

Finding Their Footing

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Anke had been worried that the shuttle from Gergasi Station to Öpik would be too much for Femke, and she would get tired and whiny. The boys were old enough to behave, but Femke was only seven Earth-standard, and they couldn't afford a sleeper berth for that leg of the trip. It was a lot to ask of her.

Femke, however, had been a trooper. Emerens and Koenraad had wanted to run off to watch their departure from Gergasi through the windows. Anke didn't even have to tell Emerens to take Femke with them.

"He's a good big brother," said the old lady in the seat across from her. "They do know they aren't really windows, don't they?"

Anke forced a polite smile. The old lady must be an Earther. No one else cared about the difference between a viewscreen and a window: a window was the thing you could see out of. "They understand," she said. "They've lived out here their whole lives. I don't think they've ever seen a real window."

"Just imagine!" said the old lady politely. She kept looking at Anke and did not seem to be done with the conversation.

"They're not very common out here, I'm afraid," said Anke, who had spent most of her marriage talking to her husband's aunts and uncles and keeping them jolly when she would rather be doing something else. "We take it a bit for granted."

"Are you heading in-system now?"

"Not anywhere they'll have windows. Only as far as Callisto eventually—that's where my new position is. We're stopping off on Triton on the way to see the first descent into one of its cryovolcanoes."

"Are you!" said the old lady. "My goodness, what a coincidence. That's just where I'm headed. I'm a bit of a cryovolcanology buff."

Anke blinked at her in surprise. "Why then, what are you doing out here? We haven't anything that would interest you, only tiny accreted rocks."

"Even at my age, my dear, you'll find you can't only do what pleases you," said the old lady. "Sometimes you must do business as well. But now I have finished my business at Gergasi and

will be making the entire run from here to Öpik to Triton with you.”

“How nice,” said Anke weakly.

“I’m Georgette Bouchard.”

“Anke . . .” Anke stopped. The divorce from Bedri’s family had only been final a few days, so she and the children had just stopped being Wongs, and she wasn’t used to it. Her choice to take back Lam as a surname was entirely whim at this point, since her own family was in shambles and could neither object nor protect them. “Anke Lam,” she said firmly. “The children are Emerens and Koenraad and Femke, from biggest to littlest. All Lams.”

“And what nice little Lams they are,” said Madame Bouchard. Anke stared at her. Was it meant to be a name pun? It was, on the baby sheep. How . . . tedious. She smiled with her mouth closed. Madame Bouchard smiled, too, and looked as though she was going back to her reading, but she said, “They are small for the cryovolcano trip.”

“I know, but they wanted it,” said Anke. “They want it desperately. It’s the last of our money from—it’s the last of our money. We voted what to do on our way as we move, to have an adventure, and the little ones were set on it. And the scientists promise that they can show them things that they will understand.”

“I’m sure they do,” said Madame Bouchard. “The scientists on this project are very good with the public. They have to be, to get funding.”

She did go back to her reading after all, to Anke’s relief. Anke was left waiting for the children to come back from the viewscreens and tell her about the launch, though she had left Gergasi Station dozens of times in her life and this was objectively no different than any of them.

Except that she was probably not coming home to the Oort Cloud again for a long time, perhaps not ever, and she found that she could not watch that, not if she was to remain cheerful for the children.

She found herself thinking over the part she had not wanted to tell the old stranger she was sharing the compartment with, about their trip to Triton. When they had been arranging to leave home, in the chilly horrible days after Bedri’s death, she had realized that there was a little extra to spare. She sat the three children down.

“We have a choice,” she said. “We have a little extra money, beyond what we need to save for emergencies. We can use it to get a little bit nicer place once we get to Callisto—with a garden of our own instead of a shared one, perhaps, or one more room.”

Koenraad eyed her warily. “What’s the other choice?”

“The other choice is that we can have an adventure on our way in-system to Callisto. We can use some of our divorce resettlement money to go somewhere special—museums or a resort park or, just anywhere really—or there’s a geological survey on Triton, going down into one of the cryovolcanoes there for the first time.”

