



# The Colors of Space

*Marion Zimmer Bradley*

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## **PUBLISHER NOTES:**

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## CHAPTER ONE

The Lhari spaceport didn't belong on Earth.

Bart Steele had thought that, a long time ago, when he first saw it. He had been just a kid then; twelve years old, and all excited about seeing Earth for the first time—Earth, the legendary home of mankind before the Age of Space, the planet of Bart's far-back ancestors. And the first thing he'd seen on Earth, when he got off the starship, was the Lhari spaceport.

And he'd thought, right then, *It doesn't belong on Earth.*

He'd said so to his father, and his father's face had gone strange, bitter and remote.

"A lot of people would agree with you, Son," Captain Rupert Steele had said softly. "The trouble is, if the Lhari spaceport wasn't on Earth, we wouldn't be on Earth either. Remember that."

Bart remembered it, five years later, as he got off the strip of moving sidewalk. He turned to wait for Tommy Kendron, who was getting his baggage off the center strip of the moving roadway. Bart Steele and Tommy Kendron had graduated together, the day before, from the Space Academy of Earth. Now Tommy, who had been born on the ninth planet of the star Capella, was taking the Lhari starship to his faraway home, and Bart's father was coming back to Earth, on the same starship, to meet his son.

*Five years,* Bart thought. *That's a long time. I wonder if Dad will know me?*

"Let me give you a hand with that stuff, Tommy."

"I can manage," Tommy chuckled, hefting the plastic cases. "They don't allow you much baggage weight on the Lhari ships. Certainly not more than I can handle."

The two lads stood in front of the spaceport gate for a minute. Over the gate, which was high and pointed and made of some clear colorless material like glass, was a jagged symbol resembling a flash of lightning; the sign, in Lhari language, for the home world of the Lhari.

They walked through the pointed glass gate, and stood for a moment, by mutual consent, looking down over the vast expanse of the Lhari spaceport.

This had once been a great desert. Now it was all floored in with some strange substance that was neither glass, metal nor concrete; it looked like gleaming crystal—though it felt soft underfoot—and in the glare of the noonday sun, it gave back the glare in a million rainbow flashes. Tommy put his hands up to his eyes to shield them. "The Lhari must have funny eyes, if they can stand all this glare!"

Inside the glass gate, a man in a guard's uniform gave them each a pair of dark glasses. "Put them on now, boys. And don't look directly at the

ship when it lands."

Tommy hooked the earpieces of the dark glasses over his ears, and sighed with relief. Bart frowned, but finally put them on. Bart's mother had been a Mentor—*from the planet Mentor, of the star Deneb, a hundred times brighter than the sun.* Bart had her eyes. But Mentors weren't popular on Earth, and Bart had learned to be quiet about his mother.

Through the dark lenses, the glare was only a pale gleam. Far out in the very center of the spaceport, a high, clear-glass skyscraper rose, catching the sunlight in a million colors. Around the building, small copters and robotcabs veered, discharging passengers; and the moving sidewalks were crowded with people coming and going. Here and there in the crowd, standing out because of their height and the silvery metallic cloaks they wore, were the strange tall figures of the Lhari.

"Well, how about going down?" Tommy glanced impatiently at his timepiece. "Less than half an hour before the starship touches down."

"All right. We can get a sidewalk over here." Reluctantly, Bart tore his eyes from the fascinating spectacle, and followed Tommy, stepping onto one of the sidewalks. It bore them down a long, sloping ramp toward the floor of the spaceport, then sped toward the glass skyscraper; came to rest at the wide pointed doors, depositing them in the midst of the crowd. The jagged lightning flash was there over the doors of the building, and the words:

HERE, BY GRACE OF THE LHARI, IS THE DOORWAY TO ALL THE STARS.

Bart remembered, as if it were yesterday, how he and his father had first passed through this doorway. And his father, looking up, had said under his breath "Not for always, Son. Someday men will have a doorway to the stars, and the Lhari won't be standing in the door."

Inside the building, it was searingly bright. The high open rotunda was filled with immense mirrors, and glass ramps running up and down, moving staircases, confusing signs and flashing lights on tall oddly shaped pillars. The place was crowded with men from all over the planet, but the dark glasses they all wore gave them a strange sort of family resemblance.

