

Wolf Mari

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Here is a love story of two young people who met under the magic of festival time. One was Trina, whose world was a gentle make-believe Earth. The other was Max, handsome spaceman, whose world was the infinite universe of space...

The First Day of spring, the man at the weather tower had said, and certainly it felt like spring, with the cool breeze blowing lightly about her and a faint new clover smell borne in from the east. Spring – that meant they would make the days longer now, and the nights shorter, and they would warm the whole world until it was summer again.

Trina laughed aloud at the thought of summer, with its picnics and languid swims in the refilled lakes, with its music and the heavy scent of flowers and the visitors in from space for the festival. She laughed, and urged her horse faster, out of its ambling walk into a trot, a canter, until the wind streamed about her, blowing back her hair, bringing tears to her eyes as she rode homeward toward the eastern horizon – the horizon that looked so far away but wasn't really.

"Trina!"

His voice was very close. And it was familiar, though for a moment she couldn't imagine who it might be.

"Where are you?" She had reined the horse in abruptly

and now looked around her, in all directions, toward the north and south and east and west, toward the farm houses of the neighboring village, toward the light tower and the sun tower. She saw no one. No one else rode this early in the day in the pasture part of the world.

"I'm up here, Trina."

She looked up then and saw him, hovering some thirty feet off the ground in the ridiculous windmill-like craft he and his people used when they visited the world.

"Oh, hello, Max." No wonder she had known the voice. Max Cramer, down from space, down to the world, to see her. She knew, even before he dropped his craft onto the grass beside her, that he had come to see her. He couldn't have been on the world for more than the hour she'd been riding.

"You're visiting us early this year, Max. It's not festival time for three months yet."

"I know." He cut the power to the windmill blades, and they slowed, becoming sharply visible. The horse snorted and backed away. Max smiled. "This world is very – attractive."

His eyes caught hers, held them. She smiled back, wishing for the hundredth time since last summer's festival that he were one of her people, or at least a worldling, and not a man with the too white skin of space.

"It may be attractive," she said. "But you always leave it soon enough."

He nodded. "It's too confining. It's all right, for a little while,

but then..."

"How can you say that?" She shook her head sadly. Already they were arguing the same old unresolvable argument, and they had scarcely greeted each other. After all his months in space they met with the same words as they had parted. She looked past him, up and out, toward the horizon that seemed so many miles away, toward the morning sun that seemed to hang far, far off in the vaulted blue dome of the sky.

"How can you even think it? About this?"

His lips tightened. "About *this*," he repeated. "A horizon you could ride to in five minutes. A world you could ride around in two hours. A sun – you really call it a sun – that you could almost reach up and pluck out of that sky of yours." He laughed. "Illusions. World of illusions."

"Well, what do you have? A ship – a tiny ship you can't get out of, with walls you can see, all around you."

"Yes, Trina, with walls we can see."

He was still smiling, watching her, and she knew that he desired her. And she desired him. But not the stars.

"You have nothing like this," she said, knowing it wouldn't do any good. She looked past him at the light tower, one of the many that formed the protective screen about her world, that made it seem great and convex, a huge flattened sphere with the sun high above, and not the swift curving steel ball that it actually was.

This was her world. It was like Earth, like the old Earth of the legends of the time before the radiation wars. And even though

her mind might know the truth about the screens that refracted light and the atomic pile that was her sun, her heart knew a more human truth. This was a world. As it had been in the beginning. As it must be till the end – or until they found a new Earth, somewhere, sometime. . . Max sighed. "Yes, you have your world, Trina. And it's a good one – the best of its kind I've ever visited."

"Why don't you stay here then?"

A spaceman, she thought. With all the dozens of men in my world, why did it have to be a spaceman? With all the visitors from New France and New Chile and New Australia last festival, why did it have to be him?

"I have the stars, Trina."

"We do too!" Last festival, and the warm June night, heavy, druggedly heavy with honeysuckle and magnolia, and the hidden music from the pavillions. And Max Cramer, tall and strong boned and alien, holding her in his arms, dancing her away from her people, out onto the terrace above the little stream, beneath the full festival moon and the summer stars, the safe, sane, well ordered constellations that their ancestors had looked upon from Earth.

"My stars are real, Trina."

