

THE OTHER SIDE OF FEAR

A SPECIAL SAMPLE CHAPTER ONE OF THE
PREQUEL NOVELLA ABOUT THE XK9S

JAN S. GEPHARDT



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The Other Side of Fear, Chapter One Sample

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THE OTHER SIDE OF FEAR

By Jan S. Gephardt

CHAPTER 1

PLANET-BOUND

“Wake up. Today you head planetside,” The voice of Pamela Gómez’s brain implant reverberated through her skull. “Wake up. Today you head planetside.”

Exhaustion sucked her deeper into her nest of sheets, drew her toward the sweet warmth of Balchu’s body next to hers. Had she finally slept after all?

“Wake up. Today you head planetside,” the alarm feature persisted. “Wake up. Today you head planetside.”

She pushed herself upright with a groan. Sitting or standing up was the only way to toggle the damned alarm off. *Planetside. This day actually came.*

Balchu’s warm caress almost seduced her back under the covers.

She shook her head. “Uhn-uh. Can’t.”

He sighed, then sat up with a groan of his own and eyed her. He didn’t have to say anything. All the words they’d already said hung around them like a cloud of angry ghosts.

Pam lurched up. Padded the few steps to the kitchen. She inserted her mug, and their coffeepot dispensed a blurt of inky liquid. Few candidates were acclimatized to micrograv, so they’d been warned to eat little or no breakfast till they were underway

in the shuttle. Not that she was hungry. She sipped the scalding brew. It helped keep her eyes open. Too bad it couldn't thaw the ice in her gut.

Balchu finished in the bathroom quickly.

She filled another cup. Extended it to him when he joined her in the kitchen.

He thwarted her intended clean hand-off with a grasp that engulfed both her fingers and his mug. He relinquished them only after he'd given the back of her hand a kiss.

She bit her lip and pulled free.

With leaden limbs and brick fingers, she packed final items. Seal-locked her Department-issue duffel, then dragged it into their small, threadbare living room. The rancid oil smell from the Ultra-Fast Tempura Shop downstairs hung thicker in here.

Balchu slung the heavy duffel over his shoulder without asking.

She could carry that herself. She almost said so, but she didn't *want* to carry that herself. "Thank you."

His dark eyes regarded her from beneath thick black eyebrows. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again and shook his head.

She grimaced. *Thank you for not saying 'please stay' one more time. Too late now.* The need to leave him for a month or more had been one of the larger obstacles for her, despite all the fighting they'd done recently.

Idiot girl, Mother's voice chided, an unwanted mental warden encamped in the back of her skull. *You got attached. That's a fool's game!* The words stung as much now as the day Mother'd learned Pam was living with Balchu. Pam took a long, slow breath. *Now is now. What is, is. Foolish or not, here I am.*

One stride brought Balchu to the door. He looked back, inhaled as if he meant to speak, then shook his head again and pushed the door open.

Pam followed. *Yes, I know. XK9s are huge dogs. XK9s are huge dogs.* "the size of a damned pony," he'd said, during one of their

arguments. He wasn't wrong. Even though it meant a promotion from Patrol to Detective First Level, the bump in her pay wouldn't rent a bigger place. *If* she was Chosen. Which was a big "if." She shook her head, heartsick. *Not likely.*

Applying for this had started the same way she'd ended up in the Police Academy. *What if? Wouldn't it be interesting? I could be someone special.* Back then, she'd dared herself to apply, in part because Mother would hate it *so much*. Then she'd discovered she really was pretty good. Good enough to graduate in the upper third of her cadet class.

She and Balchu *pang-pang-panged* down the metal stairs to street level, then tramped through mist-shrouded predawn neighborhood blocks. The XK9 cadre was a reach, a challenge, another self-dare. She'd never had a dog. Mother wouldn't even discuss it. She and Balchu couldn't afford one. But all her life she'd wished for one. Dogs always seemed so happy to be with their people, so accepting.

Unlike Balchu this morning. He strode forward, back bowed by the weight of her duffel. His silence pressed down on her like a rebuke.

She scowled at him. "You know if you really didn't want this, you could've told the truth on the Family Acceptance form." The Orangeboro Police Department didn't want to place an insanely-expensive XK9 into an unwelcoming home environment. Balchu must've lied his ass off, to keep her in the running.

He marched through the mist, head down. "I didn't want it to be my fault, if you washed out."

