

Skin Deep

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

"More pancakes, Colin?"

Cullaene looked down at his empty plate so that he wouldn't have to meet Mrs. Fielding's eyes. The use of his alias bothered him more than usual that morning.

"Thank you, no, ma'am. I already ate so much I could burst. If I take another bite, Jared would have to carry me out to the fields."

Mrs. Fielding shot a glance at her husband. Jared was using the last of his pancake to sop up the syrup on his plate.

"On a morning as cold as this, you should eat more," she said as she scooped up Cullaene's plate and set it in the sterilizer. "You could use a little fat to keep you warm."

Cullaene ran his hand over the stubble covering his scalp. Not taking thirds was a mistake, but to take some now would compound it. He would have to watch himself for the rest of the day.

Jared slipped the dripping bit of pancake into his mouth. He grinned and shrugged as he inclined his head toward his wife's back. Cullaene understood the gesture. Jared had used it several times during the week Cullaene worked for them. The farmer knew that his wife seemed pushy, but he was convinced that she meant well.

"More coffee, then?" Mrs. Fielding asked. She stared at him as if she were waiting for another mistake.

"Please." Cullaene handed her his cup. He hated the foreign liquid that colonists drank in gallons. It burned the back of his throat and churned restlessly in his stomach. But he didn't dare say no.

Mrs. Fielding poured his coffee, and Cullaene took a tentative sip as Lucy entered the kitchen. The girl kept tugging her loose sweater over her skirt. She slipped into her place at the table and rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand.

"You're running late, little miss," her father said gently.

Lucy nodded. She pushed her plate out of her way and rested both elbows on the table. "I don't think I'm going today, Dad."

"Going?" Mrs. Fielding exclaimed. "Of course, you'll go. You've had a perfect attendance record for three years, Luce. It's no time to break it now -- "

"Let her be, Elsie," Jared said. "Can't you see she doesn't feel well?"

The girl's skin was white, and her hands were trembling. Cullaene frowned. She made him nervous this morning. If he hadn't known her parentage, he would have thought she was going to have her first Change. But the colonists had hundreds of diseases with symptoms like hers. And she was old enough to begin puberty. Perhaps she was about to begin her first menstrual period.

Apparently, Mrs. Fielding was having the same thoughts, for she placed her hand on her daughter's forehead. "Well, you don't have a fever," she said. Then her eyes met Cullaene's. "Why don't you men get busy? You have a lot to do today."

Cullaene slid his chair back, happy to leave his full cup of coffee sitting on the table. He pulled on the

thick jacket that he had slung over the back of his chair and let himself out the back door.

Jared joined him on the porch. "Think we can finish plowing under?"

Cullaene nodded. The great, hulking machine sat in the half-turned field like a sleeping monster. In a few minutes, Cullaene would climb into the cab and feel the strange gears shiver under his fingers. Jared had said that the machine was old and delicate, but it had to last at least three more years -- colonist's years -- or they would have to do the seeding by hand. There was no industry on the planet yet. The only way to replace broken equipment was to send to Earth for it, and that took time.

Just as Cullaene turned toward the field, a truck floated onto the landing. He began to walk, as if the arrival of others didn't concern him, but he knew they were coming to see him. The Fieldings seldom had visitors.

"Colin!" Jared was calling him. Cullaene stopped, trying not to panic. He had been incautious this time. Things had happened too fast. He wondered what the colonists would do. Would they imprison him, or would they hurt him? Would they give him a chance to explain the situation and then let him go?

Three colonists, two males and a female, were standing outside the truck. Jared was trying to get them to go toward the house.

"I'll meet you inside," Cullaene shouted back. For a moment he toyed with running. He stared out over the broad expanse of newly cultivated land, toward the forest and rising hills beyond it. Somewhere in there he might find an enclave of his own people, a group of Abandoned Ones who hadn't assimilated, but the chances of that were small. His people had always survived by adaptation. The groups of Abandoned Ones had grown smaller every year.