“That’s it,” said Emerens firmly. “That’s us, the cryovolcanoes.”

“What’s a cryovolcano?” asked Femke.

“It’s a volcano made out of ice and other frozen things, on an ice and water moon,” said Emerens. “Instead of out of rock and lava.”

“That’s so *great*,” said Koenraad.

“There’s no guarantee it’ll erupt while we’re there,” said Emerens.

“I hope it won’t!” said Anke. “They’ll have studied the timing very carefully. There will be scientists down in it. We might be down in it. And we haven’t agreed that we’re going there anyway. We have to vote.”

The three children looked at her pityingly, as though she was not very bright. She and Bedri had gotten used to this part of parenthood, when the children would go rushing on ahead into the great black open while adults flapped their hands and said things about being sensible.

“Of course we’re going,” said Koenraad. “It’s the first time into one of Triton’s cryovolcanoes, and we can be there? Of course! Femke, you do see that, don’t you?”

“Of course,” said his sister sturdily. “Mama, do let’s. What do you have to pack for cryovolcanoes? Socks, don’t you? You’ll feel all right about it if we have our warm socks?”

Anke laughed helplessly. “We’re moving, my darlings. We will have our everything. Everything

in little duffel bags and a few bigger boxes, and much of it will have to stay here because it isn't properly ours, it belongs to the family, we'll have to buy new."

"But our socks." Femke pushed her little round face into Anke's. "You'll make sure we have warm dry socks and lichen bars, and it will be all right, and do let's go, Mama."

Anke craned her neck back a little so that she could see her sons' impatient faces around her daughter's. "All right, all right, it's unanimous, then," she said. "But you have to remember that, no matter what happens. We all voted for it."

"Of course we did," said Koenraad. "What else could we have voted for, a stupid beach dome?"

"A lot of people have a very nice time at a beach dome," said Anke. "Don't be a snob."

Koenraad made a rude noise. "They only have a nice time because no one has told them they have a chance at a cryovolcano, and we're not telling them either or they might buy our spots out from under us. Go buy our spots *now*, Mother, before someone else does."

Anke was relieved to find something they were looking forward to. Divorcing their ship family, while none of them doubted the decision, was hard on children who had known no other life, and it was good to have a distraction. Anke had refused to give her children up when the ship family wanted to restructure for efficiency in the restructuring that followed Bedri's death, all the deaths, and she felt—knew—that that was the right choice. But the adjustment had not been a smooth one.

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When they had successfully left Gergasi Station, the children came flocking back, full of tales of what it looked like, how the artificial grav powering up to drive had warped their view of space around the ship and everything was unstable in ways you could *actually see*, not like the normal instabilities everyone was used to.

The old lady across the compartment listened attentively. "Is it your first time leaving the Oort Cloud?" she asked.

The children were immediately diverted. "Yes, of course," said Koenraad. "The Oort is *huge*. Practically everything is here except planets."

"Öpik isn't even outside the Oort properly," Emerens explained. "But we haven't even been to Öpik before. Mostly our family—I mean our old family—stayed in the outer reaches. We had cousins to handle the in-system people, of course, but—" He waved the in-system interface specialists off like a miner sloughing off low-value debris in low-grav.

"I am myself an in-system person," said Madame Bouchard gravely. "I hope you enjoy your in-system experiences."

"Oh!" said Femke. She walked up to Madame Bouchard and peered at her. "Are you really? Have you seen Earth? Our mama designs soils, you know."

"I did not know," said Madame Bouchard.

"Very good ones," said Emerens loyally. "They need a variety on Callisto, where we're moving, in their gardens. Mother is going to design soils, and we are going to school. Like on Earth. Have you seen Earth?"

"I have."

The children looked at her with awe. "Your family must be very large," said Femke.

