**A View of the Stars**

"I never knew how beautiful it truly was out here," Rowan sighed as he tried to fall asleep in freefall aboard their small ship. It was strange with the push of the drive pulling against them in a direction other than the "down" he knew all his life. He was looking out the front port, as he was strapped in closest to it. Axel smiled at this, recalling his first time in space.

"I never tire of it," he replied with a sigh, "I was only five years old the first time I saw space up close like this. We were only on a vacation to Shangri-La on Deimos, but I've never forgotten it."

"Where's Deimos?" Mitt asked, not having heard him mention it before.

"It's one of the moons of Mars, the fourth planet of the Sol system. We lived on Mars; my dad worked at the University and my mom worked for an aerospace company. We had a big family, so as soon as I was old enough, I shipped out to go see what lay beyond our small solar system. Amitell seemed the best way, aside from joining the military. Even with all that's happened, I still don't regret being here. Mars was getting pretty crowded when I left," he told her.

"Oh, to be able to choose which world you want to live upon," she sighed in return.

"Even if we had real starships, I'd still live on Tayna. She's pretty comfortable," he replied, chuckling. "I'd like my kids to have a choice, but I think I've found my home. After all that red rock and sand, green trees and grass are refreshing."

"I'd still like to see what lies out here," Rowan ventured. "I've lived most of my life in one small village. It'd be nice to be able to tread on a new world, just once." Mitt laughed lightly at hearing the yearning in his voice.

"I'd like to go exploring, but I think Tayna's where I belong, too. Let my cubs decide things for themselves, but I know where I belong," she told them, smiling into the darkness. She and Minn had spoken true-mate vows and Tayna felt so "right" to her.

"Goodnight, Mitt, Rowan," Axel wished her as he yawned.

"Goodnight," she returned. "Goodnight to you too, Rowan," she wished.

"Goodnight to you both," he replied, still unable to tear his eyes away from the view.

"Well, time to pack it in," Brenda ordered Neil, as they were playing an intense game of Space Battles on their handheld minicomps. "Figure out who won and shut it down." Dotti smiled up at her as she and Maren were playing one of the teams.

"Just a minute, we have to finish up this round," Torr protested. Ryes, Brenda, and Ardis all exchanged glances. They'd heard this one before! Dodi just smiled as she watched them play, a sleeping Tobin in her arms. She looked like she’d found her true place and happiness, as they all welcomed her into their circle. Shadd merely chose to not come over if Torr and Dodi were around. Ryes and Ardis had adjusted to make sure to include her in other activities when they could. Still, Dodi was welcomed in their homes.

"All the cubs have crashed and it's going to be a long day tomorrow," Ryes pointed out. She didn't want to say that since no one had left her alone for a minute, she hadn't had a chance to check up on the shuttle crews her own way, yet. She wanted to see for herself that Garth and the rest were all right! She was fidgeting and a bit restless now, but was trying not to shove everyone out the door. Ardis caught her eye, seeing she was impatient about something, and that set off alarms in her head.

"What've you got planned, Ryes?" she pressed loudly, needing the others able to see it too. After last Winterfest, they decided to keep a close eye upon her, whenever Garth was away. She appeared startled by the question; her eye wide, as if caught in a plot.

"I want to check up on them - my way," she finally told her with a sigh and a dark gold blush, seeing the rest were now looking at them, too. There were questions in their eyes, then a dawning realization in some of them.

"Oh to hell with this," Maren declared, deactivating his minicomp, before his turn was finished. "That's much more fun."

"You're including me," Ardis insisted, smiling, "It’s been a while since I’ve gotten to venture out to see Tayna with you. I want to see it again."

"Alright, everyone who wants to see Tayna and how our two shuttle crews are faring, gather `round," she invited, finally giving in, knowing they wouldn't leave her alone until she included them all. Her friends moved to sit near her on the floor, joining hands with smiles upon their faces.

"You too, my dear lady," Torr ordered Dodi with a smile. She blushed as she lay Tobin down upon his blanket, in his stroller. "And the both of you, too," he said, nodding to Monty and Denas as they also delayed. They were talking in low voices, sitting removed from the rest. They moved to join their circle reluctantly.

