

TORN

By Mary Brock Jones

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CHAPTER ONE

A place of endless light and untouchable horizons. That was Fee's first impression of the plains regions east of her mountain home. Vast, empty lands opening out to sky and wind that looked

nothing like her native forests. Her second impression came when the flyer landed and she stepped out into air so hot it threatened to sear the skin from her body. She would have stepped right back inside, but the pilot passed her bag over and made it clear he was waiting for her to get off.

“Someone will be along to meet you.”

She had no choice but to walk down the ramp. Then he hit the hatch button and took off, leaving her stranded on a lonely dirt road in a place bare of anything resembling life as she knew it. No trees, no dancing leaves to offer escape from the fierce heat, only the wooden railings of an old fence line standing derelict on the side of the track. She hitched herself up on the first rail, fingers clinging to the familiar roughness. How she wished she could jump into a flyer and scurry back across the mountains but she had work to do and a planet to save. The once beautiful world that was Arcadia deserved better. She tucked herself up another rail and stared out at this strange land.

A man walked down the road towards her. He had to be the one sent by the Survey. An ecological engineer like her, so she'd been told, and yet nothing about this man looked familiar. There was a stillness about him, his feet scuffing up the dust on the road the only sign of his passing. She scrunched back against the fence, stepped up another railing, and waited.

She had been dropped off in this remote place to keep her arrival quiet, and the man looked like he'd walked all the way from town for the same reason. Not that it appeared to bother him. He was as one with the road; hat, hair, shirt and boots fading into the dun-coloured background. A man who belonged here.

She did not. Too dark, too restless, her hair a cloud of tangled curls and her hand playing a staccato of fidgets on the wooden planks. Everything about her was made for mist-drizzled forests, not hot, scorched plains.

She kept watch as he came to a stop in front of her. Tall and self-contained with his hands stuffed into his pockets, his eyes were the only bright colour on him, the colour of light on a high mountain tarn in the cold of winter. They studied her now, looking her straight in the face with little sign of welcome.

“Caleb,” said the man.

That was all. Fee would have liked a whole lot more. At home, she would have given her full name. Fioruisghe ingh Bram an Scathach den Coille, daughter of Bram and Scathach of the family Coille, and bowed in honour. But this was not home. She settled for a brisk nod.

“Fee.” His home; he could make the first move.

“You the one sent by Central?”

She nodded and eased herself as upright as possible. The man, this *just Caleb*, kept his hands in his pockets. No hand shake, no attempt at one, just those eyes watching her. Unfortunately she couldn't stay perched up on this rail all day. She slid down to the earth. “You know why I'm here?”

He nodded and stepped back. “You coming?”

She supposed she was.

“To your home?”

He shook his head. “Down to the office.”

She waited.

“Home's a bit farther on,” was all he added, the set of his shoulders showing clearly that was all she was going to get.

She almost gave up, but Central had sent her here, and that meant she had to stay. One deep breath and she hoisted her pack onto her back to scramble after the man. He didn't stop but did slow down to let her catch up. So whatever she was here for mattered to him too. Would it be enough? Her orders had been brief, far too brief, but had made it clear they'd have to work together.

A flurry of dust sent her into a fit of coughing. He kept walking but did turn slightly to see she was all right, passing her a bottle of water and pulling her bag off her back, to lift it effortlessly onto his own. She muttered thanks, gulped down the water, and grit her teeth as he shoved a hat on her uncovered head. An hour later, and she was grateful for that too. Was there no cloud cover in this land?

Yet another hour of hard slog passed before the first buildings appeared. She guzzled more water, and refused to register the grimace on the man's face. Water was precious here, rainfall scarce. Her studies of the area before she came told her that, but reading about something and facing the reality of it were quite different.

She'd always imagined the plains were dead flat, yet that wasn't true either. Like a hastily thrown quilt, the land rose up in knobs and hummocks; an upward slope here, a hollow there. The town coming into view was built against one of the rising hummocks.

"Protects us from wind and helps temperature regulation," said the man beside her.

It didn't look much of a town. All the buildings were single-storied, many tucked back into the dirt of the hillside and each one capped with a distinctive roof: low-slung, and covered with a silvery woven cloth that merged with the silver straw of the local grasses. It was too distinctive, too unique to be for decoration only. Solar power generation was her guess, and the man beside her had to be the source. No one else here had his training. "Your design?"