Tommy said, "I'd better check my reservations."

Bart nodded. "Meet you on the upper level later," he said, and got on a moving staircase that soared slowly upward, past level after level, toward the information desk located on the topmost mezzanine.

The staircase moved slowly, and Bart had plenty of time to see everything. On the step immediately in front of him, two Lhari were standing; with their backs turned, they might almost have been men. Unusually tall, unusually thin, but men. Then Bart amended that mentally. The Lhari had two arms, two legs and a head apiece—they were that much like men. Their faces had two eyes, two ears, and a nose and mouth, all in the right places. But the similarity ended there.



They had skin of a curious pale silvery gray, and pale, pure-white hair rising in what looked like a feathery crest. The eyes were long and slanting, the forehead high and narrow, the nose delicately thin and chiseled with long vertically slit nostrils, the ears long, pointed and lobeless. The mouth looked almost human, though the chin was abnormally pointed. The hands would almost have passed inspection as human hands—except for the long, triangular nails curved over the fingertips like the claws of a cat. They wore skin-tight clothes of some metallic silky stuff, and long flowing gleaming silvery capes. They looked unearthly, elfin and strange, and in their own way they were beautiful.

The two Lhari in front of Bart had been talking softly, in their fast twittering speech; but as the hum of the crowds on the upper levels grew louder, they raised their voices, and Bart could hear what they were saying. He was a little surprised to find that he could still understand the Lhari language. He hadn't heard a word of it in years—not since his Mentorlian mother died. The Lhari would never guess that he could understand their speech. Not one human in a million could speak or understand a dozen words of Lhari, except the Mentorians.

"Do you really think that *human*—" the first Lhari spoke the word as if it were a filthy insult—"will have the temerity to come in by this ship?"

"No reasonable being can tell what *humans* will do," said the second Lhari. "But then, no reasonable being can tell what our own Port Authorities will do either! If the message had only reached us sooner, it would have been easier. Now I suppose it will have to clear through a dozen officials and a dozen different kinds of formalities."

The younger Lhari sounded angry. "And we have only a description—no name, nothing! How do they expect us to do anything under those conditions? What I can't understand is how it ever happened, or how the man managed to get away. What worries me is the possibility that he may have communicated with others we don't know about. Those bungling fools who let the first man get away can't even be sure—"

"Do not speak of it here," said the old Lhari sharply. "There are Mentorians in the crowd who might understand us." He turned and looked straight at Bart, and Bart felt as if the slanted strange eyes were looking right through to his bones. The Lhari said, in Universal, "Who are you, boy? What iss your businesssses here?"

Bart replied in the same language, politely, "My father's coming in on this ship. I'm looking for the information desk."

"Up there," said the old Lhari, pointing with a clawed hand, and lost interest in Bart. He said to his companion, in their own language, "Always, I regret these episodes. I have no malice against humans. I suppose even this Vegan that we are seeking has young, and a mate, who will regret his loss."

"Then he should not have pried into Lhari matters," said the younger Lhari fiercely. "If they'd killed him right away—"

The soaring staircase swooped up to the top level; the two Lhari stepped off and mingled swiftly with the crowd, being lost to sight. Bart whistled in dismay as he got off and turned toward the information desk. A Vegan! Some poor guy from his own planet was in trouble with the Lhari. He felt a cold, crawling chill down his insides. The Lhari had spoken regretfully, but the way they'd speak of a fly they couldn't manage to swat fast enough. Sooner or later you had to get down to it, they just weren't human!

Here on Earth, nothing much could happen, of course. They wouldn't let the Lhari hurt anyone—then Bart remembered his course in Universal Law. The Lhari spaceport in every system, by treaty, was Lhari territory. Once you walked beneath the lightning-flash sign, the authority of the planet ceased to function; you might as well be on that unbelievably remote world in another galaxy that was the Lhari home planet—that world no human had ever seen. On a Lhari spaceport, or on a Lhari ship, you were under the jurisdiction of Lhari law.

