

# WINDHOME



Kristin Landon



# PRAISE FOR WINDHOME

After an eight-year hiatus, Landon (*The Dark Reaches*) returns with a complex fourth novel that combines dystopian and first-contact themes. // This is a quiet, tense book, saturated with dread.

—*Publishers Weekly*

This striking tale of survival and fortitude in an icy, alien world by the author of the “Hidden Worlds” trilogy is recommended for readers who enjoy character-driven stories.

—Kristi Chadwick, *Library Journal*

...Landon’s worldbuilding skills shine. While the action is strictly between the humans and the natives, the setting is easy to envision and believe...// Overall, this isn’t a necessarily happy story, but it is satisfying and leaves wide the possibilities for the next book.

—Karen Sweeny-Justice, *Romance Times*

*Windhome* delivers a page-turning epic journey of human survival through a maze of alien politics and environmental challenges. Its cultural worldbuilding is fascinating, detailed, and nuanced in a way that may remind readers of George R. R. Martin, Poul Anderson, or C. J. Cherryh. We should see more from Kristin Landon.

—G. David Nordley, author of *After the Vikings*

ALSO BY KRISTIN LANDON:

*The Hidden Worlds*

*The Cold Minds*

*The Dark Reaches*

# WINDHOME

Kristin Landon



Candlemark & Gleam

First edition published 2017

Copyright © 2017 by Kristin Landon

All rights reserved.

Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright act of 1976, no part of this book may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the editor and publisher.

Please respect the authors' rights: don't pirate.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

For information, address  
Athena Andreadis  
Candlemark & Gleam LLC,  
38 Rice Street #2, Cambridge, MA 02140  
eoi@candlemarkandgleam.com

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
In Progress

ISBN: 978-1-936460-79-3  
eISBN: 978-1-936460-78-6

*Cover art by Julie Dillon*

*Book design and composition by Athena Andreadis*

*Editor: Athena Andreadis*

*Proofreader: Patti Exster*

[www.candlemarkandgleam.com](http://www.candlemarkandgleam.com)

In loving memory of my parents





# ONE

## **F**rom the journal of Vika Jai:

*They say the sound of the wind in this country never stops. Those who are born here live all their lives hearing its voice. Long ago, the old stories say, the wind drove back the sea, piled stones into mountains, and scoured out a great valley in the heart of the land. Then the wind spoke the land's name: Shothef Erau. In the language of this world that I know best—the one that my heart now speaks—that name means “the wind’s home.” Windhome. And they say that all the winds of this world are born here.*

*Summer here is brief and somber—dust, dry breezes, and small, pale flowers. Winter is deadly. The people of Windhome are strong, tenacious, born for the cold. But even they fear the wind of winter: the world-wind, the weather-mother. They fear it, or they die.*

*In this wide country, on this cold world, so few people remain. Their lives are for each other. Their families are close. Their love is strong and full of patience. But their rules, though few, are not to be broken. And their justice can be bitter. I have seen it. I will never forget.*

*Still, sometimes, in the long hours of night, I lie awake listening to the world-wind. Stories tell of voices in that wind: the voices of those who have been cast out, and of the unavenged.*

*But I am of Earth, and to me the wind’s cry is wordless. There are no messages there for me. He is gone, into fire, into death. Even his ashes are gone—scattered in darkness. Borne to the sky on the world-wind.*



She woke to fire, and lancing brightness—to hissing, and roaring, and the sluggish drumbeat of her pulse. She woke wordless and without memory, knowing only that she was alive, and in pain. Waves of heat beat at her naked body, its flesh raw as a burn. She was spinning, swooping, diving. Even the redness she saw through her closed eyelids brought tears. When she opened her eyes, the light stung like needles. She took a breath to cry out. But only a whisper came.

Something touched her, something hot. A hand on her shoulder. “Vika.”

*Vika.* Who was Vika?

“Vika, we’re in microgravity. Just like training. You’re strapped down. You’re safe.”

“Where,” she rasped. Then “*Where?*”

The hand let go of her. “We—we made it.” A woman’s voice, unsteady.

*Wrong voice.* She coughed. “Who?”

“Keep still,” the voice said. “I’ve finished the revival protocol. I’m dimming the lights. Try to open your eyes.”

Through slitted lids, she saw that the light was weak now, and yellow. Someone floated between her and the light—long arms and legs, in gray, familiar, familiar gray.... Strange pale face. No hair. *No hair.* She remembered—people shaving off each other’s hair, laughing at each other— Other memories. People crowded around a table, in a little room, the light all blue. Drinking out of little cups—laughing—spilling the, the, what was it they were all drinking, something fizzy.

And now— *Wrong person.* “Eleni,” she said.

“No,” the pale person said. “I’m Anke.... Don’t talk now. You’re getting food, in your veins, and medicine. You’ll feel better soon.”

She coughed again. Chest aching. “Where’s—Eleni?” The kind face, the warm hands. The right one. Her voice was clearing. Plastic

taste in her mouth. A word she remembered now—*cryofluid*.

“Everyone is resting,” the wrong person said, jerking a blanket tight against her body, then clipping it down, holding her down, *holding her down* with her arms inside. She struggled, *too weak*, but the person patted her and said, “You rest, too. Until I come for you.” Vika took a breath to say no, but the person, Anke, had already left. Silence, and cool air that smelled like a—hospital. Familiar, not familiar...

*Eleni would tell me what's wrong.* Time was wrong. Jerking from thought to thought, and how much time in between—

Then, between one breath and another, she knew where she was. And why. And who had just tied her down.

Vika took a sharp breath. *Fuck this.* Rage helped her move. Weak, shaking, she freed herself from the cot, gripped it hard to keep from floating away. Locker over there. She stretched out an unsteady arm and got it open. Folded cloth. Clothes. She tore a clean coverall out of the pile, a few others floated out, she ignored them. Struggled to dress, hampered by the thing taped to her left arm. *IV pump*, the words appeared in her mind. Medicine, sugar, good thing. *Don't tear it off.*

She managed to get into the coverall one-handed, holding on the whole time. Her muscles ached, her bones ached, every motion made her spin. But she was cold. And this body wasn't hers, so sallow, so thin. *Hate this.*

“Vika!” A man's voice, sharp. “You should be resting.”

The coverall sealed, and Vika pulled herself around to face him. She blinked at him. Someone else she'd forgotten. A lean, brown-skinned man, hairless of course, dressed like her, like Anke.

Then he frowned, and *jolt* a name came to her. Pierre—he was Pierre.

And then *jolt jolt jolt* more memory came, shaking her body, making her whimper. The man, Pierre, took hold of her arm and it was like a shock, she jerked away. This little room—the med bay. That man—Pierre Gauthier. Third on the command crew, under Fadma and—Dane. Not a man she knew well. Not a friend.

*Jolt.* More names. “Pierre,” she said. “Where is Eleni? And, and

Nia. And Isamu.” Why was she afraid to say their names? “We’re here,” she said. “She, Anke—” —*Anke van Houten*— “she s-said we made it.” She looked at him, at his eyes smoky as ash. “Where are they?”

Pierre took a breath to speak, then hesitated. His brown skin had a faint tinge of green—from the blood replacement, Vika remembered now, that taste in her mouth. Cryofluid.

