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CONDUCT UNBECOMING

Chapter 1

“What happened? Anja, where’s Rik?”

Commodore (Retired) Thanta Orwell stirred experimentally in the sickbay bed, and squinted against impossibly bright lighting. The last place she remembered being was dark, and the H’cpt had kept her there for what seemed like a long, long time.

“Commodore, how are you feeling?”

It wasn’t the voice she wanted to hear. It belonged, apparently, to a woman in a medical uniform—a woman who had pink skin, a flat-boned face, and gentle hands.

Hands that pressed Thanta down again when she tried to sit up. That was foolish, because she felt fine. Just a little disoriented, maybe, after something had knocked her cold—something she didn’t remember.

“I’m okay,” she said testily. “Anja! Where is Rik?”

Commander Anja Britton, executive officer of the Protectorate Defense Forces starship *Solomons*, leaned against the nearest bulkhead and held her arms folded just below her breasts. It was a posture Thanta Orwell had seen Anja Britton use many times before—always when the Patriarca native was trying to carry off a bluff.

Anja couldn’t be doing that now. She had no reason, no reason at all, for wanting to deceive Orwell...did she?

“The captain took your place, Commodore.” The medic, who must be largely Charonese if her appearance was anything to go by, answered when Britton didn’t. Tartly, as if she found the silence exasperating. “That’s how he got you away from the H’cpt.”

“What?” Now Thanta did sit up—glaring at the medic as she did so, almost daring the woman to force her down again. This time her head didn’t spin. “Commander Britton. Where’s Captain Boehmer? And where in hell is the new ambassador? Report, dammit! *Now!*”

* * *

It couldn't be true. The ruling principle of Anja Britton's life was, "Thou shalt accept reality and deal with it, no matter what that means!" Yet this time, she couldn't believe her own memories had happened.

She stared for a moment longer at Commodore Orwell, who'd been her captain in tours of duty gone by. A captain whom Anja both respected and liked; a captain for whom she would, if anyone asked her, have been willing to take considerable personal risk. But hazard Rik Boehmer's life to protect Thanta Orwell's? That Anja would not have done, not under any circumstances.

Which made no difference now. Anja moved to the commodore's bedside, and she sat down there. She said quietly, "Backup's not here yet, Commodore. The *Solomons* is alone. I'm not sure why the H'cpt decided to hold you, after you called us and requested an early pickup—but Rik offered to take your place when he tried to open hostage negotiations and he got ignored. The H'cpt started paying attention then, and they accepted. So they've got him now. I'm waiting for the new ambassador and the amalgamation team to get here before I do anything else, because that's what Rik ordered me to do." She paused, staring into the older woman's eyes with angry intensity. Then she demanded, "What went wrong down there? What did they want from you, and what are they doing to Rik now that you're safe and he's the one they've got instead?"

* * *

Orwell failed to flinch under Britton's accusing stare. That wasn't surprising, of course, if you considered that not so many years ago Orwell was captain to Britton's conn lieutenant—but most people reacted quite differently when Anja decided to glare at them. Patriarca's children tended to be a pugnacious lot, and a first-generation amalgam like Anja was apt to have both a bad temper and a parsec-wide stubborn streak to go with it.

Thanta Orwell, whose ancestors amalgamated into the Protectorate generations ago, had thirty-five years of starship service to help her face Anja down. She also had memories of Anja as a junior officer, and before that as the scared (although still decidedly contentious!) kid whom Rik Boehmer took in hand during the evacuation of survivors from what was left of Patriarca after the rebels were through there.

The H'cpt weren't the first species to decide that they would take almost any risk rather than submit to amalgamation, once they learned

what the Protectorate required of its members. The rebels of Patriarca were willing to do whatever it took to cleanse their planet of youngsters like Anja Britton, after all; and there had been movements like theirs on other worlds. But the H'cpt panicked much earlier in the process—and that was Thanta Orwell's fault. This was her mission, her first as a diplomat. A solo diplomat, to a culture on the verge of entering into its initial covenant. Orwell didn't yet know exactly how she had failed, but she knew for sure it had happened.

"Have you had any contact with the H'cpt since Rik went down there?" she demanded of Anja Britton. "And how long is it going to be until help gets here?"

Before Rik's executive officer could reply to either question, the comm whistled. A disembodied voice wanted to know, "Commander Britton? Is Commodore Orwell available yet? There's a H'cpt who wants to speak with her."

"Tell her, him, or it to go ahead," Anja said into the small silence that followed, after she glanced first at the medic—who nodded reluctantly—and then at Orwell.

"Thanta," said someone whose voice the commodore recognized easily, after months of living among the H'cpt. They were beings who used single names and avoided addressing others by titles, and she'd adapted to their ways out of courtesy.

"Yes, H'rck. I'm listening."

"The man who offered to replace you as our messenger is on the flying boat that he used to come here. You may retrieve him now. Good-bye, Thanta. I will not see you again, I think."

"H'rck! Wait!" Thanta found her voice, frantically. Lack of dignity didn't matter right now. "Communications. Get him back! Immediately!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. No response." From the bridge, from decks above sickbay, came the apologetic reply.

"Britton to ops," Anja snapped, stepping into the situation with confidence now that she knew what needed to be done. "Get a tractor beam on the captain's shuttle, and bring it on board. Stat!"

"Aye, Commander." There was a pause, an endless several minutes during which a small craft on the H'cpt planet's surface was

lifted through layers of atmosphere to intercept the starship's orbit. Then, "We've got it on board. But there are no life signs."

"Oh, no." Thanta drew in a horrified breath. She knew, now, what kind of message the H'cpt were sending to the Protectorate's leaders—and what her own fate would have been, if her friend hadn't replaced her.

* * *

His family didn't claim his body. That came as no shock to Captain Rik Boehmer's friends and superiors.

No one was surprised, either, when Boehmer's family didn't even acknowledge receiving official notification of his death. Humans, after all, weren't supposed to leave their reservation on Luna except to be educated or for business that could only be transacted on Terra. They certainly weren't supposed to join the Defenders like Rik Boehmer, weren't supposed to take up arms on behalf of a Protectorate whose citizens they referred to with age-old scorn as "mongrels" or "mutants." Or by worse terms still, according to what Rik had told Thanta Orwell.

Of course none of his relatives would be making the shuttle transfer from Luna to attend his memorial service. They'd bludgeoned him into marrying, a decade or so earlier—into taking a female of his own kind and siring offspring, a family that his salary as a senior Defender officer supported generously—but that was where his value began and ended, as far as his society was concerned. To them Rik Boehmer was no hero, now dead in the line of duty. He was someone who'd lived by choice among the monsters, among those Terrans whose ancestors accepted amalgamation.

Why the Protectorate's leaders of long ago permitted Humans—Humans only, out of all known sentients—to maintain an unamalgamated remnant of their species, was lost now to history. What Thanta Orwell did know was that as a Defender who'd helped to put down more than one rebellion, she understood why the Human reservation on Luna could have no counterpart elsewhere.

She didn't understand why Rik had felt any degree of loyalty to his fellow Humans. But his marriage to one demonstrated that he had; and for that reason she was more glad than astonished, when a female whom she recognized from tridee images Rik proudly displayed aboard ships where they'd shared duty entered the local Defender base's chapel at last.

Rik's coffin rested on a bier at the front of that chamber, which was crowded along its walls with symbols of dozens of the Protectorate's assorted faiths. For now just his three closest friends were with him, but in a little while the dignitaries would arrive—such dignitaries as Terra had, anyway. This wasn't an especially powerful Protectorate world nowadays. Yet it was home to Thanta Orwell, and (since Luna wasn't a Protectorate member in its own right) it was also home world of record for Rik Boehmer.

It wasn't that to Anja Britton; or to Thimor, the single-named former ship's surgeon who was the third watcher at the dead man's side. Thimor's substantially Blaintain heritage showed plainly in her softly rounded body structure, and in her eyes that lost all pigmentation from their irises during times of stress.

"Mistress Boehmer?" Human women changed their names when they entered into a matrimonial covenant. Thanta knew that, because Rik had told her.

A cloak concealed the Human woman's body. Her hood was thrown back, though; and it revealed a face that was, by Human standards of attractiveness as Thanta understood them, a lovely one. Lovely, yet care-worn. Tired.

Understandably, since Thanta knew (although the cloak kept her from seeing) that Rik's wife was in the advanced stages of pregnancy. The couple already had two daughters, and soon now Salla Gardner Boehmer would bear Rik a son.

A posthumous son. Thanta couldn't imagine being pregnant, herself; but now she thought that it must be comforting, no matter how uncomfortable otherwise, to feel a loved husband's baby stirring as counterpoint to the sight of his sealed coffin.

The Human woman was paying no attention to the retired commodore in a full dress uniform. Salla Boehmer walked past Thanta, past Anja and Thimor, and stood beside Rik's casket.

Only a full captain or above, a command or flag officer who'd died in the line of duty, rated being brought home for a memorial service. Rik's body had spent the passage from the far-off H'cpt planet in a stasis tube on board the *Solomons*. Once here he'd been scanned thoroughly by Thimor and her colleagues at the local military hospital, since just how the H'cpt executed him remained a mystery; and then he was sealed up inside that gleaming black coffin, to lie in state until combined fire from

his closest comrades' side arms vaporized both casket and corpse at the service's climax.

The others would arrive in just a few minutes, now. The chapel's seating would be filled, Thanta had no doubt, because Rik Boehmer was an easy man to respect—and to love, also. Even though his marriage was an arranged one, she didn't find it odd that Salla Boehmer should defy Luna's customs to come here and say good-bye to what remained of her husband.

The Human woman spat on her husband's coffin. She turned away from it, and stared directly into Thanta Orwell's vertically pupiled eyes.

This was probably the only time in her whole life Thanta had been acutely conscious of her physical differences from a Human female. Her skin was a pale, delicate lilac in color; Salla's was light brown, like that of most Humans now (since racial distinctions had vanished during the first few generations after their retreat to sanctuary on Luna). Salla had hair, long strands of black hair. Thanta's scalp had fur on it, as did other, less obvious parts of her anatomy. Fur, for example, cushioned her pelvic bones whenever she sat down. Fur that once had been deep violet, but now was iron gray.

Salla's limbs had fewer joints than did Thanta's, and the Human's mammary glands (like those of Anja Britton) were housed in fatty globes. Thanta's chest was flat, and her half-dozen nipples undeveloped because she'd never nursed an infant and never would. Thimor was just starting to show mammary development, because Thimor was gestating her own offspring. She and her mate were physically compatible enough so they could do that, conceive without medical intervention and then (since Thimor so chose) bring the youngster or youngsters to term inside the female partner's body.

That was becoming an almost rare thing, in today's Protectorate. It was an ability Thanta didn't envy—she could hardly imagine being capable of bearing live young, as Thimor was doing and as Anja could do if a compatible male caused the pregnancy. Thanta's reproductive system classified her as female, but she'd known since pre-puberty days what she would have to do if she wanted children. She was a true amalgam, her DNA mingling that of so many different species that there was no way new life could ever begin spontaneously inside her body.

That was fine with Thanta. To her it seemed quite normal.

Spitting on something or someone was a gesture that didn't need interpreting. Salla Boehmer said calmly to the three females who stood by in shock and silence, "He's all yours now, Commodore Orwell. He never was mine, anyway! But you knew that, didn't you? Of course you did. I'm the one he made a fool of, every time he touched me."

With that pronouncement, she drew up the hood of her cloak. She walked out of the chapel.

Behind her, her dead husband's three closest friends stared at each other in consternation.

* * *

Dark. Airless. Confined. What was this place, where Rik Boehmer was awakening?

He was gasping, and getting nothing to fill his lungs. Nothing that wasn't stale, anyway. He knew oxygen starvation when he felt it, and as always it terrified him. To be without breathable air was one of a veteran starship officer's greatest fears.

He could move, although he couldn't scream. With both hands and both feet (both booted feet—why was he lying in what felt like a bed, with his boots still on?) he battered at the unyielding surface above him, desperately, because it was the only thing he could do that might get him out of wherever this was.

* * *

Anja Britton had been feeling uneasy all morning long. Strong telepathic and milder precognitive abilities would be bred out of her species, as time passed and ongoing generations of amalgamation distributed their DNA across the Protectorate; because most kinds of genetic diversity were prized, but not those characteristics. Yet in Anja, of course, they were still very much present. So she'd been taught from babyhood to avoid using them, and on the rare occasions when they insisted on bothering her anyway she ignored their stirrings within her consciousness.

Usually she could ignore them. Today, though, it was damnably difficult.

She kept thinking about how Rik would feel, if by some miracle he should wake up alive inside that sealed coffin. It would be dark in there, and airless...would he struggle, before he died again at last?

“Died again.” Now, there was an oxymoron. Soon after the *Solomons* retrieved Rik’s body from the H’cpt world he’d been deep-scanned by his ship’s medical staff, in a modern and far more dignified version of the ancient dissection rite called an autopsy. Once here on Terra, and out of stasis, he’d been subjected to the same procedures by a whole new crew of doctors. So there was no doubt Anja Britton was imagining everything she thought she was feeling, in sympathy with that thoroughly dead man inside that container of polished metal.

“Commodore. Do you hear something?”

Anja might have started calling Thanta Orwell by her given name, as Rik did, now that Orwell had retired. But it still seemed disrespectful somehow, maybe because Orwell was considerably Britton’s senior in chrono terms.

“I hear something, too!” Thimor’s hearing wasn’t quite as keen as was Thanta’s; nor was Anja’s, of course. That was one of the advantages of being a full amalgam; you were likely to possess enhanced senses, to compensate for your equally likely inability to reproduce without medical assistance.

Now Anja’s ears could perceive it, and not just her mind. *Thump, thump*. A dull sound, as of something striking repeatedly against metal.

Thanta took the blaster from her belt, the blaster with which she was planning to help give Rik his final honor by vaporizing his body, and adjusted its setting. Her face was grim as she said, “Thimor, you can sign the commitment order if I’m wrong and I’m breaking into a coffin for no damn reason! Because then we’ll know for sure that I’m nuts!”

She chose a spot below where Rik’s feet should be, so that he couldn’t (assuming the impossible—that what she was hearing really was a living man struggling to get out of a container within which he’d regained consciousness) press a body part against just the place where she was about to cut through his coffin’s lid. When she had it breached, when air from outside could get to him, she could take her time with the rest of the job.

The voice reverberated, as if the casket’s confines made it echo. But it was unmistakably Rik Boehmer who said crossly, yet quaveringly: “What the hell? Okay, I can breathe now! Hurry up and get me out of here!”

EXILES AMONG THE STARS

Chapter 1

“Alan, you’re a good friend. I’ll always love you that way, but it’s the only way I *can* love you. Please try to understand.”

Words that he couldn’t accept, Nadia McLean’s words during her last day as his captain aboard the Interstellar Guard patrol ship *Micmac*, echoed in Alan Robie’s skull as he stood at a public info-terminal in the merchant officers’ lounge at Chaitanya Control. He’d already occupied that terminal for more than the quarter-hour a patron could normally use it. Things were slow tonight, so no one was waiting behind him and wanting him gone.

Things were always slow on Chaitanya just after a Trade Fair. This planet, at a roughly central point among the four major Guard bases defining the human-inhabited portion of the Milky Way Galaxy, wasn’t good for much except commerce. All it had to recommend it, other than a breathable atmosphere and gravity reasonably close to that of long-lost Earth, was its location; but that location made Chaitanya the galaxy’s nerve center, as far as humans were concerned.

The banks had their headquarters here. So did the great trading Houses, whose freighters traveling from world to world tied humanity together. Here merchant officers without ships sought berths, and so (in a less regulated manner) did ordinary star sailors.

Even with recent and bitter disappointment gnawing at him, Alan Robie knew he was lucky to be in the former group instead of the latter. If his father hadn’t paid his cadet application fee, the younger of the two Robie sons couldn’t have left his native world without signing onto a starship as an ordinary. And if he’d stayed on Franconia, he would be rotting away as some professional man’s apprentice right now.

The Guard must fund its operations somehow, and in this far-flung society it did that by whatever means it could. Confiscating illicit cargoes and taxing credit accounts supplied steady revenue—but training starship officers, and charging a handsome fee to enter that training, brought in substantial sums, too. In some years more, in other years less,

depending on how many trader offspring reached the minimum plebe age of 18; and how many planet-bred kids like Alan Robie joined along with them.

Trader-kids went through the process because without formal training they couldn't be licensed, and without being licensed they couldn't command their families' ships. So the Guard more or less automatically took in daughters and sons of registered trade Houses, and charged the appropriate accounts. Their own brand new 18-year-olds went immediately into the next "boot camp" (another ancient term for the so-called plebe year, spent in learning the basics before a cadet was sent out on patrol ship duty). Guard brats, of course, paid no fees for their training—so youngsters entering from other channels had to pay that much more per head.

Or so Alan's father had lamented three years earlier, as he pressed his thumb against the biometric verifier and transferred the required sum from his account to the Interstellar Guard's. Even on Franconia the Guard had a financial presence, as on any world that could claim its protection—no matter how backward a place the Guard, the traders, and most other humans considered it.

Alan didn't know his home world was "backward" when he left it, backward even in this galaxy where isolation and loss or outright abandonment of knowledge had caused many cultures to regress. Yet even then he realized his father wasn't coming up with the Guard's fee so his dreams could be fulfilled, or to give him a less restricted life than he might hope for on Franconia. Tarleton Robie merely wanted to get his younger son, who promised to be far more aggressive than his firstborn, off world before Alan grew old enough to challenge his brother.

The young man hadn't heard from his family even once, after the day he boarded a freighter that brought him here to Chaitanya. The Guard vessel he was meeting didn't arrive to claim him until after he'd been forced to hang around this lounge for two long and hungry days, because he didn't yet have a credit code identifying him as a cadet. The memory wasn't a pleasant one...except, he supposed, by contrast.

Food money wasn't a problem today. Unless he failed to secure a berth before his credit ran out (since cadets started drawing pay as soon as patrol ship service made them useful, and he'd saved it all), it wouldn't become one. But he didn't want just any berth, dammit all!

He had to find a ship big enough to need two new officers, not just one. Because although she didn't know it yet, nor did he know how he was going to make it happen, Nadia McLean was coming with him.

* * *

Should he simply overpower her? She was skilled in hand-to-hand combat, but she didn't have as much muscle as he did. After two years of being her shipmate, and her frequent practice adversary, he knew all there was to know about her strengths and weaknesses. Oh, yes, he could get control and keep it in any genuine physical contest. But how in hell could he force her to stay with him afterward?

On his home world, that wouldn't have presented a problem. Taking a Franconia woman once, even against her will, forged a legal and moral bond that nothing except death could dissolve. As long as she didn't already belong to another man, of course—and as long as her father didn't decide that killing her himself was preferable to letting her become the wife of the man who'd claimed her.

In the culture where Alan Robie was planning to live his own life, though, things didn't work that way. Forcing a woman had an ugly name, and the man who tried it wound up dead. At his victim's hands, usually—something he'd never even heard of on Franconia.

He must make Nadia come to him, come *with* him, by her own choice. So first he needed a life to offer her. After that the next logical step was making sure she didn't have more attractive alternatives.

Will I have to kill you, Anders? Or can I just convince Nadia you're not the right man for her, after all?

If you're not around anymore, she'll turn to me. I know she will.

At least time's on my side! Robie didn't allow his grin to show as he scanned the last reported positions of all freighters from the House of Valeria. The one that interested him most, the House's original ship—which bore its name—was outward bound from Chaitanya to another port of call, naturally enough. Why would it be heading back here after a Trade Fair?

They'll have to take passage with someone else and catch up to the Valeria, or wait here until it has a reason to come back. Either way, that means I'm not boxed in. I can line up those berths, and then figure out how to get rid of Anders if I can't make Nadia see reason.

But what'll I do if she marries him right away?

Robie felt panic at that thought, and the images it called to mind started his temples throbbing. He needed all of his hard-learned self-command to keep his emotions from showing on his face. He told himself, *If that does happen, it won't matter for long. So what if she's a widow when I get her?*

There! The last ship on the list of registered Trade Houses was a singleton. The Callon family might quite properly refer to their “fleet,” but the star freighter bearing their name was the only ship that fleet possessed. That made it all the more amazing, Robie realized, for the *Callon* to be sailing toward Chaitanya with ordinary crewmen filling berths that normally belonged to the vessel’s first and second mates.

Why? Robie wondered, but he didn’t really care. If the captain was a bastard, or they’d encountered pirates—if they’d run afoul of some obscure planetary illness, or suffered an on-board environmental disaster—it still made no difference to him.

If they were underway and headed here, whatever catastrophe emptied those officers’ slots must be past. Those berths were just what he needed, and there was no way a responsible captain would leave ordinaries in them after reaching a port where proper replacements could be had. He knew he was going to have to sell his qualifications as he’d never sold anything before, if he wanted to convince a trader captain to hire two officers fresh out of cadet service; but Nadia, after all, had commanded their patrol ship. So Nadia could be first mate, and he would be second. For the time being, anyway.

She would like that. After she got over Anders, she might even wind up thanking Alan Robie for rescuing her from a boring existence aboard the *Valeria*—where another trained officer was the last thing her would-be husband’s family needed.

The *Callon* was still too far away from Chaitanya for comm contact, but that would only be a problem for another hour or two. Robie knew he couldn’t count on capturing one of those vacant berths, let alone on claiming both; but again, he didn’t care. This was what he’d been waiting for, and he was going after it with everything he had.

He closed out his session at the public terminal and moved, instead, to a private comm booth.

* * *

Should I tell him about Alan?

Nadia McLean, no longer an Interstellar Guard cadet-lieutenant and glad of it, stood at the viewport in the master's cabin on board the hyperlight yacht *Lady Bird* and stared at Chaitanya's surface far below. It wasn't a beautiful world, because it didn't have swathes of greenery—or blue oceans—or even gleaming ice caps. Yet it had looked wonderful to her just a few hours ago when the patrol ship that she, Anders Valeria, and Alan Robie had been calling “home” for the past year eased into orbit. It looked almost as good now, as she and her new husband prepared to leave it behind.

Someone else could man that patrol vessel now. As soon as they reached the *Valeria*, they'd be taking up new roles when Anders became captain. That was his inheritance from his dead father. Nadia knew she ought to be wondering how she would feel about living under his command after she'd been in authority over him, but right now she couldn't manage to worry about anything.

She was a bride approaching her wedding night, and she and Anders had never before made love together. Nor with anyone else, either, in her case...so she did feel nervous. But was she afraid? Of Anders?

Ridiculous. It wasn't fear that made her shiver as his arms slipped around her from behind, as she felt him pulling her close and then resting his chin on top of her head.

No; it was what he'd just casually suggested they should do, before they took this tiny ship out of the Chaitanya system. After which, of course, they would retire to the double berth that took up so much of this compartment's scanty deck space.

“Nadia, we ought to tell Alan we're leaving. I didn't give a damn about not having him with us when we registered our marriage, but how can we head out without telling him good-bye? After everything the three of us went through together?” Anders tightened his strong young arms around his bride.

She couldn't give him a logical reason for her dread of doing that. If she repeated the words Alan Robie had said to her, they would sound so innocuous! So downright silly, if offered as justification for wanting to get as far away from their former shipmate as she could and then maintain the distance. After all, Alan only did what Anders himself had done: declare his love for Nadia, and then ask her to marry him.

Nadia shivered again. She said softly, but with steel in her tone, “Anders, I need to do it this way. That’s all I can tell you, so it’ll have to be enough. Okay?”

Her husband hesitated. Then he turned her in his arms, and bent down to kiss her. When he drew back afterward he said, “Okay. I’ve always trusted you before, Nadia. I guess now’d be a hell of a time to stop. Wouldn’t it?”

As his face relaxed into a grin, so did hers. She hugged him as she said, “Hush! On this passage we’re equals, my darling. So it doesn’t matter which one of us gives the order, but we can’t get underway until someone tells the ship—and Chaitanya Control—we’re ready to leave orbit. And the sooner we get underway...yes?” She drew back, and then tilted her head to indicate the waiting berth.

Anders was through arguing with her now. His grin got wider, and he blushed as he nodded.

Nadia held back her sigh until he released her and turned away. Then she let her shoulders sag with a relief that was just as intense as it was impossible for her to explain, even to herself.

* * *

Alan Robie emerged from the comm booth feeling satisfied. He’d prepared the best damn pitch he knew how to prepare, for himself and for his “patrol ship comrade,” and he’d put that pitch in queue so the *Callon*’s captain would receive it as soon as the freighter got within comm distance of Chaitanya. Like using the booth in the first place, queuing a message had cost him credit; but that was fine. It was, as Alan’s father might have said, a sound investment of his resources.

He lifted his tired eyes toward the public screen that anyone might view without charge or time restriction, where general interest news items scrolled past continuously. It was almost morning by local time. Soon offices would be opening, and people would start congregating in public areas that right now stood calm and empty.

Did he dare to lie down on one of the lounge-benches and nap until Ezra Callon replied to his message? Robie wasn’t going to leave here until he got a response. Even if his new captain (as he confidently regarded the man already) had other, apparently more critical queued comms and didn’t get to Alan’s right away, surely it wouldn’t take more than a couple of hours.

If I haven't heard anything when the concessions open, I'll call him again, Robie decided. *I may have to do some pushing. That's all right. I know how!*

That was when text scrolling across the news screen grabbed his attention. He stood alone in the middle of the cavernous room, and he stared upward with his neck aching because he needed to see the announcement a second time before he could make himself believe it.

Nadia McLean, born at Guardbase Gamma; and Anders Valeria, trader born of the House of Valeria, have logged their marriage on board the yacht Lady Bird. Now cleared for system departure, bound for Shankill Prime. Best wishes from TradeBank Chaitanya!

Robie balled his hands into fists, while he imagined closing them around Anders Valeria's throat. Damn! But there was no use in doing as instinct bade him, no sense at all in rushing to the "tower" from which Chaitanya Traffic Control operated and shouting for the official on duty to countermand the *Lady Bird's* departure clearance. The little starship was already on its way, and Chaitanya wouldn't try to recall it unless Alan Robie came up with an overwhelming reason.

He could dash into that "control tower" (so-called, still) and tell the authorities he knew for a fact that the *Lady Bird* carried contraband cargo. He could say so as the recent shipmate of both Nadia McLean and Anders Valeria, and he'd probably be believed. He could force them to remain here, and stop them from consummating their marriage...for a little while.

Perhaps for long enough so he could talk to Captain Callon about those two vacant officers' berths, but what good would that do if his intended had to confront smuggling charges? Which was how she would wind up, along with Anders, if Robie arranged for something incriminating to be found on board the *Lady Bird* when the yacht was searched. And if the searchers found nothing, Alan Robie would face punishment for making a false accusation.

Either way, Robie realized as his mind came out of vengeful shock, anything he did to stop Nadia from leaving the system now couldn't end with the two of them boarding the *Callon* and starting a new life together.

Newlyweds traveling alone and in luxury on a yacht, all the way to Shankill. How the hell had Anders arranged that, anyway? And would they rendezvous there with the *Valeria*, so the heir could take his place as both the freighter's captain and the trading House's head?

No doubt Robie's "rival unaware" was even managing to get himself paid for that honeymoon passage, for transporting the *Lady Bird* from one owner to another. During their time as shipmates Anders Valeria hadn't had many chances to use his trader canniness for its traditional purposes, but Robie knew the other man to be damned talented.

Well, that was just fine. He, Alan Robie, was more so! He'd need a few years to prove it, time enough to work his way; but one day not far in the future, he'd be captaining a freighter of his own. Never mind that since the biocaust cut off the Terran colonists' access to their mother world's shipyards, only relatively small spacecraft—yachts, shuttles, and patrol ships—could be built. Never mind that the supply of giant interstellar ships like freighters was limited, with the fleet getting smaller, permanently, every time one suffered a fatal mishap. Never mind how trading Houses passed their vessels on according to strict rules of inheritance, so that selling one was beyond imagining and all of a fleet's captains were sure to be siblings or cousins. Alan Robie was still going to have his own freighter someday, because he didn't want to live on a planet's surface and becoming a career Guardsman interested him even less than going "home" to Franconia.

Maybe, he told his aching heart and throbbing head, it was just as well Nadia wouldn't be accompanying him after all as he went on board the *Callon* and took up his new duties there. It hurt him to think about her lying (right now, quite possibly?) in his rival's arms; but when the time came, he could and would still track her down and claim her.

EXILE'S END

Chapter 1

It was a fine day for a kidnapping.

The Trade Fair was in full swing on the surface of Chaitanya, and there were scores of ships parked in orbit around that less-than-hospitable world. The Trade Fair was held here, and not on a more inviting planet (of which there were of course dozens—hundreds, even—within the uneven sphere of human-settled space), simply because of its location; Chaitanya belonged to no group in particular, and to every human in general. And just as importantly, it was somewhere near the physical center of the area regularly plied by freighters and tankers and other such commercial starships; so gathering here at intervals that followed the solar year of long-abandoned Earth was as workable as any such gathering pattern might have been, although of course not every trader's House was represented at every annual Fair.

Valeria was always represented, though. Like most of the older Houses, that family held several ships and deliberately scattered them across the established trade routes in order to cover as much territory and consistently gain as much profit as possible. This year the old man's own ship, which according to custom bore the House's name on its superstructure, was itself in orbit above Chaitanya Spaceport. Of course, everyone in the trading community knew that Anders Valeria himself would probably take little part in the Fair's proceedings; but he was there, and his ship rode in one of the more coveted orbits where shuttle access could be had by an almost direct rise from the surface instead of by a circuitous routing in order to avoid everyone else's orbits and everyone else's shuttles. Everyone respected Anders Valeria, and because they knew the cause of his weakness almost everyone excused it by never mentioning it where any of his family members could hear.

But everyone knew, of course, that Anders Valeria would spend most of his time in a wine-fog in his cabin while his eldest child—a thirty-year-old son—ran things, for all intents and purposes as if his father were already dead. When his fellow traders spoke of this at all, carefully out of the Valeria family's hearing, they agreed that it was

fortunate for everyone that Jock had both his father's gifts for starship trading and his long-dead mother's calm, sober personality. If Anders had bred another like himself as his firstborn, that ancient House would have been in deep difficulties by now. It had taken young Jock the entire nine years since he'd completed his military obligation and returned to his father's ship to get the House back on an even keel; it had been tottering dangerously by that time, with Anders Valeria's young second wife dead and his attention focused solidly on chemical consolation rather than on his business or even on his ship.

Jock would have liked nothing better than to have gone down to the Fair with his young half-siblings, on this day when the real business was taking place aboard the orbiting ships and what happened dirtside was for fellowship and entertainment's sake only; but he no longer had that luxury, had not had it since the year he himself had been just turned eighteen and on his way—literally, straight from the Fair—to Guardbase Alpha to begin his three years of compulsory military service. So he had sent twins Jason and Xanthe, who were celebrating their own eighteenth birth-anniversary this very day, down to the festivities with firm instructions: "Enjoy every minute of it! I wish I'd known when I was 18 that being young doesn't last forever!"

That, of course, made his half-siblings look at each other with mingled amusement and disgust. In a sense he seemed as ancient to them as did their father, and therefore it was not conceivable that he'd ever been as young as they were; and in another sense he was their brother, not their parent, and therefore had no business making such speeches.

They were technical adults themselves, as of today, and had for the first time been admitted to any entertainment they cared to sample; had been able to purchase intoxicants, experiment as they pleased—and hadn't bothered with much of it, because like so many of their kind they had figured out ways to do illegally at fourteen (or earlier) everything that today was supposed to be so new and magical at eighteen. Jason had spent much of his time discreetly trailing after a certain golden-haired, closely-chaperoned girl; and Xanthe had spent her time keeping an eye on her twin.

Which was why they were arguing now, uncharacteristically, as the shuttle they were co-piloting lifted from Chaitanya's surface toward their father's ship and as night began to come down on the hemisphere where Chaitanya Spaceport was located. No longer were they young enough for curfews, but staying dirtside to sleep hadn't even occurred to

either of them. It was almost beyond imagining, to voluntarily sleep anywhere but in the safety of the *Valeria's* familiar compartments.

“Jason, you looked just plain foolish!” Xanthe told her brother now, tossing her mane of dark hair and giving him a quick glare when her eyes weren’t busy with the instrument console in front of her. “How could you think she’d be interested in you, even if she could get away from her chaperone? Do you think she doesn’t know her father hates ours?”

Jason Valeria was not responding well to his twin’s needling, because he was barely noticing it at all. The slim, wiry young man—shorter by centimeters than half-brother Jock, and so much less powerfully built that seeing the likeness of their faces was always something of a shock to strangers—was doing his job as co-pilot well enough, because that came almost as naturally as breathing; but he was thinking far more about that slender, blonde girl who’d been boarding another House’s shuttle just as he and Xanthe had boarded theirs, than about his sister’s chattering tongue.

“Jason! You do know that’s Kyla Robie you’ve been trailing around all day?” Xanthe could have reached out and shaken him, the half-smile on his face was so aggravating. “I realize no one ever sees her, the old man keeps her locked up like some kind of exotic crystal—but you did know that’s who she is? And you do remember what that means?”

Jason gave himself a small, deliberate shake. It was becoming obvious that his twin wasn’t going to run down until she got a reply, and he was too happy to want to give her the sort of cutting response that she probably deserved (probably even expected!); so he was searching half-heartedly for some appropriate word or phrase that could be used to quash her gently, when he heard a different sound from her lips.

“What?” she said, and followed the word with another that Jock would definitely not have let her say in his presence no matter what birthday she’d just celebrated. “Jason! My console’s off-line. Have you got her?” (*Her*, of course, being the shuttle.)

He hadn’t. The shuttle was moving, at just the same speed as a moment earlier when Xanthe had had it firmly in her experienced grasp; but its course was altered, and neither twin had entered any request for that course change.

Jason tapped the comm. “Shuttle to *Valeria*,” he said, in his surprisingly deep young voice. “Are you tractoring us? What’s going on?”

There was no reply except static. At his side Xanthe tapped her own comm, and tried for another contact. “Chaitanya Control, this is *Valeria* shuttle,” she said, with the outward calm of a lifetime already spent encountering and dealing with the sometimes terrible surprises that were part and parcel to a trader’s life. “We’re being tractoried, apparently not by our own ship. Control, do you copy?”

More static. The twins looked at each other, then at the readouts on their consoles; and they went to work without a word, tapping in instructions—rerouting controls—reconfiguring power circuits.

