

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Surrender*

“We have approximately three weeks of food and water remaining and could use some maneuvering fuel and other items as well,” Quardir said. He, Eva, Jylle, Lisa, Raia, and Salaro sat around the table in the main salon where the Sentients were at breakfast.

“More fresh fruit please!” Jylle said with a wide toothy smile.

Lisa laughed. “Oh, the things I would do for an apple.”

Eva swallowed a mouthful of porridge. “Where to?”

“The Independent world Werwa is five Standard days away,” Quardir replied. “A few small spaceports and somewhat advanced industry. Population six hundred million mostly humans and Mygareans. I am hoping to set down for a few days to conduct a detailed inspection of this ship and perform any needed maintenance. I also believe you might all enjoy some shore leave. You should find the nearby hills and lakes quite enjoyable. From there, it should be two months or less to Kalevala to reunite with David. I base that estimate on the near-total lack of hyperrelays, but we could get lucky because that voyage ordinarily takes only nine Standard days. Either way, filling our holds will give us more than enough to make the trip.”

“Danger,” Raia said.

“What?” Lisa glanced at her daughter, then at Quardir. “Danger? Is this planet not safe?”

“We cannot presume anywhere is safe,” he replied, “but the information I have indicates healthy enough local economy to where meeting our needs shouldn’t cause a firefight.”

“Well, at least we know where to find a fully automated surgery suite and plasma tank if we need it,” Eva remarked with a wry smile.

“No,” Raia said. “Alyya is gone from there.”

“Gone?” Lisa frowned. “What, did someone else find and save her?”

Raia laughed and made a silly face. “Maybe!”

Lisa rolled her eyes. “Any time you want to stop the maybe game is fine with me, Raia.”

“OK, Mama.” Raia looked downcast. Lisa sighed and opened her arms to pull her daughter into a tight hug.

“I’m sorry, Raia. I’m not angry with you and I know you’re trying to help. You just don’t know the whole story. Alyya was part of your father’s life long before we came along.”

“I know more than you think, Mama.”

Lisa ran her fingers through Raia’s hair and then stood up. “If you say so, little one. I’m going to put my new arm through its paces. Quardir, can we get in some hand-to-hand training?”

“Of course, just call me when ready. It’s good to see you healthy again, Lisa.”

Lisa smiled as she leapt up, grabbed on to a hatch coaming, and began doing slow pull-ups. “I love my new arm, and I love you all for giving me time to heal!”

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“This place looks like some Midwestern town and Mos Eisley spaceport had a love child,” Lisa remarked as *Quardoz* approached Werwa. The town itself spread across several square kilometrons, a collection of single-story and low-rise buildings set among gently rolling hills carpeted in grass and lush trees. The spaceport consisted of two runways and a series of round enclosures for ships capable of vertical landings and takeoffs. *Quardoz* descended toward one of the enclosures. “This seriously looks like a mashup of *Homer Price* and *Star Wars*.”

“What are those?” Jylle asked.

“I’ve been here six and a half Earth years and forget that none of you grew up on twentieth century Earth,” Lisa said with a laugh. “Jylle, *Homer Price* is a book of stories about the adventures of a teenage boy and his friends in a town called Centerburg in a place called

Ohio. *Star Wars* is a famous science fiction movie. I remember watching the first one with David back on Earth. Oh my God, that was the night he fixed the garbage disposal... and he just wouldn't stop ranting about how inaccurate the space battle scenes were until silly me took the bait and asked just how many space battles he'd fought. And here we are."

"What's a book?" Salaro spoke up. "What's a movie?"

*Thinking about the quaint technologies these children will never know makes me feel so old!* "A book is... well... it's like a writeboard, except that it's made of many sheets of paper with words and sometimes pictures printed on them. A movie is a kind of holo, but it's totally flat. On Earth, sometimes an author would write a book and then someone else would make a movie based on that book."

"Tell me one of the stories," Salaro said.

"Why not?" *It's so good to see Salaro happy and interested in something because I worry about him after everything he's been through and is still going through.* "Once upon a time, there was a teenaged boy named Homer Price who lived in his family's motel and loved fixing radios. Well, one day—"

"What's a radio?"

