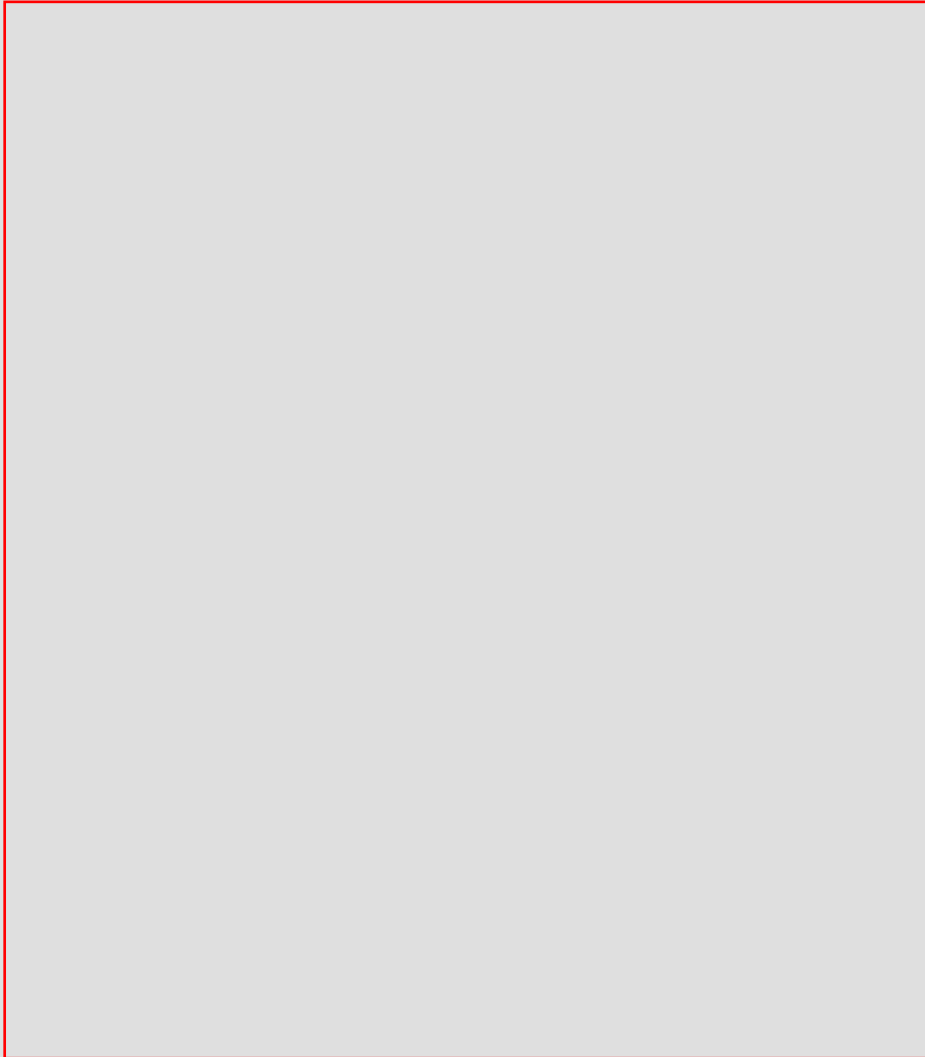


Exile's End



By Nina M. Osier

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 tractorred, 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.

CHAPTER 2

Xanthe Nordstrom (who, like most women of her heritage, used her mother's surname - "sons bear the father's name, daughters the mother's name" as the old adage put it) woke slowly and with difficulty. She was lying on a bunk, which didn't necessarily mean she was aboard a ship but it did make that likely. The sense of artificial rather than natural gravity was what made her certain this was either a ship or a space station. She'd been conceived, born, and reared aboard her father's ship, and to her this was the kind of gravity that felt natural - for all its ever-changing, slight variations, that so discomforted dirtsiders and actually gave some of them spacesickness! - not that steady, unvarying pull of a planetary body's mass and rotation.

Xanthe was feeling a bit nauseated herself right now, but that had nothing to do with gravity. It had to do with the stunning she and her twin had absorbed, when their tractored shuttle had finally been brought into a ship's cargo bay and its hatch had been forced open. She hadn't even seen their attackers. The hatch had glowed with energy applied from outside the shuttle, it had opened with a tormented shriek, and stunner fire had literally filled its small cabin. Otherwise she and Jason would have had the chance to use their own sidearms, and that was exactly why they hadn't been given the opportunity.

She got her eyes open, finally, and then shut them again at the pain that even dim lighting caused her. She lay very still for a deliberate moment, letting her mind explore her body; and what she felt reassured her. She was stiff and sore, as if her muscles had all contracted so tightly that they'd been slightly strained (a common enough reaction to stunning); her head still ached, and she knew her eyes would be sensitive to bright light for as long as another hour or two; but that was the extent of her injuries, and she was thankful. In all her eighteen years she'd never before been the target of a stunner, and she knew that some humans reacted much more seriously to its action on the nervous system. Some people even died, although of course that wasn't the intent of the person firing the weapon. But, as her elder brother Jock had always told her when overseeing her practice shots, you didn't fire a stunner at anyone or anything that you weren't willing to kill if necessary.

The next time she opened her eyes, the light was bearable. She sat up, very slowly and carefully, and looked around her.

A ship, of course. A small stateroom aboard a freighter, more than likely. On the opposite bunk she was not surprised (although she did allow herself to be relieved) to see her twin. Jason lay very still, only the even rise and fall of his chest reassuring her that he lived.

She went to him as swiftly as she could without causing herself another wave of sickness. His pulse was strong and steady under her fingertips; so she left him alone after that single, careful touch, because waking a stunner victim before nature did so was at best unwise and at worst impossible. He would recover in his own good time, and she would let him do so.

She turned toward the cabin's door, and was amazed to find it unsecured. Now, what kind of idiot would go to all the trouble of tractoring them aboard with comms blocked - stunning them unconscious - throwing them into a stateroom to recover - and then leave the door unlocked? But she went through that door, making sure it closed but did not lock behind her, and glanced up and down the passageway outside.

And promptly heard footsteps, and voices. Stern, angry voices, coming toward her from around a bend in the passage. So she went in the opposite direction, with as much speed as she could manage without magnifying her headache enough to cause vertigo.

There. A ladder, leading to - where? If this ship's layout in any way resembled that of her father's, the quarters for ordinary crew (which two bunks to a small cabin would indicate - the captain, the captain's family, and the officers had more personal space, although no one ever had what seemed to be enough) would be directly under the starboard docking port. Would there be a shuttle waiting there on the other end of an access tube, or hard-docked to an airlock? If this ship still orbited Chaitanya, that wasn't out of the realm of possibility. She would have a look, anyway; and the worst thing that could happen was that someone would catch her at it and throw her back into that cabin with Jason. They wouldn't kill her, or deliberately hurt her. If that had been the purpose, it would have happened already.

No, someone had gone to a lot of trouble to get the Valeria twins into that cabin in reasonably good health; so that same someone would be motivated to keep them that way. Xanthe climbed the ladder with

a starborn child's nimble ease, despite the throbbing that still filled her skull.

She was exultant at what she found at the ladder's head. Indeed, there was a docking port; indeed, an access tube was attached and it led to another ship. Or shuttle. Or somewhere that wasn't her captor's vessel.

For a moment she felt a twinge of guilt at leaving Jason behind her, still helpless and unconscious; but she put that feeling aside as soon as she became aware of it, because she couldn't help her twin by sitting beside him waiting for him to wake up a prisoner. She might, however, be able to free herself and help free him if she could just get through that access tube undetected.

Incredible that it wasn't guarded at this end; incredible that it wasn't guarded at the other end, where she emerged into a smaller compartment among storage lockers and bins and hanging equipment racks. She paused there just long enough to hear voices again - voices on the other side of the access tube, which meant that they could not belong to friends or potential friends. Then she opened a locker, removed enough of its contents (soft-fabric envirosuits, easily lifted or pushed aside even by her weakened hands) to make a space large enough for her body, and climbed in. She curled herself into an almost fetal position, covered herself with the envirosuits, and pulled the locker's lid down.

And once she was in darkness again, with her immediate goal accomplished, her adrenaline rush let her down with an almost palpable physical and psychological crash. She lost consciousness so swiftly that all she remembered feeling, afterward, was surprise.

Cadet-Lieutenant Linn Gelsey of the Interstellar Guard patrol ship Nova was feeling disgusted and disappointed. He had been so certain that he would find an irregularity in that freighter's logs, its authorization codes, its crew roster - somewhere! Because until and unless he found such an irregularity, he could take forced boarding of the ship only as far as a computer search. He couldn't physically check all its compartments, verify that the three missing young people (and two missing older adults - one elderly female, the Robie girl's "companion"; one ordinary crewman from the Callon, who had been piloting since neither the girl nor her old chaperone knew how) were not aboard - or, as he would have much preferred, find them and free them; not unless he could first gain search privileges by finding something suspicious on sensors from his own ship or in the suspect vessel's own computers. And he'd been able to do neither, so he was returning to his patrol ship without having accomplished a blankety-blank blasted thing.

He hesitated at the access tube's entrance, still glancing around him, still hoping he might see or hear or otherwise detect something - anything - that would serve as sufficient cause to begin a thorough physical search. There was nothing. The freighter's captain, a middle-aged woman who was hard of face but polite of manner, was looking at him quizzically (and with, he suspected, carefully concealed amusement). "Lieutenant, if you're finished - I'd like to get underway as soon as possible," she said

finally, giving him more courtesy than he merited by treating his rank as though it were regular Guard instead of cadet service only. "I have a deadline to meet, you see."

"All right then, Captain." Gelsey nodded, not too pleasantly but without any obvious rudeness. "You're cleared for departure. Sorry for the inconvenience, but we do have to do this from time to time."

"I understand," the captain said, in a tone that indicated she understood much more than either party to this conversation would admit. "Safe passage to you, Lieutenant, and to your comrades."

"Safe passage to you, ma'am." All the way into the nearest black hole, preferably. Gelsey moved through the access tube, almost floating near its center where the two ships' artificial gravity fields didn't quite meet, and was soon safe in his own small vessel.

I'd like nothing better than to cast that tube off while that young fool is still in the middle of it, the woman he'd just left thought as she watched him go. She had little liking for the Interstellar Guard in general, and less for young cadet lieutenants who presumed to use their new-found authority to harass civilian shipmasters.

Besides, this kid was a bit too sharp for comfort. He knew, she realized with cold clarity. He knew she had those three youngsters aboard, and that shielding their presence from his ship's sensors was simple enough for any captain who really wanted to keep such a secret. Later in his career, if she and her colleagues were foolish enough to let him live that long, Linn Gelsey would be as dangerous an opponent as either of his parents. But just now he had only the instincts, plus the barest beginnings of the skills. He certainly didn't have the resources of a ship-of-the-line at his disposal, and he certainly didn't have the years of experience and the solid self-confidence that would have been required to take the risk of searching this ship illegally and then justifying his action based on what he would so certainly have found.

Which was fine with the captain of the pseudo-trader, of course. She allowed herself a small sigh of relief as she returned to her control room, gave the orders that were necessary to seal the docking port and let the patrol ship retract its access tube, and then gave the additional orders that would take her ship away from Chaitanya Spaceport as fast as possible.

Linn Gelsey was sitting in the pilot's chair in the patrol ship's control room. A ship this small couldn't dignify its command center by calling it the "bridge," although he'd heard enough green cadets use that conceit; that even included his two shipmates, before he had set their thinking straight on their first day as a team. Since he was a Guard brat and they were glorified civilians - Angel Niarchos from a colony world somewhere far out on the edges of settled space, Tom Pullen a trader's son putting in his required three years so he could get master's papers someday when he would inherit his father's starship - they had accepted the correction without being particularly annoyed. That, of course, had been two years

ago. The three of them had spent their first phase of service, as did all cadets, in the most basic sort of training ("boot camp," as it was called for reasons long ago lost in time) aboard a base station or a full-sized warship; then they'd been assigned to the little Nova together, and since their teaming had worked as well as did most such combinations they had been allowed to stay together for the rest of their required tour.

Angel would enter merchant service with an aunt's shipping line, she'd decided during the past few weeks as the three of them prepared to wind down their association and leave their patrol ship for their regular careers. Tom, of course, had a life all charted out for him - and fortunately for Tom, it was exactly the life he wanted. And Linn Gelsey had never had any doubt in his mind about what he would do. He would take the oath that would make him an officer in the regular Guard, and would go where he was sent and serve where he was needed for the rest of his days. And he expected to be as happy in that life, and hoped to be as successful in it, as either of his parents.

He was not a tall man, not heavily built or impressively handsome. He was brown-haired, brown-eyed, with skin that his mother called "coffee-colored" and unkind schoolmates had once called "muddy." But it was clear skin, and his slender body was strong and his reflexes were swift. So was his mind. He could learn new things easily, and he could take a mass of information and make sense of it even when he had to do so surrounded by the furious demands of combat. Most important of all, he could make decisions and live with them even when they turned out to be wrong. That, his father had often told him, was the greatest prerequisite for starship command. Being unable to decide could be fatal immediately; but being eaten alive by self-doubt after a wrong decision was in the long run just as deadly, so it was better to act with confidence as long as you could admit it if you'd been mistaken and as long as you learned from that mistake. And, of course, as long as your mistakes weren't too frequent and as long as you managed to survive them!

Linn smiled now as he stretched his long legs out before his chair and allowed himself a luxurious yawn. He wouldn't dwell on his disappointment at not being able to locate the missing trader-kids aboard what he knew damn well was a pirate-owned vessel operating with legitimate trader's papers. He had done all he could to find them, now it was someone else's job, and he was taking his patrol ship back to base for the last time. In a few days he would be no longer a cadet-lieutenant, but a real live ensign; he would have time to spend with his parents; and then he would have his first real Guardsman's assignment.

He only hoped that either those kids were dead and out of danger that way, or that someone would find them and get them back to their families before that predatory female captain did whatever she had in mind with them. Since the holoimages he'd seen of Jason Valeria, Xanthe Nordstrom, and Kyla Robie had shown them to be physically attractive and very young, he didn't like what he suspected as the purpose of their kidnapping. Each would bring a high price in certain outworld slave markets - for purposes that had nothing to do with hard physical labor.

Enough, he thought. Don't dwell on it. You've decided that, now follow through!

"Linn," said Angel's insistent voice. Her tone made him suspect that she'd had to speak twice to get

his attention, which was not acceptable because he was after all sitting in a patrol ship's sorry excuse for a captain's command chair. "Look at this. Please."

They were informal with each other aboard ship; they had to be, or they would have driven each other mad during their months in space together. Linn moved to look over his shipmate's shoulder, and promptly realized the significance of the readings on her panel of environmental monitors.

"So. We have a passenger, do we?" Gelsey's voice was soft, but his brown eyes were very cool. He touched the comm and spoke to his other comrade, who was in the bunkroom and probably sound asleep. "Tom, wake up. We have a stowaway somewhere on board."

"What?" came a sleepy but startled response.

"You heard me, Tom. Get some clothes on and get up here to take the conn. Angel and I will search the ship. Arm yourselves, both of you; I don't expect trouble from this particular stowaway, but who knows?" Gelsey smiled. He was delighted with this turn of events.

Which kid would it be? And how had it been possible? But it had to be one of those three youngsters, because neither of the older missing ones was likely to have been swift or agile or even small enough to make that secretive journey through the unguarded access tube while the patrol ship and freighter had been docked (he hadn't had his end guarded because he had no need to take such a precaution; the freighter captain had not done so, of course, because her whole goal for the inspection had been to appear as innocent and as harmless as possible).

Now maybe he would find out what his comrades back at Chaitanya Spaceport would need to know in order to get the remaining prisoners located and freed. Nova was still barely within comm range of Chaitanya, so the timing of Angel's discovery couldn't have been better.

A few minutes later he was opening the largest of the storage lockers in the small compartment off the access port, while Angel held a blaster at ready to cover him. As if the person inside the locker could, in her present state of health, be a threat to anyone.

She was curled into fetal position, covered and almost smothered by envirosuit fabric. She was a small, slim young woman; a mane of hair so dark it was almost black covered her face even when he'd lifted the suits away from her. When he lifted her out of the locker and placed her gently on the deck, with a survival blanket cushioning its hard metal, she remained in that tightly curled position. She was barely breathing. Her heart was beating, but he wondered how long she'd been getting less than an ideal amount of oxygen - and the blue tinge of her lips didn't reassure him one bit.

Linn Gelsey gently forced the young woman's limbs out of that fetal curl, and was vastly relieved when she groaned in protest. That groan caused her to draw in a deep breath, and then she was gasping and the blue color was disappearing from her lips. She shivered, and uttered a low moan when she tried to

wrap her arms around her body for warmth.

Linn reached for a second blanket and wrapped it around her, lifting her to sitting position as he did so. He was still kneeling beside her on the deck; he gathered her into his arms, and held her both to lend her his own body's warmth and to reassure her as she fought her way toward consciousness. Stunning, he thought. A stunning whose aftermath she had fought, saving her life by doing so; but now her body was exacting its revenge for having been so abused, because she was whimpering with pain as she began to come awake.

"Oh! Good god, that hurts," the young woman mumbled, and leaned on him without opening her eyes. "Jason, is that you? Are we both safe now?"

Linn Gelsey had never been sorrier to have to admit to being himself. "Ms. Nordstrom, you're all right," he said softly, his tone deliberately even and calm and reassuring. "You're recovering from a severe stunning, and from having fought its aftereffects when you should have been resting. But if you'd rested, you wouldn't have escaped, would you?"

"Then I'm safe, but Jason's still - back there." Dark eyes opened at last, blinked in the compartment's harsh lighting, and closed again after a brief but discerning glance at the face that was so close to hers. Xanthe Nordstrom's disappointment was plain and poignant. "Please, can't you help him?"

"I can't, because we're too far away now; but I'll see that someone else helps him," Linn promised, and began to gently rub the young woman's knotted shoulder and back muscles. "Angel, go back to the control room and get on the comm to Chaitanya. Tell them what's happened so they can find that so-called freighter while there's still time to track it."

"Yes, Linn." Angel looked at her comrade and superior officer with some amusement. Plainly she was entertained to be leaving him there, kneeling on the deck with a pretty girl half-conscious in his arms and no one else present.

"Angel, stow it," Gelsey said, as he realized just what was going through her mind. "Xanthe Nordstrom is my kin, in a manner of speaking. So whatever you're thinking, you can clean up your mind right now."

"Kin? In a manner of speaking?" They'd known each other too long and too well for Angel to be much abashed by that speech. She paused before leaving the compartment, and she gave him an even more speculative look.

"All right, so it's just that her half-sibling is my first cousin. It's not a blood tie between the two of us at all. But it's family, just the same - dammit!" When Linn Gelsey swore, even mildly, he was on the verge of real anger. "Now, go send that transmission. That's a direct order, Cadet-Ensign."

"Aye, sir." She'd overstepped, and she knew it. Angel moved smartly, without further commentary.

Xanthe Nordstrom sagged against Linn Gelsey's chest, her brief fight for consciousness lost as she slipped involuntarily into sleep. But at least it really was sleep this time, a quick check of her vital signs assured him; she would be perfectly all right, once her body had had the rest it was now flatly demanding. So he lifted her awkwardly in his arms, and carried her from the docking compartment down the short passage to the bunkroom and placed her on his own lower. That was all he could do now, except follow Angel to make sure that transmission had been sent and to learn what Chaitanya thought could be done about rescuing the remaining prisoners from what they now had proof was a kidnapper's ship.

