Marra awoke and looked toward the dark window. It was the second time that night she had awakened, and yet she did not know why.

Marra listened. Everything was as still as it should be on the planet Sol III, or Earth. She looked at her two sleeping sisters and then back at the window.

Something was wrong.

She heard a slow whirling sound that was beginning to grow louder.

*How strange*, she thought, and quietly got out of bed and approached the small window. Everything looked dark and still except for the strange sounds.

Marra hesitated for a few seconds before crawling back into bed.

Suddenly, she heard a scream in the night. “The Slave Raiders are here! Run for your lives!”

The warning echoed up and down the street.

Marra jumped out of bed. She got dressed and ordered her younger sisters to
do so also. Then she ran down the hall to the small room where her parents slept.

Marra knew what a Slave Raider was. Every man, woman, and child on Sol III knew what a Slave Raider was, and it meant trouble. The Slave Raiders often visited the small planet to gather people and take them off into the galaxy to be sold as slaves.

The government could do nothing about it. There was no government. Earth had just come out from under the heavy burden of an interplanetary war. It lay in shambles—no more rockets of their own, no more space flights that had once dominated the sky.

And no more government.

The cities lay in ruins. The main population had been wiped out of existence, and a handful of survivors were trying to restore the planet to the once great influence it had been in the galaxy. Right now, though, Earth was unprotected against the worst elements of the universe—which included the Slave Raiders.

Marra burst into her parents’ room. “Mamma, Daddy! The Slave Raiders are here! What should we do?”

There were tears in her eyes as she spoke, for she remembered her friend Sarah, who had disappeared during a raid a year ago. Marra’s large, violet eyes were wide with fright. Her face was pale, but she did not cry out loud.

“It’s time to go to the Place again.” Her father was speaking, and his words put Marra into motion.

Her father bent down and took Marra by her shoulders. “Listen, honey. You’re my brave little girl. The Raiders are closer than they have ever been before. We can’t all go to the Place together this time. You must take Shora. Do you
understand how important it is that you must be brave? You must watch Shora and take care of her until Mamma and I come.”

Marra nodded slowly. She was only seven, but she understood the important job that lay ahead of her. She was now responsible for the safety of her five-year-old sister. “Yes, I promise.”

Daddy smiled at her.

“When will everybody else come?” Marra asked.

“Soon, only you must hurry. Here is a little food and water if you get hungry waiting. Hurry, hurry.”

The words hurry, hurry stuck in Marra’s mind as she grabbed her little sister’s hand and kissed Mamma and Daddy good-bye. Then she was off at a run, scurrying through the dark streets, with Shora breathlessly trying to keep up.

Marra knew where the Place was. That was easy.

She remembered how many times they had been given the warning whistle. Wherever they were, Marra and the other children dropped what they were doing and ran for the Place.

Most of the warnings came during the day, but Marra was sure she could find it at night.

Marra and Shora reached the Place in about five minutes. A pale glow came from the old, atomic fallout shelter. She saw the silhouette of a man against the opening.

“Something’s wrong,” she whispered to Shora and crept up for a closer view. Suddenly, the tall man drew near. A Raider!

Marra clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming, then
whispered desperately to Shora. “Run and hide, Shora. Quickly, run and hide!”

“Why, Marra? What’s happening?”

Marra pushed her sister ahead of her and into the rubble of a nearby building. But it was too late. The Raiders saw them and rushed upon them like wild beasts.

Marra screamed. She bit the man on the arm.

He slapped her and put a hand over her mouth. Another man picked up Shora. They were taken, screaming and kicking, toward a tall ship.

Marra panicked. She had no desire to be taken to some unknown part of the galaxy and sold into slavery, far away from her family and home. She struggled the best she could, but to no avail. She and Shora were tossed rudely into the bottom hold of the spaceship.

Shora whimpered and whined, but Marra—when she could find no escape—settled back against the cold steel wall and stared into the blackness.

Finally, she fell asleep.

**CHAPTER 2**

When Marra awoke, it was as black as ever, and she was very hungry.

She took a bit of the food her father had given her and stood up to explore her new surroundings. Nothing she had experienced during her short seven years had
been terrible enough to cry over, and she certainly was not going to begin now.
She stumbled over quite a few people, and one boy called out in the darkness,
“Does anyone have any food around here? My little sister is hungry.”
“I’ve got food,” Marra offered. “But what will you give me for it?”
“An atomic-powered flashlight.”
The trade was quickly made, and Marra turned her new light on. It cast a pale, yellow glow in the room, and she could see who else had been taken aboard.
The room was full of dirty, crying children, most of whom were clinging to other children around them and feeling sorry for themselves. Marra saw that there were no other members of her family present and quickly brushed away a tear that had found its way to her eye.
Mommy and Daddy were perhaps somewhere on the other side of the ship, while Marra and Shora were trapped—maybe for a long, long time. Just a few hours ago, she had been safe and secure in her home, but she shoved that thought out of her mind. There was no use crying now. Perhaps when she got home, she would cry, but now she more pressing matter to attend to.
Like escaping.
“I’m going to explore, okay? You stay right here,” Marra commanded her younger sister.
“Okay,” Shora mumbled. She had just woken up.
Marra shone the light around the compartment until she saw a metal ladder, then climbed quickly to the top before anyone could say a word. She pushed on the hatch.
Surprisingly enough, Marra found the hatch unlocked. She smiled. This is
going to be easy. She pushed it open, climbed out, and quietly closed it. Then she walked toward a door. Next to the door, she saw a window.

And outside the window, she saw the most awesome sight. The stars were everywhere! She gasped. The ship was in deep space. Her escape plans were shattered for the moment, and she contented herself with gazing at the most beautiful sight she had ever seen.

Suddenly, Marra heard strange voices talking in a different language. She stumbled around, looking for a place to hide, but the men saw her. Their eyes opened wide, and they ran toward her.

Another man ran in front of them and began speaking roughly.

Marra was totally confused.

The other men left, and this man turned to her. He tried many languages, but only got a response when he spoke Old Sol English.

“I’m exploring,” Marra answered his question.

The man laughed. “What if every little boy and girl down there wanted to come up here and explore?” He had large smiling eyes and a merry laugh.

This was not the Slave Raiders Marra had heard about. “Are you a real, live Slave Raider?” she asked, eyes wide.

“Oh, no, not I,” the man replied. “I’m just the captain of this ship. The Raiders needed a ship and a captain. I was ‘persuaded’ to join their little escapade.” He paused. “Or else.”

Marra said nothing.

“You must be from Sol III.”

“Yes,” Marra said. “Have you ever been there?”
“Only tonight. My great-great grandfather was born there, but I was born on a star revolving around the star Rigel.”

“Oh,” was all Marra could think of to say.

“Well,” the captain said. “You better get back down to your parents. They must be worried.”

“They’re not there,” Marra whispered. “They’re back home.” Tears rolled freely down her cheeks, and she did not try to hide her sadness. The captain tried to comfort her, and Marra poured out her sorrows. “Just me and my little sister are here. Mamma and Daddy and Greg, Jason, Monty, Dirk, and Delta are all at home.”

