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MIDDLE GRADE**

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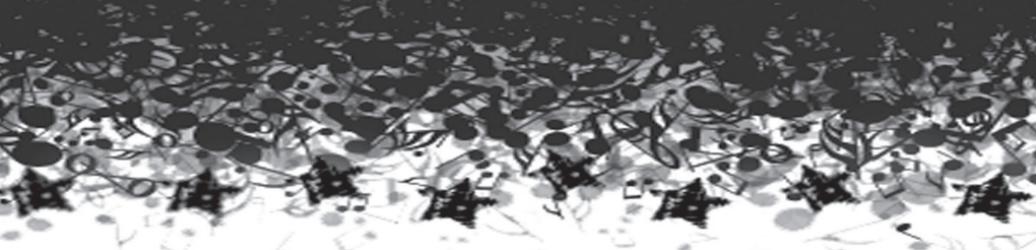
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DEDICATION

To Scott,
for believing in Kyra's, Marne's, and my songs.
All my love, always.

To Del,
for being an awesome "godmom" to Kyra and Marne.



PROLOGUE

A Failed Mission

One year ago ...

7 Messidor 896

We're back on the electrotram, and Daddy didn't even give me the window seat. He's sadder about this than I am. Daddy's face says he's expecting to get yelled at when we get home.

Mom will be very angry. I'll get sent to my room and they'll yell...and I'll be able to feel it upstairs. I guess Daddy needs the window seat. It's pretty outside, and he's leaning on the window, staring at the flat, dry grasses and orange sky fly by. Daddy showed me on his tablet that the electrotram can go almost 200 miles per hour. I also read that it makes almost no noise, which doesn't affect me, anyway.

At the hospital, I was in a room with a boy named Bran. His operation had worked, and he was just getting an adjustment because he got better. He was nice to me and wrote on a whiteboard with eraser markers and gave me a flower when the doctor came in to talk to my dad. I saw his face fall when the doctor said my surgery didn't work. But I already knew it didn't work. Nothing had changed; I still couldn't hear. I probably won't ever get to hear.

Bran was nice except for the part about the gelatin. I like gelatin. I only get it if I'm sick, and the hospital had blue gelatin, which tasted really good. He wrote me a note that said, "Do you know what that's made from?" He had

a weird smile and I shook my head no, so he wrote, "The hooves of dead eqcannuses."

I made a face and wrote on my napkin that he was a liar. He shook his head. Then I wrote, "How do they run without hooves?"

He answered, "They don't have to run; they're dead." I made a face at him, and he wrote some more. "If they get hurt or sick or get born wrong they send them to a slaughterhouse where they get killed and their hooves become gelatin." I asked what happened to the rest of their body and he shrugged and wrote, "Food for other things?" I made another face at him, but my gelatin treat was ruined.

The doctor's notes, which I made Dad show me on his tablet even though he didn't want me to see them, said I was permanently deformed. I think it is a good thing that I am not an eqcannus or I could be food for something else.

* * *

Her father gently tugged the corner of her journal and Kyra snapped it shut, looking up defensively. He held up both hands as she pointed to the cover, which read, "Diary." The corner of his mouth twitched in amusement as he tucked a stray lock of her light-brown hair behind her ear. "Big secrets at nine years old?" he signed to her.

She smiled back. Her dad had gotten them a book from the library about secret hand codes. It was in the children's section, but he had told her that, on his home planet, people who couldn't hear used similar signs. It became their own secret code. "Maybe. What are we going to tell Mom?" she signed back, and rested against his side as he put an arm around her shoulders.

"Don't worry about it, love. That's another sixteen hours away. Try to sleep."

"I slept a long time after the..." She paused, not knowing the sign for "operation," and pointed to her ears instead.

Her father shrugged; he didn't know it either. "I did not sleep. I waited the whole time to make sure you were all right."

Kyra raised one eyebrow. "Did you think I would hear less than nothing?"

Her father looked at her, his clear blue eyes still quite sad. "No. But all..." He paused and then spelled out "'o-p-e-r-a-t-i-o-n-s' are dangerous. You might not have woken up, or you could have been in a lot of pain or... I don't know."

She looked at her father for several minutes, trying to read between his expression and the gestures of his hands. Kyra sensed there was more there that she wasn't reading. Biting her lip, she scooted to her knees and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm all right," she signed with a big smile.

He laughed; she liked the face he made when he was laughing. He hugged her closely and kissed her forehead. "You are more than all right, my darling girl. You are amazing."