If necessary, he would ask that Nova be diverted and allowed to pursue that ship herself. When he thought about how close that young woman in the bunkroom had come to dying before Angel had detected her presence in that locker, he was angry enough to personally throttle that captain who'd so successfully deceived him just a few hours earlier. It might not make his comrades happy to have their current mission's length extended and their release from service delayed, but he was sure they would back him willingly if he made such an offer; and even if they didn't like it, they would have to go along.

CHAPTER 3

Jason Valeria woke from his stunning with much less pain than had his sister Xanthe, because he was not fighting for consciousness. Somehow he was fortunate enough to drift out of it on a dream, from stun-coma into natural sleep; and then from sleep to natural waking, hours later, with only a certain tight feeling in his forehead and a slight soreness of his muscles to remind him of the experience at all.

Nevertheless, eventually he did wake; and he found himself lying on a bunk in a strange, small stateroom aboard what definitely was not his father's ship. And when he realized that fact, he sat up quickly and his head did spin and his empty stomach did protest bitterly at the abrupt motion.

"Ohhh," he heard himself half-groan, half-mutter. His eyes squeezed shut again involuntarily, and he let them stay shut until his head stopped whirling and his stomach settled down. Then he cautiously opened his lids again and looked around him once more.

He was alone. No sign of Xanthe. Now he could remember leaving Chaitanya Spaceport; he could recall the tractoring of their shuttle, the being taken aboard a larger ship, the forced opening of the hatch and the wide-dispersion stunner beam filling the cabin. And that, of course, was all he could remember.

How much time had passed? He had no idea. No more than he could guess where he was, or what had become of his twin.

He gingerly moved off the bunk, found a fold-down washstand such as was common to crew quarters cabins, and splashed his face with cold water. He took a few sips of liquid, but not too much; although he'd never been stunned before, he had had a very empty stomach before after an illness and he knew that too much cold water was apt to make him sick all over again. Mostly he just wanted to rinse his mouth, cool his hot face, and try to get himself feeling human.

There, that was better. He moved around the cabin, and discovered that the door leading to the passage was locked - no surprise there! - and that the head was shared with the neighboring cabin, also a common enough deck layout. The door leading from the head into the next cabin was not secured, so he went through it.

The compartment was exactly like the one he'd just left. On one of its two bunks, there was a young woman; but she was not his twin sister. She was the blonde girl he'd so annoyed Xanthe by discreetly (he hoped!) shadowing and admiring, through much of his day on Chaitanya.

Kyla Robie. Kyla Robie without her ancient, wizened, bad-tempered female chaperone, and without the large male crewman who had seemed to accompany both women wherever they went on that day that was - yesterday? A week ago? Jason couldn't guess, although he suspected he had simply slept from what by the Valeria's chronometers would have been evening until the following morning. Now that he'd gotten his legs firmly under him once more, he felt as if he'd had a full night's sleep and would soon be ready for breakfast.

Funny how an adolescent male's appetite could manage to go on making its demands no matter what spot its owner might find himself in. Yes, he was getting hungry now; and he was also getting cross. Someone had a hell of a nerve, to have brought him here against his wishes. And if that someone had hurt Xanthe, there was going to be particular hell to pay.

Kyla Robie stirred, and uttered a low moan. Jason sat on the edge of the bunk beside her and lightly pressed his fingertips against her neck where he should be able to feel a strong pulse.

Yes, there it was; strong and steady. If she'd been stunned, too, as he suspected, then she was no doubt feeling quite miserable just now; but she would be perfectly all right after a few minutes' recovery time. Jason spoke to her, softly, in his surprisingly deep young voice. "Ms. Robie," he said, and wondered yet again at the cultural difference that had caused Captain Alan Robie to insist that both his daughters use his surname instead of each taking her mother's as was proper among trader-folk. Didn't old Robie know that by so doing he only reinforced his status as an outsider, an interloper who had made his way into the traders' ranks by marrying a woman to gain her inheritance?

But then, old Robie never had been one to care what his peers thought of him. Or so Jason had heard; he'd never met the man personally, and had never had any wish to do so. How that scarred, ugly, dishonest (or so reputation called him) man had ever managed to sire a girl as exquisite as this one, had to be one of the universe's great mysteries.

"Ms. Robie," Jason said again. "Kyla." And he touched her face, very lightly and very gently. "You're all right. Just lie still, just don't fight it, and you'll feel better soon."

For she was fighting it, twisting and moaning and struggling to open her eyes - then squeezing them shut against the light, with a sharp cry that told Jason she was not going to have it as easy as he'd had it during the next few moments. But she was smaller, and if she'd absorbed the same amount of stunner fire then it only made sense that she would suffer more severely from its aftereffects.

There was nothing he could do to help her except try to keep her calm, and since he was a complete stranger he wondered whether talking to her or touching her was at all helpful; he might actually be agitating her by doing so, but somehow it seemed heartless to just stand back and watch her writhe and listen to her complain. So he stayed beside her, and kept talking softly, and kept lightly stroking her face with his fingers.

"Kyla, you're all right," he said again, completely abandoning that awkward "Ms. Robie" business. "You were stunned, but it's passing now. Lie still, take it real slow about opening your eyes, and soon you'll be fine. There, that's it. There now. Easy."

"Who - who are you? And where is this? And where's Phillida?" When Kyla Robie finally found her voice, she put one question after another so rapidly that she gave him no chance to answer. "And where's our pilot?"

"I don't know where this is; I was stunned and brought here against my will, just as you were," Jason told her, taking his hand away from her face because now that she was conscious she was stiffening with distaste at his touch. "I don't know where Phillida is, or your pilot. I'm missing my twin sister, too, as a matter of fact. And my name is Jason Valeria."

"Valeria!" She opened her eyes wide when she heard his name, and she sat up hastily. And then groaned, and swayed; but she pushed away the supporting hand he offered. "You said Valeria? As in Anders and Jock Valeria?"

"Yes. That's my father, and my older brother." Jason was puzzled. He knew that there was no love lost between Anders Valeria and Alan Robie, and that it was somehow due to a falling out they'd had over Jock's mother - that the three of them, Anders Valeria, Alan Robie, and Nadia McLean had formed a patrol ship team during their long-ago tour as Interstellar Guard cadets - but that Alan Robie's daughter might hate Anders Valeria's son on sight, for no reason other than their fathers' old enmity, astonished him. He didn't hate her; he didn't even know her, although he certainly liked looking at her. Why should

she hate him?

But she did. The blue eyes he'd thought so lovely flashed at him, and the delicately-featured face he'd so admired didn't look beautiful when it wore that expression. When she spoke, she almost snarled at him. "Get away from me!" she said, and drew back against the bulkhead as if she thought being anywhere near him might contaminate her.

Jason was just opening his mouth to respond, although he had no idea what he was going to say, when the cabin's door opened and two humans came through it. One was a middle-aged woman who wore captain's braid on her collar, although like most traders she did not affect a uniform; the other was plainly a bodyguard of sorts, carrying a blaster rifle at ready as if he expected these two adolescents still weak from residual stunning would somehow be both prepared and able to attack and overcome his captain the minute she walked into the compartment with them.

"Here you are, Mr. Valeria!" the woman said, affably enough. "So you've discovered your neighbor already, have you?"

It was the first time in his life eighteen-year-old Jason had been addressed as "Mister." This certainly wasn't how he had pictured that it would happen at last - but even now, even under these strange circumstances, it made his chest expand a few centimeters. He stayed between what must be his captors and Kyla Robie, feeling a protectiveness that she probably didn't need and certainly didn't want from him but that came so naturally he could hardly help displaying it. "Yes, I guess I have," he said, his tone so carefully neutral that he was sure Jock would have been proud of him. Never let an adversary see that you're rattled, his brother had always told him. It was easier to say than it was to do, but so far he could manage it.

"Good. It would be an awfully long passage for either of you alone, so we decided to let you control access to each other's quarters. I wish I could give you the run of more of the ship, but I'm sure you understand that I can't." The captain sat on the little cabin's other bunk. Her guard stayed by the door, that rifle still at ready, his eyes fixed on Jason Valeria.

"Where are we, Captain?" Giving the woman her title couldn't hurt a thing, and besides it was a reflex for Jason. "And where's my sister Xanthe - and Ms. Robie's chaperone, and her pilot?"

"I don't like to have to give either of you such terrible news, but I don't see any alternative." The woman sighed. "You two are aboard a ship that's headed to a safe place, a sort of holding area where you can wait for your families to do certain things that my - ah - client wants done. You aren't being held for monetary ransom, but you are being held until certain conditions are met. My name isn't your business, the ship's name isn't your business, and neither is the name of the safe place where you'll spend the next weeks. As for your companions - I'm sorry, Mr. Valeria, Ms. Robie. The old woman and the pilot had no value, so we didn't try to retain them. Young Ms. Nordstrom attempted to escape, and - well, we couldn't let her do that. So...."

"So you're telling me my sister is dead?" Jason stared at the woman. The pirate captain, he realized now with terrible cold clarity. It was such a short distance from one bunk to the other in this tiny cabin. He could cross that distance so swiftly, he might be able to do that face some real damage before the guard by the door could get off even one shot....

But if he did that, his father would have two dead children instead of one. And Kyla Robie, hate him though she might, didn't deserve to be left alone in this situation. She might not want his company just yet, but he had a notion that before too much time went by she would be glad enough to have a companion in her captivity.

"I said that I hated to have to give you such news." The woman's voice was gentle enough; at least she had no pleasure in what she was doing, although she also plainly had no great qualms about it. "No one ever meant to harm Ms. Nordstrom. She made it necessary herself."

"Phillida," Kyla Robie whispered. There was utter devastation in her young voice.

Of course. Her nurse from her infancy, her teacher in girlhood, her companion and chaperone in young womanhood. Although Jason had thought the old woman ugly and bad-tempered from what little he'd seen of her, most likely Kyla had loved her. There was nothing strange about that, since he knew the girl had lost her mother in infancy - just as he had lost his own mother, although he and Xanthe hadn't had a nursemaid. Their father and their elder brother had managed, and had done it well enough even though Anders Valeria's drinking had escalated with the passing years until finally he was no help to Jock in running the ship - or the business - or in anything except loving the twins. So Jason understood, on some important level of his stunned mind, that Kyla's loss of Phillida was roughly equivalent to the loss he might feel if someone had killed his father.

But to lose Xanthe, with whom he'd shared everything for literally his entire lifetime? Since conception, since they'd grown together in their mother's womb?

It was all he could do not to launch himself at the pirate captain's throat. He was almost thankful when a sob erupted from Kyla Robie, so that he felt obliged to turn toward her instead of continuing to stare at his sister's murderer.

Whether or not that woman had actually fired the shot, she had killed Xanthe and she was going to answer for it. But not right now. So when she said something else, and when she rose from the other bunk and went out of the cabin, Jason did nothing to stop her. He didn't even turn to ask her what she had said, because right now he didn't care.

He was putting his arms around Kyla Robie, and instead of haughtily pushing him away as she would surely have done just minutes ago she was putting her blonde head on his shoulder and she was crying. And once the guard had followed the captain out of the cabin and the door had been secured behind them, leaving the two captives locked in alone once more, Jason found that he was crying too.

Xanthe. So much a part of him that to say he loved her was almost a redundancy; he might as well have talked about loving his own arm, and he might as well have tried to cut that arm off as to have considered that Xanthe might die. It was unthinkable, it couldn't happen.

But it had happened, and he had no idea how to bear it. Or even how to absorb it, how to believe it was true.

So he held Kyla Robie in his arms, and she held him back, and they cried together. Strangers, enemies, companions in the first great griefs of both their young lives.

Food was brought to them, a bit later; to his own amazement, Jason felt his hunger return and he ate. He had no guilt at doing so, fortunately, because he was a trader's child who had been taught from birth that to go on living after tragedy is not shameful; it is merely what's necessary, what has to be. Kyla Robie, though, turned toward the bulkhead behind her bunk and shook her head and said nothing when he urged her to at least take a sip or two of a beverage. She would dehydrate, he reminded her, if she didn't take at least something - and then he shut up, because he heard his big brother Jock's voice echoing in his own words and the resemblance frightened him. And besides, he could see that his insistence was making Kyla more obstinate instead of helping the situation.

So he left her portion of the meal in her cabin, took what was left of his own meal with him, and went through the head back to his own space. And to his own amazement, lay down and fell asleep again.

Linn Gelsey sat across a small table from Xanthe Nordstrom, and watched as the young woman finished the small meal that was as much as he'd dared offer her just yet (and certainly all she thought she could manage, she'd said in quick agreement when he'd put the tray in front of her). She was still pale, there were still dark smudges under her eyes, but she was navigating without wobbling after having slept on his bunk until she woke naturally. The three crew members of the Nova had come and gone through a full shipboard day while she had slumbered, and she hadn't been disturbed in the least.

"Ah, that's better," Xanthe said now, and smiled at the young Guardsman. "I think I'm human again."

"I know the feeling," Linn admitted, and grinned back. He did know that feeling, as it happened; he'd experienced stunning several times, once during training so that both he and the Guard's medics could judge how it would affect his body and more than once in actual combat situations. It was high on his personal list of things that he wanted to avoid repeating. "Now, Ms. Nordstrom - "

She interrupted him. "Xanthe," she said. "If you're Jock's cousin, I can't let you call me 'Ms.' Besides," and her dark eyes took on a mischievous look, "I'm not used to it anyway. It sounds like

something my mother would be called."

Would be called if she were living, Linn thought as he nodded. But he said, "All right then, Xanthe. I heard back from Chaitanya Control just a few minutes ago, and they've sent another ship after the one that has your brother aboard. I'm afraid you're stuck going along with us for the rest of our tour, and then to rendezvous with the Andromeda."

Galaxy-class starships were always, appropriately, named in honor of galaxies. Xanthe remembered that. She also remembered that they were usually assigned as flagships, under the personal control (through a flag captain to be sure) or a commodore or an admiral. She said, "I'm just glad to be still in one piece, and glad to know someone's going after Jason. Is Andromeda your mother's ship, Linn?"

His name on her lips sounded completely natural. Linn answered, "Yes. My mother is Flag Captain Sullivan; my father is Admiral Gelsey."

"And they serve together?"

"They always have. Do you think that's strange?" Some people did, Linn realized. But that attitude usually was taken by people who were not accustomed to spending years of their lives aboard starships.

"No, of course not. My mother was my father's partner, and that's usual for us traders."

"Yes. I know it is." Linn rose from his chair. "I need to get back to the control room, Xanthe. Would you like to come with me? It's nothing very impressive, but - "

"But I'd like to see it." She rose, too, and was thankful that the motion didn't cause her stomach to rebel. "My brother Jock's mother was your father's sister?"

"So they tell me. I didn't know her, Xanthe, and my father's not one to do a lot of talking about the dead." They walked together through the short passage that led from galley and mess to control room, and Angel Niarchos gladly got out of the pilot's chair and handed Linn a data pad. "Thanks, Angel. You're relieved," he said almost formally, and gave her a stern look when he realized his crewmate was gazing rather speculatively at Xanthe Nordstrom. He was getting very tired of saying, "She's my cousin, Angel! Lay off!"

Angel left the compartment, Linn settled into the chair she'd vacated, and Xanthe took the second seat. The young trader spent the next several minutes happily examining the Nova's consoles, talking to its computer, and generally enjoying getting acquainted with a ship not all that different operationally than the freighter aboard which she'd grown up - except that the Valeria was many times larger than the Nova, and the Nova's weaponry was many times deadlier than the Valeria's. One was a freighter, meant to carry goods from star system to star system and to provide a comfortable environment for its owner's family; the other was a sleek, deadly little warship.

Finally Xanthe said, "Papa talks about Nadia all the time, even now. He's always said it's a comfort to speak of the dead as if they were still living, because as long as they're loved and remembered they really do go on existing. He talks about my mother, Leah, just as much. And I'm glad he does, because Jock wouldn't have known his mother otherwise - she died when he was born - and Jason and I wouldn't have known our mother. She lived until we were a year old, but of course that doesn't mean we can remember anything."

"I heard that Nadia actually died before her son was born," Linn said, and then could have kicked himself. It was common knowledge, what Anders Valeria had done; it was almost a folk tale, thirty years after the fact, and that meant it probably had grown and changed in the telling. But it still was bad manners on his part to be mentioning it in front of Anders Valeria's daughter.

"It's true," Xanthe acknowledged, with an utter lack of embarrassment that Linn found quite puzzling. "Nadia was almost ready to give birth to Jock when she had an accident, and she died. Papa took her baby out of her body in time so that he lived, and he was awfully lucky because he wasn't without oxygen long enough to do him any harm. He could have died, too, or been left with a physical disability or - worse."

It was cruel, the way traders and guardsmen treated physical and mental disability that manifested itself at the beginning of life; but when Earth had so suddenly become uninhabitable all those years ago, the resources available to her marooned children out in space and on the colony worlds had been so terribly limited. And what was worse, the hospital facilities of Earth were gone too and with them so much medical knowledge and healing technology that Xanthe sometimes thought the everyday miracles described in the old novels of pre-biocaust Earth must have been made up along with the rest of the stories; surely such things couldn't have happened routinely. Yet she knew that they had. Once it would not have been considered at best odd, at worst immoral and cruel, to deliver the child after a pregnant woman died. Back in those days it had been a simple matter to place the infant in artificial life support and nurture it that way until it reached the age at which it would normally have been pushed out into the universe to live on its own.

But what Anders Valeria had done in taking his eight-months-formed son from his dead wife's womb, by the simple means of cutting her open, was considered so odd as to be perverted by the far-flung communities of traders and Guardsmen and colonists who were his associates and equals. It was when the social impact of his unheard-of behavior began to make itself felt that Anders Valeria had started taking more wine than was good for him, Xanthe knew, although when he'd met and married her mother Leah there had been a renaissance of sorts and for several years (Jock said, and Jock was old enough to remember) their father had been sober and happy and focused on his work.

Then Leah had died, fading away from some ailment that no healer seemed able to diagnose, and Anders Valeria had gone on a monumental bender from which he'd emerged barely in time to retain control of his House. That time, anyway. Until the next personal crisis, the next bender, and the one after that - until finally Anders slid into the fog where he still resided today, with Jock coming of age and

taking the helm just before the House's drift became irreversible.

"But Jock didn't die, and there was nothing wrong with him when he was born," Xanthe continued now, looking straight into the brown eyes of the young man who sat beside her at the patrol ship's control console. "He was small, but he's sure made up for that in the last thirty years! And without him, I don't know what would have become of our House."

"Xanthe, I'm sorry," Linn said, and meant it. "Your father did what he thought was right, and that should be the end of it."

"Yes. But tell me the truth, Linn. Is it that your father doesn't like to talk about the dead, in general - or is it that he can't bring himself to talk about his sister because of what my father did to her body after she was dead?" Xanthe did not flinch, and her eyes held Linn's without giving him the slightest chance to escape her scrutiny.

"I don't know the answer to that, Xanthe. I heard the story from someone else, not from my father; and that's one thing I sure don't plan to ask him." Linn looked back at her just as steadily, with honest regret in his brown eyes.

