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Earth Girl

Written by Janet Edwards

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JANET EDWARDS

Earth Girl



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It was on Wallam-Crane day that I finally decided what I was going to do for my degree course Foundation year. I'd had a mail about it from Issette that morning. It showed her jumping up and down on her bed in her sleep suit, waving a pillow, and singing: 'Make your mind up, Jarra! Do it! Do it! Make up, make up, make up your mind girl!' She was singing it to the tune of the new song by Zen Arrath. Issette is totally powered on him, but I don't think much of his legs.

Issette is my best friend. We're both 17 and we'd been in Nursery together, and had neighbouring rooms all through Home and Next Step. She'd put in her application for the Medical Foundation course months ago. Issette is organized and reliable. I'm not. Most of my other friends had made their decisions too, except for Keon who was planning to do absolutely nothing. He'd been doing that all through school and I had to admit he was good at it.

I didn't fancy being another Keon, so I had to decide what to do, and I had to do it fast. The deadline for applying for courses was the day after the holiday.

Wallam-Crane day is a holiday on Earth, just like on all

the other worlds, but in the circumstances we don't have celebration parties the way they do. Thaddeus Wallam-Crane invented the portal and gave humanity the stars, but we on Earth are the one in a thousand who missed out when he created the ticket to the universe.

One of my private fantasies is inventing a time machine and travelling back in time nearly six hundred and fifty years to 15 November 2142. I would then strangle Wallam-Crane at birth. If it wasn't for him, I'd be normal instead of labelled a nean, a throwback. Yes, I'm one of them. The polite people would call me Handicapped, but you can call me ape girl if you like. The name doesn't change anything. My immune system can't survive anywhere other than Earth. I'm in prison, and it's a life sentence.

If you're still scanning this, I expect it's just out of shock that an ape girl can write. 'Amaz! Totally zan!' you will cry to your friends in disbelief, but you know that I'm just the same as you really. It could have been you here on Earth, and me travelling between worlds, if only the dice had fallen differently. When you have a baby, it could turn out like I did, and have to be portalled to Earth in minutes or it dies.

My psychologist says you people are scared of us. He says that's why you call us names and have your little superstitions. We see it all on the vids. Portalling between worlds late in pregnancy turns the baby into a nean. Don't eat Karanth jelly when you're pregnant or the baby will be an ape. The latest scare is plastered all over the newzies, and everyone throws out their Karanth jelly, and it makes no difference at all.

It's all rubbish. The best scientists have been researching this for hundreds of years and they still don't have a clue. Every other handicap can be screened out or fixed, but not this one. Whether you eat Karanth jelly or not, it can get your baby just the same way it got me. Maybe they'll find

a cure one day, but with my luck I bet I'm dead by then. I expect I'll die the day beforehand, so fate can enjoy a last big laugh at my expense.

My psychologist also says I still have a lot of unresolved bitterness and anger. He's right. You've probably already noticed it. I was feeling especially bitter on 15 November 2788. I was due to meet Candace in half an hour and tell her my decision on my course, my career, my whole future life. I still hadn't made up my mind, and really needed to do some hard thinking. Naturally, I was avoiding doing that by watching the vid.

The vid info channels were all packed with special anniversary programmes. Half of them were showing that old footage of the first experiment that everyone has seen a thousand times. Wallam-Crane smirks at the camera and says: 'One small step for a man, one giant leap for humanity.' Do you know he stole that line from the first moon landing? Do you even know that they went to the moon by rocket long before they portalled there? Probably not. Well, that's a fascinating bit of pre-history for you, totally free of education tax.

The rest of the info channels were either showing bits about the first interstellar portals, or the Exodus century that emptied Earth. I switched to the vid ent channels, but they were all showing vid stars getting drunk or powered at huge parties. I spotted the male lead out of that new vid series *Defenders*. Arrack San Domex. Now there's a man with good legs. I'm a big fan of those scenes where he's looking sexy and heroic in his tight-fitting Military uniform, saving humanity from the mythical menacing aliens that we still haven't discovered. I stopped a moment to listen.

'. . . great tragedy that genius Thaddeus Wallam-Crane died so young, before he could even portal to another planet himse . . .'

I turned off the vid before Arrack could demonstrate his stupidity any further. Nice legs, not much on the brain cells. I shouted my frustration at the blank screen. 'Don't you know that the genius was already 64 when he got that first portal working? He didn't die young; he lived to celebrate his hundredth! It took them another hundred years before anyone portalled to another habitable planet. Work out how old he would have needed to be to go there, nardle brain!'