To no avail whatsoever. The comms stayed dead, the consoles stayed off-line, and the shuttle continued lifting toward—where?

* * *

Alan Robie watched the dot on the viewscreen that represented the *Valeria* shuttle’s progress, and he smiled to himself in that way that his elder daughter Alana (and before her, each of the two women who had been his wives) had learned to regard as the worst kind of storm warning. Kyla, his younger daughter and the proverbial apple of his eye, would not have felt that shock of unpleasant recognition; but everyone else who’d spent any length of time aboard the freighter *Callon* would have known that smile, just as quickly and with just as much foreboding as would Alana or her mother Treena or Kyla’s mother Dorina.

No one was here to see that smile and realize its meaning now, though, because Robie was not on board the *Callon*. He sat in the control room of a just-purchased tiny yacht, with only a single companion; and that woman, although a long-time associate, had no personal relationship with him—had never had to work for him—and therefore saw only a smile. Nothing more. So all she said was, “You look pleased, Captain Robie.”

“I am pleased,” Robie admitted, deliberately letting the small smile become a grin that distorted his scarred face. “I’ve waited a long time for this.”

“You’re paying us well for this,” the woman countered, returning his unholy grin. She did not have his horrible facial scars, but her smile was somehow not one bit less distorted. “So. We’ll take the young *Valerias* somewhere very safe, and we’ll release them only when you give

the word. And, of course, when you pay the other half of the fee for their—ah—detention.”

“Exactly.” Robie checked his chronometer. “And now, although I don’t want to be a poor host— isn’t it time for you to be back aboard your ship so you can greet them? And then get underway?”

“A moment, Captain.” The woman touched her private comm, listened intently to a message that was not audible to other ears, and then nodded in satisfaction. “I have more good news, although you may not see it that way. The young Valerias are safely aboard my ship—and so is young Mistress Robie.”

“What?” It was almost a bellow. Alan Robie reached for his associate, almost as if he would put his hands around her throat and throttle her; but an instant later he had control again, although a vein throbbed at his temple as he stared at her. “Kyla? What have you done to my daughter?”

“Nothing at all, Captain Robie. And as long as you keep your end of our bargain, nothing will be done to her. But you’ve been known to— ah—alter agreements in your own favor in the past; and kidnapping is an offense with a large enough penalty that I’ve made certain you wouldn’t decide that the safe return of the young Valerias to their family wasn’t worth making the second payment. So you will get Kyla back, when the House of Valeria gets Xanthe and Jason back. Fair enough, I think?” The woman did not wait for a reply, did not even wait for an acknowledgment. She had risen from the co-pilot’s chair as she had spoken, and she was leaving the control room for the access tube connecting the Robie yacht to her own shuttle. In fact, she was doing so rather more quickly than was strictly necessary.

Alan Robie gave a moment’s real consideration to sealing his yacht’s airlock behind her and dumping the access tube—atmosphere, pressure, unsuited guest and all—into vacuum, before the woman could gain the safety of her shuttle and cast off properly. If he did that now, he could claim imperfect knowledge of what had just been done between Chaitanya’s surface and a certain doubtfully registered cargo ship orbiting a hundred or so kilometers from his current position. He could contact the small Guardpost below, raise an alarm, have the youngsters—all three of them, his own child and Anders Valeria’s two brats—rescued before that ship had any opportunity to leave orbit. He could probably manage to do it without even getting fined for his actions thusfar, so skillfully could he place the blame elsewhere if he acted right now.

Which would mean giving up the revenge he'd planned for the past thirty years. If he'd had thirty more years in which to accomplish it, he might have chosen differently; he might have raised the alarm, because he honestly did not enjoy thinking about how frightened his daughter—that lovely, sheltered child of seventeen—must be feeling right now. But she was in no danger, and she was not going to be in any danger. He knew his associates, had done business with them on dozens of even more delicate matters over a quarter of a century and more. They would not harm Kyla unless it profited them more to do so than it profited them to hold her safely and return her to her family when the whole operation was concluded. And he not only didn't have thirty more years to set up another attempt at Anders Valeria—he didn't even have thirty more months. Right now he felt well enough, but the monstrous thing that was growing inside his body would soon begin to rob him of mobility—of clear thought—of all that was necessary, in order for him to do to Anders Valeria what he'd planned and dreamed of doing over so many long and strangely empty years.

No, he didn't like to think of Kyla's being frightened; but it was a price that must be paid. So, as he'd done so many times when sentimentality and one of his chosen goals had clashed, he decided in favor of pursuing the goal and deliberately put his daughter out of his thoughts.

She would be safe enough. And her psyche would recover; that was one of the best things about being seventeen, you could recover from just about anything. Since he did know perfectly well that he'd spoiled her thoroughly since her mother's death (and probably before it, for that matter!), maybe this experience would even in the long run be beneficial; a bit of adversity wouldn't necessarily hurt Kyla. It might actually be the making of her.

Robie checked his own private comm, trusting to the secured channel (which his associate had not been willing to do—that was why she had come over to speak with him in person), and spoke briefly with First Mate Berkey aboard *Callon*. Berkey was the only person who knew where his captain was just now. Not even Alana, who should be arriving soon on emergency leave of absence from her post as executive officer on an Interstellar Guard starship, knew or would know just how it was that her father happened to be missing.

If Alana knew the truth, she might do something stupidly “moral” about it. She would have to know, of course, but not until his

plan was so far in motion that she would have no option but to go along with it; and then he would be dead, and whether she liked it or not she would have to give up that so-called military career of hers and captain her father's ship—at least until Kyla came of age and married.

He couldn't imagine Kyla serving the required three years of military service in order to earn the right to be a ship's officer, and although he was leaving the *Callon* to her she would nevertheless have to qualify herself legally if she wanted to command it. And since that wasn't going to happen—he'd been very careful not to raise her with that possibility in mind!—if Kyla wanted her inheritance she was going to have to hire or marry someone who could command the ship on her behalf. Once that happened, of course, half-sister Alana would be free to go back to her precious Guard uniform if she still wanted to do so. She wouldn't have lost too much of her career; just a few years at most, and she owed that to her family.

Alan Robie was satisfied with the day's outcome, although being outmaneuvered by an old associate didn't please him and created a score that he might yet find a way to settle. He wouldn't be around to do it personally, though, so he would have to be very creative indeed and come up with a way to get Alana to do it for him after his death.

Hmm. A challenge of just the sort he liked best; he would have something to occupy his mind, after all, on the two week-long passage from Chaitanya to the remote and uninhabited star system that was both his and the freighter *Valeria's* next destination.

All was as it should be. The yacht left orbit, getting a deliberate head start on the freighter. *Callon* would follow, not far behind *Valeria*; Berkey reported that Commander Alana Robie of the Interstellar Guard had just notified her father's ship of her arrival at Chaitanya Spaceport.

Maybe things were working out for the best, after all. Alana was not notably fond of her half-sister, but she had a trader-child's normal fierce sense of family and there was little doubt about how she would react when she heard what had happened to young Kyla. She would go after her, and would bring her home safely or die trying.

But it wouldn't come to that, of course. Both of Alan Robie's daughters would live, and by the time Robie himself lay dead his life's last purpose would have been accomplished.

Anders Valeria would be dead, too.

* * *

Alana Robie was thinking bitterly of just where her ship must be by now, of what her people must be doing. Her body was striding across the dusty field that was the private shuttle portion of Chaitanya Spaceport, headed toward the trim craft that said “Callon” on its hull; but her mind was back on the flagship, back ten days ago when that summons from her captain had turned her corner of the universe upside down.

Flag Captain Anna Sullivan had not treated the occasion in a strictly official manner, and that by itself had warned Commander Robie that something was terribly wrong. Sullivan had summoned the younger woman to her office, but had done so with her husband—and commanding officer, Admiral Mace Gelsey—present. Interstellar Guard protocol was not as formal as that of the old-time, Earth-based military services; if it had been, a woman like Anna Sullivan certainly could not have served as her own spouse’s flag captain. But for her to confer with her executive officer in Gelsey’s presence was most unusual, because the Admiral was very careful about staying out of his wife’s relationships with her senior staff members. That sort of attention to the human relations side of starship life was probably exactly why the Gelsey-Sullivan partnership had not only endured for so many years, but had actually thrived; had even produced an adult son, who was now completing his required three-year cadet assignment on a little patrol ship somewhere far from his parents’ flagship.

Alana Robie had been with Anna Sullivan for a scant three months, just long enough to have begun to form a comfortable and secure working relationship. She had barely seen Mace Gelsey in an official capacity during that time, and had never seen him at all in any sort of personal context. Yet here he was, sitting in his powered chair in his wife’s office, his facial expression somehow telling Commander Robie that he was here to offer support instead of to act as commanding admiral of a battle group conferring with his flag captain and her exec.

Sullivan’s face—kind, careworn, with far more laugh lines than frown lines in its middle-aged beauty—told Alana Robie both that the matter was personal, and that it was tragic, even before the flag captain opened her mouth to speak. “Alana, please have a seat,” Sullivan said, her tone gentle. “I’ve been asked to give you some difficult news. When was the last time you saw your father?”

Thank goodness. It’s Papa, not Kyla, was Alana’s first—although perhaps unworthy—thought. She sat in the offered chair, with the

captain sitting beside her instead of across the desk as was usual; and she answered without hesitation, “Years, Captain. I haven’t been home since I was twenty-one.”

“Oh.” Sullivan exchanged a glance with her husband. “I didn’t realize, Alana; you and I haven’t had time to get to know each other very well as people. Anyway,” and her tone became more familiar in its sudden businesslike briskness, losing the maternal tenderness that had made Commander Robie so uncomfortable, “it seems that your father has disappeared. His first mate is requesting that you go home, take the helm of your family’s House, spend whatever time is required to either locate your father alive or to—wind up his affairs. I’ve already made out the paperwork to grant you an indefinite leave of absence. You will want to take it, Alana?”

The question that concluded the captain’s words was understandable. Commander Robie’s head had moved in a sharp, negative motion; and although she had done so silently, her lips had already formed a clear “no.”

Leave of absence, when she was just settling into her new post—an assignment so enviable that she still could hardly believe she’d won it for her own? Executive officer of Admiral Gelsey’s flagship, for heaven’s sake! At twenty-nine! And someone thought she was going to leave this, and go back to the *Callon*? Just because Papa had decided to drop out of sight for who could guess what reason?

They were staring at her—admiral and flag captain, husband and wife, two fellow humans who had thought they were giving her terrible personal news and who had prepared to give her every kind of support she might need while she absorbed the shock. How could she tell them, now, that all she wanted them to do was let her stay right here and go right on doing her job? And to bloody hell with the House of Callon, the freighter that bore its name, and—might as well think it even if you can’t possibly bring yourself to hurt these good, kind people by saying it in front of them!—to particular bloody hell with Alan Robie.

“Alana?” Captain Sullivan asked again, even more gently.

“Is there a personal message for me from Mr. Berkey, ma’am?” Commander Robie gave herself a firm shake. She wanted nothing more than to declare herself done forever with her father and his House, but she remembered now that her captain had said the message came from the *Callon*’s first mate; and Mr. Berkey she remembered with respect, even with affection. If he was the person who needed her back there—

only for a few days, of course, no matter what!—then perhaps she must consider going. At least she must listen to it, if the message was from him.

“Yes. I’ll give it to you to take back to your quarters, Commander; you’ll want privacy to listen to it, I think.” Sullivan smiled slightly. “I’ll sit on those leave papers for a few hours. Please let me know if you want me to approve them. All right?”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you, Admiral.” Robie nodded to her two commanding officers, took the data pad from Sullivan’s hand, and left the captain’s office as quickly as she could.

Alone in her cabin—a solitude that was the privilege of only the ship’s most senior officers—Alana lay back on her berth, more like an adolescent girl than a starship executive officer, and chose to listen to her old friend’s voice instead of scrolling his words across the data pad’s small screen. His voice was as it had always been, rough-toned and accented heavily by a childhood spent on a particularly infamous penal colony world (his father’s fault, not his own!). Alana remembered that voice from her earliest days, and in it she had always heard the reassurance and support that had never been there for her in her own father’s often strident tones.

“Alana, I know this is the last thing you want to hear when you’re just settling in on board your new ship,” Cameron Berkey began informally (he never had been expected to call his captain’s children by anything except their given names), “but I need you back on the *Callon* for at least a few days. Your father was diagnosed with Deneva Syndrome just about as soon as we arrived at Chaitanya to get ready for the Fair, and the next thing I knew he’d disappeared. There’s a message being held at his bank for you, coded to your biometric seal; I suppose it’s a will, or power of attorney, or at least instructions of some sort. I wouldn’t be able to access it, anyway, and the message he left for me specifically says you’re to come home and take care of some business for him. I don’t think he’s dead, Alana. Your father’s not the suicidal type, no matter what state of health he’s in; and what checking around I’ve been able to do shows that the day he was diagnosed, he purchased a yacht. It’s warp-speed capable and it’s operable for one pilot only. So who knows what he has in mind? Anyway, please do come as soon as you can. You are needed, Alana, or I wouldn’t ask you—I’d just pass on your father’s request and leave it at that.”

There the message ended. There was no formal closing, certainly no word of affection for the young woman who was the nearest thing to a daughter that old bachelor would ever be likely to have. But Alana found her eyes stinging, anyway; so she had to scrub a hand at them, irritably, when someone outside her door asked for admittance.

“Come!” she said, a trifle too sharply, and got off the berth before the door could swish open. She need not have bothered with either precaution, because the man who entered her cabin had seen her cry before and had seen her lie on that berth before. He’d been with her for so long that there was almost nothing they had not shared. “Oh, Dom, I’m glad it’s you,” she said as soon as she saw him, and she held out her arms.

He was taller than she by just a few centimeters, but his big arms enveloped her and his chest was a solid support on which she could lean. And right now that was exactly what she wanted and needed to do.

Lieutenant Commander Dominic St. Pierre. On this ship, Second Officer and her immediate subordinate (although of course everyone on board reported to her, through the chain of command if not directly); on each assignment that she’d held since her patrol ship days, her comrade and friend and companion.

He was as dark as she was fair, which made the two of them an unusual contrast in a humanity that had long ago begun to lose sharp distinctions of skin pigmentation and other such racial characteristics. When Earth had become lost to her children, those several thousand humans who were stranded aboard starships or already settled on colony worlds had had the good sense to pay attention to the avoidance of inbreeding; and the by-product of that informal but nevertheless firmly enforced social policy had been this blurring of the lines between what had been black and white, red and yellow (so-called—the old color-names were so long out of use that whenever Alana had encountered them in ancient literary works, she’d been puzzled as to how anyone had ever conceived such wildly unsuitable labels for skin colors that had never been black or white or red or yellow no matter how far back one looked in history). But somehow Dom St. Pierre had wound up with deep, rich, dusky skin, with hair and eyes darker still; and Alana Robie had wound up with fair hair (more golden than blonde, her mother had been fond of saying), blue eyes, and pale skin that always burned when exposed to a Sol-type star’s rays.

Alana loved nothing better, now that they'd finally become lovers after being friends for so very long, than to enjoy the visual contrast their bodies made when they lay close and touched each other. Long before the start of their intimacy, she'd loved the way Dom's hand looked on hers when he touched her simply as comrade to comrade. And distressed as she was feeling right now, she still was intensely aware of the feel of his body against hers; of the strength of his arms around her, of the roughness of his cheek when he bent to press it against hers.

"Alana, what is it?" he asked her gently, in a voice that was deep but had a lilt that never ceased to startle her. Such a big man had no business having a voice like that. "When you didn't come back from the captain's office, I started getting worried about you."

"Come, sit with me," Alana said, and drew her lover with her toward the berth. Her cabin was private, and that was a privilege; but its only seating other than the berth consisted of a desk chair. Space on a warship was always at a premium, and couldn't be wasted on unnecessary comforts like sofas or guest chairs except in common recreation areas. "Dom, I have to take a leave of absence and go back to my father's ship for awhile. I don't know for how long."

"What?" Dominic couldn't have been more surprised if she'd announced she intended to abandon her career and take up the life of an exotic dancer. "Alana, you can't stand your father—and you haven't been back to the *Callon* since before I knew you. What's going on? And are you sure you have to do this, no matter why someone thinks you ought to?"

"Still telling it to me straight, aren't you, Mr. St. Pierre?" Alana found herself smiling, now that she was past the first shock and now that she had her best friend's familiar shoulder to lean on.

"Well—you're the one who trained me to ask you all the hard questions, to always challenge you when I thought you might be wrong. Ma'am." Dom's dark eyes twinkled with his infuriating brand of dry humor. "So I guess it's your own fault! How am I doing, anyway?"

"You're right that it's my own fault, and you're doing it just fine." Alana groaned. "Oh, Dom, I just can't think right now. I know that's not like me, but—"

"But it's human."

"Yes. It sure is. And this time I'm not going to try to think it through, Dom; all I'll do is give myself one hell of a headache, because

there's nothing logical or sensible about the way this message has me feeling." She reached for the data pad, which she'd placed beside the bed when the door had announced a visitor, and she touched its controls and allowed the message to scroll across the screen where her companion could read it with her. She didn't want to hear Berkey's voice say the words again. Once had been more than enough.

"So it's not just your father; it's his first mate. Your old friend, the fellow who almost raised you himself after your mother died." In the eight years they'd been together, Alana Robie had told Dom St. Pierre more than she'd told anyone else about her childhood and youth; and if she hadn't told him everything, she was sure that he sensed much of what she'd deliberately held back. He was without doubt the most perceptive human being she'd ever met.

She nodded. "Yes," she said softly. "And that's why I have to go, Dom. Not for Papa—for him I'd do nothing, and not have a second's guilt about refusing. But it's not Papa who needs me. So I do have to go."

"I guess you do, at that." His arms gathered her close, and she felt the gentle brush of his lips against her forehead. "I wish I could go with you, Alana. I'm not used to having you go off without me to guard your back."

"I wish you could, too. But you can't." She nestled against him for a moment, feeling as she always did that to be held like this was luxury no woman of her rank and position had any right in the universe to expect. "Not only couldn't you get a leave of absence based on my family's request; this is something I've got to take care of on my own, anyhow. I'm not sure why, but I'm dead sure it's true."

"I know." He understood that when she kissed him, it was a farewell and not an invitation; he held her tightly for a moment longer, and then let her go. They stood, walked to the cabin's door together; then turned into each other's arms and kissed again. "Alana?"

"What, Dom?"

"I'm not going to see you again until you get back, am I?"

"That's right. I'm going back to the captain, she's going to approve my leave papers, and then I'm gone. I'll come back here to pack just the minimum, but I'd much rather you stayed away and let me go." Blue eyes met dark ones, their message firm and clear.

"Understood. But before you go, I need to ask you something."

The intensity in his eyes was unsettling. Unsettling, but not disturbing; Alana had long ago discovered that she rather liked the way her lover's intensity unsettled her. She said softly, "What is it, Dom? What do you need to ask me?"

His hand touched her face, very gently. "When you get back, Alana—will you marry me?" That musical deep voice of his had a small and uncharacteristic catch in it. After all their years together, he was used to knowing what she would do before she acted; to knowing what she would say before she spoke. But this time it was different. For the first time since the night he'd become her lover, he was asking for something he wasn't certain she wanted to give him. And now, as then, he was afraid of the risk in a way that he had never feared injury or death in service under her command.

He wanted her to say yes. Oh, god, how he wanted her to say yes.

"Dom—darling..." Alana Robie's endearments were few, but when she spoke them she meant them. Fully, unreservedly. Her eyes were stinging again—but this time her tears had nothing to do with regret, nothing to do with anger or frustration.

"You don't have to answer me now. I'm not even sure I want you to answer me now. I just want you to go away knowing that no matter what happens, when you do get back I'll be right here waiting." Dom bent his head and brushed his lips across hers, and his hands gripped her shoulders firmly. "Go on now, Alana. My love."

She wanted to say yes. She'd never in her life wanted to say that word with quite as much desperation as she wanted to say it now. But could she?

No. He was right. What they wanted, and what they could have, were as usual two very different matters.

"I will come back, Dom," she said, her voice suddenly fierce as she pulled his head down again and claimed one last hungry kiss. "I promise. And I'll answer you then."

Now, as Alana Robie approached the freighter *Callon's* shuttle at Chaitanya Spaceport so many light-years from her lover and from her starship, she could still feel the heat of that last kiss and could still see the pain in Dominic's dark eyes as his arms had released her and she'd turned to leave him. They'd stepped through her cabin's door into the passageway together, and had walked together to the nearest lift; but that had been as comrades, as first officer and second officer. At the lift

they'd exchanged polite nods, she had boarded it, and he had stayed behind there in the passageway of Officers' Country.

And she had left half her heart and just about all of her soul back there with him, Alana thought now, as she keyed the shuttle's hatch with her palmprint and was recognized despite her long absence.

She didn't want to be here. Oh, how she didn't want to be here! But when the hatch opened and she saw her old friend and (to all intents and purposes) foster father waiting for her just inside it, she forgot to be a dignified grown woman and an Interstellar Guard full commander. She threw herself into Cameron Berkey's waiting arms, and laughed and smiled in spite of herself. "Mr. Berkey! Oh, it's good to see you. Why haven't you changed?"

The freighter *Callon's* longtime first mate was a massive man, not obese but built like one of the great oaks of Earth's fabled forests. He had, no matter what his captain's daughter might claim, grayed considerably during the eight years since she'd last seen him; and his brown face was lined in places it hadn't been before, Alana realized when after a moment she stood back and studied him properly. But he was as happy to see her as she was to see him, and his broad grin showed it plainly. "I was about to tell you it's time you called me something other than 'Mister,' Alana," he said, turning from the hatch and walking with her toward the two seats at the shuttle's console. "But I just realized—you should still call me 'Mister,' because now I'm going to have to start calling you 'Captain.'"

"I suppose you are, aren't you?" It did sound very strange. Captain Robie. Alana had always hoped—to be honest, had always confidently expected—that the day would come when she'd wear four pips on her collar, and have the right to be called "captain." But she had always expected that it would happen in the context of the Guard's hierarchy, not aboard her father's freighter.

She shuddered. "Captain Robie" in this context went beyond feeling strange—it felt threatening, somehow. Creepy. Unnatural.

But Berkey was right; it was appropriate, and whether or not she liked it wasn't an issue. So she said, "Tell me everything, please, Mr. Berkey. Everything you couldn't put in that transmission to the flagship. And everything that's happened since."

As they talked, they worked; two expert pilots, clearing their little craft for liftoff and then accomplishing that task smoothly and swiftly.

The shuttle rose toward its orbiting mother ship, and the stars began to appear in its viewports as Chaitanya's atmosphere was left behind. Cameron Berkey sighed. "Captain," he said, using her new title with deliberation in his tone. "Your father hasn't been heard from. But your sister and her companion have disappeared, too, and no one's been able to trace them."

"Disappeared? Kyla and Phillida?" Alana was startled at the stab of alarm she felt at that thought. For Phillida, who had been Dorina DeLong's nursemaid decades ago and who had cared for Dorina's daughter Kyla literally throughout the girl's life, Alana had no particular concern; she disliked the woman personally, but wished her no ill. But that anything should happen to Kyla...little bright-haired, lively, laughing Kyla...no, that couldn't be. The child was spoiled, dreadfully so; but she was still Alana's baby sister, and nothing could be allowed to hurt her.

"Just yesterday, as their shuttle was lifting to return to the ship," Berkey acknowledged. "It vanished from sensors. The Guard couldn't trace it, Chaitanya Control couldn't trace it, our own sensors couldn't trace it. It was just gone."

"Oh, no," Alana said softly, and stared out the viewport as the *Callon's* bulk began to fill it. "And to think I almost...."

"Almost didn't come home?" Berkey reached out and touched her arm, briefly before he busied himself with docking maneuvers. "I wouldn't have blamed you, Alana. No, Captain!" he corrected himself, and laughed without humor. "But I'm damned glad you're here."

"So am I, now," Alana admitted. And frowned, thinking to herself but not saying to her companion: *Papa disappears, then Kyla disappears. Has to be connected. How, I don't know—but it has to be connected.*

She was cold. She missed Dom's warmth beside her. She shivered, glanced down at her civilian clothing, and felt alien and frightened and alone.

FARTHINGHOME

BOOK 1: INVASION

Prologue

Kiev and Sedna hung in the after viewports like blue-green gems awaiting the jewel smith's mallet. A mad smith, who would soon fling them into a furnace—the heat of which their fragile loveliness couldn't hope to survive.

Viewports on a sleeper ship seemed like such a useless luxury. After today, who would be awake to appreciate them? And what was there to see, anyway, in open space?

"Janna, our stasis couches are ready. It's time, don't you think?" Fraya, the watching woman's sister and research partner, stood at the hatch that led from this narrow compartment (a mere viewing gallery, no wider than a corridor) to the place where they would lie through the long years of their journey. Just the two of them, close to the vessel's secondary controls. At its bow, near the primary control center, their brothers already slept.

Janna asked nevertheless, without turning around, "Are Kar and Adair all right?"

"Yes. Their readings show everything's normal." Fraya took the single step that carried her to her sister's side, and stood at the viewports with her arm around Janna's shoulders. "It's difficult to imagine, isn't it? That when we arrive, we'll wake up and not realize time has passed at all."

"It'll be like when we did this to test our tolerance for it." Janna nodded as she ran the tip of her tongue over numb, dry lips. "As if we'd gone to bed for a night's rest, and wakened with the morning."

"Yes. That's exactly how it will be." The other woman tightened her clasp. "But that's not why you're so afraid right now. Is it, Janna?"

"No. It's not what's going to happen to me physically." How well her sister knew her. "It's everyone for whom we're responsible, Fraya. All those lives, suspended. All that distance to cross, with no one to take care of an emergency if one arises. And then, at the end—what if we've made

a navigation error? What if our calculations are wrong, and we wake up somewhere that Humans can't live?"

"That won't happen. Farthinghome is a recognized, charted colony world. We know where it is, and how to get there safely. We *will* get there safely, Janna. If I didn't believe that was true, I wouldn't be here. I'd have stayed behind, to die with our grandmothers on Kiev. And so would you." Again the warm arm tightened.

"I still think we ought to try for Earth. After all the time it's been since they banished our foremothers, surely they've forgotten there was ever a reason for sending us into exile. It's not too late to plot a new course. We could do it from here. Without waking Kar and Adair." Janna was grasping at sun sparkles now. Grabbing water in her hands, watching it trickle through her fingers, and then trying again to get a grip on the elusive stuff, because she'd reached a pitch of desperation at which such behavior almost made sense.

"No. Terra sent us here because they didn't want people like us contaminating their society any longer, and that can't have changed. Our ancestors didn't leave the home-world *that* long ago." Still gently, but with growing firmness in her tone, Fraya pressed her case.

"They didn't want people like the ones they sent to Farthinghome, either! What makes us so sure there'll be room for us when we get there?" Janna snatched at one last handful of beloved, fast retreating Kiev's golden lake-water. At one last breath of Sedna's blossom-perfumed breeze. "What if the people already on Farthinghome tell us we can't stay?"

For that question Fraya knew she had no answer. So she said, "We'll deal with whatever we find on Farthinghome when we get there. The last time our worlds communicated, the settlers had taken hold and started building themselves a good life. In spite of what the prognosticators on Terra predicted they'd do, if dumped together on a planet and left to fight each other as they'd battled the authorities where they came from. They've had centuries fewer than we had, to fill their new world and move out into space beyond it. And unlike us, they didn't arrive united by a common culture and a coherent belief system. So I can't imagine they won't have room. Especially once they understand what we can offer them that Terra never could!"

"If they're still Human at all, I suppose they'll have to take us in. Just because we're Humans, too. Because by the time we get there, we

really won't have any choice but to stay." Janna put up a hand and wiped her face. "All right, Fraya. I'm ready now."

"Good." The other woman lowered her arm so they could walk separately through the narrow hatch. Leaving their final view of twin worlds soon to be swallowed by a star going nova, to enter the state that everyone on board this ship must attain before its hyperdrive could kick in and put enough distance behind them so the coming catastrophe wouldn't engulf them in its fringes. And, by so doing, wipe out the last few hundred Humans whose dangerous customs and unholy skills had sentenced their ancestors to perpetual banishment.

Chapter 1

"It's just another damn nosey, Brenna. Don't get your keezers in a knot." Lieutenant of the Home Guard Gregory Wolfenden lifted the nose of his tiny spacecraft and climbed away from the object of his flying partner's exclamation. They'd seen dozens of those things during the years since the two of them, Greg Wolfenden and Brenna Taggart, first took to Farthinghome's skies. Shimmering silver spheres, loaded with a weird jelly-like mess that probably meant something to someone, somewhere—since that was what the scientists found when they opened the spheres and analyzed their contents. Clearly these so-called "noseys" had been made on purpose, by someone or something intelligent. But just what they did remained a mystery, because so far Farthinghome's best minds couldn't dope it out. All anyone knew was that the noseys had never hurt people or damaged property, and that after surviving the impossible heat of passing through the planet's atmosphere they self-destructed following varying periods on the ground. Or in the ocean, or (if collected but not opened right away) in storage at one of Farthinghome's research laboratories.

When opened, they didn't do anything. Their organic contents decayed quickly when exposed to air, and their gleaming shells soon followed.

"I got it!" Taggart's voice announced over her comrade's suit-comm, in triumph.

"Nice shooting," Wolfenden answered, but his words came out on a groan. "Brenna, target practice is all those things are good for!

D'you really need it today? Just ignore 'em if we see any more. Noseys aren't worth the power it takes to blow 'em out of the sky."

They'd had this discussion, which occasionally turned into an argument, many times before. Taggart sighed as she answered, "Greg. Dammit all, every one of those things ought to be blasted before it can get anywhere near our atmosphere! I don't care how long ago the Powers That Be decided there were just too many, and quit bothering. I don't care how harmless the experts' stupid tests claim they are. They come from an alien species somewhere, one we don't know anything about. You can't tell me those aliens aren't sending 'em here on purpose. *For* a purpose. Besides, they just plain give me the creeps! Unless someone who's got the right to give me orders tells me I can't do it anymore, I'm gonna go right on taking out every nosey I see."

"Some people are too damn stubborn to be believed!" Wolfenden muttered that with his head turned aside from his comm pickup, addressing himself to the universe in general. When he turned his face so his flying partner could hear him again, he said, "Brenna, did it ever occur to you that maybe the people, beings, *whatever* who've been sending the noseys our way are friendly? Or at least want to be? That's what I've read some of the authorities think. If they had any interest in hurting us, they've had more than ten years to do it. And they haven't. That sounds pretty conclusive to—"

"Greg!" Taggart's scream cut him off. "Look!"

He looked. At a swarm of nosey-globes, coming in faster than any he'd seen before. Normally they almost drifted out of space, and let Farthinghome's gravity capture them and pull them down. But not this batch. These spheres moved toward Humankind's home with purpose.

The two pilots also moved deliberately, as Wolfenden switched from private comm-cast to his partner and shouted instead to a battery orbiting high overhead.

* * *

"Primate, there's a call for you."

Bazel daKiev turned a swift glower in his aide's direction. His voice he kept cheerful and hearty, though, as he answered, "Sheena, take care of it. I don't have time. Not if I'm going to arrive at my next engagement on schedule!"

The Primate of the Outlands, newly sentenced to that exile, could have toured his domain at leisure because his boss back on Farthinghome

certainly wasn't going to verify his stops and write him up for tardiness. daKiev knew that very well. But he also knew that if he wanted his new flock's respect, he would have to start earning it immediately—and colonists, inhabiting space stations and the Farthinghome system's less hospitable worlds, had little use for officials who wasted their time by not respecting an agreed-upon itinerary.

He would visit the settlements on planets closer to the sun, and farther away from it—including those on the moons of the great gas giants, and on the largest of the mineral-rich asteroids in two belts of solar-orbiting debris—later. His tour, or “progress” as his staff grandly called it, must begin with the mother planet's own satellites. The natural ones, as well as orbital habitats built to host industries that could function more efficiently (and without further harming a stressed biosphere) in space.

He'd already made his appearance aboard every permanently occupied space station in Farthinghome orbit, and at every dome and Human-carved cavern on Castor. He was now halfway through his progress across (or rather around) Pollux, Farthinghome's smaller moon, and he couldn't spare even the time to take a comm call if he wanted get his ashram underway to Minerva with any hope of arriving there on schedule.

Getting to Minerva on schedule mattered. That most Farthinghome-like of the system's other worlds had surface conditions hospitable to some Human crops, without the need for doming over. So its enclosed habitats housed thousands, stable communities of colonists who'd been there through generations. Visiting Minerva was (at least from a political standpoint) very much like visiting Castor or Pollux. It mattered to the Faith, not just to Primate daKiev and his flock's individual members, that he make a good appearance there.

So I suppose I must make a good appearance, then! daKiev told himself with resigned sarcasm, as he sighed and took the bright orange priority comm unit from Sheena's hand after all. *Mustn't put Great Mother through the awkwardness of finding an even worse place to send me, by fouling up my assignment to this one. I wonder what she'd have done with me if I hadn't merited a primacy, or if the one for Outlands hadn't been vacant?*

“Father Bazel.” Great Mother Sigrid's voice sounded sharp and impatient in his ears. “You're recalled. Immediately!”

“What?” Her tone held something more than impatience, on second thought. Something that the man she was addressing so formally

had never heard from her before. Something he couldn't pin down, except to realize that it troubled him. A siren's screeching wail filled the hall whose podium he'd been about to mount when the call came through, and he felt the same nameless, sinking horror that had haunted his nightmares through fifteen of his first eighteen years. The same certainty that something a thousand times larger than he was, relentless and pitiless and vastly powerful, was bearing down to tear him away from everyone and everything he held dear.

"Great Mother? Great Mother Sigrid? Sigrid!" He dropped her title as he realized that the alarm on Pollux, the interrupted comm from Farthinghome's surface, and the completely foreign sound of fear in the voice of the most powerful woman he knew must spring from a common source.

* * *

Aisha Tambour hauled herself out of sleep with ruthlessness learned long ago, and honed by years of starship service. She said to the pickup beside her berth, "Tambour. What's going on, Lieutenant?"

The officer of the watch answered tautly. Which didn't make sense, with the armed cruiser safely orbiting its mother planet. "Sorry to wake you, ma'am. But Central Dictate's just put all ships in system on alert, and since you are in command right now...."

"I see." Tambour swung her feet to the deck, and grimaced at the metallic cold beneath the thin carpet that was one of her cabin's small luxuries. On a warship this old, only the captain and the XO rated carpets, private heads, and—the most valuable perk of all—solitude. "Recall the captain immediately. I'm on my way to the bridge."

