

LOVESTORY

James Patrick Kelly

A DF Books NERDs Release

Copyright (C)1998 by James Patrick Kelly

First published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, June 1998

One

Mam should have guessed something was wrong as soon as the father entered the nursery. His ears were slanted back, his ruby fur fluffed. He smelled as sad as a cracked egg. But Mam ignored him, skimming her reading finger down the leaf of her lovestory. It was about a family just like theirs, except that they lived in a big house in the city with a pool in every room and lots of robot servants. That family loved one another, but bad people kept trying to drive them apart.

? How's the scrap tonight?? The father shut the door behind him as if it were made of glass.

It was then that Mam realized the mother wasn't with him. ? What is it?? She bent the corner of the leaf back to mark her place. The father and mother always visited together. She loosened her grip on the lovestory and it rewound into its watertight case.

? Wa-wa, it's the lucky father! The scrap tumbled out of the dark corner where she had been hiding and hugged the father's legs. ? Luck always, Pa-pa- *pa* !? The father staggered, almost toppled onto the damp, spongy rug, but then caught himself. The scrap had been running wild all night, talking back to the jokestory she was only half-watching on the tell, choreographing battles with her mechanical ants, making up nonsense songs, trying to crawl in and out of Mam's pouch for no good reason. It was almost dawn and the scrap was still skittering around the nursery like a loose button.

? Oh, when the father swims near,? sang the scrap, ? and he comes up for air, all the families cheer.?

He reached down, scooped her into his arms and smoothed her silky brown fur, which was wet where it had touched the floor. It had only been in the last month that the scrap had let anyone but Mam hold her. Now she happily licked the father's face.

? Who's been teaching you rhyme?? he said. ? Your mam?? He laughed then, but his wide, yellow eyes were empty.

? Mam is fat and Mam is slow. If I'm a brat, well, she don't know.?

? Hush, little scrap,? said the father. ? Your tongue is so long we might have to cut some off.? He snipped two fingers at her.

? Eeep!? The scrap wriggled in his arms and he set her down. She scrambled across the room to Mam's settle and would've wormed into her pouch, but Mam was in no mood and cuffed her lightly away. The scrap was almost a tween, too old for such clowning. Soon it would be time for them to part; she was giving Mam stretch marks.

? Silmien, what *is* it?? Mam waved at the tell to turn the scrap's annoying jokestory off. ? Something has happened.?

The father stiffened when she named him. This was no longer idle family chatter; by saying his name, she had made a truth claim on her mate. For a moment, she thought he might not answer, as was his right. But whatever it was, he must have wanted to tell her or why else had he come to them?

? It's Valun,? he said. ? She's gone.?

? Gone?? said Mam. ? Where??

? To Pelotto.? There was an angry stink to the father now. ? She went to Pelotto, to live with the aliens. ?

? Pelotto?? Mam was confused. ? But the scrap is almost weaned.?

? Obviously,? said the father. ? She knows that.?

Mam was confused. If she knew, then how could she leave? ? What about her patients??

? Gone?? The scrap whimpered. ? Mother gone, mother??

? Who will give the scrap her name?? Mam reached an arm around the little one to comfort her. ? And it's time to quicken the new baby. The mother, Valun and I have to....? She paused, uneasy talking about birthing with the father. ? What about the baby?? she said weakly.

? Don't you understand? She has left us.? The father's anger was not only in his scent, but spilled over into his words. ? You. Me. She's has left the family. She's an out, now. Or maybe the aliens are her family.?

Mam rose from her settle. She felt as if she were hefting a great weight; if she did not bear the load, the whole house might collapse around them. ? This is my fault,? she said. ? She does not trust me to carry the baby, nurse it into a scrap.?

? It's not you!? the father shouted. ? It's *her* .? The scrap shrank from the crack of his voice. ? We're still here, aren't we? Where is she??

Mam stooped to let the scrap wriggle into the pouch.

? She thinks I'm stupid,? said Mam. She felt the moisture in the rug creep between her toes. ? She has nothing to say to me anymore.?

? That's not true.?

? I heard her tell you. And that all I read are lovestories.?

The father squished across the room to her then, and she let him stroke the short fur on her foreleg. She knew he meant to comfort, but this unaccustomed closeness felt like more weight that she must bear. ? This has gone very badly,? he said. He brought his face up to hers. ? I'm sorry. It's probably *my* fault that she's gone.? He smelled as sincere as newly-split wood and Mam remembered when she had fallen in love with them, back at the gardens. Then it was only Valun and Silmien and her. ? Something I did, or didn't do. Maybe we should've stayed in the city, I don't know. It has nothing to do with you, though. Or the scrap.?

? But what will happen to the new baby?? Mam said. Her voice sounded very small, even to her.

? I love you, Mam.? The father pricked his ears forward, giving her complete attention. ? Maybe Valun loves you too, in her way. But I don't think you and I will ever see that baby.?

Mam felt the scrap shiver inside her.

