

Excerpt from *Twin-Bred* by Karen A. Wyle

PROLOGUE

ALICE GAZED IN AWE at her birthday present. It was a picture book — a real book with pages.

"What's it called, Mommy?"

"*The Journey.*"

"Play it, Mommy!"

"You don't play this kind of book, honey. You read it. Like this."

Many years ago, before you were born, there was no one like you on this whole planet. There was no one with two arms instead of four. There was no one who could smile. There was no one with a twinkle in her eye.

The people like you all lived far, far away. They lived on a planet called Earth. And there were oh, so many of them!

There were so many people, the sky was always full of planes, and the streets were always full of cars, and there was no room for empty places. There was no room for cows to graze in the fields, or horses to run in the meadows —

"Oooh, look at the cows!"

"We might have cows when you're older. The Council says we might. After all, we have chickens now." Alice's mother read on.

So some people on Earth decided to look for other places to go.

They looked through huge, enormous telescopes.

They sent out little robots on little ships that could travel very fast, and travel very far, and take pictures of all the new places they found —

"Did the robots find our planet, Mommy?"

"Remember, honey, it isn't just our planet. The Tofa live here too. They were here before we were."

"Did they mind when we came to Tofarn? Did they want us to go away?"

"No, honey. They didn't seem to mind at all. We couldn't exactly talk to them, not even as much as we can now, but they — sort of pointed to places, and said we could live there."

Alice wrinkled up her forehead. "If we couldn't 'zackly talk to them, how do we know that's what they said?"

Chapter 1

ELIZABETH CADELL liked to knit. Her daughter Mara, age four, liked to draw. So they sat together at the kitchen table, Elizabeth knitting a sweater for Mara, Mara holding a Child's First Tablet. A warm breeze came through the open window. Seeds floated past under a pale green sky, seeds resembling those of the dandelions that no one on Tofarn had ever seen.

Elizabeth counted her stitches, then glanced up at Mara. Mara wasn't looking at her tablet. Her eyes were closed, her lips moving slightly.

"Mara? . . . Mara!"

Mara jumped. She looked wary for a moment, then donned the innocent gaze of untroubled childhood. "Yes, Mommy? I was drawing."

"Oh?"

Elizabeth looked Mara in the eye and waited. Mara visibly weighed her chances of outlasting her mother, and surrendered. She laid the tablet carefully on the table. “Well, I wasn’t drawing just at that moment. I was — well, I was —”

“You were pretending again. About Levi. Pretending to talk to him.”

Mara wriggled in her chair. “It doesn’t feel like other pretending. Not exactly.”

Elizabeth put down her knitting and clasped her hands together. “If something isn’t real, it’s pretend. Is Levi still alive? Do you really have a twin?”

Mara looked away. Quite abruptly, she started to cry, to sob. Elizabeth jumped up and lifted Mara from her chair, carried her to the window seat, held her and cuddled her. She kissed the dark head. “Mara, sweetheart. Let’s look out at what’s real. Look, darling. See the river. See all the little creeks coming from the river. Count them with me.”

Mara sniffed and swallowed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “One. Two. Three. Four.” She pointed. “See, Mommy? The tree-seeds are blowing. They’re blowing across the river. And some of them are landing on the river.”

“Yes, honey. They’re going on a journey, down the river. If — if you want to pretend something, why don’t you pretend you’re following the seeds, to see where they go.”

Mara sniffed again and nodded. She leaned against her mother and gazed out the window. Whatever she was thinking she kept to herself.

The tall thin figures passed by in a long thin line. Most were carrying large cases with sturdy handles, using their two lower hands, leaving the upper hands free. Some held their cases in their right set of hands, leaving the left arms free to carry small children.

The crowd of humans stood and watched. A few of them, those who had spent more time with their alien neighbors, might have noticed that the characteristic odor of charred toast had been largely replaced by a smell closer to rotting fruit.

A high-pitched young voice rose above the buzz of muttered conversation. “Where are they going? Why are the Tofa leaving town?” The child’s father, holding the child on his shoulders, did not answer.

Mara stood a bit apart from the other teenagers. She made one quick sketch after another on her tablet as the Tofa filed past. One of the Tofa children turned and looked at her. She stared back, mesmerized by the alien eyes, with their swirls of white and brown and green.

“What’s your answer, Mara? Why are they leaving?”

Mara no longer needed to close her eyes or move her lips. “I don’t know, Levi. Things just kept going wrong. We don’t understand them, and who knows what they understand? I guess they thought it would be simpler, living away from us.”

“Simpler. But less interesting. For us at least. This town is going to be serene, and peaceful, and dull.”