What could it be? The coup come at last, as the increasingly restive labor co-ops seized this moment of military weakness to take control of Farthinghome's faltering and disordered central government away from the industrial giants who'd held onto it for so long? That was Aisha Tambour's guess, as she hauled on her uniform trousers, jammed her feet into her boots, and shrugged into a blouse that she tucked in one-handed as she emerged into the narrow passageway bisecting Officers' Country. Jacket and weapons belt she held under the other arm.

Her ship wasn't at full alert, despite what Lieutenant Maher had said. The signal lights along the bulkheads flashed yellow, and the officers and ordinaries heading toward their duty stations moved quickly—but

not with the frantic purpose of men and women under orders to prepare themselves and their vessel for impending combat.

Whatever it is, then, it can't be that bad, Tambour decided with relief that didn't cause her to slacken her own pace. She emerged from the lift onto the *Gallant's* bridge with her belt fastened over her tunic, her sidearm riding her hip, and her sleep-rumpled silver hair (that used to be auburn) finger-combed. She demanded of Maher, who stood in the bridge's center and stared at the main viewscreen: "Report!"

The senior lieutenant's voice came out rusty, but steady. "Central Dictate's gone quiet, ma'am. Not a peep since they put us on alert. They don't even answer when I hail them."

"Get me a private link to the captain. Now." Tambour's hazel eyes narrowed. She walked the few paces from lift to command chair, and sat down.

"No can do, Commander." The Alpha Shift communications officer, who must have slipped into his seat only a second ago, didn't offer that negative response. His Beta Shift counterpart did, because she was still standing beside him. "She took herself off web a couple of hours ago."

Tambour put her forearms flat against the command chair, and drew a breath. Then she said, as if to herself, "So this is what I get for going to bed early for once. Damn!"

It was, after all, only 2143 hours on the 25-hour standard chrono followed by all ships in space and all off-world installations. The new primate of the Outlands would still be working his way through his engagement calendar on...Pollux? Yes. He'd be perhaps halfway through his progress there, finishing long after midnight and then sleeping aboard his outward bound ashram. Off to Minerva, with the *Gallant* providing suitable escort. So the *Gallant's* executive officer had retired early, anticipating her captain's last-minute return and tumble into bed—leaving the XO in charge of their departure.

Valerie Ashton seldom worried about how her personal behavior affected her XO, and Tambour really couldn't fault the captain for wanting to stretch a gift of unexpected (although also unauthorized) dirtside time out to the last possible moment. The older officer could well remember what it was like to have a child and a spouse who at every sailing from the home-world must be left behind. For her that was far in the past, but Aisha Tambour couldn't recall deliberately removing herself

from Farthinghome's communications web except while on properly granted furlough. Not even once, during all the years when she'd been wife and mother as well as military officer.

That seemed so long ago now, with her one offspring grown and in uniform, and the man who'd been her husband mated to someone else. Not only mated to another, but the father of a second family. Tambour pushed those thoughts down, ruthlessly, to where personal matters belonged while she was on duty. The *Gallant's* main viewscreen was showing her the skies between it and Farthinghome's surface, and those skies swarmed with small, silvery spheres. Spheres that the orbital batteries and Home Guard patrollers blasted steadily, but there were far too many tiny invaders for any amount of fire to stop them all. She asked sharply, "Are we picking up any ship chatter?"

Alpha Shift's comm officer answered, "Plenty, ma'am, but none of it's for us. Want me to put it on speaker?"

"Yes." The XO clamped her teeth together, and waited.

* * *

Wolfenden pushed his little ship hard, climbing away from Farthinghome's surface for all he was worth. Behind him, in her own cockpit, he could hear Brenna Taggart swearing. From all around came the sounds of ship talking to ship, and space station talking to space station—while from the planet below came nothing but silence. Except, of course, for unnaturally calm prerecorded emergency messages and monotonously wailing civil defense sirens.

"Greg, we've got to return to base!" Taggart's shouted words cut across the din. "When we can't raise anyone on the ground, that's standing orders! Greg, do you hear me? Greg!"

"Brenna, something's gone totally wrong down there!" Wolfenden finally remembered that he could mute the background noise. "I'm not sure what, but until we do know we're staying clear!"

"Maybe you are. But I'm not. See you dirtside, Greg. Whenever you finally get there." After a long silence, his partner's voice came over the commlink one more time. She was turning her patroller as she spoke. Flipping the little spacecraft around, and diving it back toward the planet's surface. Toward base, and home.

GRANITE ISLAND

Chapter 1

Autumn 1934:

The old building shook as if the wharf beneath might fall apart at any second, and dump it into the heaving waters of the harbor. Crouching on his bed, in a little room under the eaves, six-year-old Jamie listened to the storm and wept—but not from fear.

Not fear of the weather or of the maddened ocean, anyway. His wiry little body ached with fast-developing bruises, and his skinned back burned from his uncle's belt.

I won't let him do that to me again. He hates me, and it's not my fault! I didn't do anything that bad...did I?

The boy scrubbed at his eyes with a shirt sleeve, because he hadn't done as Uncle Robert ordered him and undressed as soon as the man pushed him in here and went away. He could see nothing, in this room where he wasn't trusted with candle or oil lamp; where Aunt Louisa usually left him a light that would last just long enough so he could get ready and crawl into bed. On an ordinary night there would be a lantern burning at the wharf's end, and the moon might be shining. But tonight all was black, so that if he hadn't known the rooms over "the shop" (as local folk called his uncle's place of business) intimately he wouldn't have dared to venture out. But he didn't need to see the narrow corridors, or the steep staircases, to make his way down from his nook beneath the steeply pitched roof.

They were all asleep now, of course. Uncle Robert and Aunt Louisa in their bedroom, and his cousins—six of them, three boys and three girls—in their two rooms. Sometimes his oldest boy cousin, Sammy, taunted small James about his separate quarters: "You're so special, you get to have your own room! What makes you so special, anyway, besides being a little bastard?" But no one had to explain to Jamie that living under the roof wasn't a privilege. It was cold there in winter, hot in summer, airless all the year round—and most of all, it was

lonesome. Isolating him not as a mark of favor, but to keep the tainted child safely away from those born in proper wedlock.

This wasn't the first time he'd slipped out at night. Young though he was, James Stinnett Court had roamed this Maine waterfront alone so many times that doing it while all was still and silent (from 9 p.m., when all decent folk on Granite Island went to bed, until between 3 and 4 a.m. when fishermen's houses started showing lamplight at their windows) only seemed like a pleasant adventure. On quieter nights, at least, it had seemed that way...but when the shop's door tore itself out of his small hands and started opening and shutting in time with the wind, he thought for a paralyzed moment about dashing back inside and regaining his attic refuge before anyone could hear and come to investigate.

No. Even if Uncle Robert didn't catch him (and his cousins probably were awake by now, since the door's fearful banging could surely be heard above the wind and surf!), Jamie would still get blamed for this. And then his uncle would beat him, again...he couldn't take more right now. And he wasn't going to, either!

He left the door swinging on its hinges, crashing back and forth and letting sheets of rain drench the shop's interior, and he ran. Across the packed dirt at the wharf's head, where customers parked their vehicles. Not up the road that ascended a steep hill as it left the waterfront, but into the woods beside it. Onto the path that the Stinnett children, legitimate offspring of Robert and Louisa as well as their bastard cousin James, used to make their way toward school each morning, until the winter's ice and snow forced them to take the longer way of the road instead.

Where was he going tonight? Surely not to the schoolhouse, although he ought to be there tomorrow morning. For a moment James let himself picture it, how his teacher would react if she came to work (long before any of her students showed up, as was her habit) and found him sitting on the doorstep in his present condition. His shirt bloody and untucked, just as he'd shrugged it on after Uncle Robert made him take his shirt off and his pants down for the whipping. His clothing soaked, his hair sodden, his shoes muddy and caked with wet autumn leaves.

Sitting on the doorstep? No. He wasn't going to want to sit anywhere for awhile, including on the unforgiving seat of his half of one of the schoolhouse's double desks, even though he normally loved escaping there from "home."

He shared that desk with his cousin Cecily, who wasn't one of Uncle Robert's brood. She belonged to Uncle Jay and Aunt Caroline, who lived in the big white house through whose yard Jamie had to walk when he followed this path to school. Cecily was Jamie's own age, and she had no siblings. Aunt Caroline, he'd heard Aunt Louisa telling other women (now that the shop had a telephone, which Aunt Louisa used for hours each afternoon on what definitely wasn't business), could "breed but not carry."

Aunt Caroline was beautiful, and she and Cecily lived alone in that big house most of the time because Uncle Jay was a shipmaster. A stern man considerably Uncle Robert's junior in age, as tall and tough and handsome as Uncle Robert was short and round and homely. Uncle Robert only scared Jamie when he was angry, because then his temper turned him into the wielder of a rivet-studded belt. Uncle Jay, on the other hand, scared Jamie all the time. He was so big, and his voice was so loud! And he handled his womenfolk so, well...not roughly, exactly. But Jamie shivered every time he thought about watching Uncle Jay sweep first Aunt Caroline (a tiny woman, whose clipped British accent made Aunt Louisa scorn her almost as much as did her inability to produce live babies) and then little Cecily clear of the ground when he hugged them.

Uncle Robert didn't hug anybody, except perhaps Aunt Louisa in private, and Aunt Louisa only hugged her own children. Never her dead sister-in-law's bastard, James. She took proper care of him, kept him sheltered and clothed and fed, but he couldn't remember a time when he'd sat on her lap the way his nearest-age cousin still did. Not that he wanted to at six, of course! But it seemed strange that he couldn't remember doing it when he was younger...in church, on Sunday nights or at prayer-meeting, Cecily always wound up in either her mother's or her father's lap. To fall asleep there, and be carried home, although she was getting so big now that she hardly fit into Aunt Caroline's arms.

James thought about all those things as he climbed the path up Stinnett's Hill, slipping in the mud and falling several times before he reached the place where the trees ended. Below the edge of Aunt Caroline's lawn, which looked almost like that of a summer estate...the boy scrambled up the remaining yards of pathway, between granite boulders and over ledges that poked above the thin soil (ledges slippery with wet moss, and soil thick with low-bush blueberry plants that in daylight would be ruddy from fall's first frosts).

The wind still howled and battered at him, but the rain had stopped now. The clouds were blowing away, literally, and from behind them came the moon. Full and brilliant, the remnants of the storm-clouds scudding across its face, as the stars (billions of them, just as “countless” as the Bible said!) also reappeared.

Did anyone know he was gone yet? Would anyone come looking for him? And did it matter, since he wasn’t planning to be found?

Or maybe he was, and just didn’t want to admit it, because why else had he come here? James walked across the lawn (which, although well tended and still green even this late in the year, was nowhere near as wastefully broad as that of most summer places). He stood by the steps, the ones that led to a sea-ward facing front door since all good Maine coastal homes turned their backs on the land, and he wondered what to do next.

He could see no lights inside, but that only meant the front rooms were unoccupied. Not that no one was awake. What time was it by now? So late, surely, that only in a house where there was turmoil—death, or sickness, or impending birth—would a decent Granite Islander be anywhere except in bed.

“Jamie!”

The deep voice caught him unaware, and so did the footsteps on the wet turf behind him. As did the hands that seized him, painfully because even his arms were bruised from tonight’s unusually vigorous beating, and lifted him aloft.

“Ouch!” he said, too startled to attempt his usual stoicism.

“What’s the matter? Did you hurt yourself? You look like you’ve fallen down,” his younger uncle’s voice said, and for all its sea-trained power it didn’t sound fearsome at all right now. Just worried, and oddly gentle. “Don’t worry, I’ll take you home. But let’s wait for morning now, all right?”

I don’t want to go home! James didn’t utter the words, but only because he managed to swallow them before they escaped. All his wakefulness, all the frenetic energy that had borne him along during the climb from the harbor, deserted him now. Like the six-year-old he was, he wrapped his small arms around the neck of the big man who held him; and he buried his face against his uncle’s shoulder. And after a moment, after the strong arms closed around him warmly, he couldn’t stop himself from crying at last.

"If I'd known about this before..." Joshua John Stinnett spoke softly to his wife, because the two children in the huge bed were just settling into sleep. His daughter, Cecily, back into slumber after waking briefly; and his nephew, James, from exhaustion. "Do you think we need to get the doctor for him, Caroline?"

"No. It's better to keep these things in the family, dearest." The small, lovely, brown-haired woman he'd married on a whim ten years earlier, a whim that this ordinarily deliberate and pragmatic man had never for one moment regretted, pursed her lips. "He's bruised, and his back's a mess; but I've done everything the doctor would do, or could do, already. I only wish I could think this was the first time that ever happened to him! But it wasn't. You saw the scars, as well as I did."

"Yes." Jay, as Joshua John Stinnett was always called by those to whom he wasn't simply "Cap'n" or "Skipper," tightened his arm around his love. They'd stripped the little boy together, and bathed him in front of the big, warm kitchen range, with lamplight in plenty because Caroline liked to see what she was doing and they could afford the fuel. Tight-fisted as he could be in business, with his wife and his daughter Jay could never bear to be anything except generous.

Oh, he'd wanted this so much when he was Jamie's age! A safe, comfortable place to live, instead of that wretched "shop" down on the wharf (which his father ran before his older brother took over). A woman to touch him gently and with love, a full belly, and the certainty of waking in the morning to peace. Instead of to his widowed, embittered, and always impoverished (despite what should have been a lucrative business) father's jibes...*dear God.*

Where he'd spent his own hellish childhood, he had put his small nephew without a thought. Although today's players were different, of course. Robert wasn't Papa, Louisa wasn't Mama, and their six kids plus Jamie didn't make a family equivalent to Robert, Jay, and Marianne Stinnett of long ago. Nineteen, fourteen, and five years old, respectively, when their mother died trying to birth a stillborn fourth child...*why didn't I even think about bringing Marianne's baby home for Caroline and me to raise?*

"I wish I'd been well when he was born, but I was so sick after I had Cecily. And she was still so tiny, not even a month old, when Marianne had Jamie." Caroline, as she so often did, seemed to be reading her husband's thoughts. "But if I'd known that expecting Louisa and

Robert to take him would lead to this! Jay, we aren't letting him go back there to live. Ever. Are we, now?"

Another thing about Caroline was that here, in this home, she was the boss. And she knew it, too. Instead of being annoyed, Captain Stinnett smiled at the confidence in his petite wife's voice. He answered in the gentle tone that other adults never heard from him, "Of course not, sweetheart. From this night on, he's ours."

* * *

Nestling into the soft bed, and gaining warmth from both its covers and his cousin's sleepy body, James Stinnett Court heard his uncle's words and hoped with all his soul that he was still awake. He didn't think he could stand it, if all this turned out to be a dream.

INTERPHASE

Chapter 1

“I’m not going to run, Jorge.” Edek couldn’t remember when, in all of his eleven years, he’d heard his father sound so weary. “I think I can make Lord Assman see reason.”

Males didn’t embrace on Proserpina, not even males who were father and son. But Edek and Everard Fallon weren’t men of Proserpina, so Edek was used to hugging his father in private. He went to Everard, and as he felt his father’s arms closing around him he heard the first sounds from the alley that ended at the clinic’s door.

“Hurry!” said the rich man, whose title and surname Edek didn’t yet know. He was sweating in his fine clothes, reeking of fear.

Footfalls. Angry voices. The boy couldn’t make out many of the words they were shouting, but one was repeated often enough and loudly enough so he couldn’t miss it. “Shaman! Dirty, perverted Shaman!”

No, that was three words. An ugly phrase that he’d heard before, always applied to his father—but always muttered, until now.

“Go with Lord Jotham, Edek. Call him ‘uncle,’ because he’s your protector for now.” Father gave Edek one last squeeze, and then pushed him in the rich man’s direction.

Only later, in the air car the man had parked on the Fallon house’s roof, did Edek realize what his father’s words meant. For all of Everard’s brave words about calling for his son’s swift return, the Shaman knew better.

“Don’t look down,” Lord Jotham warned as he strapped the boy into the tiny car’s passenger seat.

The sun was just sliding down behind the mountains. The city was in full daylight still, but free from the afternoon’s glare. Edek not only looked down, into the perpetually shadowed alley that was now

thronging with men; he strained against his safety harness to get a better view.

The car lifted. Lord Jotham flew it away from the outer wall, over the alley, so Edek only had to stare downward to see his father stepping from the clinic's door to face the mob.

He couldn't see what happened afterward. But when the car gained altitude, lifting to clear the city's inner wall, he tested the harness to its limits and hurt the muscles in his neck for one last backward glance—and he saw smoke rising from the place he and his new “protector” had just left.

Love, Jimmy: A Maine Veteran's Longest Battle

Chapter 1: Home Thoughts



Illustration 1: A view of Friendship, Maine's offshore islands (photo by Elaine Osier Crockett)

"There's a container inside the cardboard box, and there's a plastic tab you'll pull to open it," the funeral director told me as I held my father's cremated remains in my arms. The package (sent by parcel post from the crematorium in Portland to the funeral home in Gardiner—the small central Maine city where I grew up) surprised me with its weight. So did the \$17 or so in postage stamps on its plain brown outer wrapper. The end of a life, this life that 49 years ago kindled mine, shouldn't be so...mundane.

Then again, maybe it should. We weren't having a funeral, a memorial service, visiting hours, or any such ceremony, at Dad's own request. He'd lived his almost 80 years quietly, he'd chosen to die as privately as he could, and now he'd (as he put it) "gone home." So disposing of his worn out body should be done just as quietly, and just as privately. And just as matter of factly, too.

I put the package on my little car's front passenger seat, and I drove the few miles from Gardiner to my older sister's home in East Pittston. It was a perfect summer afternoon. Sunny, clear, with just a few white clouds—puffy, innocuous ones, not the storm clouds that a Maine fisherman hates to see coming—high in the bright blue sky. Warm

without being unpleasantly hot (I was wearing a tee shirt and shorts), with only the lightest of breezes stirring the tree leaves along the country road where Sis and her husband of 35 years had their home.

Just us two. His oldest child, and his youngest. The two he was able to raise himself—and the two who, in his last years, worked together (along with his beloved son-in-law) to oversee his care. Elaine joined me in the car, and an hour's worth of picturesque country roads later we were in the coastal fishing village where our father was born.

I drove down the road toward the town of Friendship's public boat ramp, at the end of Bradford's Point. Elaine pointed out to me where the house once stood in which Dad's older sister Elizabeth, who'd died just a month earlier, lived when Elaine (almost seven years my senior) was small. She talked about staying with Aunt Betty while Dad was working, at a time when I didn't yet exist, and about how long a walk it was for a small child from that house to the boat landing.

Bradford's Point ends in a bar that's completely out of water at low tide, connecting the mainland and Garrison Island. There were cars parked along both sides of the narrow road that led down a paved ramp to the jumbled rocks that on this part of the Maine coast, we dignify with the misnomer of "beach." I managed to slip into a space on the road's left side, and we got out (leaving Dad's ashes behind, for the moment) and walked down to the shore and looked around.

The beach was vacant, although there was plenty happening on the water. Lobster boats hauling traps, a sloop (that I thought might belong to a nearby children's summer camp) under sail...this was always a busy place, where the Medomak River enters the ocean. I could remember when Dad was one of the men working here, and so could Elaine.

We went back to the car. I carried the cremains in their discreet black plastic container, the shipping box removed, and Elaine carried my Bible (the old one, a red King James edition that Dad used during his last months at the Veterans' Home because his own Bible had fallen apart at last) and a bouquet of wild flowers from her field. She'd tied it carefully with raffia, so she could throw it into the ocean after Dad's ashes.

Getting to the water's edge, and out of sight of other people, took some doing. We climbed over ledges, and up and down granite boulders. We slipped on rockweed, since the tide was half out and the shore was still wet following the ocean's retreat, and we sank (although thankfully not too far) in patches of blue clay. Elaine was wearing

sandals. I'd worn sneakers, thank goodness. We were two middle-aged women, not the athletic and sure-footed little girls of Dad's young manhood, and from time to time we had to reach out and steady each other.

Finally, we were beside the water. Clear, salty ocean, as familiar to me as the earth under my feet if not more so...I went home from the hospital across this very harbor, at the age of two days, because we lived on the island that I could see now by simply lifting my eyes and looking directly ahead. I'm told that as a toddler I wanted desperately to jump into that harbor, and I can remember being a pre-teenager who could proudly take a dory with a 7 horsepower outboard motor and travel across by herself.

Dad taught me to do that, and then trusted me to do it. I remember him at the tiller himself most often, though; with the wind and the salt spray in his face, laughing, and as happy as a mortal creature can be.

Dad was as happy doing that as I am writing. Doing what he was born to do.

He had asked us to take his remains home, and that was what we'd come here to do. I opened the container, took out the plastic bag containing his ashes, and pulled the tab. The ashes slid quietly into the water, and Elaine handed me her bouquet to place in after them. Then she handed me the Bible.

I'd marked the place I wanted earlier: Psalm 91. Dad had told me often that this was the scripture passage which comforted him through the years of World War II, when he served as an Army private in the Pacific theater (starting at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii on December 7, 1941), and it seemed to be his favorite. I read it aloud, with the salt air in my face and the sunlight warm on my head, in this spot where he played as a little boy and then worked as a strong young fisherman:

"Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him; I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him...With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation."

I'm a trained evangelical preacher. I've led many a congregation in prayer. But it was hard to find the right words, very hard indeed, when I shared that last prayer with my father before we left him...home, where he'd longed to be.

The body can become the spirit's prison, truly, and at some point toward his life's end that happened to Dad. He was free now. Free, and safe, and home at last.

As we walked back around the shore, after we simply stood for a few moments longer beside the water that was slowly dispersing our father's ashes, we saw that a man had landed his dory and was digging clams on the bar between Bradford's Point and Garrison Island. Dad did a lot of things during his life on the water, but mostly he dug clams or raked sea moss. Garrison Island was where he sold the moss after each successful tide—so seeing that clamdigger at work, as we were about to get back in the car and drive away, felt curiously right. Like "covering the other base," so to speak.

We had closure now. All that remained was the grieving.

MATUSHKA

Chapter 1

The morning sky over Narsai's northern continent was streaked with pink and gold dawn. It was unlike Catherine Romanova to wake this early on a day when she didn't have to, on a morning when she could have stayed beside her husband's warmth until he was ready to rise; but here she was on the terrace overlooking her garden, and she was as alert as if it were already mid-day.

She reached for Linc's mind, and felt nothing but rest and contentment. That was good. When the two of them had finally come back here to live, in this comfortable little house on the home-world to whose citizenship Romanova had clung so stubbornly through more than forty years as a Star Service officer, he had been exhausted in every way that a sentient being could become weary. She had wondered for a time whether he would ever be himself again—but he was fine now, the same Linc she had met one day when they were both eighteen years old and had stood at a passenger liner's lounge viewport and had looked out in wonder at their first sight of Terra's blue-green globe.

Two kids from the colonies, Catherine Romanova a human girl from prosperous Narsai and Lincoln Casey a part human, part Morthan boy who had grown up on the far less hospitable world of Sestus 3. Two adolescents who had journeyed to Earth for their plebe year at the Star Service Academy, discovering each other's presence in that liner during their last few hours aboard and regretting that they had both endured weeks of loneliness when they might have been preparing together for the gauntlet they were about to enter.

She had been amazed to meet a male Morthan hybrid who wasn't planning to become a healer. He had been just as surprised to encounter a land heiress from Narsai who was preparing herself for an off-world career. They had talked excitedly about the new lives both were just beginning, they had commiserated about the difficulty each had faced in choosing a pathway that had seldom (if ever) been chosen before by persons from their respective backgrounds; and then the "prepare for arrival" announcement had been made.

She hadn't seen Casey again until she was a cadet second class, the equivalent of a junior at a traditional Terran university, and she had been put in charge of a company that was headed out for a field exercise. Her first command! Although she knew some of those for whom she had just become responsible, most she did not. In a class of five hundred it wasn't possible to know everybody, for these exercises the cadets were deliberately juggled to place them among as many strangers as possible—and she had looked into the young Morthan man's calm golden eyes, had remembered the day they arrived together on Earth, and had chosen him as her co-leader.

That had been their real beginning together. It occurred to Romanova now, as she sipped the hot chocolate that was her one dietary vice, that if one went by standard dating and ignored all other calendars it had been precisely forty years from that day to this one.

The garden was fragrant at this early hour. She had made a point of filling it with plants that had discernible perfumes, and the heavy dew from last night's autumn coolness was bringing those perfumes out in a way that she seldom experienced them because she was usually out here at the day's end instead of at its beginning.

A single-family house with a private garden, created for pleasure's sake alone. On Narsai that was almost the definition of material success, but that was not why Catherine Romanova had insisted on having space for a garden when she had been shopping for this house as a place of refuge from her rocky first marriage. She had simply wanted to put her hands into soil that she could call her own, and Linc had laughingly told her that her ancestors' genes were asserting themselves at last.

Which might have been true; she had certainly been coming home sore and bruised and in need of healing at that time in her own life, and acquiring this haven had been part of the process by which she'd sought to mend herself.

He was stirring now, in the bedroom that was separated by a few meters of distance and by several bulkheads (no, Katy, they're *walls*!) from the terrace where she was sitting. She could feel him starting to think in his usual controlled fashion, realizing she was not beside him physically and wondering where she had gone and why....

And then, of course, his mind touched hers and he relaxed again. She felt morning desire rising in him, stronger in the Morthan male than in the human male; and she smiled as she finished her chocolate, and drew her robe tighter around her in a shiver that was partly from the

morning's autumn chill and partly anticipation of what would happen to her when she returned to the bedroom and took that robe off and lay down to be held in her husband's arms.

It was a mutual gratification that would have to be delayed, because the front door opened while she was padding through the living room to dispose of her empty cup in the kitchen. Two people entered.

One was a red-haired but swiftly balding man, large and broad-shouldered and human. The other was a tall woman, her body shrouded in a cloak and her face obscured by a scarf that was beaded with Narsai's morning mist.

"Dan!" Romanova said, and let her thoughts touch her mate's mind with a mixture of apology that their intimacy couldn't happen as usual this morning—and of pleasure that someone they both loved was here, unexpected but always welcome.

"Hello, Matushka," the man said, and gave his informally adopted foster mother a tired grin. "Are you and Linc ready for some trouble? Because I'm afraid I'm bringing you plenty of it."

* * *

"This is Rachel Kane," Daniel Archer said, as he sat beside the woman who when she removed her cloak proved to be wearing a Star Service uniform that was tight in the front to a ludicrous degree. That had to be uncomfortable. Yet the woman's face was expressionless, which matched the way she moved—mechanically, and as if every use of muscle required a conscious effort. "You remember me talking about her, don't you, Matushka?"

The kitchen was warm, and it was fragrant now with coffee and chocolate and sweet hot cereals. Yet the tall woman with the fair hair and the green eyes was shivering, and she continued doing so even after Lincoln Casey went back to the bedroom and got an afghan and deftly wrapped it around her shoulders.

Unlike most Morthan hybrids, he could not sense the feelings of just any other sentient being who happened to be near him. There was only one other person whose emotions he could sense, and that connection had taken him years of constant and close association to develop. Nevertheless he had learned his Morthan mother's habit of taking care of the people who surrounded him, so he was the one who saw to it that the new arrivals were fed and that the room was made

warmer when he realized that Rachel Kane was still shivering even after he brought her the afghan.

Catherine Romanova was nodding and answering her foster son, and relying on her mate to do the things he always did. “I remember,” she said, and reached out to take the younger woman’s hands between both of hers. The flesh she touched was cold. “You were the first officer on the *Archangel*, when Dan was posted to her as chief engineer.”

“Yes. That was me.” Kane spoke at last, in a raspy voice and so softly that if Romanova hadn’t been leaning toward her already she doubted that she could have made out the words. “I’m sorry, I was alone for so long that I’m having trouble communicating now that I’m with people again. And it was so cold....” Her shivering turned into a shudder.

Dan Archer moved his chair closer, and put both arms around the woman and held her close. He said in a voice that was as fierce as his manner was gentle, “God *damn* that bioengineering company that supplies the Service with gens, Matushka! I hope we do go to war against the Commonwealth, if the Outworlds form up our own service I’ll join it. The way the government we’ve got now treats people like Rachel isn’t human. Oh, hell, I’m sorry, Linc—but you know what I mean, don’t you?”

Casey smiled, and set a mug of hot coffee at his foster son’s elbow. He answered, “I’m part human, kid. Remember? And I know what you’re trying to say, yes. But suppose you tell us just what happened to your friend here, and suppose while you’re doing that we all try to get some food into us. She’s never going to warm up until she eats, and she’s much too thin for a woman who’s carrying children.”

* * *

“How did you know it’s ‘children?’” Rachel Kane asked in a voice that was steadier now. She had eaten a bowl of hot cereal laced liberally with sweetening, she had downed two cups of steaming chocolate, and although she kept the afghan held snugly about her she was no longer shivering.

The four former officers had stopped talking during the brief meal, in accordance with a strict military custom that Romanova and Casey and Kane had all learned during their Academy days and that Archer had learned after he had signed onto a ship as an ordinary crew member. He had done that as a boy of sixteen, desperate to escape life in the mines of Sestus 4; and with a talent for handling both machines and

computers that had made it possible for him to be field promoted into a junior officer's berth. That had happened to him long ago, when he was still less than twenty years old and when his talents had come to the notice of Catherine Romanova's firstborn son Ewan.

Romanova loved Dan Archer for his own sake now, but her attachment to him had deep roots in his connection to her long-dead child. She looked at him this morning, as he sat in her kitchen beside the unlikely guest he'd brought home, and she thought of the first time Ewan Fralick had presented that gawky red-haired kid to her in her office aboard the old *Firestorm*—and she smiled at the memory. Bringing home yet another human or part-human stray was the best means she could imagine to honor Ewan's memory.

She felt a gentle inner tug, and looked up and heard her husband saying, "There wasn't any Morthan empathy involved, I'm afraid, Commander Kane. I know that you're a gengineered being because Dan already mentioned that. I also know from what I've heard and read about gengineered females that when your owners are ready for you to reproduce, it's done in batches. And you're about to burst out of that uniform, which means that you're either well along in your pregnancy or you're carrying more than one child."

"Very good, Captain Casey!" The young woman laughed, only a trifle harshly. "I'm a bit of an experiment, you know. Until me, female 'gens' were considered too valuable to risk in the Service and no gen had ever made it all the way through the Academy. And if I could get my hands on that damned ship's surgeon who started getting me ready to breed without bothering to tell me about it...!"

She shuddered then, and Archer put his arm around her again. He said softly and very gently, "Rachel, I'm sorry. If I'd had any idea! I always took responsibility myself, when I was with a woman that I knew I could make pregnant. But that wasn't supposed to be possible for you, dammit all!"

"It's not your fault," Kane answered him. She turned in the shelter of his arm, and she put her head down onto his shoulder.

Oh, gods. They're Dan's babies.

Romanova honestly wasn't sure whose thought that was, her own or Casey's. It didn't matter, in any case they shared both the realization and the horror that went with it; but she was the one who said practically into the silence that now filled the little house, "First things first! Why

don't we drop the rank, Dan was booted out of the Service months ago and Linc and I are both retired. And it looks as if you're out of it now, too, Rachel. I should take you to see a healer right away—but I don't suppose that would be very smart, would it?"

"No, it wouldn't." Kane did not lift her head off her lover's shoulder, but she relaxed there and turned enough so she could regard Romanova with those startling green eyes of hers. "I know I ought to see a medic, I haven't been able to do that since I realized I was pregnant. But you're right, I deserted. And that means Dan and I are putting you at risk just by being in your home. So seeing a doctor right now is out of the question, the only way I could do that would be to turn myself in."

"And if you did surrender to the Terran Embassy here on Narsai, what would happen to you?" That was Casey again, using what Romanova in one of her more acerbic moods was apt to call his bedside manner. His parents had both been medics—his father a traditional Terran-born allopathic physician, his mother a Morthan empathic healer—and although he had never had the least inclination to follow in either's professional footsteps, he could and did adopt a healer's mannerisms sometimes.

That had been part of what made him a superb executive officer, Romanova remembered with a smile that she quickly hid. He'd known instinctively when, as she had inelegantly expressed it, "to pat shoulder or kick butt." This was his shoulder-patting mode, and Rachel Kane was responding to it just as scores of junior officers had done during the years when Lincoln Casey had stood at the head of a starship's crew and had managed that crew on his captain's behalf.

"Nothing except the end of my Service career, probably, if I went back to Terra now like a meek little lamb and let the creche-doctors take my fetuses out of me and do whatever they wanted to with them. I'm a valuable piece of property, I wouldn't be executed like a regular deserter." Kane's eyes hardened, and so did her tone. "If I'd gone right to sickbay as soon as I realized what was happening to me, the ship's surgeon would have just aborted the pregnancy and that would have been that. But now that I'm carrying three twelve-week-old fetuses that as far as I know are healthy and developing normally—I don't trust the bastards who run my creating lab not to experiment with these babies for awhile first, before they'd actually dispose of them. What they wouldn't do is let me go on carrying my children until they're ready to be born, or transfer each of them to an incubation field. That's what they would have

done with embryos made from my ova and a male gen's sperm, if I'd been harvested as I should have been instead of getting pregnant the old-fashioned way."

"Nice, huh?" Dan Archer asked, with a twisted little grin. "An ordinary bastard like me has no business contaminating a gen like Rachel with his inferior offspring!"

Lincoln Casey winced, and so did Catherine Romanova; but each did so for a different reason.

"Inferior offspring?" Casey knew what those words meant, because he had been called by them times enough when he was a boy and his mother's family had visited Sestus 3 or she had taken him to Mortha for one more disastrous visit. Half human, born after his mother had left Mortha with one of the young human physicians who came there to study each year...but that by itself was in no way unusual, because almost every young Morthan woman preferred taking a human husband who was her contemporary to mating with a male of her own species (who would necessarily be much older, because Morthan males took many more seasons than did their females to attain sexual maturity).

But Kalitha Marin's son by Gladstone Casey had proved to be unlike the usual product of such a union, in that he lacked most of the gifts that made a Morthan hybrid—well, Morthan. His eyes were golden like hers, and his reaching the time of life when females interested him as females and not merely as people had come after almost forty standard years instead of after fourteen or so as was the norm for his father's species; but otherwise he had nothing Morthan about him, except for the bond that gave him access to his wife's thoughts and feelings and that gave her (full human though she was) access to his.