It annoys me so much when people don't know their history. I have a passion for facts and . . .

Yes, I admit it. I'd known what course I'd take all along. You've probably already seen I'm a natural historian. I was just rebelling against it because being a historian is like giving in to what fate has done to me. Everyone knows Earth is for the triple H: Hospital. History. Handicapped. There are other careers you can follow on Earth – we need the entire infrastructure any world has – but our two big speciality areas are medicine and history.

So it boiled down to this. I could be a dutiful stereotype Handicapped and become a historian, or I could rebel by not studying something I loved. Great choice. Then I thought of a third possibility. I could do it if I was crazy enough or angry enough. I was grinning like a maniac as I went out of my room and headed down to the portal in the entrance hall.

I met Candace in the huge tropical bird dome of Zoo Europe. They have an even bigger one in Zoo Africa of course, but cross continent portalling is more expensive than local and you hit time zone problems. You probably didn't know that, since Earth is the only world with more than one inhabited continent. Another tax-free fact for you.

Candace was sitting on the bench by the guppy pool. I

sat next to her, and for a moment we just watched the tiny shimmering crimson, electric blue, and emerald tails of the male guppies as they showed off to the drab females. Overhead, there were flashes of iridescent feathers from birds in flight. I loved this place, with its rampaging plants, humid jungle smells, and the constant bird song. Candace and I had been meeting here for years and I still never tired of it.

'So, I suppose you're still thinking things over,' Candace said. 'I hate to nag, but we have to get your application in by tomorrow.'

'You can nag,' I said. 'You're my ProMum. It's your job.'

I bet you've never heard of a ProMum. ProParents are what you get if your real parents don't want to know about a Handicapped baby. In 92 per cent of cases, it takes parents less than a day to register consent to make their embarrassing throwback a ward of Hospital Earth, give notice to dissolve their marriage or other relationship, and head in opposite directions while each screaming the throwback genes belonged to the other party.

My parents were in the 92 per cent. I'd had the right to attempt contact with them when I was 14, but I hadn't bothered. The exos threw me away, and I sure as chaos wasn't chasing after them and begging!

I used the exo word there. Us apes call people like you 'norms' when we're being polite, and 'exos' when we're not. I don't feel I have to be polite about parents who dumped me.

I mentioned that my psychologist thinks I still have a lot of unresolved bitterness and anger, didn't I?

Instead of parents, I have Candace for two hours a week. She is ProMum to ten of us. I don't know who the others are and I don't want to. I also don't want to know about her own kids. She must have experienced at least one serious

relationship, and have at least one child of her own, because it's a prerequisite for being a ProParent.

So, I know about all the kids who are my competition, but I prefer to ignore them and think of Candace as being mine and mine alone. She may only be mine for two hours a week, but unlike all the other adults that come and go in my life, Candace is two hours a week for ever. ProParents are for life. She'll be there to advise me when I get into a relationship, or have kids of my own, or strangle Wallam-Crane at birth. I have a ProDad too, and he was great until I got to be about 11. Since then we haven't got on so well.

I've run into a couple of the kids with real parents who moved to Earth to take care of them. I think I prefer ProParents really. They only bother to make you do something if it's really important, and if you're in trouble they're like superheroes. I mean, seriously, they have huge powers. If they suspect one of their kids is being badly treated, ProParents can wade in, claim advocate authority, and get Homes inspected, closed, anything they want. They can walk right into the board meeting of Hospital Earth if they feel it's necessary. Now that really is totally zan!

It's always been nice to know Candace had that sort of power and was on my side. I'd never needed her to use her authority before, but given what I was planning I might need it now.

It was time to break the news to her. I took it by gentle stages. 'I want to go history, so I need to start with Pre-history Foundation Year.'

'Well done,' said Candace. 'You've been working towards it for years, and it's obviously right for you, but the way you've been delaying the decision had me worried. I was afraid you'd have one of your moods and bite off your own nose by choosing something else. I've got your application ready; we just need to submit it.'

‘It could be a bit more complicated than that,’ I said. ‘I want to apply to an off-world university.’