He rubbed his hands together. His skin was too dry. If only he could pull off this self-imposed restraint for an hour, he would lie down in the field and encase himself in mud. Then his skin would emerge as soft and pure as the fur on Jared's cats. But he needed his restraint now more than ever. He pulled his jacket tighter and let himself into the kitchen once more.

He could hear the voices of Lucy and her mother rise in a heated discussion from upstairs. Jared had pressed the recycle switch on the old coffee maker, and it was screeching in protest. The three visitors were seated around the table, the woman in Cullaene's seat, and all of them turned as he entered the room.

He nodded and sat by the sterilizer. The heat made his back tingle, and the unusual angle made him feel like a stranger in the kitchen where he had supped for over a week. The visitors stared at him with the same cold look he had seen on the faces of the townspeople.

"This is Colin," Jared said. "He works for me."

Cullaene nodded again. Jared didn't introduce the visitors, and Cullaene wondered if it was an intentional oversight.

"We would like to ask you a few questions about yourself," the woman said. She leaned forward as she spoke, and Cullaene noted that her eyes were a vivid blue.

"May I ask why?"

Jared's hand shook as he poured the coffee. "Colin, it's customary around here -- "

"No," the woman interrupted. "It is not customary. We're talking with all the strangers. Surely your hired

man has heard of the murder."

Cullaene started. He took the coffee cup Jared offered him, relieved that his own hand did not shake. "No, I hadn't heard."

"We don't talk about such things in this house, Marlene," Jared said to the woman.

Coffee cups rattled in the silence as Jared finished serving everyone. The older man, leaning against the wall behind the table, waited until Jared was through before he spoke.

"It's our first killing in this colony, and it's a ghastly one. Out near the ridge, we found the skin of a man floating in the river. At first, we thought it was a body because the water filled the skin like it would fill a sack. Most of the hair was in place, hair so black that when it dried its highlights were blue. We couldn't find any clothes -- "

" -- or bones for that matter," the other man added.

"That's right," the spokesman continued. "He had been gutted. We scoured the area for the rest of him, and up on the ridge we found blood."

"A great deal of it," Marlene said. "As if they had skinned him while he was still alive."

Cullaene had to wrap his fingers around the hot cup to keep them warm. He hadn't been careful enough. Things had happened so swiftly that he hadn't had a chance to go deeper into the woods. He felt the fear that had been quivering in the bottom of his stomach settle around his heart.

"And so you're questioning all of the strangers here to see if they could have done it." He spoke as if he were more curious than frightened.

Marlene nodded. She ran a long hand across her hairline to catch any loose strands.

"I didn't kill anyone," Cullaene said. "I'll answer anything you ask."

They asked him careful, probing questions about his life before he had entered their colony, and he answered with equal care, being as truthful as he possibly could. He told them that the first colony he had been with landed on ground unsuitable for farming. The colonists tried hunting and even applied for a mining permit, but nothing worked. Eventually, most returned to Earth. He remained, traveling from family to family, working odd jobs while he tried to find a place to settle. As he spoke, he mentioned occasional details about himself, hoping that the sparse personal comments would prevent deeper probing. He told them about the Johansens whose daughter he had nearly married, the Cassels who taught him how to cultivate land, and the Slingers who nursed him back to health after a particularly debilitating illness. Cullaene told them every place he had ever been except the one place they were truly interested in -- the woods that bordered the Fieldings' farm.

He spoke in a gentle tone that Earthlings respected. And he watched Jared's face because he knew that Jared, of any of them, would be the one to realize that Cullaene was not and never had been a colonist. Jared had lived on the planet for fifteen years. Once he had told Cullaene proudly that Lucy, though an orphan, was the first member of this colony born on the planet.

The trust in Jared's eyes never wavered. Cullaene relaxed slightly. If Jared didn't recognize him, no one would.

"They say that this is the way the natives commit murder," Marlene said when Cullaene finished. "We've heard tales from other colonies of bodies -- both human and Riame -- being found like this."

Cullaene realized that she was still questioning him. "I never heard of this kind of murder before."

