

MISSION TO GALAVIA

By Lisa Timpf

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JACKIE JOHNSON sprawled on the walla-stone couch and groaned, holding her hands to her head.

“You okay?” Jackie’s father Cole, still wearing his tan-colored Earth Delegation uniform, looked at her with genuine concern.

“I’m fine. It’s just—I never imagined this would be so mentally exhausting. Always being conscious of putting the best face on things. Taking care not to show any vulnerability.” Jackie grimaced at her father as she rose to a sitting position. “And I thought we would have made more progress, by now.” A pang of guilt hit as she noticed the dark smudges under her father’s eyes. *Why did I say that? He’s got enough on his plate already.*

“The apparent lack of progress may be frustrating, but you, Mike, and Aubrey have done a lot to boost our cause,” Cole said. “Your interaction with the Galavians in your age group—it’s been important for the mission.”

“Do you think they’ll vote to form an alliance?”

“It’s too close to call.” Cole shook his head. “Like many people back on Earth, the Galavians find it hard to trust, after the Ptomian attacks.”

I was right not to get my hopes up, then, Jackie thought. “We left it to the United Nations to decide about forming an alliance. Why couldn’t they have done something similar?”

“Putting it to a vote of all citizens, as the Galavians chose to do, does make it more—complicated,” Cole said. “But in the end, citizens will likely have better buy-in to the decision, once it’s made.”

“We’ll know in two weeks,” Jackie stated, her tone flat.

“And if the answer is ‘no,’ depending on the mood, we may need to make an expedited departure.” Cole squared his shoulders. “The Council is concerned that as

the vote approaches, tensions may rise. The leaders of both the Galavian and Earth delegations have decided it would be best if the three of you laid low for awhile.”

“We came to help!” Jackie protested. She knew that she and her brother Aubrey, along with Mike Brownlee, still had work to do. But with fourteen days remaining before the vote, there was still a chance, if a slim one, of breaking through the Galavians’ detached reserve. Surely they wouldn’t be denied that opportunity.

“You’ve done your best, but as you’ve said so often, we haven’t yet forged a sense of connection, despite our best efforts. A few additional days aren’t going to change that.”

“So you want us to just sit around in the visitors’ compound?”

“Not at all. There’s a vet tech going out to the llvarna herds, to do med-checks and update vaccinations. Mike’s already agreed to join her, to help out. Aubrey, too.” Cole paused. “It’ll get you out of the city, as a precaution. Plus, you’ll get to see more of the planet.”

“I suppose Aubrey wants help with his pet project.” Jackie rolled her eyes in mock protest. Her brother, who had demonstrated a talent for languages early in life, had set himself the task of compiling a video/photo dictionary to help speakers of both English and Galavian to understand one another.

“What if we don’t forge an agreement? We won’t need your dictionary then,” she’d told him at the outset of the mission. Aubrey refused to be dissuaded, arguing that even the Terrans and Galavians failed to hammer out a military alliance, there might be trade between their cultures—and for that, you needed to understand one another.

But if she was honest with herself, Jackie’s reservations about Aubrey’s undertaking had their roots in other issues. She’d undergone so many disappointments, back on Earth. Things that she’d hoped for, that hadn’t come true. Like wanting Mom to come home. She feared that Aubrey’s emotional investment in the project had the potential to morph into a painful let-down if negotiations with the Galavians went south.

“Aubrey knows you’re better with the vid-camera than he is.” Cole grinned. “I’m sure he’d appreciate the help.”

“Is Vrynx going?” Jackie asked. The tall, slender Galavian youth had befriended Mike and Aubrey during first contact with the Galavians back on Earth. Like Aubrey, he possessed a knack for languages, and spoke English at a remarkably high level for someone with so little previous exposure. And unlike many of his Galavian counterparts, he’d readily built a sense of connection with Mike, Aubrey, and Jackie.

“Yes.”

