

Glass Walls

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I

Beth touched the warm glass window. Inside, the baby Minaran swam, its small head rounded and sleek, its eyes open and friendly. When she had first passed the cubicle, the baby rested on its back on a rock, basking in fake sunlight. Its fur was white, its fins slender but strong.

Odd that it would have a cubicle all to itself just inside the human wing. Odder still that the cubicle had been a banquet room a few days before.

She leaned her face against the glass, wishing she could go inside. The poor little thing had to be lonely. If she could hold it and feel its warm, wet fur against her skin, she might be able to ease the loneliness—both of their loneliness—for just a short time.

“Beth!”

Roddy’s voice. She jumped away from the window and stood, hands clasped behind her back. She kept her gaze trained downward, away from the Minaran in the cubicle. Roddy hated it when she ogled the guests.

“What are you doing in the main lobby?” He stood beside her. She could smell peppermint on his breath. He had just had a cup of his favorite—expensive—tea. “Did someone call for you?”

She shook her head. How many demerits this time? Or maybe he would take a week’s worth of tips. The diamond square pattern on the carpet ran together. She blinked, making sure her eyes were tearless.

“You know I don’t like having the personal staff in the lobby. It creates a sleazy atmosphere. Some of our patrons would prefer to ignore people like you.”

As you would, she thought. She finally raised her head, saw Candice at the lobby entrance, watching the entire exchange. Roddy wore a black suit, very twentieth-century retro, fitting in perfectly with the decor in this half of the human wing. Except for the Minaran.

“I was walking through,” Beth said, “and I saw the Minaran. What’s it doing here?”

“That’s none of your business,” Roddy said. “When you were hired on, you were told not to ask questions—”

“Beth was not hired,” Candice said. She started down the incline into the lobby. Roddy didn’t move. He froze, just like Beth had, when faced with his boss. “Let’s not have this discussion in the lobby, hmm? My office, please.”

Except for the Minaran the lobby was empty. The next ship was twenty minutes behind schedule. The staff was having its break, preparing for the mid-afternoon rush.

Beth and Roddy followed Candice around the registration desk. Her office was a spacious room with a view of the docking ships and the stars beyond. She had to have been at Hotel Andromeda for most of her life—and had to have been a valued employee—to attain a view like that.

“Sit down,” Candice said as she slipped in the wide leather chair behind her desk. Her office, too, was done retro. Beth didn’t want to sit in the leather chair on the other side of the desk—she hated the feel of

the material against her skin; it brought back too many unpleasant memories—but she did anyway. Roddy sat beside her, perched at the edge of the chair as if he were going to spring up any minute.

“The lobby is not a place for dressing down an employee,” Candice said, folding her jeweled hands together and leaning forward on the desk. “We are striving to make our guests as comfortable as possible, and they don’t need to see dissention among the staff. Is that clear?”

Roddy nodded.

“Good. You may go.”

Roddy leaped out of the chair as if it had an ejector seat. He was gone from Candice’s office in the time it took her to turn to Beth. “You know better than to stand in the lobby when you’re not working.”

“Yes.” Beth looked at her hands. They weren’t as well groomed as Candice’s. The years of hard labor would always remain in the form of yellowed calluses, bent nails, and scarred skin.

“The Minaran fascinates you.”

Beth didn’t answer. When she stared at the creature, memories crossed within her. Memories of the investigator—what was his name? Shafer?—who had killed so many Minarans and destroyed her world, too. Memories of being trapped, naked, in a cubicle the same size for her first real journey into space, the other prisoners passing her, jeering, and tapping on the clear plastic. She had hated it, hated it, and not even the memory of John got her through.

All that combined in loneliness so deep that sometimes she thought nothing would fill it.

“Beth?”

Beth looked up. Candice’s voice was harsh, but her eyes weren’t. Candice was the only nice person Beth had met on the staff. The rest treated her like dirt, like she was worse than dirt, like she had no value at all.

“You have more demerits than any other staff member. Your ten-year service contract has grown to sixteen. If you don’t watch yourself, you could be indentured to the hotel for life.”

