Starfarers

Vonda N. McIntyre
Table of Contents

Chapter 1....................................................1
Publication Information...............................29
Chapter 1

Nervous and excited and rushed and late, J.D. Sauvage hurried down the corridor of the terminal. The satchel carrying her personal allowance thumped against her hip. The other passengers had already begun to board the spaceplane.

“J.D.!”

Victoria Fraser MacKenzie strode toward her. J.D. was aware of the attention of the other people in the waiting area, surely recognizing Victoria, perhaps also wondering who the heavyset, sunburned newcomer might be. Victoria was the sort of person one noticed. Though she was small and compact, she had a powerful presence. Everything about her was intense: her energy, her eyes, the black of her hair, her passionate defense of the deep space expedition. She had been much in the news lately.

She extended her hand. J.D. took it. The contrast of Victoria’s hand, dark and smooth, the nails well-groomed, to her own, the skin roughened by exposure to wind and sea, the nails pared down as short as they could get, made J.D. wish she had had more time to prepare for this trip.

“I’m glad to see you,” Victoria said.

“Were you afraid I’d changed my mind again?”
“No. Not once you agreed. J.D.... I know how important your research is to you. But the expedition is unique. The orcas will still be here when we get back. The divers, too.”

I hope so, J.D. thought, but she did not say it aloud.

“Come on,” Victoria said. “We’d better hurry.”

They walked into the entry tunnel and joined the end of the line.

“This is your first trip up, eh?” Victoria said. “Is there anything you want to know that they didn’t cover at the orientation?”

“Um... I missed the orientation.”

“You missed it?”

“I was down at cargo. It took longer than I expected.”

“Was there a problem?”

“They didn’t want to load my equipment.”

“Whyever not?”

“Because it didn’t look like equipment to them. They tried to redefine it as personal and make me take only what I could fit in my allowance.”

“What kind of equipment is it?”

“Information, mostly.”

“Why didn’t you put it on the web? Arachne can always give it back to you.”

“Most of it is books, and most of the books I have aren’t in any databases.”
“You could have had them scanned.”

“Some of them are unique, though, and they get so beat up when you send them out for scanning. I didn’t have time to do it myself.”

“What kind of books are you talking about?”

“Old ones. You won’t understand until you see them.”

“How many did you bring?”

“Three hundred fifty seven kilos.”

“Good lord.”

“That isn’t really very much, when you’re talking about books.”

“And it isn’t half what any experimental physicist would bring. As for a geneticist — ” Victoria laughed. “Considering all the stuff Stephen Thomas brought, you’d think he was singlehandedly in charge of diversity and cloning.”

“Is he?”

“No, that’s his boss, Professor Thanthavong.”

“I’m really looking forward to meeting her,” J.D. said. “Do you think I’ll get a chance to?”

“Sure. She’s not standoffish at all. The more you can forget she’s famous, the better you’ll get along with her, eh? Anyway, Stephen Thomas still does some bioelectronics, though that’s pretty much been taken over by the developers. He’s branched out into theories of non-nucleic-acid inheritance. Exogenetics. One of
our celebrated ‘nonexistent’ disciplines. The equipment he needs is pretty standard lab stuff, but when he came up, he brought a lot of extraneous things.”

“How did he talk it all through cargo?”

Victoria made a strange little motion of her shoulders, a gesture of amused disbelief. J.D. wondered why she did not simply shake her head. Maybe it had something to do with her being Canadian. J.D. had studied a number of different cultures, but had never looked past the superficial resemblance of Canadian culture to the majority culture of the U.S. She decided not to admit that to Victoria.

“If you ask Arachne for the definition of ‘charm,’” Victoria said, “it gives you back a picture of Stephen Thomas Gregory.”

J.D. followed Victoria to their places. Victoria helped her transfer her allowance into a string bag, then showed her how to strap in against the upright lounge. It held her in a position with her hips and knees slightly flexed.

“Where are the controls for this thing?” J.D. looked for the way to turn the lounge into a chair. “How do you sit down?”