The father lingered for a few moments more, although everything important had been said. Mam coaxed the scrap out of hiding and she slipped her head from the pouch. She stared at the father as he rubbed the fluff around her nose, saying nothing. The scrap had just started her tween scents, another sign that it was time for them to part; she gave off the thin, bright smell of fear, sharp as a razor. The father made warbling sounds and her edge dulled a little. Then he licked the side of her face. He straightened and took Mam by surprise when he gave her an abrupt good-day lick, too. ? I'm sorry, Mam,? he said, and then he was gone.

Mam collapsed onto her settle. The heated cushion was blood hot, but did little to ease the chill that gripped her neck. For a moment she sat, brittle as ice, unsure what to do. The next ten minutes without Valun were harder to face than the next ten years. In ten years they'd probably be dead, Mam and the father and the mother, their story forgotten. But just now Valun's absence was a hole in Mam's life that was too wide to cross over. Then the scrap stirred restlessly against her.

? Time to sleep,? Mam said, tugging at the scrap's left ear. ? Almost dawn.? No matter what happened, she was still this one's mam.

The scrap shook her head. ? Not tired not.?

? You want the sun to scratch your eyes out?? Mam rippled her stomach muscles, squeezing her from the pouch like a seed. The scrap mewled and then slopped across the wet rug as if she had no bones. ? You pick up your things and get ready.? Mam gave the scrap a nudge with her foot. She might have indulged the little one; after all, the scrap had just lost her mother. But then Mam had just lost her mate and there was nobody to indulge her. ? Make sure you clear all your projects off the tell.?

The scrap formed up her ants and marched the little robots back into the drawer of her settle. She ejected her ID from the tell, flipped it onto the tangle of ants and shut the drawer. She sorted the pillows she had formed into a nest. She turned off the pump that circulated water through her rug, dove into the nursery's shallow egg-shaped pool at the narrow end and immediately slid out at the wide end. ? Does this mean I can't go to the gardens?? She shook the water from her fur.

? Of course not. This has nothing to do with growing up. You'll be a tween soon, too big for the pouch.?

? But what about my name??

? The father will give you one. I'll help him.?

? Won't be the same.?

? No.? Mam hesitated. ? But it will be enough.?

The scrap smoothed the fur flat against her chest. She was almost two and her coat had begun to turn the color of her mother's: blood red, deepening like a sunset. ? They're the parents,? she said. ? They were supposed to take care of us.?

Mam tried not to resent her. The scrap *had* been taken care of. She was about to leave the family, go off to the gardens to live. She'd fall in love with a father and a mam and start a new family. It was Mam who had not been taken care of, Mam and the new baby. ? They did their best.?

? I wish she was dead,? said the scrap. ? Dead, red, spread on a bed.? She was careful as she wriggled into Mam's pouch. ? Do you think she'll come to visit me at the gardens??

? I don't know.? Mam realized then that she didn't know anything about Valun. The mother had always been restless, yes, and being a doctor in this little nowhere had only made things worse. But how could aliens be more important than the family? ? But I'll come visit. ?

? You have to, you.? said the scrap. ? You're my old, fat mam. ?

? That's right.? Mam tickled her behind the ears. ? And I will never leave you.? Although she knew that the scrap would leave her soon enough, just like she had left her mam.

Mam got up to darken the windows against the rising sun. It was a chore getting around; the scrap bobbed heavily against her belly as she crossed the room. In the last few days, the scrap had begun to doze off on her own settle; Mam was once again getting used to the luxury of an uninterrupted day's sleep. But it felt right to carry the little one just now, to keep her close.

Mam waddled back to her settle through the soothing gloom. She wasn't tired and with the scrap in the pouch, it was hard to find a comfortable position. The scrap was fidgety too. Mam wondered whether the father was sleeping and decided he was probably not. He'd be making a story about what had happened, trying to understand. And the mother? No, Valun wasn't a mother any more. She was an out. Mam focused on the gurgle of water in the pool and tried to let the sound quench her thoughts.

There were never aliens in the kinds of lovestories Mam liked to read. Fathers and mothers might run off to be an out for a while, but everyone would be so unhappy that they'd come back at the end. Of course, mams never ran. Or else one of the three mates might die and the others would go to the city and try to find a good out to take their place.

She started when the scrap's lips brushed the tender skin near her nipple. At first she thought it was an accident, but then she felt it again, tentative but clearly deliberate, a question posed as loving touch. Her first impulse was to push her away; the scrap had fed that afternoon. But as the nubbly little tongue probed the edges of her aureole, Mam knew that it wasn't hunger that the scrap sought to ease. It was grief. Mam shivered and the underfur on her neck bristled. Had the scrap tried to nurse out of turn on any other day, Mam would certainly have shaken her from the pouch. But this day they had each been wounded; this feeding would ease not only the scrap's pain but Mam's as well. It was something they could do for each other-maybe the only thing. With a twitch of excitement, she felt her milk letting down. It wasn't much, it wasn't time, but the scrap had a such warm, clever mouth.

