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by Selena Thomason

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The Choosing

Selena Thomason

The events of "The Choosing" take place long before those of "Verid."

There was a chunk of flesh missing from my leg. Mother would say I had no one to blame but myself, that it had been folly to take a newly acquired form into a potentially dangerous situation. She'd be right.

Human form hadn't seemed fragile on Captain Reese. She seemed so strong and confident. It wasn't until the hungry Targk attacked me that I realized how delicate human form is. As the Targk's claws tore into my skin like it was paper, I couldn't help but wish I was still in Experimentation and could transform into something more formidable. But I had chosen. For good or bad, I had chosen human form and was stuck in it. At least the form is pliable enough to squeeze into a fissure in the rockface and get mostly out of reach. I was grateful the Targk had only managed to get a snack from me.

Although Mother disapproved of my choice, Father was proud of it. He declared it "courageous" and compared it to his mother's Choosing. The comparison pleased me.

Her name was Sofi and she was the ruler of Kedru before my father. At the time of her Choosing, she took the form of the Krieg, a violent species unanimously despised by the other inhabitants of the quadrant. "It was a bold move," Father told me dozens of times, "one that brought a great deal of knowledge and understanding to our people." Before Sofi had taken Kregan form no one had understood the overwhelming fear that the Krieg felt concerning the scarcity of basic resources such as food. No one knew that the Krieg had nearly been killed off by famine numerous times and had

developed a certain paranoia where resources were concerned. This realization helped my people understand the Kregan predilection for conquering world after world and acquiring more food and resources than their people could conceivably use. It allowed us to become the first species to establish diplomatic relations with the Krieg. We are, in fact, still the only species who trade peacefully with them.

My form was demanding more of my attention. I think it was actually beginning to die. I began to focus on my injuries, determining what the form needed to survive. It was badly damaged but not beyond repair. I initiated a Healing Sleep. As I fell into the Sleep, a corner of my mind dreamt absently about Captain Reese.

I had encountered Reese while on Bremen visiting my brother. She was the leader of a small group of strange aliens. They called themselves humans. They had been drawn unexpectedly through the Doorway and were from a far-off star system that no one had heard of. I chose to copy Reese's form because she struck me as remarkably Kedrin. Her top priority had always seemed to be the safety and well-being of her crew. Father often said that the ability to place the needs of your people above your own was the mark of a true leader. Reese and her crew died on Bremen. I decided to take Reese's form and thereby enable it to continue after her death.

Voices further down in the caverns roused my mind closer to consciousness. Instinctively I called out to them, but it only took a moment for me to remember that I couldn't move or speak while in a Healing Sleep. I could force myself back to full consciousness, but it's risky to stop a Healing once it's begun. I was afraid that if I pulled myself out of my Sleep I

wouldn't have the strength left to induce another one. All I could do was listen as they approached and hope that they were friendlier than the Targk.

"Okay people, we're looking for anything that might be edible."

I recognized their language instantly and could barely contain my excitement. More humans! It was unbelievable.

"Sensors show a high level of organic material in these caves; let's hope that translates to food." The voice continued. "Jacoby and Dyson, you take this tunnel. Silva, you're with me."

I couldn't help but wonder who they were and if they were connected somehow to the humans I had encountered on Bremen. Had they come through the Doorway with Reese and her crew? Were they chasing the ones who came before? Were they friends or enemies?

I could hear two voices mumbling, coming closer, but neither sounded like the deep, authoritative voice I'd heard before. I couldn't help but wonder who they were and if they were connected somehow to the humans I had encountered on Bremen. Had they come through the Doorway with Reese and her crew? Were they

chasing the ones who came before? Were they friends or enemies? Were they even from the same planet or did these humans have an empire that spanned several star systems? I again lamented the fact that I'd had no opportunity to speak to Reese and her crew and had managed only to observe them from a distance.

"Captain, I've found something." Startled out of my reverie, I realized that one of them was standing right next to me. "You better come see this."

I cursed myself for not paying closer attention. But truthfully, in a Sleep what good would it have done? In no time all four of them were huddled over me, excitedly talking back and forth.

"She's human!" I heard a woman's voice say.

I marveled at how attached they were to physical descriptions and wondered if they didn't find that this tendency misled them too often.

"It's Captain Reese." Their leader whispered, disbelief coloring his voice.

I wanted to point out that this was a perfect example of how focusing on physical descriptions can misled you.

"She's badly injured, it looks like she was attacked by an animal," a different voice said.

Stating the obvious must be another human trait. It went on like this for some time until the one with the authoritative voice, the captain apparently, decided that they should get me out of the rocks and take me back to their medical facility.

No! I wanted to scream that I was in no shape to be moved, but there was no way to make them understand. As they pushed and pulled and dragged me out from among the rocks, the pain came flooding back and my injuries began to bleed again. It took all of my concentration to sustain my form and I lost track of the world outside me.