Beth shrugged. She had nowhere else to go. Meager as it was, the hotel was more home to her than any other place she had lived. Any other place except Bountiful, among the Dancer’s.

Candice stood up, and shoved her hands in the pocket of her suit. She was a big woman, and powerful. “I would like to make you a project, Beth. I think you’re smarter than any other person on the staff. I can send you to an alien no one knows anything about, and you can discover its sexuality and please it within a matter of hours. If this system ran on merits instead of demerits, I suspect you would have been out of here in five years, instead of accumulating enough trouble to keep you here indefinitely. But I need to know if you’re willing.”

“What do you want from me?” Beth’s voice felt rusty, as if she hadn’t used it for days.

“I want to train you to become my assistant. You would act as liaison between all branches of the hotel, and you would mostly work in New Species Contact. You would discover what a species needs to feel most at home, and work with the design and personal staff to accomplish that.”

Beth clasped her hands together. She had never done anything like that. She could barely speak to other people. Imagine if she had to speak to other species. Normally she went into their rooms and became

like a Dancer, absorbing the emotions of the other being and flowing with them until she found what they wanted. Then she would leave, and Dancer-like, forget everything that had happened. “I don’t know design or diplomacy.”

“I would train you.”

Beth shook her head once and stood. “If you knew about me, you wouldn’t offer this.”

“I know you came to us from a penal ship. I know you were in for murder.”

“No.” Beth reached out and touched the edge of Candice’s desk. The wood was smooth and warm, like the glass around the Minaran’s cubicle. “I was convicted under the Alien Influences Act. Some friends of mine and I saw Dancer puberty rites and tried them on each other, not realizing that when you cut off a human’s hands, heart and lungs, they die. Because of us, the Intergalactic Alliance closed its second planet—Bountiful—and ordered that humans never have contact with Dancers again. And we were scattered into isolation, away from aliens. That’s why the hotel had to get special dispensation to buy my indentured servitude contract.”

“But no aliens have influenced you since,” Candice said.

“That’s because,” Beth said, keeping her voice soft, “that’s because I haven’t let them.”

Beth went back up to her room by the back way, so that she wouldn’t see the Minaran, and be tempted to stop again in the lobby.

The hallway outside her room was quiet. She pressed her finger against her door and it slid open, revealing her haven. Her room was not done retro. A sleep couch floated in the middle, mimicking the weightlessness of space. Nothing decorated the walls, not even a holoprojector, vid screen, or sound unit. It had taken her nearly two years to accept the room as a haven instead of a punishment—by that time, she was used to its sparseness. It gave her eyes a rest from the business in the remainder of the hotel.

She took off her shoes and waved at the bed. The motion made it float down to her, and she climbed on it, letting the softness take her. When she had no assignments, she usually slept. Sleep protected her from her memories, protected her from her life. She closed her eyes and felt the bed rise to its place in the center of the room.

II

The Minaran swam behind her closed eyelids, its little white body begging for her attention. Minarans were not space-faring creatures, so they had no place in the hotel. So of course the hotel would have to build something special.

But someone would have had to bring the creature here. Someone would have had to travel with it, provide it with accommodations, alter a vessel in order to carry it in space. Someone had a lot of money invested in that one little creature.

Odd. Too odd.

Beth opened her eyes and stared at the blank ceiling. Still the sense of the Minaran did not leave her. Minar, the creature’s home planet, had been closed, like Bountiful. The Minarans were an endangered species, like the Dancers.

She sat up so fast the bed rocked and nearly tossed her out. Like the Dancers, Minarans were protected species—no one was allowed to remove them from the planet. And this one was a baby, since it was the

size of a small cat. Adult Minarans grew to the size of adult male lions, like the kind kept in the Earth zoo on the fifteenth level.

Her knowledge of the Minarans came from the holos that the hotel had shown her when she arrived. The Minaran sequence was the most graphic, hordes of colonists sweeping down on the defenseless animals because the colonists believed that the Minarans had killed a few humans. The colonists had poisoned the Minarans' environment, and the creatures had died in agony as the chemical balance of their watery home shifted. Eighty percent of the creatures died before someone figured out that the colonists were killed by environmental factors that had nothing to do with the Minarans at all.