She sniffed. “Maybe they won’t miss us much. As soon as this ship lands, I’m going to catch another ship home, so they won’t have to worry about us, and we can be a family again. Until then”—she shrugged—“I’ve got to take care of Shora. My daddy said so.”

Marra wiped her eyes. She felt much better after telling her new friend her troubles.

“Listen, little girl,” the captain said. “I’m awfully sorry about all of this. If there were any way I could get you home, I would do it. By the way, what’s your name?”

“Marra Hendricks.”

“That’s a beautiful name. Don’t ever forget your name. No matter where you go or whatever happens, never forget your name.”

Marra gave the captain a puzzled look and turned to go. “Do we get to eat at all?”
“Don’t worry about that, Marra. These men like to keep their slaves healthy. You’ll get fed.”

A Slave Raider approached and grabbed Marra by the arm. He spoke in a gruff language and shoved her toward the hatch.

When Marra turned to see the ship’s captain, he was gone.

CHAPTER 3

Later that day, Marra tried the hatch. It was locked.

She wondered if she would ever see the light of day again. Shora cried mostly or sucked her thumb in hunger.

Then came a crack of light from the ceiling. The children gazed upward. A Slave Raider climbed down and began to pull the children up, motioning them to climb the ladder.

Marra quickly obeyed. Any place was better than this dark hole.

“Where are we going?” Shora whispered.

“I don’t know. We can just wait and see I guess.”

The children were herded into a large room, where there were large, steaming pots of liquid.

“Is this dinner for us?” Marra asked. “Or breakfast?”

A tall, dark Slave Raider struck her and pushed her against a wall. All of the children were against the wall, and the Raiders seemed to be looking them over and separating them into different groups.
When a Raider approached Marra, she clutched Shora’s hand for fear of being separated. The man reached for Shora, and Marra snatched the child away from him.

“Not my sister,” she pleaded. “I have to take care of her. I promised my Daddy.”

The Raider jabbered something and grabbed Shora’s arm again. He smacked Marra’s wrist, and she screamed.

“No, no! Not Shora! Please!”

The captain entered the room just then. He ran to Marra and hugged her.

“Where are they taking Shora?” Tears streamed down Marra’s face.

“Listen, honey,” the captain said. “They’re just putting her with some other little children for now.”

“How come? Why?”

The captain looked at her sadly. There was no use trying to cover up the truth.

“The ship will be landing in a few days on a planet in the Sirius star system. That’s the Raider’s first stop. They’re going to sell a group of children there, the younger ones. The ones who will not get as good a price on Syrane, their main planet in the whole galaxy.”

“You mean Shora is going to get sold right away?” Marra cried out. “Daddy said I was supposed to take care of her. I said I would. I promised.”

“Hush, Marra. Don’t ever let the Raiders see you cry,” the captain warned. “Ever. You must be brave—at least in front of them. No matter what, you must be brave.”

Marra nodded and wiped her eyes. “Okay, Captain. But someday I’ll escape.
I’ll find Shora and we’ll go home.”

“Good girl.” The captain stood and left the room.

Marra did not see her little sister anywhere in the crowd of children gathered around the pots of liquid nourishment. The Raiders had no doubt taken her away into another room. Marra had small hope of ever seeing Shora again.

She silently filled her bowl full of the thick, dark liquid and sat down to eat. It was the most terrible-tasting food she had ever eaten. If she hadn’t been so hungry, she would have thrown it away, but she ate in silence and sat in the corner.

Every day, Marra looked for her sister, but Shora was nowhere around. Not long afterward, the ship landed on a hot, humid planet that was covered in a mist that never seemed to lift. It was here that a small group of children were led away and joined a larger group of even more children and adults.

The children left aboard the ship crowed around the port holes, trying to see through the fog. Marra got a good view at the large hatch. A few children joined her. She strained her eyes to see clearly then gasped.

“Shora!” she screamed frantically and waved with all her might.

Shora looked back once and waved. Then she was led away to a large, round platform. Shora was being sold. Little Shora.

Marra turned away from the hatch and found the captain looking at her. Her only tie with her faraway family had been broken when Shora left, so Marra was now a loner.

All alone.

“Captain Barris?” Marra began. “I’ve got nobody now. Will you take care of me and be my daddy until I go back home?”
“Oh, Marra,” the captain said. “I would love to, and I’ll try, but you must now you’re going to be sold too.”

“Yes, but it was a nice thought anyway.” Marra turned and walked slowly back to their holding compartment.
CHAPTER 4

The weeks aboard the spaceship Galaxy flew by for Marra.

While the other children sulked and cried, Marra followed Captain Barris everywhere. She grew to love him as much as did her own father, maybe even a bit more. He could give Marra the special attention that she had never received at home, not with so many other children in the family, and not with the hard life of survival.

The captain told Marra stories of the strange planets and star systems he had visited. She longed to see them too, but she knew it was impossible.

There was great excitement among the Slave Raiders. They were coming to the Capella star system, the financial and governmental center of the galaxy. The planet Syrane was their final stop for the slave trade. They had stopped at many planets along the way, but Marra had not yet been sold.

She knew this was her final stop, as well.

One day, Marra overheard the captain talking with the leader of the Slave Raiders. “Now, Tau, why not let me buy the little blond earth girl?”

“You, captain?” He laughed. “And what price can you offer? I’m sure not as much as I can get on Syrane.” He smiled, revealing a row of decayed, black teeth.

“Tau, have mercy,” the captain pleaded. “You know the market is rough on kids. No home. No parents. They grow up wishing they were dead. Listen, I’ll let
you use my ship for all of your rotten escapades if I can have the child.”

“No deal, my dear captain,” Tau said. “My new ship will be ready when we land on Syrane.”

Syrane was the most beautiful planet Marra had ever seen. From inside the dark ship, it looked like a fairyland. The children spent most of the day sitting in the dark hold while people unloaded the merchandise and supplies the ship had been carrying. One by one, boys and girls were dragged from the dark ship into the light to be sold.

The captain came personally to take Marra to her new world. He passed her a word of advice. “Don’t be afraid, Marra. Smile. Gain their trust. Do what you’re told. I’ll be coming back to this world in four years on my trading route, and I’ll look for you then.

“Don’t ever forget your name. Remember this: Crystal Springs Plaza, where you are being sold. My ship will stay two days and always leaves at midnight. Can you remember all that?”

Marra nodded. “Four years. Crystal Springs Plaza. Leaves at midnight.” She sighed. “That’s a long time, Captain, but I’ll remember. Good-bye.” She smiled weakly, and a Raider lifted her from the ship and into the middle of a group of people crowded around a circular platform.

Marra blinked as the light of the Capellan sun struck her eyes. This sun was extra bright, not like tired, old Sol. Her eyes hurt. She rubbed them as a man spoke. She had picked up enough of the Raiders’ language during her traveling that she understood most of what he was saying.
“Merchandise number sixty-seven. Female. Seven solar years. This child would make a good servant in her younger years, and as she grew older, she would be quite appealing. Notice her hair and eyes—very rare and beautiful. Now, who will be the first to bid on her?” He smiled cruelly.

