

## THE CASE OF THE MISSING INARIAN

By Deb Logan

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MY NAME is Cinnamon Chou, and I'm a detective.

Okay, I'm a kid, but I'm going to be a detective when I grow up. Just like my dad. For now, I'm practicing on the easy stuff. You know, like lost full-spectrum goggles ("They're perched on top of your head, Master Engineer Wyandotte"), missing red silk slippers ("Got' em, Mrs. Abrega! When was the last time you cleaned under your bed?"), or my favorite, The Case of the Missing Inarian.

What's an Inarian? I'm glad you asked.

An Inarian is a warm-blooded denizen of the planet Inaria. They're cute and cuddly and definitely don't meet the standard of intelligence necessary to classify them as Class I Sapient Beings. Reading through my data links on old Earth biology, I've decided they're pretty similar to hamsters. They make great pets, but they're about as bright as deep space with no stars in sight.

My best friend, Lando Maxon, has an Inarian named Dumpling. When Lando woke up that morning, he discovered that Dumpling had managed to escape from his habitat. Inarians may not be smart, but they can wriggle out of places you'd swear were tightly sealed.

Normally, a Dumpling escape wouldn't merit my intervention as a detective. Lando would just set out a bowl of Dumpling's favorite treats and wait for his pet to get hungry. But today was not a normal day. Today Lando and his family were leaving the space station and returning to Centauri Three, their home planet.

That's one of the real bummers about living on a space station. Sooner or later all of your friends move away.

Of course, the up side is that new friends cycle in constantly.

At least, that's what my mom tells me every time a close friend leaves for a distant star system. Dad says Mom is an optimist. He's right, but so is she. By the time I grow

up and take my place in the Universal Star League, I'll have friends in so many star systems I'll need my own database just to keep track of them all.

Back to Dumpling. I was eating breakfast with Mom and Dad when Lando pinged my link. "Lando Maxon," my link announced.

Mom frowned at the link on my wrist. "Not at the table, Cinnamon," she said, using her duty officer voice. "You know the rules."

I swallowed a mouthful of protein-rich, calcium-enhanced syntho-juice, wiped my mouth on a recycled napkin and said, "But Mom, Lando is leaving the station in less than six hours. If I don't answer him, I may not have another chance."

Mom glanced at Dad, who nodded.

"Very well, Cinnamon," she said, "Your father and I will make an exception this time. You are dismissed."

I grabbed a slice of replicated toast, jumped out of my chair, and dashed for the door. I didn't want to give Morn time to reconsider.

Not that she would. Decisions were Mom's life. As a senior officer assigned to the bridge of Space Station Zeta, Mom made hundreds of decisions. She was awesome. Cool and professional, with nerves of steel. Nobody messed with Mom.

She was also beautiful, in a cool and commanding kind of way. Sleek black hair, dark chocolate skin, and eyes as green as all-clear lights. She had a spacer's body, tall and willowy, but tough as nano-enhanced titanium.

Dad, a detective assigned to station security, was a genetic throw-back. Despite being born on Cygnus 12, his DNA identified him as ethnic Chinese. He wasn't exactly short, but he wasn't tall and willowy like Mom. Dad had a compact strength, like a compressed spring. And smart. Oh yeah. Dad's brain held onto facts like a super-computer, but with the ability to make intuitive leaps that computers still hadn't mastered.

Me? Dad says I'm the best of both of them. I've got Dad's thought-processing brilliance combined with Mom's decision-making skills. I just need time to develop my intuition and experience to feed my knowledge base.

I'm also a genetic combination. Where Mom is dark-skinned and Dad is gold-hued, I'm ... well, cinnamon skin-toned. That's where I got my name. Dad took one look at me and said, "She's perfect, Maria. Our own little cinnamon sugar cookie."

Fortunately for me, they dropped the cookie reference and left it at Cinnamon. I'm cool with that. Nothing wrong with being named after an old world spice. Cinnamon might have been common back on old Earth, but out here in space, it's exotic. I like being exotic.

Once I escaped our quarters and made it into the corridor, I answered Lando's ping.

"What's up, Lando? Need help packing?"