When I became aware again I was lying on a cold, narrow bed with a bright light shining in my face. I had managed to stabilize my condition. Another day or so in the Healing Sleep and my form would be repaired enough to function, assuming the humans didn't try to help me anymore.

Someone was hovering over me saying, "It doesn't make any sense." He said it several times, as if the repetition might solve the mystery. "I don't understand it. With wounds this extensive she should have bled to death. Look at this wound on her leg. There's an entire section of leg missing. The flesh and muscle are scooped out all the way down to the bone. The blood can't clot an injury that large, yet it's not bleeding."

"It was bleeding when we pulled her out from among the rocks," the captain offered. I recognized his soft, deep voice.

"But it stopped without you doing anything to it?"

"Yes, it had stopped by the time we got back to the shuttle and could put bandages on it."

"There's not a single drop of blood on those bandages."

"Doctor, I don't understand what you're getting at."

"Just that it doesn't make any sense. She should be dead, but she's not." He paused, exhaling slowly and trying to calm himself. "And that's not the strangest thing. Take a look at this. This is a scan from Captain Reese's last physical. I got it from the records in the Pilots Registry. This, on the other hand, is a scan of our current patient. Do you see the difference?"

"Doctor Navarre, you're the expert, why don't you just tell me what you've found."

"Reese's medical records show that she has a congenital heart defect. When she was an infant, she had a Cardioregulator surgically implanted into her heart so that it could function normally. Her last medscan shows the implant still in place. Our current patient, on the other hand, has a perfectly normal, healthy heart, something Tyler Reese never had and could not have acquired."

"Did you verify her DNA?"

"Yes, it matches Reese's exactly. The only difference is that she doesn't have the surgical implant."

"Maybe, Captain Reese had her heart defect repaired somehow."

"It's possible I suppose, but I honestly don't see how. I know it seems strange, but despite appearances, I'm not convinced that this is Captain Tyler Reese."

I wanted to applaud the doctor's deduction, but was disappointed that it was still based on physical evidence. Can't humans recognize people by the sense and flavor of their minds?

"Who else could it be?" the Captain asked.

"I don't know."

"There must be a logical explanation for all this."

"I'm sure there is, but I'll be damned if I know what it might be. I could wake her. We could see what she has to say."

The captain seemed to think this was a reasonable idea and told the doctor to "give it a try."

I was in a panic. I knew being pulled out of my Sleep before I was ready would damage the healing. But I couldn't speak this far in.

Suddenly, I sensed a shift in the captain's thinking, as if he has just remembered something important. When the doctor returned holding a small device, the captain said, "Wait. She clearly has a unique physiology, one we don't completely understand. What if forcing her awake would harm her somehow?"

I was stunned. Had he heard me?

"It's possible I suppose," the doctor admitted, "but we need answers."

"True, but I can wait for them. I'm willing to bet that she comes out of this on her own in the next day or so. I can live with the mystery for that long. Just keep an eye on her and let me know as soon as she regains consciousness."

Then the captain was gone. The doctor retreated to the other side of the room. He sat studying something on his desk and I could hear him periodically mumbling variations of "it doesn't make any sense."

Later that night, I was feeling stronger and decided to see what I could sense of the people around me. My mind breezed through the ship, brushing softly against the minds of the inhabitants, trying to get a feel for them. Most of them seemed to be sleeping. Their subconscious minds were wandering through their thoughts, mixing images from their waking lives with strange and exotic ones, rearranging the symbols and engaging in a search for meaning.

It struck me that I was surrounded by people vastly different from me. Our similarities were only superficial ones; we looked alike, we had the same form. I tried reaching out to the minds around me but couldn't communicate with anyone. These people have no telepathy, I had to remind myself.

I found the mind of the captain. Sensing that his mind was particularly open, I tried slipping into his dreams. It was surprisingly easy.

He was dreaming of a lush green place with a stream meandering through it. I found him kneeling by the water washing his face and drinking from his cupped hands. I stood next to him quietly waiting.

He seemed to sense a presence beside him and turned to face me. "Captain Reese?" he asked hesitantly.

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"I don't know what to believe." He hesitated a little at the strangeness of the setting, but finally seemed to accept it as a dream. "You're the woman we found in the caves."

"Yes."

"But you're not Tyler Reese?"

"No." I stifled a laugh. This seemed so silly and childish. Couldn't he sense that I wasn't Reese? If he knew her, how could he mistake me for her?

"But you look just like her. You are just like her, right down to the DNA, except for one thing—the heart implant."

"Oh, yes, the mechanical appliance in her chest. I found that it wasn't usual to your species, so I didn't copy it. Apparently it was a defect of some kind, peculiar to Reese. Now don't you see how inaccurate it is to recognize people by their physical appearance?"

"How else would I...."

"By the sense of people's minds, by who they are!" I realized that I was sounding arrogant and superior, and I didn't like it. "I just don't understand your people. Perhaps you could explain humans to me. Let me introduce myself, I am Zara of the Kedru."

