can watch Jupiter, Shawne,” Conn called to the passenger cabin through the intercom.

I left the control deck, floated to the back of the ship and pulled our three-year-old daughter into my lap so we could watch Jupiter’s storms pass below. Where was the warm planet from the home sky of Orram’s memory? There the storms were beautiful, but now, seeing them so close and so real, I found them too horrendous to fathom. They made me realize how far from Earth we had come.

None of us liked putting Shawne’s health at risk to make this long trip. Her blood—and ours—was pooling. Our bones had lost calcium. We played hard to stay healthy, and to make our three months in space pass quickly. The *Lurlial* felt like an elllonian resort, with its moss-covered walls for snacking, its passenger section designed with plush seats, and its wide viewports. The Elll-Varok ship’s closets bulged with musical instruments, puzzles both physical and mental, games of both skill and luck, and educational chips in all the languages of Varok and Ellason.

The trip was marred only by notice from our companion vessel *Ranat* that the varokian astronomer Ahl had died suddenly of natural causes. I grieved for him. He had been a kind mentor at moon base when I applied for a permanent position with EV Science as consultant in human microbiology.

“We will be over Varok soon, Shawne,” Conn’s voice rang through the intercom. “Keep watch for the tallest mountains on the largest continent. Orserah’s house is in a valley full of big friendly daramonts.”

A rocky captive of Jupiter nearly the size of Earth, Varok coasted around its host at a comfortable distance outside the planet’s magenetosphere, camouflaged by a belt of ancient dust and debris. The moon’s low albedo, about 0.005, made it very faint to human eyes. Its isolation from other moons of Jupiter meant it was missed on Earth’s photo missions, Pioneer 10 and 11 and Voyager 1 and 2, which were focused on the Galilean moons.

Tectonic tides generated by Jupiter, along with the rocky orb’s radioactive veins and molten heart, supported sulfur-driven life, while Varok’s

tidal and geothermal forces provided enough energy to drive its more creative varieties of carbon- and oxygen-based creatures. Eventually its prolific life had generated an atmosphere similar to Earth's.

The intercom blared with an elllonian voice. "Would someone tell me what I'm supposed to tell Varok?" Killah demanded. "Now I've got an immigration officer asking questions. Whose replacement certificates are being used for the immigration of the new elllonian tad Da-oon?"

"I'll be right back," I said, undoing my restraints and settling Shawne onto the seat.

"Okay, Mom." She was engrossed with Da-oon, Jesse and Artellian in an electronic game of catch the ilara egg.

"I'll call if she asks for you," the varok Junah said, reading my unspoken question with her patches. "Jesse is up next to be ilara."

Orram was sending the required message as I entered the flight deck. "Immigration notice: Tandra of the Oran-elConn-Grey Family comes to Varok on the deceased varok Ahl's Certificate of Survival. Shawne, the human child, inherits a place on Varok with Conn's certificate. Killah certifies Da-oon as his replacement. Artellian the elll uses his certificate for the human Jesse Mendleton, who will be acting as an official human observer for EV Science. Junah has not used her replacement privilege. No increase in Varok's population results from the acceptance of these immigrants; with Ahl's loss, there is a decrease of one."

Killah closed the transmission.

Orram turned to Conn, his sapphire ovals focused on the elll's narrowed orbs. "We'll soon celebrate Orserah's tenth Jovian year. She'll need help fulfilling her obligations to the land at the Oran locale."

"I'm looking forward to it," I said. "It'll be like my early years on a ranch in Colorado."

"So that's why you are built like a small race horse," Conn said. "I only wish your face were more horsey, you know, narrower, with a longer nose, like varoks." He turned in his seat, pulled me close with long green velvet arms and enclosed my small nose and cheeks in his wide mouth.

"I know. I know. You like high cheek bones," I gasped, when his dry kiss, or whatever you might call it, let me go. The arms stayed wrapped around me with typical elllonian affection.

Orram sounded serious. "Orserah now has the largest web field there, Tandra. It feeds a sizeable mob of daramonts. And she produces most of

the eggs and egg-layer meats for the locale—both ilara and kaehl.”

I stroked Conn’s head plumes, lifting the red and yellow ones off his eyes, then gently pushed him away. “I love outdoor work, Orram. I don’t plan to spend the rest of my life in a biology lab, you know.”