Inferior offspring, that was both what his Morthan relatives had called him and how his parents had wound up regarding him in their different ways. And Catherine Romanova was reacting to what Rachel Kane had just said with another kind of unpleasant recognition, because she knew what it was like to have her reproductive potential regarded as someone else's property.

Thank goodness Narsai's laws and customs had changed during the years since she had been young, since the time when she had defied those who claimed to love her most and had accepted exile as the price of being able to have the children she wanted with the man she loved as their father.

That man hadn't been Lincoln Casey, who when Katy Romanova was ripe for childbearing had been an outwardly mature man—a fully competent Star Service officer, her comrade and her friend—but who hadn't been aware of her in that way yet at all. At that time in both their lives Linc had still been as puzzled and as vaguely disturbed by the mention of sex as a fully human boy of perhaps eight or nine standard years.

Now the two of them touched minds again, and again they separated after giving and accepting reassurance. Then Romanova asked in a mother's gentle tone, "Rachel, you know how many babies you're carrying and exactly how old they are. You did scan yourself, then, before you left your ship?"

There was a great deal more she wanted to know about that. How had this young woman been able to desert successfully, anyway, from a Star Service vessel where she had occupied the executive officer's post? Where had she been, and for how long, that she'd arrived here half frozen and starved and suffering the psychological effects of long-term isolation? And if Dan was the father of her children—now, there was the greatest puzzle of all; because Dan had been dismissed from the Star Service, along with every other "scrambler" (Service vernacular for those officers who had been elevated from ordinary crew member status), a full eighteen standard months earlier.

But right now what mattered was figuring out how to keep this frightened mother-to-be safe and as healthy as possible. So Romanova listened with relief as Kane answered, "Yes, of course I did. I don't have any idea how many eggs my body released, three would be an awfully small harvest; and I don't know how many actually were fertilized and didn't implant. But by the time I realized something was wrong and I did the scan, there were three embryos and they'd implanted and they were growing normally. And I still don't have any idea why I didn't just head straight for sickbay and get that corrected, it would have been so easy then. Except that—somehow, I just didn't want to. I don't know why, it still doesn't make any sense to me at all."

Romanova smiled then, and moved her chair close to Kane's other side. She said gently, "I didn't have my children because it made sense, Rachel. I had them because I wanted them, and it was my right to do that. It's your right, too. Don't tell me you're a gen and that means the lab that created you owns you, because it doesn't! I don't care what Terran law says, a sentient being should never be classed as someone

else's property. Now," and her tone that a moment ago had been tender and maternal became brisk and authoritative. "Linc, call Johnnie at the Farmstead and find out who he's got out there with him right now. Dan, do whatever you need to do to cover your tracks from bringing Rachel here; I want to hear all about it, but not until we've done everything we can do to make her safe and keep her that way. And since she does have to have medical care—I think I feel terrible today. I think I'm going to give Cab Barrett a call, and see if she has time to come over here and give me a checkup."

She gave Rachel Kane's thin shoulder a swift pat, and she rose from the sofa. "Come on, now! Move!" she said, and realized that for the first time in seven months she sounded like Fleet Admiral Romanova. And it felt good.

MISTWORLD

In loving memory of Joshua Daniel and Angelina Marie. "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."—I Corinthians 15:26

Chapter 1

"The Commonwealth won't let any of its member worlds go without a fight, Mum. But I'm telling you what you know already, aren't I?" Ewan Fralick gave Catherine Romanova a smile that the former fleet admiral recognized, although during his mortal lifetime her firstborn hadn't worn the face that formed it. Whenever Ewan expressed his feelings with the physical form he now inhabited, his mannerisms overrode those of the body's actual owner—one Ishi Sanibello, from the Human colony on Mistworld.

Katy Romanova had thought it an eerie business despite the blinding happiness it afforded, having her three boys who'd perished in a single long ago battle restored when the "Misties" brought their oddly assorted fleet to Narsai. She still found it strange, yet poignantly joyful, at moments like this one...Romanova realized that Ewan/Ishi wanted an answer. He wasn't asking the question rhetorically, after all.

"I certainly never expected the Diet to be that sensible!" she said, and sighed. "But lately I've dared to hope they may let us alone, after all."

Afternoon sunlight bathed the garden of Romanova's small home in Narsai's capital city of MinTar, where mother and son sat on the terrace together and enjoyed a rare moment of peace and privacy. Peace had become especially scarce here during the past six weeks, since Dan Archer (who was Ewan's best friend from his Star Service days, and Katy's adopted fourth son as well) and his wife, the fugitive gen and Star Service deserter called Rachel Kane, brought their three newborn babies home from MinTar Medical. With Katy, her second husband, her adolescent daughter, and the Archer/Kane family all crammed into it, the house that had so often stood empty for years at a stretch was filled now to its capacity—and beyond.

“Not likely, Mum.” Ewan shook Ishi Sanibello’s head. Not for the first time, his mother wondered if the noncorporeal Mistworld natives had deliberately paired the eldest Fralick son’s consciousness—still self-aware in this dimension almost fourteen years after his body’s death, thanks to their planet’s unique environment—with a host of his own gender and approximate age, as of the last time he walked about wearing flesh. “They’ve got to be hurting, after six months without the colonies shipping foodstuffs to Terran markets. The replacement comm relay should have arrived from New Orient a long time ago, shouldn’t it?”

Once again, the youngster was right. Romanova sighed, and nodded. “I never thought I’d see the time when Narsai would spend six months cut off from talking to the rest of the Commonwealth,” she said, and then laughed at herself. “Just listen to me, still calling Human-inhabited space ‘the Commonwealth’! But blessed if I can think what else to call it, love.”

“Neither can I, actually.” Her son chuckled. “‘Cut off from the rest of the galaxy’ would sound pretty pretentious! Although we haven’t been completely. Cut off, that is. I talked to a captain just in from Kesra yesterday. Their link’s working fine, and Terra’s not talking to them, either.”

“Or to Mortha, or either of the worlds in the Sestus system.” Katy hadn’t missed the catch in Ewan/Ishi’s voice when he said the name of his birth-world, where Human residents were no longer allowed—making Ewan, Marcus, and Bryce (her sons by her first husband, George Fralick) exiles.

Which didn’t matter a bit, of course, now that they belonged to Mistworld. Now that they’d become “Misties” themselves (a whimsical nickname bestowed by Katy’s diminutive-loving fellow Narsatians), they might wear borrowed flesh in order to visit other worlds; but afterward they would always return to a home that wasn’t Kesra.

Again Ewan nodded. “I wonder what they’re up to?” he asked, and this time the question really was rhetorical. It had to be, because not even the former Fleet Admiral Romanova—who’d worked directly for the Defense Minister, and commanded the entire Star Service—could answer it.

* * *

“Linc, they are *hopeless*.” Bryce Fralick, utilizing the vocal cords of Mistworld colonist Chad Thorne, leaned hard on the sentence’s final word. He indicated Narsai’s Commissioner of Aquaculture, whose secondary title of Harbormaster gave the man law enforcement powers. Which therefore meant that “Harbie,” along with Chief Constable Mara Ling, must lead this formerly pacifist world’s recently formed militia—to the despair of the former military officers who had the job of coaching them in their new responsibilities.

Captain Lincoln Casey, one-time commander of the Star Service Academy, rolled his golden Morthan hybrid eyes in agreement with his stepson. But he schooled his voice to say firmly, “They’ll get it eventually, Bryce. They’ve got to, for their people’s sake. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned since I started living here full time with your mother, it’s that Narsatians are loyal to their world and to each other! So the least we can do,” he glanced at Marcus Fralick (as embodied by Mistworld colonist Dram Andersen) to make sure both younger men were hearing and understanding him, “is stay with them for as long as they’re willing to keep trying.”

They ought to be how old by now? In their thirties, since the Fralick twins were green ensigns when the ship aboard which they’d been serving together vanished in a fireball over Mistworld. Along with Ewan, a very junior captain who’d turned off his comm—the better not to hear when the battle group’s commodore, his mother (the very senior Captain Catherine Romanova) ordered him not to take his own small ship down into the planet’s upper atmosphere, to aid the doomed one carrying his brothers.

They no longer looked a bit alike, these two who’d been born physically identical, because their hosts weren’t related. And because their hosts were men barely on the high side of twenty, they looked as if they hadn’t aged during the years their mother (and their mother’s husband, who’d been her executive officer at the time of their deaths) thought them gone forever.

The impression that time hadn’t passed for the three younger men, Lincoln Casey knew now, was false. Whether or not the Fralick brothers had “grown up” in the sense they would have if they’d continued living in their own bodies for the past fourteen or so years, they had definitely gained both experience and maturity from their lives as adopted members of the noncorporeal species inhabiting Mistworld’s upper atmosphere. The species that started fighting back, by the only

method they could use, when combat between the Star Service battle group under Catherine Romanova and invaders attempting to dislodge Commonwealth homesteaders on the planet's surface inadvertently began killing them—the native beings whose existence neither side in that conflict suspected.

Casey still found it incredible that the Mistworld folk should—even as they defended themselves—have attempted to salvage the essence of each individual being whose body they destroyed. Their efforts hadn't worked for everyone on board the incinerated starships, of course. But Casey was vastly grateful that it had worked for all three of his wife's sons, and not just because he loved her. He'd spent most of his military career nurturing young officers—first as Romanova's XO, and later (after spending the intervening years as his by then wife's adjutant, when she'd made flag rank but hadn't yet risen to Fleet Admiral) commanding the Academy. So he'd grieved both personally and professionally for the three promising youngsters called Ewan, Marcus, and Bryce Fralick, and having them back—even in these altered forms—delighted him in ways that had nothing at all to do with his love for their mother.

For Katy who was reaching out to him now, through the telepathic bond they shared (as did any mated pair, when one partner was of Morthan or part-Morthan ancestry). Letting him know that Narsai's Harbormaster and Chief Constable had just run out of time for drilling their units in the accurate use of personal firearms, and for the other defensive preparations that were planned or already underway.

Peaceful Narsai, where possessing weapons had been against the law for so long that neither Harbie nor Mara had ever needed them to enforce the planet's laws, would soon be either a conquered planet under enemy occupation or a world at war. Casey looked out over the floor of the vast indoor arena that in better times had served as Min'Tar's main recreational center—a floor that was still marked off for the playing of Narsai's favorite team sport, a vague descendant of the ancient North American one called “basketball”—and shook his head before he bent to the broadcast booth's commlink. From here he could address everyone on the floor, half a dozen meters below this enclosure that was tucked between banks of spectator seats on the narrow end of the arena's trapezoid. Keeping the three formally trained and off-world born coaches out of sight, to avoid undermining Harbie's and Mara's authority with their militia recruits.

I got used to giving people bad news back when we were still junior officers, he told his wife via their own most private of commlinks, as he gathered breath and steeled his nerves to say what must be said. But I'm damned if I've got any idea how to tell people like yours—people like ours, Katy!—what we both know they'll almost certainly be facing, by this time tomorrow.

* * *

Ewan Fralick and Ishi Sanibello both watched Ewan's mother as Catherine Romanova sat at one of her home's two comm terminals and stared, with her face turned away from its screen, toward the garden. Her firstborn son had no idea, until he came to know her as one adult to another during the last six months, how much she loved that garden...and this house...and her home-world itself, for that matter.

She must have found it hard to leave, and live on Kesra all those years with your father, Sanibello observed to Fralick, in one of the thousands of silent thoughts they'd exchanged since (as a Mistworld-manned Rebel ship's commander) he'd found himself paired with a disembodied Human "battle survivor" instead of being chosen to host one of the planet's natives. Initially Sanibello felt disappointed that he must lend his flesh to Fralick, when he'd hoped for the honor of embodying a true Mistworlder. But now, after months of having Ewan so close to him that each felt like part of the other, Ishi Sanibello sometimes wondered what it would be like one day when the ship now orbiting Narsai took them back to Mistworld. When Fralick, no longer needing physical form, would slip free and once again join the planet's natives in its atmosphere's upper reaches—leaving Sanibello alone, inside this body that they'd shared for so long.

I never thought about it at the time, Ewan answered his companion, *because I was a kid and they were my parents. So of course they lived together; I took that for granted! But, yeah. She must have loved Papa an awful lot, at least when she married him, to get her to live anywhere else but on Narsai.*

How come you can't talk to her mind to mind? Like a real Mistworlder would, and like the husband she's got now does? Sanibello had been wondering that, in the part of his consciousness that Fralick didn't share, ever since they'd arrived here.

Same reason I wouldn't have been able to talk to you that way, before we got paired for this voyage. Ewan sounded amused, not at all surprised, and—to Ishi's astonishment—more than a trifle frustrated, too. *I need a native to carry me whenever I want to communicate by mind-talk. Just like Narsai needs that*

new interplanetary comm booster, before it can punch real-time transmissions through to other planets again.

Oh. Sanibello, like most of Mistworld's Human colonists, was a farmer. Not a star sailor, by training or even by inclination. So whenever his body commanded the ship that had brought him here, and that would take him home again, he "stepped aside" and gave Fralick full control. At first doing so had frightened him—but not half as much as thinking he must command that starship by himself would have, of course!

Ewan Fralick knew how. Clothed once again in a mortal body, he'd thrilled at the chance. And had he not been there, six months ago when the Mistworld-led Rebel fleet swept into Narsai space and found itself facing a Star Service heavy cruiser determined to engage them in battle—with that cruiser's captain not a bit interested in pausing to ascertain the newcomers' actual intentions—Ishi Sanibello didn't doubt that the untried Rebels would have been obliterated, in spite of their technically superior numbers.

Instead the brief conflict ended with the Commonwealth vessel blown apart, and with minimal damage done to Narsai's orbiting infrastructure of habitats, communications satellites, and solar power collectors. It had cost the Rebel fleet six of its fifteen oddly assorted vessels, though...which didn't prevent Ewan Fralick from grieving for the civilian deaths he learned about later. As well as for everyone he'd known aboard those destroyed ships, because people who died while away from Mistworld were gone forever.

If our ship had been one of them, Ewan, neither of us would be anything right now except dead. Sanibello joined his hosting-partner in acknowledging that brutal fact, as they both looked at a comm screen in Catherine Romanova's living room. As a direct feed from Narsai Control showed them not one Star Service warship, but an entire battle group—everything from tiny raiders up to a trio of heavy cruisers and a dreadnought—approaching Narsai's star system, silently, from out of deep space.

REGS

Chapter 1

“You can get out of here now, Rudy. No need to hang around, and have both of us in trouble if this goes bad.”

When I said that to Technical Specialist Tasker, I wasn’t a bit sure whether he would take me up on the offer or not. But I owed it to him, to give him an out; bringing me, his team leader, down in one of the *Ishtar’s* shuttles didn’t guarantee he’d get charged with breaking regulations. He could claim I’d given him a direct order, after all.

I wouldn’t be able to make such a claim. I knew what I was doing from the second I began planning this little expedition, and I couldn’t even bother to pretend otherwise.

It didn’t matter. Either I would come back with my missing team member, my stray lamb as it were; or I wouldn’t come back at all, and in either case the consequences of my actions would be mine to suffer.

But Tasker deserved an out, and I was going to give it to him if he wanted it. He stood there staring at me, both of us with our boots crushing the clearing’s grass and sending up sharp aromas in the pre-dawn mists, and I could just barely see his face as this world’s sun tried to break through and reach us.

He looked so young. Just a kid, with dusky brown skin that hadn’t a line on it yet — with big eyes, and full lips that trembled a bit even though he was trying to hide his feelings as young males always think they must.

Why hasn’t that changed, in all the hundreds of years since humankind moved outward from Sol?

But maybe it’s got nothing to do with gender, after all. Because now that I think about it, I used to try to appear totally calm, too, when I was Tasker’s age.

That was a long time ago.

“How were you going to get back to the ship, ma’am?” Tasker asked me, with just a hint of a much older man’s wry humor glinting in his dark brown eyes. “If I was gonna leave you here, I mean.”

He was staying, and although I’d felt duty-bound to offer him an honorable escape I was only going to do that once. Because the truth was, I was going to need him in order to complete my self-assigned mission.

Even with him, I probably didn’t stand much of a chance; but I was doing what I had to do. A team leader doesn’t abandon one of her own, not for any power in the whole universe.

* * *

“If I didn’t know already that this planet has people of human descent on it, I’d realize a colony ship had landed cargo here.” Tasker said that because he was nervous, and he needed to say something. But he was right. As the sun finally cut through the mists, the clearing where he’d set us down was revealed; and it was a meadow filled with Terran wildflowers.

Black-eyed Susans. Painted daisies, or pyrethrum as they’re more properly called. Queen Anne’s lace, a pest plant in so many people’s minds; but I’ve always thought its white filigree quite beautiful, even though I realize it never yet found its way onto a colony world by design.

It always finds a way to hitchhike. Like blue chicory, like European yellow flag.

Come to think of it, I’ve always been partial to those flowers, too.

Down by the stream at the meadow’s edge, I could see clumps of something scarlet. Cardinal flower, or bee balm? The forest in this temperate latitude was part conifer, part deciduous; and the rhododendrons setting buds for the next spring’s far-off blooms made me slightly homesick for my native Rigel 5.

“The people are why Cranshaw’s in trouble,” I said to Tasker, as we started the short hike from this concealed landing site to a traveled road and — hopefully, soon after that — civilization as the locals knew it. “Damn all anthropologists for idiots, anyway! What did he think he was going to learn, that was worth risking getting caught on the wrong side of a shifting border?”

I was blandly ignoring, of course, the obvious reality that Tasker and I were taking the same risk. And that when Marcus Cranshaw

obtained clearance for his ill-advised one-man recon, he at least got that approval properly (something he must have damned well known wouldn't have happened if I'd been on board the *Ishtar*, but that's another story!).

I was on my own now, and Tasker with me. Of which reality my tech spec didn't know better than to remind me out loud. "Ms. Falconi, it's been twice that long since Dr. Cranshaw disappeared. And we'll be in Ast territory if we're still here in twelve more hours," the kid said, looking at me again with those innocent eyes of his. "The border shifts at 1700, Standard Shipboard Time."

I knew that, and he knew I knew it, and telling him so was only going to make it hard for me not to yell at him. Which he didn't deserve, not when he was risking a life he'd only just started to live by staying here with me — on top of risking the career he was also just beginning, even if we did get out of here alive. Even if we did succeed in finding our team mate; and if, when we'd found Marc Cranshaw, we were able to rescue him.

That was assuming a hell of a lot, and I couldn't afford to get excited during my first hour on the ground. Not when a single tech spec, one almost as green as the moss of the forest through which we were now padding, was all the backup I either had or could hope to have until this mission was over.

Mission? Well, I couldn't think of anything better to call it, even though certainly no one had assigned it to me.

Instead of shouting at Tasker I said in my mildest tone, "Rudy, I told you when you first got assigned to me that I don't mind 'Falconi' and I don't mind 'Nora.' But anyone who calls me 'ma'am' or 'Ms.' or 'team leader' on the ground like this, is apt to get my ass shot off for me. Don't do it again. Okay?"

I guess he hadn't thought I was serious, back when I told him that originally; and on board ship, I don't mind a bit of formality. He looked at me just before we had to step out of the sheltering trees, onto the shoulder of the macadam road that was our immediate destination, and he nodded as if he'd only just grasped that I meant what I'd been saying to him. "Okay," he responded, in a light baritone that no longer seemed like too much voice for someone his age. "Nora."

We soon left the forest behind us, and before we'd been squinting against the day's now brilliant early sunlight for more than a

few seconds' time one of Class M Planet 8055's internal combustion powered vehicles (stinking appallingly of the fossil fuel that it burned) pulled to a stop just after passing us. An elderly man leaned out of an open window and shouted, in words that thanks to proper preparation of my brain's language center actually made good sense to me, "Where are you two tryin' to go? Ya want a lift?"

We did. We crawled into the cramped cockpit (no, it was properly called a cab!) of his vehicle with him, and the old man opened the throttle again and we were on our way.

* * *

"Nothin' much open yet, but I suppose you know that," our driver said as we bounced along. "What's your name, son?"

This was one reason for me to be glad Tasker had decided to come along. What I knew of this world (gleaned from a very fast read-through of Marc Cranshaw's database) told me that a woman traveling alone was going to spend much of her time explaining herself, or perhaps even defending her right to retain her freedom of movement.

Tasker's presence solved that problem for me. He'd done his own read-through of Marc's data on this culture, and I'd given him a role to play; a cover identity to use. He said easily now, "Rudolf Tasker, sir. This is my sister, Nora Cranshaw. We're looking for her husband."

We could use our own names here, which was going to simplify things immeasurably. Once, centuries ago, our ancestors and these people's forebears had spoken the same tongue. There had been enough drift so that without preparation we would have had great difficulty communicating, but proper names were still similar enough so that ours just needed to be given the correct local pronunciation.

And if I wanted to have guaranteed access to Marc when we located him (when, not if!), I needed to use his surname. That would let me identify myself as his spouse...which I wasn't, of course. Just his boss, his team leader. But on this world, I would have to play a role in order to function effectively.

In order to survive, actually.

"Banks," the old man said, and it was his name. "Pleased to know you, Tasker."

Me, he ignored. Tasker wasn't violating any rules of courtesy by giving my name as well as his own, but he hadn't been required to

acknowledge that I had one. In which case our driver would have assumed that I was Tasker's wife.

Good thinking, Rudy. It wouldn't hurt to mention our mission up front, because this friendly local might be able to help. To point us in the right direction, anyway. To get us started.

And besides, Rudy wasn't all that experienced at field work. If Cranshaw had to in order to keep our covers unbroken, he would do anything short of killing me to conform to local customs. Up to and including knock me flat, in perfect portrayal of a husband disciplining his wife in a misogynistic society. But Rudy Tasker, poor kid, was finding it hard even to treat me discourteously. I hoped he wasn't going to wind up getting me killed, before this was over.

ROUGH RIDER

Chapter 1

“No! I won’t leave him here! I can’t do this—please don’t make me do this!” It was her own frantic voice that woke her, not her companion’s presence; but the moment Captain Joy Grant opened her eyes she was aware of not being alone, and she was grateful that she’d ignored protocol tonight and had allowed her chief medical officer to go sleep by her side instead of sending him back to his own quarters at evening’s end.

He wasn’t sleeping now, of course. No one could have slept through the racket she’d just been making, but John Woodlawn had waited patiently for Grant to rouse herself and now he was ready to gather her into his arms and hold her close while she trembled and fought down the last vestiges of her nightmare’s panic. Only when she finally relaxed against him did he ask her gently, “The same dream, Joy?”

“Exactly the same. I’ve had it every night since we changed course, and each time I get a little further into it before I wake up.” Grant shuddered, glad she’d been on intimate terms with this man for more than long enough so that she had no hesitation about being this honest (and this vulnerable) with him. He had come aboard the *St. Petersburg* with her when she had taken command of her most recent starship two years earlier, he newly widowed after a happy (although often absentee) twenty-year marriage; she in all ways but one the quintessential never-married-except-to-the-ship Star Guard captain, whose long-term relationship with an Arian civilian research scientist had just broken up and had left her feeling far more adrift than she’d expected (or than she’d cared to admit, even to herself).

They were old friends anyway, though, were Joy Grant and John Woodlawn. They’d been at the Academy at the same time, he serving as her senior mentor during her plebe year; they’d stayed in touch throughout their careers; and they’d served together on another starship

that had also found its way to Zorti, nineteen years earlier when Woodlawn's marriage had been young and when Grant wouldn't have looked at him twice as anything but a friend because someone else had occupied the most special place in her heart and in her life.

Someone she'd just been dreaming about, again. Someone she'd left behind on Zorti, the first human to die there on the world where the second Earth colony on a true M-class planet had been established during the years since then.

"I'm your doctor, you know," Woodlawn reminded his captain now, but his tone was mild rather than insistent. He let her go without trying to hold her when she moved out of his arms and lay back against her pillow, the bedclothes clasped over her breasts by arms that were still faintly moist with the perspiration of dream-inspired panic. "I could insist that you tell me about it..."

"The hell you could," Grant answered him; and although her lips twisted into a wry grin, no warmth made it as far as her blue-gray eyes. "But do I really have to tell you, Woody? You were there nineteen years ago. You know what I'm reliving whenever I have that dream. What's the point of putting us both through my telling it to you like some kind of badly written horror novel?"

"The point might be to help you stop having the dream every night," Woodlawn observed dryly. "You didn't seem to be enjoying it much, so I thought you might like to unload it. Or unload the baggage that's causing it, is what I meant to say. Why not, Joy? You said it, I was there—so there can't be anything you need to hide from me."

"Don't be too sure about that, Woody." Again that twisted, completely unhumorous grin distorted Grant's mouth. She was no beauty, never had been; but in her mid-forties she usually had an air of calm certainty that gave her perfectly average face a comfortable attractiveness whenever she wasn't finding it necessary to stare down an enemy or scare hell out of a difficult crew member.

Woodlawn remembered her as an Academy cadet who was still filled with adolescent uncertainties, as a junior officer who hadn't yet learned that it wasn't necessary for her to take herself far too seriously in order to command respect; and as a youthful executive officer on a ship much smaller, much less technologically advanced than the *St. Pete*, which would have taken twice as long to make a direct passage from Earth to Zorti and which had been heading into the utterly unknown instead of visiting today's well-established colony there. That young exec had really

been pretty whenever she'd smiled, but of course in those days her smile had reached her eyes almost every time she'd worn it.

The mature woman might have been beautiful tonight, if she hadn't long ago forgotten how to smile like that. She laughed at jokes like other human beings, she apparently enjoyed all the normal pleasures—eating, drinking, working hard, making love—but Woodlawn hadn't seen those expressive blue-gray eyes of hers fully include themselves in her smile since they'd taken the old *Rough Rider* away from Zorti after being the first humans to land on that world, all those years ago now. As far as he knew she hadn't smiled like that even once since she'd left someone behind on Zorti who had been capable of making her light up like a Terran sunrise.

Hell, of course she wasn't going to talk to him about it. She'd allowed herself to be debriefed after her return to Earth nineteen years earlier, she'd talked to the press about all the conventional things that an explorer was expected to discuss and describe—and as soon as some other drama had diverted the media's attention from the discovery of Zorti, she'd plainly been thankful to be allowed to stop talking about it and hadn't willingly done so since. Except maybe to the child that had been born to her eight months after that discovery, the child she had just learned that she was carrying when she'd had no choice but to presume its father dead and to leave his body unrecovered somewhere on the alien world of which he had afterward been immortalized as discoverer.

An appropriate fate, perhaps, for Kirkland Gambol Rogers. How they'd joked about having an uppercrust dandy of a young captain for a ship called *Rough Rider*! It had seemed so poetically suitable before they'd realized their “discovered” world already had a name, by which its native inhabitants called it, that *Rough Rider*'s officers had humorously suggested it should be dubbed “New Cuba” and that its highest elevation should be named “San Juan Hill.”

Those high spirits of theirs had come crashing down soon enough, though. Although Joy Grant had since then risen in rank from lieutenant to full captain, although she'd commanded a succession of increasingly larger and more powerful starships and although the son she'd borne eighteen years earlier had grown into an intelligent and good-looking man of whom she had every right to be proud, it was her old friend John Woodlawn's opinion that she had left much more than a lover down there among the telepathic natives of Zorti. She'd left something behind that had by its absence changed her forever, and

although Woodlawn had come to love her more dearly than ever during the months since she'd first allowed him to share her bed he was always aware even when they were closest to each other both physically and emotionally that something essential was absent from their times together. There was some part of her that he was not touching because she wasn't in touch with it herself, or (a cold thought that horrified him whenever he permitted himself to entertain it briefly) because that part of her was gone, not just concealed. Really gone, destroyed, literally and not just figuratively sacrificed on the altar of initial contact with an unknown and in its terribly innocent way absolutely deadly alien species.

"Woody, I'm sorry—this is going to sound awfully unfair—but I need you to go back to your quarters now," Grant said, managing to use her command voice without looking or sounding ridiculous given their current circumstances. Two naked lovers in a bed, and she was giving an order like the Star Guard captain she was and she plainly was expecting to be obeyed. "I know I said you could stay, but now I really have to be alone for awhile."

"All right." Woodlawn wasn't sure whether he was agreeing because he wanted to give her what she needed, or whether he was a chief medical officer obeying his captain; and it didn't matter, because he'd long since given up worrying about it when the lines between official and private relationship became blurred. Such things were inevitable when men and women served together in confined spaces over months, sometimes years, out of contact with others of their own kind except their shipmates. The old "nonfraternization regulations" had been sent to the junk pile decades earlier, and as long as mature adults used discretion there was no need to be afraid of discovery because no one really gave a damn what anyone else did in privacy. Not even when "anyone else" was the ship's captain, and when her relationship was with one of her own senior officers.

It hadn't been against regs for something like this to happen, even as long ago as *Rough Rider's* return from Zorti; but when Grant's by then obvious pregnancy had caused the intimate relationship that had existed between captain and exec to become part of the exploratory starship's story as covered by the media, the brass at Guard Command had been embarrassed and they'd frowned even though they could not openly censure. Woodlawn was well aware that between unofficial but decided disapproval from her superiors and hysterics from Kirk Rogers's wealthy, widowed and possessive mother Joy Grant had had hell to pay for returning first to base and then to Earth pregnant with her dead

captain's son. That was one good reason why he never pressed her for more than she was willing to give him now, despite the passage of almost two decades and despite the fact that he was a staff officer and therefore about the safest possible partner she could have chosen from a protect-the-chain-of-command standpoint.

Nevertheless he was disappointed at being asked to leave her now, when he'd waited so long and so patiently for tonight's invitation to come. To wake up beside a loved one again, after missing that every morning since Mae's death!

Oh, well, he'd done without that pleasure more mornings than not even while Mae had lived; he'd been serving on starships and she had been teaching school back home on Earth during most of their married life. As for waking up beside Joy Grant some morning, he still had confidence that it would happen sooner or later—provided that he was patient and cooperative now, provided that he didn't make her feel pushed for what she so plainly was not yet ready to give him.

So he got out of her bed now, dressed with the uncomfortable feeling that she wanted him gone so intensely that she'd have winked him out of existence if that had been within her power rather than tolerate the delay caused by his need to don his clothing, and bent to kiss her goodnight even though he wondered whether she really wanted him to do so. "Go back to sleep if you can, Joy," he said, and smoothed dark brown hair that was just showing its first silver threads back from her forehead. "You've still got the medicine I prescribed?"

"Yes, and I haven't taken it once and I don't intend to start tonight." She was feeling repentant, maybe even downright guilty; she put up a hand and caressed his cheek. He noticed that she was very careful to keep the bedclothes tucked securely and concealingly around her body, very careful indeed to avoid doing anything that might look like an invitation or just a reversal of her decision that he should leave. "I'll be fine, Woody. I need to think, that's all. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I never met a captain who didn't spend a lot of time alone, if that's what you mean," he answered her, and kissed her again. "It seems to go with the rank. Predisposition or consequence, I don't know—but I guess it means you're normal and I don't need to worry about you, as your physician or as your lover. Good night, darling. I'll see you tomorrow sometime, I hope."

“You know damned well you will, *St. Pete’s* not that big a ship!” Grant laughed ruefully and took her hand away from her lover’s face. “Good night, then.”

When had she ever used an endearment to address him, even in their most private and intimate moments? Never, Woodlawn thought with astonishment as he let himself out of the captain’s quarters and walked to the nearest lift. The ship’s passageways were quiet at this hour; there were on-duty crews at work, of course, in every department that required 24-hour coverage, but generally there was little corridor traffic at 0200. Even though he would not have needed to be embarrassed, would not have dreamed of trying to explain himself if he’d encountered anyone, he was still somehow relieved to make it all the way down to sickbay and his own adjacent cabin without having to politely greet anyone on his way.

He wasn’t feeling polite. He’d just got through telling his captain he wasn’t worried about her, and now he was making himself a liar—and he had no more hope of going back to sleep than she’d had, so he made himself a hot brandy and he sat in a chair and stared out a viewport instead of undressing and lying down again.

He sat there and remembered Zorti as they’d discovered it nineteen years earlier; and he knew perfectly well that six decks above him in her own quarters, Captain Grant was doing exactly the same thing. The only problem was that although he’d “been there,” just as she’d said, he had not physically or telepathically witnessed the most critical moments as she had done; had not been a command officer, had not been able to share fully in her pain and her responsibility. So he had no illusions that his recollections could bring him any clue as to what in hers could be causing that disquiet, could be making her dreams so disturbed and her waking hours so tense—ever more so, he thought as he mused, with each day that brought the *St. Petersburg* closer to Zorti and its newest mystery.

I just hope you can solve it this time, Joy, Woodlawn thought as he nursed his drink and his memories simultaneously and waited for the infuriatingly cheerful voice of his chrono-alarm to tell him that the night was over and he was free to start his day. *I hope so for your sake, and for mine.*

SAGARMATHA

Chapter 1

Scorch Stackpole hit the deck at the first sound of weapons fire. She'd learned to do that in boot camp, a quarter-century's worth of T-years ago, and the reflex had saved her life many times.

Boots Smith landed beside her, with a booking counter between them and the spaceport's main concourse. A concourse built after Stackpole left, because back then Sagarmatha barely had a spaceport. She'd been all of sixteen. Half Sagarmathan, half Terran, and dying to see her father's home-world. Wanting that almost more than she wanted to get off her mother's world — although not by much.

The memories of being that desperate kid flooded through the former master chief as she heard Smith's winded grunt and stifled her own attempt to replace the air she'd just had knocked out of her lungs. The deck (no, *floor*, in civilian lingo!) hadn't a gram of forgiveness in it. By this time tomorrow, both newly made retirees would be nursing bruises; but for now, they were still alive. And still unhurt, in all the ways that mattered, as wide-angled blaster fire raked the concourse.

"What the hell?" Smith mouthed, after touching her shoulder to gain her attention. "Sagarmatha's supposed to be a recreation planet!"

So the advertisements all said, and as far as they went they were true. Stackpole mouthed back: "Later." Simultaneously she damned herself for not doing her homework, because she pretty obviously hadn't. The Sagarmatha she remembered posed plenty of dangers to its natives, but getting burned down along with a terminal full of visitors wasn't among them.

"Attention, offworlders! We know where every last one of you is hiding. Come out now if you want to go on living. Stay put if you prefer to join the blasphemers we just killed."