“You don’t,” Victoria said. “It takes a lot of energy to keep your body in a sitting position in microgravity. It’s much easier to lie nearly flat. Or stand, depending
on how you look at it.”

J.D. thought about how it would feel to sit and stand and lie stretched out in space, comparing it to her diving experience.

“Okay,” she said. “I see. That makes sense.” She grasped the armrests. Fright tinged her excitement, not unpleasantly. Her fingers trembled. Victoria noticed her nervousness and patted her hand. The sound patterns changed as the space plane readied itself for takeoff. J.D. would have sworn that like a bird or a dolphin she could feel the increase in the magnetic field, the shift and slide of it as it oriented itself to thrust the spaceplane down the long rails. Of course that was absurd.

Victoria finished transferring her own allowance from the carrier to the compartment. She had several acceleration-resistant packages, but most of her allowance consisted of fancy clothes, similar to what she was wearing.

“Victoria,” J.D. said hesitantly, “do people dress, um, more formally on board than they would back here?”

Victoria was wearing an embroidered shirt and wide suede trousers caught at her ankles with feathered ties.

“Hmm?” Victoria closed the compartment and gave J.D.’s satchel to the artificial stupid waiting to take them off the plane. Getting out of Earth’s gravity well
was too expensive to spend the acceleration on suitcases. The AS buzzed away.

“I couldn’t help but notice what you’re wearing. I didn’t bring anything like that, if that’s what’s called for on the ship.”

Victoria glanced at her, then chuckled. J.D. shifted uncomfortably. She had thrown away most of her beat-up old clothes, and ordered new ones that she packed without trying on. She had not had time to consider buying anything formal.

“I’m not laughing at you,” Victoria said quickly. “Just imagining going to the lab in this outfit. We’re pretty casual on campus. But sometimes I get tired of casual. I always fill up the extra corners of my personal allowance with silly clothes. You can get necessities back home. It’s the things you can do without that you start to miss.”

“I see,” J.D. said, relieved.

“Don’t worry, you’ll fit right in. There’s no dress code, and the environment is moderate. Too moderate, I think. We don’t have weather, we have climate. I wouldn’t mind some snow, or a thunderstorm. Satoshi thinks it’s too cold, but he’s spoiled — he grew up in Hawaii.”

Victoria leaned against her couch and fastened the straps. “I’m ready,” she said. “So let’s get going.”

“I should tell you something,” J.D. said.
“Oh?”

The careful neutrality in Victoria’s tone told J.D. that her own original decision — to turn down the invitation to join Starfarer’s alien contact department — had had an effect that would take time to overcome.

“I resigned from the Department of State,” J.D. said. “And turned back my grant.”

“Did you? I’m glad. I’m sorry I snapped at you about having such close ties to your government. But these days you never know when they might slap ‘classified’ all over your research.” Suddenly Victoria grinned. “Though if you were still an ambassador, that would put you higher on the protocol list than the chancellor, eh?”

“I was more on the level of special attaché, and anyway the orcas don’t use titles. They don’t even understand them, as far as I could ever tell. It’s one of those human concepts like ownership or jealousy that if you finally get through a hint of what it means, they just think it’s funny. We’re pretty funny to them in general. I used to wonder if they let me hang around for my entertainment value.”

“What made you decide to quit?” Victoria asked bluntly.

“I thought about what you said, about the arguments between the U.S. government and EarthSpace. I worried.”
“As do we all.”

“I didn’t want divided loyalties.” J.D. felt guilty for making two true statements and implying a direct connection between them. For the moment, though, she could not explain to Victoria, to anyone, her real reasons for all her decisions of the last few days.

She stared out the window at the mountain slope, the treeline a few hundred meters below, the peaks receding to blue in the distance.

“Don’t worry,” Victoria said, mistaking her distraction. “The acceleration isn’t bad at all.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

The plane jolted slightly as it released itself from the gate. J.D. gasped and clutched Victoria’s hand.

Victoria smiled and let J.D. hold on as the plane slid forward.

Victoria loved riding the spaceplane. She enjoyed the landings, but she liked the takeoffs even better.