The front end of the column of Tofa, now distant, was a blur of light brown against the muted yellow and beige of the landscape. For a moment, Mara thought she saw that one of the distant figures had five arms instead of four.

“Someday, Levi, we’ll go away to school, and we’ll live where there are Tofa again. In Varley, or Campbell City, or somewhere. And we’ll learn about them. We’ll find a way to learn more than anyone ever has.”

“You’ll have to do the learning, Mara mia. But I’ll listen in. I’ll keep you on your toes.”

The Tofa were gone. The crowd dispersed. Mara walked home, imagining her future.

“Sir? Sir, we have a problem.”

The mayor of Varley looked up from his monitor. “A problem with whom, or with what?”

His assistant considered whether to offer an opinion on whether the Tofa were Who or What, and decided against it. “It’s another complaint from the Tofa, sir. They say that humans are shaking hands.”

“People are trying to shake hands with Tofa? Which hand, I wonder.”

“No, sir. With each other. The Tofa are upset that humans are shaking hands with each other in public. Quite upset.”

“How can you tell? Oh, I know, they vibrate, or smell different, or something. If a job dealing with Tofa has done anything for me, it’s made me appreciate faces, proper ones that tell you what’s behind them. . . .”

The Campbell City police chief slammed her hand against the file cabinet. “We had an agreement! After last time, we talked to them, and we worked this out! They knew when we were holding our elections, and they knew where people would be gathering and when. We even told people not to wear blue this time! Damned if I know why, but no blue, whether your candidate wants you to or not. So why the hell are they blocking the streets?!!”

The deputy showed little emotion. He had already taken a tranquilizer. “We’ve tried to reach our Tofa counterparts, if that’s what they are. And all our snitches, plus the nearest Tofa equivalent. Nobody can explain it — at least, nobody that’ll talk to us can explain it, and whoever might be able to, won’t talk to us.”

The chief reached for a medicine patch — not, the deputy noticed with alarm, a tranquilizer, but an energy and reflex enhancer. “That is IT. We are through tiptoeing around those damned troublemakers. Get every uniform here in fifteen minutes. We are going to clear the streets, and we are going to have our elections, and we are going to do it any way we have to.”

The deputy’s phone buzzed. He answered it and listened, first confused and then relieved. “Chief, we’ve just heard from the local Tofa spokesman. They’ll be gone in two hours. No explanation, but — we can keep the polls open a little longer. We don’t want our people getting hurt, if we can just wait it out.”

The chief hesitated, then balled the patch up in her fist and tossed it across the room. “No, we don’t want our people hurt. I wouldn’t give one good goddamn whether we hurt some of *them*. Sooner or later, we’ll have to, and I won’t lose any sleep. And I won’t need any of your tranquilizers.”

Mara paced back and forth in the small apartment. Every time she approached the window, she could see the looming buildings of the university. The apartment complex had few amenities and no architectural charm, but it had been convenient for a graduate student. And it was cheap. With her second doctorate in hand, Mara might have prospects that would support a more comfortable lifestyle. She had other priorities.

“It’s late, Mara. Shouldn’t you be sleeping? Big day tomorrow. The great Dr. Cadell tells the politicians how she’s going to solve their problems.”

“I can’t sleep, Levi. Maybe I should practice the pitch again. Or rewrite it. I’m not sure about the beginning.”

“How’s this? *‘Humans and Tofa drive each other crazy. Which is a recipe for disaster. As in lots of screaming, bloody death.’*”

“That’d go over splendidly. I don’t think you’ve mastered the idiom of bureaucrats. . . . But I still don’t know how to start.”

“Then skip that part for now and move on. And remember not to sound like me.”

“All right, here’s why they should trust me with a huge amount of money and large chunks of the lifetimes of many people. Imagine you’re a politician, and tell me if this might just persuade you to take a chance.”

Mara forced herself to stand still, as she would have to stand when speaking to the Council.

“None of the blended human and Tofa communities is doing well. Those that haven’t formally disbanded are on the verge of falling apart. There are too many misunderstandings and communication failures, and they always go on too long before they’re recognized as such. And even when we recognize these failures, we then fail to resolve them. Neither our slowly improving knowledge of the Tofa language nor the Tofa’s somewhat greater mastery of rudimentary Terran has overcome a deeper, more basic lack of comprehension.”

“It seems that we cannot live in harmony together. And yet, we cannot simply resolve to live apart. We can buy some time that way — time which we must use as fruitfully as possible — but ultimately, as our human communities continue to expand, separation will become less practical. Nor can we be sure the Tofa will consistently cooperate with maintaining such separation.”