"Femke!" said Anke. "In-system people don't talk about that! I'm terribly sorry, you see out here we—"

"I know," said Madame Bouchard. "It's all right. My family is actually very small. But I have a lot of money. When you go in-system, you will find that people don't want to say that out loud. They want you to figure it out quietly."

"I'm very good at that," said Femke. "Like when someone's mama and daddy are not good genetic matches, and they had to get a different bio-daddy out of the Space Chicken Database, and I figure it out because you can see how they look, I never say it out loud. Not for months now."

Madame Bouchard discovered that she had a cough and could not speak for some time.

"Yes, sweet," said Anke wearily, leaning her head against her seat's headrest. "Just exactly like that."

Madame Bouchard recovered herself. "Come and sit by me and tell me about yourselves. It's all

right, your mother doesn't mind." Emerens looked to Anke with a question in his eyes, but the younger two were already pulling up files on their handhelds.

Anke watched them carefully, but Madame Bouchard was genuinely enjoying herself. She let herself relax and read. The book was not an engaging one, just a dry recitation of facts about Calisto that one of the nicer cousins had given her as a goodbye present. She drifted off to sleep, waking with a start to the announcement, in four languages, that they had reached Öpik.

"Emerens!" she said. "You should have—why didn't—"

"They were fine," Madame Bouchard assured her with a smile.

"Of course we were," said Emerens. "What were we going to do, Mama? Set the shuttle on fire?"

Customs into Öpik Station took minimal time, since they were still in the Oort and still citizens. They lost track of Madame Bouchard in the lines, which Anke thought was probably just as well: it allowed her to take the children to an Amalthean-style spicy noodle restaurant without having to agree with a stranger on what to eat, then adjourn to an arcade to play cheap games and laugh and be silly together.

"I like the inner system," Femke announced, when they were getting ready for bed in their hotel room.

"This isn't the inner system, silly," Koenraad told her. "It won't be like this at all. This is just what Oort people do when they're pretending to come in, isn't it, Mama?"

"Well, I like it," said Femke sleepily.

The next morning there was a little time for them to walk in Öpik's carefully designed gardens. Anke bent to admire the ferns and discovered that the soils could use a little more acidity, but there were no gardeners present at that hour. She and the children boarded the craft for Triton and found a space in the lounge to watch everyone get on.

"Fancy meeting you here," said Madame Bouchard, plumping down in the seat across from them.

"Oh, hello," said Anke. "Did you rest well?"

"I did, and you?"

"We saw gardens, and Mama sniffed at their soil, but she tried to be nice," said Femke.

"That's very good of her," said Madame Bouchard, smiling at Anke. "Did you see anything but gardens?"

But before Koenraad could launch into a description of their arcade adventures—which, given his proclivities, might last the entire three-day trip to Triton—the artificial gravity cut out. Anke stifled a cry and tried not to flail, knowing that stray movement would be far more likely to knock her about. She reflexively grabbed Femke.

"Passengers will proceed in an orderly fashion to the exits," said the ship's computer's voice over the loudspeaker. "Passengers will please assist any Earthers with the evacuation process. Passengers will proceed in an orderly fashion to the exits. Passengers will please assist . . ."

"Do you need help?" Emerens said to Madame Bouchard. "Here, take my arm!"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said, but she did take it. Anke privately suspected that Madame Bouchard was more help to the boys than they to her, but they all got to the exit tube all the same, swimming along and bumping into other passengers.

"At least no one's barfing!" said Koenraad as they approached the sill that divided the ship's gravity from the station's.

"Yes, thank you for putting that in our head, dear," said Anke. She reoriented Femke with a hand on her back and helped her to step into the artificial gravity of the station, feeling it tugging as she approached. Madame Bouchard and the boys followed after a few strangers. They filed back off into the waiting area.

Koenraad turned to her hopefully. "Mother, as long as we have the time, can we go back to the arcade and—"

"Sit here, please," said Anke. "They'll probably call us to board again right away. It's almost certainly one of those things that takes longer in the off-and-on than in fixing it."