She nodded. As if by an unseen cue, all three of them stood. Jared stood with them. "Do you think Riame could be in the area?" he asked.

"It's very likely," Marlene said. "Since you live so close to the woods, you should probably take extra precautions."

"Yes." Jared glanced over at his well-stocked gun cabinet. "I plan to."

The men nodded their approval and started out the door. Marlene turned to Cullaene. "Thank you for your cooperation," she said. "We'll let you know if we have any further questions."

Cullaene stood to accompany them out, but Jared held him back. "Finish your coffee. We have plenty of time to get to the fields later."

After they went out the door, Cullaene took his coffee and moved to his own seat. Lucy and her mother were still arguing upstairs. He took the opportunity to indulge himself in a quick scratch of his hands and arms. The heat had made the dryness worse.

He wondered if he had been convincing. The three looked as if they had already decided what happened. A murder. He shook his head.

A door slammed upstairs, and the argument grew progressively louder. Cullaene glanced out the window over the sterilizer. Jared was still talking with the three visitors. Cullaene hoped they'd leave soon. Then maybe he'd talk to Jared, explain as best he could why he could no longer stay.

"Where are you going?" Mrs. Fielding shouted. Panic touched the edge of her voice.

"Away from you!" Lucy sounded on the verge of tears. Cullaene could hear her stamp her way down the stairs. Suddenly, the footsteps stopped. "No! You stay away from me! I need time to think!"

"You can't have time to think! We've got to find out what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong!"

"Lucy -- "

"You take another step and I swear I'll leave!" Lucy backed her way into the kitchen, slammed the door, and leaned on it. Then she noticed Cullaene, and all the fight left her face.

"How long have you been here?" she whispered.

He poured his now-cold coffee into the recycler that they had set aside for him. "I won't say anything to your father, if that's what you're worried about. I don't even know why you were fighting."

There was no room left in the sterilizer, so he set the cup next to the tiny boiler that purified the ground water. Lucy slid a chair back, and it creaked as she sat in it. Cullaene took another glance out the window. Jared and his visitors seemed to be arguing.

What would he do if they decided he was guilty? He couldn't disappear. They had a description of him that they would send to other colonies. He could search for the Abandoned Ones, but even if he found them, they might not take him in. He had lived with the colonists all his life. He looked human, and sometimes, he even felt human.

Something crashed behind him. Cullaene turned in time to see Lucy stumble over her chair as she backed away from the overturned coffee maker. Coffee ran down the wall, and the sterilizer hissed. He hurried to her side, moved the chair, and got her to a safer corner of the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded. A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye. "I didn't grab it tight, I guess."

"Why don't you sit down. I'll clean it up -- " Cullaene stopped as Lucy's tear landed on the back of his hand. The drop was heavy and lined with red. He watched it leave a pink trail as it rolled off his skin onto the floor. Slowly, he looked up into her frightened eyes. More blood-filled tears threatened. He wiped one from her eyelashes and rolled it around between his fingertips.

Suddenly, she tried to pull away from him, and he tightened his grip on her arm. He slid back the sleeve of her sweater. The flesh hung in folds around her elbow and wrist. He touched her wrist lightly and noted that the sweat from her pores was also rimmed in blood.

"How long?" he whispered. "How long has this been happening to you?"

The tears began to flow easily now. It looked as if she were bleeding from her eyes. "Yesterday morning."

He shook his head. "It had to start sooner than that. You would have itched badly. Like a rash."

"A week ago."

He let her go. Poor girl. A week alone without anyone telling her anything. She would hurt by now. The pain and the weakness would be nearly intolerable.

"What is it?" Her voice was filled with fear.

Cullaene stared at her, then, as the full horror finally reached him. He had been prepared from birth for the Change, but Lucy thought she was human. And suddenly he looked out the window again at Jared. Jared, who had found the orphaned girl without even trying to discover anything about the type of life form he raised. Jared, who must have assumed that because the child looked human, she was human.

She was rubbing her wrist. The skin was already so loose that the pressure of his hand hadn't left a mark on it.