“Fifty stedars!” one yelled.

“Now, my friends, will you let a lovely piece of merchandise go by for only fifty stedars?”

“Where’s she from?” someone asked.

“Sol III. Fresh stock,” came the Raider’s answer. “This girl has never been bought or sold before. You can train her as you see fit, without the worry of past training.”

“Hey, that changes things. One hundred fifty stedars!”

An awe went up from the crowd.

“Two hundred!”

Marra surveyed the crowd. They were an odd collection of beings from all over the galaxy. Some had so much hair she could not see their facial features. Some were totally hairless. She remembered what the captain said about smiling, and she laughed out loud.

There was a tremendous reaction.

“Two hundred fifty stedars!”

“Three hundred!”

“No! Five hundred stedars,” came a powerful voice.

The crowd parted to make way for a large man leading on two adults on a leash, like animals. Apparently, he had been shopping earlier that morning.
“Sold to Calliston Io for five hundred stedars.” The Slave Raider smiled broadly. He had done well today. Five hundred stedars for one slave. That was what he sometimes made after a whole day of selling. He’d been wise when he decided to visit the destroyed planet Sol III in hopes of finding fresh stock. He never believed it could produce something worth so much.

Clearly, he had assumed wrong. The girl was a good investment.

Calliston Io paid the five hundred stedars, threw a link of blue rope around Marr’s neck, and led her off the platform. The captain had seen it all. He buried his head in his hands.

Tears were in Marra’s eyes too as she took her last glimpse of the Galaxy. Good-bye, Captain. I’ll see you in four years!

She turned her attention to the buildings of the city she was being led through. Everywhere she looked she saw beauty, so different from the old Earth. She wondered if Earth had ever looked like this place.

The buildings were not tall but shaped into exotic forms. There were not motor vehicles. Instead, slaves carried their masters around on large, elegantly decorated carriages. There were few animals.

Marra took it all in and gasped in wonder.

Calliston Io lived in one of the most beautiful housing complexes in the city. Marra was led into the slave quarters and given an article of clothing. A gruff voice with strange words motioned her to put it on. Apparently, this household spoke a different language from the trader tongue she had picked up aboard ship.

Too bad.

Marra obeyed the hand motions and changed into her new garments. She
surveyed herself from head to toe. All she had left to remind her of Earth and her past was the red ribbon in her hair. They didn’t bother with her hair, so she left the ribbon in.

Her feet were not covered with funny-looking sandals that tied with thick strands of leather almost to her knees. A loose blouse hung over short pants. These were her new clothes, but Marra knew she would never get used to them.

The first weeks of Marra’s new life were the most miserable she had ever experienced. Worst even than the trip aboard the slaver ship. The strange, new language kept Marra from knowing exactly what the master and mistress wanted her to do.

This resulted in a series of sharp slaps and punishments, which persuade Marra to learn the language faster.

She never had time for herself. She had taken the place of a dead child slave that had been a runner of messengers for the household. This became Marra’s full-time work—running around the city with messages for somebody or another.

If she did not show up within a certain timeframe, and all-out search for a missing slave began. There was no possibility of escape. Where would she go?

Marra was also the odds-and-ends girl around the housing complex, doing whatever the mistress and master told her to do. Often, when she was lonely, she thought of her home on Sol III, and then she thought of Captain Barris’s promise.
Marra shivered every time she thought about it. She had a chance for freedom, if she was patient.

A chance probably no other slave on the planet Syrane would ever have.

PART TWO

MARRA’S SLAVE LIFE

CHAPTER 5

Life passed quickly for Marra. She learned the new language completely, and this made her a little happier than before. Her name, Marra, was no more. She was officially a jumble of letters and numbers, shortened to “Aire.”

One day, Marra was relieved of her regular duties by one of the more trusted slaves. “Come, Aire. We are to accompany the master to the Crystal Springs Plaza for a slave auction.”

Marra held her breath. She did not like the idea of seeing a slave auction. “Why me?” she asked.

“The master needs someone to fan him. It’s especially warm today.”

Indeed, it was warm Marra sweltered in the heat, but she could not stop fanning, not even for a moment of rest. The plaza was crowded. The slaves were all adults, and all the men had shaved heads.
Their backs were cut and bleeding, and across their shoulders were blackened branding marks. Most were swollen and infected. Dark bags hung under their eyes.

What a sorry-looking group, Marra thought. “Tell me, Master, if you please. Where are those slaves from?”

“From the Deneb system,” Calliston Io replied. “They won’t get a good price. They are used slaves being resold.”

Th slaves stood in a line and were surveyed by the crowd. They were forced to stand that way for over and hour. Many collapsed, and they were thrown back into the ship. Only a few remained standing.

“That one there.” Calliston Io motioned to a muscular-looking slave. “He was born into slavery. I can tell by the way he stands. He knows no other life. “

Marra nodded her understanding.

Another slave shifted uneasily from foot to foot. Suddenly, with a mighty leap, he jumped from the platform and began running through the city. A beam of blue light covered him, and he dropped to the ground.

“That one has not been in the slave market very long,” Calliston Io explained with a chuckle. “He still feels there is hope of escape.” He shook his head. “Fools.”

Marra shivered in spite of the heat and looked at Grecian, the trusted slave. He frowned and looked at the ground.

The selling went slowly, and Marra began to feel very hungry. She had not been hungry for a long time. Her hunger pangs brought back forgotten memories of life on Sol III, when the family had no food.

I wonder what they’re doing right now, thousands of light years away.
The memory of her family prompted Marra to quietly chant in English, “My name is Marra Hendricks. I . . . c-come from Sol III. The n-name of . . . the ship is Galaxy.” She frowned. What was the captain’s name?

She held her breath and forced herself to remember. “Captain Barris. I will never forget my—”

“What are you mumbling about, Aire?” Grecian demanded impatiently.

She sighed. “Nothing, Trusted One.”

Calliston Io clapped his hands three times. The Slave Raiders approached.

Marra’ master motioned, and a string of slaves Marra recognized from the household was handed over to the Raider.

“These slaves serve me no purpose any longer. I will sell them to you to take to another system. Maybe you can get a decent price for them.”

The slaves were led away.

Marra watched in open-mouthed terror. What is Calliston Io decided to sell her one day? She would be taken even farther away and would never see Captain Barris again. Her hope of someday escaping this life would vanish.

*I’ll die if I have to be stuffed into another slaver ship,* she thought.

Marra clenched her fists and told herself she must never, ever be resold.
The day was hot and stuffy, even in the early morning. The sun was barely up when Marra was awakened and given a hard roll and nutritive liquid.

After four long years, Marra knew her duties well. Today, she must clean the entire complex floors. Calliston Io and his family were headed out for a pleasant day at the waterway.

Tears filled Marra’s eyes. She wished that for once she could join in the fun. But slaves were never allowed to do anything but work. Marra dragged her pail of sloppy water up the stairs and began the long, tedious task of scrubbing the floors.

