

## Chapter 1: Are We Alone?

"'Are we alone?' No, you sweet thing, but we might find a secluded spot among those trees, if you'd like," Carmala said, stroking the snow-white fur on Sharmara's back between her halter top and shorts.

"Oh, Carmala! That's all you ever think about," Sharmara said, stepping away. "I meant, here we are, light-years from Taupo, on a planet who's only name is 'New Taupoian Planet 277.' What kind of a name is 'NTP 277'? We've had the warp drive for over three hundred years. Why haven't we found someone else out here? Are we just going to continue taupaforming planets like this so we can send colonists one day? Are we alone?"

Carmala purred as her tail twined round her leg. The tip twitched. She turned to look at the rate-of-charge meter of her ag-skimmer, then said, "I don't know. Maybe The Great Writer wasn't one of those science fiction types who wants aliens on every mud ball out here. Do we want to find others? They might not be friendly. They could be monsters or something."

"Now you're sounding like a Fawddomite."

"Don't make me out to be one of those anti-space travel nuts just because I wonder if we'll find someone unpleasant out there someday," Carmala said.

Sharmara stepped up behind Carmala and stroked the brown fur of her shoulder and arms, saying, "Well, could be you're right. I guess now, when we find a nice planet, at least there's no one to complain when we replace its biomes with our own plants and animals."

"No one but the Fawddomites. Speaking of plants and animals, this skimmer has been out in the sun long enough to charge up the batteries. I'd better see if I can get these grass seeds scattered before lunch. Got a couple hundred miles to go first," Carmala said, tilting her head back and forth as she admired the gleam of her sharp teeth, her golden skin, and the slight curl of her russet bangs in the mirrored surface of the skimmer's side window.

"Scattering seed in a desert just seems strange to me. I hope those environmental engineers have changed the rain pattern. You know, something else seems strange to me, as a non-biologist. Why is it that so many of these animals that I'm releasing have two sexes?"

"Well, Honey Child, I'm no mythologist. Maybe The Great Writer felt that we, as something special, should have more fun than the common beasts of the fields. Seems like a marvelous idea to me. After all, think of all the time and energy I save for making love if I don't waste them hunting for someone of the 'opposite sex!'" Carmala said. "Anyhow, that's how I'd have written the universe if I had been Her."

Sharmara smiled coyly as she twisted the tufts of fur at the tips of her ears into points. "Maybe you'd like to sneak into my tent tonight for some hot milk? In the meantime, I've still got these young dormara clones to release into the forest here before they kick their way out of these crates."

"I still think that clump of trees looks mighty inviting."

"Not if we get caught by the Chief!" Sharmara said. She giggled. "I wouldn't be too late tonight, if I were you."

"All right you two slackers, someone call my name?" the Chief asked as she stepped from behind the dormara crates.

"No, Chief," Sharmara said. "We were just saying what a great gal you are to work for."

"Yeah," Carmala said. "Sharp, helpful, you know--an all around good boss."

"Right. Well, I've got a special little job for my best workers. Get these dormaras loaded into Shuttle 24, the Marcopo, to go with the other fauna and trees we've already loaded. Here's your new work order."

"This is a pretty tall order for one day's work," Sharmara said.

"Let me see that," Carmala said, grabbing the work order from Sharmara. "According to this time-line, we're going to barely be able to get out to this island, do the work, and get back before dark!"

"Yeah. You two slackers should be busy enough to keep you out of trouble. Oughta be ready for a good night's sleep when you get back, huh? You won't find any 'inviting' clumps of trees out there now, but the Captain thinks this big island might be a great place for some rich colonists. Make sure that you do a good job. Make it real pretty. Now get moving, slackers!"

As the Chief stalked away, Carmala switched off her ag-skimmer. "Wow! Wonder what door she caught her tail in this morning?"

"We'd better get a move on if we want to get back before the fruit bats come out. I wouldn't want to fly a shuttle into one of those swarms!" Sharmara said.

"Better you than me! You're a damn good pilot and much cooler in an emergency than I am," Carmala said.