"A radio, Salaro, is like a commlink, except that it only uses sound. Anyway, one evening, Homer is fixing one of his radios, when he hears that some bad Sentients have stolen money. He later finds the men and calls the sheriff—law enforcement—to come arrest them. He does this with the help of his pet skunk, which is an animal that sprays stinky stuff from its butt to scare away—"

"How boring!" Salaro slipped off the seat and stomped off. "I want a soldier story!"

Lisa shook her head. "Just when I thought we were having a moment."

Jylle hugged her. "I like the story, Lisa."

"Me too!" Raia said.

‘Yeah, well, your cousin can be a bit of an asshole sometimes,’ Lisa muttered.

“Asshole!” Jylle said, clapping her hands. “Asshole, asshole, asshole!”

She ran after her brother. “Salaro, you are an asshole!”

“Mama, what’s an asshole?”

Lisa sighed. “It’s the place where you poop from.”

“Oh.” Raia was quiet for a moment. “Salaro is an asshole. But only sometimes.”

Salaro shouted, Jylle screamed, and pandemonium appeared to be brewing in one of the staterooms before Eva’s stern voice silenced both children. She appeared in the salon soon thereafter with Jylle in her arms. The girl’s eyes were puffy from crying and a few tears still lingered on her cheeks. “I’m starting to think we’ve been cooped up here just a little too long... and I have no idea what’s wrong with Salaro but I’m worried about him.”

Lisa kissed Jylle’s forehead and then kissed Eva’s cheek as she hugged them both. “Be gentle with him, Eva. The harder he pushes, the gentler you need to be... and yes, I know how fucking trite I sound.”

“Salaro is an asshole because he’s sad,” Raia said. “I’m sad I can’t help.”

“I know,” Eva whispered, “and it’s killing me inside.”

Lisa picked her up and the two women and two girls held each other. Just then, *Quardoz* trembled a little as they touched down, and Quardir strode into the room. “Werwa, ladies... and gentleman. I aim to procure a new jump exciter, at least one spare, and some other spare parts. I will also inspect every square millimetron of this ship and get her good as new... and hire a cleaning crew. You biologicals seem partial to food and drink, so get whatever you like and have it delivered here. Please plan for an eight-day layover.”

“Thank you, Quardir.” Eva and Lisa set Jylle and Raia down. “How can we help?”

Quardir opened the hatch. “Disembark. Go see, do, and be anywhere but here as much as possible. The surroundings do not interest me in the slightest, but you all are in dire need of recreational activities. Please enjoy and have faith that better days are ahead.”

The five Sentients stepped out into a warm day with a soft but steady wind that carried the sounds of fusion drives and tools and voices speaking Galakka and other languages, and the smells of electricity, machinery, moisture, and a mélange of foods. A slow but steady stream of atmospheric and spacefaring craft came and went, most of them availing themselves of the nearby runways. Holos broadcast news, much of it local goings-on such as ship arrivals and departures, schedules, and the antics of local celebrities and miscreants alike. *And almost no news of the war... as though we stepped into a bubble of tranquility amidst the suffering. Are these Sentients in denial? Living while they still can? Or do they have some other secret?*

“Come on, Mama!” Raia tugged her hand. “Let’s get something to eat and go play!”

“I don’t know if I can let you play, Raia.”

“Why not?”

Lisa laughed as she picked her up. “Because I love you so much that I may not be able to let you go... and then you’ll be stuck!”

Raia squealed with laughter as Lisa planted a giant raspberry on her tummy before setting her down and laughing as she scampered off a few metrons. Lisa and Eva soon exchanged some of their gold tabs for the local currency of metal disks and paper notes, which Lisa showed to Salaro to answer his earlier question about books. He scowled and feigned disinterest but perked up as they passed a cart selling bits of spicy meat on wooden skewers.