"It's normal," he said. "It's the Change. The first time -- the first time can be painful, but I can help you through it."

The instant he said the words, he regretted them. If he helped her, he'd have to stay. He was about to contradict himself when the kitchen door clicked shut.

Mrs. Fielding looked at the spilled coffee, then at the humped skin on Lucy's arm. The older woman seemed frightened and vulnerable. She held out her hand to her daughter, but Lucy didn't move. "She's sick," Mrs. Fielding said.

"Sick?" Cullaene permitted himself a small ironic smile. These people didn't realize what they had done to Lucy. "How do you know? You've never experienced anything like this before, have you?"

Mrs. Fielding was flushed. "Have you?"

"Of course, I have. It's perfectly normal development in an adult Riiame."

"And you'd be able to help her?"

The hope in her voice mitigated some of his anger. He could probably trust Mrs. Fielding to keep his secret. She had no one else to turn to right now. "I was able to help myself."

"You're Riiame?" she whispered. Suddenly, the color drained from her face. "Oh, my God."

Cullaene could feel a chill run through him. He'd made the wrong choice. Before he was able to stop her, she had pulled the porch door open. "Jared!" she called. "Get in here right away! Colin -- Colin says he's a Riiame!"

Cullaene froze. She couldn't be saying that. Not now. Not when her daughter was about to go through one of life's most painful experiences unprepared. Lucy needed him right now. Her mother couldn't help her, and neither could the other colonists. If they tried to stop the bleeding, it would kill her.

He had made his decision. He grabbed Lucy and swung her horizontally across his back, locking her body in position with his arms. She was kicking and pounding on his side. Mrs. Fielding started to scream. Cullaene let go of Lucy's legs for a moment, grabbed the doorknob, and let himself out into the hallway. Lucy had her feet braced against the floor, forcing him to drag her. He continued to move swiftly toward the front door. When he reached it, he yanked it open and ran into the cold morning air.

Lucy had almost worked herself free. He shifted her slightly against his back and managed to capture her knees again. The skin had broken where he touched her. She would leave a trail of blood.

The girl was so frightened that she wasn't even screaming. She hit him in the soft flesh of his side, then leaned over and bit him. The pain almost made him drop her. Suddenly, he spun around and tightened his grip on her.

"I'm trying to help you," he said. "Now stop it!"

She stopped struggling and rested limply in his arms. Cullaene found himself hating the Fieldings. Didn't they know there would be questions? Perhaps they could explain the Change as a disease, but what would happen when her friends began to shrivel with age and she remained as young and lovely as she was now? Who would explain that to her?

He ran on a weaving path through the trees. If Jared was thinking, he would know where Cullaene was taking Lucy. But all Cullaene needed was time. Lucy was so near the Change now that it wouldn't take too long to help her through it. But if the others tried to stop it, no matter how good their intentions, they could kill or disfigure the girl.

Cullaene was sobbing air into his lungs. His chest burned. He hadn't run like this in a long time, and Lucy's extra weight was making the movements more difficult. As if the girl could read his thoughts, she began struggling again. She bent her knees and jammed them as hard as she could into his kidneys. He almost tripped, but managed to right himself just in time. The trees were beginning to thin up ahead, and he smelled the thick spice of the river. It would take the others a while to reach him. They couldn't get the truck in here. They would have to come by foot. Maybe he'd have enough time to help Lucy and to get away.

Cullaene broke into the clearing. Lucy gasped as she saw the ridge. He had to bring her here. She needed the spicy water -- and the height. He thought he could hear someone following him now, and he prayed he would have enough time. He had so much to tell her. She had to know about the pigmentation changes, and the possibilities of retaining some skin. But most of all, she had to do what he told her, or she'd be deformed until the next Change, another ten years away.

He bent in half and lugged her up the ridge. The slope of the land was slight enough so that he kept his balance, but great enough to slow him down. He could feel Lucy's heart pounding against his back. The child thought he was going to kill her, and he didn't know how he would overcome that.

When he reached the top of the ridge, he stood, panting, looking over the caramel-colored water. He didn't dare release Lucy right away. They didn't have much time, and he had to explain what was happening to her.

