

## OUT OF THE SHADOWS

By Joan Lennon

*First appeared in "Girl's Heart Christmas," 2014*

*Appears here with the kind permission of the author*

I'm Kerry Om, Apprentice Weather Witch. What's a weather witch? Well, about a gazillion years ago, on Terra 1, there were these women who could look at the sky and guess whether it was going to rain or snow or be just fine. People liked knowing this stuff—but didn't always like the women. People got confused between *predicting* the weather and *making* the weather. So if it rained when they didn't want it to, they got mad at the women. They said they had *the evil eye*.

(Which is a bit weird, because modern weather witches actually *do* make the weather and we have special—not *evil*, just special!—eye implants. They let us see light in a different way. And, without trying to sound all boast-y, if it weren't for us and our special eyes, there'd be no successful terra-forming anywhere in the galaxy and a whole lot of colonists wouldn't have anywhere to live!)

Anyway, I'm Kerry and that day I was heading off on my very first job. Not just helping my mum this time. Me—Apprentice Weather Witch Kerry Om—with a *Sure-I-can-do-that!* look stuck on my face and a voice yelling *Help!* in my head!

The Director on Terra 326 had been really insistent.

"I don't care how busy you are," he'd blustered over the link. "If you don't get a witch out to me double quick there's no way we're going to reach cascade."

Which didn't make any sense. Cascade is when the rain system really takes off—first there's the clouds we seed with special bacteria for the raindrops to form around—then the rain falls—then the rain collects on the ground as surface water that evaporates into the air to make more clouds—everybody in the galaxy knows the drill. Terra 326 had already been properly set up by a witch—vats built, bacteria culture started, shooters installed—what could possibly have gone wrong?

“It’ll be something really simple,” my mum said. “Just the job for an apprentice.” And she winked at me.

“You’re probably right,” our Department Head said. “And I haven’t got anybody fully qualified to spare. Don’t worry, Kerry, I’m sure you’ll have it sorted and be home again for Christmas!”

“Home for Christmas,” I agreed, and if my voice sounded a bit quavery, nobody seemed to notice.

“Meantime,” said my mum, “tell them to Keep Calm and Kerry Om!” My mum’s jokes are so bad sometimes you just have to laugh. Or groan.

\*

The space port was attached to a living dome. Inside the dome, there was a humidifying system running at full blast. Outside, in the ferociously dry atmosphere of Terra 326, humans needed water-vapour masks just to be able to breathe.

It was night when I arrived but the Director, a twitchy little man who didn’t seem all that pleased to see an apprentice instead of a fully-fledged witch, insisted we go out to the vats in the desert right away.

“I’ll keep you safe, Kerry Om—don’t you worry.”

Safe from what? I wondered. This was an uninhabited world with no dangerous animals—too dry for anything to live here, at least until we got the rain cycle up and running. Then why was he so jumpy?

And why does people telling you not to worry make you worry more?

The dome was just big enough to hold the colonists’ living pods and not much else. A few people had put up some half-hearted Christmas decorations, but there was no getting around it—it was a cramped, dreary place.

I put on my mask and followed the Director out into the desert night. It was dry all right. I could feel the sweat wicking off my forehead like the air was a sponge.

The Director seemed pretty nervous for a guy on a world with no dangers. I was just about to ask him what his trouble was, when I got at least part of the answer.

Something had gone badly pear-shaped with the vats. Even through the mask I could smell it. I switched on my optical implant. The light coming off the vats was all wrong. But before I had time to get a good look, the Director let out a yell that made me jump like a Martian kangaroo.

There was a body lying on the sand.

“Not again” moaned the Director.

Again?!

Just as I switched back to normal sight I thought I saw something moving in the shadows, out on the dunes, but there wasn't time to worry about that. The guy on the ground was starting to come round.

“What happened? Who hit you?” demanded the Director.

“Are you all right?” I said, thinking this should have been the Director's *first* question.

The guy was okay, except for a bit of concussion that the docbot fixed up once we got him back inside the dome. He hadn't seen anyone but ...

“I don't know, Boss, but just before I got conked I thought I heard something, like something sighing or whispering, you know?”

“Like a ... like a ghost?” the Director said. A grown man!

“Rest now,” intoned the docbot, so we left the guy in peace on the med bed.