“Ah, expansion. What’s that German word?”

“Lebensraum. Hush.”

“Say lebensraum. It’ll impress them.”

“It’ll annoy them. Which, as you might point out, is your style and a bad idea.”

“When do we get to how you’re going to save the day?”

“Patience, Levi. I need to set it up. Now where was I?”

“After seventy years of the old approaches, we need something else: a whole new way to learn about each other.”

Mara paused. “Snack break. I can’t think with low blood sugar.”

“Eating, now. I don’t get eating. Of course, I understand that you don’t have our initial fuel delivery system, but it does seem incredibly cumbersome, and unnecessarily complicated.”

Mara opened the bakery box sitting on her kitchen counter. The small cakes were only slightly stale. “I am truly sorry that you’ll never understand about chocolate. Take my word for it, food is satisfying on multiple levels, and chocolate is what Prometheus really brought down from the gods to improve the lives of men.”

“Especially women, I gather.”

“OK, brother, tell me to get back to work.”

“Back to work, sis! Consider the whip cracked.”

Mara stretched and yawned.

“I’ve distributed abstracts of several studies about the interactions of twins in utero. The full studies have been provided to your staff.”

“We have observed extensive interaction between fetal twins. This interaction has been shown to be purposeful. Twins in utero touch each other. I’ve distributed an ultrasound image of one twin kissing the other’s cheek.”

“Carefully put. We don’t want them recoiling from the idea of intra-uterine makeout sessions.”

“Shut up! Don’t talk like that!”

“I’m sorry. You know I don’t really get sex, either.”

“Even more significant, the movements of twins in utero are highly synchronized. We can posit that something is going on that could be classified as communication. Then we have the extensive anecdotal evidence that twins — and not only identical, but fraternal twins — can sometimes sense important events that happen to each other, despite geographical distance.”

“And twins separated from each other experience significant stress. The ultimate separation — the death of one twin, even if it occurs before or shortly after birth, results — results — results in a significant and prolonged sense of loss —”

“Hey. Hey. Don’t do that.”

Mara gripped the window sill and stared at the white knuckles on her hands as she fought for control.

“Come on, now. This is old news. You can cope. I’m how you cope. You can keep me around for as long as you need me. Or longer — just for the pleasure of my company.”

“I’m sorry, Mara. I wish I could hold you.”

“So do I. So very, very much. . . . OK. Going on now. You know, maybe I should drop that last part.”

“That might be prudent.”

Mara took a deep breath, then another.

“While much more work remains to be done, it appears from our preliminary research that with sufficient medical support, a human woman could carry a Tofa fetus to term. Similarly, a human woman could carry twin fetuses — one human, one Tofa. It is possible an adult Tofa could do the same.”

“Why bring twins into it? Aside from our personal reasons for leaning that way. Why not just see what happens between human host-mother and Tofa fetus?”

“We could try that too. But we don’t have evidence of the same kind of synchrony between mother and fetus, other than what the fetus’ movements force on the mother. And the bond between mother and child has evolutionary and hormonal explanations that don’t apply to explain what happens between twins.”

“Male or female human fetuses? And does that question apply to the Tofa?”

“I don’t know, to both questions. If there’s a reason for one or the other to be better suited, we don’t know it yet. Why, do you have an opinion?”

“How could I? You know a lot more about males than I do, under the circumstances, to say nothing of females.”

Mara started pacing again.

“It is therefore possible that human and Tofa fetuses carried in a human uterus, or the Tofa equivalent, as twins would have some type of communication or understanding that has so far eluded our two species. And which might hold the key to our jointly surviving and flourishing on this planet.

“Of course, this is uncertain and speculative. But the importance of the goal, in my view, justifies at least exploring, at least beginning, the attempt.”

“What are you calling this project? Prenatal Politics? Natal Native Negotiations?”

“Cute. I’m thinking of the Long-Term Emissary Viviparous Initiative.”

“L.E.V.I. Thank you. Though it may not be smart. Which reminds me, someone’s going to ask you how you came up with this idea.”

“I’ve always been fascinated by twins. Twins run in my family. I had two sets of twin cousins.”

“That gets a little too close to the truth. They can’t find out about us. They’d write you off as unbalanced, at best. The lady pushing new types of twins who turned her own lost twin into an imaginary friend.”

Mara looked out the window into the night. The brief evening rain was over, but the streets still glistened under the street lamps. Two students were leaving the laboratory wing. They were too far away for her to hear their conversation, but she could see the sweeping gestures with which they shared the excitement of their discoveries.

“No, Levi. I didn’t imagine you.” She turned away from the window. “I imagine what you became.”