Jock Valeria had felt this way before, and he'd always known that at times he would feel this way again. The first time had been when he was thirteen years old and his young stepmother, Leah, had died; he remembered lying in his small cabin, with a year-old baby cuddled on either side of him in his berth, and wishing he had some idea of what to do to comfort his father. He had spent days after that taking care of the twins, watching his father's first mate run the ship, and intruding himself on his father's solitude no oftener than he felt he had to - once a day at the least, to make sure Anders Valeria hadn't died in his darkened cabin and his darker fogbank of pain and loss and alcohol. Jock had tried, a few times, to get some food into his father; had tried to get him to notice that he still had two babies to care for, still had a ship to captain and a House to run. And of course nothing he tried had worked, because Anders came out of that cabin when Anders was ready to do so and that had taken weeks.

When his father finally did sober up - relatively speaking, at least - and reappeared in his children's lives, he was in time to keep the House of Valeria from collapsing of inertia. Young Jock breathed a sigh of heartfelt relief, because at thirteen he already knew what would happen if the captains of the House's other six freighters should realize there was no one helming the House as a whole. Each was a blood relative, but each was an aggressive and intelligent man or woman who would not wait for Anders if a major decision had to be made and Anders wasn't up to making it. And Jock did not want to see his father lose headship of the House, both because he did love his father and because Jock already understood that if Anders held that post until his firstborn was grown and qualified to succeed him then that was what would happen. And Jock wanted to head the House; he'd wanted that as far back in his life as he could remember.

The second great devastation had come when he was eighteen, gone from his father's ship to Guardbase Alpha to begin his cadet duty tour, and he had for the first time in his life encountered people who knew his parents' history and who had no compunctions at all about shunning or taunting him for it. For the first time he was fair game for others' cruelty, and he had been made to understand that in most people's view his life never should have been. His father was a monster, and he an intruder just by existing in a universe that should never have seen him emerge living from his mother's body. Not everyone at Guardbase Alpha had treated him that way, of course; most of his superiors had been stiffly polite, and he had eventually made some friends and had had a successful patrol ship tour when the time came for that phase of his cadet years. But he'd actually had to fight to protect his own life, on several occasions, from drunken or just plain hostile fellow cadets; and he couldn't have begun to count the slights, the nasty remarks, the cruel shunnings he'd suffered, especially during the earliest days when his homesickness was also at its most severe. Sometimes he'd thought he would be glad to die, if only to make the misery of his existence stop. And then, of course, in one of his classes he would learn some fascinating new fact or be challenged to master some intriguing new skill; or he would be forced into a fight, and his strong young body would assert its desire to go on living and the exhilaration of battle would temporarily lift his spirits.

But on balance he had to say that his cadet tour, too, had been a time of despair. The only good thing that had come out of it was that, like his father before him, Jock Valeria had been fortunate enough to share his patrol ship tour with the young woman who would subsequently become his wife.

Carlie. Her given name was actually "Carlota," which she hated and didn't use except when legality required her to do so. Carlie Niarchos, a colonist from a border world whose family routinely sent its young adults for Guard service so that all the universe's opportunities would be open to them. She had been a laughing, light-hearted young woman who had made serious young Jock Valeria laugh with her, who had challenged his sober assumptions about life and who had listened calmly the day he'd worked up his courage to tell her what he'd thought everyone in the whole Guard already knew about him - about why he was sure that even she wouldn't want to entertain his romantic advances, although she'd made it plain for weeks before that day just how welcome such advances from him would be.

When he'd finally told her his story, as they sat together on watch in their patrol ship's control room while their team's third member slept, Carlie had taken his hands in hers and she had smiled at him. "I already knew all about that, Jock," she'd said, gently pressing her fingers against his. "But you needed to tell me, didn't you? So you could hear me say that it doesn't matter. Because it doesn't, you know. It's you I love, for who you are now."

She loved him. What it had meant, to hear her say that! Thinking of that day now, Jock Valeria wished he could recapture that feeling without having it intertwined and overlaid by everything that had come afterward.

He'd brought Carlie home to his father's ship, already his wife by courtesy of a quick ceremony conducted by their commanding officer just minutes after they officially left the service. Carlie had taken

to patrol ship life so naturally, so happily, despite her dirtside-dwelling background that he was certain she would fit right into the Valeria's routines and customs; and he could hardly have been more wrong.

At least they hadn't committed the sin of bringing children into the hell that their marriage soon became. If he had been free to go elsewhere with her, away from his drunken father - away from the demands that the House immediately began to make upon him, for Anders had plainly been waiting only until his eldest child's return to drop his last pretense of staying sober for even the most vital occasions - away from the twins, who by then were lively preteens and desperately in need of loving discipline and careful teaching and just plain nurturing that Anders no longer had the capacity to give them - then Jock was still sure he and Carlie could have worked it out. They'd been happy together as friends and comrades on their patrol ship, and they'd been almost crazily joyful together during those honeymoon days after they became lovers and before they arrived aboard the Valeria. And he knew they both had tried, really tried, to make it work between them in the days and weeks that had followed. But he'd never been able to blame Carlie for leaving him at last, although the way she had done it - a message on a data pad, found at his bedside when he woke one morning to find himself alone - had damned near killed him.

She was going back into the Guard, as a regular officer. She was still within the time window when that was possible without any retraining, and that seemed to be the best thing for her to do; because, she'd said in such a gentle tone that Jock had wanted to smash his head against the wall in sheer frustration, they were killing each other. Not physically, of course, but emotionally and spiritually and mentally. If duty required him to stay on his father's ship and tolerate his father's sickness and take care of his father's business for the rest of his life, fine; but he would have to do that without Carlie, because she couldn't call such an existence living. If he wanted to follow her into the Guard, she would be overjoyed and he would find her waiting. But if he didn't do so within the next six months, she fully intended to end their marriage and move on into a life where he could be nothing but a memory.

A memory of her worst mistake, he supposed, thinking about it now.

It had been utterly impossible, of course. He was the firstborn of a Trade House's leader. He had a young sister and brother who needed his care. So he had let the six months pass, and had wept alone in his cabin on the day when Carlie's last communication had reached him: the divorce papers. ("Papers," of course, being as anachronistic a colloquialism as "red tape"; "papers" were simply legal documents, no matter where they resided on computer systems or archive storage systems or data pads.)

Yes, that had been the worst time. Worse than his stepmother's death, worse than his early days of homesickness and humiliation as a cadet trainee on Guardbase Alpha.

The worst time until now. Jock Valeria sat in his ship's control room (he had long since begun to regard it as his ship, although whenever he spoke of it aloud he of course still treated it as his father's) and looked at the message he'd just accessed using his personal biometric identity seal, and felt that familiar stinging in his eyes and that terrible tightening in his chest and his throat.

The message was character-based only, so that it could not carry any of its recorder's own biometric

identifiers. It was nominally addressed to Captain Anders Valeria, but Jock had known full well it would open for him and it had done so. Which meant that the recorder had known how unlikely it was that Anders Valeria would be the one able and willing to respond to such a message.

"Captain Valeria," it began - with a title that he had as much right to use as did his father, in one very real sense! - "your son and your daughter are safe and unharmed. They will remain that way as long as you follow the instructions you are given. First, you will not contact any civilian or military authorities about their disappearance. Second, you will lay in a course that you will upload from this pad to your ship's navigational computer and you will follow that course without question. Once at your destination, you'll be given further instructions."

The message ended there, without additional threats because whoever had recorded it knew perfectly well that such threats were not needed. Jock loaded the pad into the Valeria's nav console now, watched as the data within it uploaded automatically, and took a quick look at the course and lightspeed calculations that resulted.

He'd never been to those particular coordinates, he thought with a frown, but nevertheless there was something familiar about them. Something he knew he ought to recognize immediately, but that somehow escaped him just now.

Activity was always the best counter to despair. He rose from his chair, touched the comm, and spoke on the ship's public address system. "All hands, this is the First Mate. We are about to depart Chaitanya. Secure all stores, follow all departure protocols. Out."

Next he summoned his second mate, a distant cousin, to the control room to take the watch. He would go to his father now, the data pad back in his hand since its upload had been accomplished and all it now held was the cryptic "ransom note," and he would get past the agony of having to tell Anders that his two younger children were missing and plainly in the hands of someone who was very capable of harming them.

No matter what Papa might have lost over the years in effectiveness as a shipmaster, a trader, a House head, he was still a loving father and this was going to kill him. Jock had seldom dreaded any conversation more than the one he was about to have now.

Aboard the freighter Callon, Alana Robie was speaking via ship-to-dirtside comm with Chaitanya Control. "Yes, those two bodies are the woman Phillida Clarkson and our crewman Vance Torgelsen. No, I don't want to claim them. Perhaps they have families somewhere; I'd suggest that someone search the population database and find out. But to me they're just two of my father's employees, and while I'm sorry they've died I don't accept responsibility for their corpses." She cut off the communication at that point, not seeing any need to listen to more outraged protests from the civilian official at Control who wanted to

deal with those two bodies even less than she wanted to deal with them.

Cameron Berkey gave her a taut, completely unhumorous grin. "So, Captain," he said, and handed her a data pad that had just arrived by courier shuttle. "I think this is going to relieve your mind on one point, anyway. It's the message from your father that I told you about."

"Oh?" Alana lifted an eyebrow at her old friend as she took the pad and tapped it. "Damn. Biometric seal, of course; but you did tell me that, too, didn't you?" She put her thumbprint against the pad's scanner, waited the requisite second or two, and then heard a tiny "beep" of acceptance from the little storage unit. "What makes you think I'll be relieved to get this message, Mr. Berkey?"

"Your father recorded it quite some time after he disappeared, Alana. So there's no question that he's alive." The first mate dropped the formal mode of address as he sat down opposite his protégé and watched her start to scan the pad's contents.

Indeed, it was stamped with a date and time that confirmed Berkey's words; but that was a curiosity she could think about later. It was a stylus-created, handwritten message, which only served to remind his daughter that Robie had come to the Callon from a very different life, that of a younger son in a technologically backward society on a world where younger sons inherited nothing and daughters were married off in a way that almost amounted to outright sale. People who used a hand stylus to record a message were rare out here between the stars, where Alana's mother's family had lived for so many generations and where Alana herself had always been at home. She had never exactly been ashamed of her father's origins, but she certainly had no pride in his background and she definitely did not like getting messages from him that were inscribed in this anachronistic fashion.

And as to whether she was relieved that he was alive, that was one very large assumption on Berkey's part.

"Alana, by now you're aboard ship and you've taken command," her father's vigorous script informed her. "I assume that you know about my illness. It's odd to be writing that, because I feel well enough right now; but there's no doubt about the diagnosis, so I've had to accept it.

"What I want you to do now is bring the ship to a set of coordinates that you'll find at the end of this message. I'll meet you there. A.R."

"A.R"; not "Love, Papa." Alana had expected nothing different, but part of her still had nerve enough to be disappointed. She lifted her eyes to her companion's, and saw him nod. "So he does want you to do something specific, Captain?" the mate inquired.

"Yes. But I don't understand, because all this message says is to take the ship to a certain set of coordinates and meet him there." Alana frowned her puzzlement. "Look at the coordinates as soon as I've loaded them, Mr. Berkey. Maybe you'll recognize the location."

Alana loaded the coordinates from the pad into the nav console, and frowned again when she saw where they would be heading. It was an uninhabited system two weeks' passage distant from Chaitanya, and she knew of nothing there that anyone would want. Once there had been a moon orbiting a dead, lifeless world, and that moon had had mineral deposits that were quite valuable; a number of mining expeditions had been mounted after the freighter Valeria had initially surveyed that moon, thirty years earlier, and had discovered the mineral deposits and had sold the information to a mining company for a tidy price. But those deposits were long since exhausted, so why would Alan Robie want his ship to go to that world and its moon now?

Valeria. Thirty years ago. Something - what? Alana looked up from the nav console, met Berkey's eyes, and saw him nod.

"That was where it happened," the mate said, with regret in his eyes. "Where Anders Valeria's wife died, where that abomination of a son of his was 'born' - if you care to call it that - and where your father once fought Valeria, and got those scars that he's never allowed the healers to fix. So I guess we know now what this is about, Alana."

"We know what Papa thinks this is about," Alana corrected, as she sat back in her chair and made absolutely no move to convert those coordinates into a course or to prepare her ship to get underway. "I'm not leaving Chaitanya until I know what happened to Kyla, Mr. Berkey. Not even for Papa will I do that."

Berkey stared at his new captain's determined young face, and he sighed. He hadn't wanted to do this so soon; part of him still wanted to see Alana Robie as the little girl he'd almost brought up as his own, and that made him want to shield her from certain realities. Realities that whether he liked it or not, she now had the capacity to face; because he was now looking at a grown woman, the executive officer of the Andromeda, and if his little Alana was still there under the surface as he suspected he still had to accept that he could no longer presume to protect her. Not only did she need to know the truth; she had a right to know it, although he admitted to himself that he was not at all sure what she was going to do with it. She had a lot of her mother in her, did this woman, and Treena Callon had been a decent girl. Her only fault had been being foolish enough to love Alan Robie, and then being incomprehensibly unwilling to free herself from him once she finally saw him for what he was.

Alana had her father's iron strength, but her mother's capacity to think about the needs and rights of others. If she hadn't taken that from Treena, she certainly would not have chosen to spend her life as a Guardsman who was pledged to die for her comrades if necessary - and who also had to be ready to give her life to protect civilians, an idea that would have been utterly foreign to Alan Robie. Berkey sometimes wondered how his long-time employer had managed to get through three years as a cadet without having his innate selfishness cause him to fail at some critical assignment or other.

In any case, Alan Robie was no longer in the Callon's control room and to Berkey that meant that his first duty was now to Alana - not to her absent father. She was the person he was calling "Captain," and to him that was all that mattered. So he said, "Captain, I knew where your father was ten days ago when I

sent you that emergency comm asking you to take leave and come home. I've talked with him since your sister disappeared, and I know what happened to her - although not where she is, or I'd have had her back here and safe by now."

"Mr. Berkey, are you telling me you lied to get me to come home?" Alana Robie looked at her old friend with undisguised horror. Plainly she didn't want to believe him - but after she had stared into his eyes for what seemed like an eternity, and after he had stared back at her without flinching and without saying a word in his own defense, she had no alternative. "You did lie," she said, her voice flat and cold.

"Yes. Your father told me what he wanted you to do, and I came up with the right words so you'd do it."

Focus, Alana told herself, just as she'd done so many other times when all her assumptions had come crashing down around her. Leave the emotions until later. You can't afford to feel them now.

"You said you know what happened to my sister," she reminded the mate, still in that flat, cold voice. "So tell me, Mr. Berkey."

"Alana, your father has hired someone - I can't tell you who because I don't know, thank all that's holy! - to hold Anders Valeria's two younger children until he takes his ship to the place where his wife died. The place your father wants you to go now. And it seems that when this person, this - kidnapper, for want of a better word! - that your father hired took Valeria's youngsters, he also took your sister so that he could be sure your father wouldn't betray him once the matter was settled."

"Took' Kyla? You mean kidnapped her, too?" Alana asked, tilting her head interrogatively in an eerie echo of one of her long-dead mother's mannerisms.

"Yes. Exactly." Berkey nodded. "So now you know all that I know about it, Captain. And I really do believe the best thing you can do to protect your sister's life, is to go ahead and follow your father's instructions."

CHAPTER 4

The patrol ship Nova had been on its way from Chaitanya to the flagship Andromeda's current

position for five days when the prison transport appeared on sensors. It was broadcasting a distress signal, but the signal was weak and the transport's power levels were fading.

"This is Captain Byron of the transport vessel Tasmania," the message said, as it repeated endlessly. "My ship has been taken over by an escaped convict, my officers and crew have been murdered, and I am the only survivor. To any ship that hears this message, please inform the Guard immediately; and if you are able, please attempt to track or to overtake the convicts who've escaped aboard my vessel's shuttle. Assisting me is not a priority. Repeat, you must stop the prisoners from getting away. They have weapons, they will use them against you or against anyone else they may encounter; they are very, very dangerous. This is Captain Byron of the transport vessel Tasmania...."

And so the endless loop continued. Linn Gelsey glanced at the three other people in Nova's control room with him, and he frowned in thought. "Tom," he said to the cadet-ensign who was his communications expert. "How old is that message?"

"It's been broadcasting on continuous loop for fifteen days, Linn," Tom Pullen said promptly, without having to do additional calculations because he had done all that were needed as soon as that message had been detected at longest possible range. "If that captain were still alive, wouldn't he have updated it by now?"

"Probably," Angel Niarchos interrupted, in her usual brash way. "But not necessarily. And besides, is there any warp trail for us to follow with those shuttles fifteen days gone?"

"No, there isn't," Linn Gelsey said, with only a mildly reproving look at Niarchos. "We'd be chasing off after nothing, most likely, if we attempted to follow them now. The best we can do is inform the Guard of what's happened and then try to assist that captain if he's still alive. And at least we can inspect the transport and determine what happened."

He wasn't looking forward to boarding a prison transport. He'd done so in order to inspect them routinely, of course, on several occasions in the past; and it was always an unpleasant experience. Criminals were handled by shipping them in cold sleep from whatever political center or Guardbase had convicted them, to one of the penal worlds where they were simply turned loose to fend for themselves in an environment that was capable of supporting them - but not an environment so attractive that legitimate colonists would want it, of course. Sometimes the particular shipment was landed on a world that was empty of humanoid life; sometimes such a shipment was dumped onto a world that had already received previous loads of prisoners. The transport ship's master and crew didn't know and didn't care, usually. Their job was to keep their "cargo" under cold sleep during transport, provide as safe a wakeup protocol as possible once the destination was reached (although of course it was no secret that cold sleep was risky for anyone, and that it had a particularly high casualty rate for humans whose bodies hadn't yet attained full growth), and make sure no technology related to space flight made it to the surface of any penal world. Once in awhile people did get off those worlds; there were a few bleeding heart societies that "rescued" children of convicts, since criminals often had no choice but to exercise the option of taking their families with them into exile or leaving them behind to starve on "civilized" worlds that did not want

such orphans and would make no provision for them (except slavery, of course). Generally, though, transport to a penal colony was a life sentence in the truest sense of that term.

Linn Gelsey recalled inspecting an entire prisoner deck on one such transport, early in Nova's first passage, and finding his first dead child in a cold sleep capsule. The little coffin (for so he always thought of those pods) had been barely as long as his own arm. An infant, guilty only of being born to the wrong father or the wrong mother; dead not of an unavoidable accident or illness, but of a procedure to which no parent would ever willingly subject a growing child. Cadet-Lieutenant Gelsey had had to find a place to be sick, on that day when he'd first seen the reality of his society's penal system at point-blank range.

He knew he must help that other captain, if the fellow still survived; he even admitted to himself that being in command of a transport ship didn't necessarily mean that Captain Byron was a monster. But he felt none of the outrage, none of the urgent concern, that he would have felt for any other captain who'd fallen victim to mutineers. So his tone was almost reluctant as he said, "Let's get to it, then. Angel, take the conn; Tom, you're with me. Xanthe, take the copilot's chair and keep an extra sharp watch on sensors."