“Director, what's all this about ghosts” I asked. This planet was getting on my nerves big time.

“What? *Where?!*” He spun round, and then gave me a sick grin. “Sorry, sorry. Of course it's all just nonsense. It's this place ... Ever since the witch before you left—the one who set the vats up—there have been the strangest things going on—weird whispering sounds—the sand moving even when there was no wind—there was this uncanny feeling that we were being watched, but no matter how quickly we turned around, there was no one to be seen. The colonists have got so spooked they're afraid to leave the dome. Things started to go wrong for no reason at all. So I assigned guards—and now it's not even safe for *them!* That's the third this week who's been attacked, not to mention the way the bacteria in the vats keeps spoiling.” He shook his head. “If I can't get this blinking ghost to leave us alone, I'm going to have to resign and go back to Terra 1. Though of course there's no such thing as ghosts ... “He went *Ha-ha*, but it wasn't anything like a proper laugh.

I didn't know what to think. The vats had been properly set up, and there was no reason for the bacteria to go bad on its own. It looked like sabotage, but why would the colonists deliberately damage their own future? It didn't make sense. Until Terra

326 had enough water in its atmosphere to make rain, how could they grow any crops? Without surface water, how could they keep the cycle going? Did they want to be stuck inside the dome forever?

At that moment I was tempted to get right back on the spaceship—but I also wanted really badly to figure this out by myself ...

“So, where do I sleep?” I asked the Director.

\*

It took a couple of days, but I managed to bring all the bacteria back to health. With the implants, I could see what was wrong with each colony from the light they gave off, and clean up the imbalances. I kept waiting for something to go wonky, but so far, so good.

“But what if it all starts to break down again, when you leave, Kerry Om?” The Director was looking as bad as the bacteria had. “The colonists are still as nervous as kittens. Morale is really low.”

And then I had a brain-wave. It was practically Christmas, right? I started humming the old song: “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas”.

The Director gave a sick smile. “Not much chance of that here!”

“Now that’s where you’re wrong ...”

I’d seen my mum do it before on a couple of worlds, as part of the celebrations—all you needed to do was use a different element to make the rain drops freeze. I was sure I could do it too. This first job of mine was going to be a success after all!

“Just get everybody masked up,” I said. “The show starts outside in the desert in about an hour!”

\*

It was night. I had a big grin on my face—there’s something extra magical about snow drifting down out of a dark sky, and the glow from the dome was behind us—perfect backlighting!

“Get ready to sing!” I called to the cluster of colonists and shot the freeze element up into the nearest cloud. There was a pause...and then, drifting down in big white bits of fluff, the snowflakes began to fall. And for about 30 seconds, it was just as pretty as it could be...

... until the screaming started.

I looked at the colonists, but they were looking at each other in confusion—it wasn't any of them! But somebody was under the snow cloud, screaming as if every flake was burning them like white fire.

Without thinking, I flicked on *my* optical implant...and there he was—a tall thin, pale alien I'd never seen before, right in front of me, banging his hands at the flakes and screaming. His skin was blistering and scorching. My heart tried to jump out of my chest—I did the first thing that came into my head—I ran at the alien and tackled him, rolling him about in the sand. Then I piled the sand over his body and protected his head until the last snowflake had fallen.

His eyes were closed and he was breathing funny. Well, maybe it wasn't funny for an alien, but it didn't sound good to me. This guy was badly hurt.

I looked around to see why nobody had come to help. The colonists were all just standing there, staring at me like I was some kind of freak. Then I realised that they couldn't see what I was seeing.

These aliens must use some sort of light-bending camouflage, so only somebody like me, with my eye implants, could see them. I peered out into the darkness of the desert ... There must be other aliens out there, I thought. Surely he wouldn't be here on his own?

I stood up. "Please! Come out! Talk to us! Look—he's badly hurt and I don't know how to help him—" I gestured wildly, hoping they would understand.

I could hear the colonists whispering behind me.

"Who's she talking to?"

"What was all that rolling around in the sand about?"

"She's gone mad! She was screaming like she was on fire, but it didn't sound like her voice at all! It didn't even sound human!"

"And now she's talking to ghosts!"

The alien on the ground moaned, and the colonists took another step back.