Marra remembered how the food had made her weak and sick at first, but once she’d gotten used to it, she’d grown a lot. Some of the slaves even thought she’d grown rather pretty.

So what? she wondered. As if the master and mistress would ever let her dress up and go along to help tend their children.

She pushed back her long, blond hair and tied it with the faded red ribbon reminder from Sol III. She must not think about Earth. She mustn’t!

The past few years she had lived only for the day, working hard enough to earn her daily ration. She knew from personal experience that work uncompleted or poorly done resulted in severe punishment, which was not easily forgotten.

Lunch was meat and bread and the liquid again. As she went back to her work, a young slave girl rushed up to her. “Aire, Aire, you’ll never guess what!”

“What?” Marra asked and went back to her scrubbing.
"A ship’s landed."

Marra paused and narrowed her violet eyes. “So what? Ships land every day.”

“Well, it’s not a slaver ship,” the girl said. “It’s a trader ship. And I heard it’s carrying wonderful things from all over the galaxy. Fabric, jewels, exotic food, marvels!”

“What does that have to do with us?” Marra demanded, dropping the scrub brush into the bucket.

“It’s the master’s daughter’s wedding, you goose,” the girl said, laughing. “He’s going to buy some marvelous things, and we slaves just might be able to dress up and serve at the wedding.” She giggled. “I know you’ll be able to serve, Aire, because you’re the prettiest.”

“Don’t talk silly, El,” Marra snapped. But inside she smiled. New clothes would be nice, but sometimes El exaggerated, and she was always acting silly.

The girl was still talking. “It may turn out as nice as back on Procyon. On, the dances we had there!”

“Don’t talk to foolish, El,” Marra warned. “You’ll get whipped. You better get back to work.”

El laughed. “Okay, okay, but this is going to be an all-right place, after all.”

“Don’t you miss Procyon at all?” Marra asked. “Your old home?”

“Of course not.” El snorted. “That old place? Why should I? I only got to serve at a dance one time. The rest of the time I was pushed around and beat.”

Marra’s heart thudded. “You mean . . . you’ve always been a slave?”

El nodded. “I don’t know any other life. It’s not too bad if you have a good
master and you get used to it. Calliston Io is pretty nice.”

He was, Marra had to admit, but she would never get used to slavery.

“I want to be free,” Marra said softly.

“That’s impossible,” El told her. “Say, come with me after you’re finished here. I can get work by the plaza, and we can get a glimpse of the new ship.”

“I can’t,” Marra said. “After this, I have to run messages.”

“I’ll try to deliver some too,” El promised. “Then we can stop off and look at the Marra II.”

“Fine.” Marra scrubbed and sighed. El seemed stupid but happy. Perhaps that was why she was always being bought and sold. Who wants to see an ol’ trader ship, anyway?

Much later, Marra dumped her bucket and ran to the Slave Watcher. “Those errands, sir?”

“Yes, slave. Here.” He gave her two packages. “You have 102 counts to get back here. I’ll press the timer when you leave. Remember to punch in, or you know what will happen. The packages go to Searle Tau’s house. Remember, 102 counts.”

“Yes, sir.” Marra left the dwelling slowly but broke into a run as soon as she was out of sight. One hundred two counts! She did the math conversion. Over an hour! The Watcher had given Marra plenty of time. Perhaps he was feeling merciful after her hard morning scrubbing floors.

Whatever the reason, Marra was not going to let all those counts go to waste. She ran all the way to Searle Tau’s house and handed a slave the packages.

The slave laughed. “What’s the hurry, little slave? Does the master feel like playing today? How many counts did you get?”
Marra frowned and turned to go. “Not enough to stand around listening to you.” She gave the slave a kick and ran.

She shuddered as she ran. Marra knew what that slave was talking about. Sometimes a cruel master felt like playing with their slaves. They gave them insufficient counts to make to across the city and back. If a slave did not punch in on time, he or she would be severely punished.

Marra stopped at the Crystal Springs Plaza to look at the trader ship. It was a sleek, nice-looking ship with a strange inscription written on the side.

_This must be the Marra II_, she thought glumly.

Suddenly, somebody brushed up beside her.

“Oh, hi, El.” Marra turned her attention toward the busy people loading and unloading cargo.

“Neat, huh?” El said.

Marra clutched El’s sleeve. “Uh-oh. Somebody’s coming. Let’s get out of here.”

They rushed off toward the shadows as two men approached the fence surrounding the launch area. Marra ran faster as the taller man shouted at her in a strange tongue.

“Wait, come back here,” Captain Barris shouted. “I want to ask you something.”

He and his first mate reached the fence. The captain clutched the wire. “I’m sure that was Marra. Positive. I recognized her hair color. How many slaves in this city have golden hair?” He let out a breath. “But why would she run, Joe?”
He turned to his second in command.

“I don’t know, Jeff,” Joe replied. He shrugged. “You shouldn’t get your hopes up. The girl has probably been sold five times during these last four years. Give it up.”

“I can’t,” Jeff Barris insisted. “And I won’t. I’ve got to find her."

He slowly walked back to his ship.

CHAPTER 7

The next morning, Calliston Io took Marra to the ship. Her sandals were worn beyond repair, so she’d gone around barefoot the past few weeks. Her hair was unkempt, and her tunic and short pants ragged.

Despite her shaggy appearance, Io indeed wanted Marra to serve at the wedding. That called for an outfit appropriate for the occasion. And where better to find such exotic garments than from the newly arrived spaceship?

Marra walked slowly behind Io as a slave was accustomed. She lowered her head as her master examined yards and yards of pale, sheer fabric. It was lovely! So sparkly and soft. Her eyes grew wide with wonder.

Calliston Io was in good humor. He held out a length of pale lavender with star sparkles dotting the fabric. “Do you like this?”

Marra smiled and nodded shyly. When had the master ever asked her about anything? Sometimes she wondered if he even knew she existed.
Apparently so.

“Good.” He flung the fabric over his arm and touched her shoulder. “Stay here. I see some new jewels for my wife.”

Marra didn’t move a muscle except to raise her head. She looked around the building at the wonders of the galaxy lay spread before her.

A strange man approached. He asked her a question in a language that sounded like gibberish to her ears. Marra shook her head and waved a hand across her face. She didn’t understand a word the tall, handsome stranger was saying.

“Do you wish to trade, slave?” he asked kindly in the Syrane language.

Marra paled. She had no money or barter items. She shook her head again and looked around wildly for Calliston Io. What would he say if he saw her talking to this man?

“It’s all right,” the man said. “I won’t bother you if—”

The man’s face turned pale. “Marra?”

“Is it you?” he asked in Old Sol English. “Marra?”

Marra wrinkled her eyebrows. The words sounded strange, yet vaguely familiar. She looked up into the man’s eyes. “Please, sir . . . I must go.”

The man grabbed her shoulders.

Marra gasped. If she screamed, Calliston Io would come running. But what would that mean for this man? He had kind eyes, full of worry and sorrow.

“Shh,” he pleaded. “It has only been four years, Marra,” he spoke in the Syrane language. Clearly, she had forgotten her native tongue. “You remember your name, don’t you? Marra. Marra.”