"Partially." There was a closed look on his face and his hand waved her on. "The office is over there."

It certainly wasn't inviting on the outside. Small even by the scale of this town, the office was no more than two windows, a door at front, the low-slung roof and, over the door, a weathered sign proclaiming 'Ecological Survey Office'. By now, Fee didn't care as long as the inside was dark, cool and had drinking water. She had a sinking feeling that only the last was likely.

She followed Caleb inside and found she was right. Baking hot sunlight poured in the uncovered window and the temperature control system was singularly ineffective, but there was a water chiller over to one side. She poured out a mug and let her fingers dabble in the cool drops forming on the side as she sank gratefully onto the closest chair. The man Caleb had already taken the chair on the other side of the large desk and was sending a call through to their boss at Survey Central. Audio only, which told her even more about the security of this operation. Minimising data transfer cut down the risk of outside snoopers.

That suited her fine. It meant she could stay sitting right where she was.

"What's the story?" said Caleb after the preliminaries.

"Fee there too?" said the man on line they both knew as Fox. He had a long, important sounding title but all it meant was that he ran field operations on this continent.

"Here, boss."

"You've both received your portfolios and the logins to the operational file?"

Caleb grunted a yes. Fee nodded. "Yeah."

“I’m activating the file now. Read it tonight. I need your final plan as soon as you can scope out what’s needed.”

“Isn’t that your job?” said Fee.

“Not this time.” She didn’t need visuals to see Fox’s reaction. His voice was curt enough. What did he expect? That she’d be happy about being pulled out to this back end country. Right now, she was hot, tired and too on edge to care.

Caleb leaned forward. “This important?” he asked the boss.

“Of course.”

“Why the two of us?”

“The profile analysis recommended your pairing as the most effective team. Your skill sets show the required compatibility.”

Fee really hated it when Fox spoke in disembodied jargon. It usually meant he was hiding something—and that it would come back and bite her one day. “How long have we got?” she asked.

“Soon as you can—real soon.” With which the man switched them off.

Fee scowled at the red light, and noticed Caleb was doing the same.

“There’s a secured com point over there.” He waved towards the wall, and she saw there was a smaller desk on the side. At least the docking console looked like it was made this century. She wished she could use her wrist pad, but orders ruled it out. Maximum security on this project.

What the hell was the Survey up to?

She took the seat, plugged in her remote point and brought up her screen. Luckily it used the standard Survey setup, for her so-called colleague showed no signs of helping her if she did have a problem. She logged in and pulled up the flagged file. A cursory glance at the summary, and on to the bit she most needed right now. The background file on her partner, or whatever this man Mr just Caleb was.

Full name: Caleb Winter. It fit, somehow.

Family: he actually had one. Quite a large one. Mother, father, two brothers and numerous cousins, uncles, aunts and assorted hangers on. She knew how that felt.

Grading: Ecological Engineer, First Class. Same as her, right down to rank. One of the top in a profession tasked with maintaining the environmental engineering of Arcadia to suit the planet’s human settlers.

Specialisation: passive wind and solar utilisation. So the low-slung houses and special roofs had been a bit more than *partly* his design. Not that she had any intention of calling him on it.

“You’re water and transpiration effects?” the man said now. He’d also checked her file first. “Not much call for that around here. Any water we get, we treat like gold.”

She shrugged, forced to agree. Yet there was a reason she was here. The Survey rarely made mistakes. It couldn’t afford to, not with what was at stake.

She stared a moment more at the tabs on his file, then switched back to the start. Time to find out what they were supposed to achieve here.

“No.” The man’s chair crashed to the floor. “Those bastards.”

Now he was glaring at her. “This your idea? You mountain folk—you always wanted this place.”

“What?”

“This scheme.” He paced the length of the room and glared at her again. “You really don’t know?”

She shook her head and turned back to the screen, feeling him watching her all the time.

She had to read it through twice, the first stage and the reasons for it. No wonder he was furious. “It appears simple enough,” she ventured.

“Yeah. Simple. A great, big lake, dumped right in the middle of this sector—and that’s just the start. It’ll destroy this place.”

