

# FATHERHOOD

By Margaret Karmazin

*Fatherhood: a moment of exultation followed by 18 years of worry, confusion, and bad dad-jokes.*

Unless something went wrong in the wiring, plumbing or general construction of the space station, once his dinner was down, chief of maintenance Cooper Venna sat down to a game of something or other (usually chess) with his best friend Desmoda.

Desmoda, who had a long string of names, some not pronounceable to humans, Piorans and other races on Chandra Medical, never made anyone bother with any of them. Cooper usually called him "Des." Des was a Legondi, an unusual race of beings from very far away Legondar, an Earth-like planet rotating around a star much like Earth's sun. However, the Legondi were nothing like humans aside from their personalities.

Cooper remembered when he first observed Desmoda's physical characteristics, some of which he could view from his table in the station's fanciest restaurant where he occasionally went on a date if he could get one. On the "evening" in question, he was with Inspector Brackmoor, a formidable detective in the station's police force. She, half human/half Priori, tall and stunning with lavender skin and long black hair, was out of his league romance-wise. But they were good friends and she often let him buy her dinner.

"So that is a Lagondi," Cooper said, eyeing the new alien who was deep in conversation with two Priori at a nearby table. "He doesn't seem to be eating."

"Lagondis don't eat," said Brackmoor. "They are hermaphrodite plants and get their sustenance from full spectrum sunlight. He has to go to Central Park once a day and spend a couple of hours soaking it up. A cheap date if there ever was one."

Cooper knew Central Park, a recreation area in the middle of Chandra Medical, better than anyone else on the space station. He had been instrumental in its design and, as head of maintenance, indispensable to keeping it running. The park offered full spectrum sunlight, living trees, plants and grass, a projected summer sky and an aroma of fresh air and flowers. It even had a healthy crop of bees and other insects and was extremely important to the physical and mental health of the station's occupants, human or otherwise. The sunlight that Desmoda soaked up daily for his sustenance was, for all practical purposes, quite authentic.

"I would like to get to know him," said Cooper, always an adventuresome soul.

"Certainly," said Brackmoor. "Come with me." She took him to Desmoda's table and introduced him to who would become Cooper's best friend.

Cooper, while giving the appearance of a "working man," had several educational degrees: a doctorate in space engineering, advanced certificates in plumbing and electrical grids and a masters in electronics. He was forty-six years old, divorced and childless. The sort of work he did didn't leave much time for a family, though Chandra Medical did have families on board, human and otherwise. The station was a joint Human/Priori enterprise and some of the officers and workers of both groups had mates and/or offspring.

Cooper had long accepted that he probably would never enjoy this luxury. He was, for all practical purposes on twenty-four-hour call, though he did currently have two promising supervising assistants in addition to an army of experienced workers.

One of these, Alvin Harcourt, begged his boss to let him be in charge for one full day. "Come on, Chief, how else am I going to learn?"

The younger man had a point. "All right," Cooper said, "I'll be in the Park. Don't do anything stupid; buzz me first. Remember, there are over six thousand lives on board and we are responsible for all of them. And let Tisha help you." Tisha was the other assistant and the two were fiercely competitive.

Alvin looked crestfallen. "Isn't she supposed to supervise the Clinic Three upgrade today?"

"Yes, but she can still be available for other things. What do you think my job is like? I'm on call for a thousand things at once. Get a grip, Alvin."

"Yes, sir," Alvin mumbled before slinking away.

Cooper continued on down to Central Park and found the usual bunch of cronies with their chess and bodge boards set up under the one carefully tended live oak in the park. This dwarfed the other trees. The players consisted of various species in addition to human – tall blue Piori, the occasional purplish-green reptilian Kreedda, a crimson-skinned, four armed Ragoon and a couple of Tall Whites, whom everyone hated for several reasons.

Cooper sat down in front of an unoccupied chess board and waited. No one seemed to be in sight until Desmoda stepped from behind a Piori liti tree and appeared by the table. "May I play?" he said.

Two point two meters tall, he was generally formed like a humanoid, at least with a head, two arms and two legs though he seemed to have no neck and his head was bell shaped.

Startled, Cooper said, "I-I didn't see you there."

"Well," said Desmoda good-naturedly, "I am a plant. I blend right in!" He

"Before you, I never met a sentient plant," said Cooper. "I am honored."