Marra could tell the man was on the verge of shaking her. Surely, he must
have mixed her up with another slave. The plaza was full of ragged-looking slaves.

“You’re m-mistaken, sir,” she stammered, terrified that Io would return any second.

The man looked into her eyes, smiled, and relaxed. “No, I’m not. You are the only person I have ever come across with those beautiful violet eyes and golden hair. There is no mistake. You are Marra Hendricks, from Sol III. I would stake my ship on it. I’m Captain Barris.” He gave her a little shake. “You must remember. You must.”

A tiny shiver crept up Marra’s neck and sneaked into her mind. Marra? Sol . . . Sol . . . three! Captain Barris? Yes!

Waves of memory swept over Marra. Tears sprang to her eyes. “I . . . remember,” Marra burst out. Long-forgotten English words flooded her mind, but she lapsed back into Syraenian. “But I forgot what you told me the night before I was sold. I couldn’t remember whether you said weeks, months, or years. I was only seven. I don’t even know how old I am now. The years here are different.”

“It’s been four years,” the captain told her. “You’re eleven now.”

Tears flowed freely. “Oh, Captain Barris, please take me home.”

“I will, little one,” he promised. “Tonight, at midnight.”

“I can’t.” Marra’s heart thundered in fear. “I have to serve at the master’s daughter’s wedding tonight.”

“Leave that to me,” the captain said. This evening, I’ll send a message to your house to come to me. I have several beverage samples from Betelgeuse that will please Io’s wedding guests. I’ll work it out. You must ask for seventy-five counts. With that, you can make it here, and we’ll leave.”
Marra swallowed. Seventy-five was enough time to run the errand, but not enough time to hide out in a ship until it launched. “If I’m not back to punch in within the count, an all-out search for me will go out.” She whimpered. “I’ve seen what happens to a slave that is found outside the count.”

Captain Barris knelt down. “Tell me, Marra. Are you trusted?”

She shrugged. “I guess so.” She had never given the master or mistress cause to not trust her.

“Have you always done what you’re told?”

“Yes, always.”

“Then they won’t sent out the alarm for another seventy-five counts.”

Marra’s mouth fell open. “Really?”

“Yes, really. If you are a trusted slave.”

Marra chewed her lip and pondered. The rest of Captain Barris’s last message to her came, clear as glass. He would be taking off and not returning for years.

This was her only chance to gain her freedom.

“All right, I’ll come tonight.” She lowered her eyes as Calliston Io returned, his arms full of purchases.

“Captain,” the man greeted him. “I hear you have something special in your hold.” He winked. “I might be interested. Got a special evening planned for my daughter, her betrothed, and the guests.”

“Indeed, I do.” Captain Barris folded his arms across his chest. He nudged Marra. “Send this little one this evening and I’ll provide you with samples of everything.” He winked back. “Even the contraband from the Sirius system.”

Io’s eyebrows rose. “I’d like that.” He nodded at Marra. “Come, Aire. We’re
leaving. But don’t forget this man’s face. I’ll have an errand for you later this evening.”

Marra said nothing. She didn’t even look at Captain Barris. But her insides swirled. Would this really and truly be her last night as a slave? She wondered. It seemed like an impossible dream.

El grabbed Marra the minute she got home. “I saw the fabric the master picked out for you. I bet he wants you to dance too. Of course, he would. You’re the prettiest slave in the whole household.”

Marra blushed, but with the secret of her escape plans. The lavender garment fit perfect after the seamstress sewed it. She looked in the mirror. Why, she did look pretty!

But when the message to run the errand came, Marra was dressed in her old rags and stood at the door. “How many counts, sir?”

“Fifty to the depot and back.”

“Sir, do you wish me to run all the way? The master will not be pleased if I dance and serve as if I am exhausted. This is his errand, after all, and he chose me to perform it.”

The slave laughed. “And how many would you suggest?”

“Seventy-five, sir.”

He rolled his eyes. “All right. Seventy-five it is. But it’s a strange day when a slave tells her elders how many counts.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Marra took off at a run and reached the ship in twenty counts. She crept amount the crates and barrels and sneaked up to the hatch.
“Captain Barris?” she whispered in English. “Where are you? I’m here.” She cringed. Her accent was terrible, the words cracked and broken.

The ship was dark. No one answered. Fear clutched Marra. Her mind fell back to the night when she and Shora had run to the Place in terror. The dark, the fear, the strong arms of the Raiders all rushed back. Marra felt like she was reliving that night, that she was back on Sol III, running for her life.

Suddenly, strong arms caught her in a tight grip. She opened her mouth to scream. A hand clapped over her mouth, and a voice whispered in her ear. “It’s Daddy. You’re safe now.”


“Mamma’s sleeping. You sleep now too, Mamma. I’ll take care of you.”

“No, Daddy.” Marra shook her head. “I’ve got to take care of Shora. Where is she? They got her, Daddy. The Raiders caught her.” She sobbed. “You told me to take care of her, but they got her.”

“No, Marra,” the soothing voice said. “Shora is asleep too. Right in her room. Come with me now.”

Marra felt dazed. Shora? Asleep? Somehow that didn’t seem right. But—

“Hush, or you’ll wake her.”

Marra relaxed as the man who sounded just like Daddy lifted her in his arms and carried her into the ship.
Captain Barris hurried Marra through the ship and into a small compartment next to his own quarters. “Sleep, Marra, sleep,” he told her when he laid her down on the bunk.

Marra rolled over and shut her eyes.

The captain let out a grateful sigh and closed the door. Then he raced into the control room. “Get this ship launched and off this planet,” he ordered in a tight voice.

“What’s the hurry, skipper?” First mate Joe Walsh asked.

“Just do it!”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Joe turned around and gave the orders.

“You are clear to launch,” the Syrane control tower barked.

“See you in a couple of years,” Joe snapped back. He switched off the communications and turned around to face his captain. “What’s going on?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Jeff Barris replied. “But I want to be far away and out of this system before I make any announcements. Safer for everybody that way.”

“You’re the boss—”

“Marra II, Marra II,” the comm unit blared.

“What now?” Joe muttered.

It didn’t take long for the ship’s company to find out.

“We have an escaped slave, possibly a stowaway aboard your ship. Acknowledge.”
“Acknowledged,” Captain Barris answered.

“Listen, Captain,” the radio voice urged. “This slave is worth 2,000 stedars.”

Barris whistled. “Must be a valuable slave. Whose is she?”

“Calliston Io. He values this child and has plans for her. Big plans. Find her, Barris.”

“I’ll do my best. I can use 2,000 stedars much more than I can use a stowaway slave. I’ll conduct a ship-wide search immediately.”

“The missing slave is a young girl, golden-haired, with violet eyes. A little under five feet tall and between ten and twelve earth years of age.”

“Got it,” Barris acknowledged.

For over an hour the small crew of the *Marra II* searched every nick, cranny, and storeroom. Every place except the small compartment where the little escaped slave girl slept soundly, unaware of the happenings.