He could lose his job as a Detective Second Level with the Vice Unit, if the OPD found out he'd lied. The thick fog chilled her. She walked faster. "Are you sorry I didn't wash out?"

No answer.

The coffee she'd drunk turned to acid in her gut. "Did you secretly *expect* me to fail?"

His broad shoulders slumped. "Don't do that. Not today." The duffel's strap slid. He caught it, hitched it higher with a

frown. "I just—Oh, hell. It'll be whatever it is." He tromped away into the fog.

"Balchu!" She hurried after him. He didn't slow or look back.

The commuter terminal lay ahead, an island of brighter mist in the steadily-lightening morning. All three tiers of candidates must report to Orangeboro Grand Central Terminal by 05:30.

Balchu halted at the edge of Central Plaza. He stared toward the terminal.

She stopped beside him. Grand Central was the Borough's primary transportation hub. Always busy, it usually wasn't *this* busy, this early. She glanced up at his face, harsh with glare and shadows.

"I guess this is it, then." He let out a long breath.

"Guess so." She swallowed against a pit-of-the-stomach drop. "Can we not part angry?"

"Yeah, let's not." He bowed his head. "I'm gonna miss you." Emotion roughened his voice.

Her throat tightened. "Me too. Miss you already." They hesitated a moment longer, silent. Then Pam took a deep breath and plunged forward.

Easy to spot the other candidates in the crowd. Like her, they wore plain blue Safety Services jumpsuits. Like her, each had just one overstuffed duffel for their personal gear. But the crowd on the elevator platform was far bigger than just the other twenty-nine XK9 partner-candidates. It looked as if everyone's entire extended Family had come to see them off. Her only "family" present was Balchu.

As if Mother would come for something like this.

Pretty much everybody else's mothers were out in force, though. Also their fathers. And their aunts, uncles, cousins, lovers, nieces, nephews, and grandparents. She even spotted a few dogs on leashes, or smaller ones in people's arms. Of course the dog lovers would jump at this opportunity.

Longing ached through her. All her life, she'd watched other people's families, and wondered from afar.

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They all looked alike. Sure, costumes, ages, and skin pigmentations varied, but every family member hovered near their candidate. Voices chattered in hopeful, anxious, affectionate tones. Brows pinched with loving concern, an expression she'd never witnessed from Mother. Hugs, kisses, hands held, images captured . . . She turned away. Her throat ached. How would that *feel*, to be surrounded with love?

No family is as happy as it looks, girlie, Mother's voice snapped from the back of her mind. Her vision flooded.

Balchu's hard expression softened. He lowered his head, put his arm around her.

She clung to him, cold inside. Would they—as a couple—survive this separation?

You're better off traveling light, Mother always said. *Men leave. Who needs them?*

But who was leaving, now? Pam wrapped her arms around Balchu, pressed her face against his chest. He held her, but said nothing.

At last Pam pulled back and blinked hard. Then she stared at the other candidates' families, her voice too constricted to speak.

Don't you fall for it, Mother's voice warned. *Love is an illusion. It's trap.*

Illusion or not, those loving gestures and fond faces presented a beautiful vision. Of course, glamour and illusion were the nature of traps, weren't they? Doubt shuddered through her.

Balchu drew her closer. His solid warmth steadied her. Was that an illusion, too?



O*h, God, here it comes.* Pam drew in a quick breath.
Balchu's hand squeezed hers in reassurance.

The commuter elevator arrived with pulses of blinking, multicolored lights and a high-pitched *ding-ding-ding-ding*.

All around them, voices babbled louder, in a flurry of last-minute farewells. The candidates would travel to the Hub, then embark from Rana Habitat Space Station via shuttle. After 23 hours they'd land in Solara City, capital of the Republic of Transmondia, on Planet Chayko.

The doors parted. Pam clung to Balchu for one more full-body hug, one final, lingering kiss. Then she hefted her duffel—well, made it halfway up. Balchu's hand under hers helped her settle the strap on her shoulder. For pity's sake, what had she packed in there, the kitchen sink? Plus maybe a couple of anvils?

Blue-clad candidates separated themselves from their Families.

Pam took a place in line, her throat tight.

The candidate in front of her was a tall, elegant blonde with a short, expensive haircut. Oh. Right. Ashley, or something like that. Pam stifled a shiver. *There's my competition.* Ashlynn-or-whatever had taken one of the qualification tests when Pam did, a formwork exam on canine health and care. The woman finished first, out of the eleven who'd showed up. She'd submitted her form with a *beep* of the testing center's pad, stood with a nod to the proctor, then departed with a smug little smile on her face. All of this, before Pam made it halfway through the 100 questions. No big shock *she* was here. Probably a Tier One.