Chapter One

What Happens to the Unwanted?

One Year Later

Ten-year-old Kyra flinched as her mother tapped her head with a box. She turned so she could see what her mother was asking. Zalana held up the gelatin carton. “Want some?” her lips said. The girl looked over her shoulder into the casino room, where a wall-screen displayed six-legged *eqcannuses* running around a track. Napoleon’s Central Supermart boasted five levels of shopping for “all your needs.” There were three salons and four gambling lounges that sported wall-screens for various events, including the popular derbies for the carnivorous, hooped beasts. Inside this lounge, well-dressed men and women jumped around, waving slips of paper. Kyra’s eyes were drawn to the *eqcannuses* following a rabbit on a stick. Occasionally, a camera would catch a close-up of a white-spittled, toothy muzzle or a wild dark eye with an elliptical pupil.

Two side screens showed the news, one for the planet Cordelier and one for interstellar coverage. No one paid those much attention, despite the concerned faces of the newscasters as the scroll below them announced that an InterGalactic Travel cruise ship had been fired upon by United Foundation Consortium terrorists.

Her mother rapped her a little harder. “Kyra! Do you want this or not?”

She winced from the vibrations and knew her mother was impatient. She shook her head and lowered her eyes. It had been almost a year since she’d eaten gelatin. Not since the last operation to fix her hearing had failed. Not since Bran, the boy in the hospital, told her it was made from the hooves of *eqcannuses* who were not good enough to race.

Zalana threw up her hands and returned the box of gelatin to the shelf. She huffed down the aisle, and Kyra jogged to stay close. Her mother's mouth was moving, but she couldn't see it well enough to know what she was saying. Even if she were looking straight on, she probably wouldn't understand. Her mother usually spoke too fast for her to comprehend. Daddy had only recently begun teaching her to match lip movements with the hand signs he'd taught her before and with written words.

As her mother paused to compare the prices of vacuum-sealed vegetables, Kyra watched one of the small news screens off to the side of the jumping-people-filled gambling lounge. Three news speakers sat around a table, one of them a woman with the metallic hair and eyes of someone from the planet Caterbree, while the other two looked more like the humans on Cordelier. The man had dark-brown skin with white and grey hair in tight curls close to his face, while the other woman had pale skin, with dark hair and eyes. They were talking about the incident with the IGT cruise ship. Fortunately, reading had always been something Kyra was quite good at, so she easily followed the fast-moving, color-coded closed-caption scrolls at the bottom of the screen. They were talking about questioning the captured terrorists, and if they would be questioned on Cordelier, the planet that owned the cruise ship, or Caterbree, which governed the space they were captured in.

The Caterbreian woman had just asked whether the UFC was an "actual" threat to anyone when Kyra felt her baby sister, Alyce, start to fuss. The fussing felt like a liquid itch spreading across her neck, over her shoulders, and down into her hands, the places where she was always the most sensitive to sounds and vibration. Turning to look at Alyce, Kyra saw the one-year-old wrinkling her reddening face toward their mom, who was also turning away from

the screen. Mom's face, normally a golden-pink color, was pale, and the line between her eyebrows grew deeper as she rolled the carriage back and forth to calm Alyce.

Once the baby calmed, Zalana cut her gaze to Kyra and frowned more. "Come on. We need to meet your dad at the register and see what we've been assigned for water rations. It's getting late."

Kyra nodded. She wanted to ask her mother about the newscast, why it had made her so angry and scared. She didn't, though. She had a hard time talking with her mother, who wasn't learning the hand-signs very well, and even if her mother did know the signs, Kyra wasn't sure she knew how to put together a question that could match the ill feeling in her stomach. It was easier to just look at the colorful boxes and bags of sealed fruits, vegetables, and fresh grains against the perfectly white surroundings.

Her eyes fell on the slow-moving machines that moved up and down everything, always cleaning. Reaching her hand toward two nearby ones, she noticed the hum from the large machine on the floor felt different from that of the small machine scooting on the shelves around the products. She considered pausing to touch them the way her Dad had often had her touch pieces of machines he would take apart and put back together, but Mom had picked up her pace as she headed for the register. Kyra pulled her hand away from the machine and ran to catch up.

At the register, her dad was waving a sheet of green paper that listed their water rations for the week. He always took care of those while her mother shopped, because of the long lines. Even with Mom being a Starbard, an important job on many planets, the family had to wait in line like everyone else to purchase their water each week.