"I'm Captain Kyle Sinclair of the Space Force cruiser *Prometheus*." He extended his hand towards me and, remembering this custom from Bremen, I shook it. "I don't understand. Am I still dreaming?"

"Yes." Now I was embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I realize that it's rude to place myself in your dream, uninvited. I just wanted to talk to you and I couldn't wait until I came out of my Healing Sleep."

"You mean the coma?"

"Yes. I suppose." I realized I had been presumptuous. Dreams are a very private thing after all. "I'm sorry. I'll leave."

"No, it's all right. Tell me how you managed to find your way into my dreams."

I was relieved, but confused by the odd question. "It was easy. I was going through the ship, trying to get a sense of the minds that were aboard, and... well, your mind seemed particularly open, so I just... sent my thoughts to you."

"So, you're telepathic?"

"Yes. With varying degrees of success, depending on who I'm trying to communicate with. I wasn't aware that humans had any telepathic abilities."

"We don't."

"But you heard me, in the hospital."

"I didn't. Not really. I just felt a sudden sense of panic."

"You see. You're more telepathic than you think."

Kyle just smiled.

He didn't seem to mind that I was there, so I knelt on the ground next to him and scooped my hands into the water as he had done. "This is a very beautiful place. Where is it?"

"It's back home, on Earth. I haven't been there for a very long time."

"But you think of it often?"

"Yes, I guess I miss it, even though I would never admit it to anyone."

"You just admitted it to me."

"But this isn't real, it's just a dream."

"Kyle Sinclair, you will find that dreams are real enough in their own way."

We talked for a long while. I asked him questions about humans. "Are all your people's minds like yours?" He didn't understand what I meant. "So open," I explained, "so accepting of things that can't be proven only experienced." He said that he wasn't sure. I suspected that his mind was special in this regard and not typical of humans.

I asked him about himself mostly, learning about the group through the individual. Finally I sensed that he was waking and I began withdrawing from his mind.

"Kyle, when we meet again, on the outside, will you remember me?"

"Yes," he answered and I faded away.

I was pleased by his response, more than I should have been, more than I thought I'd be.

Waking, I knew that he was among them. Before opening my eyes, I extended a hand towards him and said, "Kyle Sinclair, do you know who I am?"

"Yes," came his soft, low voice, "you are Zara of the Kedru."

I opened my eyes and smiled at him as he took my hand. For a moment we ignored the questions swelling up in the others and enjoyed the secret knowledge that was shared between us. It couldn't last.

I began spending time with Kyle. It seemed reasonable to start learning about the humans through their leader. I got his permission to stay on the ship for a while.

Watching Kyle with his crew, I noticed how different he was from Reese. He was quiet and tended towards formality with his crew; Reese had been boisterous and very informal. I noticed that Kyle and his crew wore

uniforms. I didn't remember Reese and her crew wearing any, so I asked Kyle about it.

"Captain Reese was a private citizen. She owned her ship and worked as a contractor. She wasn't a member of the Space Force, like I am, but we hired her to run supplies to and from Earth's colonies. She was transporting food and materials to Centauri Colony when her ship disappeared."

"Did you know Captain Reese?"

"Only in passing. She had been on the Centauri-Mars run for nearly 10 years. I met her a few times when I was stationed on Centauri Colony."

"So, you and your crew belong to this Space Force?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Well, my father would say it's a waste of time, something that takes much needed personnel and resources away from Earth."

"But you don't believe that."

"No. I don't. Space Force is part of the Space Exploration Association," he explained. "Its mission is to discover and colonize other worlds. Our future is among the stars, at least that's what those of us out here believe." Sadness flashed in his eyes and he gazed out into the stars. "Of course, I never intended to bring my people out quite this far."

"Then it was an accident."

"Oh, yes."

I found out that Kyle and his crew had been sent to the Centauri system to investigate the disappearance of some ships, one of them being Captain Reese's. While in sector J-17, a wormhole appeared off their port bow. They were too close to pull away and were drawn in. Once they were

on the other side the wormhole disappeared again and left them trapped many light years from home.

"I have to find some way to get my people back home," Kyle said.

I could see the burden of his people's welfare weighing on him, and it occurred to me that his sense of duty was Kedrin. He reminded me of my father. "A good leader must place his people's needs above his own." How many times had my father told me this? I wondered who had told it to Kyle. Maybe humans and the Kedru aren't as different as they seem.

"Kyle, tell me about your family."

"My father is a politician—well, he would say a 'civil servant.' He's an undersecretary in the Bureau of Earth Affairs. Government service is kind of a family tradition, one I didn't follow. My father's never really forgiven me for that. He considers space exploration a waste of time and resources. 'We've got problems enough at home,' he says. 'We should put Earth first.' That's what he believes. We both think we're being loyal to Earth and acting in Earth's best interest. We just can't agree on what that means."

