

CHAPTER ONE

Hellyann

I read the sign again, glowing in front of me:

Type of organism: human female

Origin: Earth

Age: about twelve years

**This brand-new exhibit will be introduced
to the wider Earth Zone exhibition when
emotional stability has been achieved**

I looked at the bedraggled creature, and I wanted to reach through the unseen barrier and hold its hand. (This was neither allowed nor possible: the barrier would have repelled me with a painful shock.)

Its hair . . .

All right. I must stop saying 'it'. The sign says it is a female, and so it should be 'her' . . .

Her hair fell in tight twists. I should have liked to see

it when it was clean. Her pale and hairless skin was dotted with darker spots ('freckles', they are called in her language). Her clothes were similar to those worn by the other humans in Earth Zone. She had trousers of a coarse-looking fabric and a thick-looking padded item of a lighter shade on top, while her feet were clad in big shoes fastened with looped cord.

Her face was dirty and streaked with tears, and her eyes shone wet and bloodshot. She had been weeping (this is normal – humans do it a lot), although the atomic-level mechanical medication that had been given to her had closed down a lot of her primary cognitive functions—

(Wait. Is this too complicated? Philip suggests I should write: 'Her brain had been made slow by the drugs she had been given.' And that is, I suppose, close enough. I shall let you decide.)

Despite this, there was a spark of life in her eyes. Perhaps the dosage was imperfectly calculated, or she had an ability to resist some of the medication.

Anyhow, she looked at me and I was struck by how very expressive human faces are.

She put her hand to her chest and for a brief moment I thought she was making the sign of the Hearters, but – obviously – she was not.

She looked at me intensely and said, 'Ta-mee.'

Just that: those two syllables.

She did it again: 'Ta-mee.'

I glanced over both of my shoulders, but nobody was watching as I held up my PG and recorded this bit. Communicating with the exhibits is not *exactly* prohibited, but nor is it encouraged.

Is that her name? I wondered.

I repeated the syllables she had said, although the sounds were hard for me to duplicate.

'Ta-mee,' I said.

She nodded her head and made a weird face, as though she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, which I did not understand – and still do not, not fully. Human beings are strange.

I imitated her gesture, and said my name.

The human female tried to repeat it. It sounded nothing *at all* like my name. She tried again and got a little closer. I practised the sounds a couple of times, and then tried saying my name in a way she might be able to repeat.

'Helly-ann,' I said, and a slow smile formed on her mouth.

She blinked hard and said it back to me. I found myself smiling at her.

Then her smile faded and she said two more syllables. 'Ee-fan.'

A voice came from a speaker next to the sign: 'Your time is up. Move along. There is a queue of people

behind you waiting to see the new exhibit. Do not take more than your allotted time. Next.'

The human watched me go, then she retreated to the back of her enclosure and sat on the ground as two new spectators filed forward.

Ta-mee, I said to myself as I passed the Assistant Advisor who stood at the edge of the exhibit room.

'That is your third time here, I believe,' the AA said. 'And communicating with the exhibits as well? I have my eye on you.'

Except he did not say it aloud. He did not need to – he just looked at me hard and it was enough.

That is how it is done here. Everybody obeys the rules. Nobody gets out of line.

All the way back to my pod-home, I struggled to keep a straight face, when really I wanted to crumple up and cry. That, however, would immediately single me out as being different, for people here do not cry – or laugh, for that matter.

Instead I repeated her name in my head, over and over: *Ta-mee. Ta-mee. Ta-mee.*

I played back the recording on my PG of the bit when she said her name and something else.

What is Ee-fan? I wondered. That is what she said: *Ee-fan.*

Perhaps, one day, I will find out.

Because I will be returning Tammy to Earth.

It will be dangerous. If I fail I will be put to sleep for the rest of my life.

And if I succeed? Well, I will probably have to do it again, with another exhibit.

Such is the curse of having feelings.