The voice spoke in Standard English. Her father's language, and the one she'd spoken during her years of Navy service. It did so, though, with a heavy Sagarmathan accent. Stackpole traded another look with

Smith, who would have to depend on her judgment now. This wasn't his world. It was hers. And if he didn't like the price of joining her here in retirement, at this stage of the game that was just too damn bad.

Retirement, hell. The accurate word, of course, was exile.

Smith touched her shoulder again. When she turned, he was mouthing more silent words. "Are we offworlders?" he wanted to know.

A very good question. Stackpole wished she could give it a very good answer. "Depends," she shot back, also without sound. Which choice was more likely to keep them alive? For the next few minutes, at least. Until she could find her footing on this home-world gone suddenly alien...damn, but this felt like being back on duty.

Boots sure as hell was an offworlder, and couldn't pretend to be otherwise except in relation to her. Stackpole herself could go either way, as long as whoever was out there yelling in Sagarmathan-accented English didn't recognize her face. She was still calculating the odds of that happening when a series of popping noises sounded through a concourse gone eerily quiet. After which she heard the grunts and thuds made by bodies hitting an unmerciful surface.

A different voice spoke in English. Lightly accented, this time, as if this speaker had been using it as a second language for years. As Stackpole's mother had, complete with her stilted phrasing. "Honored guests, you may show yourselves safely now. The danger is over."

"Who the hell?" Smith wanted to know, this time in a whisper.

Stackpole stood up. A second later, so did her comrade. They stood behind the counter, and they looked the concourse over. Bodies littered it.

"Are you the only ones left?" A man came toward them, walking fast and cradling an outdated projectile rifle — or "pellet thrower," as Sagarmathans called such weapons — in his arms. He wore a uniform and insignia that Stackpole didn't recognize, but his manner told her everything she needed to know.

"Looks that way," the retired master chief said. She put out a hand in the United Autonomy's standard greeting, which wasn't at all standard here. Or it hadn't been, anyway, back when she left...what else had changed, that didn't show up in the recreational recruiting ads? "Maryama Stackpole. This is my — friend, John Smith. You're from the constabulary?"

“Spaceport security, actually, ma’am. Sir.” The fellow’s gaze shifted briefly to Smith, then returned to Stackpole. “I’m sorry for the danger you were in, and I’m awfully glad you weren’t injured. Please come with me now. We need to clear the concourse, and my manager will want to talk with you. Don’t worry about your luggage. We’ll make sure it gets to your accommodations.”

Luggage. He thought they might be worried about that, after they’d just come close to being burned down by — terrorists? Or whatever they were.... Stackpole traded a look with Smith, who rolled his eyes in full agreement. As the pair of them fell into step on either side of the armed man, she said, “If you don’t mind my asking, why in the universe did your manager send you in alone just now? And who were those people? What did they have against visitors to your planet?” Or against returning natives; but she wouldn’t identify herself that way just yet.

“One man’s enough when all the opposition’s dead, ma’am.” Their rescuer didn’t smile, because he plainly wasn’t joking. “As for this filth,” he paused to kick the corpse of a man who’d died from projectile fire, “they call themselves Purifiers. I think I should let my manager tell you about them. Or perhaps your guide will want to do that himself?”

“We don’t have a guide waiting for us. We’re not here to join an expedition.” So much for putting off identifying herself by more than her name. Stackpole stifled a sigh as her shoulders braced themselves automatically. Beside her, Smith adopted the same stance.

“Why are you here, then? How did you get landing permits?” The security guard had stopped walking. Now he swung around to face them, with his rifle once more held at ready.

Now it had to be. “I don’t need a landing permit to come home,” Stackpole said, with the deliberate calm she’d so often felt just before a battle. “I was born in High Valley, Shangri-La Province. My mother was called Keela-shampura, and my father — ”

“Was Keela-shampura of High Valley’s outworlder consort.” Another voice finished the sentence for her. “Hello, Maryama. This person is your guest?” Someone had come up behind the security guard, slipping into the scene so quietly that the two military veterans discerned his presence only a few seconds ahead of the armed man. Who whirled, trained his weapon, and then lowered it.

“Manager,” the guard said, his voice catching. Clearly he knew only too well what would have happened to him, and to his two charges also, if the man who slipped up on them so easily had meant to do harm.

“Get a mop-up crew in here.” The spaceport’s manager looked around the corpse-littered concourse and wrinkled his broad nose. Although his skin showed the rich bronze of Sagarmathan stock, his face lacked a mature male’s customary weathering. Nevertheless he was still a few shades darker than Stackpole, whose father hailed from Terra’s British Isles. “I’ll take over with Maryama and her, um, friend.”

“John Smith. He’s landing as an emigrant. No, I mean immigrant! I’m his sponsor.” How many years since anyone had addressed her as Maryama? Her buddies had used her surname, always, until she picked up the nickname Scorch. But on Sagarmatha, only outworlders went by two names or more – and since her father was always “Stackpole” here, she had always been Maryama.

“We’ll have to see about that. Do you remember me from our schooling?” The manager walked them up a sliding staircase, the kind most people stood still on and let themselves be carried. “We’re going to my office. I’ll have Customs send someone up to interview you and process your documentation. I’ll have your luggage brought up, too, as soon as it’s located. We’re going to be shut down for the rest of today, at least. Could be longer, if we don’t figure out right away how that,” he gestured from the upper level they’d just reached toward the carnage they had left behind, “happened.”

He said it so casually that Stackpole shuddered. She thought of herself as a hardened combat veteran, but clearly her shell wasn’t as tough as she had imagined. She said truthfully, “I don’t remember you. No.” She couldn’t add the apology that courtesy required, because she wasn’t a bit sorry for not remembering the boy this man had been.

He opened his mouth, quite likely to tell her his name. She would remember him then, of course. But Smith’s body slammed hers to the deck in the next moment, and when she looked at the manager again he no longer had a mouth. His body stayed on its feet for a moment after turning into a corpse. Then it folded over and landed belly-down. Stackpole found herself staring into the frame formed by its smoking collar, at the cauterized stump of its neck, while more energy beams sizzled through the spaceport’s air.

SECOND CHANCES

Chapter 1

Medical smells. Antiseptics, body fluids, fear. Jan Franklin hated them, and she had her reasons. She had spent too many years out of her life surrounded by those odors, so it was always an effort to make herself enter a hospital when her profession required that of her.

It was even harder than usual tonight, but she did it. She walked up to the reception desk at Memorial Medical Center, and she asked in her usual controlled way: “Room number for Kevin Franklin, please?” And then she went up the stairs, not bothering to wait for the elevator, and walked down the wide corridor to his room.

MMC had been “Memorial Hospital,” not “Memorial Medical Center,” forty years ago when Jan and Kevin sat clinging to each other’s hands in its waiting room because children were not allowed anywhere else unless they were patients. They had stayed there, a little boy of four and a little girl of six, until their father came to tell them that Mama had gone to heaven to be with Jesus.

“But Jesus doesn’t need Mama! And I do!” Kevin had screamed, and Daddy had smacked his bottom.

Jan had stood still, and had clenched her small fists to keep herself from hitting Daddy in retaliation. Both because she was convinced, in some part of her mind, that her all-powerful father could have interceded with his God and have kept Mama here on Earth if he’d really wanted to do so—and because she hated it when Daddy smacked Kevin.

He’d never done that to her, but only because he believed that grown men should not touch little girls there. Spanking Jan had been Mama’s job, and Mama hadn’t done it half as often as Daddy had thought it was needed.

Far, far less often than Daddy hit Kevin, that was for sure.

The memory was cold and bitter, like a taste of metal in her mouth now, as Jan walked into the private room and stood beside her

baby brother's bed. He had an IV in his arm, but otherwise he was free from medical encumbrances. He looked pale, and skinny, and a lot younger than his forty-three years.

And the place where his left leg should have been, looked so empty that only her long experience as a reporter made it possible for Jan to stare at that spot for a moment before she let herself look away.

"Ms. Franklin? I'm Dr. Barter." The physician was young, and female, and pretty. And unfamiliar, which meant she must be new on staff. "You'd be Mr. Franklin's sister."

"Yes." Jan put out a hand, automatically, in greeting. "How's he doing?"

"Physically? He's listed in good condition. I'm sorry, but you aren't listed as his next of kin. So that makes discussing his treatment with you just a little bit awkward for me, I'm sure you'll understand..."

Jan felt equal parts of relief and fury welling up inside her. Between them the two strong emotions almost closed her throat. But she managed to nod, and she managed to say in her professional tone because it was the one that came out unbidden, "I see. Tom Croft's probably on his record as 'person to be notified.' Isn't he?"

Dr. Barter looked at the older woman with curiosity in her eyes. And, perhaps, with some disapproval as well. She answered quietly, "Yes. So if you want specifics about your brother, you'll have to talk to Mr. Croft. I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Jan sighed. "Any reason I can't sit with Kevin for a few minutes? Now that I'm here?"

At least she should be able to do that. It had taken such an effort of will to come here at all, that she wasn't about to just turn around and walk out. And besides, getting information that someone else really didn't want her to have was a familiar part of her job—so she had confidence that if she stayed around for awhile, she could find out a lot more than this young physician would ever realize.

"Help yourself," Barter decided, after looking at Jan for a moment longer. "I really am sorry, Ms. Franklin. This situation is—well—unusual."

Nothing about the Franklin family has ever been usual! Jan wanted to reply. But she nodded instead, and she smiled.

Calmly, coolly, and professionally.

Kevin didn't move, except for the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. He was gaunt, and that didn't look good on him because he had a large frame. His cheeks were stubbled and sunken. But when Jan put her hand on his wrist, she found a strong and steady pulse under her fingers.

He had survived losing his leg, months earlier and two oceans away from Starks Harbor, Maine. Before that, he had survived more than two decades of a life spent in the world's various war zones. And before that, he had survived growing up in Daddy's house and attempting to become the kind of man that Daddy had wanted him to be.

Or at least, passively going along with Daddy's program; until the day had come when he couldn't do that anymore.

But just about everything Jan Franklin knew about her little brother's adult life, she knew from other people's accounts (or, to be more accurate, from Starks Harbor gossip!). The last time she had seen Kevin, or had spoken to him, she had been sixteen years old and her brother had been fourteen. Small for his age, not yet showing a hint that he would one day grow into the big man who was lying unconscious in front of her now; a quiet child, whose public outburst at their mother's death had astounded his more volatile big sister. And she hadn't even known, on that morning when Daddy had loaded her into the car and had driven her to Bangor, that she wouldn't see Starks Harbor again—or Kevin—or anyone or anything that was familiar from her childhood, for nearly thirty years.

He was going to make it, physically at least. Her own observations had confirmed what the doctor had told her, and sitting here any longer when her brother clearly wasn't going to wake up anytime soon would serve no purpose. She had a paper to operate, she had work to do. So Janice Franklin stood up, and bid Kevin farewell by lightly touching his cheek with her fingertips.

He was going to make it, this time. But she was having a lot of trouble believing that the "accident" in which he'd almost drowned in the waters off Croft and Son's Lobster Pound had been any such thing. She found herself wondering as she stood in his room's doorway and took one last look: Just what had happened to give him a final push from the depression that had kept him housebound ever since his homecoming, over the edge into suicidal despair? Had it been one of those old letters,

made public at last and promising to bring more disgrace than Kevin's already-damaged spirit could endure?

In any event, for him to be lying there still breathing had cost another man his life. And in the parsonage where small Janice and Kevin had lived four decades ago, a woman was trying to figure out how she was supposed to bring a baby into the world without the man who'd fathered it at her side.

When Kevin woke up at last and found all that out, just how was he going to react?

Jan walked quickly down the corridor to the elevator, and leaned against its rear wall during the short ride from third floor to first. She closed her eyes, and she drew in a series of deep, careful, cleansing breaths.

Yes, that trick still worked. By the time the door started to open, she had her demons caged again.

And then she saw the man who was walking across the lobby toward the elevator, and she knew that her face was turning stark white with shock.

Which was swiftly followed by the crimson flush of fury. She'd known this moment must come, ever since Kevin and his long-time companion had come back to Starks Harbor to live in the house on the bluff overlooking the pound. If she had realized this would happen, when the *Bayside Press* had come up for sale and her friend Lucie Moore had offered Jan a partnership, she would never have considered coming back here herself. But it had seemed perfectly safe, at the time! Tom Croft and Kevin Franklin were somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, plying their despicable trade as trainers of third world countries' armies. They would go on doing that, more than likely, until one day their lives ended as such men's lives nearly always did. In blood and violence, in the flash of knives or the tearing impact of bullets; in just what they'd misspent their adult lives teaching other men how to do.

So Jan had come home, because she wanted to and because the opportunity was there. And now she was looking up into Tom Croft's face, because she hadn't paused at the elevator and waited for him to come to her.

She no longer lived her life that way. She had crossed the lobby to meet him, with a firm stride and with her head held high. And she

spoke first, in the way she'd so carefully taught herself to do. "Tommy. It's been a long time."

Clichéd words, and automatic use of the name by which she'd always called him. Not a good beginning, for all her take-the-high-ground approach.

His eyes widened with what looked for all the world like genuine, innocent pleasure. He was even taller than Kevin had become, and his appearance now more than fulfilled all the promises of his boyhood. He was broad of shoulder, slim of hip, and still deeply tanned from years of outdoor work in tropical climates. His dark hair was cut short, and there was a sprinkling of silver in it that had the perfectly damnable effect of making him look distinguished in the dress shirt and slacks that he'd worn to Augusta today.

If you'd been around home where you belonged, Kevin could never have taken that boat out, Janice thought with illogical but satisfying bitterness. You would have been at the wharf when he got there, and you'd have stopped him. And none of this would be happening now!

"Jan! God, I hoped you'd come!" He actually had the gall to reach for her, to put out his arms with the clear intention of pulling her into them.

She sidestepped. Quickly. And she knew that the two angry, crimson spots on her cheeks were turning into a full-body flush. She said in a calm, controlled, yet rudely clipped voice, "I came to see Kevin. I did that. And now I'm leaving. Good-bye, Tommy."

She hadn't been allowed to say that to him, all those years earlier. There was something elementally satisfying about being able to say it to him now, and about following the words by walking deliberately away and leaving him standing there alone and clearly bewildered.

Which might give him, perhaps, just the smallest taste of everything he had put her through—because it was thanks to Tom Croft that Janice Franklin knew just what it felt like to hit the wall that her little brother Kevin had slammed up against today. To become so overwhelmed and hopeless, so utterly lost in despair, that dying seemed like the only possible way out.

SILENT SERVICE

Chapter 1

It was so quiet now. Kate Landay lay still, and listened to the blessed silence after the relentless questions, and savored the absence of pain.

Was she conscious, or was this a dream? Or was she dead, and this her first moment of after-life? Right now she didn't care. Later, if there was to be a "later," the curiosity that had been landing her in difficult situations all her life would no doubt kick in; but for the moment she wanted nothing except to be left as she was.

That, of course, was too much to ask. She felt a touch that was human, or at least flesh against her flesh; she heard a voice speaking, that of another female. A voice that was familiar, that she'd never expected or even hoped she might hear again.

"Kate. Kate, don't try to answer me. I'm monitoring you, I'm watching how you react when you hear me. You can go back to sleep in a just a minute, but I need you conscious for a few scans. Unless you're in pain — and you shouldn't be — just relax, just rest. You're safe now, and they didn't do anything to you that I can't fix."

Amy's voice. Amy who had been at her side since Kate Landay was a plebe, a whole career and considerably more than half a lifetime ago.

It really was all right, then; the lack of tactile sensation below her neck must be due to her body's being immersed in regenerative gel. Somehow she had survived, although she couldn't imagine how or why.

"Dr. Salter?" Landay heard a second voice, this one masculine but also familiar. Familiar, yet so long absent from her life that for a moment she couldn't place it — or perhaps just didn't want to place it. And since she couldn't turn her head toward the sound, performing the incredibly difficult task of opening her eyes seemed pointless. "How is she?"

“Conscious, which means you shouldn’t be here,” Salter answered, with acid in her tone. But it sounded like forced disapproval, as if she said what a physician was supposed to say from habit rather than from real inclination. “But by now she’s recognized your voice; see there?”

Salter would of course be indicating the changes in her patient’s brain activity, and the man who’d come into the room (or compartment? were they on a ship, or still on the Gateway planet, or somehow back on Earth?) would be looking at the monitor and understanding the readouts and nodding almost absently. His eyes would be on Landay’s nude body as she lay suspended in the regen tank, and what he must be seeing would be disturbing even to a person who’d once served as a Ranger in the Sovereignty’s defense forces.

Would he be revolted, not just distressed? Landay wondered that almost idly. It had been so long, and her damaged body still had such a dim and tiny spark of life within it, that although she’d clearly just reacted to his presence she couldn’t claim to be feeling excited about it. She wasn’t feeling much of anything, physically or emotionally, because right now she simply wasn’t capable of doing so.

But she heard him when he spoke again, of course, and his voice held neither revulsion nor the pity that would have been worse. He said in a deceptively calm tone that she remembered well even after the passing of two decades in Terran time, “Looks like it was close, Doctor. I guess I almost wasted all those favors I called in.”

“Close? Close doesn’t count, Joe.” Amy Salter uttered a gusty sigh. “She still looks like hell, but she’s going to be fine. Kate, you can go back to sleep now. Everything checks out.”

“Pleasant dreams,” Joseph Costigan added softly, and Landay could have sworn that his fingertips brushed against her cheek as she drifted away into comfortable darkness.

* * *

“What happens now, Doctor Salter?” Costigan waited until he was certain that the woman in the regen tank could no longer hear him before he asked that question. Kate Landay was still now, with peace on her face, and that was an improvement over the way she’d looked yesterday when she’d been brought through the Gate. Then her face had been lined with agony she’d no longer been capable of feeling, but that had distorted her features for so long before it ended that her muscles

remembered and held their positions even after clinical death had given her release.

She still looked awful, there was no denying that, but already she was healing. The body he'd once known so intimately was twenty years older now, even if she hadn't been savaged inside and out by the Questioners' procedures she would still have been changed by time's passing alone — but he could see that she'd remained very much the athletic woman he remembered. Still slender from rigorous physical training, not from vain self-starvation, he thought now as he noted the contours of muscle that were redefining themselves as the regenerative gel caused her body to remember what its tissues had been like before the Questioners began with her. In this far-off place beyond the Gate he hadn't seen even her image, not once in the twenty years since he had come through that portal himself as refugee and exile; but every line of the form in that tank was familiar to him nonetheless, she had matured but she hadn't truly changed.

Not physically, anyway. Nor emotionally either, he suspected, or she wouldn't be here now in this condition. But would the ordeal from which she was now recovering alter her in anything like the ways that his own experience with Sovereignty justice had changed him?

He could only wonder, because her new life hadn't yet begun. Wouldn't begin until Salter took her out of that tank, until Landay stood again on her own legs (weak and uncertain as those of a Terran horse's foal, if all the post-regen tales he'd heard were true) and let the healing gel be washed from her re-grown skin. Coming out of the tank and showering away the last glistening coating was often compared to the rebirth of ancient legend, and while Costigan was thankful he'd never had that experience himself he suspected the comparison might be an apt one.

The life Kate had known was over, yes. The body in which she had lived her first forty-three years was to all intents and purposes gone, destroyed as punishment for the offense she'd been accused of committing against the Sovereignty and in hopes of gaining the Questioners information about her suspected cohorts. The body Costigan saw now was a new one, growing from the pattern of the other but sharing only the most basic of its structures.

Brain, spinal cord, skeleton, major internal organs. Even the latter group of items would of course have been damaged by the energies to which the Questioners had subjected her, but they never harmed a

victim's brain. They had wanted her to know, because without knowing there could be no true punishment; and they had wanted her to be able to communicate, even to the last moment.

Amy Salter was straightening at last from the regen tank's control pad, and she was working her shoulders and sighing with relief. She asked acerbically, "Since when am I 'Doctor Salter' to you, Joe? We never liked each other much, I realize; but we've known each other forever, for gods' sake!"

"I didn't dislike you, Amy." Costigan looked his old rival over, and he made no attempt to conceal the fact that he was doing so. "Kate hasn't changed much in twenty years, but you certainly have."

"If you mean that I've learned how to open my mouth and say what's on my mind, you're right. I had to learn that, I found out fairly early in my first shipboard assignment that if I didn't kick ass when it needed kicking I'd never be able to get Explorer ship crews or Rangers or anyone else I had to take care of to take me seriously. And you sure as hell can't treat a patient who doesn't accept that you're a real doctor, so I just bit the bullet as the old saying goes and started playing the role. And after awhile it started to come naturally." Salter had regen gel on her forehead, a glop that had landed there at some point when she'd found it necessary to touch her patient and had then inadvertently touched her own face. It was harmless, of course; it didn't act on any organism that didn't need its help, but it was messy and she fastidiously wiped it away.

"Kate always told me I didn't really know you," Costigan acknowledged. "And that was true, you were in medical school most of the time that she and I were together; but I've got to admit, I never thought you'd last a year on active duty. Not from what I did see of you then."

"And you still didn't like me very much. But that's old news, Joe." Salter gave him a tired smile. "Now we both get out of here and let her sleep, if that's what you meant when you asked me what happens next. She's perfectly safe, if there are any problems at all the tank will alarm and I'll be back in here inside of a minute. She's progressing beautifully — I expect to have her out of there in a week at the most, possibly in as little as four days. But you know as well as I do that regen's a completely individual process, my job's to monitor and make sure that nothing interferes. Her body and the gel interacting are doing all the real work, she only needed me to set up the protocol correctly and get it started."

“I mean after the regen’s completed, Amy.” Costigan’s gray eyes met Salter’s dark ones, and although his tone was matter of fact his gaze was a demand. “I know something else about people who come back from injuries severe enough to cause clinical death, I know that I may not have done her a favor by pulling her out of there and that you may not be doing her a favor by giving her back a healthy body. It’s bad enough when the person who’s regenned got hurt in an accident, or was injured in a battle...I never heard of bringing anyone back from a torture death before. Do you think she’s going to make it?” He paused, and swallowed so hard that his throat moved visibly. “I don’t mean is her body going to recover, I mean is *she* going to make it?”

Salter turned away from him then, and looked at her patient. She studied Kate Landay carefully, as if this woman were simply an intriguing case and not the closest friend of her entire adult life. At last she sighed, looked up at Costigan again, and grinned a small and rather crooked grin. She said softly, “That’s up to her, Joe. And in a way it’s just as much up to both of us, don’t you think? We’re all she has now, there’s nothing left of her old life here.”

“Or of yours,” Costigan said, realizing that fact for the first time even though it should have been plain to him from the moment when he’d asked Amy Salter if she would be willing to do this. “You could have stayed on the other side, Amy. You weren’t convicted of any crime, you came through that Gate voluntarily — but you left everything familiar behind, too, and now you can no more go back than Kate can.”

“Or than you can.” Their eyes met again, and this time they locked in a moment of complete understanding. “We’re stuck with each other, Joe. You, and me, and Kate. But then that’s nothing new, is it?”

* * *

If the Gate had been predictable, Amy Salter reflected as she scanned Kate Landay’s body for the hundredth or more time since she’d come through that portal with her friend’s stasis tube five days earlier, this haven would not have been available to them or to any of the thousands of other humans who lived here. Some scientists believed it was the far past or distant future of the barren Class M planet from which it periodically opened to a topographically similar, but far more hospitable, world; some theorized it was the same planet in a parallel universe, in another dimension; while others said it was simply very far away, perhaps in another galaxy within the same universe and the same time period inhabited by present-day Earth and its allies and its enemies.

In any case the Gate opened without regularity, usually several times during each Terran-reckoned year but not in any predictable pattern; and it had been known to go dormant for months at a time, in fact its longest dormant period since its discovery had lasted a worrisome fifteen months. That was why instead of using the Gate for commercial travel between — dimensions? time epochs? galaxies? — whatever, after an initial period of exploration the Diet had decided that no one would be sent through whom society might actually want to get back.

There was precedent for this sort of thing, plenty of it. Salter had studied human history as had any educated citizen, she knew about Australia — about the first colonies on the moons of Saturn — about the mines of New Siberia. And putting a prison colony, or sociological garbage dump to be more accurate in this case, beyond some kind of energy barrier or time portal wasn't a new idea either; she had read the fiction of Heinlein and other early speculative writers, she knew that such a "coventry" wasn't a brand new concept. It had been especially useful five years after the Gate's discovery, though, when the Diet had been obliged to figure out what to do with the remnants of a defeated rebel fighting force and that force's associated civilians. Dumping them through the Gate and figuring that they had a reasonable chance of staying alive in the world beyond it had been a way to treat such survivors of the Alba Five civil war as Joseph Costigan with some semblance of compassion; and of course before and since then many other undesirables had been similarly dumped. Once on the other side they weren't coming back, the high security installation on the Gateway world made sure of that; and it was beneficial to society to have a means of getting rid of people who couldn't or wouldn't be rehabilitated after having committed crimes, since now it was no longer legal to execute miscreants of any kind.

It was no longer legal, but at times it was done by *de facto* means. Amy Salter knew that for certain now, she had seen the evidence when Kate Landay's body had been released from the Questioners' section at the New Brixton Security Facility on Gateway. "Committed suicide during questioning by authorities," the death record had said; that was what Landay's family had been told, and even Salter would have been expected to believe it if she hadn't been summoned into the office of New Brixton's commander and if once there she hadn't been greeted by the sight of a stasis tube floating on antigrav pads in front of that officer's ornate desk.

Kate had been inside that tube, or what remained of Kate at least. In spite of her years of practice as a military physician, Amy Salter had looked through the transparent lid and had been obliged to swallow vigorously several times in order to keep herself from vomiting.

And yet at the same time she had wanted to shout with gladness, because there was still the potential for life in that tube. Clinical death, yes; but by definition that could be reversed, her friend hadn't yet gone to a place from which she could not be reclaimed. And then the commander of New Brixton had been speaking to Salter, had been telling her that if she wanted to accompany her patient and commanding officer's body into exile beyond the Gate she would be allowed to do so.

Someone over there wanted this woman badly. If Amy refused to go along, the prison commander continued, before she could leave here she would have to part with her memory of this conversation. The person who wanted Captain Landay was making it worthwhile for the Diet's appointees to accommodate his request; never mind how, never mind why. And that person said that Dr. Salter would recognize him if they were allowed to communicate with each other.

Amy had agreed, numbly because this was overwhelming news coming on top of her friend's arrest and torture and now temporary, but potentially permanent death. The New Brixton commander had ordered a commlink to be set up between his office and that of someone he called "my counterpart on the other side." And within seconds she'd found herself staring into the familiar face of Joseph Costigan, twenty years older than she remembered him but unmistakably Joe.

"Will you come with her?" was the only question he'd asked.

For Amy Salter to answer in the affirmative would mean the end of her career, the end of her life as she'd always known it. A story of some sort would be concocted, given out to the press, told to her few remaining distant relatives back on Terra and to her friends and Explorer colleagues...a story that would have to tie in somehow with Kate Landay's supposed suicide.

Whether or not those who knew her would believe that tale wasn't Salter's problem. She did feel sorry for Kate Landay's family; Kate had such a thing, and while it was no storybook ideal her people cared about her and they would grieve for her. So, of course, would Kate's lover of the past ten and more years. But the only person who would really have grieved at losing Amy Salter lay dead in a stasis tube beside

her, so giving Costigan an answer to his question hadn't been difficult at all.

She'd only asked, "Can you provide me with the facilities I'll need to restore her, Joe? If you can't then there's no point to this, I won't bring her through the Gate and then lose her anyway."

He had promised her the necessary medical technology, and he had delivered. And now Kate Landay, no longer Captain Landay of the Explorers although she might or might not realize that fact yet, was whole again in body and was carefully easing her weight onto her feet for the first time.

The structures that had supported her when she'd walked into New Brixton's interrogation unit almost a Terran month earlier were gone, destroyed. The flesh and bone she wore now was almost entirely new, yet it had the tactile memories of that which it had replaced. Landay was as weak as any human who'd been inactive for medical reasons over a lengthy period of time, but she wasn't going to have to learn to control her body all over again; she leaned on Salter's arm for support and for balance, but she did so with the air of a cadet gaining artificial gravity "sea legs" rather than with that of a toddler attempting to walk for the first time.

Joseph Costigan watched them on a security monitor from his office elsewhere in Government House, and although he felt a few twinges of guilt at invading their privacy by doing so he didn't seriously consider delegating the task or dispensing with it altogether. Covertly observing new arrivals was a necessary protocol, it simply had to be done; and if anyone was going to watch Kate when she was this vulnerable, then at least he was going to do it himself.

He saw two human females of similar age, both in their early forties now. Amy Salter was an African woman of medium height; her black hair not yet graying, her face strong-featured with dark eyes that watched her friend with a familiar combination of affection and relief and professional concern. Kate Landay (how she had hated it when some self-appointed genius back at the Defense Academy had corrected her name on a class list once, making her into "Katherine Landry"! Costigan recalled with a smile) was of mixed European and Native American ancestry; a petite woman who didn't look as if she could possibly pick up a blaster rifle — let alone use it with appalling accuracy. Larger humans paired with her for the Academy's hand-to-hand combat courses had quickly learned just what a disadvantage overconfidence really could be,

and Costigan himself had discovered when he'd been her training partner that she could compensate very well for her lack of reach. That small frame of hers carried steely muscles, she was a damned sneaky fighter, and her reflexes were swift.

Oh, yes, she could fight. Well enough to lead a Ranger unit, although he now knew that she'd switched service branches after...

No, he wasn't going to think about that right now. He was going to sit here instead and be glad that Amy Salter was the kind of physician who remembered that stimulating regrowth of a patient's lost hair was a very useful way to boost that patient's morale during recovery from devastating injuries such as those Kate Landay had endured. Kate's hair color was a warm brown, highlighted with hints of red or gold depending on the spectrum of light that happened to be playing on it at any given moment. Just now nothing like that was evident, of course, because the lights under which she moved were cold and unforgiving; but she looked much better with that crop of short hair than she'd looked with just frazzled wisps decorating her scarred scalp, a few days earlier when he'd seen her in the regen tank.

Kate's eyes were hazel, and her face was fair-skinned and heart-shaped and — what? Not beautiful, that was a conventional word and Kate's looks weren't conventionally pretty. Yet she had always attracted her full share of attention from those human males who came within her orbit (and from some females, too). She certainly had caught and kept Joe Costigan's interest, when he'd met her during the long-ago time while they were both midshipmen.

She had always looked so completely and confidently alive, that was it. But now she was tentative in a way he'd never seen her look before, except for one time only.

A time he didn't particularly want to remember, but he could do nothing now to squelch that memory. He watched while the woman he'd once regarded as the love of his life made her unsteady way from the regen tank to a hand-held shower nearby, studied her nude body almost dispassionately because not even Kate could be erotically interesting to him while that nauseating gel was still coating her skin...and he thought of her as he'd first known her, and wondered whether she could remember him as he'd been then with anywhere near the same clarity.

* * *

Landay's thoughts at the moment were not at all similar to Costigan's. She was biting her lip as her new/old, strange/familiar body protested at being asked to move for what was essentially the first time. It wasn't exactly painful, but it was decidedly not comfortable.

"Here, you're supposed to use the shower seat!" Amy scolded, her tone as acerbic as her supporting touch was gentle. "Sit, now. And let me handle the spray, your job's to just hold still."

"That's about all I can do," Kate answered in disgust. "I can't remember the last time someone had to give me a shower, this is ridiculous."

She wasn't, of course, equating showers shared with Yoshi with this mild humiliation.

Yoshi. Dear god, what had they told Yoshi?

The water was warm on her skin. Until now the gel had kept her from feeling any real sensation wherever it had touched her; and it had enclosed her to her chin, covering even her scalp so that only her face was exposed. She was aware now that this chamber was cool, that she would be comfortable without clothes here only for as long as the water was flowing over her body. The warmth was relaxing, though, and being able to feel anything at all was a pleasure.

Or she should have said, to be able to feel anything except pain. Those memories were still very close. She'd been roused a number of times while in the regen tank, and on each occasion the absence of torment had been less of a surprise than on the last; but she recalled little else about those awakenings. They had been necessary for Amy to configure her treatment correctly, and they'd lasted only as long as was required by that purpose.

Yet she was certain that the first time she had awakened in that tank, someone besides Amy had been with her. Someone dear to her...a masculine presence.

"Was Yoshi here, earlier?" She knew, somehow, that wasn't the case; but who else could it have been? A male physician or other caregiver, some colleague of Amy's, wouldn't have left this resonance of emotional connection behind him in Landay's mind; and none of the other men with whom she'd felt such closeness could possibly be nearby.

Her adored grandfather was on Terra, and wherever this was it wasn't Earth. Her father had gone out of her life long ago. Her brother (half-brother actually, but all the sibling — and in a sense, all the child —

she'd ever had, and therefore more precious to her than were most women's younger brothers) couldn't have been mistaken for anyone else, because if the El'kah'th/human hybrid Clifton Bradley had touched her there would have been nothing vague about the memory. And while it was possible that she, the criminal — the traitor, the cashiered Explorer captain — might have been sent into exile after somehow surviving her ordeal in the Questioners' hands, there was no way Amy Salter had done anything that would have caused the authorities to send her through the Gate too; so she couldn't have heard Joseph Costigan's voice or felt his fingertips brushing against her cheek. Assuming that Costigan was still alive beyond that Gate, of course, and this many years after he'd been sent through it to exile that was a very large and probably unwarranted assumption.

Oh, she was confused! And she hated confusion so much; she'd spent her whole adult life (and her adolescence, and most of her childhood) unraveling mysteries and solving puzzles because to *know* was her passion.

"There, that's the last of the glop," Amy was saying inelegantly. "There's no warm-air dryer here, I'm afraid; Joe's given us all the essentials but not many of the amenities. So we'll get you dried off the old-fashioned way, and then into some clothes."

"Joe?" Landay asked. Suddenly she was alert. She still couldn't remember much of what she so desperately needed to recall, but at least her perceptions of the present were clear now. She sat up straight, grasped the towel that Salter was about to wrap around her, and began to rub her wet body with as much vigor as she could muster. "Tell me what happened, Amy. I remember a hearing, not a legal court-martial but a closed debriefing. At the end of that I was told I had to be taken to the Questioners, and I expected it to be easy because they were going to use truth dope on me; and I knew as soon as they had the truth I'd be out of there and on my way home to Yoshi. But I woke up from the dope with someone telling me they couldn't get past the barrier in my mind, and that they were going to have to break down that barrier...and after that..." Landay shuddered, and for a moment she clutched the towel and closed her eyes.