One day, I was asking Kyle about the place in his dreams and wished aloud that I could see it.

"I can show you the next best thing," he replied.

He took me to a door that looked like any other, but when it opened I could see trees and lush green grass. Somehow they had managed to bring a piece of Earth with them.

"It's amazing. What is it?"

"It's called an arboretum. We take seeds and plants from Earth and grow them here. It gives us a taste of home that we can carry with us."

We walked among the trees and finally sat in the soft grass of a small clearing.

The setting must have sparked something in Kyle's mind because he stared longingly out into the trees and began talking of home.

"In the woods near my family's house, there was a clearing much like this one—thick grass and a long, gentle hill. I used to lie there, gazing up at the stars and wondering what it would be like to be out there among them. I would look up and imagine other worlds circling around the stars, and other people living on those worlds. I would wonder what they would be like, how they would live." Kyle laughed and shook his head. "But nowhere in all my wild imaginings, did I imagine you."

I decided to try some human cuisine. Kyle spoke often of something called potato soup. He said it was his favorite food. So, I went to where the crew gathered for meals and asked the cook for some potato soup.

It turned out to be a thick white liquid that steamed in its bowl. I used the tool to raise some of it to my mouth to taste it, but the liquid burned my lips. It hurt. I couldn't understand why Kyle would prefer a food that caused pain.

Just then, Kyle came in.

"What have you got there?" He asked as he sat down.

"Potato soup."

"My favorite."

"Would you like the rest? I just wanted to taste it." I pushed the bowl of punishing soup toward him.

"Oh no! Finish it. It's good for you. I'll get my own." He motioned to the cook. "Hey, Charlie, one for me too, if you don't mind. So, what do you think of the soup?"

"I don't know. It's a little odd at first."

The cook sat a bowl of potato soup in front of Kyle. I watched as he carefully blew on the spoonful of soup before he ate it. This was a ritual I had never seen before. But it made sense. I imitated him and found that the soup was indeed flavorful and strangely comforting once it had cooled a bit.

"Kyle, I've been watching the people on board. Your people choose mates, don't they?" He nodded, but didn't look up from his soup. "I was just wondering if you were bonded already or if you hadn't yet chosen a mate."

He looked up at me and was silent for a moment. "I haven't chosen yet." He smiled. "Maybe I've just been waiting for the right person to come along."

We ate the rest of our soup in a happy silence full of possibilities.

After that I began spending a lot of time with Kyle Sinclair. I told myself that I was just doing my duty as a Kedru and learning about another species. I even believed it in the beginning.

I found Kyle one afternoon standing in the Observation Lounge gazing out at the stars. I came in and stood next to him without saying a word. He knew I was there, but remained silent for a while. Finally he said, "I don't recognize any of these stars. There's so many of them that they blur together into clusters. I couldn't pick out the constellations even if I knew what they were."

"We're close to the center of the galaxy here. The star systems are much denser than where you're from."

"Zara," he said slowly, "it's so far."

I could feel how sad he was and wanted to change the subject. There was something I'd been meaning to ask him anyway. "Kyle, physical appearance is very important to humans, isn't it?"

"It varies. It's more important to some people, less important to others."

"Well, what do your people consider attractive? I mean, I don't know anything about human standards of beauty? What do humans consider beautiful?"

He turned to look at me and I thought I saw a smile playing behind his eyes. "Humans believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

"So, everyone defines beauty differently?"

"Yes."

I could see that he wasn't going to make this easy for me. "Well, what kind of woman do you consider beautiful?"

"I'm not attracted to any particular kind of woman. It just depends."

I couldn't tell for sure if he was toying with me or just avoiding the subject. I took a deep breath and dove right in, "Kyle, would you say that you were attracted to women who... well, women who looked like... well, like me, for instance?" I was too nervous to look at him.

"No, I wouldn't say that I was attracted to women who looked like you." His voice was soft and gentle, but his words made me feel like a fool. "However, I would say that I am attracted to you, specifically."

When I looked up at him, he was smiling. "Do you think I'm beautiful?"

"Zara, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met." Kyle extended his hand towards me and ran his fingers through my hair. Then he bent over and placed his mouth gently on mine for a moment.

Suddenly, I felt disoriented and frightened and happy all at the same time. "What was that?" I asked.

Kyle laughed. "It's called a kiss."

I was shaken and having trouble breathing. "It's wonderful. It feels like flying. Can we do it again?"

"As often as you like," he replied, and kissed me again.

It lasted longer this time and I could feel the soft wetness of his lips on mine. I became afraid and pulled away. "Something's wrong," I stammered.

"What is it?"

"I'm having trouble maintaining my form's equilibrium. I can't get its systems to function properly."

Kyle didn't seem worried. "Your heart's racing. You're short of breath. You feel shaky and a little dizzy."

"Yes, how do you...."

"I feel the same way. I've just learned to hide it better than you."

"It's normal then?"