? Oh,? said Mam. ? *Oh* .?

The father had told her once that, when she nursed, chemicals flooded her brain and seeped into her milk. He said this was how Mam was making the scrap into who she was. He told her the names of all the chemicals, but she had forgotten them. Mam had a simpler explanation. She was a mam, which meant that her emotions were much bigger than she was, so they spilled onto whoever was nearest. The mother always used to say that she was a different person when she was with Mam, because of her smell. Even the father relaxed when the family came together. But it was the scrap Mam was closest to, into whom she had most often poured the overflow of feelings. Now, as they bonded for one of the last times, perhaps *the* last time, Mam was filled with ecstasy and regret. Of all the pleasure the scrap had given her, this was the most carnal. When she sucked, she made a wet, little sound, between a squeak and a click, that made the top of Mam's head tingle. Mam enfolded her bulging pouch with both arms and shifted the scrap slightly so that she came at the nipple from a different angle. She could smell the bloom of her own excitement, heady as wine, thick as mud. She thought she might scream-but what would the father say if he heard her through the walls? He would not understand why she was taking pleasure with the scrap on this night of all nights. He would ... not ... understand. When the urgent sound finally welled up from the deepest part of her, she closed her throat and strangled it. ? My ... little,? she gasped, and it was as if

Valun had never gone, the aliens had never come to plague the families with their wicked wisdom. ? My little ... *scrap* .?

The weight lifted from her and for a brief, never-ending moment, she felt as light as air.

Two

Silmien was proud of his *scrap*. ? Tevul,? he corrected himself, cupping the name he had given her on his tongue. He was so proud that losing her mother almost didn't matter anymore. He spotted her and some of her friends splashing in the pond across the bone garden. She was so quick, so carefree, so beautiful in the chill, blue light of the mothermoon.

? What?? Mam had stopped to smell the sweetbind that wound through the skeleton of someone's long dead ancestor; she hurried over to him. ? What??

He pointed. Mam was already nearsighted from spending so much time indoors, the curse of the nursery. Distance seemed to confuse her. ? She hasn't seen us yet,? he said.

? The *scrap*??

? The tween,? said Silmien. ? Tevul.?

Silmien was proud of Mam, too. She had been a good parent, considering everything that had happened. After all, Tevul was their firstborn. Silmien knew just how lonely the long rainy season had been for Mam, especially since she didn't exactly understand about Valun and the aliens.

But that wasn't right. Silmien was always surprised at how much Mam understood, even though she did not follow the news or query the tell. She engaged the world by means that were mysterious to him. If she did not always reach for the complex, her grasp of essentials was firm. Silmien drew strength from her trust in him-and her patience. Even though it was a burden on her not to be nursing a *scrap*, she had never once nagged him to start looking for a mother to take Valun's place.

? I'm glad you came tonight, Mam.? He wanted to put an arm around her, but he knew that would make her uncomfortable. She was a mam, not a mother. Instead he stooped and picked a pink buttonbright and offered it to her. She accepted it solemnly and tucked it behind her ear.

There was something about visiting the gardens that revived Silmien, burned troubles away like morning mist. It was not only nostalgia for that simple time when Valun had chosen him and he had found Mam. It was the scent of the flowers and ponds, of mulch and moss, of the golden musk of old parents, the sharp, hormone-laden perfume of tweens and the round, honest stink of chickens. It was the fathermoon chasing the mothermoon across an enormous sky, the family obelisks pointing like fingers toward the stars. Valun always used to tease him about being such a romantic, but wasn't that a father's job, to dream, to give shape to the mud? The garden was the place where families began and ended, where futures were spun, lives honored.

? Over here!?! Tevul had finally caught sight of them. ? Come meet my friends!?

Silmien waved back. ? More introductions,? he whispered to Mam. ? I don't recognize a single face in this batch.? It was only his second visit of the dry season, but he was already having trouble keeping them all straight. Although he was glad Tevul was popular, he supposed he resented these fortunate tweens for stealing his little *scrap* away from him. Tevul, he reminded himself again, Tevul. At home, he and Mam still called her *the scrap*. ? Come along, Mam. Just a long smile and short bow and we'll have her to ourselves.?

? Not me,? said Mam. ? You.?

Silmien blinked in surprise. There was that odd smell again, a dusty staleness, like the corner of an empty closet. If Valun had been here, she would have known immediately what to do, but then if she were here, Mam wouldn't be. ? Nonsense,? said Silmien. ? We're her family.?

Mam crouched abruptly, making herself as small as possible. ? Doesn't matter.? She smoothed her sagging pouch to her belly self-consciously.

? Why did you come then,? said Silmien, ? if not to see Tevul??

? You wanted me.?

? Mam, the scrap wants you too.?

? I'm not here.? Mam was staring at her feet.