He got the appropriate number of affirmatives, and he and Tom Pullen left the control room to suit up while Angel Niarchos maneuvered the patrol ship toward the transport's docking port and took them in close. They would not trust to a flexible transfer tube this time; it was the most convenient way to link ships, but if one of the two vessels was not in safe hands at all times then very bad things could happen. So they hard-docked, airlock joined to airlock, and the two envirosuited young men moved from the patrol ship to the prison transport.

"Nordstrom to Gelsey," Xanthe said, as she scanned the Nova's sensor readouts with as much familiarity as if she'd been back in her own family ship's control room. "I have one lifesign. Just one, located on the fifteenth deck in what should be a storage area."

"Thanks," Linn Gelsey acknowledged, and smiled inside his helmet. He had to admit it, he was enjoying having that added presence aboard his ship during his last few days as its captain. Xanthe Nordstrom was able to contribute, not just occupy space; but even if she had done just that, he suspected he would still have enjoyed having her around. "We'll head there first, then. Maintain open commlink at all times, Mr. Pullen, Ms. Nordstrom, Ms. Niarchos."

His formality was a sure sign that he thought the situation might turn serious at any moment. So instead of the usual, "Yes, Linn," he got a chorus of "Aye, sir," in response.

The transport's power was indeed failing. The emergency lights were dim in the great lower-deck bays where the prisoners had been stored by the hundreds in their cold sleep pods. Most of them were still there, having died when the power to their pods was cut off. Since the ship had enough life support left for humans to survive now (although the light, heat, and atmosphere wouldn't remain at survival levels for much longer, Linn judged), those hundreds of bodies had started to decay. His helmet protected him from the stench, and he was thankful when he saw what his hand-held scanner was telling him.

Therefore, he wasn't surprised when he and Tom Pullen finally reached the source of the transport's one remaining life sign and when the first sound he heard upon jerking open the storage compartment's door was an exclamation of disgust. A human male rose from a mat in a corner where he'd been huddled against the ship's ever-increasing cold. The man was older than Nova's young crew; he might, Linn thought, have been somewhere in his middle thirties or so. He was thin, he was filthy, and he could barely stand.

"Captain Byron?" Linn inquired, because the man's shredded tunic did have gold braid on its soiled collar.

"Yes. Believe it or not." The man looked down at himself, and laughed harshly. "Why are you here, Guardsman? My message told you to go after the prisoners, not to bother with me!"

"But your message was recorded fifteen days ago, Captain," Linn countered, his tone deliberately calm and even rather gentle. Obviously this fellow had been through hell, alone here all this time on a failing ship without hope of rescue. "That's too long for us to be able to trace warp residue trails. So the best thing we can do is get you out of here, and get you patched up so you can tell us the whole story. Then we'll transmit it to the nearest Guardbase and someone can go after the prisoners. All right?" He put out a hand.

"All right." Byron nodded, defeated, and allowed himself to be supported on one side by Linn Gelsey and on the other side by Tom Pullen. Between them the two cadets half-carried the transport captain out of the room that had been his prison, through the Deck 15 prisoner bay and its horrible stench, and into the airlock. From there they went into the Nova's own airlock, and a moment later they were breathing the patrol ship's untainted atmosphere.

"There," Linn said in satisfaction, as he removed his helmet. "Ms. Niarchos, cast off and get us back on our previous course."

"Aye, sir," came the uncharacteristically respectful voice from the control room.

"Do you want me to stay on sensors?" came Xanthe Nordstrom's inquiring voice. There was curiosity in every word.

"No, that's not necessary," Linn decided, suppressing a grin. "But hold on a bit before you come aft, please. We've got Captain Byron, and he's going to need some privacy to get cleaned up and patched up."

As if the captain really were in any shape to care about modesty, of course. But Gelsey and Pullen helped the man out of his filthy clothing and into the shower, ascertained that the blaster burn on his arm was (incredibly) not infected although it hadn't healed because of course the fellow had eaten little during the past fifteen days and was dehydrated to boot, and cleaned and dressed the wound before helping him

into some clothing that if it didn't fit well at least was clean. Xanthe timed her arrival well; she showed up in the galley just when a tray was needed, and she had it ready and waiting.

"Now, can you tell us what happened?" Gelsey asked, after Byron had taken the few bites of food that he was able to manage and before the transport captain could nod off at the table as he was plainly about to do. "Please, sir, if you can tell us it's going to help."

Byron shuddered. He looked cleaner, but he still looked awful. He said in a hoarse, pained voice, "I have no right to be alive. That was my ship. I should have died with her, not my officers and my crew."

"How did it happen, sir?" Linn sat down beside Xanthe, across the table from Byron, and waited patiently for the captain to continue. Pullen sat at Byron's side, ready to brace him if he sagged in his chair. Which he certainly looked as if he might do at almost any time.

"I had a traitor aboard, and I didn't know it," Byron said, and shuddered again. "My fourth mate was alone on watch fifteen days ago. He revived someone I think you may have heard of - a criminal called Torlkinos."

"Torlkinos? You had him aboard an ordinary prison transport, with no special precautions?" Xanthe Nordstrom had intended to be silent, to observe and not usurp any of the prerogatives of the Nova's cadet-lieutenant; but she couldn't keep quiet when she heard that name. "How many revolutions has that man started, anyway, on how many different worlds?"

"I don't know, ma'am." Perhaps it was good that she'd spoken up; Byron looked at her as if he saw her for the first time, and he seemed to revive. For which Linn Gelsey could hardly blame him. "More than one revolution on more than one world, that's certain. Anyway, my fourth mate revived Torlkinos and Torlkinos revived his own family. If he hadn't been foolish enough to do that, if he'd revived his confederates first and left his spouse and children until later, things would have been even worse."

"Even worse?" Linn Gelsey prompted, when Byron paused.

"One of my other officers happened to be awake, even though it wasn't his watch, and he figured out that something was wrong," the transport captain explained, after taking a sip of hot beverage. "As soon as he got me awake and I realized there was a mutiny underway, I cut all power to the cold sleep pods and then dumped antimatter so it couldn't be restored. That stopped everything real quick."

Plainly Captain Byron was satisfied with, even proud of, what he'd done to halt the mutiny; but Xanthe Nordstrom, Linn Gelsey, and Tom Pullen exchanged horrified glances with each other. To put a thousand human beings to death in a moment's time, some of them completely innocent - some of them infants? Just in order to make sure they didn't awaken from cold sleep and escape their captivity, since Byron must have realized even that early on that he couldn't hope to regain control of his ship?

Some people's idea of doing the right thing never ceased to confound Linn Gelsey. But all the young Guardsman said was, "Yes, sir. What happened after you cut the power?"

"Torlkinos stepped in to stop his confederate from killing me," Byron said, his tone now calm and distant. He could have been discussing events from prehistory, for all the emotion in his voice or in his eyes. "He wasn't being merciful. He wanted me right where you found me, stranded alone on the hulk that used to be my ship, dying by millimeters when life support started to fail as the auxiliary power ran down."

"But he didn't take time to disable the distress beacon?" Gelsey prompted.

"No. I was able to activate that remotely, from where I was locked in. Torlkinos took the shuttle, plus all the supplies he and his confederate could load. I don't know where they went, but they seemed to have a plan. And that's all of it, Cadet-Lieutenant. Except that you should have left me where I was, because all I was doing was waiting to die." Byron put his face down into his hands after he'd said those words, and his shoulders began to shake.

Xanthe Nordstorm went around the table and put her arms around him. She did it as naturally as if this stranger had been her own twin brother, not someone twice her age whom she'd never seen in her life before twenty minutes ago. "But you didn't die," she said, in a calm, comforting voice. "You're alive, and you're going to stay that way. It must have been horrible, but it's over now."

"No. If I'd had any real honor, I'd have killed myself as soon as they left me alone." Byron shook his head, and he kept his hands over his face. "I should have died, because after what I allowed to happen I don't have a right to live. Not when I let them kill all my people like that! The captain doesn't survive alone. It isn't right."

"It wasn't your choice," Xanthe said firmly, pulling the man's head to her shoulder and cradling it there. "I understand what you're saying, Captain. My father would feel that way, and so would my brother. But you can't make anything better by dying now, can you?"

She got no answer. After a few moments passed in silence, Linn Gelsey went around the table too and gently drew her away from their distressed passenger. "Tom, put him to bed now," Linn ordered, and held Xanthe back with a gentle but very firm grip on her arm while Cadet-Ensign Pullen half-carried Captain Byron out of the galley and into the bunkroom. "He'll feel better when he's slept, Xanthe," he assured her then, with a grimace that had started out to be a smile. "He's been rescued after spending all that time thinking he was going to die - of course he's crashing now, emotionally. Anyone would, I think."

"I suppose," Xanthe admitted, without much conviction in her voice. "Linn, do you think one of us should watch him? At first, anyway? In case...."

"In case he really means it when he says he ought to have died?" Gelsey sighed, and took the liberty

of sliding his arm around his companion's shoulders instead of releasing his grip on her. "What good would that do, Xanthe? If a person really wants to die, that person will find a way. He didn't, in fifteen days when he could have. So I don't think it makes any sense to start watching him now."

"That's true." Xanthe liked the weight of his arm on her shoulders. She leaned against him, experimentally, and liked the way that felt too.

The comm chirped, and Angel's voice said, "Hate to bother you, Linn, but didn't you want to send that transmission to Guardbase Alpha as soon as you could? I sent the initial transmission as soon as we knew about the mutiny, but you said you wanted to add the details after you'd debriefed Captain Byron."

"Thanks, Angel." Linn managed to keep sarcasm out of his voice. He took his arm from around the young woman at his side, and he gave her a rueful smile. "Her timing's always perfect!" he muttered with unmuted bitterness. "I'm sorry, Xanthe. I didn't mean to offend you, but - "

"But you didn't offend me." Xanthe smiled back at him. "I like you, Linn, and there's no reason in the universe I can't tell you so. And all I thought you meant just now, is that you like me too. Is that right?"

"It sure is." Linn's rueful smile turned into a grin. "And sometime I might mean more than that. Is that okay, too?"

"Yes." So quickly that he had no time to prepare, and certainly no time to respond, she lifted her face to his and brushed her lips against his cheek. It was the most chaste of kisses - hell, it would have been suitable for her brother! - but when she left him standing there alone, she left him blushing so hotly that he was glad when no one came into the mess for the next several minutes. He needed all of that for his heartbeat to slow toward normal, and for his face to return to something like its normal hue.

Jason Valeria had been sleeping when the ship dropped out of warp. Perhaps he wouldn't have been awakened by that event if he'd been safe aboard his father's ship; but he had known the meaning of that sensation ever since his memory's beginnings, and these days he was more than normally sensitive to every change in his surroundings simply because those surroundings were so infuriatingly unchanging.

How many days and nights since he'd been with Xanthe aboard the shuttle, lifting from Chaitanya's surface after that holiday? How long since he'd wakened here, in this bunk, and how long since he'd been so bluntly informed of his sister's death? He had no access to a chronometer, and that was probably the cruelest thing about this captivity. Like most starship-reared humans, he felt utterly cut off from existence without a means of measuring time's passage. He did not miss sunrises, sunsets, planetary weather systems; he enjoyed those lovely phenomena like anyone else when he happened to be exposed to them, but they had nothing to do with his sense of time. That was measured by ship's computer, and he'd had not even that most basic sort of access through so many wake/sleep cycles that now he hadn't a clue as to

even how many of those there had been.

The young woman in the next cabin had been somewhat less company to him than a blank wall, so little response had she given him when he'd let himself into her cabin (he'd figured out early that she was never going to invite him, and was never going to respond to his polite tapping at the connecting door with even the basic courtesy of a "Come!" or "Don't enter, please!"; so he had gone ahead and invited himself, almost daily for a time; then less frequently, and now not at all). He had reading materials, which he'd memorized by now; he had the regular food deliveries by a silent, stone-faced crewman; and he had music recordings to listen to. And that was it.

So he slept, and he exercised. Neither of those activities was limited by the bulkheads of his cabin. And now, after all this time in warp, the ship was emerging into normal space and he certainly hoped that meant something was going to happen.

The door to the head opened, and Kyla Robie came through it. She had an alarmed look on her face, which still looked pretty to him but no longer fascinated him as it had before he'd known her even as little as he knew her now. She asked, "Are you awake, Jason?"

Well, at least she wasn't calling him "mister." Jason sat up on the bunk, glad he'd been lying fully clothed outside its blankets, and answered her. "Yes. The ship coming out of warp woke me."

"Me, too," she said, which shouldn't have surprised him because she too was a trader-child whose entire lifetime had been lived to the rhythms of a ship's passages. "Do you think that means we're arriving? At the place they intend to hold us, I mean?"

"It could mean that. Or it could mean they're going to have to allow a Guard ship to board them, or that there's going to be a fight, or - almost anything, I guess." Perversely, Jason didn't particularly care to reassure her. He hadn't realized until now just how much her aloofness had hurt and annoyed him.

"If a Guard ship boards, that will mean they'll have to unlock every hatch and every door all over this ship," Kyla Robie said, showing more awareness of the universe outside her father's ship than Jason would have credited to her. "Not one by one, but by master program from the control room. We've been through that on the Callon before, and it always makes Papa furious."

"We've been through it on the Valeria, too," Jason admitted, and stopped himself from adding that his own father never minded that order because Anders Valeria had no contraband or other secrets to hide from the Guard. "If only that had happened before this ship left Chaitanya orbit, Kyla! We'd be back where we belong right now, wouldn't we?"

He had no idea, of course, that such an event had actually occurred; that he had been unconscious through the whole boarding, lying helpless behind that unlocked cabin door, or that his sister had wakened and had gone through it. Jason and Kyla had both missed that entire day of their lives.

Now the door to his cabin was opening, and he didn't think (although of course he couldn't say that he knew) it was time for a meal delivery. He got off the bunk and moved to Kyla's side, feeling protective of her without having the least notion why.

A second later he was throwing his body in front of hers, as a wide-dispersion stun beam filled the cabin and took his consciousness from him in a blinding burst of white light. He didn't even feel the fall to the deck when it came, and he certainly didn't know whether he had managed to shield Kyla from even the smallest fraction of the beam's force. He only knew what had happened at all when he began to come awake again, hours later (it had to have been hours - no one recovered from that sort of stunning in any lesser span of time).

He was hurting. That was inevitable. He was also cold, with a chilly damp coldness that had already penetrated straight to his bones. And he was stiff from lying on something that, unbelievably, was even less forgiving than the bunk in what had for so long been "his" cabin.

This was just a thin mat, a pallet of sorts, and under it was a hard floor. He opened his eyes, found that the chamber was so dim that he could look around him without pain, and proceeded to do so.

Kyla Robie lay on a mat next to his. She was breathing, so he didn't have to worry about her as his first concern. The rest of the chamber was almost obscured from his view by piles of - what? Containers, crates, cartons? Supplies, it appeared to his practiced trader's eye. Supplies and survival equipment.

He hadn't wasted his imagination trying to think what the "safe place" the pirate captain had promised them would be like, once they got there. If he'd had expectations at all, he had thought they would be transferred to another ship or that the one they were on would simply stop in orbit somewhere and hold them aboard until their release could be arranged. That the two of them would be dumped off on a planet somewhere - marooned together - he hadn't imagined, couldn't have conceived.

But he had no doubt that it had happened, because the strange evenness of natural gravity pulled at his body and the air that he breathed was not shipboard air. It was damp and it smelled old, but it hadn't come out of a starship's scrubbers and he knew that for certain.

He tried to sit up, winced, and lay back down. Since the idea of this exercise wasn't to kill the two of them - if it had been, their captors would have done that in the first place instead of taking all the trouble they'd gone to so far! - he had no reason to think that wild animals would attack him as he lay there recovering, or that any other danger would be creeping up and hovering beyond those piles of stacked supplies. So he let himself rest, closing his eyes again because even dim light was getting to be too much, and he dozed.

Wherever this was, it was going to be home for awhile. He might as well greet it in full possession of his faculties, especially since he'd already discovered that he was going to find himself instinctively trying to take care of his companion. That thought almost made him chuckle, because in his corner of the

universe the ancient "male protects female" imperative only operated if the female happened to be one's pregnant or nursing lifemate; a female like his twin sister Xanthe, for instance, needed no more protecting than he did - less, if she happened to have faster reflexes or happened to be a better shot with a blaster. But somehow he knew that Kyla Robie's upbringing had been different, that she would not know how to take care of herself as Xanthe did; and that meant he would have to take responsibility for her. Whether she liked it or not, which she probably wouldn't.

It wasn't the most pleasant thought he'd ever had. But then again, on the ship he'd been about to die or go mad from boredom; and he had a feeling that he'd just landed in a place and in a situation that was going to relieve that boredom, completely and for a long time to come.

So he lay still, he rested, and he waited for Kyla to wake.

Jock Valeria was not sure how he felt about having his father back in the control room, after so many months - years, actually - when Anders seldom bothered to come there. He had never asked his crew to address him as "Captain," though, so at least the awkwardness (and awkwardness it was, undeniably) didn't extend into outright confusion.

He had not known what to expect when he'd had to tell his father about the twins' kidnapping, and about the instructions he'd received for retrieving them. All he'd known was that the old man (or so Jock thought of Anders, although in reality his father was not even sixty as yet) was going to be heartbroken. Well, he had been that, all right. And he had proceeded to do the impossible: he'd stopped drinking. "Cold turkey," as the ancient phrase for breaking an addiction put it. (A turkey was a game bird of Old Earth, and why it should be "cold" in this usage Jock had no idea. It was simply an expression.)

That had been an experience in and of itself, because Anders had been drinking so long and so steadily that his body had protested bitterly at being deprived of its accustomed chemical balm. There had been several nights when no one slept, when Anders had paced the deck and sweated and raved and seen nightmare visions - and had finally collapsed, exhausted, to be put to bed by his son and to wake hours later with the poison finally gone from his body and with his mind clearer than it had been since Jock had been a boy.

That point had been reached just yesterday. So now Anders Valeria was in his own control room, giving orders to his crew for the first time in years, and the freighter that carried his name was moving into orbit around a barren world that he had last visited - not thirty years ago, when Jock had been born here; but half that time ago, when he'd come here with his old comrade Alan Robie to do a final survey that was supposed to close out the system's mining possibilities and that was supposed to allow the two men to patch up their battered friendship.

Jock remembered that day very well. He remembered his father and "Uncle Alan" (oh, how

ridiculous that honorific had turned out to be!) going down to the surface. He remembered the commlinks going dead, suddenly and without discernible reason. He remember his father's first mate trying frantically to get a sensible response from the first mate aboard Callon, who had seemed oblivious to the danger of having both ships' captains dirtside without comm function and with night bearing down on the side of that barren moon where they might very well be stranded. He still didn't know the details of what had happened that day, because when Anders Valeria came back aboard his ship he refused to talk about it; but he did know they had fought, physically and viciously, because Robie had come away with the facial wounds that had become his hideous (and famous) scars. Anders Valeria had been hurt, too, but not that severely or that visibly. His real wounds had been taken in the spirit, and from that day on his drinking had gone from "one glass of wine too many" each evening to greater and greater excesses.

Jock watched his father now, and he sighed. It was such a bitter thing, to have Papa back at last - the father he'd known and loved years ago - when the price had been to come back here, to this sadly remembered place, with the twins' loss aching between them like a wound that couldn't close. He half expected to see the Callon in orbit when they dropped out of warp, and when he saw that they were alone he was surprised. That made no sense; why go to such trouble, and then have no one here and no instructions for them to follow?