The plane accelerated, racing over its magnetic rails, its delta-vee increasing, pressing Victoria against her couch. The plane reached the bottom of the long fast slope and pulsed forward along the magnetic lines of force, driven faster and faster by a great roller-coaster with a single unending rise.

The magnetic rail flung the plane off its end and into the air. The acceleration ceased abruptly: heart-fall hit.

“Wow,” J.D. said, breathless.
“What do you think?”

“That’s the first time I ever rode a roller-coaster that I liked.”

Victoria felt the slight pressure of her body against the seat belts as, in weightlessness, gravity no longer held her against her couch. Beside her, J.D. peered eagerly through the roof-window as blue sky gave way to a deep indigo that gradually faded to starry black.

“It’s just beautiful.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

The space-plane rotated around its long axis and the Earth came into view through the roof-window. Despite the lack of gravity, the arrangement of the couches made the window feel like “up.” Earth appeared to loom above her. For her first few trips into space, Victoria had tried to cultivate an attitude of nonchalance about the sight of Earth spinning slowly before her. Gradually, though, she realized that even the veterans of space travel never lost their awe, never grew hardened. No matter how matter-of-fact they acted about the dangers or the hardships of the early days, they never pretended to have the same cool indifference to Earth, vulnerable and without boundaries, whole in their sight, a sphere they could cup in their hands.

Victoria glanced at J.D., who stared up through the window with her mouth slightly open. Her short lank
hair stood out from her head as if she were underwater.

“I never thought... I’ve imagined this, I’ve seen it in pictures and on film, even on sensory recording. I thought I’d know what it felt like. But it’s different, seeing it for real.”

“It is,” Victoria said. “It’s always different, seeing it for real.”

The Earth fell behind. The space-plane slid smoothly into an orbit to catch up and dock with the transport to Starfarer.

“What’s it like to swim with the orcas?” Victoria said.

“It’s like this,” J.D. said. “Like space travel?”

“Uh-huh. Looking at Earth from space is the nearest thing I’ve ever felt to being underwater and suddenly realizing that the light at the limit of your vision is the white patch on an orca’s side. Then when they come closer... They’re magical. Until now I thought that if I could find the right words, I’d be able to explain it to everyone. But no one ever found the right words to explain — to me, anyway — how it feels to look at Earth from space. Maybe no one can explain either.”

“Damn,” Victoria said. “I wish we’d had this conversation a couple of days ago.”

“Why?”
“Because I’d have stolen your line, when I talked to the premier last night. And I wish I’d thought of saying that to your Mr. Distler, when I testified last year.”

“I didn’t vote for him,” J.D. said. “Not for senator — I don’t even come from the same state — or when he ran for president. Never mind, I know what you mean.”

“That’s what I should have told him — that he couldn’t understand why we wanted to be here unless he came and saw it for himself.” Victoria made herself relax, balancing her body between the contour couch and the seat belts. She sighed. “Probably even that wouldn’t have helped.”

“The orcas are interested in Starfarer,” J.D. said.

“The orcas? The divers, you mean?”

“There’s a diver who’s interested, yes. But I mean the orcas themselves discussed applying to the expedition.”

“Outlandish,” Victoria said.

“Why do you say that?” J.D. asked mildly.

“I can’t imagine a cetacean on board a starship.”

“That’s the trouble,” J.D. said. “Nobody imagined it when they designed the cylinders. The ecosystem was evolved around salt marshes, but there isn’t much deep water.”

“Would you have proposed transporting an orca to Starfarer if there was deep water?”
“Not one — several. They’re social beings, even more so than us. They get bored and slowly go crazy and die, all alone. They don’t like to be confined, either, but they pointed out that when humans used to catch them they lived in much smaller places than the largest bodies of water on Starfarer, for longer than the expedition is planned to last.”

“Then you think it’s a good idea.”

“I think it would be wonderful to have two different kinds of intelligent beings along on the expedition. I love the orcas, though. I love their freedom. They would have been willing to risk it, and I think they could have survived. But I wonder if they would have been happy?”