He looked his new chess opponent over. Desmoda's skin color varied in different spots from dark brown to tan to various shades of green with purple splotches here and there. The number of eyes in his face also changed moment to moment, possibly depending on what Des was looking at. His fingers resembled agile branch tips with green buds at their ends, his torso and legs were comprised of thickly tangled stems and his feet, like his hands, ended in several shorter "toe" tips. His eyes, currently limited to two in number, were beady and dark though not unfriendly.

Cooper motioned for Desmoda to sit. "Have you played before?"

"No, no, never," said the plant man. "But please explain how. I am a quick learner." He spoke Piori/English, a blend of the two languages adapted for the station, and did so without an accent.

"You speak the language amazingly well," said Cooper.

"Like I said, fast learner," said Desmoda. He proved his point after Cooper explained the game and immediately took Cooper's queen.

"Geesh," said Cooper. "What fun is this going to be if you're forty times smarter than me?"

The Legondi looked crestfallen. Apparently, he was soft emotionally. "Oh, no, my friend, I would never say that. I know what your job is and I could never ever take care of all those things. I am lucky if I can remember how to get to my quarters on a daily basis. It is just that on my world, our kind learn to be tricky at a very young age. We have many predators who like to eat our offspring or even parts of us grown and so we adapt by being crafty. This game here is one of craftiness, no?"

"Well, yes," admitted Cooper. "I suppose most games are."

"Perhaps not the the Legondi game of Sflutt. That is a game of intuition, in which you may or may not best me. Want to try it?"

Of course, Cooper did. He loved games. "Teach me," he said.

"Upstairs" in the vast medical division, Inspector Brackmoor dropped in on Dr. Trava who was the Priorian Chief of Medical. "What's with the plant man?" she asked her old friend. "Fascinating species. Are they trustworthy? I haven't been able to dig up much on them and nothing at all on this particular one."

"You know as much as I do," said Trava. "His ship showed up without warning. He was the only being onboard and brought me several cartons of material from his planet."

"What for?"

"He says his people are suffering from a terrible disease called Tomaca that affects only his species. He heard from

All this Brackmoor related to Cooper the next time she allowed him to buy her an expensive dinner. "Apparently, he came here out of the goodness of his heart, though he might not even have a heart, literally, I mean."

"He is a good person, I think," said Cooper. "I'm getting to know him. We meet any time we can to play games."

"What kind of games?"

"Chess, though he beats the pants off me. Bodge, which I win occasionally and one of his own called 'Sfutt' or 'Read Me,' which involves outwitting various villains using your intuition. I often win that one."

"How long is he going to be here?" asked Brackmoor. "Legondar is three times as far as Priori from here and four times

"Like a person running from the law?" said Cooper.

She shrugged. "It's not the first time."

She was a beautiful cop. Cooper would never admit how many nights he had relieved his tension while imagining her in his bed. She towered over him some, being half Priori. She often wore her black hair in a thick braid down her back and decorated her ears with big disk earrings and her twelve fingers with silver rings, a metal that complimented her rare lavender skin. Her long, brown eyes regarded him in the manner of a cop, not the least bit romantically as he would have wished. But hey, not even the Chief of Medical, Trava himself could get anywhere with her in that regard, though Cooper did not know if he desired to. Trava lived like a monk.

"I take it you want me to feel him out," said Cooper, not pleased with the idea.

"Gently," she said. "He might indeed be the good person you believe he is. You know how to do it. I've rubbed off on you some, haven't I?"

It was true that, like Dr. Trava, he had seen her in action and observed some of her interrogation techniques. "I hate being a prick," he said.

"You never could be that." She smiled.

A pleasant time ensued with, for once, the station running without horrible hitches, the two assistants making only minor mistakes and not trying to sabotage each other. Cooper suspected that Alvin had the hots for Tisha. Whether that was reciprocated or not, time would tell.

He found Desmoda sunning himself on a large artificial rock in the park. "Ready for me to destroy you?" he asked.

The tall plant man slowly stood up and stretched, showing himself to full glory. "You're quite an impressive being," said Cooper, admiring the creature's subtle coloring and texture.

"Thank you," said Desmoda. "So are you. So are all beings."

They found an unoccupied table and settled down.

"How is Trava doing with your medicines?" Cooper asked.

"Some of the elements are looking promising," said Desmoda. "I brought with me vials of the infesting material so his crew can experiment on it. They have abilities and resources I don't have myself."

Cooper looked up with alarm. "But what if the dangerous microorganism should escape and infect others?"