Jackie frowned. It *would* be nice to see more of Galavia, for sure. But she feared what might happen if she let the self-enforced numbness that had descended after her mother’s disappearance erode. Being in the Galavian outback would remind her of horseback riding with Mom. Before—

I’ll just focus on the task at hand, Jackie told herself. Besides, it’ll be dull around here with Aubrey and Mike away. “I’ll go.”

“A hover-hopper will take you out to the edge of the Woods. It’ll be a hike in from there to the Nursery, but I’m sure you’ll manage.” Cole paused, noting the concerned expression on Jackie’s face. “You’ll be back before you know it. It’ll be fun.”

Cole’s assertion that it would be a “hike” from the drop-off point to their destination had been an understatement. Still, as a member of the Reserve Cadets back on Earth, Jackie had completed many marches just as difficult—harder, even. She shouldered her pack without complaint, and kept up with the rest of the small party, which included Aubrey, his best friend Mike Brownley, and two Galavians—Vrynx Vcznk, son of the Galavian leader, and Syma Ngwa, the vet-tech.

Syma had the job of tending to the llvarna herds, the bulk of which had retreated to the Nursery, an isolated area of the forest where the llvarna bore and raised their young.

In their earliest discussions with the Galavians back on Earth, humans had best understood the word llvarna to mean “squirrel.” Though the llvarna possessed the bushy tails, pointed faces, and short legs of their much-smaller Terran counterparts, they also shared many traits with Earth’s horses, including their size and their use by the Galavians as mounts when travelling through rough country.

The Galavians had called upon the llvarnas' capability for dealing with uneven terrain during the Ptomian invasion, riding the wiry beasts in stealth attacks as they fought a guerilla-style resistance that ultimately repelled the aliens. But the war exacted heavy casualties on both the Galavians and the llvarna herds; hence, Syma's mission. The Galavians deemed it imperative to maintain the health of the remaining llvarna. The loss of even a few could be catastrophic, if repeated through multiple years, since the female llvarna bore a maximum of two kits per year—in lean years, none at all.

When the small party arrived at their destination, Jackie stopped abruptly, taking in the scene. The llvarna Jackie had seen in the City got trotted out mainly at ceremonial events, and had been chosen for uniformity of color—dark brown with black manes and tails.

But these—

A pair of long-necked kits chased each other through a broad, grassy meadow surrounded by vaalna trees. The front-runner's copper-hued coat glistened in the sun. Its pursuer had beige fur and dark brown sock-like markings part-way up its legs.

An adult llvarna with a mottled silver-grey coat watched the kits indulgently. An older kit with dark brown fur and a brilliant yellow mane peered down from the trees bordering the meadow, chirring as it studied the small human-Galavian party.

They're beautiful. Jackie found herself entranced. She took a step closer to the cavorting youngsters.

Hawoof! The sound made Jackie jump. She turned and noticed an adult llvarna with the coloring of a palomino horse staring at her intently. The animal stood on its hind legs and sniffed the air suspiciously while he looked in Jackie's direction. Beside him, also on its hind legs, was a second adult llvarna with a lavender coat and dark purple mane. *Guards, most likely,* Jackie thought, noting their tense muscles and alert postures.

The kits scampered up the nearest tree, their tails jerking as they climbed. More adults shouldered forward, standing behind the two guards.

Syma sidled toward the llvarna and extended her right hand.

The nearest guard animal sniffed her hand, chirred softly, and dropped back on all fours. It turned toward its companion, bobbed its head, then began digging in the soft soil. The rest of the herd relaxed, the kits scrambling down from the trees to

resume their game of chase while the adults dispersed to seek vaalna nuts half-buried in the leaf-litter from the previous autumn.

Soon, frisking, chattering youngsters romped through the meadow, zipping past Jackie and her companions. The animals' eyes radiated a keen intelligence, and the cheerful noises they made as they called out to their playmates reminded Jackie of social gatherings back home on Earth. Her spirits lifted as she glanced around.

This might be more fun than I thought.

“Is good, yes?” Syma asked, gesturing toward her mug with a jerk of her head.