Candace closed her eyes for a few seconds. I swear she even stopped breathing. Finally she opened her eyes again. ‘We aren’t going back to the denial phase are we? You went through the whole thing about how they must have made a mistake in your case, just like all the kids do. You elected to take up your option to portal off world on your fourteenth birthday. You went into anaphylactic shock, the medical team shipped you back, and you took a week to recover. Surely you remember that.’

‘Yes,’ I said. I’d been dying. I’d been terrified. It wasn’t something I’d ever forget.

‘Then you know it’s not a mistake. If you go off world, you’ll die. You can’t go to an off-world university!’

‘But I don’t have to go off world.’ I grinned crazily. ‘All Pre-history Foundation Year courses are held on Earth. I can transfer back to University Earth after that for the main degree.’

She tried all the sensible arguments. ‘University Earth does exactly the same Foundation course. They use the same facilities, the same dig sites, and the teaching is as good or better.’

I kept grinning. ‘I want a course run by an off-world university.’

‘You’re guaranteed to get a place on a University Earth course. You need the right grades to get on an off-world course.’

‘I have great grades, you know that.’

‘What about cost? Any education you want is free here but . . .’

Yes, I get educated free. Are you jealous? Being an ape has certain advantages. We get guaranteed places to study anything we want, and we never have to pay education tax

at the end of it. We get a guaranteed job in whatever field we like. If we don't want to work we have a guaranteed basic income. That's how my friend Keon was planning to live – by lazing around for the rest of his life. Every inhabited world contributes generously to care for the rejects of humanity. It's guilt money to ease their consciences. You lot pay up, so you can dump your reject babies on Earth and then forget about them.

'Does it actually say anywhere that my free education is limited to University Earth and not any other university?' I asked.

'I'll have to check. No one has ever thought it relevant so . . .' Candace was clearly cracking in the face of my determination. 'You do realize that the other students will be . . . difficult. They may not like you being on their course. Is that the idea? You want to vent your anger?'

'That's not the idea. Not to start with anyway. I don't want them to know what I am. I want them to think I'm one of them. Normal.'

'You *are* normal, Jarra. If you'd been born before the invention of the portal, no one would ever have known there was a problem with your immune system.'

This fact was recited to me regularly. I was normal. I wasn't to think of myself as a reject. I was to value myself. All the irritating repetition achieved was to make me briefly try fantasizing about being born six hundred years ago. Then I remembered all the wars and famines in pre-history, decided I preferred modern civilization, and went back to fantasizing about strangling Wallam-Crane.

I shook my head at Candace. 'People keep saying that to me. My psychologist says it, you say it, but you're Handicapped too so it doesn't help. I need the normal people to say it. I want to go on this course and have the real people think I'm one of them. It doesn't matter if I don't manage it for

a whole year, even a few days would work. That would really mean I'm worth something.'

There was more to it than that. At the end, when I'd fooled them all into thinking I was a real person like them, then I was planning to tell them what I was. One of the neans, one of the people whose existence they ignored, had forced herself into their cosy little lives. I could watch the shock and embarrassment in their eyes, when they realized they'd been fooled into thinking a throwback was one of them. I could yell at them, let out all the anger and resentment, and walk away laughing. It didn't seem a bright idea to tell Candace about that bit of my plan though.

'If this would help you value yourself at last . . .' Candace sat there thinking this through. 'It would be hard to fool the other students, Jarra, but you won't even get the chance to try. Your application will come from an Earth school, and they'll know what that means. Children born here without the condition commute to off-world schools, and their applications come from those.'

Yes, I know you're staggering at the thought of the expense of portalling between worlds every day just to go to school. It's true though. Even if both parents are Handicapped, nine out of ten of their kids will be able to portal off world. The guilt money of humanity pays for them to portal to normal schools to aid their assimilation into 'real society'.

Did you know, at one time they tried swapping babies? They took away the normal baby of Handicapped parents and gave them a Handicapped baby from off-world instead. They did it by force. I bet they never taught you that in your off-world school. My psychologist says I should forget about it because it generates hostility, but you shouldn't forget history; you should learn from it.

‘The staff may know,’ I said, ‘but that’s my personal data!’

‘You’re right!’ Candace was in ProMum mode now, fighting for her kid’s rights. ‘Staff can only access personal data for professional purposes. Your school’s planet of origin implies your handicap; therefore it has the same protection status as medical data. We can make that clear on your application. The staff may know, but it’s professional misconduct if they tell the students. What university do we go for?’