And then he saw the comm buoy on sensors, and realized his father was looking over his shoulder before he could open his mouth to announce its presence. "So," Anders Valeria said calmly. "Message from Alan, no doubt."

"Are you so sure that's what this is about, Papa?" Jock asked, moving aside slightly so his father could have a better view of his console.

"What else could it possibly be?" Anders countered. He spoke quietly into the ship's own commlink, giving a series of very precise commands; Valeria moved out of orbit toward the buoy, and within minutes had tractorred it aboard. The small spherical object was brought to the control room, and when it was opened the personal capsule inside it yielded to Anders Valeria's thumbprint.

"Hello, old shipmate," came the familiar voice of Alan Robie. "By now you're expecting to hear from me, I'm sure; and I'd hate to disappoint you. You've guessed right, Anders. I'm the one who arranged for your twins to be - ah - detained in guest quarters; since you've obviously followed my instructions if you're hearing this message, you needn't fear for their safety. I have nothing against them, so if they cooperate with their custodians they'll be kept safe and they'll be released when this is over.

"Don't even think about persuading me to worry about my future, or my reputation, or my House. I'm dying already, Anders. I found that out just a few days ago, and as soon as I knew it I set this plan in motion. I've always intended to end my life this way, but not until it wasn't worth continuing anyhow. And now that's how things are.

"You know what I want. Give it to me, and your son and daughter will be safe. Refuse me, and you lose them. It's simple, isn't it? And as for Jock, he's Nadia's child. I don't want him harmed. I hate what

you did to her to bring him into the universe alive, but since he's here I can only do what his mother would want me to do and let him go on living.

"Meet me on the surface. I'm nearby, even though your sensors can't detect me, and I'll join you there. And Jock, since I know you're hearing this: if you interfere in any way, your sister and your brother are dead. Do you understand me, youngster? I've nothing against them, but I've no attachment to them either; they aren't your mother's children.

"Who knows? It's going to be a fair fight; I wouldn't settle for anything else. Maybe this time your father will kill me, and in that case you can all go back to Chaitanya and file a nice report with the Guard. But that's not what will happen if I do what I intend to do.

"I'll see you on the surface, Anders. Robie out."

Jock looked at his father in the silence that followed, and he gave his head a strong negative shake. "No!" he said urgently. "Don't listen to him, Papa. He's always lied; why should he be telling the truth now?"

"The truth about what, Jock?" Anders Valeria asked softly. His face was lined much more deeply than his age would indicate; his hair had gone white years earlier, and he was underweight because he'd been drinking his nourishment for far too long to have done his general health any good at all. For him to get into a hand-to-hand fight now, with an opponent who had any fighting skill at all (and Alan Robie had plenty of fighting skill!), would be suicide.

But that was just what he was going to do.

"Jock, you can bet Alan is telling the truth about what's going to happen to Jason and Xanthe if I don't give him what he wants," Anders said now, still in that soft and utterly reasonable tone. "My life hasn't been worth much to me for a long time now. So please don't try to stop me from doing what's necessary to protect your sister and your brother - I'm going to do it anyway, and it will be much easier if you don't add to the problem by giving me someone else I have to fight besides Alan."

They stared at each other, dark eyes meeting dark eyes, strong will meeting strong will. Jock had known this father once, years ago; and it was almost eerie to have him back now, after all this time, under this strange set of circumstances. But at last he nodded, yielding, and put out a hand.

His father gripped it firmly. "Thank you, my son," he said formally. "Let's do it, then."

Aboard the freighter Callon, Alana Robie frowned as her ship dropped out of warp and she got her

first close-range sensor readings on the system that was their destination. She looked at her first mate, and wondered yet another time whether or not she dared believe whatever answer he might give to her next question. Oh, well, she would ask him anyway; she might as well. It would make little difference if he lied to her again.

"Is that what I think it is, hiding in that moon's shadow?" she asked, glancing from Berkey's face back to her sensor readouts. "It looks like a small spacecraft. Probably a yacht. Probably my father's yacht."

"Yes, to all questions," Berkey said, his tone carefully neutral. He'd been using that tone with his captain ever since that day over Chaitanya when he'd admitted having lied to her. He still couldn't believe she was continuing to hold it against him, after all this time had passed - but he should have known better, he told himself glumly. Just like her mother, just like Treena Callon. Honest to the point of idiocy.

"And you're sure his purpose is to fight Anders Valeria, down on the surface of that moon?"

"Yes, Alana. Yes, Captain." Berkey sighed. "Listen. If it will make you happy, I'll promise you right now: no more lies. I never lied to you when you were a little girl, you know."

"I do know that." She looked up at him again, and her hard face softened a trifle. "That's exactly why it hurt so much that your idea of treating me like an adult was to start lying to me. But I don't expect that makes any sense to you, does it?"

"Oh, but it does." How to tell her that when she was a little girl he would have died to protect her from that father of hers, if it had ever become necessary? But she didn't know, she couldn't know, what he knew about Alan Robie and his temper. So she was never going to be able to understand that when he'd stopped protecting her from her father, in his own mind he had done her the honor of promoting her to full adulthood. And that meant no longer standing between the two of them, in ways she had never even realized he'd done.

There was nothing quite as complicated, Cameron Berkey thought, as the mind of one single human being. Especially one who was half Callon, half Robie, all starship commander.

She stared at him a moment longer, expecting him to say more; but he shrugged instead, so she turned back to her console. And drew in a breath. "It's the Valeria," she said with conviction but with absolutely no surprise. "Here already, in orbit. And her shuttle's already away."

"It's happening, then," Berkey said, with relief he hadn't expected to feel. "All we have to do now is wait, Alana."

"Like hell," Alana Robie said, and palmed the comm. "Valeria, this is Callon. Acknowledge!"

"Acknowledging," came a voice that sounded too young to belong to Anders Valeria. Which fit the pattern, since the shuttle had already been launched. "Jock Valeria here."

"Alana Robie. I take it your father's on that shuttle?"

"Yes. And yours is waiting for him, I believe."

"Damn!" Alana said, with feeling. "Are we going to let them do this, Captain?"

"My father's still the captain, Ms. Robie," came Jock Valeria's reply. "And I don't see that we have much choice. I have a direct order in my log telling me to stay out of what happens next."

"Well, I don't," Alana Robie said decisively. "And I'm stopping it if I can. I know all about that kidnapping - your young sister and brother - because the bastards have my little sister, too. But how are they going to know what happened here if nobody tells them? As long as they get paid, they'll let the kids go. That's all they care about."

"True enough, Alana," said a voice that hadn't been part of the conversation until now. Alan Robie's voice, coming from somewhere - on the surface? Aboard that shadowed yacht? "But just what are you going to do to stop me? Because you'd better be ready to kill me, daughter, and I don't think you're capable of that. To protect yourself, to protect someone you think is 'innocent,' maybe - but not to keep me from fighting Anders Valeria." And from the orbiting yacht there came a flash of laser fire, so close to the Callon that the freighter rocked when the energy made contact with its light running shields.

Alana Robie's face went dead white. Not with fear, Cameron Berkey thought as he watched her; but with shock.

"Get this through your head, Alana," her father's voice said, into the absolute silence that now filled the open commlink. "This matters to me more than you do. And it's your own fault I just told that to the entire universe, because you're the one who pushed it this far. Good-bye now. I'd really like to let Berkey live, and I'd really like to leave the ship intact for Kyla to inherit someday; but you won't kill me, and I will kill you. So that's that."

The link went dead. Berkey waited a moment, then reached out and cut off transmission from Callon's end so that anything he said now would not reach Jock Valeria's ears. "Alana," he said gently, "you can kill him if you have to. I know that, and you know that. But until he's out of his ship and on the surface, he won't be vulnerable; that yacht can land like a shuttle, and I've got to say that I never expected it to be carrying a laser cannon array like that one. So if you want to kill him, you'll have to shoot him like a mad animal. Is protecting Anders Valeria that important to you, if it isn't that important to Valeria's own son?"

"Oh, gods!" Alana said, her voice a hoarse cry. "No, I can't. He's won, Mr. Berkey. Damn him, he's

won and it's already over - no matter which of them kills the other."

CHAPTER 5

Anders Valeria rode a scooter down to the moon's surface, just as he'd done thirty years earlier. That was a day he would never forget - the day his young first wife had died, the day his first child had been born.

He'd been surveying this moon for mineral deposits, and he had wanted to get a closer surface scan than he could get even by orbiting in a shuttle. Nadia had been terribly restless that day; and pregnant as she was, even she had to admit that it would be impossible for her to don an envirosuit and join him on this foray. So they'd agreed that she would pilot the shuttle, which would get her off the ship for a few hours at least and give her some solitude while he and a senior crewman with a geology background were down on the moon's surface doing the close-range scans. Solitude was perhaps what she'd needed most at that point, because even a born trader could get to feeling very cooped up after enough weeks without going dirtside; and Nadia was a Guard brat, not a trader's child, so although starships had been part of her childhood's environment so had the open spaces and free atmospheres of the M-class planets where her parents' ships had been based. No wonder she'd been feeling so on edge, with her baby just weeks from its birth and with her husband's ship so far from any world where she might have been able to take an unsuited outing.

Anders remembered kissing her good-bye that day, while his crewman had politely turned away and just before he'd secured his envirosuit helmet. They'd been fussing at each other about some petty thing, just before boarding the shuttle; but at that moment when he was about to leave the shuttle for that scooter ride to the surface, Nadia had put her arms around his neck and had returned what had started out as a rather perfunctory kiss with a tenderness that drew an immediate and powerful response from him. "Be careful, darling," she'd said, with sudden tears in her dark eyes. "This isn't an easy time for us, but don't ever think it means I don't love you."

"Nadia, I know," was all he'd been able to say. Anders Valeria had never been a man who could speak endearments with ease. But he'd kissed a tear from her cheek when one had overflowed from her eyes, and he had held her as close as he could with the child's bulk between them. And somehow he'd always had the comfort of being very, very sure she had understood all that he hadn't said, as clearly as what little he had put into words. Nadia had been like that.

So he'd left her there, settled in the pilot's chair of the shuttle, while he and his crewman cycled through the airlock and left the shuttle for the surface. And when they'd returned two hours later, which was earlier than they'd intended but had seemed wise because their attempts to check in with Nadia via commlink had been unsuccessful, they had found out why she was so silent.

How could so many things manage to go so wrong at exactly the same time? But it had been a chain of unfortunate events, actually. First there had been a malfunction in the shuttle's main computer. Just a small malfunction, but it had blocked all outgoing comm traffic; and Nadia, following her cadet training as anyone would have expected her to do, had gone about the business of trying to repair it. Much better if she had gone to the envirosuit rack and used a short-range helmet comm to contact her husband; but that hadn't entered her mind, accustomed as she was to managing such crises on her own.

The console she'd opened had shorted out, and that had done two things simultaneously. It had knocked her unconscious, so that she hadn't been able to take any further action to protect herself or to summon help; and it had taken life support off-line.

The cabin on that shuttle was so small. By the time Anders and his companion returned, the atmosphere was foul; Nadia had half-wakened at some point, had tried to rise from the deck, and had lost her balance and had cracked her skull on one of the cabin's few sharp-cornered surfaces. She was no longer breathing, hadn't been breathing for no one could guess how long a time.

Anders remembered, now, how he had torn his helmet off while his crewman flooded the cabin with fresh oxygen. It was a wonder the two of them hadn't managed to blow the whole shuttle into the next galaxy, because a single spark could have caused a flash fire under those conditions. He had tried so hard to get his wife to breathe - he had compressed her chest, blown his own breath into her lungs, shouted and pleaded - and she had still been dead.

But his hand scanner told him that inside her body the child was living still. The little one's heartbeat was not as strong as the last time he'd checked it, just hours earlier as was part of the young father-to-be's morning routine; but it was detectable and it was steady. So he had pushed aside all his carefully inculcated respect for the body of a deceased loved one, and he had taken a scalpel from the shuttle's medkit and he had done what custom forbade him to do. And seconds later a male infant had gasped, coughed, then screamed and wriggled in his hands.

No one had ever been able, after that miraculous moment, to make him even consider that he'd done something wrong in rescuing his little son from death within Nadia's failed body. That helpless little fellow had been the only thing that had kept Anders going, for days - weeks - months and years after Nadia's death, and he had no doubt whatsoever that if she'd been able to give him her opinion from wherever the afterlife had taken her she would only have blessed him for saving their son. Some customs were stupid, and shouldn't be followed. Some were useful for most situations, but hideous in their results when applied to every situation without the distinction of common sense. Anders Valeria wasn't sure into which category he should place the custom of letting the unborn child die with the pregnant mother, but he was glad he hadn't followed that custom when he had had to choose; and he was just as glad of it today

as he'd been on that day thirty years earlier, when that baby's insistent squalling had been all that had kept him sane.

So, Alan, he thought now. You loved her too, did you? What kind of love was it, that begrudged her the happiness she had with me and that blamed me because she died in a pointless accident? Yes, of course I would have insisted that she stay on board the ship if I'd had any idea that she would be in danger piloting the shuttle. But what would you have had me do, wrap the woman in restraints for nine months? Because the Nadia I remember, the Nadia I so loved, was a strong and assertive woman who needed action just as much as I needed it. All that ailed her that day was too much inactivity, too much sameness, and that shuttle excursion should have been just the right medicine. It was an accident, dammit! Just a stupid, pointless accident, not my fault or hers. And what came after, bringing the baby the way I did, was nothing more or less than what I had to do.

Damn you, Alan, why have you never been able to see that? And after two marriages and two children of your own, why is what happened to Nadia still the most important issue in your whole life?

He's mad, Papa. Crazy. That was what Jock had said, and Jock had been right.

This was the place. Fifteen years ago, after Alan Robie had lost his second wife - young Kyla's mother, whom he had actually seemed to love in his own strange way - they'd fought each other here. Anders still wondered what power had compelled him to save Robie's life at the end of that fight, after his old patrol ship comrade had tricked him into coming here and had then attacked him and taunted him with Nadia's death and had finally been almost mortally hurt in the fight he'd sought.

A cracked helmet. Chemical burns on Robie's face, from the quick action Anders Valeria had taken to seal that helmet. It had been ugly and it had been painful, but once medical help was reached the wounds should have been healed without scarring; there was no reason Robie had had to spend the past fifteen years looking like a fright mask, except that by so doing he reminded everyone who saw him of who it was he hated and why.

That was when I started drinking before dinnertime, Anders Valeria recalled now, and sighed. I'd had that bender after Leah died, but when I came back to myself afterward I was ashamed and I realized how hard I'd made things for Jock. He was only thirteen - and he'd done the most incredible job of holding things together, while all I did was fall apart. So I pulled myself back together, and I held together somehow. Most of the time, anyway, until that fight. Damn you, Alan Robie, that finished me. You killed what mattered in me that day, and you didn't even have sense enough to know it. What you're doing today is just finishing the job, forcing the flesh to follow where the spirit's already gone.

And this time I'm not going back. But neither are you, old friend, old comrade, old shipmate. You've done enough harm to my family, and there's no way I'm letting you live this time. If I'd let you die fifteen years ago, maybe I wouldn't have - lost my soul.

A second scooter was approaching. Anders Valeria did two things very quickly, very decisively, before Alan Robie could even notice - much less react.

He fired a hand-held blaster at his old shipmate, vaporizing him. And then he turned the weapon on himself.

Alana Robie was watching the Callon's sensor display with narrowed eyes, her fingers making constant tiny adjustments. Somehow she wasn't a bit surprised to have discovered that the freighter's sensors had been replaced by an array far more powerful, and far more sensitive, than what any other trader but Alan Robie would have chosen to carry; in fact, Alana was certain her father couldn't have got hold of this particular configuration by any legal means. It belonged aboard a Guard ship, and since manufacturing electronics in general and starship components in particular was difficult - had been difficult ever since access to Earth had been lost, two centuries and more earlier - such components were absolutely reserved for the Guard's use. But somehow, typically, Alan Robie had managed to lay hands on them and had managed to keep his possession of them secret.

She was glad to have them at her disposal now, in truth. She was certain that Jock Valeria was not seeing what she was seeing, and hateful as it was to her she still needed to see it.

The two men on the moon's surface were dead, vaporized. She would have to analyze the sensor logs later to be certain who'd killed whom, because that had taken her by surprise; she had expected a fight, not an execution and a suicide. But she'd been focused on her father's yacht, where it lay on the moon's surface, and she hadn't shifted that focus - although she was moving her fingertips to do so - when activity aboard that yacht caught her attention despite events a few kilometers distant.

The damned thing was powering its weapons, automatically, and it was locking them onto the Valeria. For all the speeches she knew he'd made about not wanting to harm Jock, who was Nadia's son, he had left some sort of deadman's switch that his death had activated. And now she had a second - no more than that - to stop his last act of vengeance from being completed.

For her, it was time enough. She'd already powered Callon's weapons, had already locked them onto that yacht. She could not have killed her father with premeditation, but she had been ready to do so in an instant if he - did something exactly like this.

The Callon's array flashed. The yacht was blown apart. And knowing her father's mind as she had, Alana Robie sat holding her breath and waiting for her own ship to self-destruct in answer to some buried code, some final concealed booby-trap that waited to punish her for what she'd just dared to do.

It didn't come. She did not dare to believe it; she ran diagnostics for the next several minutes, thinking as she did so that this action might be exactly the one that would trigger the hidden code and

cause the ship to blow itself apart. But all the diagnostics came back with normal readings, the ship functioned as if nothing were wrong with it, and gradually she began to believe both the evidence of her readouts and her own shipmaster's instincts. The Callon felt right to her. In fact, it felt as if something malevolent had finally left it for the first time since - when? Since before Alana Robie had even been conceived, she realized.

Finally she looked up at Berkey, who was still sitting in the first mate's chair and who had said not one word to her since before they'd both seen her father and Anders Valeria vaporized. He did not speak now, either. He just sat there and waited for her to break the silence.

"I have to go over to the Valeria," she said at last, and was mortified to hear the slightest of tremors in her voice. That never happened to her! But then, nothing that had happened to her as a Guardsman had ever been as painful or as unexpected as all that had happened to her today. "I may not be coming back, Mr. Berkey. So please be prepared to take the ship home, if it comes to that."

"What? What do you mean, Alana?" He knew damned well what she meant, of course. That was why he was calling her by her name instead of addressing her as "Captain." For just this moment, he was deliberately reasserting the old parent-child relationship between them.

Alana did not permit it. She said firmly, "You know what I mean, Mr. Berkey. My father just tried to kill Jock Valeria and his entire crew in cold blood, for absolutely no reason, with absolutely no warning."

"But you prevented him, Alana. So you owe no penalty." There was raw pain in her old friend and mentor's eyes.

"I'm not sure that's true." She looked back at him, and her eyes were steady. This time, so was her voice. "I'm going, in any case, and I'll make my offer to Jock Valeria. My life, for what my father did. And he will have the right to take it if he so chooses."

"He won't," Berkey said, in a tone that was more prayer than statement. "Surely he won't, Alana!"

"I don't know right now whether I hope he does or whether I hope he doesn't," she said, and got out of the captain's chair with the stiffness of having sat there too long. "I just know I have to do this, or there's no point in trying to live with myself. I feel - soiled, Mr. Berkey. And this is the only way I know of to get rid of that feeling. So please don't try to stop me, because I won't let you."