They had to stop arguing then, because a clutch of old parents entered the garden, giggling and stroking the bones. One, a father with thin, cement-colored fur, noticed the buttonbright behind Mam's ear and bent to pick one for himself. His companions teased him good-naturedly about acting his age. Then a shriveled mam popped one of the flowers into her mouth, chewed a few times and spat it at the father. Everyone laughed except Silmien and Mam. Ordinarily, he enjoyed the loopy antics of the old, but now he chafed at the interruption.

? I'll bring Tevul to you,? he whispered to Mam. ? Is that what you want??

She made no reply. She curled her long toes into the damp soil as if she were growing roots.

Silmien grunted and left her. Mam was not getting any easier to live with. She was moody and stubborn and often reeked of self-loathing. Yet he had stuck by her, given her every consideration. Not once, since he had first told her about Valun, had he let his true feelings show. It struck him that he ought to be proud of himself, too. It was small comfort, but without a mate to share his life, all he had were glimmers and wisps.

? Pa-pa- *pa* .? Tevul hauled herself partly out of the pond and perched on the grassy bank. ? My father, Silmien.? Her glistening coat clung to her body, making her as streamlined as a rocket. She must have grown four or five centimeters since the solstice. ? Here is Mika. Tilantree. Kujalla. Karmi. Jotan. And Putket.? Tevul indicated each of her friends by splashing with her foot in their direction. Karmi and Jotan and Putket were standing in the shallows and acknowledged him with polite but not particularly warm bows. Kujalla-or was it Tilantree?-was treading water in the deep; she just stared at him. Only Mika clambered up the bank of the pond to greet him properly.

? Silmien,? said Mika as they crossed hands. ? It is truly an honor to meet you.?

? It is you who honor me,? Silmien murmured. The tween's effusiveness embarrassed him.

? Tevul tells us that you write stories.?

Silmien shot Tevul a glance; she returned his gaze innocently. ? I write many things,? he said. ? Mostly histories.?

? Lovestories?? said Mika.

Tilantree's head disappeared beneath the surface of the pond.

? I wouldn't call them lovestories, exactly,? Silmien said. ? I don't like sentiment. But I do write about families sometimes, yes.?

Tilantree surfaced abruptly, splashing about and making rude, blustery sounds. The three standing tweens smirked at her.

? Silmien has been on the tell,? said Tevul. ? Write, bright, show me the light.?

? My mam was on the tell last year,? said one of the standing tweens, ? and she's a stupid old log.?

? Even aliens get on the tell now,? said another.

? Have you written any lovestories about aliens?? Mika was smirking too.

With a sick lurch, Silmien realized what was going on. The tweens were making fun of him-and Tevul. Only his trusting little scrap didn't get it. He wondered if the reason she was always in the middle of a crowd was not because she was popular, but because she was a freak.

? Can't write lovestories about aliens.? Tilantree rolled onto her back.

? Why not?? said Tevul.

She did not reply. Instead, she sucked in a mouthful of pond water and then spat it straight up in the air. The three standing tweens spoke for her.

? Their mothers are mams.?

? *Perverts* .?

? Two, few, haven't a clue. Isn't that right, Tevul??

The air was suddenly vinegary with tween scorn. Tevul seemed taken aback by the turn of the conversation. She drew her knees to her chest and looked to Silmien, as if he could control things here in the gardens the way he had at home.

? No,? he said, coming around the pond to Tevul. ? I haven't written about the aliens yet.? His voice rose from the deepest part of him. ? But I've thought a lot about them.? He could feel his scent glands swell with anger and imagined his stink sticking its claw into them. ? Unlike you, Tilantree.? He singled out the floating tween as the leader of this cruel little gang. ? Maybe you should try it.? He reached Tevul, tugged her to her feet and pulled her to him. ? You see, they're our future. They're calling us to grow up and join the universe, all of us, tweens and families and outs and the old. If they really are perverts as you say, then that's what we will be, someday. I suppose that's a big thought to fit into a small mind.? He looked down at his scrap. ? What do you say, Tevul??

? I don't know what you're talking about.? Her eyes were huge as the mothermoon.

? Then maybe we should discuss this further.? He bowed to the others. ? Luck always.? He nudged Tevul toward the bone garden.

Silmien heard the tweens snickering behind him. Tevul heard it too; her gait stiffened, as if she had sand in her joints. He wondered if the next time he visited her, she might be like them. Tilantree and her friends had the next four years to twist his scrap to their shallow thinking. The family had made her a tween, but the garden would make her into a mother. Silmien felt removed from himself as they passed the wall built of skulls that marked the boundary of the bone garden. No Tevul. No Valun. Mam a stranger. He could

not believe that he had defended the aliens to the tweens. That was Valun talking, not him. He hated the aliens for luring her away from him. It was almost as if they had seduced her. He shivered; maybe they *were* perverted. Besides, he must have sounded the pompous fool. Who was he to be speaking of small minds? He was as ordinary as a spoon.

? Well?? said Tevul.

? Well what??

? Pa- *pa* , you embarrassed me, pa.?

He sighed. ? I suppose I did.?

? Is this the way you're going to be?? said Tevul. ? Because if it is....?