‘Errr . . . Asgard.’ I picked it at random because it was the home planet of that nardle-brained vid star I had a crush on. Arrack San Domex. The one with the legs.

‘Asgard . . .’ Candace took her lookup from her pocket and typed a question. Data flooded the screen and she nodded. ‘That’s a high-rated history department. Good choice.’

It was, was it? ‘Are my grades good enough? Will I get in? Should I pick somewhere easier?’

‘You have great grades, Jarra, and your relevant experience section can’t be beaten. You’ve visited more history sites in a year than their other applicants will have visited in their life time. I’d bet most of them have never even set foot on Earth. If they turn you down, they had better be able to prove every student on that course has better grades or I’ll file a legal challenge from Hospital Earth on behalf of their ward.’

‘Yay!’ I just love having a ProMum with super powers on my side.

‘As for the cost . . . It won’t be more than if you go to University Earth. If anyone argues, then I’ll take it as high as necessary to get it authorized.’

I got a lot more than my statutory two hours of Candace that day, because we sent off my application. When

University Asgard got back to work after the holiday, they were going to have a shock waiting for them. They were the first off-world university to ever get an application from an ape student, and they were going to have to accept me or Candace would go legal and tear them to shreds.

2

In the end, I didn't tell any of my friends about University Asgard, not even Issette. Asgard might find a way to wriggle out of accepting me, and then I'd look a nardle. I just said I was going history, and they assumed the rest. Anyway, everyone's attention was on Keon's startling news.

Would you believe it? Keon calmly told us he had actually applied for a course in Foundation Art! The other eight of us from our Next Step were stunned that the legendarily lazy Keon Tanaka had applied for a course at all, and totally grazzed that he'd chosen something as commercial as art.

'Well there's lots of money in it . . .' said Ross. 'But you need to be able to paint, or sculpt, or light, or *something* to be an artist. Whatever you make has to be good.'

'You know, there were times in history when that wasn't true,' I told them.

They all groaned. 'No!' said Issette. 'No history lesson. Bad, bad, Jarra!'

'Art mustn't be good,' said Keon. 'It has to be mediocre. That's the whole point. People pay a lot to have real art in their home, something unique that's totally created by human hands. It has to be good enough to look at, but bad

enough that it's obviously not one of a hundred thousand manufactured copies of a brilliant original art work.'

'Yes, but can you even manage mediocre?' asked Cathan. He was looking a bit offended, since he was going art himself and took it seriously. He saw it as a secure, high-earning career, and had already researched how Earth artists sold their work via off-world agents to hide the fact it had been created by an ape.

I was tempted to ask if Cathan could manage mediocre either, but I was good and kept quiet. Things were edgy between me and Cathan. We'd got a bit boy and girlish at the beginning of the year, starting at the big Year Day party of course. The relationship only lasted a couple of months and it was mostly arguments. Cathan had nice legs, but was so sensitive. He threw tantrums if I didn't mail him every two hours, and he didn't like the amount of time I spent watching history info vids. I'd lose my temper too, because I had a right to do stuff I liked, and . . . Well, Cathan still had a few grudges about it.

Keon shrugged. 'Maybe I won't even go to the classes. I found out I'd get more money as a student than just on basic maintenance so . . .'

All of us laughed except Cathan.

Everyone forgot about applications then. There wasn't any suspense as far as my friends were concerned, since they were guaranteed places on their chosen courses at University Earth. I was a nervous wreck though. I'd been scanning stuff about University Asgard. There was a lot of competition for places on their courses, especially history, and they'd be trying to find every reason they could to reject an ape girl.

If they rejected me . . . Well, Candace could go legal at them, but forcing my way in with a lot of publicity was no good. Everyone would know what I was, and the whole point was to fool them, and see their faces when they found

out the truth. Maybe I should have been sensible and applied to University Earth as well, but it was too late to be thinking of that. I could only hope that if necessary, Candace would throw her ProMum weight around and get me a place there.

We were due to get the mails about our degree courses on 1 December. I spent all day waiting to hear from University Asgard, nerves jumping every time a mail arrived. Mostly I flipped through vid channels, but I couldn't even concentrate on an episode of *Defenders*. By the evening, I was furious. They hadn't even bothered to reject me! I sent Candace a mail telling her exactly what I thought of off-worlders. She sent me a mail back saying the inhabited continent of Asgard was in a time zone eleven hours behind us, and they hadn't had breakfast yet.