The holo was a cautionary piece about the power of erroneous beliefs. If hotel staff suffered from the same kind of prejudices the colonists had, guests would die on all levels, from ignorance to lack of care, to well-intentioned "security" measures.

That's what had been striking her as odd, more than the cubicle in the lobby. The entire staff knew about the Minarans, knew about the illegality of transporting them, and still gave this one a place of honor in the lobby.

She had seen a lot of strange things in the hotel, and she had ignored most of them. She couldn't ignore this one.

The Minaran's wide, round eyes haunted her in a way that no one had since she left Bountiful, almost two decades before.

III

She didn't want to see Candice, because Candice would ask her to change her decision. Beth wasn't qualified to work in such a sophisticated position. She didn't want anyone harping on her, forcing her into a place she didn't want to be.

A place she wasn't able to be. Working with the aliens required thought. And Beth worked hard at losing thought and memory while she did her job.

Before she could do anything about the Minaran, though, a summons came from Roddy. The summons was merely a beep inside her neural net. She had screamed so when they attached the simple system that the doctors were afraid to try anything more complex. Roddy hated the fact that he had to direct her in person, but she refused to let anyone ever again mess inside her mind.

His office was two levels down from her room. She hated it. She hadn't recognized the design when she first saw it, almost a decade before, but then she had done some research.

Roddy had chosen nineteenth-century retro, Victorian period, England. His office smelled of tobacco and liquor, both substances now banned in large- intergalactic areas like the hotel (unless some guest requested them for his pleasure). Rich reds and dark woods covered the walls and carpet. The furniture was heavy, so heavy that Beth wondered how it met regulation. Roddy's stiff suits and muttonchop whiskers looked natural here, as did his distaste for her and the others like her.

"We had a request from Amphib," he said, his back to her. Steam rose from a cup on his desk, and she recognized black tea, as difficult to get as the peppermint stuff he usually drank. "I've forgotten. Do you swim?"

He hadn't forgotten at all. He just liked to toy with her. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of emotion in her answer.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He turned. Between his fingers, he held a pipe, unlit, of course. His gaze was cold. “We wouldn’t want you to drown, like Tina did last year. We can’t afford more scandals like that.”

“Good swimmers can drown in only a few inches of water if they get knocked unconscious,” Beth said. Keeping her tone flat had become more difficult. Tina had taught her how to swim when she first came to the hotel almost a decade before. Careless sex, violence, or some kind of accident had caused Tina to die.

“I suppose.” Roddy leaned against a shelf filled with antique books. “We had a request from a Ratoid. It seems it heard about our interspecies service from a satisfied friend. I have a vid in the next room if you want to see how it’s done among consenting Ratoids—”

She shook her head. She had discovered that information vids often interfered with her flow, her opportunity to do her work. “What room?”

He handed her a card with a floor plan and a duplicate of the print which would open the Ratoid’s lock. “In all fairness,” he said, “I should let you know that Ratoids achieve orgasm underwater. I trust you can hold your breath for long periods of time?”

Beth bit back a response—she usually held her breath the entire time she was in his office—and snatched the card from his hand. She worked her way through the maze of levels. At least the Amphibs were close to the human quarters. The atmosphere, oxygen levels, and room design weren’t all that different. The various amphibs from a number of worlds required a pool instead of a bathroom. They had adjusted to beds and sofas and other human comforts.

Finally, she climbed up a flight of rough-hewn stairs and pushed open a door. The air that greeted her was thick with humidity and smelled faintly of stagnant water. The Amphib section had several kinds of water pools—stagnant, spring-fed, saltwater, acidic, and freshwater. Some Amphibs did well with chemical water treatments. Others died.

She pushed back her hair with one hand and paused in front of the door. Stagnant water. Yuck. Then she took a deep breath and reached to the part of her mind where the Dancers lived.

