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## *heart dance*

### *chapter 1*

#### Druida City, Celta, 405 Years After Colonization, Winter, Morning before Workbell

Dufleur watched the fresh pinecone wither before her eyes and fall into dust. This experiment with time was not going at all well.

Not good, her FamCat, Fairyfoot, said telepathically. Fairyfoot had insisted on a cat tree the level of the table next to Dufleur's chair. Her chair was scuffed wood. Fairyfoot's perch was quilted velvet with gold-thread embroidered mice.

"No, not good." She wished she had her father's notes.

You want to reverse time.

She knew what she wanted to do and didn't need a cat to point it out, but managed to keep her comment between her teeth.

With a Word she dismissed the clear forcefield around the tube holding the pinecone. The cylinder exploded, sparks flying. Dufleur flung her arms in front of her face, shoved back her chair. What had happened? And why now and never before?

A yowl came from her left along with a nasty singeing odor. Fairyfoot was hopping around, the ends of her whiskers glowing red. Dufleur snapped her fingers and the fire went out. Flakes of black fell away. "That was interesting," she said.

Noooo, moaned Fairyfoot, racing through the only door of the secret room into Dufleur's bedroom. My whiskers are ugly! Horrible, horrible, horrible! How am I to judge distances with damage to my whiskers? She jumped up and down and spat at her reflection in the spotted mirror on Dufleur's bedroom closet door.

"I'm sorry," Dufleur said. Her stomach clenched. Is this what had happened to her father's lab that fatal night? She shoved the thought aside, that would lead to emotion and emotion had no place in touchy scientific experiments. "Want me to—"

You have done enough. Fairyfoot plopped down and began meticulously stroking each whisker with a licked paw.

Dufleur gulped and braced herself on the battered table set in the middle of the large

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stone room on the lowest level of D'Winterberry Residence. Now she became aware of muscles cramped from her work, eyes burning from her concentration. She wished she had the funds to leave this place and set up a proper lab, but the Family fortune was as ruined as her childhood home.

With a writestick, she noted down the failed results. She hadn't slowed time but done the complete opposite, sped it up to such a rapid rate that the fresh spruce pinecone had disintegrated. There might be a use for this spell someday, if she could standardize it and incorporate it into an object people could use, but right now it was an incremental addition to her knowledge base and a failure of what she really wanted to do.

A knock came at the door of her bedroom, beyond this hidden room she used for her illegal, secret experiments.

Damn, her cuz, Guardzman Ilex Winterberry was here a little early to collect the gift she'd made for him and his wife.

Using a voice-projection spell she called, "One moment!" Shrugging from her lab coat at a run, she flung it onto the chair, shot into her bedroom. Then she muttered a couplet to slide the stone door of the concealed room shut and grabbed her outdoor cloak.

She opened the hall door to her cuz. "Greetyou," she said, only a little out of breath.

"Greetyou, cuz," Ilex said, smiling. He was always smiling now, his serious nature lightened by his HeartBonding to the vivacious and optimistic Trif Clover and with a baby on the way. "Trif sent me for the baby robe. Still six\*\* months before the child comes and she's wild to have the gown. And when she's anxious she gives me no peace." He sniffed and a puzzled look crossed his face.

Oh, no! Dufleur'd forgotten he was sensitive to smells. With less care than she should have, she picked up the small gown she'd finished the night before and handed it to him.

He held the robe by both tiny shoulders, studying the dark green, intricately embroidered pattern. "Exquisite. Simply exquisite." He met her eyes. "This will be a treasured Family heirloom for us."

The kindness in his eyes, the affection emanating from him for her, closed her throat. "Thank you."

"You're ready for work? Why don't I walk you to the public carrier plinth?" He set the gown back in the box she'd pulled it from, put the lid on the box and sealed it with a tap of his finger.

Was she acting suspicious? Guilty? He'd notice that, too.

Fairyfoot hissed. He glanced down. "My apologies for rudeness, Fairyfoot. Greetyou."

Dufleur looked down at her Fam. Her whiskers looked fine. One word about the experiments and you find yourself a new FamWoman, she sent privately to the cat.

Fairyfoot sniffed, then offered an ingratiating smile to Ilex. Doing anything interesting today, cuz Guardzman?