Barris reported back to the Syrane control tower. “I’m sorry, folks, but there’s no slave like that aboard my ship. *Because Marra is not a slave,* he added silently.

“Are you certain, Captain?”

“I resent your questioning me,” the captain barked.

Silence.

“And now, control tower, I’m exhausted, and I would like to get some sleep while we exit your star system.”

“Acknowledged, *Marra II.* Good voyage! Syrane tower, out.”

And just like that, he had rescued Marra.

His spirits soared at what he had accomplished. “That was close, boys,” he said with a nervous laugh. Then he told them what he had done.
Clapping and whistling was the response. The crew had known for four years what their captain had intended. Now it was done, and everybody could get back to their primary job—trading.

Captain Barris slept soundly for six hours. He awoke when he heard muted crying and shrieking. He threw off his bed covers and ran to Marra’s room.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in English.

No answer. Only more crying and screaming.

Marra had spoken it so well only hours ago. He spoke Syraenian this time, and she woke up.

“I’m scared, Captain. I had a dream about being caught and punished. It was awful. Never let them take me back. Please!”

“They won’t,” the captain promised. “You never need worry about that. Now, go back to sleep. It’s only 0600, and breakfast is a couple hours away.”

Marra closed her eyes and turned over, asleep in an instant. As the captain closed the door to her compartment, he whispered, “I hope I can keep that promise, little one.”
Marra once again became accustomed to a life of freedom. Often, though, she woke in the middle of the night, dreaming of being captured and returned to the dreaded planet, Syrane. Those were horrible nights, and she usually found herself in the captain’s arms, assuring her she was safe at last.

She barely remembered how she had been rescued. It was like a dream, in which her own daddy had carried her away from Syrane and back to Earth. Only, that first morning she had awakened and found herself on Captain Barris’s ship and not anywhere near Earth.

But it had been a pleasant dream, and she was far away from Syrane.

Captain Barris ordered that Sol English be spoken on the ship so Marra could remember her forgotten language. She was a fast learner and a hard worker. Four years had taught Marra things that would stick in her mind forever.

She loved the planets Captain Barris and the *Marra II* visited. They were filled with natural marvels Marra had never dreamed of. She found a special animal found only on one planet in the galaxy, and the captain let her keep it.

A few months later, Marra was in the off-duty rec room, playing with Nootka, her small, furry friend.
“Marra?” Captain Barris ventured.

“Yeah?” Marra laughed as Nootka rolled over.

“Would you like to go home?”

It was as simple a question. So simple that Marra didn’t know what to say. She froze and let Nootka run off behind a counter. Then she slowly stood up and faced the captain.

“Home, Uncle Jeff?” she asked, dazed. Only recently Marra had begun to call the captain “uncle.” She figured he was the only family she had left.

“Home to Sol III,” he answered. “Remember it?”

Marra nodded. She remembered Sol III, all right. A slow, aching pain tore at her heart. Although torn by ruin and war, Earth was her beloved planet of birth. Tears filled her eyes. “I can’t,” she said simply and turned to catch Nootka.

“Why ever not?” the captain asked.

“I can’t go home,” Marra said. “Not without Shora. I promised my daddy I’d take care of her, and so I can’t go home without her.”

She picked up her pet and stroked his soft, pale-blue fur. An idea was tickling the back of her mind. “Uncle Jeff?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Could we find Shora? Please? Then I could go home!” Marra’s hopes soared.

The captain shook his head sorrowfully. “Oh, Marra, you know that would be impossible. Four years is a long time, and it’s a huge galaxy. Your sister was only five. Just a baby when she was sold. I wouldn’t even know where to begin to look.” He sighed.

“Please?” Marra begged. “Could you at least try the planet where she was
first taken? That misty one with all the fog? I would recognize Shora anywhere. She’s my sister. She has a birthmark on her left arm. It’s just above her elbow. It’s large. For sure I would recognize that.” Her eyes pleaded.

Captain Barris looked at Marra. Then he smiled. “All right, we’ll try Sirius VII. I might be able to participate in some brisk trading while we’re there.” He shook his head. “How you talk me into these things, I’ll never know.”

He punched the communication’s console. “Control room?”

“Yes, skipper?”

“Change course to Sirius VII.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Marra threw her arms around the captain. “How long?”

“A couple of months.”

Sirius VII was the same misty planet Marra recognized from four and a half years ago. Shivers ran up and down her arms as she remembered the condition that she and Shora were in the first time they visited this planet.

“What now, Marra?” Captain Barris asked. “Do we talk to slave owners?”

Marra paled. “Oh, no, Uncle Jeff. Never talk to them. They’ll lie themselves blue about their slaves, and any other owners’ slaves too. We need to talk to the slaves. They know everything about everyone. Especially the older slaves.”

She gave the captain a sly look. “But it’s going to be expensive. Do you have enough stedars?”

Captain Barris nodded. They set off, walking through the city.

Soon, an official-looking man approached. “You’re strangers to our city, I
presume,” he asked in Syranean, the main language of not only Syrane, but of many other planets too. “State your business.”

“I’m a trader,” the captain replied. “This is my niece. I’m looking to buy a slave. A companion for my niece.”

Marra flinched at the word “buy,” but it went unnoticed by both men.

“Well, step right up. I can certainly help you with that,” the city official said with a smile. He led them to a waiting place, where many slaves were busy working and even begging.

“I wish I had enough money to buy all these slaves, and all of those in the universe,” Marra whispered in English.

Captain Barris nodded but said nothing.

“Any of these slaves are for sale,” the official said. “Take your pick.”

“I would like to speak with them,” Marra said.

“Fine, go right ahead.” The official left them alone.

Marra walked up to an old man. “Do you remember a little girl with a large birthmark on her left arm being sold almost five years ago?”

“I may be just a slave,” the man said, spitting at their feet. “But you trash can never make me talk.”

Marra sighed and asked the same question in slave jargon. It was a special, secret language, which only slaves knew. Their masters could never understand it, and hardly knew it existed.

But Marra knew the language well.

The old man’s eyebrows shot up. “How do you know the jargon?” he snarled.

“I was a slave for almost five years,” Marra told him gently. “Now I am free
and looking for my little sister, who was sold here on this planet. Do you know anything?”

The old man’s expression softened. “No, small one, I don’t know anything about her. But I know someone who might. See that old woman?” He pointed to a corner.

Marra nodded.

“She knows everything around these parts.”

“Thank you.” Marra pressed a silver coin into the old man’s palm. A ten-stedar piece, perhaps enough to buy his freedom. Perhaps not. She hoped so.

Marra walked over to the old woman and began talking with her. For each snippet of valuable information that she gave, Marra pressed a stedar piece into her hand. She learned a lot in one short half hour.

Her spirits soared. “Guess what, Uncle Jeff! I know where Shora is. The woman told me that a small girl of Shora’s size and description was sold four and a half years ago as a new slave to Wellin, one of the wealthy merchants of the city. They called her Tess, but the woman remembered the child always yelling that her name was Sora or Shora or something like that.”

Marra took a breath and kept talking. “It’s got to be Shora. It just has to be! Anything helps. Anything—”

“Well, let’s go,” the captain said excitedly.