Tommy stepped off a moving stair and joined him. "The ship's on time—it reported past Luna City a few minutes ago. I'm thirsty—how about a drink?"

There was a refreshment stand on this level; they debated briefly between orange juice and a drink with a Lhari name that meant simply *cold sweet*, and finally decided to try it. The name proved descriptive; it was very cold, very sweet and indescribably delicious.

"Does this come from the Lhari world, I wonder?"

"I imagine it's synthetic," Bart said.

"I suppose it won't *hurt* us?"

Bart laughed. "They wouldn't serve it to us if it would. No, men and Lhari are alike in a lot of ways. They breathe the same air. Eat about the same food." Their bodies were adjusted to about the same gravity. They had the same body chemistry—in fact, you couldn't tell Lhari blood from human, even under a microscope. And in the terrible Orion Spaceport wreck sixty years ago, doctors had found that blood plasma from humans could be used for wounded Lhari, and vice versa, though it wasn't safe to transfuse whole blood. But then, even among humans there were five blood types.

And yet, for all their likeness, they were *different*.

Bart sipped the cold Lhari drink, seeing himself in the mirror behind the refreshment stand; a tall teen-ager, looking older than his seventeen years. He was lithe and well muscled from five years of sports and acrobatics at the Space Academy, he had curling red hair and gray eyes, and he was almost as tall as a Lhari.

*Will Dad know me? I was just a little kid when he left me here, and now I'm grown-up.*

Tommy grinned at him in the mirror. "What are you going to do, now we've finished our so-called education?"

"What do you think? Go back to Vega with Dad, by Lhari ship, and help him run Vega Interplanet. Why else would I bother with all that astrogation and math?"

"You're the lucky one, with your father owning a dozen ships! He must be almost as rich as the Lhari."

Bart shook his head. "It's not that easy. Space travel inside a system these days is small stuff; all the real travel and shipping goes to the Lhari ships."

It was a sore point with everyone. Thousands of years ago, men had spread out from Earth—first to the planets, then to the nearer stars, crawling in ships that could travel no faster than the speed of light. They had even believed that was an absolute limit—that nothing in the universe could exceed the speed of light. It took years to go from Earth to the nearest star.

But they'd done it. From the nearer stars, they had sent out colonizing ships all through the galaxy. Some vanished and were never heard from again, but some made it, and in a few centuries man had spread all over hundreds of star-systems.

And then man met the people of the Lhari.

It was a big universe, with measureless millions of stars, and plenty of room for more than two intelligent civilizations. It wasn't surprising that the Lhari, who had only been traveling space for a couple of thousand years themselves, had never come across humans before. But they had been delighted to meet another intelligent race—and it was extremely profitable.

Because men were still held, mostly, to the planets of their own star-systems. Ships traveling between the stars by light-drive were rare and ruinously expensive. But the Lhari had the warp-drive, and almost overnight the whole picture changed. By warp-drive, hundreds of times faster than light at peak, the years-long trip between Vega and Earth, for instance, was reduced to about three months, at a price anyone could pay. Mankind could trade and travel all over their galaxy, but they did it on Lhari ships. The Lhari had an absolute, unbreakable monopoly on star travel.

"That's what hurts," Tommy said. "It wouldn't do us any good to have the star-drive. Humans can't stand faster-than-light travel, except in cold-sleep."

Bart nodded. The Lhari ships traveled at normal speeds, like the regular planetary ships, inside each star-system. Then, at the borders of the vast gulf of emptiness between stars, they went into warp-drive; but first, every human on board was given the cold-sleep treatment that placed them in suspended animation, allowing their bodies to endure the warp-drive.



He finished his drink. The increasing bustle in the crowds below them told him that time must be getting short. A tall, impressive-looking Lhari strode through the crowd, followed at a respectful distance by two Mentorians, tall, redheaded humans wearing metallic cloaks like those of the Lhari. Tommy nudged Bart, his face bitter.

"Look at those lousy Mentorians! How can they do it? Fawning upon the Lhari that way, yet they're as human as we are! *Slaves of the Lhari!*"

Bart felt the involuntary surge of anger, instantly controlled. "It's not that way at all. My mother was a Mentorian, remember. She made five cruises on a Lhari ship before she married my father."