The children dropped obediently to the squashy molded seats of the waiting area all in a row,

with Madame Bouchard and her things forming a bulwark at the end. Madame Bouchard didn't know their favorite waiting-in-line game, which was about meeting an enlightened Callistan (and remembering the whole list of things they were one with). They had just finished a theological argument about whether Callistan Buddhists were supposed to be one with everything or just with intelligent things when an announcement finally came on in the boarding area.

"All passengers for the Triton transit please check your handhelds for new transit details," said the announcer's voice in the waiting area. "Those needing to adjust their travel plans please see a gate agent."

Anke and Madame Bouchard each pulled out their handhelds. "Oh dear," said Madame Bouchard softly.

Anke stared at hers. It showed herself and the children routed through Eris and then through Titan, arriving at Callisto one day earlier than their plan. Triton was nowhere on the list.

"But there has to be a mistake," she said.

"What's the mistake, Mama?" said Femke.

"They've—they've changed it. This ship must be very broken."

"We could go to Triton without artificial gravity," said Femke. "I wouldn't mind floating around the whole time. It would be fun. We could eat like the astronauts of olden times, out of tubes and things! We could even wear our vacuum suits."

"You don't need your vacuum suit just because the gravity's out," said Koenraad.

"But for dress-up," said Femke.

Anke felt the gravity turn off in her stomach. "Dears, no one just has artificial grav in a ship, do you understand? It's all part of the FTL drive. It's a side effect: we're manipulating how gravity works on the large scale to get the ship around the Solar System so fast, so we might as well manipulate it a little bit locally too."

Koenraad and Femke were staring at her, waiting for her to go on, but Emerens's face had already crumpled.

"So this ship couldn't take us fast enough to get there in time for the cryovolcanoes," Anke said. "It couldn't get us there at all. It would take years and years. So what they've done, you see, is they've put us on a different ship."

"All right," said Emerens. "So let's get on that ship."

"That's where things get a bit tricky. And I will have to talk to the gate agent. Because they haven't put us on another ship to Triton. They've put us on another ship to *Callisto*."

"Oh no," said Koenraad. But Emerens was nodding. "Oh no, oh no, they *can't*."

Emerens said, "They can. That's where we're going."

"We're going to *both*."

"I'm going to try," said Anke firmly. "Do you mind . . . ?" Madame Bouchard nodded. She left the children sitting with her, wide-eyed and silent, and strode off to the gate agent.

She tried not to think that they had not made those faces at her since their father died.

"Well," said the gate agent, pressing keys on his device, "I see what you mean, your original trip and your current one. Does your family perhaps carry trip insurance?"

Anke started, "Yes, I'm sure that—oh, I don't—I don't have a family. Not since—I don't have a family," she repeated.

The gate agent looked away. "I'm sorry." Then it was his turn to repeat himself, his voice getting stronger: "I'm sorry, but if you're not insured for the specific stops on this trip, we only guarantee that we will book you through to your final destination. Which, as you see, is what we have done. If you wish to travel to Triton, we can manage that, but it will cost extra."

"How much extra?" said Anke, hope flaring.

The gate agent named a sum that covered not only the small cushion Anke had remaining for emergencies but also the money intended to pay for things like pots and pans and beds and chairs in their new home.

"I see," she choked out. "Thank you."

"Would you like to book that trip?"

"No," Anke whispered.

She didn't have to tell the children what the answer was, although they didn't want to hear it. When she rejoined them, they could see in her face what had happened. She sat down in the squashy chair almost without thinking, her knees going out from under her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"But Mama, that's wrong, we're going to Triton to see the ice volcanoes," said Femke. "It's our adventure."

"We can't," Anke said. She stroked Femke's hair reflexively. "My darlings, we *can't*. We haven't the money to get to Triton and still make it to Callisto."

"But we already paid," said Koenraad.