Marra ducked her head. “The woman told me the child was sold about a year later to a ship headed for Vega.” She drew a deep breath. “So, that’s our next stop.” She lifted her head and smiled at the captain.

“Vega!” Barris roared. “Do you know how far Vega is?”
“No."

“It will take months to get there. I think our search has come to a dead end.”

“Please, Uncle Jeff?” Marra pleaded.

He scratched his chin. “Oh, all right. I’ve only traded on Vega once before. Maybe I can get a good price for the stuff I’m picking up here on Sirius VII.” He smiled. “How can I resist that pleading smile of yours?”

The official returned just then. “Did you find anything to your liking?”

Captain Barris shook his head, but Marra interrupted. “What about that small slave boy, the one about two years old over there?” she pointed to a curly-haired little boy, barely past toddlerhood.

The official snorted. “That one can’t even work yet. And he doesn’t seem like a good companion to your little girl.”

“How much?” Marra stood firm. This was her money. “Or do I need to go elsewhere with my business?”

“Ten stedars.” The official sighed.

“Done.” Marra handed him the coins, and he handed her the boy’s papers.

She held out her hand to the toddler. “Come on, Joey.”

Joey stuck a chubby finger in his mouth and followed Marra and an open-mouthed Captain Barris.

Back on the ship, the captain unleashed his fury. “What were you trying to prove, m’girl? Buying a baby! And naming him after my first mate!”

“He had no parents. What if some mean folks bought him? Besides, that official might have gotten suspicious if we had left without buying anything after spending so much time there.” She grinned. “I told you it might be expensive.”
“You do seem to know all the tricks, m’girl.” The captain’s grin broke into a smile. Then he laughed aloud.

CHAPTER 10

The months heading to Vega passed quickly for Marra. She spent most of her time caring for Joey and teaching him English. He jabbered a lot in slave jargon, and she wanted to break that bad habit.

Vega was another beautiful planet revolving around the star, Vega. Captain Barris landed the Marra II in the capital city, where all the trading took place. While Barris traded his goods, Marra searched for Shora, bearing with her the all-powerful stedar pieces.

But she found no luck anywhere. No one had heard of a slave named Tess or Shora or had even seen a child of Shora’s description. Marra was about to give up, when a young slave girl about Marra’s age approached her.

“I heard you asking questions,” she said in slave jargon. “I remember this child with a patch of dark skin on her left arm. My previous master bought her then sold all his slaves when he moved to Procyon. This child, Rhea, was sold about a year ago to a couple from Rigel. They were visiting Vega, bought her, and then returned to the Rigel system. I remember it well, because I was sold right after the child.”

“What were their names?” Marra asked, holding her breath.

“What knows?” The girl shrugged. “But they took the child an traveled aboard
a ship called . . . hmmm . . . I think it was called the Marra II, bound for Rigel.”

“The Marra II?” Marra’s heart leaped to her throat. She threw five stedars at the slave girl, who picked them up greedily, before any stray child might.

Marra ran for the ship and found the captain preparing for liftoff.

“I was just going to go looking for you, Marra. We’re leaving. Vega was a great success. I did much better here this time than even the last time I visited. We’re making quite a profit. It was a great—”

“Uncle Jeff!” Marra was panting. “I’ve got something big to tell you.”

Captain Barris nodded, and Marra spilled her news.

“What do you mean?” The captain looked shocked at her story.

“A couple bought Shora and took her to Rigel,” she told him again. “Aboard this ship! Do you have a passenger list?”

“I sure do,” the captain said. Marra’s excitement was clearly rubbing off on him.

She followed him into the records room and watched him drag out an old logbook. He preferred keeping his records on hard copy rather than being stored in the ship’s computers.

Joey, holding Nootka, wandered in and watched. Marra peered over the captain’s shoulder as he thumbed through the captain’s log. A growing sense of frustration overwhelmed her.

“I can’t read any of this,” she complained. “It’s not written in English or in Syraneean.”

“I’ll read it to you,” the captain said. “Here it is. The Jarens—Tau and Jae. One child, Rhea. One way to Rigel.”
“Oh, Uncle Jeff! We know their names! What are we waiting for? Let’s go to Rigel!”

Joey clapped his hands, though Marra was sure he had no idea what she was yelling about. “Oh, unca! Oh, unca!”

Marra’s twelfth birthday came and went by the time they reached the Rigel star system. This system resembled the Solar system the most. There was no slavery, except for those brought in from other planets. Selling slaves on Rigel was illegal.

The ship landed near the city of Thomasville on Rigel V. It was a big city, and Captain Barris looked relaxed and at ease. This was his home. People passed him on the streets with waves and shouts of greetings. Marra was happy too, seeing how happy her uncle looked.

The captain knew just where to go. The city hall contained the names and addressed of all its citizens. “If these people are in Thomasville, we’ll find them,” he promised Marra. “If not, we’ll try another city. Then another.”

Marra nodded.

The captain found the Jarens quickly and jotted down the address.

“Do you know how to find the address?” Marra asked impatiently.

“Sure,” he said. “Follow me.

Marra skipped happily down the street behind the captain. Then suddenly she stopped and felt her face turn pale. All her former fears crept up and she almost screamed. Walking down the street were the worst group of men in the galaxy—the dreaded Slave Raiders. She clutched Joey’s hand tightly and pressed
close to Captain Barris.

“Don’t worry, Marra,” he told her. “You’re free. They won’t steal you from my side.”

The brightness of the day was lost, however, and Marra followed the captain silently.

Soon, they came to a house covered with thick plants and trees and flowers. A stone walkway led up to the door. In the front yard there was a well, and next to the well, two little girls were playing. One girl had long, red hair. The other had curly dark hair—and a large, easily seen birthmark on her left arm.

The two girls were fighting over a pail, and Marra listened.

“No, Terra, I get to bring the water in. It’s my turn.”

“No, it’s not. It’s mine. Mama said for me to do it.” She paused. Then, “Stop it, Rhea! You’re supposed to always let me have my way. You’re nothing but a slave. I’m gonna tell Mama on you, and you’ll get whipped. So there!”

The red-haired girl dropped the bucket and fled toward the house, slamming the door behind her.

The dark-haired girl, Rhea, sighed and looked at the ground. She seemed sad and lonely.

“Hello,” Marra called softly. Captain Barris had taken Joey for a walk.

The girl looked at Marra without answering.

Marra unlatched the gate and walked inside until she stood face to face with the little girl. “Shora?” she whispered.

“Huh? My name’s Rhea.”

“But it used to be Shora,” Marra said. “Don’t you remember? I’m Marra. Your

Marra held her breath. A confused looked covered Shora’s face. She shook her head.

“Don’t you remember the night Daddy told us to go to the Place? Remember the Slave Raiders? The ship? That misty planet where I never saw you again?” Tears sprang to Marra’s eyes. If Shora didn’t remember, it might be hard to convince her to run away. “Oh, Shora, don’t you remember anything?”

She felt like shaking the child. She stood so still. So . . . defeated.