"Shhh." Salter knelt at her friend's side, wrapped a second towel around her shoulders and put both arms around her. "Of course there wasn't any barrier for them to break down. You told them the truth with and without the serum, but they just didn't want to believe it. So they

kept up the Questioning until you died. Clinically, anyway. And then they put your body into stasis, and thank all that's holy they did it soon enough."

"Why did they put me in stasis?" The shudders stilled after a moment, but Landay didn't try to disengage herself from the other woman's arms. She leaned against her friend instead, and her eyes remained closed. "Were they going to regen me so they could start all over?"

Now, that was a thought so horrible it hadn't entered Amy Salter's mind. She said honestly, "No, Kate. That wasn't the idea, not at all."

"What, then? I know how far a full Questioning can go before the subject dies, there can't have been enough left for me to live again without the regen no matter what you or anyone else did for me." She put her head down onto Salter's shoulder. She must be getting her friend wet, but right now she didn't care; and Amy didn't seem to care, either. She put up a hand and smoothed Kate's hair instead of trying to move fastidiously away.

"The idea was to send you through the Gate to Joe Costigan," Salter said, and waited a moment when she felt the smaller woman's body stiffen in her embrace. "He's not only survived over here, Kate; he's acquired some kind of power, a lot of influence. Enough so that when he contacted people he knew on the other side — and I know that's supposed to be impossible, but it isn't because I saw him do it! — he was able to get your body released intact into exile instead of having your ashes sent home to your next-of-kin, and he asked me to come with you and do the regen. So of course I did, and now here we are. That was five days ago, you've always been a fast healer."

"What did they tell my family? What did they tell Yoshi?" There was a measurable interval before Landay asked those questions, and when she did so her voice was hushed and reluctant. Whatever the answers were they couldn't be good ones, she already knew that; but still she must ask, and still Salter must tell her.

"They said that you committed suicide to avoid giving the Questioners the information they were seeking." Salter tightened her arms, almost fiercely tucked her friend's head closer into the sheltering curve of her shoulder. "That's what Yoshi's been told, what your family's been told. I'm not sure how they explained not having your body or your ashes to send home, but after Joe contacted me I stopped caring about

that because I was busy taking care of you. But I'm sure the bastards thought of something, they always do."

"Yes. They always do." Landay swallowed what sounded like a sob, and one more powerful shudder rocked her body. Then she deliberately lifted her head, pulled back against Salter's arms and waited to be released.

After which she put up her hands and began toweling her hair, nonchalant in her physical nakedness now that she'd successfully covered her painfully exposed emotions. She said, "I remember thinking I heard Joe's voice once, I think it was the first time I woke up in the regen tank. I even thought he touched me, on my cheek because that was about the only place I had available to touch right then. When I woke up later I was sure it must have been a dream...but he really was there, wasn't he?"

"Yes. I think he had to see you and touch you to make sure he'd really got you away, and that you really were going to live and get well. He hasn't been back since then, but he's called me often." Amy smiled her relief. This was the Kate Landay that she knew, and the one everyone else knew too. She was glad her friend could trust her enough to let her see that other Kate, the vulnerable one who'd rested quivering against her body just a few moments earlier; but getting this woman back had been the whole point of the past five days' efforts.

* * *

"She's small," a voice said quietly at Joseph Costigan's shoulder. "You realize you haven't told me a damned thing about her, really? But I did expect someone physically larger. I don't see how that little thing ever got through Ranger Basic."

Costigan didn't start, because he had been aware of it when his life partner had entered the room that he fondly referred to as his office. This world beyond the Gate had been occupied by humans for a full generation, so although it was still very much a frontier it now had some fair-sized settlements; and the woman who stood behind his chair was his partner in the leadership of this particular settlement, the oldest and largest one on this planet.

He wouldn't tell Hanna Leone that actually she reminded him of Kate Landay, that their similarities as he perceived the two women were why he'd been attracted to Hanna two decades ago when he had been thrust through the Gate along with 796 other people. That sounded like a huge group, of course; it was enough to populate a village, enough to

crew the largest of starships. But it was a pitiful remnant, to be all that remained of the human element of a once-thriving colony.

He'd become that remnant's leader by default, because though the Sovereignty had characterized them as a "rebel force" most were civilians; and although he was only in his early twenties then, he was an experienced military officer. A Ranger, which meant that he was used to small units and dangerous but short-term assignments — he hadn't had the training of a starship command officer or Explorer, and he really didn't know much about organizing a group like that one and getting its members settled into life on a new world. But what else could he do, when they were looking to him and to the several former enlisted men and women among their number for guidance and protection?

And how in bloody hell was he or anyone else supposed to protect them, anyway, when the world to which they'd been so unwillingly sent was already occupied?

The Gate had been open on that day at its widest possible expansion, which was serendipitous because its functions were in no way controllable by the New Brixton staff — and the opening's unusual breadth had at least allowed Costigan's people the doubtful protection of being able to keep together, instead of being forced to form a column whose individuals could be picked off. He'd thought they might be attacked like that immediately, because they had been allowed to bring along food supplies and his notion of what lay beyond was one of deprivation and anarchy. And they had been met at the Gate; met by an armed band, one that had held them there while he and the other former military people had battled their own urges to resist and had firmly controlled those among their civilian charges who had seemed close to panic.

Then Hanna had appeared. She'd been little more than a girl, in those days her much older (and by then reclusive and dying) lover had been the leader of a settlement that had coalesced out of those who had been dumped during the five years since the Gate's discovery.

There hadn't been as many previous arrivals as he had expected there would be, and that was probably why they were far better organized than he'd anticipated. There was a main group, a settled village where families who'd been exiled together had set up rude homes and where couples who'd joined themselves after being exiled had done likewise. There were other, smaller groups — some settled, some nomadic — of people who couldn't or wouldn't fit into the main village. From time to

time the more violent of these raided the more peaceful, and that was why (as Hanna Leone had explained to the newly-arrived Joseph Costigan) it had been not only possible but absolutely necessary for those in the main settlement to establish leadership and to create defenses and especially to monitor who or what came through the Gate whenever the damnable thing self-activated. Usually it brought them just a few new citizens-to-be, people who'd done something the societies on the other side of that portal couldn't tolerate and that they themselves couldn't repent of...but sometimes it brought psychopaths, and while weapons were never officially allowed through they did make it occasionally in spite of all supposed safeguards.

The refugees from the disbanded colony on Alba Five created a major problem for the Gateway world's existing population, because they numbered more than half as many as its main settlement's residents and because they were a cohesive group. Assimilating them quickly was vital, that Hanna Leone had been able to see immediately and that she had recommended to the community's leader. And of course the best way to assimilate them promptly was to combine authorities, for her to bring Joseph Costigan and his comrades together with their local counterparts. The alternative would have been to help them establish their own separate community, and to do that as quickly as possible so that competition for resources couldn't spark conflict between the two groups.

They had chosen to meld their people into one settlement. It hadn't been easy, there had been countless conflicts and arguments for the leaders to mediate or arbitrate. But it had worked, and when the original community's leader had died part way through the process Hanna Leone had settled the succession issue by assuming her dead partner's role and then taking Joseph Costigan as her new mate.

If she hadn't been attractive to him then, Costigan thought now as he turned in his chair and looked up at her after almost two decades of life at her side, he would have been in deep trouble. But although she wasn't like Kate physically — she was taller and more generously built, fuller of breast and broader of hip — she had the same air of being in control of her surroundings, and the same vitality shining in her eyes.

Brown eyes, much darker than Kate's eyes. Black hair, as black as Joe's own. No, she didn't look a blessed thing like Kate Landay except that both were adult human females; but she had the right spark, he had been able to want her and take her and make a life with her all those

years ago. And he still cared for her now, if only with the affection of a long-time friend...and she'd never attached much importance to the physical part of their relationship anyway. When they were younger she had expected him to want her from time to time and probably would have been insulted if he hadn't, but now he no longer touched her in that way and she had never thought it necessary to initiate such contact.

That was one way in which life with Hanna Leone was completely unlike life with Kate Landay. Kate, Joe Costigan recalled with an inward smile, had been the initiator just as often as he had during the long-ago time when they'd been mated. And she had been a tender and enthusiastic lover, although too often distracted even during intimate moments by the demands (both real and perceived) of duty.

Old married couple, or just friends and allies who'd at one time also been lovers? Costigan wondered that briefly about himself and his current partner, as he left his chair and gave her an embrace that was warm and tender but not the least bit sensual. He said, "Kate's little, but don't put your money on that if you ever have to fight her. A lot of people have made that mistake, and not all of them are still around to talk about it."

"I'll bet!" Hanna said, and she kissed his cheek and she laughed. "Be careful, Joe. I don't mind that she's here, I'm glad you got her out. From what you told me, no one's ever had a worse exit from the other side than she did! But now that she is here, she and that friend of hers have got to fit in and make themselves part of what we've built. Either that or they'll have to do what the misfits always have to do, and find a place in one of the villages or among the nomads. If she's a threat to our people here, I'll handle her the same way I've handled all the others. I'll expect you to do the same, and what she was to you twenty years ago had better not make a difference."

Leone drew back with that statement, and looked into Costigan's face without having to look up at him as Kate Landay had always been obliged to do when they stood like this. They measured each other, brown eyes meeting gray eyes in what wasn't quite challenge but had never been full harmony either; and after a time both heads nodded in agreement.

STARSHIP CASTAWAYS

Chapter 1

“Dammit, Alike! This just isn’t right!” Chandler of the Clan Cranston hissed the words into his commanding officer’s ear so that no one else on the *Baikal*’s bridge could hear him (he hoped). “It’s wrong to leave them crippled like this. We have to finish them!”

“Chandler, I don’t have time for this.” Alike, also of the Clan Cranston, fixed her second-in-command with a stare that wasn’t even a degree or two warmer than the expanse of vacuum separating the *Baikal* from its victim. She didn’t give Chandler the courtesy he’d given her. She spoke at normal volume, and her voice (as always) reached every officer in the compartment. “They’re not going far, and that means they can’t survive for long. I want to get that freighter under tow before anyone else shows up—we’re on the border of Clan Yanger’s space here, and we could wind up having to stand off one of their ships if we’re discovered with a prize that’s unsecured.” She let her green eyes rest on Chandler for a moment longer before she gave him the mercy of looking away and snapping to a more junior officer, “Helm! Take us alongside! Nice and easy, now, so that anyone who’s not in the control room watching sensors won’t even know what’s happening.”

That was how any Clan raider did it after disabling a Commonwealth ship that had chanced the dangerous passage through Clan space. Open a breach in the hull—flood its interior with poison—and soon after that, the boarding party could do its work without opposition. The Clans had regarded this part of space as theirs for generations, and they claimed whatever of value crossed it as their own.

Nothing was supposed to be crossing it from Commonwealth to Empire, actually. That was why the *Baikal*’s current prey was escorted not by a state-of-the-art military vessel bristling with the latest armaments—but instead, by a ship picked up at auction and refitted for this kind of guard dog duty.

Chandler spared that hapless vessel, what twenty years ago when it was launched from a Commonwealth shipyard was classed as a light

cruiser, a last glance as it passed out of range of the *Baikal's* sensors. As he did so he shook his head in wonder at the valiant fight that ship's people had managed to offer his own. He didn't dare repeat, not even in a self-directed whisper, what he had already told his captain; but he thought it again unavoidably.

The people on board that enemy ship had fought with valor, and they were out of range now only because they were continuing in the direction they'd been moving when their vessel's sublight drive as well as its hyperdrive ceased functioning. Inertia would carry it along at the same rate, since in space there was no atmospheric friction to slow them, until long after the human beings inside it died from whatever got them first.

Would it be exposure, as the ship's interior temperature fell inexorably after eventual power failure? Oxygen starvation? Death from lack of water? Or—slowest of all—from starvation, after the rations ran out?

They wouldn't be able to call for help. Before she gave the order to abandon their crippled prey to its fate, Captain Alike Chandler of Clan Cranston first made sure that the enemy vessel's communications array was destroyed.

You fought gallantly to protect your charges. You deserve better than what you're facing now, Chandler Cranston thought at whoever was still alive inside that hulk. *You deserve mercy given by one honorable crew to another, and I'm ashamed—bitterly ashamed—that a Cranston clan ship is abandoning that duty.*

Damn you, Alike! Cousin or no cousin, you're still what happens when a raider captain's chosen according to pedigree instead of by combat record!

"Chandler!" Alike's voice penetrated his thoughts (and probably the *Baikal's* bulkheads, too, Chandler thought sourly as he responded with lifted head and expectantly directed eyes). "There's no rush now. Don't send the boarding party across until every compartment of that ship's been flooded and then cleared. D'you understand me?"

"Aye, Alike. I do." Chandler inclined his head toward his superior with respect in his manner, and utter disgust in his eyes.

* * *

"Captain, I've got nothing left to give you except thrusters. I'm sorry, but that's it!" Marilla Lansing surveyed the wreckage that used to be the *Archangel's* engine room, and she shook her graying head in utter frustration. The tears that stung her dark eyes were partly from the wisps of acrid smoke that automatic scrubbers and fire extinguishers (still

operating somehow) couldn't remove from the compartment's atmosphere quite fast enough to keep ahead of the situation, and partly from angry despair. Never in all her forty-plus years of living had Rilla felt quite this helpless.

"Damn," came the mutter of Captain Irina Pappaniku's voice over commlink from the bridge. She sounded ridiculously calm. "Well. That takes care of coming about and making a stand against the clan ship, now, doesn't it?"

She probably wasn't expecting an answer, but Lansing gave her one anyway because the engineer could see several pairs of eyes turned expectantly in her direction. She knew without having to guess, because these were her people, which ones were feeling relieved that for them this battle was over now—and which were mortified at learning they couldn't possibly go back and continue doing the job they'd signed on to do.

She said, "You could bring her about, Captain. And there we'd be, dead in space."

A sitting duck, useful to the ship they were supposed to be protecting only if the enemy captain allowed the old cruiser's continued (and probably unexpected) activity to pull the clan ship's attention away from its true quarry. That could only be temporary even if it did happen, because the *Archangel* and the freighter *Keltic* were all alone out here. Help wasn't on the way, and slowing the clan ship's boarding of the freighter and slaughter of its crew wouldn't make one bit of difference in this incident's outcome.

An "incident" was just how this day's carnage would be written up by InfoServ, of course, if it made the public broadcasts at all. Incidents in Clan territory got press attention only when they featured particularly lurid details or when prominent Commonwealth citizens died or disappeared. There wasn't anything newsworthy about a freighter that vanished while attempting an illegal (technically, anyway) passage from Commonwealth to Empire, since InfoServ wouldn't know it had taken this first ever "hired gun" escort ship along with it into oblivion.

How had she, Commander Marilla Lansing of the Commonwealth Defense Service, wound up spending her life's last hour here? Retired Commander Lansing, formerly of the Commonwealth Defense Service, that was...why hadn't she been content to stay on Claris 5 with Abraham and their son, instead of following her old friend

and long-time commanding officer Irina Pappaniku into the no man's land of Clan space?

It was far too late to be wondering about that now, though. Pappaniku's familiar voice was saying evenly over the commlink, "I won't throw our people's lives away making a gesture, Rilla. We've got life support. Unless we fire those thrusters and counter it, we've got forward motion. The clan ship's ignoring us, and if its captain was going to bother finishing us off that would be happening right this minute—so I'm betting they're going to leave us right where we are. Abandoning us to die, is what they think they're doing! But we aren't going to cooperate."

When had Pappaniku switched from a direct bridge-to-engine room call to a shipwide broadcast? Lansing hadn't noticed, but she realized now it had happened because her surviving crew members weren't staring toward her and straining to eavesdrop. They had their heads lifted, and their faces wore the slightly vacant expressions of humans listening to a voice that was (from their viewpoint) disembodied.

"We aren't going to lie down on our decks and die," Captain Pappaniku was saying with absolute determination. "That's probably what 'Clan honor' expects, since we're out of the battle and the ship we're supposed to be guarding with our lives is lost no matter what we do or don't do now. But committing suicide by giving up isn't part of my code of honor, and I don't believe it's part of anyone else's here, either!" The tempo of her speech picked up as she said that last sentence, as her tone went from defiant to galvanizing. "Department heads and deck bosses. Get your areas secured; put together a list of repairs you can make, and start your people on them immediately. Put together another list of repairs you can't make, and bring it with you to my ready room 30 minutes from now. I want casualty lists then, too. We're going to figure out how we can stay alive, and after that we're going to figure out how we can get this ship to safe harbor somewhere until help can reach us. Get busy, now! Pappaniku out."

From all over the engine room, Rilla Lansing heard sighs. The people under her command, those who were still alive and conscious and able to react to their captain's speech, threw despair aside and went back to work with a grim enthusiasm that five minutes earlier Lansing wouldn't have believed possible.

* * *

On her bridge, Captain Irina Pappaniku slumped as she closed the commlink. Making that announcement had taken the last of her strength...or almost the last of it, anyway.

She had one more thing to do. Her first mate, her executive officer in the parlance of the Defense Service to which she'd belonged for so many years out of the life she would lose today, was bending over her with poorly concealed horror in his eyes.

Pappaniku didn't want to know how she looked, and Mitchell Dufrain's eyes came far too close to serving her as a mirror. Yet she couldn't afford, not just yet, to close her own lids; because once she did that, she doubted she would have enough strength (physical strength, at least) to pry them open again.

Strength of will she still had, but that could only carry her ruined flesh so far. Beyond that, lay death—and for the first time, death looked inviting and peaceful to Irina Pappaniku.

They'd promised her it would be this way when her time finally came, had her teachers during the early years of her career. She'd tried her best to believe them, but she hadn't quite managed it until now.

Now what she felt most keenly was gratitude at discovering that they were right after all.

"Captain, we don't have a sickbay anymore. But can't I at least get you onto the couch in your ready room? You've got to let someone dress those burns, and give you enough painkiller to knock you out. What you just did, talking to the crew like that—you've made the difference. For God's sake, let the rest of us take it from here!"

Mitch Dufrain was a huge man, tall and solid and broad of torso without carrying a gram of flabbiness in the process. Lifting Irina up and carrying her off her bridge would be the easiest thing in the universe for him, and he would do it gently, too.

Nevertheless the idea of being moved was about the only thing left in the universe that could horrify her now. Pappaniku locked gazes with him, and she grimaced because shaking her head was an almost equally bad idea. "No!" she grated, as the powerful analgesics already in her bloodstream began giving way to pain again. Mitch was right; if she took enough to push the agony back one more time, it would also be enough to send her over the edge into unconsciousness.

She was going there soon enough anyway, and for that relief she wouldn't need pharmaceuticals. Nor would she return from it...so

wasting these final moments of awareness was unthinkable. They were difficult, but they were also incalculably precious.

“Mitch, in 30 minutes I’ll be gone. You know that as well as I know it,” she said, gathering herself physically while her mind grew preternaturally clear. “I don’t want everyone walking into the ready room to find me, or what’s left of me, lying on that couch. I want them to find you waiting for them, in command and ready to take their reports and put together a plan. I’m dead already—I knew I was about two minutes after I got hit. I’m counting on you to pull the people together now and keep them together, and get them to someplace where they can survive. Understood?”

He opened his mouth to argue. She stared at him without flinching, now truly using the last of her strength and thinking it well invested when he closed his lips again, set his jaw, and nodded.

He did understand. He was accepting the charge she’d given him.

It was enough. She could rest now.

Irina Pappaniku closed her eyes for the last time, and let the darkness take her.

* * *

“Where’s the captain?” It was Rilla Lansing who wanted to know that first, of course. Rilla had been one of Irina Pappaniku’s closest friends.

Mitchell Dufrain looked at each of the half-dozen other people who were occupying the casual seating (several comfortable chairs and a sofa) in the *Archangel’s* ready room. He knew he ought to be sitting behind the captain’s desk, but he couldn’t manage that yet. So he was in the guest chair in front of that desk instead, with the chair swiveled on its base so that he could face his department heads and deck bosses.

They’d lost sickbay and they’d lost the hangar deck, both completely, so there were two fewer people here than there ought to be. One of those attending this meeting was a substitute, because the ship’s chief tactical officer had arrived wounded in sickbay just before a shot that Dufrain devoutly hoped even a clan ship hadn’t aimed for the medical facility struck there anyway.

Still, he had a better representation of the ship’s leaders than he’d any right to hope for considering their desperate situation. The ones who were still alive were even whole (so far) in the physical sense, relatively

speaking. Their bodies showed bruises, abrasions, and cuts that were clotting now under light coatings of soot; but no one here was badly hurt.

The badly hurt among them had for the most part, Dufrain thought sourly, died when sickbay was blasted open to vacuum.

“Captain Pappaniku was wounded, and she wouldn’t let me relieve her,” the first mate informed Engineer Lansing, and everyone else along with her. “She made it through the battle. She died in her command chair, within five minutes of when she made that shipwide announcement.”

“Oh, *God*.” Rilla Lansing was a professional, one so seasoned that she’d managed to complete her Service career and retire. Yet this news rattled even her, coming as it did just when they were realizing they truly had survived the clan ship’s assault—and were about to regroup, in hope of also surviving the ordeal that began when the enemy turned its attention aside and that part of the fight was over.

Yes, Lansing really was a professional. She uttered that one despairing groan, and she blinked fiercely to get rid of the moisture that flooded her eyes; but then she straightened her shoulders. The next thing she said was, “So that makes you acting captain, doesn’t it, Mitch? And it makes Ms. Eriknova first mate, and me second.” She nodded toward a fellow female who appeared to be as human as she was, but who possessed singularly odd dermal pigmentation.

No one ever addressed Thalia Eriknova of Themyscira by her given name. As far as Mitch knew, no one had ever been invited to do that.

“Correct,” Dufrain said, acknowledging Lansing with a nod and then giving Eriknova a hard look.

The womyn looked back at him, impassively. She nodded after a moment, letting him know she understood.

Rilla Lansing had a husband, a high-ranking civil servant (or was Abraham Hightower actually a politician of some kind or other?) back on her world of residence. She was also the mother of a young adolescent son. Although Dufrain doubted that most of the people in this compartment knew it, Irina Pappaniku was a long-time widow whose only child (a daughter named Lena) was a cadet in her fourth year at the Academy. Pappaniku hadn’t made any effort to let her officers on this ship get to know her, but as her first mate Mitch Dufrain had learned a

few things about his captain anyway; and Rilla Lansing, of course, knew Pappaniku from as long ago as the two women's shared plebe year.

Did Eriknova have a family (as he understood the word, anyway) on the mysterious planet that she called home? Dufrain wondered that now, along with why it hadn't entered his mind to wonder about it before. Then, of course, he put the thought aside along with all else that was personal.

Lena Pappaniku would go on living without Irina, and so (if the *Archangel's* people never made it home) would young Abram Hightower. Abram's father, Abraham, would mourn awhile for Marilla Lansing; but then he would surely find another woman to share his life and help him finish rearing his son.

The same thing would happen to the families of all the other people on board this ship now, and to the loved ones of those who'd died already. Their lives would go on, as the lives of lost sailors' families always had.

They were the lucky ones even though they undoubtedly would never be able to see it that way, Mitch Dufrain thought as he moved from the swiveled guest chair to take a seat perching on the edge of the captain's desk instead. From there he could see the others better and hear them better, could give them his full attention as he began listening to the reports Irina Pappaniku had ordered them to start preparing during the last minutes of her life.

Yes, civilians who could go on with their lives as usual—except for sorrow that they endured for a time, and then forgot—were the lucky ones where bereavement by space combat was concerned. Mitch Dufrain knew what it was like for a starship officer when violence touched his home-world, and took away his family but left him to go on serving when he had no one left to protect.

He recalled lifting his captain's seared and lifeless body out of her command chair just minutes earlier, and then he fought to put that memory aside along with all those others so he could focus completely on what Rilla Lansing was trying to tell him as she offered the first of the post-battle status reports. Before he succeeded, though, he also remembered envying the dead woman heartily.

She'd gone out knowing her only child was safe. It was the kind of mercy fate hadn't given Dufrain—either that knowledge itself, or the

resulting peace that he saw as he looked at his captain's ravaged face for the final time.

Her worries were over forever, just as Mitchell Dufrain's were starting all over again.

TABITHA JUNE IS A SHOULDER CAT

Chapter 1: Shoulder Cat

She leaped onto my shoulder like Honor Harrington's Nimitz, while I was bending down to take off my winter boots. She was six weeks old, and her smooth coat had a tabby cat's typical markings in silver and gray and black and white.

Her nose had a white diamond on it, and she greeted everyone she saw with a stentorian, "Prrrttt!" She already had a name: Tabitha, for obvious reasons.

I didn't need another kitten. I'd come to my brother's home to meet Tabitha's litter mate, a tortoiseshell kitten who would (I had already agreed) become Cat Number Four at my house in a few more weeks, after mother cat Patches finished nursing her family. But what could I do? Tabitha had me by the heartstrings, and that was that.

So Tabitha June (who added her own middle name—don't ask me how or why, because I can't tell you what I don't know myself!) became Cat Number Five when her sister Anabel became Cat Number Four. My life has been like that, starting with Cat Number One.

Her name was Rascal. I was two years old when my parents added her to my life, and she was (predictably) a female with a black coat that had other colors mottled into it. Sometimes I think that coloring got imprinted onto my psyche, leaving me forever afterward with a weakness toward any cat that my maternal grandmother would call "brindled" and the veterinarians and animal shelter staff members I've known call "tortoiseshell." Such cats are almost always females. Male "tortis" are so rare that they're quite valuable when they do occur.

Rascal was for sure and certain female. My father, who had occasion to stay in the house alone with her at times, swore that she decided he was her kitten and ordered him around just as she would her real offspring. When he didn't do as she wanted, she disciplined him, too! Her method (as it would have been with a kitten) was to administer a sharp pinch with her teeth, a good, solid nip that hurt because it was meant to hurt.

Rascal was well named. As much as I loved her (I'm told that while I was learning to talk I once fell asleep muttering to myself, "Cat-th!" in a baby's lisp), she knew she could tease me and she delighted in doing so. Her favorite trick was to find me sitting on the floor at play, and approach me silently from behind. Then she would poke her naughty head over my shoulder without warning—and I would, invariably, leap into the air and scream.

"Hey *cared* of Rascal!" I would proclaim, dropping the initial "s" from "scared" but leaving no one in doubt about my meaning.

She also liked to perch on a door frame (they were wide in the old house that we rented, in the Maine coast town of Thomaston) and put her head down into my view, just as suddenly as she might have thrust it over my shoulder. It got similar results.

It's a wonder Rascal didn't convince me that all cats were evil creatures, and instill me with a lifelong terror of them. Instead, she taught me to prefer tortis.

Who knows how? Maybe the friend who tells me that such cats are my "familiar," is right!

THE MAD FISHERMAN'S DAUGHTER

Chapter 1

“‘Somewhere East of Suez’? What the hell kind of name is that for a planet?” The ticket seller cocked her head, roused (for the moment) from her boredom. She looked the traveler over from behind the remote spaceport’s counter, where people paid for passage when they didn’t have access to the Empire’s credit transfer system. Or when they didn’t want to leave tracks.

“It’s the kind of name an ex-soldier would give it, when he’d found a place to settle down and make a home for his family. That particular ex-soldier was one of my great-grandfathers.” The traveler shook her silvering brown head, and smiled faintly. Distractedly, as if her mind had already rushed out across the light years and reached the world of her birth. She wouldn’t say it was “at home” there, though. Not for half of her lifetime had Christabel thought about Somewhere East of Suez in those terms.

“Oh. I see.” The seller went back to being bored.

“Not many people read the ancient Terran poet Kipling these days. The line’s actually ‘somewheres east of Suez,’ because it’s written in dialect. It means a place where society’s usual rules don’t apply.” The traveler leaned across the counter to look at the monitor for herself. “So from here I can make a straight shot? Great! Thank you.”

“As long as you don’t mind traveling by freighter, yes. And you’re welcome, Ms.—Christabel? You don’t have a second name?”

“Where I come from, humans don’t.” The traveler wouldn’t mention that for the past decade and more she’d been using an adopted one. This far out toward the frontier, she didn’t need her identity verified in order to conduct business. Or to do anything else, either. “Do you have any messages for me?”

“Maybe. I can check, if you want.”

The traveler sighed, and drew out another of the untraceable credit transfer strips with which she’d paid for her passage. She put it

down on the counter, because she knew better than to hand it over. That could open her up to charges of offering a bribe, and the seller to accusations of accepting one. Out here such “gratuities” were only customary, and both parties knew it; but they also knew that the laws of the Empire still technically applied.

Those laws still protected Christabel, for now. They would go on protecting her until she set foot once more on her native soil. But after that, all bets were off because she was barely going to make it “home” ahead of the coming Ast annexation.

“You’re crazy, do you know that?” her lover, Sienna, had yelled after her one last time. As Christabel Tyrone, Esquire, left their comfortable apartment on a not particularly overcrowded planet (one with plenty of park land, and reasonably clean air and water) within a sector’s distance of the Empire’s capital. “How can you change anything from there, when you already know you can’t do it from here? Because when you tried, you got shot down in flames!”

“I don’t know what I’ll be able to do, but I can’t stay here and wait it out,” Chris remembered answering, from the sidewalk where she stood waiting for an aircab. “Dad hates to ask anyone for anything, but he says they need me. And if I don’t go now, I may never see my family again.”

“I thought you never wanted to see them again. That’s what you’ve always told me!” Sienna trailed after her partner, down over the old-fashioned stone staircase at the apartment building’s entrance, so she could deliver her parting shot at something less than a shout. “At least you could take me with you. Dammit all!”

“No, love. I can’t.” The cab was coming. Chris turned, and held out her arms. “Sienna, please. I have to do this. Can’t you just let me go? And maybe even wish me luck?”

Sienna shook her head, and said again: “You’re crazy.” But when the cab touched down, she helped Chris hoist her travel bags into its cargo space; and then she kissed her.

“Will you be here when I get back?” Chris asked, her voice forlorn now.

“Of course I will.” Sienna gave her partner a fierce squeeze, with the strong arms of a veteran peace officer. “You be careful out there, Justice. Hear me?”

“Yes, Chief.” Damning the expense of the waiting cab, Chris clung for a moment and then collected another kiss. Then she turned

away, climbed into the automated craft's tiny cabin, and didn't let herself look back.

When she left this place, this stepping off point for her long journey's final leg, she wouldn't look back, either. She was nine weeks' travel time away from Sienna already. When she arrived at Somewhere East of Suez, she'd have been more than twelve weeks on the way.

"No messages," the ticket seller announced, with a grin that showed several gaps where teeth were missing.

Christabel forbade herself to bristle. The "gratuity" had, after all, been for checking messages; not necessarily for finding any. Instead she asked, "May I wait here? It's not long until the orbital shuttle leaves, and I really don't want to waste credit on getting a room."

"Suit yourself. It's not very comfortable, but at least I can promise you it's safe." With another of those gap-toothed grins, the other woman indicated half a dozen dilapidated benches in the open chamber opposite the counter.

Christabel swallowed her sigh. In spite of the ticket seller's words, she didn't feel the least bit easy about doing what she desperately needed to do right now—which was go to sleep. The waiting area might be deserted, but in order to enter it she'd had to walk past a truly bizarre collection of aliens, part-aliens, and disreputable-looking fellow humans who were lounging on the cobbled street outside its (as far as she could see) only door. For a moment she let herself wish that she had Sienna, complete with weapons belt and stinger, beside her after all.

* * *

Janek's gnarled joints made going out in a boat impossible now. He could only stand on the headland, leaning on his stick, and watch while his son-in-law Friel and his only son, Gant, swept past in the catamaran that long ago had belonged to Janek's own father.

Or so he told his children, and his grandchildren. And so far no one on Mandalay, the largest of the island continents that were all the dry land Somewhere East of Suez possessed, had been unkind enough to expand on that perfectly true statement. Perhaps by now he didn't need to worry about it; perhaps no one was left alive who both remembered, and cared to repeat, that Janek's maternal grandfather (one of the world's original settlers, who'd helped to clear its orbit of the previous tenants' space junk) had given his father the boat. Given it to him in hopes that Jorge might develop into a worthy partner for the old man's daughter, after she'd married in defiance of his advice...but it hadn't worked out that way.

What was it about being a man from their line? First came Jorge, who worked hard but didn't know how to plan for the lean seasons; and who, after his wife died when Janek was barely seven, never seemed right in his head again. Then Janek, himself, who imitated his grandfather by going off to fight in the Empire's wars—but who, unlike the old man, came home with something broken inside him that a lifetime of trying different palliatives hadn't managed to mend. Something that his third wife's love could in no way ease, nor could his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren even start to cure its pain.

After Eleen, their daughter Christabel was his life's greatest joy. Christabel, his baby, born from his life's one true love—ten years after Lara, his firstborn, and three years after Gant, who didn't in any way endear himself to Janek by looking, acting, and sounding like an echo of the now-dead Jorge.

What could a man do, when he had one son and he simply couldn't respect the boy? Or even (what was worse) manage to love him?

The catamaran wouldn't leave sight of land, because on Somewhere East of Suez no surface vessel ever did. Those who'd dared to try it, long ago, hadn't returned. But the schools of flying fish that were the main protein source for humans on the planet's islands lived, and thrived, on the under-sea shelf surrounding each land mass. So as Janek watched, and saw the far-off sparkle of sunlight on drops of water when his only son and his firstborn daughter's husband flung the nets skyward, he knew the fish would leap into those nets and be caught; and when the boat came back to land, it would do so with its tow-sacks full.

Janek remembered what it felt like to be out there with the sunlight on his bare torso, with the wind and the salty spray in his face, and the lines clasped in what then were his strong, brown hands. For a moment the recollection lifted his heart, and made his mouth curve into a smile. But then he remembered why he could never do that again...and he glanced down at the hand that now rested on the knob at the end of his stick. The swollen joints, the twisted fingers, and the thinness of the wrist and forearm protruding from his shirt-sleeve, turned his reminiscent smile into a grimace of disgust.

Did he really want Christabel to come home, and see him like this? And did he really want to put her back within Gant's reach?

Pointless questions, because he'd had no choice but to send for her. Now he could only hope that she would come.

* * *

Eleen, daughter of Ethelle, slammed down the gavel and rendered judgment. "The girl isn't your daughter, Frederick. So you've

got no right forbidding her to marry. If you offer her a dowry, it's a gift. If you don't offer her a dowry, that's your choice to make. Do you understand?"