Dancers—long flowing bodies that looked as if they danced instead of walked. Wide eyes, a faint tang, and a chirp. No memories, none at all, just instinct and free-flowing emotion. Affection, warmth, curiosity, and touch. She still remembered their touch, rubbery and soft at the same time. She had wanted to be a Dancer when she was young. Now she became one each time she walked through a guest’s door. Inside, large creature, beautiful creature with jeweled skin. Not jeweled. Water dappled. Air smells fetid. Stagnant water. Her skin tingles, wondering how it will feel pressed up against the creature’s. It speaks—a rumble she does not understand. She steps forward, rubs her hand on its jeweled skin, feeling water, feeling coolness, feeling slime. Her entire body heats. The creature pulls away her clothes, and together they dive into the green algae, floating on the surface of the pool...

IV

And when she came to herself, she was standing on the rough-hewn steps, her clothing carelessly wrapped around her. She smelled rank—decayed water and something else, something even more foul. Her body felt heavy, tired, used, like it always did when these things ended. She lifted a hand, and found it coated with black slime. A shudder ran through her, and she ran the remaining distance to her apartment.

A beep echoed inside her net. Roddy. He wanted to see her humiliation. Odd he could think after all these years she could still be humiliated. Odd that she could. So many of the others shut off their skins as if their brains had been developed with an on-off switch. Hers must have malfunctioned. She always came to herself frightened and disgusted.

Her apartment door opened and she let herself inside, discarding her clothing, climbing into the tiny bathing cubicle, and setting the water temperature near scalding. Washing didn't make the feeling go away, but it did give her some of her dignity back. She never could remember what happened, but that never changed her feeling that what did happen was wrong.

The beep echoed again. She put on a different outfit and checked herself in the tiny mirror. No trace of the Ratooid remained.

On the surface.

She was about to let herself out when the door swung open. Roddy stood there, hands on his hips. "I've been summoning you," he said.

"I just finished. I was coming."

"You finished almost an hour ago."

He was watching, then. She wondered how many times he watched, and how it made him feel. It made her feel even more used.

"I don't know what couldn't wait until I got cleaned up."

"The Ratooid wants you back, later. It is bringing in a number of guests, and wants you for entertainment."

She couldn't suppress the shudder. The last time she had participated in an interspecies orgy, she had nearly died. Roddy knew that. He knew how she feared another encounter. Maybe he was still punishing her for glancing at the Minaran. Or maybe he wanted her to know how much he resented the inter-action with Candice, earlier.

"It's against regulations to perform with an alien twice in one day." She put one hand on the undecorated wall to anchor herself.

"You are in too much trouble to quote regulations to me." His jaw was set, his mouth in a sideways line. She didn't like the way his eyes glittered.

"The regulations protect the hotel." She kept her voice soft, but the muscles in her arm tensed. "Too many humans died from repeat contact. Sometimes the alien touch is like a slow-acting poison. I remember when Steve died—"

"I had the autodoc check out the Ratooids," Roddy said. "You'll be fine."

"No." Beth felt dizzy. She had never stood up to Roddy before—to anyone before. She wondered if the Minaran swimming in its little tank felt the same trapped anger that she felt so dangerously close to the surface. "No," she said again.

"This kind of action will allow me to hold your contract forever."

"That gives me a lot of incentive to work harder," she said, and pushed her way into the hall. The air felt cooler there. She strode toward the lobby, not looking back. She had no plan, no idea in mind. She just

had to walk.

It wasn't until she stopped in front of the Minaran that she realized she had had a plan after all. It swam up to her, examined her for a moment, then swam away and climbed up on the rocks, its back to her. She wanted to tell it she knew how it felt, trapped in there, on display, with no one to love it, no one to hold it, no one to understand its dreams—and its nightmares.

“Pretty, isn't it?”

The voice was soft, deep and human. Beth turned and looked up into the face of an older woman. Her hair had been painted in small geometric squares of black and silver, and her skin in complementary shades of brown and cream. She wore a rich purple dress that accented the bizarre geometry that some thought fashion.

“You brought it here.” Beth made herself look away. The Minaran had hunched into itself, as if it were frightened of the woman.

Assumptions. Human assumptions. Something the hotel warned them never to make.