"But I've seen Tayna from Ryes' point of view before," Monty assured him. Then saw the determination in Torr’s eyes and gave in.

"Won't this be too much?" Denas asked, unsure.

"No," Ryes assured her. "I've been getting a lot of practice at this lately. I'm learning how to handle numbers," she told her. "I don't know if by stretching out with my abilities, I actually increase their power, or if by trying new things, I learn how to focus and handle things better. All I know is the more I push at what Dr. Cruthers calls `the envelope,' the better I become at utilizing my Talents."

"If you need to draw upon my Booster Talent, feel free," Maren reminded her, smiling.

"I think I have plenty of energy, but I'll keep it in mind," she replied. "Now everyone join hands and relax while we form our inner link," she instructed. She saw them complying, nodding her head to her cousin as he joined them.

Once the link was formed and everyone settled down, she opened Empath Talent, drawing freely upon her own Booster, then drew them out to experience the night life near Winterhaven. She reached outwards to encounter the sleeping thoughts of the inhabitants of Winterhaven, itself. Stretching out further she encountered their windracers, as they dozed in their paddocks, then she lightly brushed the minds of some skin-wings as she drew the others upwards. The skin-wings were feasting as they caught the insects in midair, which were drawn to the lights around their complex. The deaths of the insects drove her onwards. She moved higher, finding a hunting night bird as he scanned the soaring land beneath him, seeking for the warmth given off by his prey. As he dove for a scatter-chase, she pulled them upwards once more. They finally drifted high above the clouds, looking down upon Tayna herself, as they passed quickly through the atmosphere, catching up to the daylight side of their world.

"Watching a colorful world turning below is what I never tire of," Brenda sent out into their inner commune. There was amusement from the other humans and Denas, but amazement from the rest, as many were seeing all this for the first time. They had never imagined what their world would look like from up above.

"It's absolutely beautiful!" Ardis declared. Her heart was pounding with excitement at this journey. Each time seemed so different and still amazing!

"I don't think I'd ever tire of it, either," Ryes agreed, smiling to herself. She hoped to never become so jaded as to take such a breathtaking view for granted. "Let's go find them, now," she warned, turning her attention outwards, away from Tayna. The pulse of life and dance of the cosmos spread out before them, amazing everyone anew. There was life among the stars too. It wasn't something they were used to, as they could clearly feel its rhythm.

"Some have said we’re merely the children of the stars. Now I can see why," Neil dared, astounded to be so drawn to the stars themselves.

"That's what it feels like!" Maren agreed, joyfully.

"That's why I usually stop right here," Ryes told them. "I don't want to lose myself out there. Once I'm sure I can safely return to myself, then someday I may journey beyond Monrush, but for now, the only star I've brushed is Monrush."

"A cautious explorer," Brenda teased.

"At times, not cautious enough," Maren countered with a mental laugh. Ryes laughed in agreement, then stretched out, knowing their crews were heading azimuth to the solar system plane and found both shuttles, very quickly.

"It seems they've hardly gone anywhere, yet," Minn protested.

"They're not going very far in the first place," Maren replied as Ryes homed in upon the occupants.

"Not everyone can travel upon the wings of a thought like Ryes can," Torr pointed out, mentally chuckling. "If we could keep her awake and looking out here all the time, we wouldn't need satellites."

"Could you check to see if anyone's near us, first?" Neil questioned, wondering how far she could perceive things, which didn't belong.

"There’re patterns to life. I can tell if it exists, and if it has a higher order, as we hold in our villages and towns," she replied. "There was a pattern of such likeness upon one of the moons of Monrush III, Tyssen, the one time I was out here exploring before, but haven’t had the time then to investigate further."

"Could you show us?" Dotti pressed, needing to see if there were other survivors from the Star Quest, too. The others caught her concern.

"They could be another people, entirely," Torr warned her, not wanting her to get her hopes up too quickly.

"They could be more starmen," Brenda cautioned, seeing what Torr meant.

"Would the humans still have survived this long?" Dodi ventured, speaking out for the first time, surprising herself, having not meant to be so loud.