She was still reading, still trying to get to grips with the data and figure out what was really going on here. It wasn’t as if one lake would make much difference, not on its own. This had to be more about the big picture, the war the Survey was fighting to save their world from its own people. One lake would provide water for irrigation, would let the people here grow grass rather than hide from the sun, show them they could live in a kinder world. She looked at the projection figures.

“So what was here two hundred years ago,” she said.

“Shrubs, open forest, tall grasses.”

“And now?”

For a minute, she almost feared for her safety. He actually growled at her. “Shorter grasses, sparse scrub, herbs. So?”

“And the transition zone between your grasslands and the mountain forests?”

“Almost a single line. A clean cut.” He was back to pacing. “The change; it’s too abrupt. I know that. It’s going to get drier here, dead, if nothing is done.”

“This isn’t just about the plains.”

He looked at her as if she’d said he was an idiot. “Yeah, I get that. The Survey’s playing a bigger game, but why do they have to start here?”

“Because you know these people,” she guessed.

“Hearts and mind. But you know something? These plains, our world: we like them just as they are.

He kept pacing, one eye on the screen, reading even as he walked, till he finally ground to a halt. She gave him the dignity of silence, as he glared at the screen, then at her.

“Seems your services are needed.”

It was a poor kind of concession but all she was going to get. She did her best to ignore him as he sat down again and went back to intently studying his screen.

For half an hour, only the occasional grunt or angry murmur broke the silence as they each pored over the rest of the plan. Words and images began running in circles in Fee’s head.

Finally she shoved back her chair and stood up, looking round the room.

“Have you got a holo-field here? I need to get a proper handle on this.”

He stood as well, looking no happier than her, and punched a code into his unit.

“Full security on?” she asked as the holo-field shimmered into life.

“For this? Hell yeah, at maximum.”

The field settled, revealing a three-dimensional aerial view of their continent. Arcadia was a simple world. Two main continents, one circling half of the southern hemisphere, the other, her own, straddling the opposite quadrant of the northern, plus a scattering of islands and a small third continent in the seas between. Right now, it was her own land she was interested in, watching closely as he zoomed in. Other Survey teams could sort out the mess elsewhere.

From the short, coastal margin in the west, across the towering forest clad slopes of the main dividing range that was her home country, to the dry baked foothills and plains on this side. He set it to slow scan, hovering at easy speed over the brown grasslands of his home territory, out to the dry centre of desiccated sand and rocks with the occasional scrubby patch, to the lifeless centre, and on to the east, the washed out coastal hills before the land plunged into the eastern sea.

“And North?”

He changed direction, bringing it back to the dead centre, before swinging up to the great metropolises hovering on the edge of the sub-arctic region. Water was no problem there, fed by the great northern ice sheets and the generous rainfall as the hot central air currents hit the cold stream from the north. That’s why the major cities were there.

He paused over the largest; a great expanse of tower blocks and traffic ways. The capital city, Urbis. They’d both been to college there—it had the only remaining school of eco-engineering—and was home to Survey head office.

“You visit often?” she asked, unable to quell her curiosity.

“Not unless I have to.”

She wasn’t surprised. Urbis had nothing in common with this fierce plainsman.

“Couldn’t breathe there,” he suddenly muttered.

A second comment. A breakthrough? *Don’t fool yourself, Fee. The man looked as surprised at admitting it as she was at hearing it.*

But now was not the time to push it further. So her gut said anyway, in a sudden jittery swirling. “Can you extrapolate forward ten years, based on current ecological trends?”

His fingers stabbed at the com unit. The holo-field settled into a new pattern, one that shoved his mouth into a dead straight line. He added rainfall averages and prevailing winds, and it was Fee’s turn to gasp, her eyes locked on her mountains in shock.

“You’ve read the figures,” he said. “What did you think they meant?”

She stared at the dark band of gale force storms bearing down on her beloved trees. “We’ll be destroyed. No planting will stop that.” She stepped forward, jabbing at her unit to take control of the field, and zoomed in on her home town. A mighty sheet of water poured down the hillside, scouring away trees, tearing up rocks, overflowing old, familiar water courses. Her home tree, a mighty baullnia, the largest tree type of this world, stood square in the path of the torrent. Then it stood no more.