? No, I'll mind.? He licked two fingers and rubbed them on her cheekbone. ? But are you sure they're your friends??

? *Silmien* !?

? I just thought I'd ask.?

? If they're not, it's your fault.? She skipped ahead down the path and then turned on him, blocking his way. ? Why do you always have to bring Mam??

? What do you mean, always?? He looked over her shoulder. The old parents had doddered off, but Mam had not moved. Even though she was still a good thirty meters away, he lowered his voice. ? It's only been three times and she wanted to see you.?

? Why can't she wait until I come home for a visit? Besides, I don't have anything to say to her. What am I supposed to do, play a game of fish and snakes? Climb into her fruity old pouch? I'm not a scrap anymore!?

? She's unhappy, Tevul. She feels unwanted, useless.?

? Don't use *my* name, because there's nothing *I* can do about that.? Tevul's ears went flat against her head. ? It's strange, you two here together. When the others have visitors, they get their mothers and fathers. She's not my mother.?

? No,? he said, ? she's not.?

Tevul's stern facade crumbled then and she broke down, quietly but completely, just as her mother had on the night she had left him. And he hadn't seen it coming; Silmien cursed himself for having stones up his nose and knotholes for eyes. Tevul's body was wracked by sobs and she keened into his chest so that Mam wouldn't hear. ? They say such mean things. They say that Mam picked my name, not you, and that she named me after a character in a stupid lovestory. I try to joke along with them so they won't make a joke of me, but then they start in about my mother, they say that because she's a doctor ... that the aliens....? She turned a scared face up to him, her scent was bitter and smoky. ? What happened to the baby, pa-pa? Is he still in her? I want to *know* . It's not fair that I never got to see you pull him from mother and bring him to Mam, that's what's supposed to happen, isn't it, not all the disgusting things they keep saying, and I'm supposed to be there, only I wasn't because *she* went to the aliens, it's not *my* fault, I'm tired of being different, I want to be the same, in a real family like Tilantree, the same.? She caught her breath, sniffed and then rubbed her face into his stubby fur on his chest. ? No blame, no shame,? she said. ? The same.? She shuddered, and the hysterics passed, as cleanly as a summer squall.

He bent down and licked the top of her head. ? Are you unhappy here, my beautiful little Tevul??

She thought about it, then sniffed and straightened her dignity. ? This is the world,? she said. ? There is nowhere else.?

The orange fathermoon was up now, resuming his futile chase of the mothermoon. It was the brightest part of the night, when the two parent moons and their billion star scraps cast a light like spilled milk. A stirring along a hedge of bunchbead, where a farmbot was harvesting the dangling clusters of fruit, distracted Silmien momentarily.

? I am proud of you,? he said. It wasn't what he wanted to say, but he couldn't think of anything better. When the robot passed them, he dipped into its hopper, pulled out a handful of bunchbead and offered them to Tevul. She took some and smiled. Silence slid between them. Somewhere in the distance, the chickens were singing.

Tevul watched the stars as she ate. ? Where is Mars?? she said at last.

? It's too far away.? Silmien looked up. ? We can't see it,?

? I know that, but where is it??

? Kadut showed me their star last week.? He came up behind her and, resting his elbow on her shoulder, pointed so that she could sight along his forearm. ? It's in The Mask, there.?

? Why did they come, the aliens??

? They want to help, I guess. That's what they say.?

? I have to get back soon,? said Tevul. ? Let's go see Mam.?

Tevul was very polite to Mam and Silmien could see that the visit cheered Mam up. Mam insisted on waiting while Silmien walked Tevul back to her burrow, but he finally understood that this was what both of them wanted. Back at the burrow, Tevul showed him a lifestory she was working on. It was about Ollut, the scientist who had first identified estrophins, the hormones that determined which females became mothers and which mams. Silmien was impressed by Tevul's writing and how much she had absorbed from the teaching tells in just one season. She was quick, like her mother. Tevul promised to copy her working draft onto the tell, so he could follow along with her research. As he was getting ready to leave, her roommate Laivan came in. To his relief, Silmien remembered her name. They chatted briefly. Silmien was on his guard for any sign of mockery, but there wasn't any. Laivan seemed to like Tevul and, for her sake, tolerated his intrusion into their privacy.

? Luck always,? he said. ? To both of you.? And then he left.

It was only later that his anger caught up with him. Mam had fallen asleep, lulled by the whoosh of the go-to through the tunnels, so there was no one to notice when he began to wring his hands and squirm on his seat. First he was angry at himself, then Tilantree, then Tevul's teachers, then at himself again, until finally his outrage settled on Valun.