She had stopped struggling. She gripped him as if she were determined to drag him with her when he flung her into the river. In the distance, he could hear faint shouts.

"Lucy, I brought you up here for a reason," he said. Her fingers dug deeper into his flesh. "You're going through what my people call the Change. It's normal. It -- "

"I'm not one of your people," she said. "Put me down!"

He stared across the sluggish river into the trees beyond. Even though he had just begun, he felt defeated. The girl had been human for thirteen years. He couldn't alter that in fifteen minutes.

"No, you're not." He set her down, but kept a firm grasp of her wrists. Her sweater and skirt were covered with blood. "But you were born here. Have you ever seen this happen to anyone else?"

He grabbed a loose fold of skin and lifted it. There was a sucking release as the skin separated from the wall of blood. Lucy tried to pull away from him. He drew her closer. "Unfortunately, you believe you are human and so the first one to undergo this. I'm the only one who can help you. I'm a Riame. This has happened to me."

"You don't look like a Riame."

He held back a sharp retort. There was so much that she didn't know. Riame were a shape-shifting people. Parents chose the form of their children at birth. His parents had had enough foresight to give him a human shape. Apparently, so had hers. But she had only seen the Abandoned Ones who retained the shape of the hunters that used to populate the planet's forests.

A cry echoed through the woods. Lucy looked toward it, but Cullaene shook her to get her attention again. "I am Riame," he said. "Your father's friends claimed to have found a body here. But that body they found wasn't a body at all. It was my skin. I just went through the Change. I shed my skin just as you're going to. And then I came out to find work in your father's farm."

"I don't believe you," she said.

"Lucy, you're bleeding through every pore in your body. Your skin is loose. You feel as if you're floating inside yourself. You panicked when you saw your form outlined in blood on the sheets this morning, didn't you? And your mother, she noticed it, too, didn't she?"

Lucy nodded.

"You have got to trust me because in a few hours the blood will go away, the skin you're wearing now will stick to the new skin beneath it, and you will be ugly and deformed. And in time, the old skin will start to rot. Do you want that to happen to you?"

A bloody tear made its way down Lucy's cheek. "No," she whispered.

"All right then." Cullaene wouldn't let himself feel relief. He could hear unnatural rustlings coming from the

woods. "You're going to have to leave your clothes here. Then go to the edge of the ridge, reach your arms over your head to stretch the skin as much as you can, and jump into the river. It's safe, the river is very deep here. As soon as you can feel the cold water on every inch of your body, surface, go to shore, and wrap yourself in mud. That will prevent the itching from starting again."

The fear on her face alarmed him. "You mean I have to strip?"

He bit back his frustration. They didn't have time to work through human taboos. "Yes. Or the old skin won't come off."

Suddenly, he saw something flash in the woods below. It looked like the muzzle of a heat gun. Panic shot through him. Why was he risking his life to help this child? As soon as he emerged at the edge of the ridge, her father would kill him. Cullaene let go of Lucy's wrists. Let her run if she wanted to. He was not going to let himself get killed. Not yet.

But to his surprise, Lucy didn't run. She turned her back and slowly pulled her sweater over her head. Then she slid off the rest of her clothes and walked to the edge of the ridge. Cullaene knew she couldn't feel the cold right now. Her skin was too far away from the nerve endings.

She reached the edge of the ridge, her toes gripping the rock as tightly as her fingers had gripped his arm, and then she turned to look back at him. "I can't," she whispered.

She was so close. Cullaene saw the blood working under the old skin, trying to separate all of it. "You have to," he replied, keeping himself in shadow. "Jump."

Lucy looked down at the river below her, and a shiver ran through her body. She shook her head.

"Do -- ?" Cullaene stopped himself. If he went into the open, they'd kill him. Then he stared at Lucy for a moment, and felt his resolve waver. "Do you want me to help you?"

He could see the fear and helplessness mix on her face. She wasn't sure what he was going to do, but she wanted to believe him. Suddenly, she set her jaw with determination. "Yes," she said softly.