The man in front of her glared, but he ducked his head in the proper response. "Yes, Magistrate," he said. After which he turned and walked away, along with the half dozen people (all of them members of his family, except for the young man whom his stepdaughter wanted to marry) who'd come with him.

Eleen sighed, and took the insufferably hot robe of her office from her shoulders. How she envied Janek on a day like this one. The warm season was just beginning, but already the meeting-grove where she heard cases and taught lessons was heating up. Oh, if only she could wander along the headland and watch while the boys sailed past!

Nothing was stopping her from doing that, of course. Nothing except the family's need for enough money to live on, both now and during the slack season to come. Janek's pension from the Imperial government arrived erratically, since that was how the starships linking Somewhere East of Suez to the rest of humankind operated this far away from the Empire's center. For a time after each payment's delivery, Janek and his family could live well; but budgeting his funds wasn't one of the aging veteran's talents. The generosity that was one of his best qualities, one of the reasons Eleen had started loving him—and one of the reasons she loved him still—was also his greatest weakness. Even if he'd known how long the money must last before he could hope to receive more, he would still have run out part way through that period.

Eleen knew that. And since the days were over when Janek could fill in the gaps by working on the fishing grounds, or by gathering seaweed and digging shellfish from the coastline's ledges and mud flats, her income as magistrate and teacher mattered more than ever as the family's steadiest source of sustenance. Her stepson Gant, after all, had a barren wife who spent all he could earn, and more. And her stepdaughter Lara, wife of Friel, had children and grandchildren who every year added to the demands on their extended family's hearth...Eleen supposed she should simply be thankful that Janek was now too feeble to go in search of liquor after the freighters visited.

Soon her afternoon class would assemble, so the magistrate didn't have time for more than a quickly inhaled bite or two of lunch. On worlds where humans lived primarily indoors, she'd once been told by a visiting medic who gave her advice about managing her chronic digestive difficulties, she would have needed major surgery for them long ago; but here people didn't use such invasive technologies. Nor did they live and

work indoors, except when the weather turned brutal (or when couples wanted privacy).

The way people lived here was better, and healthier; but it required strength as well as fostered it. A part of Eleen still couldn't believe that her daughter Christabel, her only true-born child, really was coming back after fleeing this world's harshness many years ago.

Would the girl (for so Eleen still thought her) really be able to do anything to change their planet's situation? For all her training in the Empire's laws, for all her experience in arguing (and now, in deciding) cases, would she be of any use—or just one more person for Eleen to look after and try to protect, as the society humans had spent the past several generations building here on Somewhere East of Suez faced alien occupation?

Janek had faith in Christabel. Absolute faith. Friel and Lara thought almost as highly of her abilities. But Gant shook his head and snorted, whenever anyone at the family's communal evening fire mentioned his half-sister's homecoming; and Gant, after all, was the family's only son. So although Janek might ignore what the younger man said, and while Friel and Lara might take his words lightly (although they did listen to him with courtesy), Eleen must and would give Gant his due.

After all, the boy had overcome so much! Sitting on a stone bench that several of her pupils would soon occupy, and munching a piece of the fruit that she preferred to heavier foods when the weather grew this sultry, Eleen remembered how he'd come into her care. A boy in mid-adolescence, almost ruined by his mother (who was Janek's second wife—the one he'd married after abandoning Lara's mother, and before finally taking his childhood love, Eleen, to wed). Which was worse for a youngster, anyway? To be neglected, as Lara was during her earliest years; or to be indulged as Gant was until the magistrate on his mother's far-off island had told Janek, "Either you come and get him, or I'll have him drowned"?

Even Janek still agreed that they couldn't have permitted that to happen. But Janek didn't seem to realize that for someone who'd lived wild and uncontrolled through his first fifteen years, just adapting to military service (the only place there was left to send Gant, after Janek and Friel both despaired of his settling down to a fisherman's life!) represented a huge accomplishment. So did staying with it long enough to retire, at a precious 20-year pension. And if Gant didn't always feel up to going out to fish with Friel every day, now that he was part of their household again, what right had Janek to criticize him for that? Janek,

who even when he was in fine physical condition had sometimes sat muttering on the shore—unable to make himself get up and launch the boat, much less take it out to the fishing grounds and cast its nets high to capture the flying schools?

Janek had good reason for staying ashore, now. And he was wrong, dead wrong, when he grumbled that it was Gant's fault whenever the catamaran's engines malfunctioned. Yes, Gant liked to tinker with them (and for that matter, with any piece of machinery on which he could lay his hands). So had Janek, when his hands could still manage such tasks; and so did Friel, now. It was coincidence, nothing more, that tied Gant's "tuning" of the engines to most of their major malfunctions.

That was one good thing sure to come from Christabel's return, Eleen told herself firmly as she rose from the bench and tossed the pit from her fruit into the depths of the grove. Reconciliation between her husband's two youngest children was long past due, and it couldn't happen while months of hyperlight space travel separated them. Not that it could do either Christabel or Gant, or the rest of the family, much good by happening on the eve of Somewhere East of Suez's annexation by the Ast; but still, Eleen thought, she didn't want her daughter facing the Great Beyond with lies told about her brother on her conscience.

They had to be lies, of course. Gant wasn't the best man the Father ever made, but neither was he what Christabel (as a girl about to leave her parents' fireside in anger) had made him out to be.

Hopefully she wouldn't repeat those ancient accusations, now that she was coming home. But no matter what happened, Eleen thought as she welcomed the first of her afternoon students, a timid thirteen-year-old who always came early and alone, even Christabel wasn't going to turn her heart against Gant. She hadn't borne a son, and hadn't known what a lack that was in her life until the first time she'd heard Gant's voice speaking to her, and calling her "Mother."

* * *

Janek sat on his favorite rock, beneath a pina tree in one of the headland's sheltered spots. He leaned back against its wide and solid trunk, and he closed his eyes. This promised to continue a fine day, and the boys wouldn't be in from the sea anytime soon...and when they did arrive, he wasn't sure he wanted to be around to listen to Gant's babbling about what "just had to be done" to the catamaran's purring, perfectly running engines before tomorrow's foray.

The kid (Janek could never think of Gant as a fellow grown man, not even now that his only son's hairline was fast receding) fancied himself a mechanical genius, because he'd been an engineering mate on

board several different Imperial space stations during his twenty-year naval career. He'd never seen star cruiser duty, which puzzled Janek still. How did an enlisted man, an ordinary, avoid serving at least a couple of shipboard tours while staying in the service long enough to retire?

Janek never asked Gant that question, though. He didn't feel like listening all over again to what the boy thought about his own service record.

Was he really a raider of the Empire's purse, a burden on its honest taxpayers, because he'd been hurt in ways that his body didn't show? Because his years in a combat zone, and then his Ast captivity—a time that he couldn't remember—had left him as he now was?

They think I don't know we live most of the time on Eleen's earnings. They think I sat here because I was lazy, all those times when I was younger and should have gone out to fish, but didn't because I couldn't. They think I don't hear, or see, or notice, when I go to Eleen's grove and the children she teaches draw back and stare. Or when the boldest ones mutter to each other, "There he is! The sponger!" Because their parents and grandparents tell them that Gant served his score of years, and earned what the Empire pays him now; but Gant's father, the magistrate's husband, came home early like the coward he is. They said the Ast held him prisoner, but that's a lie because everyone knows the Ast never take captives. So now he lives off the Imperial Purse, and sits on the shore and watches other men do honest work, because he has no shame.

I wish they might dream with me for just one night. Or do I wish that fate on anything as innocent as a child?

No. But I do wish it on the elders who've taught them to mock me!

With that vengeful thought, Janek slipped down into his waking dream-state. It came to him oftener now than it had when he was younger; and although he still couldn't recall specifics, he felt sure the visions had grown more vivid with the passing of the years.

How could anyone expect a man to endure this, and not be changed by it? This irregular yet unremitting descent into hell, that could (and did) claim him without warning? Drag him down when he least expected it, and then hold him without mercy until it deigned to let him go?

THE WAY TO FREEDOM

Chapter 1

“Nora, you’ve got to get Keren back to 8055. *Now*. Yesterday! Or you’re going to lose her.”

In all my 56 years of living, I can’t remember when I heard words that scared me more than those ones did. Go back to Planet 8055, from which I and my survey team mates escaped (damn near miraculously) ten years earlier? Go back there on purpose, to a world where a post-menopausal woman like me is under an automatic death sentence—where the Ast and their almost equally mysterious (and ruthless) allies rule—and the human inhabitants are doomed to extinction, as soon as the current generation dies off? All that would have been bad enough to contemplate, but Dr. Reiko Ballantine was telling me I must take my nine-year-old daughter with me.

“Are you sure there’s nothing you can do to help her?” I asked my old team mate Rudy Tasker’s wife, who also happened to be the best pediatric endocrinologist in the business. She’d come all the way to Rigel 5, home to me (and for the past decade, to my husband and our daughter, too) to try to diagnose Keren-Happuch Mira Cranshaw Falconi’s curious malaise, that approaching puberty seemed to be worsening...and that, Reiko had just let me know, heralded a much worse problem.

Marc, my team mate throughout my long career as a planetary survey leader and my husband ever since we returned from 8055, sat beside me in the office Reiko had borrowed at Rigel 5’s best pediatric hospital. He reached out for my hand, because we no longer had to act like colleagues now that we were both retired. Retired in mutual disgrace, because of how our careers ended...but that’s another story. A long one, called *Regs*. Maybe you’ve read it? But if you haven’t, don’t worry. I’ll make sure you can understand this one, without doing that first.

“Yes, I’m sure.” Reiko nodded, and then sighed. “Whatever those ‘Others,’ as you and Rudy always call them, did that made all of 8055’s women sterile except you...and made you fertile again, somehow, at the

same time!...also affected Keren. While she was *in utero*. That's my best hypothesis, anyway, since what's happening to her is definitely a function of her body preparing itself for menarche. What I'm sure about is that we'll never find the answer here. You've got to get her back to where you conceived her, and—oh, hell, Rudy's going to kill me when I tell him this, but there's no help for it! I'll have to come with you."

She made it sound so simple. Which, of course, it was. But "simple" is not at all the same thing as "easy," and unfortunately she'd made it sound that way, too. So I asked again, not believing I was doing so when my little girl's welfare surely depended on this woman's continued willingness to go far beyond the call of medical duty, "Reiko, are you sure she won't survive if she stays here?"

"Yes. I'm afraid I am. If Keren goes on deteriorating at her present rate, she may celebrate her tenth birthday—but she'll never make it to her eleventh. Not even with any palliative treatments I might be forced to prescribe, if you're refusing to try the one thing that I believe can actually work."

Once again, Dr. Ballantine had no idea what she was saying. Despite being married to a survey op, she was clueless about the impossibility of getting our hands on a ship capable of making the passage from here to 8055—taking it, unnoticed, down to the planet's surface (assuming neither our own forces nor the Ast had stopped us from crossing the interstellar border)—blending into the population there for long enough so Reiko could determine the exact cause of Keren's condition—and then getting back into space, and safely across the border in the opposite direction. Nor did she realize, I felt sure now, what getting stranded on that world would mean.

Especially for women. Surely Rudy had been honest with his wife about our last sojourn there? Technically a survey op wasn't supposed to tell outsiders about his experiences on a world like 8055, but most of us made exceptions for our nearest and dearest.

Then again, not many ops managed to maintain such long-term relationships as those words implied. I'd had Grandmum, and no one else of any significance, waiting back home during my first decade as an op, and I was pretty typical in my scarcity of personal ties. After the old girl died—in a "recreational mishap," which was how the local university described it when their Mathematics Department Chair Creature fell into a crevasse while chaperoning a Mountaineering Club outing—I had no one left at all. That was about the same time Marc parted company with

the mother of his first child, after which we turned to each other for something more than the comradely friendship we already shared.

You had to expect it would be like that, when you chose a survey op's life. You just couldn't get home often enough, or stay there for long enough at a stretch, to be of much use to a spouse. Not when your life's work required spending time (sometimes long stretches of it) on a succession of alien worlds that had populations which Survey Central deemed worthy of study. People to whom their families mattered a lot usually didn't last longer than a mission or two—if they made it through op training in the first place, which they often didn't. And that, of course, was a damn good thing.

Did I dare to open my yap now and ask Reiko a series of blunt questions, until I was sure she knew enough about 8055 to make an informed decision about going there? Or should I just be glad she was so willing, and start making travel plans?

"Good thing Rudy's still on active duty," Marc said from beside me, in the tone he always uses when he's waited long enough and finally decides I must want him to take the point (conversationally speaking). "He'll have to find us transportation, you know. We're not poor, Reiko, but chartering a long-range shuttle's beyond us. Even if we used every credit we've got, plus everything we could borrow."

"It would have to be a charter flight, wouldn't it? Or you'd have to buy a ship outright. I guess I'm too used to just getting myself a ticket and then hopping aboard a liner, and winding up anywhere I've ever wanted to travel. So I didn't think about how we'd be getting to 8055 in the first place." Ballantine looked at us both, not just Marc, with the beginnings of wisdom (otherwise known, sometimes, as fear) in those dark eyes with their vestigial hint of Terra's Orient. One of her parents—it would have to be her father, since "Ballantine" must be her mother's surname—had bequeathed to her characteristics seldom seen on the faces of today's homogenized humans. But back on Terra, which was Reiko's home just as Rigel 5 was mine, some regions still had populations that exhibited their ancestors' racial traits. You could identify such people on sight as "Anglo," "African," "Hispanic," or "Oriental"—although Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and so on, were harder to guess. They'd managed to retain their identities, genetically as well as culturally, by keeping determinedly to themselves on their own segments of the home-world's surface.

Those of us whose forebears headed outward to the stars, who established homes for themselves and their offspring on other planets, lost those distinctions long ago. Marc and Tasker and I were (and of course still are) all typical examples of our kind; with skin tones in varying shades of brown, eyes that can be any color, and hair that can be brown, black, or deep auburn. Seldom will you see blondes among us, and almost never what a native Terran would call a “redhead.”

Did Reiko Ballantine’s ancestral-world upbringing, and privileged adult life, contribute to her obvious naivete about the mission for which she was volunteering? Perhaps. But most civilians were pretty damn clueless, so she probably wasn’t that much worse than the rest. I’d been expecting more from Rudy Tasker’s wife, that was all.

Anyway, Marc had just administered a first dose of reality therapy to our well-meaning friend; and I was grateful. He’d administered enough of that unpleasant tonic to me, after all, during the years of our professional association—which started when Survey Central put him on the first team I ever “bossed,” expressly to serve as my nursemaid.

Sometimes he still plays that role in my life, all these years later. I squeezed his hand, since I was still holding it, and I said, “Good thing Rudy’s not off on a mission. At least he’s available so he can lend us a hand! How about giving him a call, Reiko? And then hauling him in here, so we can get this caper planned while Keren’s big ears aren’t listening?”

* * *

“I had an idea it’d come to this.” Rudolf Tasker was well past thirty now. His wife, Reiko, I knew to be slightly older; but you couldn’t see it by looking at them together. He’d lost his boyishness long ago, and I could remember exactly where and how. That was when he lost his first wife, the 8055 colonist/modern human hybrid girl in whose honor I gave Keren-Happuch Mira Cranshaw Falconi the second of her given names. Her first, of course, being that of both my Mum and Grandmum.

“So what’ve you got in mind?” I asked him, as he stood at the window of the hotel room he and Reiko shared. We’d had to get out of the borrowed office at the hospital when its regular tenant wanted it back. But Keren, who’d been strong enough to go to school today, wouldn’t need someone to welcome her home for hours yet; so the change of scene shouldn’t be a problem. And if she got sick, as she often did part-way through the school day, her teacher could find us anywhere. As long as we wanted to be found.

“I’m on transition leave right now, so going with you’s not a problem. I can get us a long-range shuttle, and supplies for it, too. Nothing’s really that hard, when you’re an incoming sector boss.” Tasker turned slightly, just enough so he could look at the rest of us over his shoulder. “The rest of us” defined as Marc, and me; because Reiko hadn’t arrived from the hospital yet. She’d been hauled into an emergency consultation, the kind that a physician’s oath precludes turning down, just as we were all trying to get out through the door.

“Rudy! Congratulations, that’s wonderful!” I turned him around so I could hug him. I was fond of this man, in the way that a human woman is fond of younger siblings if she has them—which I never did, in a natural sense. But eight months of being stranded together on 8055 had forged bonds among the three of us, Cranshaw and Tasker and me, that went far beyond a team’s normal comradeship.

I meant that it was wonderful for him, of course, since he must want it or he wouldn’t have applied. I’d never had the slightest interest in becoming a sector boss, or anything else that was higher on the food chain than team leader. Even *that* title my beloved Marc hadn’t cared to wear except once, temporarily and disastrously—so being elevated to the role of “team leaders’ boss” had never entered my husband’s mind, most likely. But Marc was an anthropologist by training, not an ex-Marine like me or a former military pilot like Tasker. So even leading the team had, to him, been nothing but a distraction. He’d become an op so he could study alien (and estranged human) cultures. He didn’t give a damn about anything else, and he’d adjusted so nicely to retirement only because my Grandmum’s old university gladly took him on as a member of its faculty, soon after I dragged him home with me.

I wished I could say I’d settled in just as fast and just as well, but for me it was a whole lot harder. There wasn’t much for me to do at first except finish gestating Keren. And after that (of course!) bear her, suckle her, and mother her, during the early years when caring for a small human can easily manage to be an adult’s full-time job. I’d had a tough time letting go of my daughter, to my chagrin, when she got big enough so that she needed to spend much of every day at school.

I finally went to work teaching classes in both self-defense and wilderness survival, for a privately run “organized recreation” school. I found it satisfying, because I realized my work might spare other people’s loved ones from getting the kind of news I’d received after Grandmum’s

fatal climbing mishap. But the job really wasn't enough to fill all the places in my life that Marc and Keren didn't occupy.

Okay. Time to be honest! I hated *why* I was about to leave my life on Rigel 5 behind, but part of me couldn't help feeling relieved and excited about it. Even though I must go back, instead, to 8055—taking along every single fellow being about whom I cared, into a setting where I knew we would be in constant danger—I still *wanted* to do this. Now that I'd got past the first shock of realizing it could happen, I was growing fiercely glad that it must.

"Yeah. I suppose it's wonderful." Tasker's arms came up to return my embrace, but he did it perfunctorily. I'd hugged him in spontaneous joy on other occasions, so I knew how to read his reaction today. After a few seconds he held me at arm's length instead, and stared into my face while he said what he'd been wanting to all along. "I didn't volunteer to go upstairs, Nora. The higher-ups kicked me there, and I had to either accept it or get done."

"Why?" Marc asked the question before I got my mouth open again.

"Same reason I've been told to take a nice, long rest. The last mission I led...well, it broke me. That's also why Reiko's on leave from her practice." Rudy's full lips twisted as he answered Marc, but went right on staring into my eyes. "Don't get me wrong. She wanted to come out here and take a look at your daughter, and help Keren if she could. But if I wasn't an official basket case right now, at a rank that lets the service keep me on payroll because they're having a hell of a time finding enough experienced ops to replace retiring sector bosses these days, Reiko wouldn't be free to do any of this. And neither, of course, would I."

* * *

"It's that bad, huh?" Marc spoke again, into the hotel room's quiet. "They're starting to recruit Big Bosses, are they? Not taking volunteers only, now that it's been ten years since the military stopped allowing people like you and Nora to transfer over to the Corps before their 20 years are up?"

"That sums it up pretty well." Tasker nodded, and sounded relieved that he wasn't going to have to explain all that to us. After which he folded me into his arms again, like a little kid hugging a stuffed toy for comfort, and of course I let him do it. Just as I'd once allowed him to hold me in his arms through most of an impossibly dark night on 8055;

so he could fall asleep and stay asleep, after he'd been forced to watch while a gang of drunken men raped his young half-native wife. Over and over until she died, her body literally torn apart by their brutality. I'd wondered then if he would ever be the same.

Well, not the same, of course. It would be ridiculous to expect anyone to come through that horror unchanged. But I had wondered whether he would be able, afterward, to go on living an op's life and doing an op's job. If the experience would harden him, temper him, or break him; because I knew from my own long seasoning in our strange profession that it was sure to do one of those three things.

I'd thought he came out on the other side tempered. Made stronger, without losing his compassion or his flexibility. But now he had endured some other horror, which did to him what Mira Alcorn's death hadn't managed; and I suspected that the only reason he was on temporary instead of terminal leave right now was that Survey Central (with its back to the wall personnel-wise) preferred experienced leaders to undamaged ones.

"How do you feel about that, Rudy?" Marc asked the next question gently. As if he were talking to me, during an off-duty moment; or even to our daughter.

"Rotten. If they can't trust me to do my job on the ground anymore, how the hell am I supposed to trust myself to boss people who have to go there?" My old friend shuddered in my arms, and his hold on me tightened convulsively. "Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut, because now you may not want to go anywhere with me. Especially not back to 8055, with your kid in tow! But both of you were always honest with me, and I—well—thought you had a right to know."

"You've told them now, anyway." A different voice, Reiko's voice, came from the hotel room's far side. I'd heard the door slide open, quietly though such fixtures moved in this luxurious place, but I'd paid it no heed because I knew Marc was there and watching my back. So my old reflexes, the self-protective ones a former survey op never loses, hadn't kicked in. And as for Reiko seeing me held close in her husband's arms, well—tough, if she found the sight puzzling or offensive. If the four of us (or five, counting Keren) were going to head out together on the most dangerous mission any of us had ever tackled, then Reiko would damned well have to get used to how the team of Falconi, Cranshaw, and Tasker functioned.

Because it sure as hell did look like that long disbanded team was back in business. As of right now; this very minute.

UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY

Chapter 1

Cold. That was the first sensation Renata Colby felt as consciousness reclaimed her. She was still in her seat, for which the acceleration harness could be thanked; and although her head ached and she was sure her body was bruised, she was able to move all her limbs and digits when she ran through the check-off list before attempting to get the harness unfastened.

She lay under the open sky, on her back looking upward. The seat's securing bolts (or the local equivalent thereof) must have sheared off or otherwise let go, which annoyed her because on one of her own shuttles that couldn't have happened. But then she finally did get the harness loose, managed to move herself out of that faintly ridiculous flat-on-her-back but with heels in the air position—and then she saw where the deck to which her seat had been attached was now, and she swallowed hard and decided she didn't mind that those bolts had given way.

The shuttlecraft that Admiral Colby and her coxswain had been riding in as VIP passengers had come apart, whether before or after striking the ground Colby couldn't recall. All she could remember was hearing gibberish instead of their hosts' comm traffic coming clearly through the translator units, glancing across the insufferably hot cabin's narrow aisle at Mac—who if he'd been at the controls would have been unflappable, but who as a passenger had been turning green—and then she'd felt the ship dropping out from under her, with only the harness keeping her from banging her head against the cabin's roof. After that she had no memories.

Mac. Oh, lord, Mac! Colby got herself completely loose, and managed to stand. The little ship's wrecked fuselage lay in one direction; in another she saw two more seats, some meters distant across the small mountain valley where the alien pilot had somehow managed to direct their crash instead of smacking them into a cliff as she'd at first thought might be about to happen. That was the sickening drop she remembered,

a drastic course correction that had brought them down before the shuttle could reach the mountain face.

Yes, she did remember that much. Which didn't help a thing, although it did leave her with a profound sense of gratitude toward that orange-skinned young Harimi male for the action to which she was sure she owed her survival.

The two seats she'd spotted contained what was left of both Harimi. They hadn't landed as fortunately as she had; they were on their faces, and when the human woman laboriously turned first one and then the other over she found two smashed craniums.

But then Harimi bones didn't seem to be quite like human bones, she had noticed that when she'd gripped hands with her hosts in greeting. She suspected that it had taken less force to do this to Octi and Octa than it would have taken to do the same thing to her, or to Mac.

She went in search of the cabin's fourth seat. She found it meters away, with its harness unfastened and its occupant lying limp with most of his body submerged in a mountain stream.

Mountain streams were cold here on Sacorra 6 just as they were on Earth and on Deneb Prime, even though this world had an overall warmer climate. Colby dragged her coxswain out of the water, gripping him under his arms and hauling his heavy body with considerable effort. She wasn't out of training, she had not allowed moving up to flag rank to do that to her; but she was of average size for a human female, and Lieutenant Thor MacKenzie was a tall and wide-shouldered young man. Colby was still shaken from the crash, and while she hadn't been wet until now the air here was cold—and she wasn't certain how long she might have been lying unconscious and strapped to that seat before she'd awakened at last.

If she was cold, Mac had to be much colder. Night was coming on, and she had no idea what survival gear the alien shuttle had been carrying or where such gear (if any) had wound up after the crash. But she had better find either that or the comm unit that the crash had knocked out of her hand when she'd been in the act of trying to use it, damned fast, or Mac almost certainly wasn't going to make it through a night here; and she might not, either.

So she left him, murmuring an apology she knew he couldn't hear, and headed for what remained of the fuselage. There she had her third bit of good luck (her survival being the first, Mac's survival being

the second). Inside the battered hull she located blankets, and a lumipanel.

Warmth and light. At the moment she could ask for nothing more unless it was to find her comm, Colby thought while she was dragging her companion across what felt like an endless expanse of scraggly grass-like vegetation and exposed ledges that separated him from their critical bit of shelter. His comm was gone from his belt, too; Colby vaguely remembered the Harimi co-pilot turning around and snatching it away from MacKenzie during the last moment before the crash.

Had Octa thought Mac's comm was a weapon, when he had pulled it out to try to let the *Serengeti* know they were in trouble? She and MacKenzie were, after all, the first humans the two Harimi had ever seen—and although they'd been coldly polite, both Octi and Octa had been visibly uneasy with their passengers. Colby had the distinct feeling that if it were up to any of the Harimi she'd met since arriving in the Sacorra system, the evaluation of their climate-altering project on the sixth planet would have been called off the minute she showed up instead of her Denebian deputy whom they had been expecting to greet. And to think that she had been urged to come here personally because someone on the Council had wanted to impress the Harimi, and that she'd agreed to do so because the project had interested her!

Well, she'd impressed them all right; they had looked at her as if they couldn't believe the Council would insult them like this. And whether Octa had thought Mac was threatening her or not didn't matter, both comms were gone and there was no point trying to find them at night. She had to use the lumipanel's weak light as a beacon to guide her over the last few meters, as darkness came to the valley; but she made it. *They* made it.

There was nothing to do now except strip wet uniforms from both their bodies, to roll them up together inside the dry blankets; to hold this boy of twenty-five in her arms, him naked and she in her still-dry underwear, and wait nineteen hours for morning to come.

* * *

"What in bloody hell does he mean, the Admiral's shuttle disappeared?" Commander Kristen Nordstrom asked the question incredulously as much as angrily. She looked at her captain, and she waited for a response.

Thaddeus Worthington held out a hand toward his executive officer. He was usually such a mild person that those who didn't know him well wondered how Thad Worthington had ever come to command a starship; but those who did know him, Nordstrom among them, also knew that when he suddenly got through being mild you didn't want to be the person who had caused him to reach that point. He directed his next words to the viewscreen and the image it displayed, though, after he'd nodded toward ops so that he would be put through.

Which Nordstrom hadn't been, and for all her hot temper the *Serengeti*'s exec would never have been indiscreet enough to ask that rhetorical question if she'd been on comm to—the enemy? Their allies?

Just how should he regard the Harimi? Worthington wondered that even as he started to address the orange-skinned male creature on the planet's surface far below the orbiting flagship. He said, "Organizer, did the shuttle crash from accidental causes, or do you believe that someone on Sacorra 6 is responsible?"

"We cannot know the cause of its crash until we have located the shuttle, Captain." The Harimi organizer inclined his head calmly, and beside him his female counterpart did likewise. "However, we have no reason to believe that any of our citizens at Second Colony would have wished the Admiral harm."

"Not even if someone down there thought her report might come out with a negative recommendation?" Worthington kept his growing annoyance inside him for the moment, both because it wouldn't do to antagonize the Harimi if he wanted to get any relevant information out of them—and because he knew that most of his anger should quite properly be self-directed. If only he had put his foot down and insisted that Renata use one of their own shuttles, with her coxswain at its controls, instead of going along with their hosts' declaration that only Harimi pilots were allowed to fly in-atmosphere craft on Harimi worlds! That piece of sky-junk might have been state-of-the-art for local technology, but he damned himself roundly now for keeping silent when his temporary commanding officer had agreed to board the thing at all—let alone ride it from the main Harimi colony on Sacorra 5, all the way to land at their secondary colony on neighboring Sacorra 6.

And no shuttle of any vintage or origin would have dared to crash if Thor MacKenzie had been at its controls—but it was too late for second-guessing now. Since one of Sacorra 6's charms was a natural dissimulation effect which made it impossible for starship sensors to get

anything except background readings while scanning its surface, Worthington's task now was to persuade the Harimi to let him send out shuttles and search that world at low altitudes—visually, if that was what it took—until the admiral was found.

He wasn't going to get that kind of cooperation by accusing and antagonizing, so for now at least he must keep his anger to himself. And his suspicions, as well, since he'd already voiced them once and had been told they were groundless.

* * *

Colby woke to daylight. Not the gray dawn that she had somehow expected, but to bright yellow sunlight that sparkled on the ground outside the ruined fuselage that still sheltered her. Sparkled on it, because that ground was covered with a thin layer of pure white snow.

Already it was melting, already the temperature was rising. She was thankful for that, because she wasn't looking forward to having to crawl out of the warm nest of blankets and expose her body and her companion's to the air.

Would he wake up when the cold hit his bare skin, or was he really still unconscious and not just asleep? She was looking into MacKenzie's face and trying to decide whether to attempt waking him, or slip away and let nature take its course, when she heard sounds from outside the shuttle's wreck.

Wonderful, I always wanted to get caught bundling with a handsome kid not much more than half my age! she thought sardonically, and slid out of the blankets and reached for her outer clothing. Her uniform was still damp from the stream, so pulling it on required determination; but she managed to do so, while inside the warm cocoon she'd left Thor MacKenzie stirred and muttered unhappily but didn't wake completely.

There, now she could face a rescue party. Colby ducked out from under the half-crushed hull, and stood immediately so that she would be visible. She didn't want someone getting trigger-happy in an isolated spot on an alien world and thinking the noise and movement she created might be a threat. Worthington's people were well trained, but reflexes could be overpowering things under certain conditions.

Instead of familiar uniforms, she found herself looking almost directly into the face of a being who appeared to be human but couldn't be. However, the one fact she was certain about was that this was no Harimi! It was alone, for one thing, and Harimi always traveled in

male/female pairs. It was humanoid, in fact it was eerily like a human male of middle age—but it couldn't be human. There was no human presence anywhere in this sector, she knew that, except for those humans who were aboard the *Serengeti*. And herself, of course, and Mac.

No, the being wasn't alone. Half a dozen others like it, males ranging in apparent age from what looked like the forties down to a boy in his late teens, all fully bearded except that boy, appeared the instant the man she'd seen first uttered a low-pitched but commanding call.

Rough-knit fabrics and tanned hides made up their clothing, which was handsome and well-constructed for all its rude materials. Their feet were shod in sandals, the snow on the ground didn't seem to bother them in the least. And the longer she stared at them, the more Colby wanted to think they were members of her own species. Not that she'd understood the obvious leader's call to his band, but that meant nothing; there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of human languages and dialects besides the one that was known as "Standard."

If she was staring at them, they were certainly returning the favor. Behind her Mac groaned, coming to consciousness at last; otherwise she would have gone right on looking these people over, and they her, for some additional minutes. But now she turned away, since she had seen nothing to make her feel threatened by the newcomers' scrutiny, and knelt at her coxswain's side and gently touched his cheek. "Mac," she said, not using his rank as she would have done if others who could understand her had been present. "Easy, you're okay even if you don't feel that way right now."

His eyes came open, and recognition was there immediately. "Admiral," the deep young voice said, and then there was another groan. "Oh, gods, my head hurts! What happened, what...?"

He saw something over her shoulder then, and his eyes went wide. But his very disorientation made him see things more clearly than she had at first, because the next thing MacKenzie did was smile. He said with relief, "People! I don't know what humans are doing on Sacorra 6, Admiral, but I'm sure glad to see 'em."

* * *

"If you speak very slowly and carefully, and if I do the same, then we can understand each other." Now that she expected that to be the case, it was; Colby's brain no longer insisted on treating her host's words as gibberish. Mac was right, these were humans like themselves—and at

one time, their forebears had spoken the language that had since evolved into Standard.

She and the band's leader were outside the shuttle's remains, while two of his cohorts remained inside the wreck and helped Mac to dress himself in his wet uniform. Why the quartermaster couldn't come up with uniform fabrics that would dry more rapidly, Colby was sure she didn't know—except, perhaps, that being fire-resistant and melt-resistant was a great deal more important in space. And after all, Mac was a pilot and not a ranger who could be expected to be paddling around in the oceans and bogs of an alien world's surface.

The others of the native party were busily gathering up materials from the crash site, preparing salvage to be packed out of this high valley as soon as Mac could be made ready to travel. Clearly they were nervous about being here, and burying the Harimi dead didn't seem to enter their minds. Colby made a mental note to ask someone about returning to do that later, and to make a thorough search for the missing comm units; but right now her hosts' sense of urgency was so strong that it was contagious, and she realized that she and Mac must go with them immediately if they wanted to do so at all.

"You are righ', I un'erstan' you now." The leader had a way of swallowing certain of his consonants, but he was making an effort now to pronounce each syllable clearly. "We mus' go fro' here."

"Will more like those come?" Colby indicated the Harimi remains. If that was the only reason they were in such a rush to leave, she and Mac would be much better off waiting here for rescue than going somewhere else with these people who seemed not to want anything to do with Harimi. But Mac needed warmth, food, and medical care, and even primitive assistance would be better for him now than none at all. They had to take this chance, keeping both of them alive and as healthy as possible was the first consideration.

"I do no' know. But there are other dangers, and your luck of las' nigh' is not likely to las' if you stay here." The man turned and looked into the shelter, and nodded approvingly. "Your mate will need help, but we can go now."

"He's not my mate, he's my pilot," Colby said, and then damned herself when she saw the way her host's facial expression changed.

You're supposed to have had basic diplomatic training, Renata! I know, I know, you're the scientist and Lana's the diplomat—your job on this world is to

evaluate the impact of the Harimi's project to warm its climate to their idea of comfortable, you didn't come here prepared for a first contact situation. But you know better than to give a member of a completely unknown culture personal information that could be offensive, and it looks as if that's what you just managed to do.