Her family’s home was built within those branches. She stared in horror, the controls slipping unheeded from her hands.

“Sit,” he shoved a chair in behind her, “before you fall.”

So now she knew how he felt, and the twist of the corner of his mouth said he saw it. She had to fight hard to get herself under control, before surrendering charge of the field to him. She’d seen enough of her home’s fate.

“Bring the scan back to this region, with no change.”

The quirky twist disappeared and she was venal enough to feel pleased. He zoomed south again, and she recognised his town and the building they sat in, surrounded on all sides now by dying grasslands. Brown stalks, tough woody scrubs and stony ground. She remembered the view as she came in, hovering over long rippling waves of grasses. Dry, yes, but not leached of life as it looked in this projection.

A cluster of buildings stood out, some distance from town to the east. Towering over them was a field of waving pillars, silvery groves of tall metal flashings with endless flexi thin panels of sooty grey floating between them.

“What’s that?”

“The nearest solar plant. It’s not as big in this time, and there are open bush lands and animals around it still.”

“And the buildings?”

“Houses.” His face closed up. He shrugged, and relented. “My family compound. The main house is a bit farther away.”

Aah. Hence the wealthy education and the air of command. Suddenly, she realised who he must be. She should have made the connection sooner—or Fox should have warned her.

Winter Solaris, the name behind the solar energy company that dominated the plains’ economy. Usually known just as Solaris, but their logo included a large and florid W.

“They must have been thrilled at your choice of career.”

The ghost of a smile but no explanation. She let him be. He’d read her file; must know she was a den Coille though he’d said nothing. “Add in the lakes; the first one we’re building to start with, then the rest, along with the other changes they make possible.”

He switched views again, putting in the new water sources, the new plantings and cross sculpturing of the landforms. She gasped. The change was impressive. Still mostly grasses and shrubs, but so much richer. Touches of green, along with animals and more houses. The solar array was smaller, but still substantial.

He moved the scan again, across to the centre. Grass, scrub, solar arrays again, but filled with so much more life, and back to the mountains, to see trees marching up the lower parts of the eastern slopes where only scrub stood today.

“Now add in the full scheme.”

Both gasped.

She stepped forward, fascinated. “I’ve seen that before.”

“Yeah. At college.” His voice sounded as stunned as she felt. “It’s straight out of the historical surveys from the first landings. Some of the plant types are imported and there’s organised farms with sustainable cropping, but overall, that’s what this world looked like before we came.”

Fee stared. She knew the theories, her reports were part of the puzzle that gave it proof, but to see it brought to life like this... Their planet was unique, one of the few with carbon based life forms fully developed into a flora and fauna capable of supporting human habitation. The original eco-engineers had only to tweak what was here already. Except the money took control and the settlers did more than tweak.

The weather patterns in her home continent were well enough understood. Water laden winds streamed in from the western oceans, barrelling in soggy triumph over the narrow coastal flats and filled to greedy saturation, until they hit the dividing ranges. The clouds ruptured, dumping vast floods of their watery burden on the western slopes, and what was left had to supply the whole of the eastern plains. At the time of settlement, that rain had been enough to support extensive grasslands in the east. All that had changed.

Thanks to her family and others, today that western coastal strip was no longer a healthy mix of meadow and forest, but almost entirely covered by densely packed plantations of festia trees, source of a nutrient-rich pollen that was the basis of her family’s wealth. The Den Coille

company dominated the festia market as much as the Winter's did Solar energy production, power bought at a high cost to the dangerously unbalanced mountain slopes.

Solar power had dealt to the inland prairies. The energy barons, with Winter Solaris leading the pack, had stripped away any plants in the way of their vast arrays of sun –soaking panels. Not the only way to harness the sun's energy, as her new partner had shown with his roof designs, but by far the most profitable. The resulting desertification was a bonus as far as the solar barons were concerned.

Now, the mountain range was no longer the main problem. It wasn't high enough to explain the widening disparity in rainfall between west and east. No, that came from the catastrophic clash between the increased density of the forest on the western slopes and the hot rising thermals of the increasingly denuded plains. The rain clouds gathered their harvest of water from the oceans and across the thick forests then raced up the divide to smash headlong into the red-hot currents swirling up to the peaks. As if hitting an impenetrable wall, the clouds now dropped their load almost entirely on the west. The only water making it to the east had to travel underground, water that must wend its way through tunnels, cracks and aquifers before dissipating into the thirsty interior.