"Look!" I shouted out into the night. "This can't go on—you've got to show yourselves so everybody can see you! If we don't talk, how can we solve this mess?"

There was a long pause, and then, at last, with a sighing, whispering sound, a crowd of aliens came into focus.

From the gasps behind me, I guessed the colonists could see them now too. Then I heard scrambling, running-away noises as well. The whole lot of them had scarpered back into the dome.

It was just me and *the ghosts*.

My mouth was dry and my heart was galumphing in my chest.

The aliens bundled the wounded guy away and then one of them—I thought she was probably a female—came up close. Way *too* close. I did my best not to flinch away.

“Well, evil demon from the underworld?” she said. “You want to talk? Let’s talk.”

I have a translation chip like everybody else, but I could tell it hadn’t activated. Her voice was a bit weird-sounding, but she was definitely speaking Standard.

“But—how do you know how to talk like us?”

She shrugged. “We listen. We learn fast. And your language is simple.”

They’d been there all along. Their natural light-bending camouflage was so good the colonists couldn’t see them, and their bodies had practically no moisture in them so they wouldn’t show up on scans.

“When the first surveyors came, why didn’t you *tell* them you were here?”

She stared at me like I was slow. “We would never do that. When alien invaders come, we hide. And then, they go away again. This isn’t an easy world to live on. That protects us.”

I tried to imagine what that would be like. It would be hard to just hide and wait, wafting around the edges like a bunch of ghosts. Humans are a noisy species and we like to change things—make our presence felt! And I always thought that was a good thing. I mean, well, I would, wouldn’t I?

“But you, you demons from the underworld – you stayed and *stayed*. We learned your language and we listened in to your plans. At first we couldn’t believe what we heard. Why would *anyone* choose to do anything so hellish to our beautiful planet?”

“We didn’t know you were here!” I protested, but she was still talking.

“You were going to drop burning poison from the sky –”

“Hang on!” I said. “We were going to drop *water* from the sky.”

“That’s right. Burning poison.”

I thought of the poor alien screaming, and shut up.

“We were getting desperate. If the planet couldn’t protect us this time, some of us argued that we’d have to protect ourselves. So we started sabotaging the vats of poison before you could shoot it into the sky. We even attacked the guards. Anything to stop you.”

Well, of course we would be stopping now. It was the end for Terra 326. The rules about terra-forming new worlds were very clear: if anybody was there first, the whole thing is called off.

Poor Mr Director, I thought, and then, I don’t know why, I asked her something that had been bugging me. “Why do you call us *demons from the underworld*? You *know* we come from another planet—why not *demons from the sky*?”

Her face was odd, but I could still read an expression of *don’t-be-so-stupid!*

“It’s a metaphor! Of course you don’t come from the underworld. *No one* can come from there. There is nothing there but vast caves of water poison and air putrid with moisture. *We* call you that because you are trying to kill us with the same kind of poison.”

“WE DIDN’T KNOW YOU WERE HERE! When will you get that through your head?!” And then I stopped. “Wait a minute—what did you say?” Could I have heard right? “This world already has water—*underground!*!”

She shuddered. “Poison. Yes. A terrifying place of huge caverns and underground rivers and lakes—enough to burn every last one of my people to death ten times over.”

“So,” I said, trying to speak calmly even though I had this sudden new hope banging about in my chest, “that isn’t a part of your world you use much then?”

“Use it? Are you joking? None of my people would ever go near such a horrible place.”

“Then can we have it?” I blurted out.

\*

My first solo job turned out to be a whopper, but I think we’re going to be able to make things work. There was something in the rocks that had blocked the survey scanners, but the caverns under the surface are every bit as huge and wet as she said they were. The colonists have moved underground and started a weather system of their own down there. (Most of Terra 1 is underground now, so it’s what they’re used

to anyway.) We're leaving the surface strictly as it is—dry as a bone and beautiful to the people who were there first. The Old Terran 326ers have shown the New Terran 326ers so many things about this world we had no idea about—and in return? I wasn't sure what we'd done for them.

“Well, you helped them come out of the shadows,” my mum said when I talked to her about it by link on my way back. “Not to be ghosts any more!”

Is that enough? I hope so. I really do.

Anyway, I'll be home in time for Christmas!