Must have been because he's human, or at least appears that way. He looks familiar, you can understand each other's speech, therefore you let down your guard. Damn fool, you've known better than that since you were Mac's age or younger.

"You removed the clothing of a male not your mate?" That came out clearly enough. And to Colby's mild embarrassment, she realized that Mac was hearing it; the two young men who'd helped him dress were just hauling him to his feet outside the shuttle's fuselage.

"It was that or risk watching him die from last night's cold," Colby said, her voice firm. "I take it that I offended your customs...? I'm sorry, I still don't know what to call you."

An acknowledgment that she'd given unintended offense, followed quickly by a distraction. A positive distraction—sentient beings that didn't enjoy being asked their names and titles were few and far between. Maybe the crash had shaken her up more than she'd realized, maybe the cold had gotten to her too, but her mind was clear again now. She wouldn't screw up like that again, at least not soon.

"Shand," the man said, and nodded gravely as if this were the most formal kind of introduction. "I lead the People. And you are called?"

"Admiral Renata Colby, Environmental Services," she answered, and returned the nod. "But that's too long. You use one name, without titles? Then I'm called Ren, by those who address me using just my name. The male is called Mac."

Shand's eyes moved from Colby to MacKenzie, and the young officer had sense enough to nod even though moving his head made him wince visibly. Shand nodded back. Then the older man said, "He will not be able to walk far, and attempting to do so out of pride may cause him additional harm. Make a litter, carry him. But quickly, now!"

Was Shand swallowing fewer of his consonants, or was her ear adjusting to his speech still further? Colby wasn't sure, but she was relieved that her host seemed to have decided to forget about the differences between his people's sexual customs and hers.

Or had he? When she looked at the native leader again, fully intending to suggest that they hunt for the comm units while the litter

was being constructed, he was regarding her with a frown. After a moment's silence he said, "This is not a matter for a man to decide. When we reach our home, you will join the women and—Mac, that is his name?—will receive the care he needs for his injuries. And then the Wise Grandmother will tell us what is to be done about the two of you."

Another pause. Once again Colby was about to open her mouth and ask for help in locating the comm units when Shand added a suddenly concerned question: "Is either of you mated to another?"

"No." The admiral knew enough, now, so that she would have said that even if it had not been the truth. She had an uncomfortable feeling that if the answer was "yes" in either of their cases, the consequences would be far more severe; and she was not about to put either herself or her coxswain in harm's way because they'd inadvertently violated some primitive tribe's taboos.

She'd guessed right, Shand was satisfied. And now the makeshift litter was ready, and Mac had been trying to stay on his feet for long enough so that she didn't have to order him to lie down on it; he did that quite willingly.

HIGH PLACES

I solemnly swear, by all that I hold sacred, to supervise faithfully every sapient being placed in my charge. I will protect all such beings with my life, if so required; and I will give my clients' safety absolute and total priority over that of my colleagues. Excerpted from the Minder's Oath, as taken by all newly hired Direct Care workers — United Star Nations Central Government, Department of Inter-World Services, Bureau of Family Safety.

Chapter 1

“Jack, I’m sorry.” Star Guard Captain Maisie Thurlow whispered the words into a commlink that she thought had gone silent. So First Officer Jacques Qiero’s answer, reaching her helmet speakers in an equally hushed tone despite the racket all around them, made her start against her command chair’s restraint harness.

“For what, Maisie? You didn’t know this was gonna happen.” The familiar voice did what it always did. It centered her, and gave her back her focus.

No, she hadn’t known. Couldn’t have. Yet the captain must be held responsible, nevertheless, for all that happened aboard her ship. Authority she could delegate, but accountability clung to her no matter what.

So be it. Thurlow squared her shoulders and braced her feet against the ship’s bucking. Closed her ears to the screaming alarms, and spoke into the commlink on purpose this time. “All hands, this is the captain. Check in with your mates as soon as you can after we’re down. I’m assuming we won’t have a working intercom, but we will have a breathable outside atmosphere and gravity pretty close to T-normal. So get yourself out of the ship, and then get your helmet off so you can hear. If you need to shuck your suit so you can run better, do it! Stay alive, people. That’s your only priority right now. I’ll see you dirtside. Thurlow out.”

Dirtside on a dirt ball that didn’t even have a name on the star charts. Coming down through its atmosphere trailing fire, and hoping the shields would hold and their power source wouldn’t fail until the ship’s outer skin was no longer endangered by heat-generated friction. Trusting to restraint harnesses and envirosuits to protect their fragile Human bodies from the forces of such a ride, and then from whatever fires and fumes a crash landing would set loose inside the breached hull.

At least they had military-issue gear to guard them against all that, and at least they had years of training in how to get through this. Did she dare to hope that a band of untrained civilians, the oldest among them not long out of childhood, had survived a similar landing some 20 years earlier? Not all of them could have, common sense told her. But maybe some had. Survived not only landing, but everything that must have come afterward...Thurlow stopped listening to her ship, now that nothing she did in response to it could make a difference, and fixed a face from the past firmly in her mind.

I'm coming, Big Sister. Not quite like I promised I would, because I sure didn't plan on crashing my ship beside yours! But I'm coming after you anyway, at last. And no matter what things look like right now, I'm making you another promise. I'll get us both off this dirt ball somehow. Sometime. One way or another, I'll get you home.

With those words and Eve Thurlow's image filling her thoughts, she bid instinct be damned and forced her muscles to relax. Shut everything outside her body away from consciousness, and waited for the next few minutes to be over.

* * *

Waking up hurt. Thurlow expected that, but she hadn't expected it to hurt this much. The air inside her helmet still smelled and tasted as it should (although no one could ever call suit atmosphere "fresh"), but smoke outside it surrounded her when she opened her eyes. She couldn't feel the heat, but she knew the command deck must be hotter than hell because the only light penetrating the smoke came from flames. Greedy flames, through which she must walk if she wanted to get out of her crashed ship's remains.

The release on her harness had worked as it should. In training she'd always taken that for granted, but in this reality she recognized it as a huge blessing and claimed that blessing for an omen. The worst was over now. They'd set down, and she'd regained consciousness uninjured (never mind her screaming bruises!) inside an unbreached envirosuit. All the rest that survival required would follow, surely. She only had to take it one step at a time.

"Maisie! Come on, I got the hatch open!" She hadn't realized until now that silence surrounded her, in the midst of flames that must be roaring as everything flammable on the command deck went up. Her XO's helmet was pressed against hers, so his voice could reach her despite her dead commlink.

"Jack?" He wasn't hearing her, because he'd already moved away. Except for a gloved hand that gripped one of her arms, and hauled at her unmercifully. Thurlow heaved her body out of the command chair, and discovered that its tough fabric had begun smoldering beneath her. It caught as she moved clear, flaring sullenly instead of with the bright enthusiasm of so many other fires raging nearby. The heat was just beginning to make itself felt inside her suit.

That got her attention. The last of the detachment to which she'd awakened disappeared, and the physical discomfort from being pounded around inside her suit and against her harness got pushed down into a part of her awareness that could be spared no attention whatsoever right now. Heat shouldn't be able to get inside an envirosuit, built as it was to protect its wearer from the deep cold of space. So even though she couldn't smell the smoke surrounding it, her suit had been breached somehow, to some degree; and that meant she had a finite timeline for getting out of here. It wasn't going to take the ship's drive exploding (a thankfully unlikely event unless they took a direct hit in combat, or got too near a star) to cook her alive inside the self-contained little universe she wore.

Everything worked. Her legs moved awkwardly at first, but full control returned as she moved across the deck. The soles of her suit's self-boots sank into its softened surface and left tracks behind, as if she'd been hurrying along a waterside pathway that Quiero had already walked ahead of her. All of the bridge's work stations except Quiero's were still occupied. She needn't worry about saving those crew members, because each of the bodies lay at an angle no living human could assume.

There went any chance Thurlow had of pretending she could pull this off without Evie's life costing that of somebody else. Fleet hardware was bad enough, but lives...lives were different. Thurlow swallowed hard, but kept going. She had lost crew members before, although never under circumstances remotely like today's. Those circumstances might or might not control how she would feel about losing her bridge crew, later when she had time to reflect; but for the moment duty, training, and instinct all demanded that she do the same thing. Get through the hatch that Jacques Quiero was now holding shut with his body, to keep the outside atmosphere from blasting into the command deck and feeding the fires there another dose of oxygen. The first time he'd opened it had probably set things well enough alight. Yet the longer he held it shut, the more time it had to melt itself that way permanently...Thurlow thanked the God she didn't believe in for letting her regain consciousness, since one man working alone might or might not have been able to carry her through that hatch to safety. Or to whatever lay on its other side, which surely had to be safer than staying here.

Quiero heaved the hatch outward. As she dove through the opening, Thurlow felt rather than heard the roar rising behind her. Her XO followed, and rolled clear without trying to close the aperture from which flames now streaked out in greedy pursuit. The belching fire briefly enveloped his envirosuit, but had no power to scorch the fragile flesh within.

It was dark outside. Or it would have been, but for the torch the ruined starship offered. Thurlow fumbled for her helmet's fastenings until a grip around one of her wrists arrested the movement. Quiero's helmet pressed against hers again, and his voice rasped: "Look around, Maisie! Forest fire!"

Even breached as it must be, her suit still offered considerable protection against the fire rising from gnarled tree-like vegetation not far beyond the starship's wreckage. The ground between that flaming tree line and the ship's hull was already burned bare and black, and for a moment Thurlow hesitated as her eyes searched for a break in the flames. When she realized she wasn't going to find one, she simply plunged into the fire.

* * *

The ground sloped upward, and the herbage let her through. How far the conflagration would travel, she couldn't guess; but this blaze was sure to spread farther than any nature-caused planetary fire, because its intensity would be drying out the wood and leaves and other fuel ahead. In the silence of her damaged suit, Thurlow ignored the growing certainty that her air system was no longer doing its job. She couldn't take her helmet off to breathe better here, in air so superheated that its touch could set her hair ablaze and char her skin — never mind what it would do if drawn inside her lungs. Her only chance lay in making do with what remained inside her suit, and the usual strategy of minimizing physical exertion to conserve oxygen had no application here. She must move as fast as she could, virtually blinded by the brightness all around her and clueless as to how far she had yet to travel before reaching safety, and not let herself think about failing to survive. Her crew, however many of its members managed to emerge from this hell still living, needed her. And even if they didn't, her sister most certainly did. She wouldn't consider, now, the possibility that Eve Thurlow might no longer be alive somewhere on this planet. Or might never have made it here in the first place, all those lost years ago.

The climbing got harder, but the heat inside her suit stopped building at last. Her hair clung wetly to her scalp, and the rest of her felt just as soaked. Her eyes smarted as she blinked perspiration out of them, damning her inability to get at the stuff and wipe it away — damning that inability out loud, with those curses the first sounds she'd heard since landing except the brief exchange with Quiero followed by her own increasingly labored breathing. She emerged from the flames only when they could follow her no longer because she'd ascended beyond everything that fueled them, coming out onto bare ledge. Ledge that might, for all she could tell from inside this damnable suit, be dangerously hot from the fires below — as might the air around her. So she kept on climbing despite the growing pain in her chest, and the throbbing in her head that warned of both exhaustion and oxygen deprivation, until she crunched snow beneath her boots. In near darkness now, the flames glowing far below her, she sat down at last and raised her hands to her helmet. Disengaging its fastenings and lifting it over her head took the last of her strength.

The air that struck her sodden head threatened to flash freeze her sweat into a new kind of helmet, but for the moment it felt good anyway. She sat there in the cold night, and forced herself to breathe through her nose after a

few desperate gulps that hurt her chest worse than the past few minutes of oxygen-starved exertion. She wondered when she'd be able to use her voice again, because the next thing she must do was find the others. Who might actually be able to hear her, as soon as she got enough breath back to call out, thanks to the distance between her perch and the still raging fires below...the still spreading fires, that were traveling down slope now and finding plenty of fuel.

Dear God, help anyone who got off the ship and then ran down this mountain instead of up it!

Had she uttered that plea out loud, instead of thinking it as she'd intended? Perhaps not; but she'd heard someone's voice, and the fire's now muted roar hadn't drowned it out. Below, where her helmet had kept her from hearing anything except her own rasping breaths and pounding heartbeat, those flames must be deafening. She tried to speak deliberately when the voice didn't sound again, but all that came out of her mouth was a croak. How had she managed to get this thirsty without feeling it?

"Maisie! Maisie, where are you?" It wasn't Jack's voice, and it wasn't calling her "captain" as everyone else from her ship would have.

THE MINDER'S OATH

Chapter 1

“The creature had a mission for which it gave up its life. We are responsible for seeing that mission completed. We cannot rescue its comrades ourselves; we would kill them just as quickly as we killed the creature itself, if we brought them aboard one of our starships. So we must carry word, somehow, to others of their kind.”

Ala seldom spoke forcefully, and she'd never before spoken to this many of her fellow Rinii at once. The aging scientist could scarcely believe she was doing this now. Looking out over the Diplomatic Council's well filled chamber, meeting the gaze of each Council member in turn because to do otherwise would give unpardonable offense, she kept her boneless body upright on the raised platform by signaling its surface plates to lock themselves in place. Each Councilor twined around a resting-pole, and worked at a data station set within that pole. Ala, called before them after seasons of pleading — and after her report on the creature her research ship had snatched from a faraway planet when it signaled its need for emergency transport had been thoroughly analyzed by Council staff — neither had nor needed data access just now. She must make her case as best she could with voice and memory and intellect, and then accept whatever decision these representatives of the Rinii Federation of Sapient Worlds might render. She would have no second chance.

So what would she do, if the Council refused to authorize the mission that would with any luck be her last venture into deep space? Never in all the centuries of Ala's life had she faced an absolute conflict between duty as she perceived it and orders as her superiors had issued them. Would that happen to her now, at what should be her career's glorious apex? As if a career as obscure as hers could have such a thing...!

She would have trembled if her body plating had allowed it. She finished her presentation by adding, “We have located the creature's world of origin. That seems the surest place to find others of its kind that will be capable of understanding its last message, and of rendering the aid it died to secure for those under its protection.”

Now she could lower herself from locked-plate erectness and slide across the platform and down its exit ramp. Could take her place at the data station provided for that purpose, outside the Council's chamber and away from its members' direct view, and respond to each question that individual Councilors might pose. She no longer wanted to tremble, because being cross

examined over a commlink of sorts felt just as familiar as standing before a mass of fellow beings had felt unfamiliar. As a Rinii scientist, she'd been doing this since her first days of training.

"You're certain that the creature's memory engrams translated accurately? That you understand what it truly wanted, and that you haven't misread its worthiness to command our assistance?" The first question came in before she had time to settle herself, and Ala read genuine excitement in the fact that it was actually two questions asked without a pause between.

"Yes. I'm certain. Strange as the creature was to me in terms of its body systems and life requirements, its thoughts were remarkably like those of a Rinii." Would she give offense, with all of the Council and its staff members listening in, by answering thusly? If so, Ala couldn't help it. As a scientist, her first duty must always be to the truth. Not to species pride, and certainly not to any ancient beliefs this Councilor or any of the others might hold to fondly. "Which conforms to the theory that true intelligence is essentially the same, no matter what sort of physical husk may have evolved to house it."

This was going well. She knew that when no one contradicted her, or even chided her for adding that pedagogical explanation. Which she hadn't meant as giving instruction, and therefore possible insult, to one of her betters; she'd "spoken" via the data station automatically, after scores of seasons spent giving instruction and guidance to those younger and less experienced within her own profession.

The Councilors had caught her excitement. For the first time since Rinii travelers lifted from their home planet in their first primitive spacecraft, and began building their now vast network of sapient allies, they were being handed a chance for first contact with a species completely unlike their own. With beings so strange in appearance, and so incompatible in their environmental requirements, that the biggest problem Ala and her team faced might well be finding a way to get the creatures called "Humans" to recognize the Rinii as fellow sapients. The being that had called itself by a curious combination of air vibrations — air of a sort that Ala could no more breathe, and live, than *it* had been able to breathe Rinii atmosphere and survive for more than a few agonizing seconds — had not been able to conceive of Ala's transporter room crew as anything but a terrifying group of animal predators. So Ala had to assume that Miles Mindlothian's fellow Humans would take the same view when they, too, saw their first Rinii.

So be it. Ala knew her duty, and so — she was realizing with relief, as the questions reached her station one after another — did the Diplomatic Council's four score members.

EVE'S PLANET

Chapter 1

Apple green. So Mother and Papa had both called the fair weather skies of Eve's Planet. Edouard Quiero had never seen an apple, green or otherwise, but that description came to mind anyway as he nestled deeper into the furs surrounding him and tightened his arms around his wife. Pre-dawn twilight was turning into full daylight now, rapidly, and the sky above this high plateau was lightening toward its daytime hue. A beautiful morning in spring...he had dreamed of this day for so long.

A small thing, a foolish thing, really; this wish to greet the dawn here with Meg in his arms, and no one else around them. He'd had it since their early adolescent years, when Beck, Meg's father and predecessor as community leader, had led the entire band upward past High Camp at the end of each springtime pilgrimage. Only those few who couldn't dare the rare nighttime climb stayed behind, then. Everyone else regarded coming here at the start of their year's High Camp phase as a ritual of — well — religious significance.

At least Eddie's grandmother, Vera, had described it that way. And neither of his parents had contradicted her.

Vera's husband, his grandfather Rene, lay buried in the same grave with the woman who'd killed him, just out of sight from the lifeboat wreckage against which Eddie Quiero rested his back. Not far from that grave another, empty one lay topped by a rock cairn that provided the best vantage point; but Eddie wasn't purist enough to insist on greeting the dawn by standing on that cairn's top. This was how he'd dreamed it, as a boy poised on manhood's edge. Eddie and Meg cuddling together in warm furs, with the sky turning lighter and greener above them every minute.

"I wonder how Rennie's doing with Cass and Josef," Meg said, with her usual talent for shattering her husband's romantic daydreams.

They'd made a dozen round trips between Winter Camp and High Camp in the years since he and Meg had buried Beck elsewhere on this plateau. Not once had Eddie felt free, at the start of all those other

springs, to suggest this admittedly frivolous excursion. Always there'd been a reason, a good reason, why it wasn't possible...usually because Meg was pregnant, or nursing a child. Eddie's mother, Maisie, hadn't let either of those conditions keep her from the annual pilgrimage of his boyhood, but with Meg it was different. Everything on Eve's Planet was different, after the *St. Helena* came and went.

"Rennie's fine." Eddie realized he was starting to feel too warm already, as the sun streamed down onto the arctic tundra where Meg's grandmother, Eve, had first set foot on the planet that now bore her name. He opened his mouth again to ask his wife to move, and then shut it as Meg pushed his arms aside and climbed to her feet. So he stood up, too, and started bundling up the furs for their downward climb. "He probably doesn't even remember Shari taking care of him, and he's used to us leaving him for awhile."

"Callie remembers Shari taking care of her. She doesn't like Cass half as well. But she's almost old enough to take care of herself now, of course." Meg rummaged in one of their packs for breakfast materials. "I can't believe I had her 11 years ago this spring! I hope I never cut it that close again."

"I hope not, either." Eddie remembered how white-faced Meg had arrived at High Camp on that trip, her first spring migration as leader, and he shuddered. He still had no idea how long she'd been in labor before arriving safely at their warm season village allowed her to admit it. He only knew that Callie, their first child, had been born before the sun reached its zenith that day.

Of the two sons born between Callie and Rennie, their toddler, neither had made it past the fourth birth anniversary. Life on Eve's Planet was all Eddie Quiero knew, but that didn't stop him from perceiving it as brutal for the very young. As it no doubt would be for the very old, also, someday when they had such people to worry about; and as it was already for those with chronic illnesses or maiming injuries. Not to mention for women in childbearing...he didn't want to think about that, though. The memory of his second sister's death was still too fresh. Would he ever stop hearing the way she'd screamed? Or, after her strength to do that failed, how she'd moaned during the last hours before unconsciousness shut down and death finally followed?

Even the rawest of memories faded eventually. Experience told him that, and Eddie hugged the knowledge close as he turned his thoughts away from the stone hut at Winter Camp where Shari's life had

ended. He and Meg were still alive, and so were Callie and Rennie. So, also, was his sister Cass; and so was Cass's family. He didn't trust either of Meg's half brothers and their wives to watch his own children for long enough to fetch water, let alone for this overnight trek. Rennie might not like the older of his aunts as well as he'd liked the younger, but life didn't care what anyone liked. It delivered whatever fate decreed, and all any Human could do was — well — deal with it.

“Do you think they'll ever come back?”

Meg's question caught her husband off guard, so completely that for a moment he had no idea what she meant. Then he realized, and drew a steadying breath. “They will if they can,” he said, and meant it. “I don't know about that alien woman, Ala. I don't know about the old minder, Cashman. But I do know about my parents, Meg. They promised they'd come back, and that means they're coming someday. Whenever they can.”

“Or whenever they've got a real cure for the lowland madness.” Meg sighed, and lifted her face toward the sky. “Which might never happen. I don't suppose I ought to care, Eddie. We have a good life here, even though it's hard sometimes. I wouldn't know anything else was possible, if the old ones hadn't told me...if I hadn't seen the books from the *Saltonstall*, before Carl trashed them. Sometimes I wish I didn't know about any of it. Don't you?”

“I guess I need to think about that one, love.” Not once in his life had it occurred to Edouard Quiero to wonder, whether or not knowing about the larger Human universe — the place from which his parents and grandparents had come, before crashing here — was a good thing. As much as he prided himself on having a poet's soul, and as much as he thought about Meg as lacking that kind of imagination, sometimes she surprised him with a flash of insight that would never have come to him.

“Doesn't matter.” Meg was her familiar self again with those words. “It is what it is, as Vera used to say! I just miss them, Eddie. I thought that was gonna stop, sooner or later. But it hasn't stopped. Instead, I swear it just keeps getting worse.”

Now, *that* he understood. Eddie put his arms around his wife and pulled her close for a moment, holding her tightly and not saying a word. Sometimes they needed none; and this, most definitely, was one of those times.

“Sixty? That makes you a spring chicken compared to me, you know.” Forrest Cashman hadn’t looked his age on the day Maisie Thurlow first met him, 12 years earlier when the *St. Helena*’s shuttle set down outside High Camp. He didn’t look his age now, either, but he did look older. Not yet pushing the century mark, at which point Humans who’d had modern medical care all their lives generally entered frail old age; but moving toward such a time visibly now, so that the medic vetting crew members for the refitted *St. Helena* had shaken his head on the day he’d learned that Cashman intended joining the ship for this long delayed journey. Elders traveled through space all the time, of course. But they did so as passengers on comfortably outfitted star liners, not as crew on a military surplus vessel headed far off the commercially traveled space lanes.

This year Maisie couldn’t make the familiar joke that had marked her birthdays for the last three decades. She couldn’t say that with a 66-year-old mother, she could not possibly be expected to accept turning 60; because Vera, who’d emerged from a long stay in stasis to find herself only six chrono years her daughter’s senior, would have no more birthdays now. She hadn’t lived to make this trip. Nor had a lot of the others, the original castaways...had the same thing that caused madness in Humans born elsewhere, on all but the highest Eve’s Planet elevations, also left those who had spent over half their lives there vulnerable to early death?

If so, those who had crashed on that world after them appeared to be having better luck. Maisie at 60 looked no older than any other Guard officer embarking on well-earned retirement, and neither did the man who stood beside her in the *St. Helena*’s former wardroom as she picked up a cake slicer to carry out a birthday ritual that none of their children had ever had the chance to perform.

Were all three of them still alive? If so, they must surely have children of their own by now. Maisie wondered how many there were, and what their parents had told them about the generation that had left Eve’s Planet aboard the *St. Helena* 12 long years ago.

“Felicia ought to be here,” Jacques Quiero said softly, so that only the two people closest to him would hear. Maisie on one side, and Forrest Cashman on the other.

Cashman raised a white eyebrow, but said nothing. Maisie lifted her eyes to meet those of her husband for a moment before she turned

her attention back to cutting the cake. Jack was right, of course. She knew it, Forry knew it, and so did Jar, who was holding down the bridge just now. But not even Forry's influence as a minder retiree had been enough to get Felicia Cates out of the military hospital where she'd spent the past 12 years, still adrift in the half waking, half sleeping state to which she'd emerged from sedation after being forcibly hauled off Eve's Planet. Her condition continued to baffle the brightest minds Human medicine owned, and that made hauling her back to Eve's Planet now pointless.

"Did you make a wish, Captain?" someone wanted to know, from across the table in this compartment that now served as dining facility for the whole ship's company. One of the young scientists — a biochemist, she thought? — who'd signed onto this venture in hopes of getting a thesis from it, or for other reasons far more compelling than whatever stipend Minder Headquarters was paying for their services.

"Yes, I did. But I can't tell you what it was, or it won't come true!" Maisie reminded the youngster, as she came up with the smile he expected despite the pang his question caused. For she had, indeed, made a wish...one that could not possibly come true.

TO THE FARTHEST OUTLANDS

Chapter 1

“I’d go with you if they’d let me. You know that, don’t you, Solly?” Frederick, Crown Prince of Novaya Zemlya, touched his promised wife’s face with a gentle hand.

The purposeful chaos of an orbital navy yard swirled around them, and even now Marisol Marshwood could not ignore that chaos entirely. Even with her beloved standing close enough to reach out and pull her into his arms...even with his eyes holding hers, and searching her soul.

He could not embrace her here. Neither a royal nor even the most junior of navy captains could behave in such a, well, *Human* way while others watched. Should she remind him that he ought not to have come? That seeing her off in person inconvenienced dozens of people, from his own security staff all the way to the yard’s dock monkeys?

No, she wouldn’t tell him that again. Even like this, with no touch more intimate allowed than a brush of his hand against her cheek, having him with her until the last possible moment meant everything.

“Of course I know that,” she said, so softly that she hoped none of the embarkation deck’s powerful audio pickups would catch her words. “I love you, Freddie, and I know you love me just as much. Thanks for letting me do this.”

One final mission, her first and only in command of a combat-capable starship. She had to do this before she came ashore forever. Before Lieutenant Commander Marisol Marshwood became the crown prince’s wife, who could go on serving in Novaya Zemlya’s navy only as a desk pilot. Or, more likely, as a figurehead; a symbol of the Royal Dominion’s might, made all the more powerful by having a deep space command record to her credit. And even that must stop forever, someday when Frederick ascended to the throne.

“Letting you do this? How would you suggest that I go about stopping you, my love?” Frederick’s mouth curved in rueful but genuine amusement as he moved in, convention and protocols be damned, to kiss her. Lightly and briefly, and only on the cheek; but even that buss would have his handlers twittering at him, later.

They might as well fuss about this as about some other breach on his part, Marisol reminded herself with a sudden grin. No matter where her Freddie went, and no matter what he did, at least a daily scolding from his handlers must surely follow! She fought down her desperate desire to throw her arms around

him, and cling during what could turn out to be their last few seconds of physical togetherness. Not for his sake and that of his handlers, but because at least some members of her brand new crew must surely be watching; and she undoubtedly looked young and callow enough to their eyes already. She didn't need to reinforce any notion her people might already have of a wealthy noblewoman — no, make that girl! — relieving her boredom, and trying to give her empty life meaning, by taking command of a mission that ought to be led by someone more deserving.

They could not think they needed someone better qualified, though. She knew the truth of that, because she'd worked as hard as any young officer could have in order to stand here today. Wearing both the insignia of rank that she had earned, and that of a starship's master or mistress after God.

She laughed as she answered Frederick's question. "You couldn't!" she said. "But it means so much, Freddie, that you've never made me choose. I have to get out of here now. You'll make sure everything's in place for the wedding?" That wasn't a bridegroom's job, but this particular bride could not carry it out; and she had no family left to do it for her.

"Yes, Solly. You know I will." The man who could pin a politician's or diplomat's ears back as easily as he could slap down a fawning courtier answered her with gentle patience. He always had, from their shared days in the palace nursery onward. Did she remember seeing anyone else's face before his? Or feeling anyone else's earlier touch?

"Captain." Her XO's voice reached her through the newly installed comm chip lying between skin and bone behind her right ear. She hated it already, but accepted it along with all else that captaincy required.

The chip could not transmit or receive thoughts. Only sounds, so she answered by speaking aloud into her commlink. "On my way, Hal." She nearly added, "Sorry," before she remembered that captains didn't apologize for being the last to board and taking their own sweet time about doing so.

"Nag call," she said to Frederick, with a final smile. "I know they're not gonna sail without me, but I'd still better get moving!"

He grabbed her as she was already turning toward the airlock secured to the patrol ship *Watchbird's* matching one, and he spun her back around and into his arms. Probably the news channels all over Novaya Zemlya would be humming with images of this royal impropriety, minutes or even seconds after Lieutenant Commander Marisol Marshwood took her starship out of spacedock at last; but for this moment neither crown prince nor Navy captain cared. Solly kissed her lover back, and clung to him for one fierce, possessive moment. After that she pulled free and ran.

* * *

Winston Daimler watched the scanner readouts as if his life depended on seeing every detail they disclosed. Because, in fact, his life did depend on that; and so did the lives of every member of his crew. So far no one in the Novaya Zemlya system gave any sign of detecting his ship or the other ships lying with his, behind the concealing bulk of the system's outermost gas giant. Six ships — not much of a battle group, but without skillful navigation added to sophisticated jamming technology they would still have been picked up by the myriad buoys that kept Novaya Zemlya's navy aware of whatever approached their system from space beyond it. Daimler and his elite group had pulled off a near miracle by coming in undetected through the whole critical period between dropping out of hyperspace and reaching the gas giant's shadow.

If an inbound ship entered the system from the same direction, his people had damned well better spot it before it spotted them. Although what they could do about it, that would not set off alarms all through Novaya Zemlya's warning systems as well as aboard its orbital defenses, he had no clue despite hours spent trying to come up with a workable strategy. There just wasn't a way for one ship to take out another while inside a star system and do it quietly. No matter how he handled that, if it happened his flotilla would lose the vital advantage of surprise.

So it had better not happen, that was all. The navy yard that lay above Novaya Zemlya in a vast network of orbiting docks and stations held precious few spaceworthy vessels at present, and the only one prepped for travel — let alone for combat — would soon launch and head out system, hopefully without passing anywhere near the gas giant behind which Win Daimler's forces lay. Not that one lousy patroller could hope to give his six ships, each of them with many times its mass and carrying several times its armament, all that much trouble. But still, he wanted it gone before he made his move. That would make the raid that followed faster, and cleaner, and altogether more successful.

The patrol ship sailed free from its retracting docking clamps. It maneuvered briefly, and then picked up speed. It would leave the system within minutes, and its course would take it right past Win Daimler and his battle group.

Daimler swore. Then he said to his pickup, "Commodore to all captains. Go! Right now!"

* * *

The ships came from behind Zeus, the largest and outermost planet orbiting Novaya Zemlya's sun. How the warning buoys lying even farther out had missed their arrival, Solly Marshwood could not imagine. She would let the Navy's scientists figure that out later. Right now she had to deal with the failure's consequences, and she could not afford to let wildly unequal odds freeze her brain the way it wanted to freeze after processing what her eyes had just told it.

Six of them. Big ones all, at least relative to her *Watchbird*. Which was built to fight, yes; but mostly to protect itself, as it roamed the reaches of space that prosperous and expanding Novaya Zemlya either controlled now or hoped to control eventually.

What exploded from Zeus's shadow now wore the colors of a system don. The hull of each vessel blazed with, of all things, a dragon from ancient Terran mythology. Six bright gold and crimson dragons, based (according to the royal nursery's governess from long ago) on the mythical creature from the banner of England's St. George. That seemed fitting to Solly, somehow. For England had been an island nation that for a few decades — or as long as a standard century, maybe? — held and ruled an empire stretching all the way around the home world's globe, just as the Don of the New Hibernia System stretched his rule across most of a star sector. Which shared one tenuous border with Novaya Zemlya's territory.

In a few weeks she would have reached that border, and despite differences of mass and armament she would have encountered any dragon-emblazoned vessel without a qualm. With plenty of maneuvering room, and the way always open — thanks to the emptiness of deep space around her — to jump the little *Watchbird* into hyperspace, and force even a vastly larger adversary to either attempt pursuit or let the prey escape. Fighting was, after all, not a patroller's mission. The *Watchbird* and its like sailed the spaceways to gather information and report everything learned back to Novaya Zemlya. No one had ever intended for a single patroller to face a half dozen fully armed behemoths alone while trapped inside its home star system, with its captain forbidden to do what she would have done in a heartbeat if confronting this situation in its anticipated setting. Here she could not race past her adversaries, reach open space, and jump to safety. Here she must stand and fight, however hopelessly, and die a hero. Because running and living to fight another day, and leaving her home world without even such ridiculously small protection as the *Watchbird* might give it, would mean never coming home to what was left of Novaya Zemlya after this raiding party finished its mission. If her XO, or even one of their junior officers, did not take command away from her as soon as she made her cowardly intentions clear...Marshwood spoke into her pickup. "Battle stations! All hands, this is the captain. Clear for action! Mr. Warren, prepare to engage the enemy!"

What happened next made no sense. Instead of the *Watchbird* coming about and its weapons starting to blaze, the patrol ship's controls froze. Its forward velocity slackened, its armaments stayed off line, and then its heading changed — but not because its helmsman had responded to commands from captain or XO. It moved straight toward one of the enemy ships, instead. Inexorably approaching that vessel's belly doors, which opened as the distance between them closed. After which the bigger ship's bulk swallowed Solly Marshwood's little *Watchbird* whole.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nina with Katie-Kat, November 2005
(photo by Eva Marie Osier)

Nina M. Osier (pronounced “9-UH”) was born with a sun tan in Camden, Maine, toward the end of the post-World War II baby boom. Her parents, a commercial fisherman and a reading teacher, taught her to love books, the English language, and the Maine coast.

After graduating from New Hampshire College (now Southern New Hampshire University) and working for several years as a high school teacher, accountant, theology student, and business manager, Nina found her niche preserving future history as Director of Records Management Services at the Maine State Archives. She especially enjoys using ideas suggested by her "day job" while writing her science fiction tales, and loves to explain that day job's purpose with these words: "I make sure everything that should be in the Starship Enterprise's library computer will survive long enough to get there." Nina lives on a quiet street in Augusta, Maine, where she writes, gardens, and wishes humans didn't have to waste time sleeping. She welcomes visits from her readers at:

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