It was a pattern of damage repeated all over the planet, extremes in local ecosystems clashing with those of equally driven neighbours. Only the Survey stood between the powerful money lobby behind it all and the catastrophic environmental disaster that must come.

Yet something in her still hoped to be wrong. "Add in the populations able to be supported." She was holding her breath, she discovered.

Together they studied the new figures superimposed over the field. "About the same as now," said Fee. Caleb Winter nodded. "And without the plan?"

The figures settled, clear black against the underlying images. "On screen, number comparisons only," demanded Fee, even as his fingers worked.

The columns sprang to sharp life on his screen, the figures undeniable. This was what waited them if nothing changed.

"They are so low," Fee breathed.

"About a third of today's population, and that's only from the mountains."

"Your town is down to twenty percent."

"It's settled then." He looked no happier than her, glaring at the screen as if willing the figures to change.

She could sit still no more. "Strategy?"

It was as if he just remembered her presence. He swung round, his gaze raking over her from her small, softly-shod feet, up her dark leggings and leaf-green tunic to her face and hair. She looked different from him, did not fit here. She knew that.

"Not tonight. Not yet." He stood. "I'll show you where you're staying."

She stood too. Was forced to hurry after him to catch his long strides.

"And after?"

"We talk strategy. Just—not tonight."

Within minutes she was deposited in a small room in the attached annex. It had all the essentials, but she wasn't foolish enough to feel welcome.

"Don't leave the building. The fewer know you're in town, the better. And remember, if anyone asks, you're here on a routine calibration visit."

He stepped back, nodded a cursory farewell, and strode swiftly away. As if he couldn't rid himself of her presence soon enough.

CHAPTER TWO

Fee opened the bunkroom door and stopped out into a morning already warmer than any day she was used to. The harsh sun cut into the shadows and chased away the night's chill.

She had slept last night after a fashion. Not a restful sleep, rather one fraught with hazy images of danger. Her home tree, crashing down in a gale; dancing spikes of brown grasses jeering at her fears; and dust storms rising from the ground, racing to engulf her. In the middle of all the mayhem, the tall figure of Caleb Winter strode relentlessly forward.

Her hand jerked, and she took a hasty swallow of the bitter dask in the mug she held. Honest dask was how the man had described it last night as he gave her a brief rundown of the kitchen.

The annex layout was simple enough, much like all the other Survey quarters she'd stayed in. Bunk room, basic kitchen, laundry and combined dining/living area. Built to hold all the members of a research party, the space felt far too big and echoing for one person. Making it worse, her so-called colleague had barely checked she was settled before rushing out the door.

Escaping. That's how it had looked to her.

"Morning." A man walked down the street. Tall, dressed in a faded shirt and tough trousers like Caleb, he waved a laconic hand and went on his way. Not a curious people, these plains folk, it seemed. She lifted her mug to take another sip. It did bring you to life, she had to admit, and by the third sip came close to thinking it not such a bad drop after all.

Another person ambled down the street. A woman, dressed in similar, stout work clothes to the man. The shirt had once been red, she would guess, but was now a washed-out blush of colour. "Morning," she called to the woman, and got another laconic wave back.

A few more passed by as she stood on the doorstep. None showed much interest, but all gave her a friendly enough salute. She stood, watching the morning come to life, the sun quickly rising in the sky and the sheltering shadows of the early dawn burn off under the hot rays. She squinted into the distance. The office's front door opened onto the main street, but the annex looked out onto a side road at the edge of town. Across the road the surrounding plains faded into the distance. Vast and empty, threatening to dwarf any who failed to stand against the power of that unending panorama.

She watched the next person wander down the road. Again that slow lift of a hand in hello, the deliberate amble, seemingly slow but covering the ground easily and with a deliberate sense of purpose.

And all so much taller than her. Alien did not begin to describe how she felt. She stepped back inside and shut the door on the burning sun.

She'd only just finished breakfast when the door banged open and a familiar figure strode through.

"What the hell were you thinking? The whole town knows you're here," said Caleb Winter.