Killah turned to Orram with a sarcastic tongue looped over his nasal gills. “The Council of Species has other plans for you, Orram. If you take that job, you won’t be much help to Orserah.”

Orram’s crystal blues focused on Conn, then me. “You both heard the stakes. Should I agree to serve as Governor of Living Resources?”

Conn’s eyes relaxed to their largest salad-plate roundness, and his head tilted forward at an angle, daring Orram to read what was in his mind.

“Voice it,” Orram demanded.

“You’ll get a lot more if you read me,” Conn said.

“I don’t want to get lost in your brain right now.”

“What are you two talking about?” I asked.

“Orram smells a rat on Varok,” Conn whispered to me. “They’ve offered him a chance to be big cheese, but he doesn’t like the smell of Limburger.”

It was a relief to laugh. I was grateful for the ell’s quirky use of English.

“Varok offers me the honor of a horrific pain in the neck, to borrow another human phrase,” Orram said.

“I agree,” Conn said. “Do you think the council is asking you to take this job because everything is coming up shiny red web berries on Varok?”

“Something has probably gone wrong,” Orram admitted. “The present Governor, Tahl Onaliak, plans to resign. Someone on the council has the wierd idea that my expertise in snooping around Earth will be useful.”

“You would not enjoy playing bureaucrat, Orram,” I said.

“True,” he said, “though I would enjoy roaming the hills, canoeing the lakes—you know, keeping tabs on Varok’s living populations.”

“Surely, eco-complexity can’t be managed so closely,” I said, taking him seriously, “only modeled and nudged occasionally. There are too many variables, unknown keystone species in addition to the well-known traps of dealing with complex systems.”

“That’s all true, but we have to watch for large perturbations, Tandra,

and seek out their causes,” Orram said, lowering his voice. “To take responsibility for Living Resources would require a total commitment on my part, and more sacrifice than I’d care to ask of this family.”

“Sacrifice?” I didn’t like the sound of that.

“It means that we might live in Ahl Vior, not at Orserah’s house,” Conn said. “It could be nice. The ellls at the Concentrate swim a delightful school.”

“Then we’re agreed, it’s not compatible with the life we chose,” Orram said, turning on the transmitter.

He radioed his decision to Varok. He explained that he must honor the contract to care for the land and to meet food production obligations at his family’s locale. “Collectively, we have many work-hours to share. As a family, we will expand our research and analyze communication that comes from Earth. We intend to continue to present to the human population our recommendations for their gradual conversion to a steady-state.” He thanked the Council for the honor. “There will be no further communication until we have landed. Transferring to Port Ahl Vior, Incoming. Orbit attained.” He shut off the transmitter.

“Now,” he said with a smile, “Enjoy the view, my good farmers. Go behind and be sure all your restraints are secure.”

I wasn’t fooled. Orram’s mind was seething. Soon he would call me into his thoughts, where I would play the mediator between his rational state and his rising emotional challenge.

### *Conn—moments later*

Conn pulsed the fusion amplifiers and teased the ionic propulsion engines, easing the *Lurlial* toward the remote Jovian moon he had known as home since his youth. Like a banded agate, Jupiter shone in the blackness of space, its image slowly contracting as the ship approached Varok, orbiting Jupiter at a distance of 3.488 million kilometers.

*Relax. Unroll your tongue, Conn, my boy. Don’t let Mahntik get to you. You can land your family on Varok, and they will remain safe there. Varok could not have changed much in the Jovian half-year since we’ve been gone. Or could it?*

As Varok began to pull the *Lurlial* into orbit, Conn enjoyed his infrared vision of its atmosphere. It shimmered with the continuous sheets of lightning that played against the dancing green, yellow and blue aurorae. The colorful storms encircling Jupiter’s huge sphere lit up large

slices of the Varokian sky.

Conn loved his adoptive home. Here on Varok he had grown up as a loner and studied at the Concentrate, making his school on Ellason proud of him. Varok's odd collection of intelligent life forms provided good entertainment, and Earth studies filled his dry land time with a serious hobby. The mixed Varokian society could be as steady and true as the course of a running stream, yet any new stone, like the introduction of three alien humans, could shift its flowing patterns. *Who knows what might self-organize with the humans Shawne and Tandra and Jesse Mendleton triggering the complex mini-systems of Varok?*

The thought opened Conn's froggy face into a grin that spread from one side to the other, and his tongue reached up to wet the gills sprouting like wild mistletoe from his trapezoidal nose. *Humans, my loving humans on Varok.* Shawne would be a challenge for Orserah, but she would love the child, and the child would love the pond in Orserah's lodge.