“I figured this would be a good place to find it a home.” Her voice had the warmth of an Amphib sauna, but her silvery eyes glistened with chill. Beth saw, over the woman's shoulder, Roddy gesturing at her frantically. She ignored him.

“Wasn't it at home on Minar?”

The woman laughed. “So sweet and amusing.” She tucked a strand of hair behind Beth's ear. Beth shuddered. “I thought you were the one that liked touch.”

Beth stiffened. This was a guest. She couldn't contradict a guest. “I'm off duty,” she said.

The woman's eyes twinkled for the first time. “I thought staff never went off duty.” Her smile grew wider. “Would you like to please my little Minaran there? It looks quite lonely.”

Inside the cage? Trapped behind invisible walls? Beth pushed away, trying not to be rude, but her entire body had started to shake. She bobbed her head once, and walked away, turning her back on Roddy, whose face had turned purple with anger.

V

In her dream, she dived into the Minaran's tank. The water was cool against her skin. The creature rubbed its furry face against her breasts, seeking comfort, seeking milk. She pushed it away. She wanted friendship, but not touch.

She hated touch.

She swam underwater to the rock in the center of the pool. Then her fingers gripped the hard surface and she pulled herself up. Artificial sunlight caressed her body, warmed her, comforted her as she hadn't been comforted since she left Bountiful.

Except for John. Hands tentative, gaze soft. They hadn't known what they were doing. But the Lunar Base psychological staff had. They burst into the room, pulled two lonely teenagers apart and kept them separate forever. Since then, she had never touched another human being in love.

The Minaran pushed its face against her arm. Its muzzle was wet, brown eyes liquid. It chirped at her,

then dived back under the water. When it rose again, it was on the other side of the rock. Its loneliness radiated from it. The round eyes looked sad.

She rolled over on her stomach, covering herself as best she could. The Minaran used its fins to pull itself on the rock and cuddle next to her. She tried to push it away—it was too human, too cute. She didn't want touch, didn't want touch, didn't want—

Beth woke up, heart pounding, skin crawling. She put her head between her knees, made herself take deep breaths. Ever since she saw the Minaran, the nightmares were coming thick and fast. Opening a little door that would best remain closed.

Trapped. The little creature was trapped. No being deserved to be imprisoned, bartered, and sold. No being. No one. Not even her.

She eased the bed toward the ground so that she could climb off. Then she stood barefoot on the cold floor, hugging herself as she stared at the four bare walls surrounding her.

VI

The next morning, she made her way into the docks. Willis was there, working in a small cubicle, head bent over a small screen. When he saw her, he grinned and waved. She made herself wave back.

“Going to take me up on it?” he asked, voice jaunty, eyes filled with too much hope.

Beth made the smile stay on her face. “Someday,” she said. Usually she felt nothing when she spoke to him. This morning she felt a bit sad.

The large docking bay was over cool. Goose bumps rose on her arms. Marks from hundreds of shuttles covered the floor, and the bay doors had dents in them from accidents missing the path. Through the double protection windows, she could see a dozen ships orbiting around the hotel.

“Knew it wasn't my charm,” he said, careful not to touch her. Willis had tried to touch her once years ago, and she had screamed so loudly that Security arrived. They both got demerits for that incident.

“What can I do for you?”

“Your office,” she said, and made herself put her hand on the small of his back. His face flushed, but he still didn't touch her back. He had offered to buy her contract from the hotel, indenture her to him, and then throw the contract away once they were in space—no strings. Only they both knew that he wanted her love forever, and she had no love to give.

A soft female voice echoed in the bay. “Next arrival in thirty-six minutes. Next arrival...”

Willis closed the door on the sound. Beth reached up and shut off the interhotel com. Willis's flush left his skin and he tamped back something, probably willing his net to stop monitoring the conversation.

She hoped it worked. His net was twenty times more sophisticated than hers.

“Can you get a message off the hotel for me?” she asked.

He started, then sat down. “I didn't know you knew anyone away from here.”

She shrugged, unwilling to implicate him more than she had to. She handed him a small chip encased in plastic. It had taken her more than two hours to put the package together and to hide her steps.

“Instructions are on here,” she said. “Could you do it once you're out of hotel range?”