An hour and a half later, Sharmara circled the island, reconnoitering. "Grasses and shrubs seem to be doing okay down there. How about that cove? Looks like a pretty central spot for us to operate out of."

"I don't know, if I were a rich colonist I'm not so sure I'd think an island with a big volcano at one end was such a divine place," Carmala said.

"Yeah. I guess it's more of a threat than those alien monsters of yours. But the scanner said it's extinct."

"Extinct? Hah! A shuttle's scanner isn't meant for geological work. So, who knows how long it'll stay extinct?"

"Long enough," Sharmara said, "for you to take the tree-shooter and make this place look 'real pretty,' as the Chief said."

Sharmara set the shuttle down at the edge of the cove. She used the shuttle's tractor beam to unload the ag-skimmer that she'd be using for scattering the fauna and the tree-shooter for Carmala.

They looked at the work order once again. Carmala tore off the instructions and time-line for planting the trees and gave the remainder to Sharmara.

"Okay," Carmala said. Looks like if I start here with the trees, you can start your grassland critters off on the plains. Then come in with your dormaras and woodland fauna as I work round the other side of the volcano with my trees."

"Right. Just stick to the time-line and we should have no problems. Make sure you're back here by 1930 hours and we should make it back to the base in plenty of time."

"Get back here early, darlin', and we might have time for a little pre-flight R&R, too," Carmala said. "With no Chief to find us."

"We'll see. First, though, the work order."

Sharmara managed to get done about forty-five minutes early. She stowed the ag-skimmer and walked up the grassy knoll from the beach to find a nice spot overlooking the cove for their 'R&R.'

When, after a half hour, Carmala still hadn't returned, she walked back to the shuttle and checked the communicator. Nothing except her own short message to base to confirm completion of her duties. She checked the scanner and discovered a storm approaching the region of the volcano.

"Oh, fur balls!" She punched the communicator. "Hello, Carmala, where are you? Any trouble with the storm?"

No response.

"Sharmara here. Carmala, come back."

No response. She tried several more times, then thought, "If she's on the other side of the volcano she might not hear me."

Sharmara waited a few more minutes, then tried again. Still no response. "I should report to base. It's probably nothing. Give her a few more tries."

Still no response. "Fur balls!" Sharmara closed the shuttle hatches and lifted off, moving toward the volcano. She set the scanner for the tree-shooter's signature and for Taup life signs as she gained altitude. She saw nothing as she circled the volcano.

She tried calling again. No response.

"She wouldn't have..." Sharmara brought the shuttle up and over the crater. The storm was still a ways off.

The scanner beeped and indicated the location of the tree-shooter. Sharmara brought the shuttle to a halt above it. No signs of Carmala. Then more beeps as the scanner located Carmala about a hundred yards from the tree-shooter. Sharmara saw her, prone and unconscious on the volcanic rock. She began to descend. The scanner beeped a warning and displayed "Danger--High Carbon Dioxide Levels--Sulfur Dioxide Increasing to Dangerous Levels."

"Fur balls! That storm's not the only danger here. Extinct or not, this volcano is still a killer. Better hurry!" Sharmara rose to a safe altitude and set the shuttle to hover over Carmala. She plucked Carmala from the crater with the tractor beam and brought her aboard. She sealed the cargo bay hatch and

set down on the volcanic rock. Sharmara grabbed the First Aid Bot and rushed back to the cargo bay.

She was relieved to find Carmala still breathing. She watched as the Bot hovered over the unconscious Carmala, extended a respirator mask, and administered oxygen.

"Come on," Sharmara said. "Where's a muse when you need her? Is she all right, FAB?"

The bot sounded its "don't-get-your-tail-in-a-twist" chime and continued.

After what seemed like an eternity, Carmala began to stir. She sat up and pulled away the oxygen mask.

"Wow!" Carmala said, shaking her head.

"Carmala! What were you thinking? Landing in here and going exploring? Are you crazy?"

Carmala took a deep breath, then looked toward Sharmara. "Well, glad to see you, too, Honey Child."

"Oh, Carmala. I'm sorry. I was so worried when I found you. You might have been dead. Are you all right? What happened?"