J.D. gazed out at space, at Earth, where the oceans dominated. A weather system had just passed over the Pacific northwest, leaving the area clearly visible.

000

The clicks and squeals and stutters of the orcas echoed across the inlet. The cold, clear water moved with a gentle, irresistible power, rolling fist-sized stones one against the other on the rocky shore, creating a rumble of counterpoint to the calling of the whales.

J.D. swam. The artificial lung, nestled against her back, absorbed oxygen from the sea and transferred it to her mask.
Kelp waved below. A bright orange nudibranch swam past, propelled by its frilly mantle. At the limit of J.D.’s vision, a salmon flashed silver-blue in the filtered light.

She shivered. Her metabolic enhancer could produce only so much heat. She could have worn a wet suit, but it limited her contact with the sea.

Soon she would have to swim away from the mouth of the inlet and return to shore. She stroked upward and broke the surface of the clear green water. Before her, the inlet opened out into a part of Puget Sound where no one could go without an invitation. Apparently the divers would not invite J.D. into the wilderness today.

The orcas remained out of sight around the headland. She could imagine them playing, oblivious to the cold, their sleek black and white bodies cutting the swells. By morning they would be gone. They could swim a hundred kilometers between one dawn and the next. Orcas never stayed in one place for long.

The sun on her face made the water feel even colder. J.D. turned and swam toward shore. Her cabin stood back among the Douglas firs that grew to the edge of the stony beach.

Just offshore, she stopped at the anchored deck. She teased the artificial lung from her back and tethered it beneath the planks, where it would feed and breathe
and rest and pump sea water through itself until she needed it again. She dove from the deck and swam easily home. Without the lung, she no longer felt a part of the sea.

Barefoot, she picked her way among the beach stones. It was getting on toward evening. In the shade of the trees it was cool, and inside her cabin it was chilly. She plunged into the shower. The sun-warmed water splashed over her. After a few minutes she stopped shivering.

Toweling her short straight hair, she turned the heat on under the kettle for a warm drink.

“J.D.?”

She started and wrapped the towel around her.

“Zev, you’re so quiet. You scared me.”

“I never meant to.” The diver stood in the doorway. Fine white-gold hair clothed his mahogany body in a translucent sheen. He looked awkward, seeking her out on land. She felt awkward, talking to him when she did not have any clothes on. That was strange, because she swam naked with him and his family, divers and orcas alike.

“Sit down, excuse me a minute.” She turned her back and took a last swipe with the towel beneath her heavy breasts, then pulled on a shirt and a pair of baggy black pants.

“I thought to find you in the sea,” Zev said.
J.D. deliberately finished tying the drawstring. “I hoped to find you there. But I can’t stay in the water forever.”

“We were talking,” he said. He lowered his gaze and glanced at her sideways, with an expression both mischievous and shy. “We sometimes talk for a long time.”

“I’ve noticed that.” On the solar stove, the kettle steamed. Being in a wilderness area, the cabin had to be rustic. It contained no electronics beyond her web link. Nothing operated by voice-activation. Now that she knew how everything worked, it amused her to remember how long it took her to figure out all the mechanical switches. But it had not been very funny at the time.

“Do you want a hot drink? I’m cold, and my fingers and toes are shriveled up like prunes.”

Zev looked at his own hands, turning them over, spreading his fingers, stretching out the translucent swimming webs.

“My fingers never do that,” he said. “Why not?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” J.D. said. “Physiology isn’t one of my specialties. Don’t you know?”

“We are different,” he said.

“That’s for sure.” The kettle hissed. “What did you decide? Do you want some tea, or maybe some cocoa?”

“Some ice cream?” he said.
J.D. laughed. “Sure.”

He perched on the window seat, his knees pulled up, his feet apart, completely unconscious of his nakedness. When she first met him she wondered about his gender, for he had no external genitals. His people had engineered their basically human bodies into a more streamlined form: male genitals drawn inside, female breasts small and flat. Both genders possessed a layer of subcutaneous fat that burned away during any long underwater exertion, leaving the individual ethereal and with an appetite like a shark. Zev always amazed her with how much he could eat. She made herself some tea, gave him a dish of ice cream, and sat on the rag rug in a patch of sunlight. She still felt cold. She sipped her tea, glad of its sweet spicy warmth.