Jackie, seated on a rock near the fire, replied with the one Galavian word she'd mastered to date. “Yssa,” she said. The word's meaning, if she'd understood Aubrey correctly, meant fell somewhere between “yes” and “it is so.” *Perhaps Syma's reserve is thawing*, Jackie thought.

Though the Galavian woman had been polite to the three humans, she had thus far maintained the same stand-offishness shown by most of her people, with the exception of Vrynx. Now, though, Syma sniffed the beverage in her mug appreciatively and grinned, showing short, even teeth within her slightly snouted mouth.

Coffee's been a hit with the Galavians. Good thing we brought lots of it along—

Despite the caffeine, Jackie found her eyelids drooping. The buzzing of the m'gasa, dangling from the tree branches from their furless tails while they hummed to attract night-flying insects, had a soothing effect. *Sleep should come easy tonight.*

Mrrraanmmwrrrr! A blood-curdling screech between a yowl and a snarl echoed through the small valley as though artificially amplified. Jackie's eyelids jerked open, and her muscles tensed.

“Skavacryx,” Syma said. She stood and gazed into the forest to the north of the camp, her posture rigid.

Aubrey's brow furrowed in concentration. “Skava—big,” Aubrey said. “Cryx—cat. Big cat?”

“Yssa,” Vrynx replied, nodding vigorously.

As she reassumed her seat by the fire, Syma burst into a torrent of explanation too quick for Jackie to understand. Aubrey translated as best he could.

“She says the skavacryx is a large predator,” Aubrey explained. “By changing the angle of its fur, it camouflages itself—it can appear pink-purple like the soil or dark brown like tree bark. Sounds like it’s slightly larger than panthers back on Earth.”

“Big cat—will it hurt the llvarna?” Jackie asked Syma, looking at the furred woman anxiously as she waited for Aubrey to translate the question.

“Hurt?” Syma asked, frowning.

Vrynx jumped in, offering a few words in Galavian.

“Ah,” she said, with Vrynx translating. “No, the herd will protect them. Skavacryx are shy—easily frightened. Though if one came upon a young llvarna alone, it might attack.”

Jackie nodded, letting her shoulders slump as the tension ebbed. She’d enjoyed watching the antics of the young llvarna. It pleased her to hear that they weren’t likely to serve as dinner for a prowling feline.

“That’s some mushroom,” Jackie said. She checked the vid-camera’s viewfinder and gave a thumbs-up as she rose from a kneeling position. “Got a few images of that.”

“Mitna,” Vrynx said. He pointed to his mouth and grinned. “Good to eat.”

Jackie studied the rabbit-sized yellow-orange fungus, glad that they’d already had breakfast. With any luck, this wouldn’t be on the menu for lunch.

Aubrey asked a question in Galavian, which sparked a torrent of words from Vrynx, none of which Jackie understood. She wandered away from her companions, stopping to capture some images of a low shrub with brilliant red leaves.

Mom would have loved it here. The thought of her mother brought tears to Jackie’s eyes. *If only she’d come back safely—*

Jackie knew the inherent peril in pursuing that line of thought. Her mother’s fighter jet had disappeared during the last desperate push to repel the Ptomian invasion. She’d been shot down above the hazard area, a no-man’s-land of potholes, craters, and ruined buildings that marked the borderland between Toronto and the Ptomian encampment north of the city.

The Ptomians had pocked the hazard area with a mish-mash of deterrents—land mines, trip wires releasing toxic chemicals, and small caches of fuel that would

combust when approached. With maddening slowness, search and rescue teams had combed the rubble, but to date, only bodies had been found. No survivors, and no sign of Jackie's mother or her fighter craft.

Seeking to outrun her thoughts, Jackie jogged down the path. Eager for a distraction, she peered up into the trees, trying to spot one of the yellow bala-birds whose trilling, flute-like songs echoed through the forest. After negotiating a bend in the trail, Jackie found herself in a small meadow. To her right, a tall, wide-branched vaalna tree stretched skyward. Jackie assessed the girth of the tree's broad trunk, guessing she wouldn't be able to reach her arms all the way around it. Noticing movement along one of the branches, Jackie stopped abruptly.