A tiny 3-D model of my friend hovered above my wrist link. It was hard to tell on such a miniscule face, but I thought he looked worried.

"Kinda ... maybe. Look, it's Dumpling. He escaped again. Only this time I don't have time to wait for him to come out of hiding."

I nodded, thoughts racing. "Plus, I'll bet your quarters haven't been sealed. Not with everyone packing and moving boxes to the landing bay."

"He could be anywhere," Lando agreed.

"I'm on my way." I paused, thinking about my approach to the case. "Does your family have a DNA detector?"

The tiny Lando shrugged. "Maybe, but if we do, it would've been packed long ago. Not exactly a necessity."

"Gotcha," I replied. "I'll ask Dad to borrow his. See you in a few. Cinnamon Chou, over and out."

I ended the link, but before I could return to our quarters, Dad stepped into the corridor.

"Just the person I needed to see," I said, giving him my brightest smile.

Dad cocked an eyebrow, glanced from my dazzling smile to the finger hovering above my link and said, "What do you need, sugar cookie? Or rather, what does Lando need?"

I grimaced. Only Dad could get away with comparing me to an overly sweet pastry. "Lando's Inarian has escaped and he doesn't have time to wait for it to reappear on its own."

Dad nodded. "You're hoping for a DNA detector?" I upped the wattage on my smile and nodded.

"I don't know, Cinnamon. Those are delicate instruments, easily misread."

My smile morphed into a scowl in a nanosecond. “Really, Dad? You think I’d mistake Inarian DNA for, oh, I don’t know, a Tenarian tunnel rat?”

Dad had the grace to drop his gaze. “No. I know you’d use it properly.” He sighed, stared at the ceiling for a moment, then nodded. “Follow me, Detective Chou.”

My grin returned, and I skipped down the corridor at Dad’s heels.

Space station corridors can be very confusing. A person new to the station often thinks they all look alike, but they’re wrong. You just have to get used to the subtle clues. Since I’ve grown up on Space Station Zeta, I’m never lost. I can tell purple sector from blue without even having to resort to the colored chips embedded in the corridor walls and floors. I can tell the sectors by their odors.

Green sector houses hydroponics and smells of nutrients, water and growing plants. Purple sector houses the market district. Purple always smells of hot oil, spices, and too many humans and aliens packed into too little space. Red sector is mechanical engineering. If you think nanobots and computer circuitry don’t have distinct odors, then you’ve never lived on a space station.

And then there’s white sector. Medics and remedies; antiseptics and bile; with a stiff overlay of fear. I shivered. I hated even walking past white sector.

But now I followed Dad to my favorite sector: blue. Blue sector is administration, which translates to military since Space Station Zeta is a Universal Star League station. As such the station is under the command and protection of the USL Fleet. Both of my parents are USL officers, so blue sector smells of peace, security, and home.

Not that we lived in blue sector. All living quarters were in the central core—yellow sector. Yellow was further divided into crew and civilian quarters, and then by individual or family, but beyond that our station had no class boundaries. At least not where living quarters were concerned.

Dad paused before the entrance to security, waited for the station to acknowledge his voice and retinal prints, and then strode inside when the entry irised open. I followed quickly. The door would’ve irised open for me as well, but why wait to be scanned when I could just stick close to Dad?

Everyone but me wore blue and silver USL uniforms. The officers, like Dad, with insignia of rank emblazoned on chest and shoulder, the crew with the simple, stylized

USL logo. Everyone saluted when Dad entered, since he was the ranking officer. When he returned their salute, they relaxed and called greetings to me as well.

“Aikens,” Dad called, and a young man snapped to attention. “Please find an old DNA detector for Cinnamon. It doesn’t need to be state-of-the-art,” he continued, “just functional.”

“Sir. Yes, sir.”

Dad cocked a brow at me. “What are you waiting for, Detective Chou? Follow Aikens, collect your gear, and get out of my office.”

I grinned, saluted, and ran to follow Aikens. I found him in the supply closet, rummaging through a box of outdated gear.

“What are you up to today, Cinnamon?” he asked as he rooted through the box. “Why a DNA detector?”