“What was your family talking about?” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “You, of course. That was why we did not invite you out today.”

“I don’t see that it would have made much difference,” she said, “since I can’t understand your language yet.”

“You will never begin to understand true speech, as you are.” He spoke quite matter-of-factly. “I will never understand it completely, either. But the next generation will.”

If there is one, J.D. thought, but she kept her silence.
She found the idea intolerable, that the divers might be permitted — or encouraged — to die out. It was all too possible, if the new administration acted on its prejudice against genetic engineering.

“Besides,” Zev said, “it is rude to talk about someone in front of them when they cannot understand. Is that right?”

“That’s right. Some people would say it’s rude to talk about someone behind her back, though, too.”

“Oh. We did not know. We did not mean to be rude.” He hesitated. “J.D.?”

“Yes?”

“When is it polite to talk about someone?”

“Good question,” she said. “Anytime they don’t know it, I guess.”

“That is strange.”

“Yes, it is,” J.D. said. “But never mind. Everybody does it, anyway. What did you say about me? Or can you tell me?”

“No one said I should not. But perhaps you would rather have a surprise.”

“I’d rather know.”

“It is all right, then.” He put down the empty ice cream bowl. “We played and talked. Some said you were strange, swimming masked against the sea.”

I might as well have stayed in the city, J.D. thought. The divers aren’t the only people who think I’m
strange.

“But I said you felt the sea as well as any diver, and would feel it more deeply when you could dispense with your machines.”

Zev moved his hands like waves. Underwater the divers communicated by sound, and by touch when they were close enough. On land they retained the very human quality of adding to their speech with gestures.

“We are aware that we know things you would like to understand. And we all agreed that you know a large number of things about which we have fallen into ignorance.”

“Thank you for the compliment,” J.D. said.

“My family thinks it is too bad that you are still entirely human. Many of us wonder if you have considered changing your nature.”

J.D. clenched her hands around the mug of tea, oblivious to its heat.

“J.D.?” Zev said. “I have surprised you. I did not mean to. Are you angry?”

“Not angry,” she said. “Stunned. Zev... all I ever hoped for was that you’d invite me to stay in the open water — that you’d give me permission to bring my boat so I wouldn’t have to come back to the cabin every evening. What you’ve asked me is more than I dreamed. Is it possible?”

“Of course,” he said. “You have visited our lab. We
know what to do. We were never born from human and orca, as some say. Nor did people throw little children into the ocean and say, ‘Swim, grow fins and extra lungs!’ We chose our creation, like all changelings.”

“I know where divers came from — but no one’s gone from human to diver in a generation,” J.D. said. “Where are you going to get the biotechs?”

“My family has resources.”

J.D. blew on her tea and sipped from the cooling surface, taking time to think.

What Zev offered her was attractive. It was also illegal. Even before becoming U.S. president last fall, Senator Distler had repeatedly sponsored a bill to force the divers to change back into ordinary humans. J.D. feared that now, as president, he might be able to force the bill through Congress. The divers had few vocal supporters, and they employed no lobbyists. It would be terrible public relations for the government if it rounded them up and forced them to undergo reversion against their will. That might be the divers’ only protection. After all, any individual could decide to revert at any time. The divers chose to remain as they were.

As far as Distler and his supporters were concerned, preventing genetic diseases was one thing, changing the human species something quite different. The
enthusiasm for human engineering had peaked and faded rapidly, leaving a sizable group of divers and a few other changelings. Only the divers had increased their numbers.

“How will you decide?” Zev asked.

“I don’t know,” J.D. said slowly. “I feel like saying yes without even thinking about it. But I should think about it.”

“But how will you decide? With divers, the whole family plays and talks. Then we decide. Will you go to your family and talk with them? Will you play? You should play more, J.D."

She laughed, though Zev’s was a perfectly serious comment.