Carmala took another deep breath, then replied, "The Critic must have calculated that time-line! I didn't have a snowball's chance of finishing early, let alone in the time allowed. So I juiced up the shooter for all it was worth. It kept overheating. So I'd set down for a while, let it cool, and go on. Just as I finished, I saw the storm off shore. Didn't seem to be coming my way but I thought I'd just take a short cut over your extinct volcano just in case. That's when I noticed that the shooter was

overheating again. Apparently the beeper malfunctioned, because she was pretty hot. So I set her down. The place was so alien, yet so beautiful, that I thought I'd look around while the shooter cooled off. I walked a little ways, then noticed a strange, sour taste in the air. That's the last thing I remember until I woke up with FAB here trying to smother me."

The First Aid Bot beeped indignantly at this last statement.

"Sorry, Honey," Carmala said, patting the bot. "I know you were helping me."

"Can you get up and walk? We need to pick up your shooter and get back."

Carmala got to her feet, still a bit wobbly, and threw her arms around Sharmara's neck. "If we're going to be late, why not spend a little more time here, Sweetie?"

"You are crazy! The Chief'll be ready to skin us alive and make ear muffs out of our hides when we get to base. You might end up in the brig for your stunt! We should already be on our way back and I haven't reported in. Let's get your shooter and get out of here!"

As they finish stowing the tree-shooter, Carmala cocked her head, listened, and said, "Uh-oh. The rain's started. Better get a move on."

They hurried back to the cabin, buckled up, and Sharmara readied for lift off. "The way this is coming down, I can hardly see."



A bright flash illuminated the cabin and Carmala exclaimed, "Holy Muses! That was close! You'd better switch on the shields."

"Can't this close to the ground. The size of this storm, if I try waiting it out we may still be here in the morning."

"Best idea I've heard all day, Sweetie," Carmala said, leaning over and stroking Sharmara's arm.

Sharmara looked over at Carmala, raised her eyebrows, then shook her head. "We're still at the leading edge of the storm. I'll try gaining some altitude, hope nothing happens, and then switch on the shields so we can pop up through the storm. Should be able to head back and report in then. If we take a lightning bolt, I'll pop the shields button, regardless."

"And if the lightning takes out the power?"

"Don't even think about it," Sharmara said.

The shuttle rocked and shuddered a bit as they slowly gained altitude. The cabin was illuminated by other strokes of lightning. Sharmara gradually swung the nose of the shuttle around in the direction of base, then pressed the shields button at two hundred yards altitude. "There, smooth as a kitten's fur," she said, and accelerated toward home.

"Guess I'd better check in and let them know that we're a bit delayed, but okay," Carmala said. "Hey, what's this switch?"

"What's what switch?"

"Here. Looks like someone drilled a hole in the control panel and stuck in a toggle switch. Doesn't match any of the

others. Just a piece of tape with 'voice' written on it stuck above the switch," Carmala said.

"Maybe the regular crew did it," Sharmara said. "Maybe it plays music, or lets them hear what's being said in other compartments. I don't know. Hey! Hey! Don't..."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," said a Taupoian voice that seemed to come from around them.

"Fur balls! Now what have I gone and done?" Carmala said.

"Relax, folks. I'm Marcopo, the ship's computer. You can call me Marki," the voice replied. "I've been about ready to go nuts listening to you two chatter on and on. Do you realize how hard it is to communicate with just beeps and flashing lights?"

"Um... Er... Okay. Hi, Marki. What is going on?" Sharmara said.

"Obviously, nobody told you about me," Marki went on, speaking rapidly. "I'm an experimental computer. I can take voice commands--now that Carmala's flipped the switch. I can also communicate better than beeps and flashes. The co-pilot hung her purse on my switch while she was cleaning up the mess after our last flight and pulled my toggle into the 'Off' position. I can fly the ship if necessary, although, as I said, I'm just experimental, so I'm still in Learning-Mode. Oh, gosh! I'm just rattling on and on, aren't I? You're still in charge here, you know. Would you like me to send that message that you were referring to, Carmala?"

Carmala and Sharmara just looked at each other for several moments, before Sharmara replied. "So, you're a snitch! That's why the Chief had us fly you."