That must be a treemyk. Vrynx said they're rare. Moving slowly, Jackie raised the vid-camera, framing a short-furred creature the size of a mink and sporting purple fur with yellow and green stripes. The treemyk clung to a branch upside-down, its coloring blending with the surrounding foliage.

Jackie took a step closer, holding her breath. *Don't move. Let me get a better look.* The treemyk obliged, its attention clearly elsewhere.

Satisfied with her images, Jackie lowered the vid-camera, thinking about last night's conversation by the fire. Vrynx, with Aubrey translating as needed, had given them a run-down on the type of flora and fauna they might encounter. The treemyk, Jackie remembered, lived primarily on carrion. And this particular one had its attention focussed on something huddled at the base of the tree, though it had not yet scuttled down to investigate.

Wonder what it's after? No longer worried about startling the treemyk, Jackie studied the base of the tree. What she saw sent her racing forward. She fell on her knees just before she reached the protruding tree-roots at the base of the trunk, where a llvarna kit with a red-orange coat and cream-colored belly lay sprawled.

Blood from a gash on the llvarna's head clotted the little creature's coat. Jackie reached a tentative hand toward the kit, and noticed the way its sides heaved as it took in labored breaths.

"Aubrey! Vrynx! Over here!" Jackie hollered as loudly as she could. Her call sent a flock of bala-birds spiralling into the air, squawking indignantly.

Overhead, a loud chittering ensued, and Jackie looked up to see an adult llvarna racing down the tree, tail jerking. It paused half-way down and continued its clamor. A llvarna kit's face peered down from a jumble of small branches and leaves.

This one must have fallen out of the nest.

Jackie heard a twig snap behind her, and whirled in the direction of the sound. "Took you long—" She halted in mid-sentence.

That's not Aubrey.

Though she'd never seen a vid-photo of a skavacryx, Jackie was certain that's what faced her now. Had she not been terrified, she might have thought the giant cat-like creature beautiful. Plushy fur pulsed with a life of its own as the skavacryx's short, thick hairs shifted position, revealing an undercoat that matched the hue of the soil under the trees. The camouflage worked so effectively that Jackie second-guessed herself. *Did I really see it? Or did I imagine it?*

Then the skavacryx took a step forward, shattering the illusion. The big cat looked at the kit, then at Jackie. The intensity of its yellow-eyed gaze made Jackie shiver. *It wants me to move out of the way.* The skavacryx raised its upper lips, showing yellow teeth. The breeze gusted, carrying a musky scent to Jackie's nostrils.

Syma said they're cowards. They'll back down if confronted.

But the big beast didn't look frightened. It took a step closer, setting its rounded, oversized paw down carefully. Noiselessly.

Jackie shot the llvarna kit a panicked look. The helpless creature wouldn't stand a chance. She knew that. But perhaps it was already close to dead—

Thoughts of death took her too close to her own feelings about her mother. All the fear and helplessness Jackie had felt over the months since her mother's disappearance surged through her. She matched the skavacryx snarl for snarl and raised her arms above her head, striving to look as large as possible.

"Go on! Get out of here, you big bully!" Jackie yelled. She waved her arms and stomped her right foot. "Scram!"

The cat glared, its tail lashing. It gave her a measuring look, as though gauging the distance between them.

"Jackie?" Aubrey raced around a bend in the trail, trailed closely by Vrynx. "Hey! What're you—"

Noting the arrival of reinforcements, the skavacryx assessed the odds, finding them not to its liking. The big cat registered its displeasure with a deep and heartfelt growl, then stalked away, tail raised. Within seconds, Jackie lost track of it as its coat blended with the surrounded foliage.