"Hghai!" she called to her dad as she waved back. Kyra ignored the pained look on her mother's face. Her dad had recently started to teach her how to speak properly,

but Kyra was having a much harder time with it than with reading, writing, or signing.

Kyra started to run to her father, but her mother's hand came down hard on her shoulder. She let out another noise, this time unintentionally, and looked up, pain summoning tears. Zalana gasped and let go quickly. "I'm sorry, my heart! I forgot... It's just you shouldn't run off!"

Pouting, Kyra waited for her dad, who wove through the crowds toward them, ration sheet clutched tightly. He wrapped one arm around her mother's waist and planted a kiss on her lips, then moved to Alyce and covered her little face with kisses until she laughed. Kyra liked it when Alyce laughed; the sensation it caused felt like bubbles tickling Kyra's skin.

Finally, Nicolas squatted in front of his older daughter and kissed both her cheeks. Looking at Zalana, he asked, "Mind if I kidnap her before the outdoor market ships close? It's the last day of the season—"

Her mother said something that looked like she was scolding her dad. Kyra could read his lips saying "I know, love" before smiling sweetly. Her mother's expression softened some, but not entirely. There was less of a harsh vibration in her response, but she still spoke too fast for Kyra to read much more than "money" and "foretell" and her sister's name. Kyra got the gist, though. It was her parents' usual argument. Well, her mother's usual argument. Alyce was born with the Starbard mark, and even though Kyra was too, her sister could hear, so the family needed to make sure money was spent on Alyce, since Alyce would have to carry on the line.

The argument always made Kyra feel sick in her stomach.

As he turned away from her mom, Kyra figured her dad felt almost the same from the expression on his face. But when he looked down at her, everything changed, and he

gave her a big smile. Twirling her around, he tickled under her arms as she spun. She couldn't help but giggle.

He grinned at her. "I like it when you laugh. You don't do it nearly enough," he said, speaking slowly and forming the words carefully.

She laughed again and blew a kiss. He picked her up, swung her around, and put her down. "You're getting heavy," he signed to her. "Not such a little girl anymore!"

She gave him a sweet smile and batted her eyelashes, which made him laugh.

"I have a surprise for you, Kyra, but we have to hurry." He took her hand and slowly jogged around the multicolored tents and streamers of the Darlinian Outdoor Market, which set up in the fields behind the Central Supermart for the first month of every season, just as the weather changed.

* * *

Nicolas pulled his longish black hair out of his face as the sharp wind whipped it around. Kyra looked up at him in his thin silk shirt and pulled her maroon coat more closely around her neck and shoulders. Still, the cold pins of the coming winter touched her skin. Her father hardly ever got chilled, even in the winter months when winds blew so hard they swayed the tall pillars holding up the electrotram's single rail. The first time she'd noticed the swaying, she'd asked him if the tram would fall, and he'd explained that the pillars were made of a metal that would hold up in the wind, and that the energy making the tram run also kept it from falling.

She wondered if there were an energy holding down the metal pegs that kept the market tents from flying away like giant birds or butterflies. The ropes strained in the wind, making the pegs and ropes look like they were holding down those flying monsters that had lived on Cordelier before people settled here, according to her history books.

Neither of Kyra's parents had ever taken her past the tents, in which merchants sold pretty clothes, food, and toys from other parts of the planet. Some tents even held puppet shows in the mornings.

As they left the colorful tents, she gasped as what looked like a small city of metal and glass buildings with wings spread out beyond the merchant tents and across the dry-grass field.

Her dad tapped her upper arm. "Those are starships, small ones," he told her.

She looked at him in confusion.

"Star. Ships. Your mom goes on bigger ones for some of her foretellings on other planets."

Kyra blinked as she digested this information. Other planets. Her dad was from another planet, one that was colder than their home planet, Cordelier. She knew her mom would often be gone for months for a foretelling on another planet. Slowly, she nodded. He nodded back and rubbed her arms. "We're meeting someone, from another planet far away. We need to hurry, though. They'll be leaving soon."

After nodding again, Kyra struggled to keep up with her dad's quick stride. He clasped her hand tightly, making it a little sore in his effort to keep her close.