Calmly, Desmoda moved a Sfutt tile with a game villain on it. "The evil Vitrotas will not take over the kingdom this time," he laughed. Then he answered Cooper's question. "As I told you, as far as I know, Tomaca cannot infect iron-carrying blooded animals. You could drink the microorganisms, rub them into your eyes, eat them on your ice cream and nothing will happen. Your immune system would mutilate them in a matter of minutes. Also, they would have nothing to hitch a ride on."

Not quite convinced, Cooper said, "How do you know for certain this is true? How do you know that red blooded animals have never come in contact with Tomaca?"

"For the disease to take hold, the microbes or whatever they are, need cell sap," Desmoda stated firmly. "This fluid is in the vacuoles of a plant's living cells. It contains variable amounts of food and waste materials, inorganic salts, and nitrogenous compounds. It is our blood. The Tomaca pathogen operates in a particular sap. Red blood would be a most hostile environment."

Cooper lay down his own tile and gesticulated at their surroundings. "This tree here, all of the trees and plants here, our food growing in the greenhouse could be in danger if those pathogens should escape Trava's lab!"

Desmoda's voice was low and even. "It is possible," he admitted. "Though still the risk is low for a certain reason. I informed Trava of all this and his team is working in extremely sealed conditions. You need to understand that Tomaca is a pathogen geared to our particular sap, our Lagondi peculiarities."

"How do you know that?" Cooper had lost his desire for the game, now starting to worry and, unfortunately, feeling suspicious of his friend. He remembered what he had promised Brackmoor.

"Let us play chess again," said Desmoda and no more information was forthcoming.

Unhappily, Cooper complied and of course lost the game.

That evening, Alvin and Trisha almost ejected into space three technicians working under Food Processing. It was a mistake anyone could have made but Cooper yelled at them for a full hour. "I caught this in time," he told them, but if I hadn't, neither of you would ever work in space again! You forgot the rule of checking everything three times and then three more times. Get the hell out of my sight and don't let me even hear you breathing till tomorrow morning!"

Their faces looked terrified as they slinked away, too scared even to mumble under their breath. Cooper made himself a dry martini. Fortified, he then traveled by the silent train in the wall to Dr. Trava's floor and walked the rest of the way to the doctor's quarters, which were connected to his office in Medical.

"I know I am nobody in medical circles," he told Trava, who was also having a drink, though not a martini, "but Brackmoor does have me in the loop. I'm very friendly with Desmoda and would like to know, if possible, what your team has discovered about his medical plants and pathogens."

Trava, a relatively good-looking Priori, extremely tall by human standards, slim of build, and blue skinned with short, thick brown hair and wide brown eyes, had recently lost his weird second wife under strange circumstances and seemed not to mind his drop-in visitor in the slightest. It was known that he had a first wife on his home planet and loved her but she would not live on a space station, nor travel in space unless she absolutely had to. Cooper knew no one who did not like and admire the famous immunologist.

"I sure would not classify you as a 'nobody,' Cooper. This place would cast us into space without you, so you are as important as I am around here. To answer your question, we did find something unpleasant. The pathogen is engineered."

So that was what Desmoda meant. Cooper's mind flooded with speculation. For one thing, Desmoda's traveling alone all that distance - why hadn't he come with a team?

"I would venture to say that whoever engineered it," said Trava, "didn't have anything nice in store for Desmoda's species."

Cooper thanked the doctor, turned down an offer for a drink and though it was late, headed for the quarters of Inspector Brackmoor. Surprisingly, she invited him in. If he had harbored any wishes to see her in whatever she might put on when at home, he was disappointed since she wore her usual attire of form fitting pants and jersey top. Every move she made was like that of a dancer.

He told her what he'd just learned but she already knew it. "Desmoda is not the only Lagondi in this section. A trader passing by reported some 'plant beings' on Roja III from a ship just like Desmoda's asking for information on someone who sounds just like our friend. They are looking for him; who else would it be?"

Was Des legitimately on the run or was he a criminal, Cooper wondered. "It's time we found out what his story really is," he said.

"By the way," said Brackmoor. "That disease Desmoda fears, Tomaca, it doesn't in any way affect animals like you or me. There is nothing to worry about there."

"What about our trees?" Cooper asked, thinking about his beloved Central Park.

"No worries there either," she said. "It is a pathogen designed specifically for its target." She stood up – a clear indication to leave.