"A snitch! I am not a snitch! I am your friend and ally. My job is to help you with the ship. I have no allegiance to this Chief you're talking about. She probably doesn't know anything about me and chose this shuttle because it wasn't already assigned to duty today. Of course, that's because..."

"Enough! You do rattle on and on," Sharmara said. "From now on, speak when you're spoken to."

"Yeah," Carmala said. "This is a bit spooky."

"Okay, but you should know..."

"Speak when you're spoken to Marki. Now, just let the base know that we're going to be a little late," Sharmara said.

"You sure are..."

"Marki! When you're spoken to!"

Carmala napped about half the journey back, then woke up, stretched, and said, "Do you really think the Chief's going to be angry with us? Maybe I could check the log and delete some stuff so it'll just look like I took longer than planned. Marki, can we do that?"

"I'm not sure about that function. I told you, I'm still in Learning-Mode," Marki said, bringing the log up on Carmala's monitor.

"You guys get caught doing that, and you'll be in even bigger trouble, Carmala!" Sharmara said.

"Huh? What's this? Log says that fuel tank 2 has been removed for servicing. Due to be put back tomorrow?" Carmala said.

"What? Uh-oh! Low-Fuel light's come on. We don't have enough to get us back to base," Sharmara said.

"Not enough fuel?" Carmala said. "How's that possible? What good's a warning light if you still don't have enough fuel?"

"Because we use fuel from both tanks at the same time," Sharmara said. "When the pressure gets down to a certain point--a point where there should still be enough fuel for us to get back home--the light comes on. But with only one tank installed, we only have half the reserve."

"Well, hump The Critic!" Carmala said. "Marki, why didn't you say something?"

"'Don't speak until spoken to.' So I just turned on the Low-Fuel light. Why do you supposed I wasn't scheduled for some other duty? I tried to tell you, but, no, 'Don't speak until spoken to.' Well, now..."

"Marki! We need help, not a lecture," Sharmara said. "How close to Base can we get with our current fuel supply?"

"Within about ten miles, if we're judicious," Marki said.

"So, Sharmara, just call for an escort, set us down in the water when we get there, and let them pick us up," Carmala said. "This is definitely not our fault. Chief shouldn't have sent us out with this shuttle."

"I should have noticed it in my pre-flight check," Sharmara said. "I just assumed that everything was ready. I could end up with a week in the brig myself."

"Least ways, I'll have some company," Carmala said. "Hey, I can't see it very well, but doesn't that water look closer? Say, Honey Child, does this thing even float?"

"I'm redistributing the remaining power. We don't have enough to maintain altitude," Marki said. "Our density is 1.308. No, we don't float."

"So we're in deep poo! Better send out that call to make sure the escort will be there when we need them," Carmala said.

"Maybe, maybe not." Sharmara said. "Watch yourself!"

The shuttle decelerated momentarily, and dropped slightly. Carmala brought up a fur ball and a bit of her lunch. "Just lost my stomach! What was that?" she said.

"Good thinking, Kiddo!" Marki said.

"I opened the ram scoops. Slowed us down and, as your stomach noticed, we dropped a bit. We're not in warp, but at this speed we can scoop up enough water vapor for the deuterium sieves to process. These shuttles aren't meant to be starships, but they can be used as escape pods. So they can process interstellar gas for its deuterium."

"We're gaining altitude!" Carmala said.

"You did say that I was a damn good pilot. If we're lucky, we should get back and maybe the Chief will already have gone to bed."

"One small suggestion?" Marki said.

"Sure."

"Unless the deuterium sieve processes fruit bats, you'd better close those scoops before we get too close to shore."

"Thank you, Marki! That deserves a reward. Let me show you two how to 'revise' the log," Sharmara said.

When they came over land, Sharmara hugged the river to stay below the flocks of fruit bats. It was well after mess, so everyone had returned to quarters by the time they touched down at the Marcopo's assigned parking zone.

"Look at that," Sharmara said. "Fuel to spare, thanks to the sieves. Even the Low-Fuel light's out."

"Don't touch my switch!" Marki said, as Sharmara and Carmala shut down the shuttle and prepared to leave.