It didn't take Vrynx and Aubrey long to assess the situation. Vrynx sprinted back along the path to fetch Syma and Mike, while Aubrey and Jackie kept a wary look-out in case the cat re-materialized.

When she arrived, Syma knelt beside the injured llvarna, issuing a low-voiced stream of requests. In response, Mike handed her items from the supply pack he'd been carrying. Syma dispatched Vrynx to find several short, stout branches, which she trimmed to the right length to fashion a splint for the kit's right foreleg.

"Will he make it?" Jackie asked anxiously as Syma, her work completed, leaned back, taking a seat on the spongy soil under the tree.

"Can't say. But if we don't help him, he has no chance." Vrynx translated Syma's words. "We must get him back to the clinic."

"Can we call the hover-hopper?" Jackie asked.

Aubrey shook his head. "We can radio them, but they can't come into the forest. Too risky. We'll have to get back out to the drop-off point. But we need to move fast." He paused and met Jackie's eye. "We'll need to ride."

Jackie took a step back, shaking her head ever so slightly. Horseback riding was something she'd done with her mom. They'd had a tradition, going out to the trail riding establishment a half-hour drive from home each time her mother came back from deployment. Jackie didn't ride in between times. She hadn't been since—

She caught a knowing look from Aubrey. Anticipating a lecture about the difference between tradition and superstition, she tensed. But Aubrey took a different tack. "It's not the same," he said, his voice soft.

"No, it's not," Jackie said, her tone bitter. *It never will be.*

Moments later, Vrynx led a long-legged llvarna with a chestnut-coloured coat toward Jackie. The Galavian had already attached the riding harness, which consisted of a neck collar and a strap running under the llvarna's belly. Jackie found herself intrigued by the ingenuity of the setup. A number of loops attached to the harness

provided foot and hand-holds. The multiple positions would accommodate any size of rider.

No reins, Jackie noted. That, too, seemed consistent with what she'd been told. It would be up to the lead rider to guide the foremost llvarna using voice commands. Its companions would simply follow.

The llvarna flopped to the ground, lying on its stomach. Jackie climbed aboard and fitted her hands into a set of upper loops, slotting the toes of her shoes into lower ones. Once she'd settled into place, the llvarna leapt to its feet, waiting for the signal to move out.

Vrynx and Mike handed the injured kit up to Syma, who gently laid the small animal across her mount's shoulders. From the limpness of the little creature's limbs, Jackie guessed Syma had administered sedation.

Syma's mount took its first steps down the broad trail, the others trailing, single file.

Jackie found the first five minutes of the ride uncomfortable—frightening, even. Despite her previous experience with horseback riding, Aubrey had been right—this *was* very different. At first, Jackie couldn't shake the sensation of being one jolt away from tumbling to the ground. But once she got the knack of gripping the collar's hand-holds for support and tightening her legs around the llvarna's chest, just behind the powerful front shoulders, she felt more at ease. The llvarna travelled in great leaps, its legs absorbing the shock of landing. As her mount loped along the broad trail, Jackie relaxed.

The group entered an open area leading to the banks of a broad river. Jackie frowned. *Last time, we went upriver to a narrower part, at the tree-trunk bridge. But now—*

Maybe we'll swim. She grimaced, knowing from experience how cold Galavia's clear, racing rivers could be. Seeking a clue for what might be coming, she looked up just in time to see Syma's llvarna hurl itself toward the opposite bank. Jackie noticed, for the first time, the flaps of skin that joined the llvarna's forelegs to the torso, and the hindquarters to the body. The llvarna caught an updraft and rose slightly in the air. Then it landed on the far side and resumed its pace.

You've got to be joking. Jackie yearned for a set of reins, so she could draw her llvarna to a halt. Aubrey shot an encouraging glance back over his shoulder, grinning

broadly. Then he turned his attention forward as his own mount launched itself from the bank.