Though he needed to get some sleep, he was wide awake and worried on several levels. After walking off some steam on Brackmoor's floor, he traveled to the park and was glad to see that hardly anyone was there at this time, most night revelers being in the entertainment section two floors below. He took a seat at his usual table under the live oak and stared up at the artificial starry sky. It was set to create the look of natural phases of Earth's one moon, the Priorians having politely declined to insist on their own three, and currently it was in new moon phase.

Cooper found the night conducive to deep thinking on certain subjects and he examined his feelings about Desmoda. He did not deny his intuitive and sometimes psychic side and right now he felt that his friend was in danger from more than one source. What this danger was, he could not pinpoint but it was dire. He resolved to confront him the next day.

Tisha greeted him in the morning. She was tiny and compact and at first, he had doubted she would be able to survive on Chandra without the physical strength to perform some of the jobs that arose, but she more than made up for that with wiry agility and the ability to bark orders at much larger people until they jumped to action. "Sir," she said, "your friend the plant man is in your office. He seems impatient to talk."

Desmoda was cheerful as usual, though the information he imparted was anything but positive. "Remember I told you once that the lifespan of a Lagondi is usually about three hundred of your years? Occasionally one of us makes it to three hundred and thirty or so but that is newsworthy."

Cooper nodded.

"Well...before we come to an end, we experience a certain...feeling. It is described to us by our elders. One begins to feel an elation, a sense of purpose they have not felt before, a knowledge of the future. It comes in waves. Our "deaths" are not really an end. I didn't explain that part to you. So, when this time approaches, there is a sense of importance, even a thrill."

"Yes?" said Cooper. He dreaded to think where this was headed.

Desmoda said, "I didn't expect it this soon but it is here, my friend. I am feeling it."

"But you said you were only about two hundred and forty. You said you-"

"I know, but sometimes these things happen. I did have a relative who met his end at only two hundred and ten. It is rare."

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?"

Desmoda put a twiggy hand on Cooper's arm. "I am sure, Cooper. It is something we know by instinct."

Cooper felt like someone had punched him. "Are you saying it's going to happen soon? Right here on the station? Or do you have to get back to Legondar?"

"It will happen right here, Cooper. And there is something I have not told you about our life cycle." Desmoda had reduced his eye count to two large black ones and stared kindly into his friend's own blue ones.

"What's that?" Cooper said, feeling weird in his stomach.

"I never explained how my kind reproduces. It is nothing like how your sort does it. I believe on your world, you have the term 'fragmentation,' in which an organism breaks off pieces of itself, which then develop into a new organism. Well, we do something of that nature only it is slightly more complicated. At some time in our lives...well, more likely many times, we mate with another person or persons. It is a generally pleasant procedure as it usually is on your world. Our bodies store the gametes from this procedure and keep them viable for years. If we perform this mating

procedure with, say, ten other people, we have in storage a nice assortment of gametes and resulting chromosomes. This assortment is stored in a middle section of our bodies but when death is near, it is released and circulates in our sap. That is what causes the predeath feeling I mentioned which is a form of euphoria. Most pleasant. Meanwhile, all over my body gametes are joining in different combinations. When the euphoria reaches a pitch, my body will divide into parts. I will lie on the floor or ground or wherever and break up. At first the parts will not all look alike but within a short time, they will form into miniature Lagondi, each one having a different combination of genes. These will be my children. And that is what I want to ask you about, my dear friend."

Cooper was alarmed. Was Desmoda going to ask him to take the offspring to Legondar? How would he do that? The trip would take months even with space bending or worm tubes; he had a station to run, he had lives to protect!

"Let us get your Inspector Brackmoor here to listen to the rest of my request," Desmoda said. "As a witness of authority."

Cooper felt unadulterated panic. He had no intention of leaving the job he loved to go on some foolhardy trip across space! He liked Desmoda, maybe even loved him, but no, just no. His commitment was to Chandra Medical and that was that.

After a quick interchange with Alvin and Tisha about a not too serious leak in Storage, he buzzed the inspector. She said she'd stop by his office in ten.

He and Desmoda sat quietly until Brackmoor appeared, sexy as usual, her hair loose this time, a silken cascade down her muscular back. She sat down and waited.

"Whatever it is, Desmoda, tell her," Cooper said. He did notice that the plant man looked slightly different – a shift in his coloring, almost iridescent. Maybe like that thing they said about pregnant humans? That they glowed?

"It is this," Desmoda said, after explaining to Brackmoor what was happening to him. "I want Cooper to be the parent of my children."

A moment of stunned silence followed before Cooper half shouted, "What?"