Then Shora started to tremble. “I remember,” she finally whispered. “At least, I remember you. But it doesn’t make any difference.”

“Why, what do you mean?”

Shora shrugged. “I’ve been bought and sold so many times and have had so many names, that I’ve accepted it. I’ll always be a slave. After the first time, I dreamed you would find me take me home to Mamma and Daddy, but I don’t dream anymore. I don’t remember anything about Sol III except how scared I was. I can’t remember what Mamma and Daddy look like.”

Marra couldn’t remember either, but none of that matter. The only thing that mattered was that she had found her sister!

“How long has it been?” Shora asked.

“Five years. You’re ten years old now. I’ve been searching for you for over a year now. And I’ve come to take you home to Sol III. Remember my promise, Shora? That I’d take care of you?”

Shora nodded.
“Well, I didn’t do a very good job of it, did I? But after I escaped—yes, I escaped. I’ll tell you about that later. Anyway, I just couldn’t go home without you, so the captain and I looked for you. And found you. Now we can be a family again. We can go home.” She smiled.

Shora shook her head. “No, I can’t remember that much. This is my life now. I’ve been a slave since I was five years old. Don’t you see? They changed me. I’m not the same Shora you promised to take care of. I’m different now. I’m a slave. The Jarens bought me to be a playmate for their daughter, Terra. It’s not bad.” She shrugged again. “But it’s not good, either.”

“Do you want to go home?” Marra asked.

“I don’t know. I’m scared.”

“You aren’t a true slave, you know,” Marra said. “You were born a free citizen of Sol III, and so help me, you’ll die a free citizen, preferably on Sol III.”

“But people paid money for me,” Shora whispered. She glanced nervously toward the door. “They might come out any second and find you here with me.”

“Somebody made a big mistake, Shora. You were not for sale. You were stolen from Sol III.”

Shora shuffled her feet in the dirt.

Marra could see her sister thinking. Did she secretly long for her old life, her free life? Marra certainly hoped so. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Can we just leave?” Shora’s face turned white.

“Of course not,” Marra said, smiling. “But we’re going to just the same.” She dug into her pocket and pulled out paper and pen. “But first I’ll write a note.”

She scribbled the words as fast as she could. Then she dumped 200 stedars
next to the paper.

JARENS. HERE ARE 200 STEDARS FOR TAKING CARE OF SHORA. I AM NOT BUYING HER SINCE SHE IS NOT FOR SALE. SHE NEVER HAS BEEN.
FROM: MARRA OF SOL III

Marra grabbed Shora’s hand and dragged her out through the gate, down the street, and to the ship.

“Let’s get out of here,” she called to Captain Barris. “Boy, it’s a good thing we’re not on a real slave planet, or we never would have gotten away with what I just did.” She brushed the hair from her face and grinned at Shora. “We’re going home.”

PART FOUR
MARRA’S PROMISE

CHAPTER 11

Home! The word had wonderful effects on Marra and Shora. They busily prepared themselves for the meeting with their family. It would be quite a shock to their
parents when their two lost children suddenly appeared out of the past.

Joey ran around and around the ship, laughing and shouting in his baby voice over all the excitement. He was a little darling, and everybody loved him.

A few days before they reached Sol III, Marra talked to the captain.

“Uncle Jeff,” she said. “You’ve been the most important person in my life the past few years. You rescued me from the world of slavery, and you were patient enough to help me find Shora. I always wanted to explore the galaxy with you, and nobody could be a better father or uncle to me than you’ve been.”

Marra wiped her eyes and kept going. “What I’m trying to say is that I’ll miss you when I’m back on Earth, and I’ll never forget you. You cared enough to take care of me and help me get home and . . . and . . . I love you. Would you care for Joey? He can fly around the galaxy with you. He’d love it, and I think you would too. You can teach him all you know about ships and trading, and I know he loves you too.”

A sob caught in Marra’s throat. “I think I’d better go now, before I really make an idiot of myself and cry.” She turned to go.

Captain Barris caught her. He pulled her into a tight hug. “Thank you, honey. You were a brave little girl many years ago, and you’re still a brave girl, though not so little anymore. Remember, I’ll always love you, and I’ll visit Sol III often. And if you want to join Joey and me and my crew on a trading route sometime, I’ll gladly take you along.” He smiled. “Now, I need to plot our landing. It will be the same place the Slave Raiders forced me to land all those years ago. I remember it well.”

A day later, Captain Barris landed the Marra II in the exact same spot where
a certain Galaxy ship had once landed. The sun was shining, and the sky was the prettiest blue Marra could remember in all her years.

The first place Marra took Shora and the captain was the Place. Her memory was clearer than it had ever been, but the Place was nowhere to be seen.

A boy appeared practically out of nowhere. “What are you looking for?” he asked in Sol English.

“Where’s the Place?” Marra asked desperately. She needed to get her bearings somehow.

The boy snorted. “That place was destroyed by the Raiders a few years ago.”

Then Marra noticed that most of the rubble had been cleared away, and even a few young trees had been planted. Sol III was beginning to look like a civilized planet once again.

“Where does Dirk Hendricks live?” Marra asked. She judged the boy to be about her younger brother’s age. He and Delta would be eight, if she had done the math right.

“The twins?” The boy’s face brightened. “You know them?”

“Yes.”

“They live over on Juno Street now. They used to live right around here, but they moved when things got better.”

“Do the Raiders come back often?” Marra asked with a catch in her voice.

“They?” The boy laughed. “Nope. Sol III’s getting better at protecting us.”

“Thanks.”

Marra gave Captain Barris one more hug. “Shora and I can find Juno Street. I know this is hard. On both of us.” She sniffed.
“I do not want to barge into a family reunion,” the captain said. Tears were in his eyes too. He hugged Marra one more time, then he picked up Joey and headed back to his ship.

“Good-bye, Captain!” Marra shouted.

He waved and soon disappeared around a corner.

Marra grabbed Shora’s hand and the girls ran all the way to Juno Street. Marra giggled when she saw “Hendricks” written on a brand-new, shiny mailbox in front of a simple but sharp-looking two-story house.

Two teenaged voices were arguing. “That must be Jason and Monty. They were always picking on each other.” The familiar words sent a warm glow through Marra.

Suddenly, the whole family came out of the front door and down the steps.

Marra’s heart filled. “Mamma! Daddy! We’re home!”

She started running.

Mamma put her hand to her throat and turned white. “No, it can’t be.” She swayed, and her husband caught her in his arms.

“Marra?” Daddy whispered, clearly in shock. “After all these long years. Can it really be you? And Shora?”

Marra threw herself into her father’s strong arms. “I remembered the promise, Daddy. I took care of Shora and brought her home. We’re home to stay.”

There was not a happier sound than the running feet, the shouts, and the pats of welcome from the Hendricks family to their once-lost children. It would take hours and even days to retell the story of slavery and escape, of excitement and adventures—good and bad—that Marra and Shora had experienced. And of
course, they must hear everything that had happened on Sol III during their absence.

But that was all right. After all, they were a family again, and they had all the time in the world to tell their stories.