Her stomach twisted in an icy knot. *I must be out of my mind.* Maybe this really was a bad idea. Maybe she should just . . . No. Pam clenched her jaws and squared her shoulders. She might be a lowly Tier Three, but she'd made a commitment, and she'd made the cut. Might not have a chance in hell, but she meant to take her shot.

A moment later her head came up at a familiar laugh. She turned to look behind.

Several people back from her in line, four young men about her age clustered together.

"*How misty was it?*" one of them demanded. Ben, from his

bass rumble. She'd met these guys at the obstacle-course part of the testing.

"It was *so misty* I thought I'd have to wear swim fins." Pretty sure that was Terry, Ben's patrol partner.

"It was *so misty* my auto-nav couldn't find the switchbacks." That nasal tenor definitely belonged to Tim, Terry's roommate-with-benefits.

"It was *so misty* I . . ." Berwyn stopped.

"I can't *hear* you," Ben sang.

"Don't leave us hangin', man!" Tim cried.

Berwyn groaned. "It was *so misty* my head got full of fog and I can't think of one."

The other three replied with moans and guffaws, but Pam sympathized. She couldn't think of one either.

Tim, Terry, and Ben heaped laughing insults upon Berwyn, but their horseplay contained no hostility or disdain. This was how the self-styled "Four Amigos" had razed and cheered each other through the grueling obstacle course.

They hadn't acted menacing, like some of the more cut-throat competitors who'd vied for a place in this candidate group. She'd stayed close to them for safety, but watching them and listening in also lifted Pam's spirits. They'd vicariously encouraged her, too. Now she waved at them. "Hi, guys. Good to see you again."

"Hey, it's Pam! You made it!"

Wow. They'd remembered her. She let a few other candidates move past her so the young men could draw even with her. Terry gave her a toothy grin and a high-five. He was tall, tan, and surprisingly strong. "Congrats! Ben and I are Tier Threes, Tim's a Tier Two, and we're all officially jealous of that rat, Berwyn. He's a lofty Tier One. Can you believe it?"

"Maybe that's why he's so slow-witted this morning. He used it all up on the exams," Tim said.

"Haw-haw," Berwyn answered. "Better to be slow now than then." He focused on Pam. "Seriously, way to go, getting in."

Pam smiled, warmed but still wary of taking things for granted. "Tier Three, but at least I made it. Congrats back at you."

"Yes, yes, it's an honor just to be nominated," stocky, dark-skinned Ben said. "We figure it'll be Berwyn who attracts a dog. He's got that animal magnetism."

Berwyn turned to Terry. "*Don't* let him start barking again!"

Ben laughed. "Arf-arf! Woof-woof! Aroo-oo-oo!" But he muted his sound level. They'd drawn near the commuter-elevator's doors. One of the OPD supervisors leveled an unamused scowl at them. They quieted, but Pam didn't miss the glint of mischief in their eyes and the humorous quirks of their mouths.

Two Uniformed Peace Officers stood just to the right and left inside the big commuter car's entrance. Candidates handed their duffels to one or the other. The UPOs placed the identical duffels into neat rows with methodical care.

Pam moved farther inside, but stayed near the Four Amigos. Harder to be gloomy next to their high spirits, even if they *were* studiously behaving themselves for now.

The elevator took almost an hour to get to the Hub. Fifteen kilometers stretched between the air pressure in the 1-G habitat wheel and the Alliance Standard pressurization for Vertebrate Oxygen-Breathers, in the microgravity at the Hub. Pam hadn't been to the Hub in a year, but like all Ranans, she'd learned the basics of moving in micrograv at age 10. All Safety Services personnel continued to maintain basic Class-A certifications with biennial refreshers "up top."

From the Topside Terminal, transit to the shuttle was stupid-easy by design, for a lower attrition rate among tourists. Candidates pulled themselves along a short, marked half-pipe with a handrail. At the end they swung onto a waiting Multi-Passenger Terminal Shuttle, or MUPATS, which some people insisted on calling a "muppet." She gave up her slot on the first one, so Tim could ride with the other three. The Amigos thanked her and waved. Then they jetted away on a burst of retros.