“My friend is cycling off-station today, and his Inarian escaped. I’m hoping to help him track it down before he ships out.”

Aikens paused, dislodged a small electronic device, and pulled it free of the box. Thumbing it on, he checked the read-out, then nodded.

“This should do the trick,” he said, handing the detector to me. “It’s got plenty of juice and is reading properly. Good luck with your search.”

“Thanks! This should make it easy.” I saluted Aikens, ran back past Dad’s office and out into the station corridor. Now to get to Lando’s quarters on the double.

I arrived at the Maxon family quarters in yellow sector sweaty and out of breath.

“Hi ... Mrs. Maxon ...” I wheezed. “Is ... Lando ... home?”

Lando’s mother gave me a distracted look and waved toward Lando’s room. “He’s in his room. Searching for Dumpling.”

I nodded. “I heard,” I said, my breathing settling into a more normal pattern. “I’m here to help.”

She turned back to the wardrobe she was inventorying. “I hope you can. We won’t be able to delay our departure for an Inarian.”

“Understood,” I said, already on my way to join my friend. As the door whooshed open and I stepped into Lando’s room, he raced forward, grabbed my hand and pulled me to the habitat.

“I think I’ve found where he got out,” he said, pointing to a junction between the main habitat and one of the tubular trails that allowed Dumpling to roam the edges of Lando’s room. “That connection is slightly loose. It doesn’t look wide enough for escape, but it’s the only possibility I’ve found.”

I got down on my hands and knees to examine the evidence. Sure enough, Lando had discovered a half-inch gap between the main habitat and the tube.

Now Inarians are small, but they’re not that small. Dumpling was at least six inches long, but while he looked like he was as round as he was long, he was actually little more than a walking ball of fluff. I’d seen him squeeze himself flat under his exercise wheel. No idea why he’d done that, but I’d witnessed it with my own two eyes. If he could get into that tiny space, he could ooze out through the loose connection Lando had discovered.

I pulled the DNA detector out of my pocket and turned it on.

“Okay,” I said, “this device is our best hope. Look around and find me a bit of his fur or blood, or, well, whatever might have his DNA.”

I examined the escape point to see if he might have scraped himself and left a sample behind, but the smooth edges were clear. A whoop of victory told me that Lando had fared better.

“Here, Cinnamon. I found a clump of fur.”

I held my breath as we touched the DNA detector’s probe to the fur. “Let there be DNA,” I whispered. “Let there be DNA.” I knew enough about genetics to know that unless a hair has the follicle or root attached, you can’t get a DNA reading. I watched the meter’s read-out. Nothing.

Carefully, I touched a different bit of the fur with the probe ... and the screen lit. We had a reading!

Lando said, “Yes!” and I exhaled in relief.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Now we follow Dumpling’s DNA trail.” I worked the dials on the device and locked in the sample reading. Now the screen would only light when matching DNA was detected.

Crawling along Lando's bedroom floor, we followed the trace evidence Dumpling had left behind. The trail led to a very small hole in the wall between Lando's bedroom and the main room of the family's quarters.

I glanced at Lando and saw his shoulders sag. He was thinking the same thing I was ... what if Dumpling found a way to scurry along inside the walls? We'd never be able to track him through the permaplastic.

After a quick discussion of our options, we agreed that Lando would stay in his room beside the hole, while I ran into the main room to see if there was an exit anywhere nearby.

I laid the DNA detector on the floor and tapped the wall, hoping to hear Lando tapping back. There! I was about six feet too far into the room. I moved toward his rappings, pleased to hear the noise getting louder. When I found the right place, I lay down on my stomach and searched the junction of floor and wall.

"Lando!" I shouted into the little hole. "I found it. There's a matching hole on this side."

"Did he come through?" Lando yelled back. "Does the DNA trail continue?"

Rats! Or maybe I should say, Inarians! The detector was several feet away on the floor where I'd left it. I jumped up to retrieve it, just in time to see a loading dock worker push a floating cargo cart into the room. He'd come to collect some of the Maxons' belongings, and he stopped the cart right over the DNA detector.

If he allowed the cart to settle, he'd crush the instrument that was our only hope of finding Dumpling in time!