She meant it, he knew she meant it, and he said no more. He moved to the chair she'd vacated, and he touched the comm. "Callon to Valeria," he said, in a tone that was even but that sounded weary. "Prepare to receive our shuttle. Captain Alana Robie will be aboard. Please acknowledge."

"Acknowledging, Callon," came a voice that was not Jock Valeria's. "What is the purpose of Captain Robie's visit?"

"You'll have to find that out from her," Berkey said, bluntly but not rudely. "Callon out."

Jock Valeria was too numb to think, much less weep. He had watched events on the moon's surface using normal freighter sensors, which meant that he had seen what happened but had not perceived those events detail by detail as had Alana Robie. For all he knew, either of the two men might have fired the fatal blaster shots; and he had no idea why Robie had fired on her father's yacht just seconds after his death. And he certainly had no idea, now, why she was coming over to - pay a condolence call? Hardly, when her own father was just as dead as his was. So what could she be wanting, and how quickly could he get rid of her?

They had not met, of course, although each knew the other by sight. Alan Robie had pretended to renew his friendship with Anders Valeria on that one occasion fifteen years ago, when their older children had been adolescents; but each had stayed aboard his or her father's respective ship, and there had been no contact between them. Not then, not before then, not after. But in a peculiar sense Alana Robie had already played a large part in Jock Valeria's life, and he had already played a large part in hers; so when he met her, in the freighter's salon (or family living and dining area) because he did not want it to happen in the control room from which he'd just witnessed his father's death, he had no sense that he was in a first encounter with a stranger. He looked at her sharp-featured face, at the braids of long fair hair that were bound about her head, at the steady blue eyes that were staring at him so searchingly; and he put out a hand with reflexive courtesy. "Captain Robie," he said carefully, remembering that now she merited that title.

What was her rank in the Guard, anyway? He didn't know. And of course it didn't matter.

"Captain Valeria," she said, startling him because he hadn't yet realized that at last he too must use that title. She did not take his hand. Instead she offered him her sidearm, butt end first.

"What's this?" He took it before he realized what he was doing. And when he did realize, he was horrified.

Oh, gods. Blood penalty. She was offering him the right to take her life in payment for what her father had done, which was absolutely foolish; but it was also absolutely traditional, and by accepting her sidearm he'd also accepted her offer. And if he backed down now, if he let her live, he would dishonor them both.

Well, that's what he would do, then. He was alive in the universe because his own father had had the courage to defy another such stupid tradition, and he hoped he had at least as much courage as had Anders Valeria. He said firmly, "No, Captain Robie. I didn't understand what you meant just now, or I wouldn't have accepted this - " he indicated the sidearm in his hand - "under any conditions. You're not to blame

for anything your father did. Besides, for all we know my father may actually have killed yours. So I'm going to give your weapon back to you, we're both going to be glad there are no witnesses to this conversation, and you're going to go back to your ship. And neither of us will ever mention this to anyone. Agreed?"

"No! It's not agreed. And if you want witnesses, I'll get some." Alana Robie was astonished by her own vehemence. "Captain Valeria, my father's yacht was set with a deadman switch to destroy your ship a moment after he fell. That yacht's weapons were locked onto your ship and were about to fire when I took it out. Which of the old men killed the other isn't the issue here; but that my father tried to murder you and all your people, is a crime that I didn't begin to expiate by preventing him from completing it." She paused, her breast heaving, her pale face flushing with a passion she couldn't remember feeling or displaying since that day when she was five years old and she watched her mother die. She'd screamed then; she'd howled then; she'd writhed then, until as large a man as Cameron Berkey could barely restrain her small body. And while she wasn't screaming or writhing or crying now, she was just as wrought up and just as beyond reason. She knew it, but there was nothing she could do to control it.

Even Dom wouldn't have known her, she thought with the tiny corner of her mind that had remained sane.

Jock Valeria watched her with infinite sadness in his dark eyes. He thought for a moment, letting her stand there and hoping she would back down; and when he realized that she wasn't going to, that if he gave her back that sidearm against her wishes she might do something with it that he didn't care to witness, he made up his mind. He put the sidearm on the nearest table, and before she could reach past him to reclaim it he reached out to her and clasped both her hands in his.

"Alana, if we're going to go by one old custom let's go by them all," he said decisively. "Blood penalty is what you're invoking?"

"Yes," she said, when he paused again and she realized she had to give him an answer. She was puzzled, and having to think actually started to calm her.

"Good. Because there's something I can do other than kill you, if you're offering me your life. And that's what blood penalty really means, doesn't it? To offer your life as payment for a kinsman's crime?"

"Yes. Yes, that's what it means. But I don't understand...?" There was something more than puzzlement in her blue eyes, now. There was a kind of fear.

"I think you do understand. I don't want your death, Alana. I don't want to cause it, and I don't want it on my conscience if I should refuse your offer and have to watch you take your own life for shame that I wouldn't. But I will take your life, if that's really what you're offering me. Your life, not your death." He still had her hands in his, partly to keep her from reaching to reclaim her sidearm, partly because it gave him a connection to her and he could sense that even a stranger's touch was somehow enough to draw her

back toward life.

"Do you mean that you want me to...?" She couldn't say it, because she could barely bring herself to think it. Surely she should regard what he was suggesting, as something worse than dying at his hands. Worse, even, that dying by her own hand.

But suddenly she knew just how much she still wanted to live, because she remembered Dom's touch and Dom's laughter and Dom's solid supporting presence by her side in the confusion and fury of battle. And what she was remembering, what was calling her back to life, she was now being asked to give up forever any hope of knowing again.

"I won't kill you, Alana. But if you want to give me your life, I'll take it. I don't have a wife. You don't have a husband. So it's possible. Or would you really prefer to die?" Now Jock released her hands, reached to the table, and picked up the sidearm. He offered it back to her. "Your choice, madam. And remember as you're making it - a marriage can be reversed if it proves to be a mistake. A death can't be reversed. Now, which will it be?"

They weren't alone now, hadn't been alone for several minutes; there were Valeria officers outside in the passage, and some busybody had taken it upon him or herself to connect the salon's comm to Callon's control room. So even Cameron Berkey was watching and listening now, his face plainly imaged on the salon's viewscreen. Alana Robie was barely aware of any of them, even Berkey. She pushed away the one of Jock Valeria's hands that held her sidearm, rejecting it; and she took his free hand in hers.

"I'd rather live, of course," she said, her voice calm once more. "Who wouldn't? But only with honor, Jock. Thank you."

Good-bye, Dom, she added silently. Because if I do this planning to reverse it, then it isn't real and it isn't honorable and I'd much rather accept that weapon and turn it on myself right now.

Oh, Dom. Good-bye, my love. Good-bye.

She stepped into Jock Valeria's arms, and lifted her face for his kiss. His lips felt as cold as hers did, but then it was done and there was no going back. He had asked her, she had said yes, and they had sealed their bargain before witnesses.

For better or for worse, as the most ancient of ceremonies might have put it, she was his wife. And that was that.

"The first thing we need to do is get the children back," Jock Valeria said positively, not realizing

that he was falling back into his old way of referring to the twins even though he'd promised himself not to call them that after their eighteenth birthday. "How are we going to find them, now that Robie's dead? Or didn't he know either?"

They sat in the Valeria's salon, facing each other across the family dining table because that was a safe barrier and this was a time to be absolutely businesslike. Sorrow had to be forgotten; so did their strange new relationship. On a third side of the table sat the Valeria's second mate, the distant cousin who had been serving under Jock's command for several years now and who was looking at Alana Robie from time to time as if seeing a rival; and on the viewscreen was Cameron Berkey, who remained aboard Callon but who had to be included in this conference in which the groundwork for more than one new relationship must be laid.

"I don't believe he did know," Alana said softly, and glanced at the viewscreen for Berkey's confirmation. "So how was he going to find out, Mr. Berkey, once this was over?"

"I believe I can contact the - ah - person your father dealt with, Captain," Berkey told her, using her title very deliberately indeed. He still wasn't sure in his own mind whether he was relieved that Jock Valeria had found a way to keep her alive, or whether he was furious with her for having created this (as far as he was concerned) needless and messy situation. "But if you want me to do that, I have to do it alone. If you're with me, that person - whoever he or she is! - almost certainly won't accept the contact. I'm the only possible alternative to your father."

Alana nodded. "Where would you have to go?" she asked. "And how long would it take for you to do that?"

"I could rendezvous Callon with Valeria two weeks from now, at Chaitanya," Berkey decided, after a moment's thought. "I'd hate to be in the position of having to tell my captain it will be better if I don't have her aboard, but since you'll be staying with your husband anyway...." He said that word ironically, and he looked straight at Jock Valeria.

"Alana and I need time to discuss those issues," Jock said, his tone decisive. "And while I know what my father's will says, maybe she doesn't know about hers. Do you, Alana?" His dark eyes were kind as he turned his gaze to her.

Strange, how that confrontation of just minutes ago had cleared the atmosphere of its overwhelming burden of grief. Not that each of them wouldn't still grieve, of course; but they had the rest of their lives in which to do that. Now the important thing was "the children," and Alana thought of them that way without irony because she had not seen Kyla since her half-sister had been a little girl of eight and since she had never known the Valeria twins at all. Although she knew intellectually that Kyla was seventeen now, soon to be eighteen and legally an adult, the little sister she had lost was still a baby of eight as far as she was concerned. "I know," she said softly, and surprised herself by reaching out to touch Jock Valeria's large hand where it lay on the table's surface. "Papa never held out any false promises to me. Callon was my mother's ship, but my mother left her unconditionally to Papa and Papa has left her to Kyla. I'm to

hold the captain's position, and head the House, only until Kyla both comes of age and either qualifies herself to command or marries someone who can do so. And that's all right!", she added hastily when she saw Jock Valeria's dark eyes kindling. "I never wanted to be Papa's heir. The truth is, I got tricked into taking this leave of absence and coming home to deal with this situation. All I want is to go back to the Andromeda and continue my Guard service. I wish to hell Kyla was three years older and already had her cadet service behind her, and that's the truth."

Cameron Berkey spoke up again, anger in his eyes and in his voice. "Alana, your sister is never going to command a ship," he said bluntly. "Either she'll marry someone who can, or she'll hire someone who can; but Kyla hasn't been trained for command as you were, hasn't even been brought up thinking herself capable of it. So I've been expecting you'd have to make a very difficult choice about your father's plans for you, now that he's gone; I don't think the Guard gives the length leave of absence you'd be needing, in order to get your sister married off to a qualified captain or otherwise settled in control of her own holdings. But that's moot now, isn't it? You're married to Captain Valeria, so you're not going back to the Guard."

"No. I'm not, am I?" Alana admitted softly, and took her hand away from her new husband's. "But for now, anyway, I'm still your captain and I will be even though I'm not actually sailing with you on this passage. Go contact my father's 'associate,' Mr. Berkey. We'll make that rendezvous with you in two weeks, at Chaitanya. Won't we, Jock?" She looked into Valeria's eyes as she asked that question, seeking agreement from him in almost the same way she would have sought it from a Guard officer whom she considered her equal or at least her teammate.

It didn't unsettle him, this assumption of partnership. But then, he was no Alan Robie to whom a wife was little more than chattel. He nodded, and gave her a taut smile. "Looks as if that's all we can do, doesn't it?" he admitted. "I have business at Chaitanya anyway, since we left so quickly and since Papa's death means there are things to be settled. The Fair's long over, but the loose ends will still be hanging."

"Papa's death." He'd said it without flinching, with his voice holding steady. Jock wasn't sure whether that made him feel better, or whether it made him feel ashamed of himself.

"Then let's do it, Mr. Berkey," Alana Robie said, and stood. "I'll bring the shuttle back across right away, because I do need to collect my personal things. You can have someone bring me back to the Valeria, and then you can get underway."

"Aye, Captain," Berkey said, and cut the commlink between the two ships.

Personal things. Nightgowns, underclothing, the Guard uniform that she would have worn for her return to duty. She'd never been one to collect baggage, because in the Guard there was no sense trying to haul material things around with you; so there was little for her to collect on this last trip back to the Callon, and there would be little for her commanding officer aboard Andromeda to dispose of when she transmitted her resignation and added a personal request that Flag Captain Sullivan have someone attend

to that matter. She wouldn't ask that anything be shipped to her. What would she want with even the single uniform she'd brought on leave with her, let alone the others that waited back in the first officer's quarters aboard *Andromeda*? Or with any of the few personal possessions that she'd left behind in those quarters?

She wished she could find a way to have Dom told that she'd died. That would be better than what she would have to tell him instead, and she would have to do that herself. A recording was at best a cold thing, but at least it would be her face he would see and her voice he would hear. But what could she tell him, and how could she say it? He'd asked her to marry him, she'd left him thinking that she would almost certainly say "yes" when she returned, and now she had married a stranger instead.

Oh, gods. How did this happen?

She was still wondering that a few hours later, with Callon long gone into high warp and with Valeria on course back toward Chaitanya. She had undressed, showered, taken down her hair and brushed it at a mirror that must have been used by generations of Valeria women. Jock's cabin was of course set up for a couple because he had been married before; the compartment had a broad double berth, extra personal storage space and even (to Alana's embarrassment) a cradle permanently mounted near one side of that berth.

Well, she'd made her bargain, and now she had to keep it. She slipped into the berth, wondering which side was hers and deciding that it must be the one nearest the cradle, and she waited.

His father was just hours dead. Perhaps a bride wasn't even of interest to Jock Valeria right now, she thought as the cabin's light dimmed automatically now that the sole occupant of the compartment was lying in bed. Was that what she hoped for? She'd never liked waiting for the unknown or the threatening to come to her, though; she'd always preferred to seek it out and face it down, the sooner the better for any confrontation to take place.

The cabin's door opened, and Jock Valeria's voice said softly, "Computer, maintain minimal lighting."

Of course, he would undress in semi-darkness this first night; or even in the head, for that matter. He was a grown man, he'd even been married before if Alana remembered correctly, but he'd been decently reared and he would treat her with respect. Of that much she was comfortably certain. If she protested at consummating this marriage, she suspected, he would even honor that - would not attempt to force himself on her, physically or through any appeal to guilt or her sense of duty.

She wouldn't protest, of course. She would keep her bargain.

He took his time. She heard the shower, and its falling-rain murmur made her doze. She'd had no idea she was so worn out, but after this day that shouldn't have come as any surprise. But when she felt his

weight on the bed, when he lay down beside her, she came wide awake and she felt her body's involuntarily stiffening.

So did he, no doubt. He spoke to her then, his voice soft and very gentle. "Alana, nothing's going to happen," he said firmly, without turning toward her - he was settling himself on his back, well away from her on the berth's broad surface. "You're an attractive woman, if things were different I'd be the luckiest man in the universe to be lying here with you like this; but I don't love you, and you don't love me. So there's no way I'm taking you tonight. Let's go to sleep, and in the morning let's talk about how we get ourselves out of this."

If he hadn't prefaced that flat rejection with those words of reassurance, Alana thought, she couldn't possibly have accepted it. She had spent all of her girlhood, and most of her young womanhood, thinking of herself as at best unattractive and at worst downright homely; her mother had called her pretty, but mothers were supposed to do that and she'd never quite believed it. Her father had valued her thinking ability, her physical strength, her talents for the math and science of starship navigation and her courage in learning the rough skills of hand-to-hand combat; but he'd made nothing but disparaging remarks about her as a female. That she'd been a daughter and not a son had been one of his greatest disappointments, and she'd known that from the first.

Until Dom, no man had ever made her feel beautiful. But Jock Valeria had just done so, with an unaffected honesty that soothed her ego so completely that she could accept the words that had followed the compliment. So she answered him not with a protest of outraged honor, but with a simple, "Jock, I know you're tired; but couldn't we talk now? Please? I was ready to be your wife; for as long as we're legally bound I'll stay ready, because I made a bargain and I won't go back on it. But if we are going to do something other than come together now as husband and wife - I need to know just what that's going to be. If there is a way out of this situation that's honorable for both of us, please tell me about it now."

He sighed, turned toward her but did not move closer; and he spoke to the computer again. "Computer, normal lighting," he said, and grinned ruefully. "Sorry, Alana, but if I don't have the lights on I'm going to pass right out on you. It's been one hell of a day, hasn't it?"

"Yes. It sure has." She grinned back, facing him, and blushing when she realized how ridiculous this was. This was their wedding night, and they were going to lie in bed with an empty meter's distance between them and the lights on full and talk?

Oh, thank god that was what they were going to do.

"Alana, the only reason we're here is that I couldn't kill you," Jock Valeria said softly, looking into her eyes with an intensity that made her feel as if she were about to fall. Fall right into the depths of his eyes, dark as they were - calm and dark and deep as infinity itself. "I respect your traditions, so I followed them with you; but I can't follow them so far as to actually go through with a marriage that's based on circumstances, not on love. I don't know you at all, but a little while ago I heard you say that the only life you've ever wanted is the one you've had in the Guard. So we have to find a way for you to go back to that

life, as soon as we get the kids back safely. Agreed?"

"It would be agreed, but how?" Alana frowned, tried to take her eyes from his, found that she couldn't do so. "I can't promise to be your wife one day and then leave you the next. I know some people do that, I know you think it's all right because you told me when you accepted me that a marriage can be reversed; but that's not the way I was brought up, and if it happens to us it can't be my doing. And besides, I've married you without getting my commanding officer's permission and that's definitely against regulations. So I may not even have a Guard post to go back to, even if somehow I could be free again."

"If you could be free again." Jock repeated her words, with almost tender irony. "Alana, listen to yourself! You just said it all, didn't you? For you this marriage would be a prison. And you're absolutely right, I do believe that when a marriage doesn't work - when it's destroying two people, not nurturing and fulfilling them - it not only can be undone; it had damned well better be undone. That's happened to me once already in my life. It was my wife who left me, that time; and what I think has to happen this time, is that I'll send you away when the kids are safe and we've no more need to be together. If I'm the one who ends the marriage, then any dishonor is mine. You'll be free, in every sense of that word."

"Your wife - your other wife - left you? She didn't die?" Now, this was news to Alana Robie. She'd had some vague recollection of Jock Valeria's having married, but it had happened while she was away on her own patrol ship posting; she'd thought no more about the matter, since at that time it hadn't concerned her in any way; and when she'd finally met him just hours ago, he had informed her that he did not have a wife. So she'd assumed the woman was dead.

Oh, how stupid. Valerias being Valerias, she'd been an idiot to assume anything.

"That's right. She left me after we'd lived together for just two months, and she went back into the Guard. Just as you're going to do, Alana, because I don't believe that the Flag Captain Sullivan I once met is going to hold what's happened today against you. Her husband was my mother's brother, remember? And she knew Papa's second wife, too, I seem to recall. So we'll get the kids back from wherever they've been taken, I'll give you divorce papers, and if it's necessary I'll go with you to your C.O. and I'll explain. And I'll take all the blame for your not having gotten her permission to marry me, if blame is what we have to call it. All right?"

"All right," she said. And she shuddered.

He had a wife who was living. Although this was an issue she'd never had cause to think about with any seriousness until now - now, when it had suddenly become so personal! - for Alana Robie a promise was a promise, and to break one's word once it had been given was unthinkable. And by that reasoning, the woman who had once married Jock Valeria and who had actually lived with him afterward was still the person who ought to be lying here at his side.