She had been the leader of their family. Where she jumped, they followed, even if they landed in mud. It had been her idea to move to the paddies, where the air was thick and the water tasted of the swamp. Farmers needed doctors, too, she said. She had been the one who healed the family's wounds as well, the one they all talked to. Yet when she left them, she wouldn't say exactly why she was going, only that there was something important she had to find out from the aliens. Valun had ripped his life apart, left him incomplete, but he had tried not to hurt her the way she had hurt him. Speakers from the tell had

interviewed him about Valun and about his life now. In all his statements, he had protected her. Her work with the aliens was important, he said, and he supported it, as all the families must. There were so many diseases to be cured, so much pain to be eased. It was an honor that she had been chosen. If he had followed a different path, it was because he was a different person, not a better one. He had done all this, he realized now, not because it was the right thing to do, but because he still loved her.

Only Silmien had not realized how much she had hurt Tevul. Valun hadn't visited the gardens, hadn't even copied a message to the tell. Silmien had long since decided that Valun left the family because she had been bored with him, and maybe he could understand that. But no mother ought to be bored with her own tween. For an hour, his thoughts were as blinding as the noonday sun.

Eventually, Silmien had to calm himself. Their stop was coming up and he'd have to rouse Mam soon. What was it Tevul had said? *This was the world*. What did he have to give to it? A new family? The truth was he couldn't imagine some poor out taking Valun's place. But life was too short, twenty years from pouch to bone garden. A new family then-and afterward, he'd give the world his story. He would need to get some distance from Valun; he could see that. But eventually he would write of how she had hurt him and Mam and Tevul. He would tell how he had borne the pain, like a mam carries a scrap. He paused, admiring the image. No, not a lovestory-the story of how he had suffered. Because of her.

Because of Valun and the aliens.

Three

Valun thought she could feel the baby swimming inside her. Impossible. The baby was no bigger than her thumb. He was blind and hairless and weak and brainless, or nearly so. Couldn't swim, didn't even know that he was alive.

The baby wasn't moving; she knew that the waves she felt were made by the muscles of her own uterus. The contractions weren't painful, more like the lurch of flying through turbulence. Only this was predictable turbulence, a storm on a schedule. The contractions were coming more frequently, despite her fierce concentration. It was what distressed her most about giving birth. Valun had gotten used to being in control, especially of her own body.

The humans had almost complete control of their bodies; it was their astonishing medicine that had drawn her to them. They had escaped from nature, vanquished diseases, stretched life spans to the brink of immortality. They managed their emotions, commanded their thoughts, summoned inspiration at will. And on those rare occasions when they reproduced ... well, they could play their genome like a flute. There were no stupid humans, no wasted space in their population. No mother was inconvenienced by labor...

Another lurch. Too soon for another contraction. Then she realized that it was the go-to decelerating. Coming to a station. The readout in the front bulkhead lit up. Uskoon. Less than half an hour until she was home. Plenty of time.

She didn't want to be traveling while she was in labor, but this was the only way to have the baby on her terms. Mothers were supposed to give birth in the nursery with their happy families gathered around them. She would be in the nursery soon enough, only she doubted that the family would be all that happy to see her. Mam would be vastly relieved-maybe that was within sight of happiness. Silmien, however, would be furious that she was forcing this baby on him and then leaving him to care for it with Mam. He'd strike the martyr's pose, maybe even write about it. The scrap? She probably hated Valun. Valun would've hated *her* mother, had she done something like this when she was a tween. Tweens' deepest feelings were for themselves; she'd grow out of it. Valun had heard that he had named her Tevul, after the heroine of that story he liked so much. Was it *Drinking the Rain*? No, the other one. But then Silmien

liked too many stories too much. The world was not a story.

Thinking about them made Valun feel like the loneliest person in the universe. Part of her desperately wanted to go back to stay. She longed to sleep and eat and breathe again with her family. But not to talk; if she told them what she had learned it might destroy them. Living with the humans had not made her happy at all. Indeed, most of the outs in Pelotto were miserable.

Valun now knew what she had only suspected when she left the family. The world they had been born into was a lie. There was no reason for the laws of birth order. No reason why she or Silmien or Mam or their little scraps should have such brutally short lifespans. Mams could be mothers, mothers could nurse, outs could have babies.

No reason why there had to be families at all.

Of course, the humans did not advocate change. They offered only information; it was up to each intelligent species to decide how to use it. Except their message was corrosive as acid. Everything was negotiable. Reality was a decision-and no one here was making it.

This idea had infected Valun's imagination. Even if all the families took from the humans was the ability to prolong lives, the rigid structure of their culture must surely crumble. She wasn't sure what would come after, or who. Perhaps those people-those outs-would be happy. But how could anyone alive today bear to watch the families collapse? Valun didn't want to inflict that future on Silmien and Mam and the scrap, so she had exercised her right of silence and cut them off entirely. If they wanted to learn what she had, they would have to choose, as she had chosen. But her silence had isolated Valun from the ones she loved most. She belonged to no family now, only to herself. She was alone, but it was not what she had wanted. Alone. She drifted alone on the whisper of the go-to.