"We paid for the whole trip," Anke tried to explain. "Now they've refunded us the small piece that's just getting to Triton and having our lodgings there, but the new amount—" She tried to think how to explain transportation costs to small children, and for the moment failed utterly. "They've changed what ships are going there, do you see? So they can't give us passage for that price."

Femke looked up at her. "What price can they give it to us for?"

"More than we have, sweet."

"But *why*?"

Anke was struck dumb with the weight of disappointment. Transit schedules. Seven-year-olds were not made for interplanetary transit schedules.

"They have to get more people around the Solar System than just us, do you see, Femke?"

"Yes, we used to have our own ship, and then Daddy died and our cousins got mean and now we have to share with strangers, I know that part."

Anke couldn't bear it any more. She broke down crying. Her head went down on her knee, and she wept choked, snotty sobs, making weird noises that sounded like some kind of medical emergency, which, with some corner of her mind, she supposed it might be. Having three children with only one adult in their family confused and disoriented her. She had told the children that Madame Bouchard was not their new auntie, but here she was treating her like one, because she had honestly never raised children without one, without *ten*, and cousins, and uncles, and everything.

Did your family perhaps carry trip insurance. Of all the questions to undo her.

"How much do you want chairs?" said Anke.

"What?" said Madame Bouchard, sounding alarmed.

But Emerens knew his mother. "Not at all, Mama. We can do without chairs for a whole year if we have to. Can't we?"

"I hate chairs," said Koenraad stoutly.

"I like chairs," said Femke, her voice wavering as she looked from brother to brother to snott-streaked, wild-haired mother.

"Femke," said Emerens, bending down to his sister. "If you have to choose between having chairs when we get to Callisto and going to see the cryovolcanoes, how much do you want chairs?"

"Oh!" said Femke. "Not that much."

"Lots of people don't have them on Callisto, I expect," said Emerens, his chin high.

"We'll eat quite a lot of lichen," Anke warned them.

"Lichen is my favorite," said Koenraad. "Yummy yum yum lichen!"

Madame Bouchard was watching them with her lips pressed together. Anke smoothed her hair back with both hands. "All right, then, children. We are going to the cryovolcano! We will have our adventure, and I have no idea what we will do after, but—but—we will have it!"

"Daddy would have," said Femke softly.

They all stared at her. She had spoken the words no one could say. Anke picked her up—too big to pick up much now—and crushed Femke's little face fiercely into her shoulder. "All right, baby," she said, loud enough for the boys to hear. "I will be utterly mad. But for you, not for your daddy. Your daddy would have, I know. But he's not here. This one's ours."

The gate agent blinked at her in shock when she returned to transfer the money, but he said

nothing, just processed her payment and noted the changes in her file. Her handheld made the change silently, instantly, and she breathed out, sagging against the counter.

"You still don't have insurance for this, you know," said the gate agent. "Transport damage of this type is very rare for our company, but if something else occurs—"

"I know," said Anke. "Thank you. Yes. I know."

She made her way back to the children's hopeful upturned faces and nodded. They leapt to their feet, screeching, and capered about, hugging her and each other. Emerens began singing, "We're going to see the ice volcano, we're going to see the ice volcano!"

"Shh, shh, you're going to bring station security down on us!" Anke begged. But the station security guard was already smiling upon them with such a fond look that Anke wondered if she had children or nieces and nephews of her own.

The trip to Triton felt like the days after recovery from a bad flu: everything tasted wonderful, though their steps were a little shaky. The entertainments on board the ship were limited—it was not a fancy cruiser—but the children taught Madame Bouchard all their travel games and loaded their favorite art into the ship's computer for future child travelers to share. Anke looked at the viewscreens, though the changes were impossible to interpret in the outer Solar System, and did not make any sense to anyone but a navigator.

And then there was Triton. They had never seen so much mass in one place before, none of them, not even Anke. It was dizzying. "Mama, will Callisto be like this?" said Femke.

"Even bigger," said Anke. "Rockier and even bigger, though I don't think we'll be able to tell when we're standing on it. I think it'll all just be, you know, moon. When we're standing on it."