The rest of that day was as blissful as any the Johnson family had known since before the war. Lisa marveled at the architecture, simple painted wood structures on streets lined with large maple-like trees that, but for the holos, fusion-powered vehicles, and steady stream of aerial craft, might indeed have passed for Centerburg, Ohio as she imagined it from *Homer Price*. Sentients of all races passed to and fro, either not noticing the two women and three children or exchanging greetings and pleasantries. They wandered through a commercial district, browsing

shops and picking out new outfits—simple dresses for the girls, pants and jumpsuits for Salaro, and light, loose-fitting clothes for themselves.. They returned to the spaceport late that afternoon and spotted Quardir squatting atop *Quardoz* with a gaggle of technicians and robots around him peering down at something through an opened panel. Other personnel were busy washing down and scrubbing the hull.

“We’re home, Quardir,” Eva called.

“Welcome back,” the robot said. “Pleasant shore leave, I hope? And I imagine you are dropping the children off and heading out carousing? I certainly would if I were you.”

“Yes and yes,” Eva replied with a grin.

“There are dockyard personnel inside cleaning and performing maintenance tasks, but I have the entire ship under constant surveillance,” he said. “I will feed the children and put them to bed. You two enjoy yourselves. I hope not to see you before morning.”

Werwa’s sun was sinking behind the high walls of the landing bay when Lisa and Eva stepped back outside half an hour later. Both wore boots and tight stretchy pants that clung to their curves. Lisa opted for a tank top, Eva for a snug halter top. Lisa wore her Marine cap, and Eva was bareheaded, her long blonde hair trailing down her back. Lisa’s favorite guitar was slung over her shoulder. They looked each other up and down.

“Looking good, Mrs. Johnson,” Lisa said.

“Feeling good, Mrs. Johnson,” Eva said with the widest smile Lisa had seen in months. “So now what?”

Lisa gestured toward town. “Now, we get good and drunk... and laid. But not anywhere near here... because the last thing I want to do is pity-fuck someone after hearing war stories and crying in my drinks. Let’s go across town and mingle with locals.”

She started walking but Eva caught her arm. “Lisa, are you sure you want to... I mean...”

Lisa rotated her wrist, slipped free of Eva's grasp, and took her hand. "Eva, I love your brother with all my heart... what's left of it after losing Maradei... and we both agreed to find companionship and connection wherever we could, because chances are good one or more of us doesn't make it out of here alive. So yeah, I'm going to get laid before I tear one of my new arm muscles trying to get myself off."

Eva smirked as she let Lisa pull her along. "You're cute when you put your foot down."

Lisa threw an arm around Eva's shoulder. "And you're a knockout when you're happy."

Eva put her arm around Lisa's shoulder. "Thanks, but you're no Zyra."

"Yeah, well, you're no Maradei."

It was just after dark when they located a bar with a band and a lively crowd that looked for all the world like any dive bar in San Francisco, Eureka, or even Centerburg. Lisa was soon perched on a perfectly Earthlike barstool with a Raian tea in her hand, her legs crossed, one foot tapping her stool in time with the music that reminded her of an Earth band called... *Holy shit, they are playing ZZ Top... and it may be in Galakka, but I'd recognize If I Could Only Flag Her Down anywhere!* She polished off the rest of her drink and approached the stage as the song wound down, guitar in hand. "Hi! Mind if I join you?"

The musicians looked at each other and then at her. "Do you know our songs?"

Lisa shrugged. "I think I know a chord or two... and I can sing a little."

"Well come on, then!"

Lisa leapt on stage and one of them handed her a transmitter for her guitar and clipped a microphone on her top.

"Do try and keep up," the lead singer said.

Lisa laughed. "You all keep up with me, because I'm about to turn this up to twelve!"

She spun to face the crowd. “Hello, Werwa! I didn’t compose this next song and I’m no Frank Beard, Billy Gibbons, or Dusty Hill, but I do know this music in its original Earth language. Now, I don’t know about you, but I just can’t stop rockin’, baby ‘til I lose my mind!”

Before anyone could react, she began belting out the first few chords. The startled band sputtered for a couple bars before the drummer recovered and started up the beat. Lisa extended the intro for a few more bars to let everyone catch up before launching into song. “You’ve heard about the rock for some time, I know!”