"Good morning to you, too."

He scowled back in answer as she tucked a falling strand of hair back behind her ear, wishing she had the courage to look down. Her buttons were all done up?

"Dask," she tried.

"You were meant to stay out of sight."

She remembered his farewell words of last night. "Why?"

He gave that about as much consideration as the dask mug she passed him, gulping at the burning liquid as if at water. It didn't appear to help much.

"I went into the store this morning and what's the first thing I'm asked. Who's the *pretty* stranger up at the quarters?"

"I just waved hello to a few passersby."

His fist clenched the mug handle. "We don't do *passing by* out here. The only accidental *passerby* was the first one. After that, you had Jenny May Scree, biggest gossip in town, the Mayor, the Chief Warden, and the owner of the general store—my third cousin—who just happens to also own half the rest of the shops in town."

It wasn't sounding too good. She thought of shrugging, but a strong sense of self-preservation stepped in. She tried looking meekly apologetic instead.

"Don't. I've seen your file. There's not a meek bone in your body." He gulped down another mouthful, a long deep swallow as if attempting to find sanity in its restorative powers.

She backed up, putting space between them to diminish the effect of his height. "Okay, sorry or whatever you want me to say, but I really don't see the problem. You must have had Survey staff visiting before."

"Not one planning to leave a whole damn lake behind when they left. Especially not where Central claims this one should go."

"It's in the wrong place?"

"No." It was dragged out of him. "Not for what the Survey wants it to do." He banged his mug on the table, thrust a hand through his hair and paced across the room. The man seemed to do that a lot. "You need to see it. From the ground."

Finally something that made sense.

"Finish your breakfast. We leave in half an hour." He tossed his unfinished dask into the waste chute, pushed the mug into the washer, grabbed open the door and slammed out.

Fee didn't move, sipping at the remains of her dask. It was cold. She screwed up her nose in disgust. Nothing for it but to get a move on. She hurriedly ate and showered, washing off the stale feel of the troubled night, stepped out and pulled her bag open. On top was the plains gear pack the Survey pilot had shoved into her hand as she'd entered the flyer, telling her to leave her own behind.

"No use where you're going," he'd said with little sympathy.

She'd kept hers anyway, tucking it like a talisman below the new one.

Caleb came back in exactly half an hour. He said nothing, just raked her from head to toe, studying her new gear. Tramping boots, still with that just-bought shine, khaki trousers unmarred by the persistent dust of the region. Ditto her long-sleeved shirt and cap. She had followed to the letter the guide in the pack, but all she got for her trouble was a brief nod before he picked up

her bag and strode out, clearly expecting her to follow. *So he hadn't been able to criticise her gear. One very small point to her.* She hurried to catch him up, though wondered why she'd bothered as she still had to walk double to keep up with his strides.

He glanced at her. "We have to call in on the family compound on the way. They know you're here, now the whole town has seen you, so you'll have to meet them. Too many questions otherwise." A frown touched his face. "I run the Winter livestock operations. We'll say you're coming with me to check out the grazing near the ranges. The family is used to me taking Survey staff out there. It's an easy way for them to see the land, and keeps the Survey away from the areas that matter to Solaris."

She nodded, not sure what else to say. He knew his people. "My family must not find out what is planned," he added.

"You know best." So they had something in common, apart from their Survey link. Both of them must lie to those they loved. A dubious link.

Despite the basic look of the town, she was relieved to find they were to ride out in a modern skimmer. But too soon, the vehicle carried her into a world far from anything familiar. Out here, the vegetation felt even more forbidding. Tough scrub, spiky succulents, and bleached to near translucent grasses; and hot, so hot and dry. Nothing like her forest home on the far side of the mountains where she could dance in the rain, race down a tumbling stream, lift her cheeks to a fine mist on a summer's morning. She tugged her hat farther down her head and glanced across at the man Winter, wondering how he survived this heat.

Then recognised the look on his face as he stared out at the scrub and rocks. He loved this land as much as she loved her own, and that was something she must not forget.

They passed the third array of solar panels. So far, all had been the same. State of the art, simple, but extraordinarily ugly. She pointed at the last one.

"Why not use your roofline material instead?"