"You," said Desmoda, "are ideal. I have come to know you as an intelligent, kind, and trustworthy individual. I cannot return to Legondar. I am a hunted person.

"You see, we have been taken over by another species from an unknown source, a planet or dimension we are not familiar with. They appeared in our skies out of nowhere and immediately began to infect the population with the engineered pathogen. They did not respond to attempts to communicate. Our people died like insects; it spread like fire. Our communication grid was mostly wiped out, but I managed to get news from an independent enterprise on the southern pole. They told me what to do, how to gather what I could of the pathogen without infecting myself. At the time, I had been resting in a remote area where I owned comfortable lodgings. Finding some newly deceased victims and with much trepidation, I did as the source instructed and collected what I could from them. I managed to escape alone in my ship by cloaking when I could and moving inside a nearby asteroid belt. When I felt getaway was possible, I gunned it to the nearest worm tube and came out in a position to make it here.

"Some of us knew about you. Probably they are looking for me but your defense system is excellent and here I still am. I imagine that the stress of this has brought on my premature end."

"But when they, whoever they are, find out you have offspring..." said Brackmoor.

"I don't think it would occur to them. They think of me as one individual. They wouldn't know what I have become. They will try to kill the offspring if they find them though, that is a given. Not because they are mine but because they are Legondis."

"How many offspring are we talking about?" said Cooper.

"Oh," said Desmoda casually, "possibly twenty or so. If they live, you can see how many more they could make and it is possible they could begin a new civilization somewhere."

"But," said Brackmoor, "from what you've said, you've stored gametes to create them but they would not be able to gain any new gametes in their lifetimes."

"Yes," Desmoda said, nodding like a human, "that is correct. But I have stored many many gametes. I have had hundreds of sexual encounters in my lifetime. These assorted gametes would be distributed throughout and appear in various amounts in their different bodies. They will have to mate with each other to further spread these around, but there should be enough variety to begin anew on a small basis. And there is always the chance that others have escaped Legondar and will eventually find each other."

"What do you want Dr. Trava to do with the cure, should he happen to find one?"

"That is up to him," said Desmoda, looking placid as a Buddha. "Perhaps he can send such a cure to explode on Legondar. Something that goes poof when it hits our atmosphere. I do not know; I have done what I can."

"Where would I bring up the children?" asked Cooper, feeling as if he might burst from anxiety. "On Chandra Medical? And your kind lives much longer than mine. I'll be dead before they're hardly adolescents, assuming they turn into those."

"Your kind, with good care, lives from a hundred and twenty to one hundred and forty. You are what? Not yet middle-aged? By the time you are dead, they will be young adults. No problem. Meanwhile, when you hear of a world that will allow them freedom, send three or four. Scatter them about the universe."

"In true plant fashion," commented Cooper quietly.

He and Brackmoor sat in silence for a moment and then the inspector stood up. "I will talk to Trava," she said.

Over the next few days, Cooper withdrew and examined his life. He mused on the fact that one can only coast along for a limited amount of time before he is once again thrown for a loop. Calling Alvin and Tisha to his quarters, he offered them drinks and told the story. They were very quiet, their usual bickering and snideness toward each other stilled.

"We will help you," Tisha said and Alvin, amazingly, nodded in agreement. "I know some of the techs who'll lend a hand."

"Franklin in Cleanup is very fond of kids," said Alvin. "He's from a really large family and experienced."

"Yeah, my friend Zip," said Tisha, "her too."

The event was attended by Cooper, Brackmoor, Dr. Trava, Tisha and Alvin. Desmoda was elated right to his end, as he predicted, due to the hormone release. When the culmination occurred, he suddenly went quiet and his eyes disappeared into what had served as his head. Everyone stood up to watch. Cooper's eyes were wet.

For a long moment, the body lay on a mattress on the floor without moving and then quickly, it broke apart into chunks, some larger than others but most about the size of Cooper's forearm. He counted and came to twenty-eight. The pieces lay dormant for about ten minutes and then came to life. They formed into little humanoid shapes and struggled to sit up or stand. The humans and Priori arranged themselves around them and soon the little beings rushed to one or the other, bunches crowding into open arms. It appeared that they were quite willing to accept whoever was there as a source of comfort and nurturing.

"I never imagined such a day," Cooper said, already planning to teach them chess.

End

*Margaret Karmazin is one of several "repeat performers" in this year's line-up. Her command of narrative flow, coherent plot, and relatable characters get her here virtually every time she submits. You can agree with our assessment on our BBS.*