Jackie didn't have time to watch his progress. The river drew closer with every beat of her own llvarna's paws. She gripped the hands-holds so tightly that the ropy fibres dug into her hands. Through her legs, she could feel the llvarna's muscles bunching as it gathering its strength. Then she, too, found herself airborne. The llvarna's skin-flaps billowed, enabling the animal to float on the air. Jackie closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the cool breeze against her cheeks. The llvarna landed softly on the far bank of the river and once again picked up its bounding stride.

Vrynx let his llvarna slow until it dropped back beside Jackie's. "Fun, yes?" Vrynx asked. Not waiting for an answer, he continued in broken English, "Too bad we can't go through the treetops. You would enjoy, I think. If we had full saddles—"

Her reservations about riding forgotten, Jackie grinned broadly. "That," she said, "would be fabulous."

After they'd escorted the injured llvarna to the clinic where Syma worked, Jackie, Aubrey and Mike headed toward the visitors' compound.

"Are you going to join the *stcasa* game tonight?" Mike asked as they entered the courtyard.

"No, not this time." Jackie wrapped her jacket tighter. "There's something else I want to do."

Mike and Aubrey exchanged glances and shrugged. Jackie understood their surprise. She barely understood her refusal herself, for *stcasa*, a game that included elements of basketball and soccer with a bit of hockey thrown in, had become her favorite pastime here on Galavia.

But Jackie's experiences in the back country had given her a different priority. Having others translate for her when she wanted to understand *right now* had been frustrating. It was high time, she thought, to check the effectiveness of Aubrey's makeshift dictionary. Though Aubrey's work, by his own admission, still had gaps, Jackie thought she might give him feedback on the format, based on how—and whether—it worked for her.

An hour into her study of Aubrey's dictionary-in-progress, Jackie detected the click of the door signalling her father's return from the day's meetings. She bounded into the common area of the apartment, eager to share her news about her adventures in the forest.

The downcast expression on Cole's face caused her to stop as soon as she walked through the archway, the words she'd been bursting to say left unspoken. "What's wrong?" Jackie asked.

Cole tried to form a smile, and failed. "The weekly communication burst from Earth came in."

"And?"

"They found her body." Cole's voice broke on the final word. Tears filled Jackie's eyes, and she took slow strides across the room to hug her father, seeking both to comfort and be comforted. "In the hazard zone. She died instantly in the crash. So she didn't—"

"Oh, Dad!" Though she'd known this to be the most likely outcome, Jackie had hoped that her mother could somehow beat the odds. This news brought closure, but it also closed down hope for her safe return.

Jackie wandered over to the window, finding the violets and oranges and reds that accompanied the Galavian sunset almost painful in their beauty. It seemed unfair that life should just go on, that the sky should be as lovely as it had the day before, as though nothing had happened.

Just as things would go on, back on Earth. Life would go on, in the kitchen that had been filled with her parents' laughter as they worked together to prepare supper. In the living room where the four of them had so often exchanged teasing remarks as they jostled in friendly combat playing old-fashioned board games. In the light-filled sun room where her mother loved to put her feet up on her days off, contemplating the back yard, vibrant with birds and shrubs. All of these places would be filled with memories of her mother, and with the knowledge that she wasn't coming back.

Jackie sat on a wooden stump, enjoying the bonfire's orange-purple flames. Among the loose circle of humans and Galavians sitting around the fire, she

recognized Nagwa and Rssmya, two of the Galavians who were regulars at the *stcasa* games. The group also included several Galavians she didn't recognize.

She clasped her hands together as she considered the reason she, Aubrey, and Mike were in attendance. The llvarna kit, despite Syma's best efforts, hadn't made it. Because the three humans had been involved in the attempt to rescue the small animal, Syma had invited them to attend a Ceremony of Sharing. If Jackie understood Vrynx's explanation correctly, the Ceremony was a kind of send-off for the lost, as well as a comfort for the bereaved.

"We gather here tonight," Vrynx, seated between Jackie and Mike, provided a whispered translation as Vrynx's father, Zymd, began to speak, "to say farewell."

Jackie's throat tightened.

"Syma, do you wish to begin?"