"They're expecting us to be a little late. If we just leave the shuttle where we found it, whoever was supposed to put that other fuel tank back in will do it as scheduled in the morning. Let's have a good night's sleep and hope that nobody does any real checking," Sharmara said. "Good night, Marki. It was nice flying with you."

When they finally slipped into Sharmara's tent, she called out, "Fabric--Opaque, Lighting--Low."

"All right, Honey Child. I'm about to explode," Carmala said as she pressed her two pairs of breasts against Sharmara's. She slashed out with her claws and small pieces, all that remained of Sharmara's halter top, floated to the floor.

The next morning, alone in her tent, Sharmara brushed her fur and buffed her claws. She coughed up a fur ball. "Ugh... That Carmala--she needs to brush more often. Better get going or I won't get any breakfast. Must have broken my alarm with all that wrestling around."

As she walked along the back of the mess tent, Sharmara heard foot steps behind her, but didn't get a chance to turn.

"Don't you look bright eyed and bushy tailed this morning?" Tunto'o whispered into her ear.

"What are you doing?" Sharmara said, trying to stop Tunto'o's hands from pawing her lower breasts. She twisted around and they kissed.

"That's nice," Tunto'o said. "Maybe tonight I'll get to your tent before that Carmala. We'll see who has the tastier milk."

Carmala watched them as they pushed through the mess flap, hand in hand, grabbed their breakfast trays, then deliberately sat down to each side of her.

Carmala just smiled. "You were too late last night, Dearie. I heard you outside the tent."

"What makes you think it was me?" Tunto'o said, running a claw gently up Carmala's spine and blowing into her ear.

"I recognized the limp. You still haven't got over getting clipped by that dormara week before last. I said we should have only brought ones that had lost their antlers."

"Yeah, sweet little Captain Montomas hears pillow talk, but what're the odds that she'll remember anything else a private has

to say?" Sharmara said. She looked around the mess tent. "Where is the Captain, anyway? She and the staff are usually here before now with the duty roster... There they are. Hey, the staff doesn't look good, like they found Brittany Fawddom clones in their tents. Something's up."

"Ha! I wouldn't mind finding Brittany Fawddom in my tent--I could send her into orbit. Look at that gleam in the Captain's eyes. Bet she had a three-fur last night," Tunto'o said.

"A big bed is one of the privileges of rank," Carmala said. "Captain must have news from home. Bet those Fawddomites are rioting again."

"May I have your attention?" Captain Montomas said. "We are bugging out. Pack your gear and whatever equipment can be loaded before noon. Release any fauna which has been brought down, then report to your assigned shuttle. The critters'll just have to fend for themselves. Expect a triple scan for communicables before you board for the trip back to the Sunrise."

"Release the fauna? Some of them will never survive. It's a jungle out there," Carmala murmured to the others.

"More details will follow, as we get them, once we're back onboard the Sunrise," the Captain continued over the chatter. "However, to belay the rumors, just let me say that the crew of the Blackfur has infected Taupoï with a nasty little disease. They were able to disembark and disperse for shore leave before the infection showed up... Quiet! Quiet! It's not supposed to be deadly. Except as dehydration from diarrhea can be life-



threatening for the weak and elderly. Your families are probably safe. At ease! At ease! The Sunrise is large enough to have its own police force, so we're returning to provide security and whatever other assistance is required. You'll all be given some basic police and medical training on the trip back."

"Captain! Captain!" someone shouted. "What about us? Won't we catch it too?"

"The Med Service should be able to help you get over a little diarrhea. Okay, mates. Let's go! Bug out!"

"Oh, pooh," Tunto'o said. "So much for your tent tonight. Six by six-up bunks in those cramped crew quarters just won't be the same. Wonder when we'll get back here?"

"Back here?" Carmala said. "Not in our lifetime. Once you set foot on Taupoi, you won't leave again until the Med Service comes up with a foolproof protocol for preventing alien infection. This is just what those nutty Fawddomites need to finally shut down space flight."

"Fur balls!" Sharmara said, standing. "That look in her eyes wasn't from a three-fur. The Captain's lying to us!"