Have you ever felt really stupid? I had no excuse at all. We have enough time zones on Earth. The everyday stuff we portal to is all local and in a similar time zone, but some of our school trips had set off in the middle of the night so that we would arrive in daylight at the other end. I'm a nardle brain. Nardle, nardle, nardle . . .

My mail from University Asgard came five hours later. They'd accepted me! They didn't sound ecstatic about it, and there was a special note about how they couldn't make any non-standard arrangements to allow for my disability, but I didn't care. I danced round my room in victory.

The special note was designed to worry me, but it didn't. They couldn't do anything to stop me taking part in all the classes. There was a shakeup in history teaching twenty years ago, because so many historians had never been to Earth at all. That wasn't so bad if they specialized in modern history, but even the leading experts in pre-history had never visited a single site. They didn't want to be contaminated by us apes! Teaching pre-history when you've never been to Earth is like teaching literature when you've never scanned a book.

So they cracked down on the whole thing, made the History Foundation course purely about pre-history, and made it compulsory for it to be held on Earth. It makes sense. You can't ignore pre-history. It's the starting point for everything that has happened since the invention of the portal. So, all historians have to learn pre-history and experience Earth dig sites right at the start of their training.

When I finished dancing round the room, I sent a jubilant mail to Candace. She wouldn't read it until next day of course. I had enough sense not to wake up my ProMum at midnight with an emergency-flagged mail unless it really was an emergency. Issette was a totally different matter. She was my best friend and I wanted to tell her this right away!

I dashed next door and stuck my hand on the door plate. I could hear the faint sound of its response from the other side of the door. A musical tone, followed by a voice saying, 'Your friend Jarra is requesting admission.'

I gave it another minute or two and then tried again. The door opened and Issette stood there in a crumpled sleep suit, looking at me with bleary, accusing eyes. 'This better be good! Are you dead or something?' She turned round without waiting for an answer, went across to the bed and flopped on it with a dramatic groan.

I followed her in and the door shut behind us. 'I got the mail about my course. I've been accepted!'

'What? You woke me up at this hour to tell me that!' Issette lifted her head to glare at me.

I grinned back at her. 'I've been accepted by University Asgard.'

'WHAT!' Issette screeched.

A computerized voice interrupted us. 'Please have consideration for others attempting to sleep at this hour and reduce your noise levels.'

Issette threw her pillow at its sensor box. We all hated

having those things in our rooms. Officially they weren't an invasion of privacy, because the units didn't record or pass on information, they just told us off reproachfully. If you kept ignoring them for too long then they started making an annoying noise like a gong being sounded every second until they beat you into submission.

It wasn't just noise they complained about either. They didn't like fire hazards, messy rooms, or you getting too boy and girlish. It does nothing for a romantic moment when a computer voice interrupts saying: 'Your current inter-person intimacy is exceeding that acceptable for your age group.'

There were always rumours going round that people had managed to hot-wire their room sensor to bypass monitoring, but most people just set the tampering alarm off and have to pay for a new unit out of their personal credits. Those things are expensive so I've never tried it myself. Cathan wasn't worth it.

'I can't wait to leave Next Step and get away from that thing,' snarled Issette. She turned back to me. 'You're not serious about University Asgard? You can't be!'

I spent the next hour convincing her I was serious, and explaining what I was planning. The computer complained about our noise level several more times. Eventually Issette started taking me seriously.

'I'd love to see their faces when they find out,' she said. 'You have to promise me to vid it and mail it to me.'

'And you have to promise to keep this secret. Don't tell anyone, none of our friends, no one. Only you and Candace know. If too many people find out about it, then someone will be bound to give it away. I can't fool the other students if they're expecting an ape to join their course.'

Issette pulled a face. 'Don't call yourself that!'

'Please have consideration for others attempting to sleep at this hour and reduce your noise levels,' said the voice.

We both groaned.

'You aren't even telling your psychologist then?' Issette was shocked.

'I'm dumping my psychologist. He's optional after I leave Next Step.' I didn't think much of psychologists, and I felt my sessions with mine were a total waste of time.

'I'd be lost without my psychologist,' said Issette, but she didn't argue any more. She was a believer in psychologists and I wasn't. We'd been round this too many times in the past to bother with it again now.