Syma stood, and Vrynx offered a terse translation as the Galavian vet-tech spoke of the young llvarna kit she had been unable to save. As she mentioned the role the three humans had played in the rescue attempt, Jackie sensed the assembly's attention turning to her, and blushed. When Syma had concluded, she lowered her head and clasped her hands in front of her. Thanks to Vrynx's briefing, Jackie knew what would come next. What she needed to do. A murmur of voices, Jackie's included, rang out from around the circle. *Verana syna yaga ta*, they chanted.

We mourn with you.

A tall, slender Galavian woman Jackie didn't recognize rose to her feet. The woman had lost her six-month-old child to a fever carried by biting insects the Galavians called the night-fliers. After the woman finished recounting her story, Jackie chanted along with the group, *verana syna yaga ta*.

Another person stood, and another. By now, Jackie's cheeks gleamed with moisture, as did those of her companions, human and Galavian. Finally, it seemed that they were done. Jackie lowered her head and breathed in slowly. It felt like the aftermath of a good cry—which, she supposed, it was.

Jackie looked at Vrynx expectantly, waiting to follow his lead. Instead of rising to his feet, Vrynx jerked his head. Jackie looked in the indicated direction. There in front of her, cloak billowing slightly in the breeze, stood Zymd.

Jackie opened her mouth to apologize for not noticing him sooner, but the Galavian leader raised his hand and smiled. He spoke a few words in his own language, addressing her directly although he must know she didn't understand.

Vrynx translated. "You may speak if you wish."

Me? Speak? Jackie fought down an impulse to shake her head. She'd always been shy about standing up in front of the class during school projects. Speaking in public in front of people from an alien culture—that seemed unthinkable.

But were they so alien?

Some humans couldn't look past the physical differences—the furred bodies, the slightly snouted mouths, the three-fingered hands equipped with extra-long thumbs. But the Galavians Jackie had come to know acted a lot like people back home. They loved, and worried about, family members and friends. They enjoyed sports and pastimes. They demonstrated both curiosity and inventiveness.

They felt compassion. And they grieved their losses. Tonight proved that.

Zymd waited. The assembly waited.

Somehow, Jackie managed to rise to her feet. She rubbed sweaty palms against her beige trousers. "I—" She paused, then gestured Aubrey, the crowd's eyes following. "My brother and I—we just got word that our mother's body was found, back on Earth." Jackie turned to Vrynx, who translated her comments, then nodded to tell her she could proceed. Her words seemed so bald, so unrefined. She hoped Vrynx could manage to make her sound more articulate in Galavian.

Jackie thought of her mother, and the sacrifice she had made on behalf of her fellow humans. "She died fighting the Ptomians." Tears rolled down Jackie's cheeks, and she took a desperate swipe at her face, trying to dry them. "She—fought with hope. She dared to hope. For a better future. As I think you do, also." She glanced around the circle, meeting the eyes of her intent listeners. "She was a special person. I will miss her."

A hand clasped her right forearm. Jackie turned to see Syma offering a comforting smile. Seconds later, Vrynx gripped her left hand and gave it a squeeze.

Verana syna yaga ta, the Galavians chanted. The sound reverberated through the air, strong and comforting, as though in defiance of despair.

The night of the vote, Jackie sat on a bench in the courtyard behind the visitors' residence, huddled under one of the felt cloaks provided by the Galavians. She studied the plastabloc surface of the patio, noting the signs of patchwork repairs. Like Earth, Galavia still bore visible scars of the Ptomian conflicts.

Less visible were the emotional scars the Galavians undoubtedly still bore. Would they choose hope over fear tonight? Or would the lingering reminders of the war reinforce a distrust of the Other, no matter how friendly they tried to be?

They'd know the answer soon.

Hearing a scuffing sound on the concrete patio, Jackie turned to see her father approaching. "Hey, Dad," she said, shifting to her right to provide a spot for him to sit.

"Well?" Cole's tone sounded teasing, and his brown eyes shone brightly. "Anxious to hear the outcome?"