Cold sleep. *Forty years of cold sleep*. She remembered how afraid she’d been. Then *jolt* and she knew this was a ship, the *Assurance*, she knew she had lived through all those years, she knew she was facing Pierre, Pierre who never said much, who had an odd accent—*Québécois*—who hadn’t grown up in the Covenant, why was he here, why was he here if Isamu was not—

He was near her again now, had hold of her hands, his hands were warmer than hers. Thin hands, he was thin like her. *Cold sleep*.

But beyond that— She looked up at him, into his face, and frowned. *He’s afraid. He’s really afraid.*

He frowned back. Hiding fear. “Come with me.”

Maybe he would take her to Eleni. Eleni, always so kind. *She’ll answer my questions*. Vika followed Pierre out through the open hatch. Awkwardly at first, she pulled herself behind him along one of the ladders in the dimly lit central passageway. Heading forward. She felt strange, as if she were moving someone else’s limbs. And this—microgravity—confused her. When she last passed this way, when the *Assurance* had been under drive, forward had been *up*. She remembered that much.

Pierre reached the only hatchway that was spilling light into the passage. A sign next to it said RESEARCH BAY. Vika took hold beside it and looked in. Familiar, this place. *I’ve worked here*. The compartment was walled with screens, most of them dark. Anke floated near the hatch, her pale, quiet face lit by her own workscreen, her thin fingers tapping against the input plate. She did not look at them.

Cold touch on Vika’s spine. *Anke. Pierre. And me*. Three of them alone—not even one other of the team. Sixteen men and women—

*Oh, no*. Aghast, Vika looked fore and aft along the passage.

Darkness and sealed hatches. She took a breath to speak, but Pierre had already passed through the hatch. Vika swung awkwardly after him through the opening and caught hold of a loop just inside, one question trapped in her throat.

Pierre flicked a glance at Vika, then looked at Anke. “Tell her. We have no time to be gentle.”

Anke turned to Vika. Her chin lifted. “Vika—our colleagues, the rest of the team—they’re gone.”

*Gone.* Vika tightened her hold and looked at Pierre. His eyes were dark, strange. She shivered. “You mean they’re dead?” Voice like a thread. She had to take another breath. “They’re *all* dead?” The words hollowed her out as she spoke them.

“Worse than that,” Anke said. “They’re missing. Gone without a trace. All but Isamu, and he—”

“Isamu is dead.” Pierre’s voice was quiet. “Anke found him when the system revived her yesterday—because she was the backup medic. And she revived me.”

“Because he’s the backup commander,” Anke said in a low voice.

“No,” Vika said, her voice high and strange in her ears. “Oh, no, no.” She stared at Anke. A dozen people. *Missing.* More names crowded into her mind, too late. Fadma Taouil, the pilot, the captain. Eleni Sadik—the doctor, the kind one. Dr. Alexei Kozlov, their team leader, the wise one. *Gone.*

And Murakami Isamu, the nearest to a friend she’d had on the team—Isamu was dead.... “How did it happen?” she said. Her eyes burned, tearless. “How *could* it happen?” Sealed in this ship for all those years of cold sleep, alone in the dark between the stars—

“Our teammates’ cryopods are gone,” Pierre said. “Cut off at the base, very cleanly. Removed. I cannot tell how. Or—or by whom.”

“By *what*,” Anke said harshly. “Pierre says it happened just over a year ago. Something about pressure changes in the environmental logs. Something came aboard. And left. Left us behind.”

Vika looked away, at the bulkhead, the dark screens, at anything

but their faces. “So...what do we do now?” Then, a little wildly, “What can we do?” *Three of sixteen?*

“We go on,” Pierre said. “We salvage what we can of the mission.” He sighed. “Anke. I have more to check in the lander. Vika must be ready to work in an hour. Give her more drugs, give her tea, anything. I’ll see you both in the common room at twelve hundred. We’ll plan our work for the rest of today. We need complete data before we decide the landing site.” He launched himself through the hatch and vanished into the dark.

Vika floated there, her thoughts scattered, touching and revisiting one impossible fact after another, implications unfolding slowly in her mind. “Anke. How can we do this?”

“Ask Pierre,” Anke said abstractedly, already turning back to her workscreen. “I’ve got work to do. There’s no data system like this on the lander.”

*The lander.* Why did that matter? They wouldn’t be using the lander for weeks yet. Vika swung to face Anke’s screen. She could not tell what it showed. A rough, broken gridwork of bright colors, overlaid on a contoured gray surface. “What’s that?”

“Ruins, from this world,” Anke said. “Scans from the old probe, built up over the years while we were coming here.” She looked up at Vika, her face lit by the screen, angry. “Do you remember anything yet? The ruins. This world was attacked, six centuries ago. The civilization here almost wiped out. Not all the way, like at Kishar, but almost as bad.”

Vika frowned. “I remember. I do remember.”

“And so they sent us here. To find what happened, to protect Earth.”

“I know,” Vika said. “I know that. Tell me what this is, on the screen.”

Anke stared at her for a moment, then said, “This is the most important site, in the south of the main continent, near the mouth of that big river. It must have been their largest city once, maybe three hundred thousand. Good infrastructure, all rubble now. No standing structures left.”

“Why not?”

Anke looked impatient. “See the rings here and here? Craters. Full of water now. A crater where the dam was, too. Bombs. Or big impacts. But I think bombs. We know they used bombs on Kishar.”

Vika shivered. “So all of that might be—radioactive?”

“Pierre says we can’t tell from orbit. It might be, even after all this time.” Anke frowned at the screen. “But we could probably work there for a short time. It’s not as if any of us will be having children.” Anke caught Vika’s wrist, measured her pulse. “Are you thirsty?”

“No.” Vika shook her off and floated to her workstation against the far wall, reached out to unclip her datapad from the bulkhead beside it. Then hesitated. She remembered leaving it there—forty years ago, the night it was her turn to go into the sleep. She remembered slipping it into its holder, afraid, jittery, but imagining this moment....

*No. Not this moment.*

She took a breath, then tapped open the top layer of her files, swiped one onto the screen. While the grid populated with new data from the orbiting probe, she said, “You keep saying we don’t have time. Mission protocol says at least forty local days in orbit, gathering data, before we make the first landing.”

“That was the old mission,” Anke said flatly. “You’ll find out at the briefing.”



As Vika expected, Pierre was the last to arrive in the common room. Anke had said that none of them were ready to digest food yet, so she and Vika were sipping bulbs of warm water with electrolytes. It tasted terrible. Anke, one arm hooked through a loop on the bulkhead, seemed absorbed in her datapad, but she looked up when Pierre entered and took hold on the bulkhead opposite the two women. He gave Vika a searching look. “Anke, how much does she remember now?”

“I think the amnesic phase is over,” Anke said.

Pierre faced Vika. “We’ve reached our destination. We are in orbit. But there are—complications.” He seemed to be struggling for words. His Standard had never been as strong as everyone else’s. “The ship is damaged. We can’t follow the mission protocol.”

Vika set her water bulb on the bulkhead, the little magnets making a faint click in the silence. “The—those—what came aboard. They damaged it?”

Pierre’s lean face looked grim, half-lit by Anke’s screen and nothing else. “I thought we were all right, at first. A hole burned through the outer door of the aft airlock, that was all. I would guess that—they—sealed a docking tube there. But when I looked further—” He stopped for a moment, then said, “The environmental systems have been interfered with. Some kind of hardened black coating mingled all through the main boards, mixed in with them. I can’t remove it. The systems are frozen, nonfunctional.” He shook his head. “Recycling efficiency is inadequate to sustain us more than a few days. And we cannot trust any of the ship’s systems—I won’t have time to inspect everything on a ship this size, alone.” He lifted his chin. “So we must land *now*.”