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Back to icy solitude. She bit her lip and resisted the low-level nausea that was a given in micrograv.

The next shuttle had open slots on the back row. She grabbed one. *Oh, how special was this?* She'd ended up next to Ashra-or-whatever again. In micrograv, her formerly-sleek blonde hair stood straight out on end in all directions. The woman gave Pam a cold, grumpy stare, then pointedly looked elsewhere.

Yeah, nice to see you, too. Pam scowled toward her feet.

But a moment later, a man about Balchu's age and height took the slot on her other side.

Mmm-*mmm*, he certainly improved the local scenery. She took a moment to appreciate his athletic build, the warm bronze of his skin, and the classic symmetry of his face. She smiled at him, glad for a distraction. She'd spotted him on the far side of the room at one of the lectures she'd attended, but they'd never spoken.

He offered her a little nod and strapped in, but his well-manicured hands shook.

Concern crowded out her pleasure. "Are you all right?"

He released a soft, shuddery breath. "Micrograv. It'll pass when we hit gravity again."

"Is there . . . Anything I can do to help?" She gave him a sharp look. His skin had gone kind of ashy.

He bowed his head. "Nothing, really. I just . . . I won't be good at small talk."

"Okay." She eyed him, still uncertain. Clearly, she could have it worse, but somehow she didn't feel any less out-of-place. Must've stumbled into the row reserved for beautiful people with problems. "Um, good luck."

At least the transit to the gate ended quickly. She'd half-dreaded a bare-bones military shuttle, but *oh, thank goodness*. The OPD had chartered a tourist-class craft. Wrap-around screens dominated the oval-shaped cabin's walls. Crystal-clear images of the sensors' outside view surrounded them. *Smooth!*

She reconnected with the Four Amigos, and buckled into a

padded travel couch next to Berwyn. On the forward screen, the view centered on a tiny blue, green, and rusty-red planet, partially obscured by the white swirls of clouds. Planet Chayko, the only other planet within Alliance Space that humans had been allowed to claim besides their homeworld, Earth.

If only Balchu were here. They'd dreamed of traveling together to exotic places, but neither had ventured farther than the Hub or Monteverde, the next Borough to leeward from Orangeboro.

You're better off traveling light, Mother's voice scolded from the back of her mind. A stupid tear pooled in her eye. She brushed it away, but that just created a little cloud of tiny, hovering droplets. *Crap!* She struggled to cup them in her hand, then push them against the semi-absorbent fabric of her jumpsuit. *No more crying!*

The screens on Pam's left showed parts of two other green-and-white shuttles in the Wayland Transit fleet, with just a glimpse of Wheel One and Pam's own home-Wheel Two, counter-rotating beyond the shuttles. Where in that wheel was Balchu now? The chronometer on her implant's Heads-Up Display told her his day-watch had started. Maybe today he'd find more leads for his trafficking case.

Longing constricted her chest. *No. Must focus. Be here now.* The screens on her right showed a long expanse of Hub and more docks. In the middle-background, Wheels Three and Four counter-rotated. She squinted against the dazzle of harsh light and consciously calmed her breathing till the ache in her chest eased up. She'd seen pictures, but never witnessed this view for herself before. Somewhere *way down there* lay more Wheels. There were eight in all.

The shuttle filled with her fellow candidates. Pam spotted many she'd seen at various tests or group instruction sessions. A few smiled or waved back, but no one spoke. The old ice-walls locked in. Why should any of them talk to her? *Yeah, yeah, wah-wah,* Mother's voice mocked from her back-brain.

Pam listened to the Amigos' repartee, desperate for distract-

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tion. They stayed intent on each other, but it was pretty funny to listen to. Familiar, cold loneliness settled over her. *What would it feel like, to be fully included?*

A woman's voice came over the PA. She introduced herself as their captain, welcomed them aboard, and urged them to make sure they were securely buckled in. "We have been cleared for launch," she said.

Excitement rippled up Pam's back, raising hairs along the way. *Launch. Oh, wow. Here we go!*

Rana Station slipped away from the side-screens' view. Velvet black, speckled with stars, replaced it. Half-grav settled over the cabin. The front screen showed a split view: Rana Station loomed large in one half. In the other, Planet Chayko looked like a grape that could fit in her palm. Attendants circulated, distributing breakfast bulbs with hot scrambled eggs or oatmeal, fruit, and drink options.

The 23-hour journey had begun.

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And thanks again for your interest!

Jan S. Gephardt