"Yes, they could have, but most likely it’d be the children of any survivors," Monty assured her. "A human's average life-span is now about a hundred and sixty years. And there’ve been a few people who have lived up to a hundred and ninety years, or so."

"That's with good food and medical care," Dotti added. "Let's go check out that moon, Ryes," she urged.

"Yes. You started this and now we all need to know," Ardis agreed, feeling her reluctance.

"It still lies within the bounds of the Monrush system," Maren pointed out. "And we can always tell our intrepid astronauts what we discover, on our way back."

"All right," she finally gave in. Ryes reached out toward Tyssen, then hovered over the area on its moon which held order. It was unmistakable to all of them that here existed life, a strongly ordered life. She gently reached downwards. There was a thin atmosphere, much more so than Tayna. It gave her misgivings, but she plunged on downward, seeking them out. She found a great bubble resting upon the side of a deep canyon. It mostly protected the main living area, which appeared to be crude huts, overall. Also it looked as if they utilized the natural caves here as dwellings too. There were two wells providing water, after a fashion. They had small, terraced gardens, which seemed to sparsely support the peoples, as well as some animal pens. All-in-all, it reminded Ryes too much of Matlowe Village.

“That’s an environment shelter," Neil assured her, recognizing it. It appeared of human manufacture.

"Look, there are people in odd clothing," Denas pointed out, seeing them first. There was a small line of people walking with a small, covered wagon, heading towards the shelter. Ryes brought them closer. It turned out that here was another mix of starmen and humans. But instead of being an equality, it looked like the humans were enslaved, having to pull the cart under the crack of a whip. This brought out Ryes’ anger suddenly, as a bright hot spark. She was outraged by what she was witnessing!

"How can they do this? We are almost the same people?" Denas demanded, puzzled, and deeply disturbed.

"Maybe we shouldn't contact them after all?" Maren suggested, feeling Ryes' anger welling up from deep within.

"No. We should save the humans from this, at least," Ryes decided.

"Look, we've been noticed," Dotti pointed out, indicating a starwoman, who was looking up to them, puzzled. She stopped, looked around the area about her, then closed her eyes.

"Who are you?" she demanded. She was using Mind Voice – being clearly understood.

"I’m Ryes from Tayna. And my friends are with me. How can you think of yourselves as civilized, if you enslave humans in such a manner?" she demanded right up front, needing answers.

"Who are you to judge us and tell us what to do?" she returned, not believing she could be talking with someone from another world! The rest of her hunting party stopped as they saw she was standing still, using her Talent, and wondering what the problem was.

"I’m the Chief Executive Officer of Winterhaven. These humans fall under my jurisdiction and I will have them safely back!" she challenged her - directly.

"You can't do ANYTHING to us, if you're on Tayna," she retorted, smiling to herself, sure of this truth.

This was the last straw! Ryes suddenly reached out and flipped her head over heels, suspending her in midair with Manipulator Talent. The woman screamed as she hung out of the reach of her friends. She would’ve lost her link with them, but Ryes held that firm too, at the same time. Denas opened her Talent to help Ryes, strengthening her connection to the meld and the pool of power. She immediately felt her gratitude for the assist.

"Don't tempt me," Ryes warned, then lowered her slowly to the ground once more. "The gravity's lighter there," she told the others gathered with her, so only they heard this observation. A ripple of amusement ran through their thoughts at this daring of hers, which this stranger clearly heard.

"I'm called Nesa. If you can save your humans, will you please return us to Tayna, too? Our great-great-greats came from Tayna and were shipwrecked here on Booda, as were the parents of our humans. We promise to change, if you would return us to our homeworld, too," she pleaded, all arrogance cast aside. This could be their one and only chance of finding a new life back on the world her ancestors originated. It was only legend to them all now.

"I will advise our Base Commander, my husband, Garth," she told her, still not trusting her. "The decision will rest with him. I’ll return tomorrow to let you know what he says." With this she pulled back, feeling the first touches of her limitations. Maren added in his own Booster Talent, granting her his support. She showered him with her love and appreciation. It wasn’t as if this outing diminished her pool of power, but that his was more focused than hers. She thought his training with Saree had helped and she’d have to study a way to improve her own Talent use, now.