“Pierre says we have two days,” Anke said flatly. “Two days to prepare for landing.”

Vika looked from one to the other in shock. “Two days? That’s impossible!”

“The lander is pre-stocked with supplies, or it *would* be impossible,” Pierre said. “But we must abandon ship within forty-eight hours. Which means settling on a landing place.”

“Which Pierre and I can’t seem to do,” Anke said bitterly. “He insisted that we needed your input. You’re the biologist.” She gave Vika a dark glance. “The one we have left.”

Vika looked at them both, feeling the distance between them. She remembered hearing that they’d been lovers for a while, late in training, but that it had ended quickly. She struggled not to swear.



“Pierre,” she said. “Both of you. Do we still *have* a mission? Will the ship even be able to relay our data to Earth?”

“For a few years,” Pierre said. “I can’t be sure beyond that.”

“A few years,” Vika said. “So we have time to learn what happened here. Look for scraps of the attackers’ technology. Learn from the—the survivors what they know. And tell Earth.” She looked from one to the other. “We *can* go on.”

“Of course,” Pierre said. “We must. But the mission has changed. We have enough fuel for one landing. Without the ability to refuel, we will be able to move the lander once, maybe twice, from point to point on the surface.” He looked away, frowning. “But, we have a pilot, a biologist, and an expert on ruins. We can go forward with that.” He turned to Vika. “Can you confirm the original probe data on the life here? Is this a seeded world?”

“Yes,” Vika said, irritated. “The colors of the vegetation, the chlorophyll—it’s all consistent with Earth life, and the biota found on—” She stopped.

“On Kishar,” Pierre said gently. “The first of the attacked worlds that our people found.” Vika grimaced.

“So it won’t be starvation that kills us,” Anke said. “Cold, maybe. Or the inhabitants—if they have records of the attack, they may think we’re their enemies come again.” She turned to Pierre. “I still say we need to land by the ruins. Kishar—that happened so long ago, there’s almost nothing left. Here we can study at least one actual attack site. A recent one.”

“That might tell us how it happened,” Vika said. “But not what it *meant*. What it was like. Our people need to know that, too.”

“Stories,” Anke said dismissively.

“No.” Vika looked at Pierre. “Evidence.” *The people*. The people of this world were the key—whether Anke or Pierre saw that or not.



Late in the ship's night, Vika floated alone in the science lab, taking her turn at the big main display, glowing with images and data. Pierre and Anke had gone over most of them in detail. Pierre wanted safety; Anke wanted her ruins. They argued over the method of destruction, the chance of residual poisons, radiation, unknown threats.... And all the while lingering cold sleep made them all likely to drop off to sleep without warning, sleep intensely for a few minutes, then rouse confused. It wasn't helping any of them think clearly. Or keep their tempers.

Vika rubbed her eyes. Pierre had gone off to make sure some necessary thing or other was safely in the lander, and Anke was off gathering the next round of IV nutrient packs and post-sleep injections. Nasty ones—stimulating their bone marrow to pump out blood cells faster. Vika's bones still ached from the last one. But Anke said they'd need their strength when they landed.

Soon now. Too soon. Her heart lurched when she remembered what her first task would be: first contact. *To face the aliens, alone.*

She studied the main screen. Just now it glowed with a wide view of the world on which they would live out their lives. "Chara c" in the catalogs. Beta Canum Venaticorum c. The Task Force for Exploration had given it some noble name or other, that no one on the team had ever used.

A world bitter and beautiful. A white dazzle of ice spread from each pole halfway to the equator. Around the middle was a band of gray-blue ocean, dotted with barren-looking islands. The one significant continent, north of the equator, lay centered in the view: wrinkled gray-and-white mountain ranges, a few side valleys feeding into a great river plain dull green with vegetation. Farther north, the land blended with the ice cap.

Vika rubbed the back of her neck, took a breath of the cool ship's air, with its faint tang of metal and plastics. It did not yet smell stale.... No, they must land somewhere in that river plain, where most of the people were. Winter would come soon; and the winters here were dangerous. This world's year, like its day, was longer than Earth's. The

seasons varied with the planet's eccentric orbit. Summer came briefly to the whole world all at once, when it made a swift passage closer to its sun. Winters were long and bitter everywhere. *No*. Marooned down there, they would certainly die without help.

She expanded the image of the river plain. All of this was like the interstellar probe images she had studied in training—studied so intensely that she had sometimes dreamed of them. But now that it was so near, only a few hundred kilometers below their ship...it was no dream. A harsh world. *And full of secrets*. Vika rolled her shoulders, moved her head to ease tight muscles. This sick feeling was more than just the cold sleep reaction, more than just grief. She guessed—no, she was certain that there was danger down there

Vika closed her eyes again, remembering a dream. Blue light. A thin whistling sound. Bitter cold on her bare skin. She'd known that dreams happened in cold sleep—the slow dreams of four degrees Celsius. But this one—maybe it had been real. She held her breath against another surge of nausea.

Yet there, below, lay the first living alien civilization humans had ever found. At that thought, she felt a tremor of excitement again. She flipped through some of the river-plain views again, working her way north along the river. Plenty of level land to set down on, but where exactly made the most sense? Anke's orderly sequence of images, thickly tagged with notes, showed some ancient, overgrown roads, and two precisely round lakes along the southern stretch of the river—more craters. As for the survivors' descendants—the only signs of them were wandering threads of dirt roads, scattered patchworks of pastures and fields, small clumps of buildings. A few widely separated towns. These people had restored nothing of what they had lost.

She scrolled through one huge, almost cloudless composite image to the spot that she'd drawn to Pierre's attention earlier. A group of big open fields, a couple of kilometers from a major cluster of buildings protected by a double wall and surrounded by smaller fields. And it was only thirty-eight kilometers by road from the largest of the

river towns. Vika pondered it. They would draw attention from those buildings, right enough. They could make contact from the safety of the lander. With luck, in time they'd be allowed shelter there. They could reach out to the larger center nearby, once they'd learned the local language.

Vika knew she would end up taking point on that; she had trained as backup for Lucas and Nia, the contact team. Both gone. Since she was a child, she'd loved learning new languages. Anke had once said she did too, but only to read. And Pierre's Standard was still stiff, still accented with his Métis French.

Just the three of them left to do this. She held still against another wave of sorrow. In the quiet of the ship, the others would hear her if she cried; and she did not want them to hear her. She rubbed her eyes again. *Rest for a few minutes.* The next two days would be hard ones. She waved her screen dark, slid her datapad into its slot on the bulkhead, and worked her way carefully to the hatch.

The passageway was dimly lit for safety, but Vika stopped and held on. There was light from the med bay where Anke was working. But beyond it, far aft, blue radiance spilled from the sleep bay. What could Pierre be doing there? She pulled her way aft along a ladder until she reached the hatch and stopped, swaying, in the opening.

Pierre was there, alone, his back to the hatch. Floating beside one of the remaining cold-sleep pods—the only one showing the pulsing blue light that meant it was powered. Isamu's pod. Now his grave.

As she took a breath to speak, Pierre touched a control on the side of the pod. With a hiss, vapor plumed from the slit along its seal. Then the cover split and folded back into the sides of the pod. A light flicked on, illuminating what lay inside. And Pierre recoiled, almost losing hold.

She launched herself forward, over the neatly sliced metal stubs where the missing pods had stood. Pierre looked up in startlement. "No, Vika!"