Cullaene's hands went cold. "All right. I'm going to do this quickly. I'll come up behind you and push you into the river. Point your toes and fall straight. The river is deep and it moves slow. You'll be all right."

Lucy nodded and looked straight ahead. The woods around them were unnaturally quiet. He hurried out of his cover and grabbed her waist, feeling the blood slide away from the pressure of his hands. He paused for a moment, knowing that Jared and his companions would not shoot while he held the girl.

"Point," he said, then pushed.

He could feel the air rush through his fingers as Lucy fell. Suddenly, a white heat blast stabbed his side, and he tumbled after her, whirling and flipping in the icy air. He landed on his stomach in the thick, cold water, knocking the wind out of his body. Cullaene knew that he should stay under and swim away from the banks, but he needed to breathe. He clawed his way to the surface, convinced he would die before he reached it. The fight seemed to take forever, and suddenly he was there, bobbing on top of the river, gasping air into his empty lungs.

Lucy's skin floated next to him, and he felt a moment of triumph before he saw Jared's heat gun leveled at him from the bank.

"Get out," the farmer said tightly. "Get out and tell me what you did with the rest of her before I lose my head altogether."

Cullaene could still go under and swim for it, but what would be the use? He wouldn't be able to change his pigmentation for another ten years or so, and if he managed to swim out of range of their heat guns, he would always be running.

With two long strokes, Cullaene swam to the bank and climbed out of the water. He shivered. It was cold, much too cold to be standing wet near the river. The spice aggravated his new skin's dryness.

Marlene, gun in hand, stood next to Jared, and the two other men were coming out of the woods.

"Where's the rest of her?" Jared asked. His arm was shaking. "On the ridge?"

Cullaene shook his head. He could have hit the gun from Jared's hand and run, but he couldn't stand to see the sadness, the defeat in the man who had befriended him.

"She'll be coming out of the water in a minute."

"You lie!" Jared screamed, and Cullaene saw with shock that the man had nearly snapped.

"No, she will." Cullaene hesitated for a moment. He didn't want to die to keep his people's secret. The Riiame always adapted. They'd adapt this time, too. "She's Riiame. You know that. This is normal for us."

"She's my daughter!"

"No, she's not. She can't be. This doesn't happen to humans."

A splash from the riverbank drew his attention. Lucy pulled herself up alongside the water several feet from them. Her skin was fresh, pink and clean, and her bald head reflected patches of sunlight. She gathered herself into a fetal position and began to rock.

Cullaene started to go to her, but Jared grabbed him. Cullaene tried to shake his arm free, but Jared was too strong for him.

"She's not done yet," Cullaene said.

Marlene had come up beside them. "Let him go, Jared."

"He killed my daughter." Jared's grip tightened on Cullaene's arm.

"No, he didn't. She's right over there."

Jared didn't even look. "That's not my Lucy."

Cullaene swallowed hard. His heart was beating in his throat. He should have run when he had the chance. Now Jared was going to kill him.

"That is Lucy," Marlene said firmly. "Let him go, Jared. He has to help her."

Jared looked over at the girl rocking at the edge of the riverbank. His hold loosened, and finally he let his hands drop. Cullaene took two steps backward and rubbed his arms. Relief was making him dizzy.

Marlene had put her arm around Jared as if she, too, didn't trust him. She was watching Cullaene to see what he'd do next. If he ran, she'd get the other two to stop him. Slowly, he turned away from them and went to Lucy's side.

"You need mud, Lucy," he said as he dragged her higher onto the bank. She let him roll her into a cocoon. When he was nearly through, he looked at the man behind him.

Jared had dropped his weapon and was staring at Lucy's skin as it made its way down the river. Marlene still clutched her gun, but her eyes were on Jared, not Cullaene.

"Is she Riiame?" Marlene asked Jared.

The farmer shook his head. "I thought she was human!" he said. Then he raised his voice as if he wanted Cullaene to hear. "I thought she was human!"