Some of the starships opened up on one side, with tents or giant awnings covering part of the ship but revealing tables full of things inside, like one of the smaller shops inside the Supermart—only darker and definitely not pristine white. Other ships just had rows of tables with no covering or protection from the wind, and still others had small collections of tents set up outside. Metal coils and machine parts were openly displayed. Fresh fruit or meat or fish (some with thin clouds of hovering flies and smells that made Kyra wrinkle her nose) sat in baskets in other shops. And some of the places had mostly-closed flaps, keeping

people from seeing any merchandise. Many of the people selling things looked dirty, and some smelled almost as bad as the unusual fruits and meats. Most wore the trouser-blouse fashions Kyra saw on native Cordelierans (covered with heavy coats, of course); others wore jumpsuits or dresses and coats that looked like liquid metal—but dulled, as if in need of polishing. Some wore tattered woolen blankets and robes in layers; others looked like they wore the skins of animals!

More than half the people she saw selling things were the humans that lived across the majority of planets that she knew of, but she also recognized aliens with deep blue skin, and those who looked like they were part bird. Some beings that she'd never seen before had odd growths or shapes on their heads or faces, and pure silver eyes. A few of the shopkeepers—human *and* alien—leered at her as she passed. So did some of the other shoppers, nearly all of whom were human. Kyra remembered that since Cordelier, of all the populated planets, had the fewest livable areas, few aliens chose to settle there, even after humans had made it habitable.

She glanced up a few times; her father appeared nervous as he barreled straight ahead. After a moment, he broke into a jog, yanking her arm as she raced to keep up.

He called to a bearded human man, dressed in layers of wool blankets, who was exiting the starship they approached. The man raised an eyebrow at them and made a face Kyra couldn't read, but that made her father tighten his hand. She made a noise and wiggled free of his grip, rubbing her palm. He mouthed "Sorry" and "Stay close" and returned to talking with the man. The man seemed to mumble; she couldn't comprehend his lip movements. After a few seconds of this exchange, she grew bored and looked around.

Stacked by the starship, not very far from where her father was speaking to the man, were cages about as tall as Alyce, and each enclosed a single alien animal unlike anything Kyra had seen before. Granted, she didn't leave the house often, and she'd seen lots of things just on this short walk that she'd never seen before. However, these little creatures intrigued her. They stood on two legs, and many gripped the cage bars with two small hands. Black button eyes glistened like jewels from oval heads, wider than tall. Their skins were various shades of purple and lavender. Some had spindly appendages hanging limp from their necks. The setting sun cast shadows that made it hard to discern more details about these strange creatures, but one stood out from the rest.

Not purple or lavender, this creature was bright pink. Kyra glanced over her shoulder. Her dad was waiting for the man to check his currency card, so she slipped around the table and headed toward the stacked cages. Squatting by the pink thing, she curiously looked it in the eye.

It had no nose, but it did have a single slit below its eyes that could be a mouth. The pink flesh stretched smoothly across the entire head. Atop the head were antenna-type protrusions, small ones, with knobs on the top. They leaned slightly in her direction. Watching them move took her aback; it was like watching slugs crawl.

Its small hands, almost as small as her baby sister's hands, clenched the bars as it looked at her. Warily, she stuck out her forefinger to touch them. Upon feeling the soft skin, she quickly snatched her hand back, in case it should bite her. It blinked shiny black eyes the size of the small round stones between the plants in her family's back gardens. She winced again, wondering from where the lids came; she saw no wrinkles or folds.

~I won't bite you.~

Kyra gasped and stumbled onto her butt. Her mind swam with a hundred thousand thoughts, but one stuck out the most. *Did I just hear?!*

~Technically, no. Not in your species' sense of hearing, anyway.~

Kyra pressed her fist to her mouth and bit her knuckles. Her throat vibrated in reaction. What was this thing? Did it have magic? Could it make her hear?

~Now you've gone and done it,~ it said, sounding both angry and sad. ~I don't know what they'll do with me now that I've gone and scared you.~

Her dad was by her side, and she felt his raised voice as she looked up at him.

“—do you think you're doing? I told you to stay by me! You have no idea!”

Her dad's expression looked more scared than she'd ever seen it, but the shock of that didn't surpass that of possibly hearing. Gaping between her dad and the thing, she began to sign rapidly: “Can hear! The thing talked to me! I can hear it!”

~I *told* you, it's not really hearing. You're just predisposed to telepathy.~

“Look.” Her father helped her up, brushing the yellow grass and dirt off the back of her coat and pink trousers. “Maybe this isn't such a good idea... Let's go, Kyra.”

She shook her head. Something told her that this thing, like all of them, was scared. They all got scared when the other man came over with her dad. She pointed at the pink thing again and tugged on her ear. It looked from her, to her father, and to the bearded man. It didn't want to go with the bearded man.

“Kyra, sweetheart...” her father began, glancing at the thing as well.