"It is when two people feel strongly about each other." Kyle placed his arm around me and drew me close to him. We stood there looking out at the stars, and I marveled at how something physical could have such a profound mental and emotional effect. My people would never believe this.

As the days wore on, the problem of getting his people home weighed more and more heavily on Kyle's mind. I could see that he was getting desperate and beginning to blame himself for failing his people.

"If we can find the wormhole again, we'll go back through," he told me.

"But there's no way to know where the Doorway will take you," I argued. "You may end up even further away from home."

"It's a risk, I know, but one I'm willing to take."

"Legend has it that the Doorway has a mind of its own and that it shuffles people around the universe for its own purposes. Maybe it brought you here so that you could learn about life in this part of the galaxy, or so that we could learn about you. Now that we've made contact, maybe it will smile on you and take you home."

I had meant it as a happy thought, but the sadness of it crept up on me as I considered the possibility of Kyle returning home. Earth is very far away. Even Kedrin mates couldn't stay bonded over that great a distance. The telepathic link between Kedru could remain strong over one light year, maybe two, but thousands? It was impossible. Even couples that have been bonded for several centuries couldn't stay connected that far apart.

I always envied the connection between my parents. They never spoke aloud to one another. They had been in constant telepathic communication since the day they were bonded. There's an old saying among the Kedru that only newlyweds need to sleep together. I don't think my parents ever had to sleep in the same room. Their connection was so strong that even in the beginning they could dream in unison, no matter where their physical bodies were.

Just watching them as they went about their daily business I could tell that they were always aware of each other's thoughts and feelings. I remember how sometimes I'd be in the Great Hall with my Father and he would suddenly smile then turn to me and say "your mother wants you in the garden."

I can remember watching them and thinking—I want that, I want to share my mind with someone and never be alone again. I remember asking my mother how she knew that Father was the right mate for her. Mother said that when you met your true mate you know because your minds would fit together as if their natural state were to be intertwined.

This thought came to me one day when Kyle and I were in the arboretum. We were lying on the grass looking up at a simulated sky. My head was on his shoulder and his arm was around me. Our hands were cupped one inside the other, his warm palm against the back of my hand. Seeing our fingers intertwined like that I thought of what Mother had told me about choosing your mate. Suddenly I understood what she meant.

Mother wouldn't approve of the physical metaphor of course. In fact, she'd be appalled by it. Love is not physical. That sort of thing is for monofoms. Kedru choose a mate based on the quality of the person's mind and how well it fits in with their own. Kedru don't even consider physical form. Your mind defines you, not your form. These are all ideas that I grew up with, heard over and over throughout my life.

These ideas are part of the Kedrin way, Mother would remind me, and I'd have to admit that it was true. But what Mother doesn't understand and could never know is the feeling of being encircled in her beloved's arms. Being with Kyle made me realize that physical closeness only enhances the bond between mates and that it even has a pleasure all its own.

My mind was reeling. I couldn't believe that I was really considering choosing a mate who was not Kedru, who was instead a monoform! Aunt Isabeau would be proud, but everyone else would be horrified. The scandal of a member of the royal family doing such a thing! It was unthinkable.

Then I thought that maybe I just wouldn't choose a mate at all. I'd be like my father's friend Krous who is nearly 800 and still hasn't chosen a mate. "It is tragic to be alone," he told me once, "but not so tragic as being bonded to someone unsuitable."

Unsuitable. Every Kedru I've met so far has been unsuitable. I liked some of them well enough, but I never felt like I could share my mind with any of them for the rest of my life. Then there's Kyle Sinclair, a human. Why should it seem so easy to share my mind and my life with him? Could we even have the kind of telepathic bond Kedrin mates enjoy? Would we ever be able to dream in unison? There's no way to know. Could I live without these things in exchange for the feel of his fingers laced in mine?

It's a question I'd have to find an answer to soon. He's asked me to stay with him aboard the *Prometheus* and although I hate the thought of being so far away from home, the thought of being far away from Kyle hurts more. Besides, there's plenty of time to be on Kedru. If I'm going to be with Kyle, it must be now. I learned on Bremen that humans have an unbearably short life span, barely over 100 years. If it is to be at all, it must be now.

But what will my family think? I could say that I was doing this to learn more about the humans, but would anyone believe me?

I lay there in the cool grass, listening to Kyle breathe and feeling his chest rise and fall, and I tried to count the cost. Either way, it was pretty high.

I decided to stay. I told Kyle that I must return home first to see my family and explain it to them. Kedru is not so far from where they found me so Kyle agreed to take his ship and crew on a minor detour.

I was calm until I actually got there. Then all my fears and doubts came crashing down on me.

Ever-faithful Jareth met our shuttle.

"Jareth, where is everyone?"

"Princess Zara, welcome home." Always a stickler for tradition, Jareth bowed. The deference seemed ridiculous to me considering he had taken care of me since I was a child, but Jareth seemed to prefer things this way so I went along with it. "His majesty is in Aquila meeting with the city's representatives. He is expected to return tomorrow. The Queen is on Bremen, visiting your brother. She has not yet decided when she will be returning home."