She took hold beside him and looked at what lay in the pod. Stared at it, paralyzed. Though her stomach was utterly empty, years

empty, nausea almost overpowered her. She swallowed hard, again and again.

Isamu had been laid open and cleaned out, neatly and completely. His abdomen gaped; his rib cage, sliced through the sternum and splayed, was hollow, too. His spine glistened, knobs of yellow-white. An arm and a leg had been flayed, and the bones of his face laid bare. And from the brow up was nothing. They had removed the top of his skull, and taken his brain.

There was no blood, of course—only cryofluid, clear and greenish, frozen now that there was no need to protect Isamu’s tissues. The cuts through flesh and bone were impossibly clean and straight.

“That’s enough,” Pierre said harshly. She looked up at him, saw the anger in his eyes. “You didn’t need to see this.”

“Isamu was my friend,” Vika said. Something tiny and glittering was floating in the air in front of her face. A tear. She rubbed her eyes and the rest of the tears spread out, cool over the skin of her face. “Why are *you* looking at him?”

Pierre touched a control, and the pod closed and sealed again. “Because I must,” he said.

“Because you’re in command,” she said slowly.

“Of course,” he said. “I am the only survivor of the ship’s technical crew. The only surviving pilot. Dr. Kozlov planned for all contingencies.”

*Pilot.* That had been Pierre’s work assignment before the team formed, she knew—but that had only been cargo runs from Earth orbit to the Moon, or to the LaGrange points. “Did Dr. Kozlov plan for *this*?” She opened her hand, indicating the two of them, the ship, everything.

His eyes were dark. “Something like this. Because of the dangers of so long a cold sleep, he analyzed many possible combinations of survivors. And left detailed orders, which we will discuss tomorrow.” He touched Isamu’s pod. “For now, I have a duty here. And little time.”

“Reintegration,” Vika said. “I would like to stay.”

Pierre hesitated, then said, “Of course. It will be brief.”

“Shouldn’t Anke—”

“She has no interest in such things.” His voice had an edge. Vika said nothing more.

Pierre took out a book—an actual book, small and thin-leaved—and read aloud from it in French. Something Vika didn’t recognize, about green pastures, and a shadow. He put the book away without explanation. Then he took out his private datapad, touched a file, and began the familiar Reintegration service.

Vika let the words run past her and studied the sealed pod. For Isamu, as for all of them, there would be no true Reintegration. Gaia, their mother, had lost them. Vika knew she should grieve over that. But it seemed a strangely unimportant loss, among all the rest.

In the cool blue shadows, Isamu’s pod was white and smooth. For a man who had been full of laughter, of the colors of life, it seemed a lonely place to lie forever. And the others—where were they now? Vika had decided that it would be best if they were dead. They *must* be dead, whatever Pierre imagined or hoped. Taken apart like Isamu, most likely.

Blinking back the pointless tears, she made herself listen again to Pierre. He was finishing the last meditation, the one for peace in the mourners’ hearts. He ended and let the datapad go dark. “That’s done,” he said. “Our last duty to Isamu.”

“Except to remember him,” Vika said quietly.

He frowned. “Of course.... Well. We’re awake; we should be working. Anke will have your next round of medications ready.”

Taking the hint, she slipped through the hatch and pulled herself toward the med bay. Her thoughts were grim. The plans and protocols they’d all worked so hard on during training—their safe, careful approach to the world below—none of that applied anymore. The next few days would decide everything.



Morning, for all the difference it made in the haze of Vika's tiredness. After their silent breakfast in the common room—the first food Anke had allowed them, a glop of rice mixed with sweetened water—they gathered at one end of the too-long table, belted into chairs. It was meant to be a comforting simulation of life under acceleration. It felt awkward, artificial. And Pierre took the seat at the head of the table, the one that had always been Fadma's. So this was going to be formal. Vika glanced at Anke, who looked as tired as Vika felt.

“This is the latest transmission from TFE Command, received nine days ago,” Pierre said, and flicked it from his datapad onto a wallscreen. News from Earth. Twenty-six years old, of course. Vika watched as the blandly attractive TFE communications agent read it out, accompanied by visuals. The sound was flawless, the crisp images chilling.

There had been five more megacyclones in the northern hemisphere this year than last, and sea level rise was threatening to overtop the massive dam at the opening of the Mediterranean. The Semi-autonomous District of South Asia (Vika flinched—*home*) had named three more coastal cities for permanent evacuation within fifty years, and the water crises in Africa and central Asia were deepening. The UN Office of Climate Monitoring had advanced the year when Earth would cease to be capable of supporting its projected population—even reduced as it already had been by rigid population control and by the endless toll of natural disasters. The crash was now barely three centuries away. As a result, planning for exploration and colonization missions had expanded to meet the challenge. The agent's warm voice was reassuring. “The children of Earth will find new homes, and new challenges, on other worlds.”

“They're still keeping it secret,” Anke said. “The real reason we're here.”

“They will as long as they can.” Pierre looked grim. “Better lies than panic.”

Now the command update, from a young man as pretty as the young woman: a series of cheerful reminders to the assembled crew to rely on each other as they had trained to do, and to always work with a good heart for the safety and prosperity of the homeworld.... Vika stopped listening. In the middle of the night she had gone to her bunk and dutifully viewed the last two or three of the small queue of communications from her mother and father. They were well, they said. They looked older than Vika had expected. Thinner. Smiling stiffly at the imager.

Her father had tried. He at least had always tried to keep communication open after she broke their hearts by choosing this mission—robbing them of their one hope for a grandchild, perhaps even a grandson.... By now, of course, they were likely dead of old age, or one of the savage new cancers. Vika had tried to make herself feel it as real—as a reason for grief. But she could not. It was not like losing Isamu.

The recording from TFE ended, as all of them did, with the Task Force for Exploration logo and a bright fanfare. Their duty to Gaia, humankind's endless future, limitless vistas. Joyous young men and women marching under the green and blue and white of the flag of Earth. Pierre shut it off. "You see," he said. "Earth needs our data more than ever. They are vulnerable to the same threat that devastated this world only a few hundred years ago. The new worlds they settle will be even less able to defend themselves." He looked from Anke to Vika. "Even weakened as we are, we must still learn all that we can. We can't know what small detail might be the clue that keeps our people safe." He set his fists on the table. "We three—we *must* complete the mission."

Anke gathered herself. "You still refuse to accept that *we three* are an experiment," she said, speaking carefully. "We were left alive precisely because those things that boarded us want to study us in the environment of our mission. Our ship was disabled to force us to land. They want us down there so they can study our actions, and



judge us. Judge Earth.” She took a breath. “And plan their attack.”

“And you know this—how?” Vika heard the tension under Pierre’s calm voice.

Anke frowned impatiently. “It’s the only explanation that makes sense. Maybe they detected our first probe, all those decades ago. Maybe they were expecting us. Watching us. Maybe even now.”

“From where?” Pierre’s voice had an edge.

“I don’t know,” Anke said. “Somewhere in this system. Hidden, so they won’t interfere with the experiment. Until it’s time to end it.”

“Listen to me,” Pierre said, his voice rough. “We *will* explore this world. We *will* discover what happened here, and how. And when we’ve learned enough, when our report is complete, we will transmit it to Earth.”

Anke, pale with anger, faced Pierre. “What would you say our chances are?” she said to him. “Your *professional* assessment.”