I've married a man who already has a wife. I really am still free! Alana couldn't decide whether to be

thrilled, or angry, or profoundly humiliated.

She would go along with the facade of this marriage for as long as it was necessary, and then she would allow Jock Valeria to take the formal steps to end it that he'd just described; but from this instant onward, she would no longer have to think of herself as his wife in anything but appearance. He'd had no right to take her. Dammit, no right at all!

And yet, if he hadn't done so - and if he hadn't killed her instead of wedding her, since that had been the alternative - she had no doubt that she would have turned that sidearm on herself, a few hours earlier in Valeria's salon. So she owed her life to his unwitting deception, and at least he'd spoken truthfully when he'd said that any blame must belong entirely to him - for this, much more than for any breach of Guard regulations that she'd committed. She was ashamed and she was humiliated, and on some level she was also deeply angry - with whom, she could at this moment hardly tell!; but at the same time she was alive, and she was guiltless, and she was free.

Oh, Dom. Will you still want me when you know all this?

With that thought, Alana Robie realized that Jock Valeria had fallen sound asleep beside her. She lowered the cabin's lights again, this time with a touch to a bedside control instead of with her voice, and she settled herself so that if sleep turned out to be possible for her she would be ready to welcome it.

She was sufficiently worn out so that she, too, was soon deep in merciful oblivion.

CHAPTER 6

Jason Valeria and Kyla Robie moved cautiously up the stone staircase that led from their underground chamber toward daylight. He had waited for his companion to regain consciousness and to recover from stunning, and he'd been glad after all that he had taken the brunt of that destructive energy; she had come out of it this time with minimal discomfort, so she was following him now without difficulty. But she was, characteristically, complaining.

"Jason, haven't you got any idea where this is?" she wanted to know, her voice peevish as she stood for the first time on the surface of this world and looked up at its skies. Those skies were blue, a marvelous bright blue that at the moment was cloudless. The space where they stood was paved with

some sort of artificially quarried and smoothed stone, and was enclosed by walls of the same material. It looked ancient and weathered, but it was solid and it had only one door. One broad, double door, that was closed and that Jason could see no immediate means of opening.

"Maybe when night comes and I can see the stars, I can make some kind of guess," Jason told his companion in answer to her question, when she repeated it. "Right now all I know is it's an M-class planet and it's been settled by humans for a long time. I can tell that because this stonework has seen an awful lot of weathering."

"Oh." Kyla Robie had spent little of her life anywhere but within the compartments of her father's ship. And when she had been allowed a dirtside excursion, she'd always been in Phillida's charge and had certainly not paid attention to cultural details of whatever planet they were visiting; they'd spent their time in the marketplaces, of course, and had been escorted back to the ship as quickly as possible after they'd made their purchases. "Do we have to haul all that stuff up here from underground?"

"Only if we decide we want some of it up here," Jason told her, trying to keep his tone even and reassuring. "Unless we get heavy rains and that room hasn't enough drainage, everything should be safe enough down there. So let's leave it, for now, and let's explore while we have daylight. Okay?"

"Okay," Kyla said, and looked around her with newfound curiosity. "Do you think they - those people - put us here so we can't get out?"

"Sure looks that way. And you mean those pirates, don't you? I wouldn't exactly call them people." Jason made up his mind about where to begin his explorations. He headed straight for the enclosure's doorway.

It was actually a set of double doors, that were intended to swing outward in the old-fashioned manner instead of slipping aside. They were massive, and they were newer than the rest of the structure because they were made of metallic alloy when wood would have better matched the stone structure's age. They were well secured, too, and not from the inside. He pressed his shoulder against one of them, just to make certain, and it didn't budge at all. Not by a single millimeter, not with even a tremor.

"What are pirates?" Kyla asked him, from where she'd followed along a meter or so behind him. Not too close, but close enough so she didn't feel alone.

"What are pirates?" Jason couldn't help repeating her question, although he knew he sounded foolish. He did manage not to say what occurred to him next, which was: "Good god, woman, don't you know anything?"

"Well, I've heard the word; but only in old literature, from old Earth cultures," Kyla said, for once not taking offense. "And I've heard it used for some people nowadays, too. But Papa's always told me it was a foolish word, that it didn't mean anything except in the old stories."

"Well, I hate to tell you your father was wrong," Jason said bluntly, as he stood back from the unyielding door and wished with all his heart for a scanner, "but pirates are real enough! They're the descendants of the people who were part of old Earth's military space service, who were within the Sol system when the biocaust happened and who escaped into space."

"I thought that was the Guard, or I mean it was the people who formed the first Guard," Kyla countered, sitting down in the shade of the nearest wall and wiping perspiration from her forehead. "Oh, it's going to be hot in this box! I hope we can find a way out, Jason."

"So do I," he agreed, and sat down beside her. Maybe staying out of the noonday sun wasn't such a bad idea. They needed to use the daylight, of course, but frying themselves wasn't exactly smart; and they both had starship-fragile skin, that was completely unused to solar radiation even in the form of normal sunlight. Besides, although he was in excellent physical shape and she probably hadn't deliberately exercised once in her whole life, he was sweating now too. Damn that sun. "The Guard was formed by people from that first service, yes; but they were the ones who were safely out in space. On ships, on bases, on space stations. So there was no risk they'd spread contamination, and there was no reason to try to contain them or kill them."

"Contain them or kill them?" Kyla frowned. She was puzzled.

Ye gods, she really didn't know anything at all. Anything about politics, or about her own society and its organizations and customs. Jason proceeded to explain. "There was a war on Old Earth, two hundred and fifty years ago," he said, trying not to use a tone that would treat his companion as a small child. If she really was this ignorant, someone had deliberately kept her that way; so it wasn't her fault, and he didn't want to humiliate her for it. "Bio weapons were used. The whole mother planet was contaminated, so completely that nothing and no one survived and no one could go back there safely. There were just a few thousand humans living outside Earth's solar system then; colonization of the stars was new, warp drive hadn't been around that long, and when Earth was lost so were most starship and computer manufacturing facilities and a lot of other things."

"Medical facilities, for instance." Kyla had known this much; she nodded, for all the universe like a little girl listening to a favorite story for the hundredth time and enjoying it just as much as she had the first. "I knew that; that's why it's so hard to get spare parts, so nearly impossible to replace ships and even shuttles. And that's why injuries and illnesses that are cured easily in old stories, we can't do a thing about in our society today."

"Yes." Jason nodded. "The people who became the Guard had to protect themselves, and all the civilian traders and colonists - our ancestors - from contamination by those few starship crews who found their way into space after the biocaust on Earth. It was cruel, it was horrible, but those first Guardsmen believed they had no choice but to kill those people on sight. Otherwise the infection would have spread, instead of being contained within Earth's system, and no humans could have survived anywhere in the galaxy."

"But that can't be true," Kyla objected. "If it was true, all the people you say were the pirates' ancestors would have died!"

"Yes. You're exactly right, Kyla." Again, her companion nodded. His young voice was sad now. "We made a terrible mistake, you see. We - the Guard's ancestors, everyone else's human ancestors - ought to have realized that anyone who was still living and still apparently healthy after getting clear of Sol's system, hadn't been infected in the first place; there must have been dozens of ships, of one size or another, and maybe even some colonists on the Sol system's other planetary bodies or space stations, who never came in contact with the biohazard. Anyway, they came out to the stars expecting our ancestors to welcome them and help them find homes. Instead we killed them on sight."

"So...?" Kyla was even more like a child listening to a story, her blue eyes wide and her lips parted.

"So by the time the leaders realized that they'd been killing their comrades needlessly, it was too late to make peace with their survivors," Jason said. "They hated all of us and they distrusted all of us, and there was no changing it. So they made homes, all right, but we still don't know where. Once in awhile a Guard ship finds a pirate enclave, and destroys it; now that's the only thing there is to do, because if they're allowed to live it never works. But mostly they keep their bases secret from us, they raid our ships and our planets to get the things they need for survival, and we do our damndest to stop them and kill them whenever they're caught raiding. But they seem to have contacts within our organizations, they seem to know when and where they can dive in and take what they want and then vanish before we can do a thing about it."

"I think I understand now," Kyla said, and leaned her blonde head back against the stone of the wall. It wasn't exactly cool, but here in the shade its surface wasn't burning hot and it did support her. "I knew about the pirates, but Papa never allowed me to call them that. He said it was - what's the word he used? - pejorative."

"He may have been right," Jason had to admit, with his own father's blunt honesty even in matters where such honesty was inconvenient. "Certainly their first generation became what they became through no fault of their own. It was a misunderstanding, Kyla. The most tragic misunderstanding in human history, maybe."

"So no one's been to Earth in two hundred fifty years?" Kyla asked, after a moment's silence. She put a hand over her eyes, wearily.

"No. No one's ever going back to Earth again, because it's been contaminated permanently. That's why the Guard placed those warning buoys all around the Terran Perimeter - it's why going past those buoys is a capital crime, even if anyone was ever stupid enough to do such a thing." Placing those buoys had taken resources, in both time and materials, that the stranded humans of those early post-biocaust days had been ill able to spare; but it had had to be done. Jason's father had taken their ship near the Terran Perimeter on a few occasions during Jason's memory, and each time he had listened to the nearest

buoy's warning message and he had shuddered. It was almost as if his very cells remembered what had happened to cut his race off from their mother planet, so deep went that horror - almost as if his very DNA coding carried that warning, without the need for a buoy to remind him of it.

"I wonder if that's really true," Kyla Robie murmured, her hand still covering her eyes.

"What?"

"I wonder if anyone's ever dared to check. It's been more than two centuries. How do we know the biohazard is still active? How do we know we can't go back to Earth?"

Oh, she was a child. What a silly question. But Jason tried not to sound excessively patient as he said, "I guess we don't really know that for sure, Kyla. But the buoys are set to destroy any ship that passes by them toward Sol, so wouldn't you say it's sort of a moot point?"

"Maybe. But I'd like to know, just the same, whether or not we could go home now if those buoys weren't there - or if someone found a way to deactivate them." Kyla sighed. "Oh! I think I'm going to fall asleep right here."

"So why don't you?" Jason lowered himself to the stone pavement, staying carefully within the shade. He was drowsy, too, and he certainly didn't want to go out into the noonday sun and fry himself - nor did he want to return to the confines of that underground room where their supplies and their pallets were. They didn't need to do a thing right now in order to survive, because they had water and they had rations that were ready to eat. All they had to do was wait to be rescued or retrieved, whatever term one cared to use, actually; trying to get out of here wasn't even necessary, because he had every confidence his father would find him or would do whatever the pirates were demanding so that they would take him home themselves. But nevertheless he was going to find a way out of this ancient fortress, once he and Kyla had waited out the noonday heat. He didn't like being a prisoner, and if the only freedom he could regain was the freedom to roam this planet's surface at will then that was the freedom he would seek.

But right now he needed to sleep. It was hot, he was still weak from the stunning's aftereffects, and until he slept he wasn't going to be able to do the strenuous things he would have to do in order to find his way out of here.

He was vaguely aware of Kyla Robie settling down near him, not touching but close enough so that he could have reached her if he'd wanted to do so. That was a good idea, he thought drowsily. If anything did go wrong - it wouldn't, but just on the outside chance that it might - he would be able to protect her that much more easily, if she stayed close to him.

And then he was asleep, and dreaming of laughing with his sister. He always dreamed of Xanthe, whenever he slept now.

It was going to take him the rest of his life, to get used to the idea that she was gone.

The patrol ship Nova was docked with the space station above Guardbase Alpha, like a kitten attached to its mother's nipple, Xanthe Nordstrom thought with amusement at the simile. That was how it looked to her from the vantage point of the flagship Andromeda.

Guardbase Alpha referred to both the space station and the world it orbited, of course, which was the nearest in physical distance to the Terran Perimeter and the forbidden space beyond it. This was the first military base humans had established outside their own star systems, centuries earlier. Xanthe had not been here before, and she was as interested in this place as she was always interested in anything new - anything unknown.

Right now she was waiting to be introduced to Linn Gelsey's parents, and she had to admit to being a trifle nervous. She understood that in a sense she was their kinswoman, and that this gave her informal status even with two such senior Guard officers; but she hadn't even served her own cadet tour as yet, was just barely old enough to begin doing so, and she felt shy and untried and awkward. And just because she had been raised to be so confident in new situations, those feelings were foreign to her and she hated them.

Finally the door to the flag captain's office dilated. Linn came out, and held out a hand to her. "They want to see you, Xanthe," he said, his lack of formality telling her that all was well.

Not that she'd expected it to be otherwise, but one never knew. Xanthe rose from the conference room chair where she'd waited, in a large and lonely compartment from which she could see the space station and the planet below and the stars beyond, and she took Linn's hand and went with him.

Admiral Gelsey was in a powered chair. She remembered hearing about such devices, but she'd never seen one before; major disabilities were quite rare among trader-folk. If you had a severe injury you usually either died of it or made a substantial recovery. But there he was, the Admiral of Guardbase Alpha, his legs useless and hidden within this technological substitute means of getting his body around the ship and around the station.

He couldn't fight like that, of course. But no officer of flag rank had to fight hand-to-hand, so it didn't matter.

Flag Captain Sullivan greeted her guest with extended hands and with a warm smile. "Xanthe Nordstrom," she said, and startled the girl by drawing her briefly into her arms. "I held you when you were five days old, did you know that? No, of course you didn't. But your mother and I served together, for a few months anyway; and she was so proud to show me her twin babies, when you and Jason had just been born."

"I didn't know you knew my mother, Captain," Xanthe said, blushing and feeling even more foolish for doing so. "Papa - my father - never told me that."

"There was no reason he should, I suppose," Sullivan said, and moved back so her husband could greet their guest. "Admiral Gelsey, Ms. Nordstrom."

The man might not have use of his legs, but his handclasp was powerful and his smile was warm. His eyes were like Linn's, brown and intelligent and kind. "Hello, young lady," he said with old-fashioned courtesy that startled her coming from someone in a Guard uniform. "We all know each other, don't we? Traders, Guardsmen, anyone who spends more time in space than anywhere else. It's just that we don't always admit it, I think!"

How true that was, Xanthe thought as she accepted the seat Captain Sullivan was offering her and as Linn sat beside her and once again reached openly for her hand. He had no hesitation at all, she realized, about letting his parents see their developing relationship. She said, "My father's always talked to me about my mother; but he didn't talk much about you, Admiral. I knew your sister Nadia was my half-brother Jock's mother, but that's the only tie I knew about."

"It's the only actual legal or blood tie, of course." Captain Sullivan was the one who spoke, not usurping her husband but speaking for him in the way that Xanthe had noticed long-married couples often had of completing each other's sentences or even (as in this case) each other's thoughts. "And you need to know, dear, that we honor Nadia's memory and that we don't begrudge your brother his life. We knew him when he was a child, before your mother died and your father became - ill. We would have known you, too, and would have watched you and your brother grow up; but it wasn't possible, under the circumstances."

"I can understand that," Xanthe admitted, blushing again at even so delicate a reference to her father's weakness. "Captain Sullivan. Ma'am. What's been done to locate and rescue my brother? Those were pirates who kidnapped us, weren't they?"

Admiral Gelsey and his wife exchanged a glance. A long, sad glance. And this time he answered for her, obviously with her full consent. "Ms. Nordstrom," he said, without Sullivan's informal use of the young woman's given name and certainly without presuming an endearment. "We sent a ship to track that vessel just as soon as we received Linn's message. It went where none of our ships can follow. It went inside the Terran Perimeter."

Xanthe uttered a small cry. She couldn't help herself, nor could she keep from squeezing Linn's hand until she was sure she must be hurting him. But he didn't take his hand out of her grasp, and after a moment he put his other hand around it too and began to gently massage her fingers. "No!" she whispered. "That can't be. They must have been destroyed. The warning buoys...."

"Are very old, and don't always do their job anymore," Captain Sullivan said gently, from behind her desk where she was now settling herself. "The pirate ship got through, Xanthe. And that means that there are issues here that go far beyond your brother's life, important to all of us though he may be."

"Issues more important than Jason?" Xanthe asked, tears filling her eyes. "What issues? Why?"

Linn's chair was not secured to the deck, so he could and did move it close to her side. He put his arm around her shoulders and held her against him for comfort. And she let him, without embarrassment.

"Ms. Nordstrom," said Admiral Gelsey, "for some time now we've been noticing that the pirates were resupplying themselves at a rate that their raids simply couldn't explain. They've been getting their hands on spare parts, even whole ships sometimes - and we couldn't imagine where those things came from. But now I think we're beginning to imagine."

Captain Sullivan took up the narrative where her husband paused. "We suspect, although of course we can't be certain, that Old Earth may have become habitable again," she said, and then let a silence extend for long enough for those words to sink into the minds of the two young people who hadn't had time - as she and the Admiral had had time - to consider their implications beforehand. "The idea that the biohazard would always remain active, is a tradition and not something that's ever been proved; and it has, after all, been two and a half centuries since that war. I've never been able to understand that reasoning, anyway. What kind of fools would contaminate their own world, for the sake of trying to gain control of it? What good could that kind of victory do them?"

"Anna," her husband said, his tone a gentle echo of one Xanthe had often heard Linn use. "I doubt they understood what they were doing. An interaction of two substances that had never been tested together, perhaps. Or some other sort of half-accident, half-miscalculation. It had to be that. Surely it had to be that, because you're right. No one would be mad enough to do such a thing deliberately."

"I'd like to think so, Mace." Sullivan reached out and briefly clasped her husband's hand. She smiled, and then she turned her gaze back toward Xanthe Nordstrom. "Anyway, it makes no difference now. The point is that even we - the Admiral and I - can't allow, much less order, a Guard ship to go inside the Terran Perimeter. That's a law so old, a tradition so strict, that if we defy it all we'll do is get ourselves removed from our posts."

"So you're telling me that you think Jason is living, that he hasn't been taken into a poisoned place where he'll die - but that no one can go after him?" Xanthe looked from Anna Sullivan's face, to Mace Gelsey's, to Linn Gelsey's. And she grew even paler than she'd been before. "Because I'll go after him, you know! I just need a ship. I haven't served my cadet tour, I realize, but I know all I need to know about ships and I can do this. Alone, if I have to. And I'm going to!"

"Of course you are, love," Linn Gelsey told her softly, and tightened the arm that still clasped her shoulders. "But not alone. I'm going with you."

"What? How can you do that?" Her eyes were wide, and there was something almost wild in them.

"Shhh. Calm down, love. Mother just gave you the official picture; she didn't tell you the rest of what she has to say. So just hold on, and listen to her for a minute or two longer. Okay?" Linn's tone was soothing, and his strong arm was warm and firm around her body.

So Xanthe quieted, and she nodded. "Tell me, then," she said, addressing Captain Sullivan. "What can we do that isn't official? How can we get my brother back safely?"

It was such a small ship. A yacht, by classification. Xanthe Nordstrom had never even been aboard anything this luxurious, let alone had possession - however temporary! - of such a craft. It was small, but it was fast and it was sleek and it was beautiful. And she was sharing it with Linn Gelsey, without awkwardness because she was his wife now.

"Cadet service doesn't necessarily have to be performed aboard a patrol ship, you know," Flag Captain Sullivan had told her new daughter, with her eyes crinkling at their corners in the dry humor that Xanthe was finding Linn had taken from his mother just as surely as he'd taken those calm brown eyes from his father. "Don't worry, dear, I'll see that you get just as rough a time in boot camp as does any recruit. You're just not going to do things in quite the usual order. Now, you do understand that if you want your commission you'll have to accept cadet assignments that separate you from Linn? Later the two of you can serve together, of course, but not while you're a cadet. Not after this one assignment, which you'll have to admit is far out of the ordinary."