“Not leaving with me?” he asked, a little too seriously.

“After this,” she said, “I’m probably not leaving at all.”

VII

Every morning after that, she stood at the edge of the lobby, watching the Minaran swim. Its fur had grown coarser, and its eyes less bright. Its energy was flagging, and she began to wonder if she had taken action in time.

Sometimes, as she stood there, Candice came up beside her and stood, too. They never spoke, but Beth felt as if Candice wanted her to say something, to reconsider her decision. Roddy would catch Beth standing there and a few minutes later her net would beep, summoning her to darker and smellier parts of the hotel. She went, but came to herself with unusual bruises and once, a limp on her left side.

And she didn’t see the woman again, not until the day the Intergalactic Police showed up at the hotel. They had used the Security entrance, and tripped no alarms, used no buzzers. One minute the lobby was empty, the next it swarmed with uniformed creatures—most investigating the cubicle holding the Minaran.

Beth inched her way into the lobby and stood off to one side, knowing that she looked shoddy and hurt. Roddy was nowhere around, but Candice buzzed into the room, all efficiency and smiles. Only her shaking hands betrayed her fears.

“Officers?” Candice said, her voice carrying, warning the staff to keep the guests away.

A burly man grabbed a computer clip from a four-armed humanoid and approached Candice. “Ma’am. I need to see the manager on duty or the highest person in charge of the hotel.”

“Right now, that’s me,” she said. “The others are sleeping or attending a conference off surface. Would you like me to contact—”

“No.” His voice boomed in the small area. The Minaran had stopped swimming, and had retreated to its rock. Beth wished she could do the same. “I came to inform you that you and your hotel are in violation of Galactic Code 1.675: kidnapping, imprisonment, and trafficking of an endangered species.”

“The Minaran?” Candice asked. She turned toward the cubicle. Beth could see her struggle for control.

“We’re also looking for a human, Candice Arrowsmith.”

Candice straightened. “I’m Candice Arrowsmith.”

“Then you shouldn’t look so shocked, Ms. Arrowsmith. You will receive a commendation from Galactic Services for risking your job and contacting us. The Minaran will be returned to its rightful home, and the guilty parties will stand trial for this.”

Candice’s gaze caught Beth’s. She opened her mouth as if to speak to Beth. but then another officer called her away.

Beth watched for another moment, saluting the little Minaran mentally. “At least,” she whispered, “one of us is free.”

VIII

The Intergalactic Police took only three hours to remove the Minaran and clear the lobby. Hotel workers dismantled the cubicle, and by afternoon, the space housed a banquet room again. Beth watched through

a double-paned window as a shuttle took the woman who had kidnapped the Minaran away.

Maybe the little creature would go back to its family. Maybe it would find someone to love it, to hold it, to give it the comfort it needed...

A hand touched her shoulder. Beth jumped. She turned and saw Candice standing behind her, face ashen and worn with the stress of the day.

"My office," Candice said quietly.

Beth followed her in there. The normally neat office had papers strewn about Screens on all four walls bunked with waiting messages. In addition to the strain of talking with the officers, Candice's neural net was probably going crazy—she had all her superiors to answer to.

She closed the office door and slumped in her chair. Beth remained standing. She didn't know what Candice could do, but she would do something. Still, out there, the little Minaran was going home.

"I saw your face when they came in," Candice said. "What were you thinking?"

Beth knew better than to play dumb. She knew about the other things they had installed in her net, in the pain centers, things they promised to remove when her contract was up. "I knew they wouldn't believe me, even with all the evidence in front of them. That woman was rich, wasn't she? Rich enough to have the entire hotel at her feet."

"So you used my name."

Beth shrugged. "I figured you'd get in trouble otherwise, if someone else reported the violation. This is the first time I've ever seen the hotel party to such a big crime."

"And you have the right to place a moral judgment on the rest of us? Did this come from your experience on the penal ship?" Candice didn't move, but her words had the force of blows. Beth resisted the urge to duck.

"I know what it's like to be trapped, with no escape," Beth said. "Like that Minaran. There's no worse thing in the world."