He sighed. “We do have a chance. But I need your best work, yours and Vika’s. Your most careful attention to the problems before us. Not only the mission—the indigenous race will be frightened of our landing, may believe we are their old enemy returned. We’ll be at their mercy.”

Anke laughed. “If they know what mercy is.” She looked at Vika. “I don’t envy you—having to face them first.”

“I’ll be ready,” Vika said steadily. *By the time it happens, I will be.*



They all worked hard for the rest of that day, the last before landing. The bone aches and abrupt sleeps of recovery faded. And at their noon meeting, Pierre chose the landing site that Vika had suggested, over Anke’s objections. Not the ruins. The people. Which meant Vika would certainly face them tomorrow.

Pierre was carrying out a complete check of all their equipment in the lander, in hopes of spotting any tampering. Vika endured Anke’s

resentful silence alone as they worked to transfer the probe's data and their own to the lander's systems.

But all systems, all supplies, tested out. After their evening meal, as they finished the last coffee they would ever taste, Pierre reviewed the results.

He took his time, as always, but at last he set the datapad aside. "This is the final set? Then all appears to be correct."

"Every system but one," Anke said.

Vika looked at her in surprise. "Which one?"

"The comm implants," Anke said. "We need to remove one of them and check it under the scope."

"But they were placed in us on Earth," Vika said, hiding her fear. "And there's no sign that any of *us* were—interfered with."

"The diagnostics show no change in the implants' function," Pierre said. "And our body scans show normal placement. Paranoia should not drive us—"

"We haven't *seen* the implants," Anke said. "Pierre, as medical officer, I must insist on this." She looked at Vika. "Pierre is our pilot. We can't risk infection or a fever, not with him. So I'll remove yours."

Vika winced. Pierre sighed again. "Very well. I will examine the implant. Once it is cleared, you will replace it. But this is the last delay. I've made the landing calculations. We launch tomorrow at 1750—it will be midafternoon at the landing site, with good light."

"And the weather looks good," Vika said.

"All will be well," he said, and smiled at her. But his smile looked hollow.



"Hold very still," Anke said, and Vika heard the faint hiss of the scalpel beam moving in the numbed flesh under her jaw. Vika's sweating hands gripped the edges of the medical pallet, her muscles so tight they ached. She had lost count of her breaths. A hundred, Anke

had said. She caught a whiff of smoke. Her own flesh burning. She steadied her breathing against a qualm of nausea.

Anke worked on. “Clear that, Pierre.” A wet, sucking sound. “No, all of it—I don’t want it floating into my eyes.” Vika winced at sudden pressure in the numb wound, metal against bone. “I see it,” Anke said. “I’ll have to lift it a little so I can dissect it free. Steady, Vika.”

A hard, aching tug, and a sharp thread of pain. “One more,” Anke said. “There. Take it, Pierre.” Anke’s face moved into view above Vika’s. “It’s done. But hold steady, I’ve got to cover the wound.”

When Anke was finished, Vika turned her head. Pierre was hunched around a datapad linked to the microscope field that held the implant. His lean shoulders were tense. Vika licked her dry lips. “What is it? What do you see?”

He turned to them, frowning. “Look.”

Vika released herself from the pallet, and she and Anke floated over to see the datapad. The magnified implant was clear on the screen, a complex, irregular gray object, its biopolymer surface meant to protect the wearer’s body from the comm device inside. But at one end she saw a glob of something smooth, glistening pink, adhered to it. Tissue? But nothing was supposed to be able to attach to these.

“See.” Pierre touched the pad and the image rotated. The pink substance covered most of the other side, a hard, smooth layer.

Vika’s stomach turned. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Pierre said. “From its appearance, it grew there. But it is not flesh.” He sounded weirdly calm. He tapped the pad and the image changed to an internal scan, the pink material highlighted so they could see its extent. Threads of the material reached deep into the communicator. “I can’t judge what effect this invasive material might have. But it’s clear that this device, too, has been modified.”

Those things *had* touched her. Vika took a steadying breath. “If they did that to me—”

“We must assume they did it to all of us.” Anke’s fingers were pressed against her jaw, just where her own implant was. “And we now

know that they were able to—interfere with us without leaving a mark.” She looked at Pierre. “Our implants will have to come out as well.”

Pierre looked bleak. “That leaves us dependent on hand comms, which can be lost. And we lose our ability to track each other.”

“The alternative,” Anke said hotly, “is to leave alien technology inside our bodies. Technology whose purpose we don’t understand. It may let them track us, monitor us, perhaps kill us at will.”

“Oh, I agree,” Pierre said. “The risk will be a little worse. But it was already very great.” His pale face set hard, he clipped the datapad to his equipment harness, beside the container that held Vika’s implant. “I must examine this in the lab, and then we’ll remove the other implants. I observed this procedure—I’ll do yours. And then we will proceed according to our orders.”

Vika watched, her hand on her aching jaw, as he slipped away through the hatch. Then she looked at Anke. “We’ll be all right once we’re free of those things.”

Anke looked at her. “Oh, certainly. Assuming this is *all* they did to us.”

Vika could find no answer to that.



Toward midnight, Vika assisted as Pierre removed Anke’s implant, and a few minutes later as Anke removed his. Then they rechecked the inventory of the lander’s cargo. With only three people rather than sixteen, Pierre had decided that they could load in much more than just the mission-specific supplies and equipment that were already in the lander; at his insistence they bundled in all the clothing and food that remained in the ship’s supplies, securing it in and around the empty acceleration couches. And of course, all the weapons—small, chemically powered guns that threw heavy slugs of metal. Aboard the lander, Pierre locked them away carefully.

Vika still struggled against fear. The dreams—once they were free of the ship, she hoped, the dreams would stop. Vika’s thoughts

now were of Dr. Kozlov, of Isamu and Lucas and Nia. Her friends, her colleagues, far more than Pierre or Anke. Gone. Or—again, the thought she could not push aside. *Or they're still alive somewhere. Afraid and in pain.*



Silence in the ship, in all the empty places. Silence in the dark passageways, and in the cold pod where something lay frozen, shut out of sight forever.

Silence in the cubicle where Anke slept restlessly, floating, lightly tethered, her long hands twitching. And dreamed of water rising, rising, stealthy and cold. Dark water swirling. Touching her feet. And over her head, the locked hatch. The water rose.

Silence in the narrow compartment where Vika dozed, sweating in her sleep bag. Dr. Kozlov embraced her again, warmly, more than warmly. He was her lover, as he had never been. She turned and muttered in the heat and darkness, and in the dream his hands caressed her body, gathered her against him. And just as he took her, his lips against her own turned hard, bare, and she pulled back and looked into his face. But he had no face, only gleaming bone, like Isamu. Just the same....

The boarding bay was also silent. Pierre slept dreamlessly, a datapad still glowing, turning slowly, slowly in the air near his hand, a pad with a checklist nearly filled. But even in the place without dreams, he was afraid.

## TWO

Vika endured the jouncing, juddering descent from orbit in a fog of nausea and fear. Landing was a jolt, then echoing silence. The lander creaked and popped as its metal skin cooled. It would never lift to orbit again. They were one more irreversible step from Earth.

She released her straps and lay rubbing her hands together—they ached from gripping the sides of her acceleration couch during entry. Ahead of her she saw Pierre deftly locking down the control board. Beside her, Anke lay still, her eyes closed, breathing with careful steadiness. Here they were, and here they would stay. The *Assurance*, left in low planetary orbit, had only one purpose now: to transmit what they learned here back to Earth for as long as the ship's power lasted.