She got back to the point. 'I don't see how you can manage to fool them even if you do manage to keep it secret. You won't know all their stuff. The right clothes. The way they talk. I know we watch the vids but . . . And the sectors all have their own silly words. Those aren't in the vids we see. We don't see sector only stuff, there's only the odd bit in a comedy when they do it for a joke.'

I nodded. 'Yes, they can all speak Language, but they have dialects too. Alpha sector has the strongest dialect because those are the first planets settled during the Exodus century. Did you know, the newer the sector, the closer the dialect is to standard Language? I saw this info vid about linguistic history mapping and . . .'

Issette had her fingers in her ears. 'No history lesson. Bad, bad, Jarra!'

'Stop doing that.'

She took her fingers out of her ears. 'Well, stop lecturing me on history. You're always doing it.'

'I'm not.'

'Oh yes you are. You're obsessed.'

'I'm not obsessed.'

Issette just gave me her special look. It's a sort of hard stare, which says she's right, I'm wrong, and we both know it. It's very hard to argue with, so I gave in.

'Well, if you say so . . . Anyway, if I pretend to be from a sector, there are bound to be some other students from there, and I won't have the accent or know the dialect. My plan is to say that my parents are Military.'

Issette looked suspicious. 'Is that because you're a fan of Arrack San Domex?'

It wasn't, really it wasn't. I'd picked Asgard because of Arrack San Domex, and he plays a Military character in *Defenders*, but my decision was based on logic this time.

'No, it isn't. All the sectors have their dialect, but the Military don't. They stick to Language. When they're on assignment, their kids live in places just like Home and Next Step, and Military kids usually go Military themselves. No chance of running into one in a class of thirty history students.'

'That could work,' Issette admitted. 'That would explain your name too. Hospital Earth and the Military both use stupid old-fashioned names. I mean, "Issette"! Have you ever seen an Issette in the vids who's less than eighty?'

I giggled. Issette has successfully resolved her anger and bitterness over being Handicapped, but her psychologist is still working on her hatred of her name. The only reason she hadn't changed it years ago was that she couldn't make up her mind about a new one.

Issette fell asleep soon after that, so I went back to my own room and started scanning info vids about the Military. You can't totally trust the facts in these things, but it was fascinating all the same.

Well, the ones about Planet First opening up new worlds were fascinating. The ones about running the solar space arrays were interesting too, though I didn't follow all the science in them. The policing stuff was a bit too like sociology in school. Yeah, yeah, we have cross-sector Military so the different sectors don't have their own armies and get tempted

to re-invent war. I shouldn't be rude about it – I'm going history and I know we don't want any more wars – but it gets a bit preachy.

As for the alien standby exercises, well that was just funny. Even the Military people taking part in them sometimes started to laugh in the middle. How do you train to fight aliens when you've never met any? The answer is you get someone to imagine mad scenarios, so you find yourself fighting computer-generated bouncing-ball-shaped aliens who can stick to ceilings or eight-legged things that squirt sticky ribbons at you that explode on contact.

All right, it's serious stuff really. We haven't met intelligent aliens yet, but it's been mathematically proven that they must exist, and humanity will at some point meet them. Some of those aliens will be hostile. I may find it hard to believe, but it's a scientific fact. We have to be prepared, and the Military are doing their best.

I scanned vids all night, and made notes of what I needed to study. I had one month to create myself an identity as a kid of Military parents. If I was going to make a success of this, I needed to make Military Jarra into a real person, and know what she would know. The more I found out, the more I realized I had to learn.

The bit about Military schools was a big shock. Since Military kids usually go Military themselves, their schools cover a lot of things to prepare them for that career. Military basic training is for new recruits from the sectors. Military kids skip it because they've already done it at school.

I nearly gave up when I found out all Military kids were trained in unarmed combat. It was only a month until Year Day, and University courses started the day after that. How could I learn unarmed combat in that short a time? Should I pick a different fake background? At least there were info vids I could study on this, and if I didn't know all I should

about the Military, it was pretty certain that my fellow students would know a lot less.

In the end, I decided to stick with the Military idea. I started making up career histories for my fake Military parents, details about bases where I would have lived, and mailed Candace asking if she could arrange anything about unarmed combat training.

Candace mailed me back about nine in the morning. The mail showed her holding a glass of frujit and smiling. 'Congratulations, Jarra. I'll find out about the training, but maybe you're taking the Military research a bit too seriously. You do tend to get carried away by things. Why not have breakfast and get some sleep?'

I decided to take her advice.