The pond was his watery nest, but piloting the spacecraft was like swimming the deep currents of Ellason's oceans. He played the plasma engines as he would fine-tune his backfin in water. Two meters tall when standing, he had powerful legs that could carry his weight on Varok's lush but twiggy land. Though he preferred to ride the huge daramonts there, he refused to admit that riding was easier than walking on the broad sheets of sensitive web tissue that connected his long toes.

He tried to relax. He didn't like Mahntik and the great-fish contacting Orram. *I doubt they are on the same team.*

Orram joined him at the ship's controls with a questioning look.

"Go ahead and read me," Conn said to the varok in English. "It saves wear and tear on my vocal gills. Why are my hexlines lit up as if I were about to be attacked?"

"I don't need to read you for that—it's Mahntik," Orram said. "She irritated me, too. I'd rather deal with the pythons in Florida. She's some kind of predator."

"She thinks you're cute. Always has."

"Speak Varokian, Conn. How does 'cute' translate?"

"Trust me. It doesn't."

"Trust is a human thing. I can read sarcasm without it—even in that tangle of sensory circuits inside your head."

"We can't fail them, Orram," Conn continued in English, serious. "Tandra and Shawne."

“Ah, there it is. How are we going to protect our beloved, fragile dry-land bipeds from a threat like Mahntik, something that we can’t define ourselves?” He turned to look more closely at the eIll he had known since their youth. “You know what? I see in you a more basic worry—something about our family not being family in any biological sense.”

Conn blew out his lungs and closed his gills in agreement. “Tandra might find it difficult to build a relationship with your son Orticon.”

“No more than I will. Tandra and you and I are much closer to Shawne than I will ever be to Orticon, though he shares my genes. Right now I’m more worried about you. Will our family be enough? Or will you need to join the schools of Lake Seclusion, perhaps the larger schools of Tahkallan?”

“I don’t think so. I’m too much a loner, Orram.” Conn picked thoughtfully at his wet-sweater. “I may need a mate, though. How about you?”

“I’m a varok, Conn, remember? I’ve got what I need in the mind-link with Tandra. She fulfills all my varokian hormones. It’s Tandra who may need a mate.”

“Yeah, you may be right. She and I may have more work to do in the sex department.”

“We’ve taken on a bit of a challenge with this family of ours.”

“We knew that. All of us knew that, and love trumps it all. Right?”

“Right.”

“Swear by my wet-sweater, old pal.”

“No need, but sworn—to give your overactive angst some peace.”

Woven of the same silver moss that lined the space cruiser’s passageways, Conn’s wet-sweater kept the eIll’s pressure-sensitive skin tiles moist and protected the neuromasts, the electro-magneto and ultrasonic receptors in the chartreuse lines between his tiles. Without the wet-sweater, he could not live more than ten light cycles out of water.

“You share five perfectly good, non-aquatic senses with humans and varoks.” Orram smiled, turning back to the control panel. “But your hexlines may need some time in the lakes, fizzing and buzzing or whatever your schools do there.”

“I don’t need schooling buzz, ‘Ram. I’m a loner. What I need is varokian patch organs to guess Tandra’s mood. When she’s in your thoughts, I might as well go suck ilara eggs.”

“That’s ridiculous. Your empathy is as good as human intuition and any varok’s mood-reading,” Orram said. “Sometimes you know how

Tandra and Shawne feel before I do. Your job now is to let go, let them do their own adjusting to Varok. It might surprise you.”

“They won’t have trouble adjusting . . . unless Mahntik is after your bod.” Conn pushed away from the pilot’s console. “You’ve got to admit it, Orram, my man, if you’ll pardon the expression. Something is seriously wrong down there, or the great-fish and our favorite varokian control-freak wouldn’t be competing for your attention.”

“Mahntik or no Mahntik,” Orram said, “Tandra and Shawne will adjust to Varok in spite of us.”