And so it was time to get to work. Vika unstrapped and sat up slowly. She and Pierre had chosen this landing site with care: a small cultivated area tucked into the hills above the main river valley, within easy distance of a cluster of buildings that might be a village, and two days' walk northwest of the largest town on the continent—possibly fifty thousand inhabitants. Vika watched as Pierre swung his booted feet to the deck, leaned forward and sighed. He had actually shaved his face for this, but the black stubble on his scalp still made him look untidy. He struggled to his feet, hunched in the cramped space, and shuffled to the hatch. The release was manual, a bare-bones device—no power-draining automatics. He looked bleakly at Vika and gripped the handle.

The hatch chuffed open, then groaned as Pierre slid it aside. Daylight filled the lander, and with it came a gust of air, fresh and vividly cold. It had a green, pitchy smell, sharp enough to taste. From Vika's couch she could see only a slice of deep-blue sky, with a lacework of high cirrus clouds racing past.

Pierre leaned out. Vika moved her tongue, trying to form a question, but Anke spoke first. "So?" she croaked.

He shaded his eyes with his hand. "None of the intelligent inhabitants in sight. I would guess this is a pasture. I see a stone fence, and some large animals at the far end."

Vika rose—the gravity felt far too strong, unnaturally so, though she knew it was slightly less than that of Earth. She made her way over to join Pierre. The lander stood on level ground at the top of a sloping field of tufted, grayish grass, closely cropped and fenced with neatly laid gray stone. The animals—fifteen or twenty brown, low-slung quadrupeds, with spiky two-branched horns—crowded against the fence a hundred meters away, heads tossing restlessly. They were big, bigger than cattle on Earth. She wondered what they would do when she was down there among them. And what the aliens would do, confronted with beings from the sky. They would have every reason to be afraid.

Past the fence was a belt of squat, blue-gray trees that looked like conifers, branches tossing in the cool, steady wind. Beyond that, the little valley rose again toward a wooded ridge. To the west, she decided. The whole scene looked like a history holo, if she overlooked the odd hunched trees, the gray tinge in all the foliage, the gaudy, impossible blue of the sky. "It's beautiful," she said.

Pierre glanced down at her. "Now it is. But summer will be short." She grimaced and turned to look at Anke, who had slid open the shutters on the viewport opposite the hatch. Through it, Vika glimpsed a hillside, covered with evenly planted trees. Their leaves were a deep purple-black.

The inhabitants certainly knew they were here; the landing jets would have been audible for kilometers, the flame brilliant even in

daylight. Vika steadied herself with a hand on the bulkhead next to the hatch. She felt wobbly, even after the full cycle of preacclimation drugs. They'd landed. Their mission was beginning—a much harder one than they'd trained for or ever imagined. The three of them were alike in only one thing: they'd given up literally everything for the work they were about to undertake.

Now they had to make it worth their comrades' sacrifice. Vika straightened and turned away to prepare what she would need for her first task: to stand face to face with the aliens.



Kelru stared up at the sky, his hands pressing his ears shut, his claws digging into his fur. The white flame descended. Not toward him any longer—further east, in the direction of the sisterhold. Thunder shook his bones, built, built—then ended. Slowly he removed his hands. In the sudden silence even the *klakurr* were still. Kelru's mount crouched low under him. The fur stood erect along its neck. "Be easy, Thonn," Kelru said, and clicked comfortingly. A lie: he was certainly as frightened as the beast. "Up!"

As Thonn reluctantly rose again beneath him, Kelru kept his eyes on the eastern sky. The flame had gone down behind the shoulder of the next hill. At the men's college in Kheosseth, Kelru had heard of stones that fell from the sky like that, with fire. So this did not necessarily mean that the Destroyers had returned....

But if it had been a stone, why had it *slowed* as it fell?

He scratched his nose with a claw. Now, he knew, his friends in Kheosseth would want him to be their ears, their noses, their eyes. He had come here, dangerously close to the Thanen River sisterhold, to meet with a group of the farmholders and encourage them to send at least a few half-grown boys from this year's outdriving to Kheosseth to learn, instead of turning them out onto the road to wander until they found place as men. He and his cousin Nakhalru had agreed



that this kind of recruitment was necessary, if there was ever to be a strong coalition of educated men to stand against the Old Anokothu and their followers.

But it was a risk, coming here—it would anger Dethun, and she had many men in sworn service protecting her sisterhold. And patrolling near it. They, too, would come to investigate this thing that had happened.

No time to waste. Kelru sniffed the air again, looked up and down the road. It was a task he knew he carried well, to pass through danger and slip away again. So, then. He would go and see this stone from the sky for himself—yes, even in the shadow of Dethun’s walls. And then—if these were not the Destroyers come again, but something else—he would escape with the news.

When Kelru was a boy, still in his birth family, one of his fathers had taught him that some events, and some truths, carved a new streambed for time and history. If this was such a moment, and the flood swept him away—well, it would be a death worth singing about.

If anyone was left to sing.

Kelru urged his mount forward along the road, toward the place where fire and thunder had touched his world once more.



In the lander’s hatchway, Vika tensed. “I see something.”

Pierre and Anke both sat up straight from their work rechecking the travel packs they would carry from the lander. “Where?” Pierre demanded.

She pointed. “There. Under the trees at the bottom of the pasture.”

They joined her at the hatch, and she handed them their scopes. Vika trained hers on the shadows under the gray-green conifers. She swept slowly back and forth, wishing the scope were powered and set for infrared. But the optics were plain glass, built to last decades. Nothing, nothing...*there*. She backtracked. Its outline— “Humanoid!”

Vika felt a shiver of excitement. Humanoid, and cautious. Not, in this moment, aggressive. Perhaps because it was alone?

“I see it,” Pierre said. “Not just the same biochemistry, then. Perhaps a shaped intelligence as well.” Cultured by unknown outsiders, as humans had been in the dark, lost past.

Anke caught her breath. “It’s coming over the fence.”

Yes, its body outline was humanoid—tall and powerful. But when it turned its head briefly, Vika could see that it had small erect ears, and a short-muzzled face that was substantial and strong-looking. Not like any Earth animal—something other. It seemed to be wearing a coat made of animal fur, like something on Earth before the Covenant. She looked again. No, the fur appeared to be its own, sleek and reddish-brown.

It moved through the animals, seemingly unconcerned, and they yielded to it. When it walked into the sunlight Vika saw that it wore no clothing, only a strap around its waist, and another angled across its chest. But it carried a long, powerful bow, held it with an arrow nocked on the string—an arrow that must be close to a meter long. She itched to get a better look.

“See that,” Pierre said. “If bows are their best weaponry, we have them well outgunned.”

“That’s a longbow,” Anke said from behind them. “You shouldn’t underestimate it. Especially one that size.”

Vika nodded. The huge bow was in proportion: the reddish-furred alien had to be well over two meters tall. It had no tail, as far as Vika could see. Its eyes faced forward, and it strode forward calmly and deliberately. She was struck by its dignity in the face of the unknown.

About thirty meters from the lander, it stopped and stood looking up at them. Pierre turned to Vika. “It’s time.”

“She should at least be armed,” Anke said. The stubble of her fair hair looked white in the sun. Her pale eyes were intent, her strong jaw set firmly. “Surely, Pierre. Look at that thing. It’s twice her size.”

Pierre turned his head, and Vika followed his glance at the weapons locker. “No,” Pierre said. “We must not go armed into their reach.”