And dreamed of smells. The sweetness of rain brushing her nose like a lace veil. The honeycup he had put behind her ear; he loved to pick flowers and give them to her. The velvet scent of grass crushed beneath the weight of warm bodies. It had been so long ago that they had made this baby-much more than the traditional two years-that she had forgotten where it happened. Under the moons, out in the fields and her head filled with the husky father smell that was like a lick between the legs. Then the hot, silky bouquet of sex. She felt as if there were a hand inside her, squeezing. The pressure was not cruel, but rather the firm grip of a lover. ? Silmien.? His name caught in her throat.

Valun started awake at the sound of her own voice. The seat beneath her was damp with the yeasty soup of her birth waters. ? Oh, no,? she said. Ten more minutes. She focused all her attention on the knot under her belly and the pressure eased-a little. Lucky there were no other passengers in the compartment. *Luck always*, Silmien had said on the night she had left him. Why did he keep popping into her head? Concentrate. She was thinking womb thoughts when the go-to stopped at their station and she walked on candystick legs to their burrow and announced herself to their doorbot.

? *Valun* .? Silmien flung the door open. ? I can't believe....? His nostrils flared as he took in her scent. ? What have you done??

? Come home for the holidays.? She was trying for a light touch, but when she stepped into the burrow, her body betrayed her and she stumbled. Like crunching through a skim of ice, except that ice seemed to have formed in her head too. When Silmien caught her, she slumped into his arms. She knew she ought to be embarrassed for losing control. But not now-tomorrow, maybe. Felt good not to be standing on her own.

? Tevul!? Silmien shouted. ? Mam!?

They carried her to the nursery and laid her on Mam's settle. The ice in her head cracked and began to melt. Something different about the nursery, but she couldn't pick it out at first. The water rug still brimmed, its damp breath filling the room. Lovestory next to Mam's settle. Wedding picture above the pool: Mam and Valun and Silmien. The tell murmured in its familiar corner. Then Valun realized the obvious. No toys, no lines of ants marching up the walls, no miniature settle in the corner. As she had expected, the scrap was home from the gardens for the lunar eclipse, but she was a visitor now and would certainly *not* be staying in the nursery. She was probably sleeping in Valun's settle, next to Silmien. And where would Valun sleep that night?

She shivered and saw her whole family gathered around her, as if she had just fallen out of a tree. Valun giggled. That seemed to fluster them even more. ? Tevul.? She nodded at the scrap. ? Sweet name. Fills the tongue.?

Tevul stared as if she thought her mother insane.

? I'm sorry I wasn't at your naming,? Valun said. ? Life in the gardens agrees with you??

? It's all right.?

? You're learning a lot? Making new friends??

? What do you want?? said Silmien. ? What has happened??

? Valun, did *they* do this to you?? said Mam. ? The aliens??

? What?? said Tevul. ? Someone tell me what's going on.?

? She's having the baby,? said Silmien. ? Smell it!?

? She can't.? Tevul looked from Silmien to Mam and finally at Valun. ? We just learned that in biology. You have to be exposed to all Mam's pheromones in order to bring an embryo out of latency. You're still supposed to be in diapause.?

? This is *their* work,? Mam said.

Choosing what to tell them was the hardest thing Valun had ever done. She didn't explain how she had lied about being invited to live with the humans. She had simply gotten tired of waiting and had gone to them on her own. It turned out that was the only way to gain access. The humans never actually invited *anyone* ; all the outs in Pelotto were self-selected. Self-condemned. Nor could she tell them about the longevity treatments, the first reward for those who sought human knowledge. The problem was that pregnant mothers could not be rejuvenated, even if their embryos were latent. She said nothing of how the humans had offered to remove the embryo from her womb, and how she had almost left Pelotto then. That was too much story; her time was getting short. She could feel her womb knotting again.

? By the end of the rainy season,? she said, ? I started to worry that some other family's pheromones might be similar enough to yours to trigger a quickening. But by then, the scrap had already left for the gardens.?

? I'm Tevul,? said the scrap. ? You can say my name.?

? So I had already missed the weaning,? Valun continued, ? and the chance to share scents with all of you. The humans told me that they could end diapause artificially, so I could control when I had the baby. I was sure that you all still wanted him, so I agreed. And here I am. I timed him for the eclipse so that we could all, as a family, I mean....? There was a sudden, vast and inevitable loosening inside of her, and

once again she felt her body slipping from her control. Something trickling, tickling through her birth canal.

'You should have told us.' Silmien's scent was bitter as a nut. 'Why did this have to be a surprise?'

'Because she isn't staying,' said Mam. 'You want to go back to the aliens, isn't that it? Your *humans*.' She made it sound like a curse. 'Who are you having this baby for, us or yourself?'

'Mam, I....' Valun pumped her knees together convulsively, then spread them apart wide. 'The baby....' She kneaded her belly. 'Help, Silmien!'