Ilex looked at Dufleur with raised brows.

She sighed. "Fairyfoot cannot resist the temptation of very costly thread. She has been banned from the embroidery shop."

I am an adventurous Cat. I could help you, Fairyfoot said, whiskers twitching. Tail high, she left the bedroom for the basement hallway. Dufleur exited the chamber and let Ilex shut the

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door behind her. He sent a glance around the bedroom, but she sensed he saw nothing out of place. Still, this was his childhood home. He might very well know of the secret room. She hurried to the stairs up to the main level entryway.

"Dufleur?"

Tensing, she turned back with a strained smile that froze on her face when she saw his fingers curve over the door latch. "Yes?"

He said a short spell. "You forgot to spellshield your rooms." Now his gaze was blank. "You might want to keep your personal things . . . personal."

Her heart thumped hard. Did he have any idea she was carrying on her father's work? She wished she could do it openly, but that bitch D'Willow had made a mockery of her father's name and experiments. If anyone knew she was as fascinated with time as he, she'd lose all credibility of being a sensible person, perhaps even her job. Perhaps this place where she lived and worked. Hot rage sizzled deep inside.

Ilex cleared his throat. "Our mothers can . . . pry."

She forced herself to present a calm front, to pull her mind to this lesser concern and answer him. "They're snoops, you mean."

His lips curved. "Yes." The smile didn't reach his eyes. Neither of them had good relationships with their mothers who lived upstairs. Of course that was because neither of their mothers was a reasonable person. She spared him the knowledge that his mother, D'Winterberry, was too deep into the yar-duan liquor addiction to leave her rooms anymore.

"Your mother has paid little attention to me. As for mine," Dufleur shrugged. "Fairyfoot has been a blessing in many ways, not the least because my mother is allergic to cats. If she pries, she pays." Her smile was just as bleak as his.

He nodded.

Me! Can I go with you to the guardhouse, cuz Ilex? Another perky smile from Fairyfoot.

They were out the front door and into the winter cold before Ilex answered. He looked down at Fairyfoot. "Not today, FamCat." Then he whistled. A few seconds later his animal companion, a fox, slid out of the shadow of a nearby building and trotted up to them. "Fairyfoot, it's been a long time since you accompanied Vertic on his travels, perhaps that could appeal to you?"

Fairyfoot snorted but touched noses with Vertic. Then she opened her mouth a little and curled her tongue in that sixth sense cats have. He smells like interesting places, she admitted grudgingly.

Vertic lifted his muzzle. Cat may come with me today.

"Gracious of you," Dufleur murmured.

Vertic inclined his head. Yes.

Ilex coughed.

The fox tilted his head. Cat's whiskers on the right side of her face are shorter than the left.

Fairyfoot hissed, sent a nasty look at Dufleur.

Cat, come now. With a fluff of his full tail, Vertic turned and ran in the opposite direction. Fairyfoot followed. She was a small cat and foxes were notoriously speedy.

The FamCat would be exhausted by the time Dufleur returned to D'Winterberry

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Residence after work. Not a bad thing. Dufleur wouldn't miss her cat's comments on her time experiments, and before she let Fairyfoot back into the room she needed to do some serious shielding of the cat tree. The room, too.

She and Ilex had reached the corner and turned left. The public carrier plinth had several people standing by it. Four carrier lines stopped here, in the once noble neighborhood slowly disintegrating. Dufleur rode straight into CityCenter.

"Sure you don't want to teleport?" Ilex asked.

It would take too much of her psi energy, her Flair, that she would need for her daily work as well as more experiments this evening. "I prefer not to."

He held out his hand and she put his fingers in his. Bowing over them, he brushed a kiss on her knuckles. "Thank you again for the lovely gift."

"You're welcome."

"Dufleur . . ."

"Yes?"

"Be careful." He dropped her hand. As she watched, he disappeared from view, teleporting back to his beloved wife and her large optimistic family. He lived in Clover Compound now, surrounded by cheerful people.

Dufleur had never felt so lonely.

\* \* \*

That afternoon Saille T'Willow, GreatLord T'Willow, stood hands clasped behind him as he stared at the cryogenics tube holding his not-quite-late MotherDam, struggling to keep his bitterness from showing.