Biting her lip, she signed, “Ask him what happens to these things. Where does he take them? Where do they come from? They’re scared of him.”

Her dad frowned but spoke to the man in mumbles.

~They’re speaking Kurduxtian. You probably don’t know it,~ the thing said. Kyra looked back at it, heart pounding as her mind jumped to *eqcannuses* and gelatin.

Her father tapped her arm. “They just keep going around to different planets until they all find homes.”

Kyra frowned and signed, “What if they do not find homes on any planet?”

Her father opened his mouth and closed it, then shrugged without meeting her eyes. Kyra folded her arms impatiently. He shrugged again.

~He knows. So do you. He just doesn’t want to tell you.~ Its “voice” carried feeling—anger, sadness, and other emotions Kyra recognized but hadn’t names for.

Tightening her lips, she pointed to the thing again. She signed, “You brought me here to see if I could hear them, correct? I can hear that one. It can help me...so Mom is not so...so Mom likes me more.”

Her father lowered his eyes. “Your mother loves you and you know it,” he signed emphatically. Kyra didn’t budge. He turned back to the man, and they mumbled some more as she squatted next to the thing.

“What’s your name?” she signed.

~Marne,~ it said. ~And you can just think what you want me to know.~ It leaned toward her while its antennae turned toward where her father and the man were speaking with big gestures.

~Do you know what they’re saying?~ she tried to think at it.

~They’re negotiating my price.~

She paused and then asked her next question. ~What are you?~

She couldn't see any pupils but she got the distinct feeling it had turned its eyes upon her. ~I'm a he, in your language, not an *it* or a *thing*, first off. And I'm a Naratsset.~

~Oh. He. Sorry. Naratsset... Are you from a different planet?~

~Why? Are there Naratssets on this planet?~

She frowned. He "sounded"...something she wasn't familiar with. ~Well, you're here on this planet. You could be from one of the countries I haven't been in, yet. There's a lot of those.~

He blinked again and shook his head a little. ~Yes, I'm from another planet. Natarasq is about 500,000 light-years away from here.~

~Light-years?~

~The distance light can travel in a year? Well, not a year *here* on this planet, but wherever a year is on whatever planet the term originated from...which is a long way away.~

~Oh.~ Kyra wanted to ask Marne several more questions, but her father brushed her shoulder again. She looked up to read his lips.

"He's yours. Let's go before your mother starts to worry."

Kyra smiled, feeling her throat vibrate with her happiness. Marne looked at her oddly. The bearded man moved the cages, picked up Marne's, and handed it to Nicolas.

"Do we have to keep him in the cage? He doesn't like it," Kyra signed.

"At least until we get home," he replied, looking at the Naratsset warily as they walked back through the market, where people were closing starship doors and tent flaps. The lights dimmed, making the walk even darker as the sun set.

"His name is..." She paused, not sure how to spell it in signs to sign.

"Marne," the pink alien said. She still "heard" it, but the slit of his mouth fluttered this time.

Her father nearly dropped the cage. Kyra smiled. “None of them said anything while we were there!” He said defensively “We’re not allowed.”

“Oh,” he replied, looking between Marne and Kyra, who could hardly tear her eyes from the alien to watch her father’s lips. “I see.”

Kyra giggled and her father smiled. She signed, “I can hear him even though he says I am not hearing... What is it?”

“Telepathy. All Naratssets are telepathic...and Kyra has a predisposition for it,” Marne said.

Her dad blinked at Marne and looked between him and Kyra once more. “Naratsset,” he muttered.

“Ratsi is what the traders call us...as an insult.”

Kyra frowned. “That’s mean!” she signed.

Marne shrugged.

“Please, don’t go into my mind like that,” her father said, face looking strained and eyes narrowed at Marne. “And perhaps we should cut this conversation short. I don’t think your mother... She’ll need...to talk about this.”

Kyra’s smile faded as she looked at the little thing. ~Mom’s going to be angry,~ she explained.

Marne just nodded his head and sat down in his small cage. Kyra’s stomach tightened...and she thought she felt his worry as well. He didn’t say it, but she sensed he was afraid to go back. She didn’t blame him, though she feared he wouldn’t like it with her much more.

~I think I’ll like you,~ came his thought.

She was about to reply, but then cringed as she felt her mother’s furious yelling wash over her. Covering her shoulders with her hands, since that seemed to dull the discomfort, she ducked behind her father.

Marne had turned around in his cage and looked at her with his black stone eyes. ~I think we’ll be all right, though, really.~ At least Marne sounded more confident than she felt.