Candice remained quiet for a long time, refusing to meet Beth's gaze. Beth continued to stand, unmoving, until Candice signaled that it was all right.

"You know I can never offer you a position of authority here again," Candice said.

Beth nodded. "I could never exercise authority," she said. She wouldn't punish or she would be too harsh. She would run in fear of some creatures and worship others. And she would never, ever, allow a creature to imprison another, no matter how much money was involved.

Candice sighed. "Leave me now," she said. "I have a mess to clean up."

IX

Beth spent the next three days in her room, leaving only to eat. She received no summons from Roddy, no word from Candice. The other staff would not speak to her, and even the robotic units kept their distance. If Candice had wanted a way to punish Beth, this was it.

Finally, someone knocked on her door. Beth grabbed a robe, and sent her bed up to the center of the room. Then she let the door slide open. Willis was there, bouncing from foot to foot, slapping papers

against his hand.

“Orders from above,” he said. “You’re supposed to come with me.”

Beth stared at him for a moment, heart hammering. The last time, they had dragged her away from John, still naked, kicking and screaming. The time before that, they had taken her off the planet with the other children, promising them that they would be taken care of. They were taken care of, all right. Analyzed, tried, viewed galaxy-wide, then sent on separate penal ships to parts unknown.

She hadn’t done anything illegal. The hotel had no right to send her away.

“Get dressed,” he said, “and pack up. It’s okay. I’ll turn my back.”

His smile faded as she still refused to move. “It’s okay,” he repeated. “They’re setting you free.”

He handed her the papers, and she saw her name all over them, with “completed” stamped across the pages. She separated them out, ran her fingers across them, wondering, wishing, it was all true.

“You need a proper net,” he said. “If you had a proper net, you wouldn’t have to look through the documentation. We’ll see what we can do once we’re away from the hotel. We got to remove those pain receptors, anyway. Now get dressed.”

He stepped outside and let the door close, true to his word. She packed numbly, touching the papers from time to time, feeling her hands shake.

When they had let her out of solitary—late one night when the other prisoners were asleep—she had refused to crawl out of her corner. She believed that once she put a foot on the real floor, the guards would beat her for trying to escape. She believed she wasn’t worthy of emerging. She believed she could live nowhere else than that clear plastic hole.

She glanced at the bed, at the empty walls, at the room that had been her prison since she arrived at the hotel. “I didn’t do it for me,” she whispered, knowing Candice couldn’t hear her.

But Candice didn’t have to hear. She knew. She spent her life in the job she had offered to Beth, reading aliens, understanding their needs, pleasing guests and making sure that even unspoken wishes were granted. The one time she had made a mistake—allowing that woman in with her Minaran prisoner to broker a sale—she had received an out. Beth had saved her. Beth had freed the Minaran.

She took one small case, and kept her papers clutched in her hand. Then she slid the door open.

Willis was still there, back to the door, shifting from foot to foot.

“Where’re we going?” Beth asked, the words almost sticking in her throat. She remembered the feeling of near-surface panic, and had to prevent herself from searching for guards.

He smiled and took the bag from her. “Wherever the lady wants.”

Wherever she wanted. The concept was beyond her. Once she had had dreams of seeing other places, other lives. But she had left those dreams on Bountiful, with the Dancers. Since then she had wanted nothing but to be left alone.

“Don’t worry,” Willis said quietly. “You’ll think of someplace you want to be.”

And for the first time since she arrived at the hotel, she favored someone with a real, heartfelt smile. Willis flushed, and started down the hall, keeping his physical distance, saying nothing, but walking beside her in

companionable silence.

Anyplace she wanted. Thank you, Candice, she thought, and wished that she had a functioning net so that she could send a true message. But Candice wouldn't want to hear. She wanted Beth to disappear in the chaos following the arrival of the Intergalactic Police. She wanted Beth gone so the incident would blow over and go away.

Beth gave a little skip. Anyplace she wanted. She gazed out of one of the hall portals at the darkness of space, a view she used to ignore. Anyplace she wanted. Or no place at all.

"I'm joining you, little guy," she whispered to the Minaran.

"We're free."