It took only minutes for Lisa to forget all about the lights shining in her eyes, the cheers of the crowd, the movement of dancing bodies, the clink of glasses, the smells of drink and sweat and old wood, the heat of her exertion, the war, David, everything but her guitar and her fingers flying across the fretboard and strings. Her body moved, her hands spun music, and her mind lost itself in the music as she played song after song. *Fuck! Fuck yes! This feels good! I feel alive!*

“It’s a fine time to fall in love with you...”

“Slip inside my sleeping bag...”

Lisa played guitar and drums until she saw stars before pausing for breath and returning the raucous applause with a sincere bow. “Thank you! Thank you all and thank you to the band who let me up on this stage without any idea who I am or whether I could play a note. You all have no idea how much I’ve missed playing music and entertaining a crowd, and I can’t tell you how much your support means to me. And now, how about one final song? This one goes out to my sister-in-law Eva because... well... it’s true.”

Lisa began playing again. “She’s got legs, she knows how to use them...”

“Thank you,” she said again when she had finished. “Thank you one and all! Eva and I are here for a week after way too long in space... so you may be able to flag us down!”

She unplugged, thanked the band again, and made her way back to the bar, swapping high fives and handshakes with the enthusiastic crowd. Eva gestured to the empty barstool next to her, and Lisa was soon working on her second Raian tea.



“You remind me of Lisa Heikes,” a male voice said on her left. Lisa glanced over. A human male leaned against the bar. He stood a bit over two metrons tall and seemed at least reasonably well-built. Lisa drank in his dark curly hair, thriving moustache, and the hint of lush chest hair visible above his open collar. She nodded at him.

“Is Higgins bringing the Ferrari around?”

He laughed, taken aback. “Excuse me?”

She looked her new companion up and down. “You look the spitting image of Tom Selleck from *Magnum P.I.* It’s a show from—never mind. You’ll do.”

“Excuse me? I’ll do... what?”

Lisa ran her hand up and down his arm, pausing to squeeze his biceps, then looked him in the eye. “Me, if I’m lucky.”

“Um...” *Space, is he blushing? That’s just adorable. I may feel guilty in the morning, but it ain’t morning yet.* “Well, you’re forward, aren’t you?”

Lisa threw her head back and laughed aloud. “What, are you the shy innocent type, or are you just a little too used to being the hunter instead of the prey?”

“I... the former?”

“Bullshit. No human man approaches any human woman in a place like this unless he’s aiming for her pants. Most women reject you—as they should—but here I am wondering why my panties are still on.”

The man accepted a drink from the bartender and downed it in a single gulp before turning to look at her. “Ah, so you know about the other entertainment this place offers.” He extended his hand. “My name is Eton.”

Lisa shook his hand and glanced back at Eva who smiled, shrugged, and raised her glass in salute. She then turned back to Eton. He smiled. “Welcome to my world, dear Madam. Whatever secrets you make here are safe with me!”

Lisa hesitated for a moment. *David and I love each other... and we made a deal... or at least I rammed a deal down his throat after ramming Markash down mine. Can I live with myself if I do this? Can I live with myself if I can't? Oh, to hell with it.* She took his hand in hers. "I'm Lisa... and Eton, I'm still dressed."

Eton guided her off the barstool and toward a door guarded by a large Gryvan who licked his chops as he waved them through. This room had dim purple lights shining on smooth black walls. Soft music hushed but didn't drown out the sounds of conversations and sex. Lisa felt a pit in her stomach. *Am I really going to do this?* Even so, she nodded when Eton gestured toward an open doorway and stepped inside, finding herself in a simple changing room with benches and a row of lockers. *I'd at least hoped for the illusion of romance... of being undressed by an attentive partner... but I'm here and so is Tom Selleck's clone.* She peeled off her clothes and stashed them in a locker, paused long enough to admire her naked body in a holo, took a deep breath, and stepped back out into the corridor. Eton was waiting for her. She looked him up and down again, her gaze lingering on his midsection. "Oh yeah, you'll do." *Any port in a storm.*

The play area was a round room ringed with alcoves, some of them completely exposed, others at least semiprivate. Sentients stood, sat, and/or lay on chairs and beds, some alone, most with at least one partner. Lisa had only time for a brief look before Eton's arms and hands were on her body, his lips pressed against her neck, his groin pressed against hers. She closed her eyes as she felt her nerve endings coming alive like they hadn't done for a long time. A small flicker of guilt crossed her mind like a small cloud in front of the sun before she surrendered to the moment. She and Eton occupied an alcove before moving into the main room. Other Sentients came and went in a random swirl of bodies, appendages, hands, and genitals. Lisa was vaguely aware that some of the hands and mouths on her were female, but that barely registered. *I wish it was Maradei. I wish I was sharing what's-his-face with my wife.* She imagined nuzzling Maradei and inhaling her scent... and erupted in climax.