Jackie nodded, unable to trust her voice.

"They voted in favour of an alliance," Cole said, his voice soft. "Overwhelmingly."

"Great," Jackie croaked.

"You've come to like it here, haven't you?" Cole asked.

"Yes, I—I think I'll find it difficult to leave. There's something about it—" Jackie stopped, afraid to hurt her father's feelings.

"There'll be an ongoing need for an Earth delegation on Galavia," he said. "Earth Base has said they'd understand if we need a break, but if we want to stay we'd be more than welcome. A credit to our hard work." He arched his right eyebrow and grinned. "Although I'm sure cost saving entered into it, too. They won't have to pay to ship us back, and send someone else out."

Jackie didn't care about that. "I would like to stay," she said. Her eyes misted over, blurring the image of the three Galavian moons as she thought of the sacrifices made by her mother, and others, so the rest of them could go on living. So they could come here, and do what they were doing, trying to secure a better future for Earth and her allies.

“I hoped you’d say that. Though I would have gone back, if you and Aubrey wanted.” Cole’s eyes looked bleak, just for a moment, and Jackie understood. He, too, dreaded returning to the now-too-quiet house back on Earth.

Father and daughter sat quietly for a moment, listening to the small night sounds that had initially been so foreign, and now seemed so familiar. The scent of the lavalla flowers, a heady aroma combining elements of oranges and cinnamon, filled the air, and Jackie took a deep breath.

“We’d been so busy, both cultures, trying to show ourselves in the best light, to conceal any vulnerability, that we almost missed seeing what we had in common,” Cole mused. “Being included in the Ceremony of Sharing, showing that we too are capable of depth of feeling, that we have griefs of our own—that may have played a role in the Galavians’ decisions.”

“Compassion for other creatures—they have that,” Jackie said. “The ability to mourn. To share sorrows.”

“We’re alike, I think, in more ways than we differ. It just took time for everyone to fully appreciate that fact.”

Jackie heard the patter of felt boots against the stone patio. Vrynx, trailed by Aubrey, darted into the courtyard, then stopped in surprise when he saw Cole.

“Sorry,” Vrynx said. “Do I interrupt?”

“No, of course not,” Cole said, gesturing toward the bench opposite them. “Come, join us.”

But Vrynx and Aubrey remained standing. Jackie looked more closely at the brown items slung over the Galavian’s left arm. “Are those *saddles*?” she asked.

“Tonight, we ride among the treetops,” Vrynx said, his voice light. “When moons are full—very beau-ti-ful. You wish to come? Mike and a group of others are waiting at the hopper.”

Jackie hesitated.

“Go,” Cole said, smiling. “You’ve earned the free time. Go.”

Jackie turned to Vrynx, her expression serious. “*Yssa*,” she said. She paused, then added, pronouncing each word carefully, “*The amieay savva mala*. I would like that very much.” She hoped the darkness hid the flush of red suffusing her face. It was her

first halting attempt to say a full phrase in Galavian on her own, without being coached.

Vrynx grinned, his teeth showing in a flash of white. “You said that—how do you say—per-fect-ly. So, perhaps Aubrey’s dictionary is not wasting time, after all.”

“Perhaps,” Jackie replied, her tone dry. “He couldn’t have done it without me, you know—”

Cole leaned back into his chair and watched Jackie jog southward beside Vrynx and Aubrey. Clad in cloaks and seen from behind, the trio looked very much alike in the twilight. At a quick glance, it would be almost impossible to say which of the figures was human, and which Galavian.

Rupert Brownley, lead negotiator for the Earth delegation, strolled into the courtyard carrying two mugs of hearty Galavian beer. “We can make the treaties,” Rupert said as he handed Cole one of the mugs. “But it will be up to their generation to really make it work.” He raised his beverage in salute and nodded toward the rapidly-disappearing forms of the three young people.

Cole smiled. “In that case,” he said, “I think the future is in good hands.”