Silmien and Tevul rallied to her. No question that she could feel the baby now, wriggling, pulling himself into her vagina with his ridiculous little arms. It occurred to her that at this moment in time she had family inside and out. What odd thoughts she was having tonight! She giggled again. The scrap was licking her face and sobbing, 'Ma-ma- ma'. Oh, ma! Valun could feel Silmien's hands on her vulva, delicately opening her as he had opened her just once before, controlling her as only a father should, fingers basketed to catch the baby. She had forgotten how much pleasure there was in giving birth, ecstasy of mind and body to smell hot, wet life scrabbling toward the world. 'Oh,' she said, as the final dribble of birth waters leaked out of her, and Silmien held the baby high, offering it to the moons. 'Oh.'

Silmien brought the baby down so that she and Tevul could see. He was just four centimeters long and almost lost in the palm of his proud father's hand.

'He's so tiny, so pink,' said Tevul. 'Where are his eyes?'

'They'll grow.' Silmien's voice was husky. He brought the baby to his face and cleaned him gently with the tip of his tongue. The baby's mouth opened and closed. The arms wriggled uselessly.

'Stop.' The harshness of Mam's voice startled Valun. 'What are you doing?'

'Washing the baby,' said Silmien.

'There is no baby.'

Valun propped herself on an elbow, her head savagely cleared of the moist joy of birth. Mam's scent was like a hook up her nose; Valun had never smelled anyone so angry.

'Here.' Silmien offered it to her. 'See it.'

'A baby has a mother,' said Mam. 'There is no mother here, only a father. This is an experiment by the humans. Take it back to them. Tell them that it has failed.'

'Mam, no, Mam!' said Tevul. 'He can only live outside a few minutes. He has to start crawling to your pouch now. Look, he's already shivering.'

'Mam,' said Silmien. 'Our baby will die.'

'Then put it on her.' Mam turned contemptuously to Valun. 'Let her open her pouch. Let *her* love it.'

'I have no pouch, Mam,' said Valun. 'Only you can take care of him.' She could see that the baby was distressed. 'Please, tell me what you want.' He curled into a ball and unrolled with a spasm. 'Mam, I'll do anything!' Whatever crumb of brain the baby had must have registered that something was wrong. He should already be threading through his Mam's fur, not still flailing across his father's hand.

? I have nothing to say to an out,? said Mam. ? I will talk to its mother. Does anyone know where she is??

? There's no time for this,? said Silmien.

? What do you want from me, Totta?? Valun could tell that it had been a long time since anyone had used Mam's name. ? I'm Valun. The mother.?

Mam's eyes narrowed. ? I want you to care about someone else other than yourself,? she said. ? I want your story to be a love story, Valun.?

Valun struggled up off the settle. The world spun crazily for a few seconds, but she got it under control. She cupped her hands and extended them to Silmien. ? Give him to me.?

He brought his hands on top of hers and opened them. Silmien was sobbing as the baby slid onto her palm. Valun had never held a baby before. It weighed less than a berry and yet it was as heavy a burden as she had ever carried. ? Will you take my place, Totta?? She nodded at the settle.

Mam hesitated for a moment, but then stretched out, facing Valun. She kept her legs closed, however, and clutched her knees to her chest to cover her pouch. Valun held the baby just above her.

? Totta, Silmien, Tevul, I will stay with you and be this one's mother. ? Valun astonished herself. In just one season the humans had taught her more about her own biology than she had learned in a lifetime of study. How could she turn away from that knowledge? ? I'll be here to give him his name,? she continued, ? and I won't leave until he has come out of the gardens with his own family. I will do this for the love of him and against my best interests. But I will not sleep with you, Silmien, and there will be no mam baby from this family. No more babies at all. I can't be what you want, and you must all accept that. When Tevul and this scrap are grown up, I will go back to Pelotto again and study with the humans. I hope it won't be too late. Until then, I will study patience.?

Mam did not unbend. ? I heard many words, but hardly anything of love. What kind of mother are you? ?

The baby was on the move again, scrambling up the side of Valun's cupped hands. ? I will love this baby because I have given up so much for him,? she said. ? That is the truth, by my name.?

? It's not a happy ending. ? Mam was still not convinced.

? Totta,? said Silmien, ? this is not a story.?

? Mam.? Valun tilted her hands to show her the baby's blunt head. ? Someone's hungry.?

Mam closed her eyes. Her face was hard with grief as she opened her legs. Valun laid her hands on Mam's belly and let the baby slip through her fingers. He landed on his back but flipped himself immediately. Driven by instinct, guided by scent, he crawled unerringly for the pouch. With each heroic wriggle forward that the baby took, Mam's face softened. When she opened her eyes again, they were bright as stars. Valun tried to imagine herself as a mam. A difference in her family's birth order and it could have been.

Valun could smell the buttery scent of relief melting from Silmien and Tevul. And once the baby had found the nipple, Mam's nursing bliss filled Valun's nose like spilled perfume. All these happy smells made Valun a little ill. This had certainly not turned out the way she had wanted. She wondered what fool had made all those promises. How could Valun keep them?

How could she not?

? Ma-ma- *ma* !? Tevul hugged Valun, just like she used to, but then she was still a tween and had so much to learn about being a mother.