“My family — ” She started to describe her family, half-siblings, half-parents, step-siblings, step-parents, dispersed and recombined. It was an unusual family even in these modern times.

“My family never swims together,” she said, and left it at that. “This is a decision I’ll have to make by myself. May I have some time?”

“My mother will talk to you tomorrow,” Zev said. “That will be the real invitation. But I think... you will have to decide quickly.”

That was the last thing she had expected Zev to say. She had never known the divers to make an important decision in haste.
“Why?”

“I cannot tell you,” Zev said. He scooped up the melted ice cream on the bottom of the bowl with his finger and licked the chocolate from his knuckle and from the swimming web. He stood up. “Thank you for the ice cream.”

“You’re welcome.”

He crossed to her and hugged her, holding her close. He was shorter than she. He laid his head on her shoulder, and the curls of his pale hair tickled her skin just below the hollow of her throat. J.D. put her arms around Zev, giving him a big-sisterly pat on the shoulder. On land the heat of his body was even more noticeable than in the water.

He sighed deeply and stroked her breast. Startled, she put her hand on his, moved his fingers, and drew away.

“What is wrong?”

“You shouldn’t do that.”

“But why? We touch each other when we’re swimming.”

“It’s different on land, Zev. In the sea it’s just playing. On land, touching is more serious.”

“Oh,” he said. “You see? We need you, to tell us these things that we have forgotten, so we will not forget everything about living on land.”

His semi-retractile claws clicked on the linoleum,
then his feet scrunched in the gravel of the beach. He moved with a languorous grace, as if he were already in the water. He waded through the gentle surf. The water rose around his legs. When it reached his hips he breast-stroked forward and vanished. The waves obliterated the ripple he left behind.

Each wave reached a handsbreadth higher on the beach. J.D. watched the tide come in. Her tea grew cold.

The invitation gave her more than one decision to make. Accepting it would completely change her life. She would be able to resurrect her career, though she would have to restrict its focus to a single blended society. The story of the integration of the divers with the orcas deserved to be told. If she accepted, she would be in a position to tell it.

I should have accepted on the spot, J.D. thought. She could not come up with a single good reason to refuse — aside, of course, from the fact that she could be put in jail for becoming a changeling. This frightened her more than she cared to admit. She had been raised to obey authority, not defy it.

This is the best chance you’re ever going to have to practice your profession, she told herself. If your application to Starfarer hadn’t been rejected, things might be different. But you were turned down. And, anyway, why should human contact with aliens off the
Earth be more important than human contact with the beings that live on the same world, and still are alien to us?

The change in her life would include her form. She would become not only a chronicler of the divers, but a diver herself. Somewhere, somehow, the divers would obtain the sensitizing virus, and the changing viruses; they would inoculate her with the one, then with the others. As the changing viruses spread through her body and integrated themselves into her genes, she would begin to change.

She imagined her lungs enlarging, altering, the tissue of one lobe of each transmuting into a substance like the artificial lung. In that respect the divers differed from other marine mammals: they could breathe underwater, absorbing oxygen directly from the sea.

She would dispense with the metabolic enhancer, because her body would gain the ability to accelerate into a more efficient state. Spreading her strong square hands, she imagined swimming webs between her fingers. She imagined her light complexion darkening to protect her from exposure to the sun, and wondered if her brown hair would pale to gold or red.

She curled her toes to feel phantom claws extending, scratching the floor. Her breasts were heavier and her hips wider than any diver’s, and her imagination failed
when she tried to think of her body changing to resemble their sleek shape. She wondered if her breasts would shrink and flatten, if her hips would narrow, if the changing virus could alter even a person’s bone structure.

The idea of the change both frightened and intrigued her.

She wondered what her family would say. They would not object. Her dad might make one of his offhand remarks, so dry that J.D. often found herself laughing before she realized what was funny, so offbeat she could not imagine what it would be.

The shadows of the Douglas firs lengthened across the beach and pierced the water with their tips. The breeze freshened. J.D. felt cold again, as if she had never really been warm.