"Does the same job, yeah, but on a smaller scale and it's too expensive, so I'm told." There was a wry twist to his mouth; the nearest to any hint of empathy he'd shown.

Just then, they crested a slight rise and a house came into view. She gasped. Not just any house, not this place.

The Winter Homestead.

"My mother rules here," said the man beside her, in what she was coming to recognise as typical understatement.

She looked, and felt something inside her break. Trees. There were real trees, towering around the large, airy house. It should have looked incongruous, the design of it quite unlike the ground-hugging design of the houses in town. This house was double-storied, surrounded by wide porches on both levels, and light and cheerful. Surrounding it, a garden of rare beauty, mixing trees and brightly coloured flowers.

Here was a house that said "This land is mine" rather than "I belong to this land". Yet for all its alienness, it looked right. She could only stare in wonderment.

She tried calling on her training to make sense of the incongruity. Was it the clever transition from native to exotic in the garden margins, trees and shrubs merging into trees and foreign bushes and flowers, so that by the time the eye made it to the velvet green patch of lawn in front, there was no shock of transition? All, and yet none of that quite caught it.

“Your mother’s not from here?”

He shook his head. “My great-grandmother. She was an offworlder, from Earth. No one since has dared change it. My mother’s a plainswoman but she loves it here. The native edging is hers. My father didn’t want to change anything, but she made him.”

If Fee hadn’t been nervous already, that finished it. How formidable was this woman? She’d heard all her childhood of the reputation of Sol Winter, and had guessed more from the little Caleb said and the vast litany he left unspoken, but she had hoped for an ally in his mother.

What to hope for from a woman who could stand up to the head of Winter Solaris?

Caleb pulled up to the imposing front portico. A strange choice for a family member. The small driveway heading off to the side of the house had the well-used look that said that was how most came to this house, but she said nothing. The man looked near to uncomfortable as it was.

An awkward grimace, as he opened her door. “It’s tradition, when someone hasn’t been here before.”

He marched up the wide steps leading to the front door and shoved a blunt thumb against the pad. The door slowly opened. An older man bowed slightly, a warm welcome on his face. Fee’s nerves settled fractionally.

“Your mother is waiting in the green room, young Ser.”

Caleb’s smile was equally as warm and he touched the man on the shoulder before marching in through the doors, leaving Fee to follow in his wake.

“A colleague, James,” was all the explanation he offered, but the man bowed low and gave her a formal smile of welcome.

“This way, Sera,” he said as his arm waved her in. She hurried to catch up. Caleb was opening a door, and she followed after him into a truly beautiful room. Walls sprang to life with a pale swirl of green and white, leaves and flowers mingling together in harmonic serenity, and the furniture was a mix of the decorative and the stunningly comfortable.

She halted as she noticed the tall woman rising gracefully from a chair. The likeness to her son was undeniable, especially when the woman raised her eyebrows as she looked pointedly at Fee, standing just behind her son.

“A colleague, here on a calibration visit,” said Caleb.

The woman’s eyebrows rose a notch higher, and her son shrugged in a kind of surrender.

“Mother, may I present Sera Fioruisghe ingh Bram an Scathach den Coille. Fee, my mother, Helena Bascombe Winter.”

Fee wasn’t sure which stunned her most: that he’d taken note of her full name in her file, or that the man was capable of formal courtesies.

She bowed her head to his mother and spoke the proper words of greeting from her homeland. Her new Survey clothes obviously fooled no one, for the woman looked unsurprised and returned with the accepted mountain reply.

“May you and yours flourish. You are welcome under our canopy.” She gestured to a chair beside her. “Please, be seated.”

“We can’t stay, Mother. We’re heading out to the west range to check the stock. The Survey can only spare Fee a few days.”

Huh. Fee had assumed this assignment would take weeks, rather than days. This man had some explaining to do. When they were alone, that is. For now, she took the seat indicated and blandly met his mother’s gaze.

“Den Coille? Of the festia plantations?” Her face cool, the woman’s mouth twisted in distaste.

Fee nodded. “My family’s home is directly across the ranges.”

The mother dipped her head in assent but left it at that. Her son rose abruptly. “We have to get going.”

“Your father will want to see you.”

“Is he here?”

“Out in the sheds with Ethan.”