Cullaene took a handful of mud and started painting the skin on Lucy's face. She had closed her eyes and was lying very still. She would need time to recover from the shock.

"I thought they were going to kill her," Jared said brokenly. "There were two of them and she was so little and I thought they were going to kill her." His voice dropped. "So I killed them first."

Cullaene's fingers froze on Lucy's cheek. Jared had killed Lucy's parents because they didn't look human. Cullaene dipped his hands in more mud and continued working. He hoped they would let him leave when he finished.

He placed the last of the mud on the girl's face. Jared came up beside him. "You're Riiame too, aren't you? And you look human."

Cullaene washed the mud from his shaking hands. He was very frightened. What would he do now? Leave with Lucy, and try to teach the child that she wasn't human at all? He turned to face Jared. "What are you going to do with Lucy?"

"Will she be okay?" the farmer asked.

Cullaene stared at Jared for a moment. All the color had drained from the farmer's face, and he looked close to tears. Jared had finally realized what he had done.

"She should be," Cullaene said. "But someone has to explain this to her. It'll happen again. And there are other things."

He stopped, remembering his aborted love affair with a human woman. Ultimately, their forms had proven incompatible. He wasn't really human, although it was so easy to forget that. He only appeared human.

"Other things?"

"Difficult things." Cullaene shivered again. He would get ill from these wet clothes. "If you want, I'll take her with me. You won't have to deal with her then."

"No." Jared reached out to touch the mud-encased girl, but his hand hovered over her shell, never quite resting on it. "She's my daughter. I raised her. I can't just let her run off and disappear."

Cullaene swallowed heavily. He didn't understand these creatures. They killed Abandoned Ones on a whim, professed fear and hatred of the Riiame, and then would offer to keep one in their home.

"That was your skin that they found, wasn't it?" Jared asked. "This just happened to you."

Cullaene nodded. His muscles were tense. He wasn't sure what Jared was going to do.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

Cullaene looked at Jared for a moment. Because, he wanted to say, the woman I loved screamed and spat at me when she found out. Because one farmer nearly killed me with an axe. Because your people don't know how to cope with anything different, even when they are the aliens on a new planet.

"I didn't think you'd understand," he said. Suddenly, he grabbed Jared's hand and set it on the hardening mud covering Lucy's shoulder. Then he stood up. There had to be Abandoned Ones in these woods. He would find them if Jared didn't kill him first. He started to walk.

"Colin," Jared began, but Cullaene didn't stop. Marlene reached his side and grabbed him. Cullaene glared at her, but she didn't let go. He was too frightened to hit her, too frightened to try to break free. If she held him, maybe they weren't going to kill him after all.

She ripped open the side of Cullaene's shirt and examined the damage left by the heat blast. The skin was puckered and withered, and Cullaene suddenly realized how much it ached.

"Can we treat this?" she asked.

"Are you asking for permission?" Cullaene could barely keep the sarcasm from his voice.

"No." The woman looked down and blushed deeply as some humans did when their shame was fullest. "I was asking if we had the skill."

Cullaene relaxed enough to smile. "You have the skill."

"Then," she said. "May we treat you?"

Cullaene nodded. He allowed himself to be led back to Jared's side. Jared was staring at his daughter, letting tears fall onto the cocoon of mud.

"You can take her out of there soon," Cullaene said. "Her clothes are up on the ridge. I'll get them."

And before anyone could stop him, Cullaene went into the woods and started up the ridge. He could escape now. He could simply turn around and run away. But he wasn't sure he wanted to do that.

When he reached the top of the ridge, he peered down at Jared, his frightened daughter, and the woman who protected them. They had a lot of explaining to do to Lucy. But if she was strong enough to survive the Change, she was strong enough to survive anything.

Cullaene draped her bloody clothes over his arm and started back down the ridge. When he reached the others, he handed the clothes to Marlene. Then Cullaene crouched beside Jared. Carefully, Cullaene made a hole in the mud and began to peel it off Lucy. Jared watched him for a moment. Then he slipped his fingers into a crack, and together the alien and the native freed the girl from her handmade shell.