"Bigger?" said Femke. She slipped her hand in Anke's. "How can they make a mass of thing that's bigger than this?"

"Oh, little one," said Madame Bouchard. "Just wait until you stand on Earth."

"I don't know that she *will* stand on Earth," said Emerens. "Mother never has. We might not."

"I will," said Koenraad. "I'm going everywhere. *Everywhere.*"

"With what money?" said Emerens.

"Mother found the money. I shall find the money."

"Get in your suits," said Anke. "A few months of lichen and we'll see how you feel about finding the money. But enjoy this while we're here, look at it glisten. All the water they haven't even mined off the surface yet!"

She felt she should wait politely for Madame Bouchard to get into her suit, with all the traveling they'd done together by then, even though in-system people always took forever, as though putting on a vacuum suit was like painting a masterpiece. They added ice crampons to their ordinary vacuum suit shoes, so that they wouldn't slide around and fall on the ice surface. They stepped out together with the larger group, between the ropes the scientists had laid out for them.

The surface shone in all colors of green and blue and pink. Anke had not expected the ice to be so many reflected colors. She had thought that ice would be a grey sort of powdery stuff, like in the comets. This was smooth solid layers, over and over again over time, loops and whorls beneath their feet and off into the distance. The mountains of ice towered away from them, taller than the rim of the stations in the Oort would have been far away.

Anke wished she could reach within her helmet to wipe away tears.

"Oh, Mama," said Emerens.

"I don't want any chairs ever, I just want this," said Femke.

"I'm going everywhere," said Koenraad. "I told you, and I *am.*"

"Yes," said Anke. "Yes."

They walked on a bit with the group, and then Madame Bouchard said, "Do you mind if we have a private channel? Away from the children too."

"Of course," said Anke. She kept the children where she could see them but opened a channel in her suit radio.

"I have friends on Callisto," said Madame Bouchard.

"It sounds as though you have friends everywhere," said Anke, watching the children spill out

of the gravity-controlled area, bouncing merrily along in their vacuum suits.

"I have been speaking to them about what soil designers they use. It sounds like you've had too much experience for the position you've got."

"I'm not afraid to work my way up."

"No, of course you're not. But I think we can find another way. Unless you're not interested in a soil coordinator position?"

Anke's heart leapt. "I am, oh, I am. But surely—you haven't even looked at my work."

"Emerens showed me on his device while you were sleeping on the first shuttle. You seemed such a nice family, and times have been hard out here."

"You didn't have to do this. We're not even your family."

"Of course I didn't have to." Madame Bouchard's face was invisible; Earth-style vacuum suits never paid enough attention to what glare would do on the faceplate. "But I *can*, and I wanted to. We'll work out the details later, yes? But I think you can do the work well. It will be a few more hours a week than you were planning on—more of a stretch, learning new things—but Emerens can help out with the younger ones while you adjust. And you should be able to afford chairs."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" Anke flapped her arms helplessly. She went and bumped her helmet against Madame Bouchard's the way she would an aunt or cousin, even though she knew that the gesture probably wouldn't mean anything to her. "I don't know how we'll ever manage to thank you."

"Femke asked if I would be her new auntie. I would like . . . not as she would think of it. But more like an Earth person would. Her benefactress."

"Oh yes, certainly that!"

"Just relax, my dear, and enjoy the trip with the children. You should enjoy what you were willing to take risks for." Madame Bouchard waved her on, and Anke crunched across the slick surface after the children, glad of the crampons biting in for her. The layers of ice beneath her boots showed a history of eruptions she was glad the scientists could explain, because she didn't have the background to interpret the waves and ripples beneath her, but every one looked more beautiful now.

She looked up and saw the children waving her on as they climbed the slope. "Mama, come on!" called Emerens over the suit radio. "They're showing us the layers!"

"Don't step too close to the edge," said Anke. "Mind what the planetologists tell you." But the children were peering at the ice cores and paid her no mind, as she knew they would not.