"Thank you." I motioned to Kyle who was standing next to me. "Jareth, I want you to meet a friend of mine, Captain Kyle Sinclair of Earth."

"Pleased to meet you," Kyle said. He extended his hand instinctively but hesitated because he couldn't find anything resembling a hand in Jareth's mostly gaseous form.

Jareth, not knowing what to make of this gesture, ignored it. "A monoform. How nice." Turning his attention back to me, he added, "Your majesty, would you like me to show you to your quarters?"

"No thank you, I know the way. Please let me know when Father returns."

"As you wish. If you'll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to."

"Of course." Thus dismissed, Jareth blew back into the Palace as quickly and quietly as always.

"What is he?" I heard Kyle whisper beside me.

"He's my father's Chief of Staff."

"No, I mean what species is he?"

Confused by the question, I stammered, "Well, he's Kedru of course."

"No, I mean what's his..." he hesitated, searching for the right word, "his form."

"Oh! It's Velusian. They're a mostly gaseous species who live in the atmosphere of Velus 3. Jareth's adapted the form somewhat to allow for vocal communication and the differences between Velusian and Kedrin atmosphere. Still, it's essentially the same. Actually, it's a very freeing form. I remember when I tried it, I spread myself out as far as I could, almost to the point where my form would lose cohesion, and it was like being everywhere at once. It was wonderful. I understood then why Jareth chose it."

"It must be strange to have everyone be so different."

"But they aren't different. They're all Kedru. Only their forms are different. And forms are surface, appearances, not who we are. Come on, let's go in. I want to show you the Great Hall."

"Where is the human?" Jareth appeared behind me in the mirror. He had entered quietly, slipping in before I had even noticed him.

"He is still asleep."

"I see. Your father has returned. He is meeting with the ministers regarding his trip to Aquila and will see you later in the morning."

"That will be fine."

"What is that colorful piece of fabric you are wearing? I understand that humans cover their forms with cloth in most settings, but this piece does not appear to have any function."

"It's a scarf," I answered, still fiddling with it in the mirror, trying to get it to look right. "I guess it doesn't really have a function. It's just decorative."

"Then it is not an essential part of the human form?"

"No."

"I see." He was silent a moment, apparently assimilating this tidbit and determining how best to proceed. "Then why wear it here? You are home. You are not among the humans." I only shrugged in response. "What is there to be learned by wearing it here?" he pressed on.

"Nothing, I suppose. I just like it. The fabric feels soft against my skin."

"You like the way it feels?"

"Well, yes," I replied, quickly trying to determine what I had said that warranted Jareth's disbelief.

"But it is only a physical thing." He was close behind me now, as if the proximity might clear up the misunderstanding.

"That doesn't diminish its value."

"It should... for a Kedru." Jareth was plainly shocked and I tried to think of a way to minimize the effect.

"Besides, it was a gift."

"From the human."

Realizing suddenly that this may not have been the best tactic, I had to admit "Yes."

I saw Jareth's features begin to curl into a disdainful frown. "It is not the way of the Kedru," he said, attempting to sound as neutral and matter-of-fact as possible. "Some people, those who don't know you as well as I do, may question your judgment in getting so personally involved in the social mores of monofoms. Kedru learn from copying the forms of other species, they do not become members of those cultures."

"Jareth, I don't care what people think."

"Of course. Still, it is something you should be aware of and it is my duty to bring such matters to your attention. If you'll excuse me..." He concluded and left without awaiting my response.

Kyle and I were walking in the garden when I felt it. A cry of grief and anger pierced my mind and scattered all other thoughts. "Father," I cried out but there was no answer. I turned to Kyle and grabbing his arm, dragged him back towards the Palace. "Something's terribly wrong."

Jareth met me in the doorway.

"What's happened?" I demanded.

"Your mother and brother have been killed in an explosion."

"What?"

"The Krieg have attacked the Bremen. The Queen and Prince Alrich were in the capital city when it was destroyed."

"The Krieg did this?"

"Yes," Jareth replied, much too calmly.

"They are supposed to be our allies."

"True, but they are not the Bremen's allies."

"But it wasn't just the Bremen they killed. It was two members of our royal family, of my family."

"The Krieg had no way of knowing that there were Kedru on Bremen."

"Maybe Sofi was wrong. Maybe we should have destroyed them when we realized how vicious they were."

Jareth's calm demeanor was replaced with shock. "What?"

I tried to make up for it by suggesting that we could at least have encouraged them to change their ways.

It didn't work. Jareth was still appalled to hear a member of the royal family speaking such blasphemy. "It is not our place to meddle in the affairs of other cultures, only to learn about and understand them."

"And look at what all our tolerance and understanding have cost us, what it has cost me?"