Another of those indecipherable looks on Caleb Winter’s face. “Tell him I called in.” Then Fee was forced to gallop after him again. Just once, she wished he would remember she needed two steps to each one of his as he strode out the door and through the complex of buildings lurking behind the homestead.

He stopped at a plain, square-built shed, quite unlike the environmentally attuned buildings of the town. Inside, a man input data to a screen and another lounged against the back wall, watching. Caleb nodded to them.

“Cay.” The young man leaning against the wall nodded back. When he saw her, he straightened up, a very interested smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye.

“Hel-lo.”

Caleb frowned at him. “Down, Si.”

“So,” said the young man, taking a step forward.

Caleb frowned again, gave one of those disgruntled shrugs of his and gestured at the grinning man. “Fee, my baby brother Silas. The one making himself useful at the table is our tech wizard, Jake.” The man at the screen briefly glanced up to acknowledge her then turned back to his screen. “Fee’s here on a calibration trip. She’s busy, working.”

“Unlike some of us,” said Si with so much laughter in his voice Fee got the feeling that teasing his big brother was one of his chief delights. “Don’t listen to my surly brother, pretty lady. I’m sure you can spare me one evening to let me show you the pleasures of our humble town?”

She couldn’t stop the smile touching her lips and reluctantly shook her head, aware of the dictates of security. “Sorry, but Caleb is unfortunately right. Ask me again if I come back,” she couldn’t resist adding.

The graceless rogue took her hand and bowed low. “With the greatest of pleasure, sweetheart.”

She could almost feel the fire of Caleb’s eyes burning a hole in her back and reluctantly dropped the hand. Suddenly, a gruff shout ratcheted through the air from outside and the laughter was wiped from the young man’s face.

“Damn,” said Caleb. “Back door?”

“Too late,” said Si. “He’ll know you’re here.”

Another moment, and a large frame blocked the doorway.

It didn’t take the age of the man to tell Fee his name; the likeness to Caleb was too strong. Older, broader built, but with the same lean features and rangy height.

“Pa,” said Caleb, the formality of his voice belying the familiarity of the word. “Ethan.”

Only then did Fee notice the second man standing behind Sol Winter. A man with the face of their mother, but the same height and stance as his brothers and father.

“I heard you were here,” said Sol Winter.

“I’m on my way to the west range.”

“And the girl?”

If Fee had any illusion the man hadn’t seen her, which she didn’t, it would be gone now. The older man scanned her from head to toe, lingering on the badge on her shoulder that matched the one on his son’s.

“Survey,” he spat, “and mountain stock, from that face.”

“She’s here on calibration, as legally required.”

“Just make sure she stays on the western range.”

Legally, she could go anywhere needed for her work, but now did not seem to be a good time to remind the head of Winter Solaris of that fact. As it was, the man at the table had shut down all data screens as soon as they heard Winter Senior shout. Shut them down so Sol Winter wouldn’t think she’d seen what was on them, she realised now.

“Fee; my father Sol Winter and my brother Ethan.” There was a hint of a wearied sigh in Caleb’s voice as he answered. Did his father hear it too? His other brother stepped forward, giving her a brief nod, his face as cool as his mother’s.

“Ethan manages the solar side of the business.”

“Since my eldest son sees fit to spend his life elsewhere, someone had to.”

Caleb’s eyes darkened and he glanced over at Ethan. “We’re going now,” he said.

“In that Survey skimmer of yours, I suppose. At least take a family vehicle with a tracker to let us know if you get into trouble.”

“The Survey one in the skimmer works fine. They can find me as well as any of your trackers.”

There seemed nothing more to say after that. Sol Winter shoved into the room, forcing her and Caleb to step back and down the steps. Young Silas winked at her as she left, and the older brother, Ethan, glared at Caleb with such a look of pain in his eyes.

Family. Yes, she and Caleb definitely had that problem in common, and felt a huge rush of relief as their skimmer set out from the Winter compound to head west.

“Can they track us?”

Caleb didn’t bother asking who she meant. “No. The Survey’s tracker unit will shield us.”

She got the feeling she wasn’t the only one who suddenly felt free as they left the Winter homestead. Next stop, this new lake. A lake site Caleb Winter hadn’t told her the full truth of yet.