“Pierre’s right,” Vika said. “If the people here want us dead, we’ll die. With a fight or without one.” She looked out at the approaching alien. *Now it begins.* “I’m going down.”

Vika heard Anke take a quick, angry breath—then let it out. “Good luck, then. You’ll need it.”

Vika felt hollow, unreal. But her hands were steady as she clipped her datapad to her equipment harness. Then she rose and moved to the edge of the hatch. She folded out the landing hoist, and Pierre helped her into the sling. “Hold tight,” he said. “Cross the burned ground quickly. And don’t worry. You will do well.” He gave her his version of an encouraging smile. *Don’t screw up.*

She frowned at him and said, “Watch for my signal.”

All through her descent she was conscious of the alien watching, of the bow ready in its hands. Now she was down. She stepped over the black, stinking burn from the landing jets and onto grass, closely cropped, mounded here and there with pungent animal dung. She smelled smoke, and dirt, and ammonia. The alien waited, still without taking aim. But she saw its ears twitch as the wind carried her scent toward it. Behind her she heard the faint hum as the sling ascended. No retreat. *But this is what I came here to do.* She had expected to be afraid. Yet all she felt now was clear focus, and a tremor of excitement.

She walked down the gentle slope, picking her way among droppings and tufts of grass, mud from recent rains. Five meters away from the alien, she stopped.

The alien regarded her, still with that apparently unshakable calm. She looked it over more closely. It might possibly be male, if such an analogy could be made here. A working hypothesis. The alien held the bow steady, left-handed, and waited.

“I come from a planet called Earth,” Vika said. She spoke in Standard. She must not sound excited, must not provoke this being. She closed her fists to keep her hands from visibly shaking.

“*Shothef av’n snng,*” the alien said. “*Shothef nadaeth, sugfroheh.*” The voice was deep, husky, strange. They stared at each other. The

alien's ears twitched. Then he made a fist and thumped his chest. "*Kh'doeh senmoeth kelru.*" He waited, then repeated the gesture. "*Kelru.*"

The word might be greeting, but more likely it was his name. "*Kelru,*" she repeated, and then copied his gesture. "*Vika.*"

"*Veekahh.*" Her name in an alien voice. She felt herself flush with excitement. A connection. A beginning.

Now, her eyes on the alien, she reached slowly for the packet of pictures clipped to the belt of her harness. He watched her hands, but made no move.

She unfolded the packet and took out the pictures. The first, made a few hours ago, showed herself. Unsmiling, looking straight into the imager. *Procedure: Establish that the images represent physical reality.* She walked forward slowly, holding up the square of plastic.

He came to meet her, bow still half-ready. She offered the picture. He lowered his bow slowly, then took it and the arrow together in his right hand and accepted the picture with his left. His fingers did not touch hers. He had long, strong-looking hands, with three fingers and a thumb ending in sharp claws. His palms were bare skin, brown and deeply creased.

She pointed at the picture, then at herself. "*Vika.*"

He peered at it, and then at her, tilting his head slightly to one side. The gesture looked quizzical. His eyes were red-gold, as fathomless to her as the eyes of an animal. But this was not an animal.

She held out her hand, and he gave her the picture. His ears twitched again. She wondered what it meant. Curiosity, she hoped.

They ran through the rest of the pictures the same way. This planet, gray and silver. Then Earth—the land tan and gray and fading green; the ocean flecked with vivid green seaweed farms; no ice caps at all. Their ship. The lander descending. Herself again, then Pierre and Anke. And that was all.

As the alien—Kelru, she ought to call him—finished studying each picture, he returned it to her. When she had the last one, she folded up the packet and clipped it to her belt. Kelru watched her with

level interest. The sun beat down on them both. Sweat trickled down her neck.

Then she spread the fingers of her left hand carefully at her side, the signal that would bring Pierre and Anke down. Her work was just beginning, but this moment was over.

And here was Pierre already, picking his way down the slope from the lander. Anke, she saw, stood by the lift, guarding their packs. Not visibly armed, Vika saw with relief.

Pierre stopped beside Vika. She sensed his nervousness—as tall as he was, he had to look up at the alien. Kelru repeated the gesture he had made before, and named himself. She elbowed Pierre. “Say ‘Kelru.’ Then do what he did and name yourself.”

Pierre complied. “What is he, do you think? A hunter?”

At that instant she heard a strange buzzing *churr*, and the shaft of a huge arrow trembled in the ground near her foot. Staring at it, she stumbled as Pierre seized her arm and jerked her back, away from it. The alien called Kelru had already moved to the relative shelter of one of the landing struts. They followed, and Anke as well.

The alien’s ears were flat back. He laid the arrow on the string of his bow again. Motion, shadows. The animals at the foot of the slope stirred. Vika saw seven, no, eight more of the aliens, spread out in a line, striding up the slope toward them. All but one of them were armed with bows. They were unclothed like Kelru—just straps for knives and pouches, and for quivers of arrows. The one in the lead, stocky and gray-coated, wore only a silver-hilted knife in a sheath at his side. At the spot where the arrow had struck, they stopped.

Kelru looked down at Pierre and her. “*Dokhosk*,” he said, and tossed his head toward the lead rider. “*Ganarh*.” His voice sounded different, harsher. He half-raised his bow, and Vika saw the muscles of his arms and shoulders bunch under the dense pelt. He was ready to aim and loose. These must be his enemies—dangerous ones, if he would turn his back to the humans in order to face them.

The gray one raised his arm straight up, hand clenched in a fist,

and spoke in a clear, deep voice. His followers spread out and encircled the lander. Pierre put his arm around Vika's shoulders. She twisted a little, and he dropped it back to his side.

Another order, and three of the bowmen nocked arrows on their own strings, half-raised their own bows. The lander's strut gave them no protection now, but Kelru did not move as the gray leader approached. The sun went behind a cloud; the wind was picking up.

The leader kept his eyes on Kelru as he walked, his ears flicking forward and back. Vika noticed a black ring punched through one of his ears, maybe tarnished metal. He spoke—to Kelru. "*Khadai!*" He gestured downward. The bowmen stood ready behind and beside him.

Kelru planted his feet and started to raise his bow.

The gray one spoke sharply, and beyond him, in a smooth motion, his bowmen aimed at Kelru. Their arrows, gleaming yellow, had savagely barbed metal tips.

Kelru froze. Then, slowly, slowly, stooped and laid his bow in the mud.

The gray alien stepped forward and held out his hand. Kelru drew his knife, stopped a moment, then reversed it and handed it hilt-first to the gray one.

"*Ai,*" the gray one said, with what sounded to Vika like satisfaction. Then he stepped on Kelru's bow, pressing it down into the mud—stepped forward over it and walked a slow circle around the three of them, sniffing the air.

Then he threw back his head and called out in a strange, high voice that pierced Vika's skull. And from far away, in the direction of the distant buildings, a second voice answered.

There was another answer as well, from the trees below the pasture: a deep, rumbling cough. Ganarh looked downslope, shading his eyes with a hand, and spoke. Kelru seemed at first not to hear; but then he raised his voice and called. One word: "*Thom!*"

The shadows under the trees moved, resolved into a huge, shaggy, long-bodied beast—dun-furred, with a sinuous neck and a broad, flat head. Vika's eyes widened. Surely that *thing* would not come into

the pasture— But it strode over the fence, almost flowing, and paced up the hill toward them. The pastured animals scattered in panic, hooting. Vika and Pierre shrank back as the huge beast passed near them. When it reached Kelru it stopped, prodding his chest with its nose. It wore a saddle, with a couple of leather packs slung up behind, but no other harness.