I was horrified by the selfish thought I had just given voice to, but Jareth let it go unchallenged, presumably attributing my outburst to the extreme circumstances and my understandable grief.

Once I was calm, I suggested that we bring the matter to the attention of the Krieg. "They should know the full consequences of what they have done."

"They will say that the Kedru should not have been there, that they knew the risk involved in being on Bremen. I doubt that we can change a mindset forged by millennia of experience."

"Jareth, we've got to try. We've got to find some way to convince them that there are enough resources, that their species can survive without destroying everyone else."

"Perhaps that will be your great service to the Kedru when you become ruler."

Suddenly I realized that my time would now come a lot sooner than I had planned.

"I have to see Father." I rushed into the palace, leaving Kyle and Jareth to follow behind me.

When I entered the Great Hall, there was only my father, sitting on his throne at the far end. He was hunched over and sobbing shamelessly. I had never seen him like this and the sight filled me with dread.

I ran to him and he embraced me. "My precious daughter, all that is left to me."

"Father, are you sure? Are they really gone?" It was a dumb question and I knew it, but part of me still hoped that there was some mistake.

"She's gone. They're both gone. My mind is so empty. The silence. I never expected it to be so quiet. So lonely. So deadly quiet."

"Father please. It'll be alright."

Kyle and Jareth had caught up to me by now and while Jareth remained at a distance, Kyle came directly to my side, trying to comfort me with his presence.

Father saw him and the look on his face hardened. "You are the human I have heard about?" He demanded.

"Yes, I'm..." Kyle started to say.

I interrupted him, "Father, this is Captain Kyle Sinclair. I brought him to meet you because I've chosen -"

"I know what you've chosen," he growled at me. Suddenly he reached out with a scaly claw and grabbed Kyle's arm. I don't think he realized that he was hurting Kyle, but I saw small drops of blood begin to seep out of his vulnerable human skin. "Do you love my daughter?" He demanded.

Kyle hesitated, stunned by the force of my father's manner.

"Father, please." I pleaded, trying to get him to let go.

"Do you love her?" he demanded again, tightening his grip.

"Yes sir, I do. I love her."

Father peered into Kyle's eyes for a moment then appeared satisfied that he was telling the truth and loosened his grip. "Then you must leave her now."

"What?" Kyle stammered.

"Father, please don't."

"Leave her now while it won't hurt too badly. Years from now it will destroy her. You don't understand. You can't possibly know what it's like. You must leave her now before she becomes accustomed to the sound of your thoughts in her mind, before she can feel everything you feel. You must leave her now! Promise me. Promise me you will!" In desperation he had tighten his grip again and Kyle's face could no longer hide the pain.

"Father, stop it!" I screamed. "You're hurting him!"

Finally, he seemed to realize what he was doing and let go. "Think about what I've said, human." He sank back into his chair. "Leave me, I am in a grief that none of you can possibly understand."

He was right and I knew it, so Kyle and I withdrew from the Great Hall. I knew that losing a mate was considered to be an inconsolable, unbearable grief. Every Kedru knew that. But I never thought I'd actually see it.

We have such control over the inner working of our forms that we can cure any disease and heal most injuries. This kind of sudden, unexpected death is practically unheard of. Certainly people die, but only after they've lived a full life and have begun to tire of the physical world. Upon approaching 1000, Kedrin couples will choose to die together rather than risk one dying before the other, thus leaving the survivor in such grief. They simply cease to sustain their physical forms, allowing the forms to die and

thus releasing their minds into the Next Phase. I was afraid of what my father would do now that his mate was gone.

"What was that all about?" Kyle's voice broke into my thoughts.

I couldn't face talking about it so I made an excuse about needing to be alone for a while. Thankfully he agreed and I went back into the garden alone.

Jareth came out into the garden a little while later to tell me what I already knew, that my father in his grief had chosen not to sustain his physical form any longer. His form was dead and he was gone.

"You are all that is left of the royal family." Jareth informed me.

"I know," I replied and that was all that needed to be said.

"I'll make the arrangements," Jareth concluded and left me alone again with my thoughts.

It all happened so fast, I kept thinking. How could my world be completely rearranged so quickly? "How could my father do this to me?" I yelled at the trees. It was a selfish and evil thing to say and I was glad no one had heard me.

This is not my time. It's not fair. Father was supposed to rule for centuries longer. Then my brother would rule, then me. I had plenty of time. Plenty of time, I thought, to live a life with Kyle. Plenty of time. Not anymore.

Jareth will be arranging the Ceremony of Service for as soon as possible, tomorrow probably. In such a time of chaos and turmoil, the Kedrin people need a strong leader to reassure them. It's going to have to be me. There is no one else left.

My family has ruled Kedru for longer than anyone can remember, far back into the days before histories were kept. Who am I to turn my back on them now? What kind of a leader would I be if I didn't place the needs of my people above my own?

I sensed Kyle coming into the garden and I could feel the end approaching.