She had to give herself time before deciding. So many factors came into the mix. The opportunity of joining a group of beings that she loved, of telling their story, had to be balanced against the possibility — indeed the probability — that academic colleagues would no longer take seriously the work of a researcher who had, in the old-fashioned phrase, gone native.

And she had to face the legal question of making the change.

Perhaps a few years ago it would not have mattered.
It was possible that even now, no one would notice. But if they did, the current fashion of despising science and technology would cause her a great deal of trouble. And that did worry her.

So did Zev’s uncharacteristic reluctance to tell her why she would have to make her choice so quickly.

The sun set. Darkness crept into the cabin.

Needing the familiarity of simple actions, J.D. put her teacup in the sink, puttered around straightening up the cabin, and, for the first time all day, asked her web link for mail and messages and the day’s report.

It reported.

Victoria’s invitation to join the alien contact team suddenly made her life even more complicated.

Victoria watched J.D. as she gazed back at Earth. She was glad the contact specialist had agreed to join the expedition on such short notice, after Nakamura quit.

It must have been hard on her, Victoria thought, to be turned down and then invited again. It takes a lot of guts to put aside hurt feelings.

Nevertheless, she wished she knew all the reasons J.D. had changed her mind about staying with the divers. Victoria felt certain that she did not yet have the whole story.

“J.D.?”

J.D. continued to stare out the window for a
moment. When she turned to Victoria, her expression was wistful, lonely.

“Time to board the transport.”

In low Earth orbit, the spaceplane docked with the EarthSpace transport, an ungainly-looking but efficient craft, one of the trucks that ferried cargo and passengers from low Earth orbit to the O’Neill colonies and the labs, to lunar orbit, and to Starfarer.

As Victoria helped J.D. negotiate the zero-g path from the plane to the transport, she glanced over the passengers sharing the journey. The space-plane, which should have been full with a waiting list, was half empty. These days, too few people traveled out to Starfarer. Far too many traveled away, recalled by their governments, or, like Nakamura, giving up in despair.

While the plane resembled a regular jetliner, with well-maintained upholstery and paint, the transport looked more like a tramp freighter. Its workings hung out in plain sight, exposed, growing shabby with age and use.

“Quite a difference,” J.D. said, glancing around. She held the net bags stuffed with her and Victoria’s personal allowances. Her possessions were drab next to the bright colors and textures that showed through the mesh of Victoria’s bag.

“There’s one new transport,” Victoria said. Towing
J.D. by one hand, she pushed off down a corridor.
“They always schedule it so it’s the one that picks up
the VIPs on their junkets. I never have figured that out.
If we let them see the old equipment, we might get
enough money to keep it properly maintained.”
“Can I try this myself?” J.D. said.
“Sure.” Victoria took the two mesh bags.
“Remember that even though you haven’t got any
weight, you still have mass and momentum.”
J.D. planted her feet, kicked, and headed for the far
wall too fast and too hard. Victoria winced and pushed
off after her, but somehow J.D. managed to turn in
mid-air, catch herself on her toes against the bulkhead,
and bounce back, awkward but safe. Victoria used her
arms and legs as springs to give all her momentum to
the metal surface. She floated beside J.D., who hung
upside-down nearby, laughing. Her hair, short and
limply dry from exposure, flew around her head.
“Even better than diving,” she said. “And you don’t
need half as much force to get you where you’re going.
I’ll learn to compensate. I thought maybe I’d let my
hair grow, but I think I’ll keep it short.”
They found their closet-sized cubicles, where they
could rest during the trip to the starship.
“One of Satoshi’s department members says the
transport reminds him of his college days,” Victoria
said. “He used to travel cross-country in a bus. But I
think of the transport as the China Clipper. Crossing space like a prop-plane crossing the Pacific.” The transport was less luxurious but safer, not as unbearably romantic.

“The middle of the Pacific is scarier,” J.D. said.

The transport freed itself from the spaceplane with a low *clang* and a vibration that trembled through the ship. J.D. started, then flushed with excitement when the gentle acceleration provided micro-gravity.

“That’s really on our way, aren’t we?”

“We really are,” Victoria said.