She shook her head, unable to argue with him. World-woman and spaceman, and always different, with nothing in common between them, really, except a brief forgetfulness at festival time.

"Come with me, Trina."

"No." She gathered up the reins and chucked at the horse and

turned, slowly, for the village.

"You wouldn't come – for me?"

"You wouldn't stay, would you?"

She heard the windmill blades whir again, and a rustling of wind, and then he was beside her, skimming slowly along, barely off the ground, making her horse snort nervously away.

"Trina, I shouldn't tell you this, not until we've met with your councilmen. But I – I've got to."

He wasn't smiling now. There was a wild look about his face. She didn't like it.

"Captain Bernard's with the council now, giving them the news. But I wanted to see you first, to be the one who told you." He broke off, shook his head. "Yet when I found you I couldn't say anything. I guess I was afraid of what you'd answer..."

"What are you talking about?" She didn't want to look at him. It embarrassed her somehow, seeing him so eager. "What do you want to tell me?"

"About our last trip, Trina. We've found a world!"

She stared at him blankly, and his hand made a cutting gesture of impatience. "Oh, not a world like this one! A planet, Trina. And it's Earth type!"

She wheeled the horse about and stared at him. For a moment she felt excitement rise inside of her too, and then she remembered the generations of searching, and the false alarms, and the dozens of barren, unfit planets that the spacemen colonized, planets like ground-bound ships.

"Oh, Trina," Max cried, "This isn't like the others. It's a new Earth. And there are already people there. From not long after the Exodus..."

"A new Earth?" she said. "I don't believe it."

The council wouldn't either, she thought. Not after all the other new Earths, freezing cold or methane atmospheres or at best completely waterless. This would be like the others. A spaceman's dream.

"You've got to believe me, Trina," Max said. "And you've got to help make the others believe. Don't you see? You wouldn't live in space. I wouldn't live here – on this. But there, on a real planet, on a real Earth..."

Then suddenly she felt his excitement and it was a part of her, until against all reason she wanted to believe in his mad dream of a world. She laughed aloud as she caught up the reins and raced her horse homeward, toward the long vista of the horizon and the capital village beyond it, ten minutes gallop away.

Max and Trina came together into the council hall and saw the two groups, the roomful of worldmen and the half dozen spacemen, apart from each other, arguing. The spacemen's eyes were angry.

"A world," Captain Bernard said bitterly, "there for your taking, and you don't even want to look at it."

"How do we know what kind of world it is?" Councilman Elias leaned forward on the divan. His voice was gentle, almost pitying. "You brought no samples. No vegetation, no minerals..."

"Not even air samples," Aaron Gomez said softly. "Why?" Bernard sighed. "We didn't want to wait," he said. "We wanted to get back here, to tell you."

"It may be a paradise world to *you*," Elias said. "But to us..." Max Cramer tightened his grip on Trina's hand. "The fools," he said. "Talking and talking, and all the time this world drifts farther and farther away."

"It takes so much power to change course," Trina said. "And besides, you feel it. It makes you heavy."

She remembered the stories her father used to tell, about his own youth, when he and Curt Elias had turned the world to go to a planet the spaceman found. A planet with people – people who lived under glass domes, or deep below the formaldehyde poisoned surface.

"You could be there in two weeks, easily, even at your world's speed," Captain Bernard said.

"And then we'd have to go out," Elias said. "Into space."

The worldmen nodded. The women looked at each other and nodded too. One of the spacemen swore, graphically, and there was an embarrassed silence as Trina's people pretended not to have heard.

"Oh, let's get out of here." The spaceman who had sworn swore again, just as descriptively, and then grinned at the councilmen and their aloof, blank faces. "They don't want our planet. All right. Maybe New Chile..."

"Wait!" Trina said it without thinking, without intending to.

She stood speechless when the others turned to face her. All the others. Her people and Max's. Curt Elias, leaning forward again, smiling at her.

"Yes, Trina?" the councilman said.

"Why don't we at least look at it? Maybe it is – what they say."

Expression came back to their faces then. They nodded at each other and looked from her to Max Cramer and back again at her, and they smiled. Festival time, their eyes said. Summer evenings, summer foolishness.

And festival time long behind them, but soon to come again.

"Your father went to space," Elias said. "We saw one of those worlds the spacemen talk of."

"I know."

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