"Zara, I'm sorry to hear about your father."

I couldn't answer him.

"I've been talking to Jareth about Kedrin culture and I want to ask you a few things."

I could feel the turmoil coming off of him like heat in the summer, but I tried not to acknowledge it, hoping the dread would go away.

"You know that I'll tell you anything," I said finally. "What do you want to know?"

"Zara, is your father's reaction to the death of his mate unusual?"

"I don't know what you mean," I heard myself lie.

"Would his reaction to his mate's death be considered extreme or out of the ordinary?"

"It's tragic." I braved a look up at his face and saw that he knew I was holding back. "But it's not unusual." I turned and walked away a little, hoping it was over. It wasn't.

"Zara, what is the life expectancy of a Kedru?"

That stopped me. He wouldn't have asked if he didn't already know. I could see where he was going with this and it wasn't a destination I cherished. "What does it matter?"

"I'm asking you."

I couldn't stand here and refuse to answer. I couldn't hide from my mate. Every piece of me knew that it wouldn't be right. It would go against everything I'd been taught, everything I believed. So, I drew up my courage and answered him. "About a thousand of your human years."

"So, even in a best case scenario, you would outlive me by several centuries." I didn't answer him, but he didn't need me to. "No wonder your father begged me to leave you. He knew what kind of grief you were setting yourself up for, even if I didn't know." He started for the door and I didn't know of anything to say that would be able to stop him. He paused in the doorway to ask, "Why didn't you say anything?"

"It didn't seem important at the time," was all I could think of to say.

"With your father dead, you'll have to take his place as ruler, won't you?"

"It's my duty."

"Can't someone else?"

"No." I was silent for a moment while I tried to find the courage, my father's courage, to do my duty at the expense of myself. "I can't go with you. I'm sorry."

"I understand. It's probably just as well, considering. I couldn't offer you much of a life, by Kedrin standards."

"Kyle, don't say that. It's not true." It hurt me somehow to hear him talk that way about what could have been our future.

"Goodbye Zara. I hope you have a long and happy life."

I knew he had turned to go, but I couldn't bring myself to look at him, fearing that the sight of him would shatter my sense of duty.

"Kyle, if we meet again, in your dreams perhaps, will you remember me?"

"Yes," I heard his soft, low voice whisper, "you are Zara, my beloved."
By the time I felt strong enough to look up at him, he was gone.

I stood on the balcony, looking out into the city as night descended upon it. I watched the people coming and going about their lives, returning home at the end of the day. They were my responsibility now. These were the people I must serve and protect with my life. I don't resent it exactly. It has always been the duty of my family to serve. There was just so much else I wanted to experience before it would be my turn.

I'm complaining about my duty and Father would have hated that. If he were here he'd be terribly disappointed in me.

Jareth appeared at my shoulder.

"Zara, ruler of Kedru, what would you have done?"

"Jareth, I want you to halt all trade with the Krieg."

"But, the Lethium industry relies so heavily -"

"I know what it will cost, just do it."

"Of course."

"Also, contact the Kregan premier. Tell him I want a meeting with him immediately and that until we've come to an agreement that satisfies me, there will be no further trade or diplomatic relations between our peoples."

"I will take care of it." Jareth hesitated at the door. "Your majesty, what did you learn from your time among the humans?" He asked me this without a trace of bitterness or irony.

I wondered if he really wanted an honest answer. Would Jareth understand the lesson that there is value and pleasure in physical bodies and experiences? How could I tell him that even now I longed to hear the beating of Kyle's heart and feel his breath on my cheek? What would he say

if he knew how close I had come to turning my back on my people and my duty, just to stay by Kyle's side for a minuscule seventy years or so? What would any of my people say? They would say I'd gone mad.

Finally, I answered like the Kedrin leader I was supposed to be. "I learned that I am not one of them and that I can never be." I knew this was the answer Jareth was looking for.

Thus satisfied and reassured, Jareth went off to attend to other, more pressing matters of state. I gazed up at the stars and wondered which one shone on the lush green land of Kyle's dreams. Would either of us ever see it again?

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Selena Thomason writes mostly science fiction, but sometimes feels called to other forms and genres. Although she holds a B.A. in Drama, writing continues to be her first love.

Cover: "Science Station Alpha 1"
Bill Snodgrass
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Bill Snodgrass began writing during his high school days. In the winter of 2003, however, he embarked on the journey of becoming a published fiction author. Bill writes fantasy, science fiction, and other fiction, all grounded in Christian values and appropriate for readers of all ages.

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The Sword Review is a publication of Web-Net Solutions, LLC. It is available at www.theswordreview.com and updates are published weekly.

The Sword Review (ISSN 1556-5416), 9618 Misty Brook Cove, Cordova, Tennessee 38016
For more information visit www.theswordreview.com. Selena Thomason's "The Choosing" and Bill Snodgrass's "Science Station Alpha 1" appear as part of Issue 5, August 2005.