Ruis Elder, Captain of the ancient colonist ship, Nuada's Sword, stood beside him. "As you can see, her life indicators are still doing well. When the Healers find a cure for her debilitations disease, we will be able to awaken her for treatment."

"I thank you for all you have done," Saille said evenly. He hadn't made any of the arrangements. She had, the former GreatLady D'Willow, also named Saille, who had despised him. Unlike most Celtans she hadn't accepted death like a reasonable person, but had fought its coming . . . because she loathed him, hated the fact that he was her Heir and would take the title.

For generations the strongest Flaired person in the Willow Family had been female. Until him. His grandmother took it as a personal insult that he, a man, would be the foremost matchmaker on Celta.

Now she lay in the cryogenics tube, and deep in the fissures of her brain where a neuron still sparked with life she believed she would be revived. When she was, she'd reclaim everything he had . . . or struggle for power with a descendent of his. It was lowering to understand that he'd prefer that. Let someone else deal with her.

"You aren't the only one who had a relative who looked at you with disgust," Ruis said.

That was true. His MotherDam hadn't tortured him, at least not physically, like Ruis' uncle had. She hadn't sought to kill him, merely banished him to a Willow estate far outside Druida City. But both Ruis' uncle and GreatLady D'Willow had wanted power; the land, title, riches that came with being of the highest status.

"Want to pull the plug?" Ruis whispered.

The phrase meant nothing to Saille. "What?"

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Ruis bent down and opened a panel in the stand on which the tube rested, pointed at a thin, sparkling filament. "This is her life support." Leaving the door open he stood and looked at the large woman. "I can't think this will ever work. I know it doesn't seem right to me."

Saille stared at the filament. Temptation beckoned. Yes, he yearned to "pull the plug." But he couldn't. "She contracted with you." Paid the Captain an extortionate amount of gilt to refurbish the tube and be placed in it, kept alive before the last, fatal stage of her disease began.

Ruis tapped a forefinger on the clear material of the tube. "Sometimes rules – and contracts – must be bent to ensure justice. She'd die in, what, two weeks, if she wasn't inside here?"

"That's the amount of time the Healers gave her." Saille found the laugh coming from himself sounding far too harsh. "I wouldn't be surprised if she proved them wrong." She ever was contrary.

"Arrogant," Ruis said. "I've never cared for arrogant people. She didn't negotiate with me, you know." His mouth twisted. "She knew better than that. She was one of the people who voted for my execution. Instead she caught my wife in a soft moment." He shrugged. "Or my wife's telempathy assured her that D'Willow should be spared." He looked around the gleaming metal walls of the ship. "Still, it's a drain upon Ship's power and systems, even though Ship considers this an interesting experiment."

"Spare me interesting experiments," Saille said.

"My feelings exactly." Ruis scratched his chin. "I was an outcast in our culture, but even I believe in accepting death, in the soul's circling the wheel of stars into reincarnation." He waved at the tube. "This is unnatural. Our ancestors used these cylinders while they traveled from one planet to a new one, not simply for life extension. Unnatural."

Saille could only agree. But he couldn't say so. "This is what she wants, and I will obey her instructions."

Ruis slanted a look at him, lifted and dropped a shoulder. "I hear your Family has welcomed you as the new head."

Now Saille could smile with real feeling. "Yes, the ladies are an affectionate bunch." He spared one last look at the mound of his MotherDam. "She was a difficult woman to live with as the disease took its toll." And for about a hundred years before that, too.

"Well, then, you have some blessings in your life."

"Many." That was the truth.

A high, giggling shriek echoed down the hallway outside the room and Ruis laughed as the metal door slid open and his daughter toddled into the chamber.

Saille's smile froze. The little girl only reminded him that he had no beloved HeartMate. Yet.

Once more he glanced at his predecessor. She'd deliberately hidden his HeartMate from him. It had taken extraordinary measures – sending his barely spellshielded HeartGift out into the world – to find his HeartMate.

Now he knew who she was and it was time to plan another casual meeting. For tomorrow.

He turned away from the woman who had ruled his life in the past and toward his own future and the woman he hoped to share it with.