The creature's enormous head turned, and it regarded Vika and Pierre from two meters away. She drew back, rigid, as it bared its teeth and snorted. Strong jaws, a carnivore's teeth, mad cinnamon eyes. She heard her own breathing, shallow and quick. She could not look away from its eyes.

Then Ganarh raised his left arm toward the gathering clouds and shouted a command. The bowmen moved closer. Vika saw Kelru tense, his hand moving to the empty leather sheath where his knife had been. Instinctively she tensed, too.

But Ganarh turned away, bent and picked up Kelru's bow from the mud. He raised his fist again and called, "*Nata'akhanai!*" Then he swept his arm forward, down the slope, and strode off. His bowmen followed, urging the humans and Kelru ahead of them on foot. The beast followed as well, close behind. The stubble on Vika's scalp prickled as its hot breath touched her. She had to hurry her steps to keep up with the tall aliens, and with Anke and Pierre.

The sun vanished behind darkening clouds, and a chill rose from the damp ground. Vika chose her footing carefully. The unmortared stone wall, chest-high to her, was old, crumbling under her hands, scraping her as she climbed unsteadily over it with a boost from Pierre. A rutted, muddy track led away through more trees, toward the cluster of buildings. Something gave voice in the trees along the path, a harsh *kre-krek-krek*. She heard little noises in the thick scrub as they passed: *chip-pop, chip-pop*.

As they walked she heard the wind in the trees, the hissing breath of Kelru's beast close behind, the solid thump as its lashing tail struck the ground. She glanced back at it, and its eyes glittered at her, its black

tongue lolling. Then Kelru moved up beside her, and spoke to the beast behind them. "*Thonn. Uvekh'a.*" And the creature dropped a little farther behind. Vika took a slow breath of relief and smiled up at Kelru.

And he looked at her sharply, the fur on his neck rising. Oh. She had bared her teeth at him. She covered her mouth with her hand, and he snorted and moved away.

Pierre looked back at her, his expression a warning. Ahead, in the deepening gloom, a stone wall loomed. Shelter—that was good, she could smell a storm coming—but what else waited there? A narrow gate opened, and Ganarh strode through. Pierre and Anke followed, then Vika and Kelru. Now she smelled stone, manure, woodsmoke—smells almost familiar, but so strong after subjective months on shipboard that they seemed artificial.

They stopped in the center of a small, muddy courtyard. Vika looked around. Walls of yellow stone, walls of weathered wood loomed, broken by a few narrow vertical windows. Aliens were closing a heavy, iron-bound wooden gate behind them. Before them was another such gate. Ganarh walked up to it and spoke in a low voice.

Now the second gate opened slightly, and someone came out. Two of the aliens, smaller than Kelru or Ganarh, empty-handed, completely unadorned. One said a few words to Ganarh.

He and his bowmen turned away and left through a side gate, taking Kelru and his riding animal with them. Kelru looked back intently as he moved off, and for a moment his eyes met Vika's. She felt a strange pang of worry, almost of loneliness. She hoped they would not harm Kelru, the only one of these beings to offer her his name.

Now the inner gate swung wide at last. "Here we go," Pierre muttered.

The two smaller aliens led the humans forward into another courtyard, narrower and deeper than the one outside. A third closed the gate behind them and barred it—barring Ganarh and the others out. Vika frowned.



Wooden buildings surrounded this inner courtyard, high, heavy-beamed, built at odd and precarious angles. They seemed to lean over her, casting shadows that might hide anything. The narrow windows showed no light. Far off, in the blackening sky to the south, thunder grumbled.

Their guides urged them up a flight of wooden stairs just too high to be easy for humans to climb. Pain stabbed through Vika's legs and back, long-unused muscles protesting.

At the top, she followed the others through a tall, arched door. Inside, shivering with chill and nerves, she looked around, forcing herself to observe. The room was an uneven rectangle with a low beamed ceiling, neat and whitewashed. The windows let in almost no light; a fire blazed in a low-arched alcove of rough yellow brick. There was no furniture but a low table near the fire. The wooden floor around it was scattered with thick-furred animal hides.

Then a strong, cool hand clamped Vika's wrist. The larger of the two aliens tugged her closer to the fire. The other appeared beside them, holding a small bowl of brown glazed clay. And then drew a knife, a slender, straight blade, and handed it to Vika's captor.

Vika took a sharp breath in reflexive fear, but she kept still. She said, steadily, "It's all right. Don't move. I think they only—" And she gasped as the knife gashed the side of her right hand.

The grip on her wrist stayed steady. Vika's blood dribbled into the bowl. She looked away from it, looked up at the alien who had cut her. The dark, wide-pupiled eyes turned from the bowl to Vika, met her look. Then the alien released her.

Vika backed toward the other humans, holding part of her sleeve wadded against the cut. "Are they going to drink it?" Anke sounded sick. Vika swallowed, her throat dry.

The aliens did not drink the blood. They studied it in the light from a window, sniffed it carefully. Finally the smaller one spoke a word to the other, then pitched the blood into the fire, where it spluttered and steamed.

Vika pressed the wadded cloth harder against her cut. The blade had been so sharp she had barely felt it, but now the wound throbbed with her quick heartbeat.

Anke said suddenly, "I think these two are female."

Vika took a closer look at their hosts. It could be true: they had teats, so small that their dense fur almost hid them—four, in two rows. Call them female, then—which meant she had probably guessed right about Kelru.

The larger alien stared at them, then spoke a sharp sentence. The other lit a small, sooty-globed oil lamp and, carrying it, led them out another doorway, up one more flight of steep stairs, to a narrow, arched door. She pulled it open and stood aside. Vika followed the others in. This was another asymmetrical room, musty-smelling, with a small unlit fireplace in the center of the longest wall, opposite two narrow windows. Two rough beds covered most of the floor—wide, shallow boxes holding sack mattresses. By the empty hearth stood a low table. Thunder rumbled, nearer and louder.

Then the alien female gripped Anke by the arm and started for the door. Caught off balance, Anke stumbled after her. "Pierre!" She sounded more angry than frightened. But before Vika could move, before Pierre could reach the door, Anke was gone. The door closed heavily behind her. Then Vika heard the grating sound of metal sliding on metal, and a crash as the bar slid home.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristin Landon lives in Oregon with her husband Tom and an imperious Cavalier spaniel named Lucy. In addition to writing science fiction, she works as a freelance copyeditor of a wide range of scholarly and medical books. Her novelette “From the Depths” appeared in the highly acclaimed anthology *To Shape the Dark* (2016, Candlemark & Gleam). She is also the author of the Hidden Worlds trilogy—*The Hidden Worlds*, *The Cold Minds*, and *The Dark Reaches* (Ace Books). Visit her website at [www.kristinlandon.com](http://www.kristinlandon.com).



*The*  
**ADVENTURE  
CONTINUES ONLINE!**

Visit the **Candlemark & Gleam** website to

**Find out** about new releases

**Read** free sample chapters

**Catch up** on the latest news  
and author events

**Buy books!** All purchases on the  
Candlemark & Gleam site are DRM-free  
and paperbacks come with a free digital version!

**Meet** flying monkey-creatures  
from beyond the stars!\*



**[www.candlemarkandgleam.com](http://www.candlemarkandgleam.com)**

\*Space monkeys may not be available in your area. Some restrictions may apply.  
This offer is only available for a limited time and is in fact a complete lie.