Tommy sighed. "I guess I'm just jealous—to think the Mentorians can sign on the Lhari ship as crew, while you and I will never pilot a ship between the stars. What did she do?"

"She was a mathematician. Before the Lhari met up with men, they used a system of mathematics as clumsy as the old Roman numerals. You have to admire them, when you realize that they learned stellar navigation with their old system, though most ships use human math now. And of course, you know their eyes aren't like ours. Among other things, they're color-blind. They see everything in shades of black or white or gray.

"So they found out that humans aboard their ships were useful. You remember how humans, in the early days in space, used certain birds, who were more sensitive to impure air than they were. When the birds keeled over, they could tell it was time for humans to start looking over the air systems! The Lhari use Mentorians to identify colors for them. And, since Mentor was the first planet of humans that the Lhari had contact with, they've always been closer to them."

Tommy looked after the two Mentorians enviously. "The fact is, I'd ship out with the Lhari myself if I could. Wouldn't you?"

Bart's mouth twisted in a wry smile. "No," he said. "I could—I'm half Mentorian, I can even speak Lhari."

"Why don't you? I would."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't," Bart said softly. "Not even very many Mentorians will. You see, the Lhari don't trust humans too much. In the early days, men were always planting spies on Lhari ships, to try and steal the secret of warp-drive. They never managed it, but nowadays the Lhari give all the Mentorians what amounts to a brainwashing—deep hypnosis, before and after every voyage, so that they can neither look for anything that might threaten the Lhari monopoly of space, nor reveal it—even under a truth drug—if they find it out.

"You have to be pretty fanatical about space travel to go through that. Oh, my mother could tell us a lot of things about her cruises with the Lhari. The Lhari can't tell a diamond from a ruby, except by spectrographic analysis, for instance. And she—"

A high gong note sounded somewhere, touching off an explosion of warning bells and buzzers all over the enormous building. Bart looked up.

"The ship must be coming in to land."

"I'd better check into the passenger side," Tommy said. He stuck out his hand. "Well, Bart, I guess this is where we say good-bye."

They shook hands, their eyes meeting for a moment in honest grief. In some indefinable way, this parting marked the end of their boyhood.

"Good luck, Tom. I'm going to miss you."

They wrung each other's hands again, hard. Then Tommy picked up his luggage and started down a sloping ramp toward an enclosure marked TO PASSENGER ENTRANCE.

Warning bells rang again. The glare intensified until the glow in the sky was unendurable, but Bart looked anyhow, making out the strange shape of the Lhari ship from the stars.

It was huge and strange, glowing with colors Bart had never seen before. It settled down slowly, softly: enormous, silent, vibrating, glowing; then swiftly faded to white-hot, gleaming blue, dulling down through the visible spectrum to red. At last it was just gleaming glassy Lhari-metal color again. High up in the ship's side a yawning gap slid open, extruding stairsteps, and men and Lhari began to descend.

Bart ran down a ramp and surged out on the field with the crowd. His eyes, alert for his father's tall figure, noted with surprise that the ship's stairs were guarded by four cloaked Lhari, each with a Mentorian interpreter. They were stopping each person who got off the starship, asking for identity papers. Bart realized he was seeing another segment of the same drama he had overheard discussed, and wished he knew what it was all about.

The crowd was thinning now. Robotcabs were swerving in, hovering above the ground to pick up passengers, then veering away. The gap in the starship's side was closing, and still Bart had not seen the tall, slim, flame-haired figure of his father. The port on the other side of the ship, he knew, was for loading passengers. Bart moved carefully through the thinning crowd, almost to the foot of the stairs. One of the Lhari checking papers stopped and fixed him with an inscrutable gray stare, but finally turned away again.

Bart began really to worry. Captain Steele would never miss his ship! But he saw only one disembarking passenger who had not yet been surrounded by a group of welcoming relatives, or summoned a robotcab and gone. The man was wearing Vegan clothes, but he wasn't Bart's father. He was a fat little man, with ruddy cheeks and a fringe of curling gray hair all around his bald dome. *Maybe he'd know if there was another Vegan on the ship.*