"I never knew you could do something like that!" Denas commented, astounded. “Actually extending your Manipulator and using it on another world! I am amazed and have never heard of anyone doing that in the before!”

"I didn’t know I could do that before either. But, if I could stop a wall of flame from engulfing people far in Tayna's past, I thought why not try it at least?” They all saw a short wisp of her memory of that event, startling most of her friends. “Here're our shuttles, again," she told them, having drawn back that far, very quickly. She’d felt Denas’ surprise at the way she used her Empath Talent, too. It must be a different kind than she’d known before.

"It seems they're just settling down for the night," Brenda observed. Ryes’ anger over the way the humans were being treated amazed her. She cared deeply for them all and would protect these strange humans to the full extent of her amazing abilities.

"Then let's wish them a goodnight," Dotti urged. There was agreement from the rest, so Ryes lightly brushed their minds, allowing everyone to say their goodnight wishes. Then she drew back from the rest to solely encompass Garth and Sabin's minds. She showed them their encounter with the inhabitants of Booda and asked what should be done about it. They clearly saw her heart and her need to rescue the humans trapped in such a hopeless life.

"We'll check out the situation, ourselves," Garth told her, seeing the way she could still reach out with her Manipulator Talent to reach another world. "I'll RADIO you about what we decide, after we place this last satellite."

"Why should we have bothered coming out here? She could've just as easily have placed it for us," Sabin suggested, humor in his mental voice. This sparked laughter all around, as both he and Garth had made their comments “loud” enough for the rest to hear them.

"If any problems develop with the satellites, we can always have Ryes check them out," Neil supplied, agreeing with him.

“And effect the repairs, if needed,” Ethan asserted, happy with this idea.

"I'd better go," Ryes told them, feeling it was time. "I'll check on all of you tomorrow," she warned. She and Ardis gave their husbands their love, as well as the rest of the shuttle crews, along with the rest of their friends giving them their love, then Ryes released the shuttle crews. She returned her friends back to Tayna, and to themselves, once more, making sure everyone was safe. They opened their eyes, back in her living room.

"We touched another world!" Dodi declared, still amazed with all she experienced.

"And they definitely don't think like us," Maren pointed out with a sigh. "At least our own people are safe," he added, smiling as he looked at his cousin.

"I think this was what I was trying to do last winter, but the cubs were almost due, and my Talent was no longer mine to command," she told him, smiling. "And now they're much further away."

"Thank goodness there's no ice storms either," Torr returned, chuckling as he stood and extended his hand to his new wife. Dodi smiled as she took it and got to her feet.

"Maybe some floor pillows for next time," Dotti suggested, grinning as Maren helped her up. Then he turned to help his cousin, who was already on her feet, smiling impishly at him.

"That's a good idea," she agreed. “We might as well have some comforts.”

"Goodnight Ryes," Neil wished her, as first he, and Brenda gave her kisses and hugs, then to the others in the room. They gathered their daughter and things, then headed for the door. "Goodnight," they both wished before leaving.

"Goodnight," Torr and Dodi wished them. "Goodnight Ryes, thanks," he told her, giving her a hug, too. The others quickly followed suit until only she, Denas and Monty remained.

"Goodnight, cousin," Denas wished her, wrapping an arm around Monty's waist. This shocked Ryes, while bringing out a chuckle of happiness from Denas. "Monty invited me over tonight, if I wanted to go. If you don't mind…" she informed her.

"Not at all," she assured them, smiling. She stepped over and hugged them both, wishing them a whispered goodnight. "I'll see you both tomorrow, then."

"Yes, ma'am," Monty agreed, smiling in delight, finally relaxing. His stomach was slowly unknotting, having expected some kind of scolding, which he realized would've been out of character for her. "Goodnight." He picked up Denas’ overnight bag.

“Goodnight,” she wished them, seeing them out the door, then closed it thoughtfully. She realized she didn't want to see either of them hurt, but it was their choice. And after what Maren put her through last year, she was done with meddling with others' lives! Ryes turned off the lights and went to bed, sure in the knowledge Garth was truly still safe and sound.