At one point, during a particularly languorous session, Lisa stretched her arms wide and felt her hand slide across a breast. *Oopsie!* Her eyes fluttered open and then went wide as she sat up with a squeal. *Oh shit!*

"Eva! My God, I'm sorry! It was an accident!"

Eva glanced over at her and winked. “Oh, it’s you. Hi!”

Mortified, Lisa scooted out of range and took a few breaths. *What the fuck am I doing? This is*—and then Eton’s hands were on her body, and she succumbed to the moment once more.

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The remaining seven days passed all too quickly for Lisa, Eva, Jylle, Raia, and Salaro. By day, Lisa and Eva spent some time procuring supplies and shopping before taking the children to the woods to hike, explore, and swim in a nearby brook. By night, the children safely back aboard *Quardoz*, the women parted company, Eva to a local watering hole or club, and Lisa to Eton’s apartment in one of the low-rise buildings near the spaceport.

“There you are,” Eva said on their last morning on Werwa. “I haven’t seen you in... what, two or three days? Just what have you been doing?”

Lisa looked her sister-in-law in the eye. “Fucking. Sleeping next to a man and in his arms. Talking with a man and sharing the kinds of things that only strangers and old married couples share. Cooking. Eating. Fucking. Drinking. More fucking. And when things got quiet, we’d start fucking again. I am spent, sore, chafed, and won’t be able to sit or shit straight for a few days. I’m also happier and more relaxed than I’ve been in a very long time. And you?”

“Me?” Eva laughed. “I didn’t move in with anyone, but if it was female and interested, I went for it, human, Mygarean, and then some. I have seen and explored vaginas unlike anything I’ve seen before and loved every minute of it. Well, except yours, but that was an accident, and I apologize yet again.”

“Yeah, that was some night,” Lisa said. *Eva really is a knockout, not just physically but in how she lights up when she’s happy. Funny I’ve never really noticed that before.* “So how do you feel... besides fucked half to death?”

“I definitely feel fucked half to death,” Eva said with a peal of laughter, Lisa rejoicing inwardly as she saw the happy gleam in her eye, as if her zest for life had been rekindled. “This is the first sex I’ve had since... There were times I almost couldn’t do it because I miss Zyra so

Creator-damned much. It was like ripping open my heart all over again... and I actually left more than one companion in tears either before or partway through the sex. Even so, the feeling of physical connection and intimacy, however fleeting and meaningless, was exactly what I needed. I feel alive. Like acutely alive, you know?”

Lisa smiled. “Oh, I know. Eva, I meant it when I told you that David and I agreed to find pleasure where we could and when we could. Do I feel guilty? A little. Do I have any regrets? No. Am I going to do this again? Every chance I get. What are you smirking at?”

Eva winked. “You remind me of myself when David and I first arrived in the Second Federation. I woke up healed from a lifetime of pain and went on the bender to end all benders until I met Zyra and decided to try settling down. And it worked. It worked! Until... until...”

Lisa embraced her as her happiness was replaced by wracking sobs. “It’s still working, Eva. It always will, as long as you live. And the more you truly live, the better it will work.”

“Excuse me, ladies,” Quardir said from the hatch. “The last of the supplies are loaded, the children are aboard, and I just completed my maintenance inspections and pre-launch checklist. Kalevala awaits.”

“And the sardines swim back into the can,” Lisa said as she stepped back from Eva and took her hand. She paused, then impulsively kissed her on the lips before tugging her arm. “Come on, you.”

The hatch closed behind them, and *Quardoz* lifted off into the afternoon sky.