"No!" I yelled. "Don't settle the cart there. You'll crush my gadget."

The dock worker stared at me, then checked around his feet, clearly confused. He was just about to lower the cart when I pulled a Dumpling and threw myself into the space under the cart. The way too small space to accommodate my bulk.

"What the..." the worker said, and steered the cart into the center of the room, away from my flying feet and fingers. "Are you nuts, kid? This thing could break you in half."

I grabbed the detector and hugged it close to my hammering heart. "I know," I answered, "but it would've pulverized my DNA detector."

Shaking his head at the lunacy of kids, the dock worker settled the cargo cart and began loading it with boxes.

Moving back to the hole in the wall, I sank to the floor, closed my eyes, and allowed myself to simply breathe until Lando joined me.

“Well?” he asked. “Do we have a trail, or don’t we?”

I held the detector out to him. “You check,” I said. “I’m still recovering from a close encounter.”

He cocked his head and gave me a quizzical expression, silently asking for an explanation, but I waved him toward the hole. I’d tell him all about it later, in a cyber-sending if not in person.

Lando bent to the floor and a moment later gave a fist pump. “We have a trail,” he cried and crawled off toward the family kitchen.

Thanks to Dad’s old DNA detector, we found Dumpling fifteen minutes later curled up in an empty kitchen cabinet, surrounded by bits of breakfast cereal. The cabinet door was firmly latched, with no cracks big enough for even the flattest Inarian to wriggle through.

Lando and I decided that Dumpling must have already been in the cabinet when Mrs. Maxon gave the kitchen a final once-over and closed the door.

With the over-full Inarian still sleeping off his cereal high, Lando and I set about disassembling his habitat and packing it for the journey. Dumpling would be confined to a small carry-case for the duration, but he seemed blissfully unconcerned.

I walked my best friend and his family to the loading dock. Not the cargo loading dock. The people loading dock. There wasn’t much to see, just a little waiting room with a door that led into a tube. It reminded me of Dumpling’s tubular trail system, only this tube would carry my best friend in the whole universe to the space ship that would take him from our home on Space Station Zeta to his new home on Centauri Three.

I wasn’t sure how many light years would separate us, but it really didn’t matter. Too many to bridge with a tubular trail.

The light over the exit turned green, and passengers began to move slowly to the tube.



Mr. and Mrs. Maxon each hugged me and thanked me again for rescuing Dumpling ... and thereby their son. Then they stepped aside so Lando could approach.

“Well,” he said, staring at his shoes, “I guess this is it, Cinnamon.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I guess so.” I looked at the floor, too, willing the tears not to flow.

“Thanks for being my friend.” He touched my hand, and suddenly my arms were around him, hugging him tight.

“You’ll always be my friend,” I whispered, my throat tight with tears I didn’t want to shed. “Light years can’t change that.”

He nodded and we stepped apart.

“Take care of Dumpling for me,” I said. Then a thought struck. “Here. Take this.” I thrust the DNA detector into his hands. “It’s old and Dad doesn’t need it ... and you never know when you might need to track an Inarian.”

Lando smiled, brushed the back of his hand across his eyes, and said, “Thanks, Cinnamon. You’re the best.”

A moment later Lando and his parents disappeared into the tube. I stood there staring at the empty passageway until a blue and silver clad security crewmember closed and locked the door.

I walked away from the dock, heading back to tell Dad what had happened to his DNA detector, when I heard a woman speaking. A woman who sounded like she was trying to be excited but was failing rather spectacularly.

Turning, I saw a tall, willowy blonde woman in the blue and silver of the USL leading a blue-eyed girl with light brown hair pulled into braids. “Don’t worry, Sammy. I’m sure we’ll be happy here. You’ll make friends in no time, and I ... I’ll learn my new post quickly. Everything is going to be A-Okay.”

She raised her eyes, saw me watching, and gave a little wave. “See, honey? There’s a little girl about your age. Maybe she can help us find our quarters.”

I straightened my shoulders, pasted on a smile, and walked over to the newcomers. This Sammy person might not be able to replace Lando, but I could definitely help them find their quarters.

After all, Space Station Zeta was my home, and I was a detective. I could find *anything!*