It certainly was that, Xanthe thought, and smiled to herself now as she sat in the pilot's seat in the yacht's little control room and waited for her husband to board. She'd said, "Of course I understand that, Captain Sullivan. I wouldn't expect anything else."

"Not 'Captain' right now, Xanthe. 'Anna' or 'Mother,' whichever you prefer." And the older woman had put her arms around the younger one, had held her for a moment, and then had sent her on her way with another of those warm but ironic smiles.

The title had come to her lips with some difficulty, because she'd never before used it to address anyone; but Xanthe was glad she'd chosen to try it, because once spoken for the first time it felt so right. She'd said, "Good-bye, Mother," as she'd left Flag Captain Sullivan there in her office and had given her newly-joined husband a few moments alone with his parents before they departed the flagship and the Guardbase and headed out on this strange assignment of theirs.

A pair of honeymooning rich kids on a yacht. Who could expect them to realize what they'd done, if they sailed right on past a warning buoy that wasn't functioning? If a Guardsman did that, or if a trader

licensed to command a starship did that, there would be no doubt about his or her guilt - the law would have been openly broken, with all the terrible consequences that carried; but kids like these two couldn't be expected to know. The licenses they carried were for pleasure craft only, and the identities they'd assumed were those of two young people who'd never seen either Guard service or trader-ship life. So as long as they remembered not to call each other by their actual given names if they should indeed encounter trouble in the form of a trader or a Guard patrol ship, as long as no one on such a vessel happened to recognize either of them....

All right, there were risks. Huge risks. And to find out what had happened to Jason, Xanthe was willing to run them; Linn was willing to do anything in the universe for Xanthe; and Linn's parents were willing to risk their son's life in order to find out just what had been happening inside the Terran Perimeter during these past few years, because this was quite possibly the only way they could get the information the Guard needed in order to evaluate the threat posed by the pirates' new source of spare parts and replacement ships and who could guess what else. So Linn and Xanthe would head into the Terran Perimeter's heart, straight for the coordinates where Old Earth supposedly still lay, and if they were very fortunate they would come back alive. If they were incredibly lucky, they might come back with Jason Valeria.

Or they might be shot out of space by their own people, or they might be destroyed or (what would be much worse) captured by whoever or whatever now inhabited Old Earth. Or if the biohazard really was still active there, they might simply die from it.

Xanthe couldn't claim to be without fear, as she sat there waiting for her brand-new husband; but she was anxious to get started after the long days of preparation, and she had no qualms about what they were about to do. She couldn't have done anything else, from the moment she'd realized that such an opportunity existed.

Finally she heard footsteps, and Linn settled in beside her. That she would be primary pilot was part of their disguise, so he did not ask her to give up her seat to him and she certainly did not offer it. They cleared Guardbase Alpha under comm silence, with as few Guardsmen as possible aware that the civilian yacht had ever been docked there and with only Admiral Gelsey and Flag Captain Sullivan aware that the two civilians who supposedly crewed it were the same two Guardsmen - a newly commissioned ensign and a brand-new cadet recruit - who had theoretically departed in other directions, on separate assignments, hours earlier.

Assignments from which neither would return, if the yacht should disappear or be apprehended somewhere on its clandestine journey. Their deaths would be recorded, Xanthe's family would be informed without any reference being made to her marriage, and that would be that.

Flag Captain Sullivan and Admiral Gelsey watched the yacht's departure from a viewport in their shared quarters, not from any official compartment aboard their starship; and they held each other's hands in taut silence. This was the hardest part of being who they were. Going out there to die oneself wasn't what was difficult; it was sending the spouse, the child, the sibling that you loved.

But they'd known that from the day they'd decided to stop preventing conception, to have that baby they'd wanted for so long; and they'd known it every day since, for twenty-one years. Both were still hoping that someday they might get used to this feeling.

They both knew that they never would.

Jason Valeria couldn't believe it when he saw the mural. They had found the second underground chamber quite by accident, poking about the stone compound and exploring; it was pleasant to do that in the early morning and late afternoon hours, when the sun wasn't as fierce as at noonday and when there was enough light to see comfortably. He'd been walking along the top of the wall, which he had been able to reach by scaling it using handholds and toeholds (to Kyla's undisguised horror) and the absolute disregard for heights that was built into every starship child's very bone marrow. He did have to remember that he was working within a planet's full gravity well, and that if he lost his hold or his balance and fell he was going to be severely hurt - or more likely killed; but that wasn't something that was going to stop him. It was just a perfectly normal danger that was attached to an everyday activity, and once he'd taken every proper precaution against that danger his natural inclination was to ignore it.

Not so Kyla, who'd fussed at him until she got her first real sample of the Valeria temper. So then he had been even more inclined to climb up to solitude, to walk the top of the enclosure's walls and gaze into the far distance and call down to his companion (when he felt like taking notice of her) the things he saw from there.

The old fortress lay by itself on a vast, high plain. He could see what he suspected might be a forest, somewhere far on one horizon; on the other he could see mountains, purple and snow-capped and mysterious. There was water just barely visible in another direction, either an ocean or a substantial lake. Clouds seemed to rise there, and sweep across the plain to bring this otherwise arid spot its occasional downpour. And in the fourth direction the horizon came down to meet the plain, without anything disturbing its line.

Two days had passed when he found the lift that was concealed inside the wall. He found it quite by accident, by stepping on what looked to him like any other block of stone and by suddenly feeling his feet begin to sink. He uttered a startled exclamation; he kept sinking, but at a gentle rate that gave him no falling sensation and no fear of injury; and by the time he realized that Kyla was screaming his name from the ground, he was inside the wall and the sound of her voice was retreating. He kept sinking, inside a shaft built into the wall's breadth, until the lift finally came to rest somewhere beneath the fortress. Somewhere that was like a cavern, like a docking bay, like a - meeting hall? He'd seen few of those, of course, in his starship-bound lifetime; but he'd seen enough depictions of such chambers. For he couldn't believe that a docking bay or shuttle garage would have such murals decorating its utilitarian walls.

He wanted to stay down there, to start exploring his find immediately; but he couldn't forget the terror in Kyla's voice as he'd disappeared from her sight, so he stepped back into the lift after a moment of staring wonder and he tried to figure out its control mechanism. After a few moments of experimentation he felt it start to move, to carry him upward again.

And since he was a risk-taking adolescent, not a sober adult or a frightened child, he experimented a bit more and tried making it stop partway up the shaft. And he was rewarded for his audacity when the lift not only stopped; a portion of the ancient wall obligingly slid aside, creating a doorway where none had seemed to exist before. He was looking out into the fortress's interior from a point just a few centimeters above ground level.

Kyla shot through the opening, and threw herself into his arms with a force that knocked him back against the lift's interior. At which point the door closed as suddenly as it had opened, and the lift started to sink back toward the underground chamber.

His breath had been knocked out of him, too, but somehow he didn't mind. His arms closed around her, and when the door opened at the bottom of the shaft he half-carried her out of the lift and drew her down to sit with him against the nearest wall. She was crying, and he didn't know what else to do except sit with her and hold her until she'd let it out.

"I thought you were gone!" Kyla whispered after awhile, when she could manage words but with her face carefully concealed against his shoulder. "Oh, I thought you were gone and I'd never see you again."

You were wishing for that not so many minutes ago, Jason thought wryly; but he knew better than to say it. Instead he said gently, "I'm sorry, Kyla. I had no idea that was going to happen. I didn't do it to scare you."

"Where are we?" She turned her face away from him as she sat up, finally, and began to look around the vast chamber. There was no fear in her voice; she'd got over that kind of terror during the days just past, and Jason was thankful for that change in her. She no longer feared what was unknown just because it wasn't familiar or predictable. And he didn't blame her one bit for being terrified of being left all alone here on this strange world. He might not have reacted quite that dramatically if he'd been the one to watch her vanish without warning, but he would not have enjoyed the experience one bit more. So he had no business feeling superior, and he wasn't indulging in it.

He said honestly, "I don't know. But look at those murals, Kyla! Do you suppose they show this place the way it was? When the people who built it lived here?"

The two of them rose, then, and walked to the nearest of the murals. The ancient paintings were faded, but still perfectly plain in the images they depicted. A spaceport - ships recognizable even in their designs, since technology had suffered such an arrest when the war on Old Earth had ended with humanity's exile two and a half centuries earlier. Tall buildings, so tall that neither young trader had ever

seen anything like them because the colony worlds they knew were not populated to such density that skyscrapers were needed or even wanted. The term "skyscraper" was, in fact, an ancient word known only from literature. But those buildings in the murals were skyscrapers, nevertheless, and that was clear to Jason as he moved slowly from one image to the next and never let go of Kyla's hand during the entire circuit of the chamber.

A council table somewhere, with men and women in military uniforms standing around it. A human in a strange, primitive spacesuit, planting a banner of red and white striped pattern with a blue starfield on a barren (possibly lunar?) surface. Ancient ships, headed out from one world to another in a system of a Sol-type yellow star and nine planets and one asteroid belt. One planet was blue-green and cloud-patterned; one further out in the system had rings around its middle....

This could not be. Jason Valeria looked at Kyla Robie, whose face was still blotched with tearstains but who was so shocked by what they'd both seen that she was completely oblivious to her own appearance for the first time since he'd known her.

"Kyla, it's Earth," Jason said, speaking softly as if he thought someone might hear him and rush out of the walls to execute him for heresy. "These murals - they show Old Earth. The first landing on the moon; the first ships to travel to Mars, to the Belt, to Saturn's moons; the United Space Defense Forces council chambers; the cities that went up into the skies because there was no more land left to expand them without taking the farms and the forests, even after most of the deserts were reclaimed. These are images of Old Earth."

"But they're just paintings, Jason." Surprisingly, she was the practical one now. But perhaps that shouldn't be surprising him; he knew nothing of her dead mother, Dorina DeLong, but he knew plenty about her father and there was no more practical man in the galaxy than that devil of an Alan Robie. It wasn't Kyla's fault she had been caged up like a pet bird, deprived of any kind of useful training or education or chance to develop her mind. She was getting plenty of chances now, though, and she was taking advantage of this peculiar sort of freedom and she was - growing up. And that nasty shock she'd just had, in thinking herself alone on this alien world, had plainly done her years' worth of good in the maturity department. "The people who lived here must have come from Earth; all humans did, by one route or another, at one time or another. So they remembered, and they made images to remind them of their home. That's all."

"Maybe," Jason said, and felt himself shudder. He wanted to accept the theory his companion had just given him; he didn't like his own theory one bit. It was too wild, too heretical, too frightening in its implications.

This couldn't itself be Old Earth, this planet on which they stood. Despite what the nighttime stars seemed determined to tell him, Old Earth was poisoned; and anyone who even approached it - let alone tried to land on it - would swiftly sicken and die. And after two days of being here, he and Kyla were both perfectly healthy. Besides which, they'd been brought here by a captain who whatever her moral failings presumably knew what everyone else did about Old Earth; who would not have risked her ship, her own

life, her captives' lives (and the payment they were worth) to land them in such a forbidden place when there was a whole galaxy of safe worlds from which to choose.

But Jason Valeria had never felt quite such a shock of recognition before at anything that was supposed to be so alien, and he wasn't just shuddering now. He was shivering as if from an illness.

Oh, gods. The poison, the biohazard? Could it be starting its work on his body?

No. He was just scared, and cold, and hungry; he'd forgotten all about eating, and hours had passed since they'd come down here. Kyla was slipping her arms around him again, warming him and trying to comfort him. Funny that she should be having to do that for him; it felt like the oddest role reversal of his life, he'd grown so used to having to take care of her. But that was just what she was doing, and he liked it. He wasn't used to always having to be the strong one. He liked to lean, too, and finally she was able to return the favor.

"Jason, it must be dark outside by now," Kyla told him, her voice gentle and firm. "This chamber's got its own automatic light panels, just like a starship; but it's night above us, and that's why you're cold. Come on, let's see if that lift will take us back where we came from. We need to eat, we need to get warm, and we need to rest. We can come back here tomorrow and explore some more. All right?"

"All right." He let her draw him to the lift's opening, and he got enough of his wits back to operate the controls. When the two young humans stepped out of the lift into the now pitch-dark fortress, the portal closed behind them; but Jason found that he had no fear of not being able to access it again. Like anything else that humans had built for their use, it could be figured out and it could be made to serve the purposes of a later generation. Getting ancient technology to work was something of a specialty among the humans of Jason Valeria's heritage.

So when he and Kyla retreated to their underground room, to eat a hasty meal of prepared rations and to sleep on their familiar pallets, he was able to relax and think with excitement but without panic about what they would do tomorrow. And for the first time since his sister's death, when he slept that night he did not dream he was with her. Instead he dreamed about a lost, beautiful, doomed world. And then he woke up screaming, certain he had contracted the ancient plague and that he was about to spread it to everyone he'd ever loved.

And he woke to find Kyla beside him, holding him in her arms, cradling his head against her shoulder. Which embarrassed and delighted him, because his cheek rested against her firm young breast and that was the first such touch he'd ever known from a woman's body.

CHAPTER 7

Cameron Berkey accessed his employer's account on Chaitanya's Central Bank without bothering to inform anyone that his employer was no longer living. He had had certain limited privileges with the House's accounts for many years, and he saw no reason to muddy things up by letting the bankers know his status had just changed dramatically. Most likely he would have at least as much discretion under the terms of Alan Robie's will, especially during a period like this one when Alana was not available to take command and when he - the old man's most trusted employee - must of necessity do all that was required to keep things going; but he wasn't going to chance reconfiguring the stabilizers right now. He checked the contents of the personal mailbox, not just the business ones (there were several, for enterprises of various sorts - not just the one for the House and its interests), and he soon found what he'd expected.

He had promised Alana he wouldn't lie to her again, and then he'd turned around and done exactly that. But although she could have accessed this message just as readily as he had done, she could not have seen the markers it bore without gaining knowledge that she must not be allowed to have. So far she was absolutely innocent of any of her father's doubtful associates and even more doubtful business dealings. She might suspect, must suspect, that the old man hadn't been completely honest; but she herself was not tainted, and Berkey wanted her to stay that way. If she chose to involve herself once she began to know the truth, fine; he'd lived on the edge of this morass himself all his life, but with his penal-colony origins he'd had no choice. He had been "involved" from the day of his birth. Alana, on the other hand, could be protected and must be protected. The only way she would be soiled by all this was if she decided for herself that she would follow her father in every sense of that verb's meaning.

So Berkey got the information he needed, left the message he needed to leave (no matter what he'd claimed to Alana he knew perfectly well who Alan Robie's contact was and what she was called and where to find her, but he would never be so unwise as to contact her directly), and paid the funds that were due at completion of the contract. Now he could only hope that the woman who had Kyla Robie, Jason Valeria, and Xanthe Nordstrom would return them to their families before she realized that Alan Robie was dead.

Because if she realized that Robie had died before the money was paid, then the contract would be null and void; it would have died with its maker. And she would take the money, kill outright or abandon to exile the three youngsters - why should she risk bringing them home, if Robie wasn't around to be double-crossed? - and that would be that.

He couldn't let that happen. It was all too much to try to explain to Alana, even if he'd wanted to risk involving her. So he went ahead and acted for Alan Robie just as though Alan Robie still lived, and then he wished he could literally hold his breath until he could know whether or not he'd successfully deceived Robie's associate.

If he hadn't, those kids were going to die. Swiftly, by direct execution; or slowly, abandoned somewhere where their families would never think to look for them; but there was no chance that they would survive to see their own people, if he'd failed them now.

He did not know how to pray, and he did not have any deity to pray to. So all he could do was hope. And curse. And wait.

The Valeria was moving along toward Chaitanya at normal cruising speed, and Alana Robie was on watch in the control room and feeling less out of place than usual because she was on duty alone. She'd got the message, early and clearly, that her presence as nominal first mate to her temporary husband (for so she was now permitting herself to think of him, thank goodness!) was absolutely infuriating to the woman who should have moved up to the first mate's chair as soon as Jock became captain following his father's death.

Alana didn't blame the woman one bit, of course. Sela Valeria happened to share her cousin's surname, but the blood connection between them was slight and Alana realized immediately what she was sure still hadn't entered Jock's poor innocent mind: Sela fully expected that sooner or later, her cousin would turn to her as his "mate" in a sense that was personal rather than professional. She was attractive, although not exactly beautiful; she did her job with skill; and she was far more fond of that dense man than he deserved for her to be, Alana thought as she watched them together over the days of the Valeria's passage.

Alana would have liked nothing more than to tell Sela Valeria just how little threat she really posed to the other young woman's plans for her cousin's future. But of course she couldn't do that; wouldn't have done that, even if she had not been the object of Sela's understandable hostility. But in the meantime this was nominally her own husband's ship, she was entitled to the post she was filling, and if she hadn't had work to do she was sure she would have lost her mind. So she acted as first mate, at night she slept chastely beside Jock in the master's berth, and she thought of Dom and of her mates on the Andromeda with only a bit of foreboding.

She wasn't certain Jock was right, and that she could get past Flag Captain Sullivan's wrath quite as easily as he seemed to think she could. He'd been a cadet, as had everyone else in Alana's universe, for three years long ago; but he had no real idea of what it meant to be first officer to a flag captain, so she took his comforting words with a large helping of salt. However, that she could salvage her career in some form she did have confidence; and she realized that she would much prefer starting over again, even if Sullivan decided to break her back to ensign (not a likely possibility, either, of course - reality would fall somewhere in between that indignity, and getting to keep her first officer's post as if nothing had happened), than leaving the Guard for any other kind of life. And if she dreaded telling Dom what she'd been up to here on Jock Valeria's ship, she at least felt certain that their friendship would survive. Their

love? About that she wasn't as sure. But the friendship had come first, and in the long run it was what mattered most.

She was going to survive. And she was going to find Kyla, and leave her little sister firmly in control of all that was hers to inherit. Just how she would accomplish that without giving up the next several years of her own life, she didn't know; but with Alan Robie gone, his firstborn daughter suddenly found that she felt as confident in her personal life as she'd always felt behind the authority of her Guard officer's insignia. Her father's House was her House now, she was in charge of it, and it was going to answer to her just as surely as did every officer on the *Andromeda*.

And as for Sela Valeria, she was welcome to her cousin Jock. He was a good man, a kind and honorable man; but Alana didn't want him, and she wished Sela all the luck in the universe at winning his affection once Alana no longer needed his temporary protection.

Funny. She'd never, even in her self-doubting adolescent days, thought of herself as needing anyone's protection; not even her father's. But that was what she was getting from Jock Valeria, and she didn't mind it a bit. He had a way of giving her what she needed, just as when he'd told her she was attractive on that strange and unconsummated wedding night, so matter-of-factly and with such genuine kindness that she couldn't feel reluctant to accept it from him no matter how much she suspected she ought to be objecting.

But then, he was used to giving. He'd been doing nothing else all his life, with that father of his.

There was a ship on long-range sensors. Alana scanned it carefully, frowned, and scanned it again. A freighter, but modified in certain ways - ways that were familiar to her both from her Guard service, and from having seen what interesting things her father had done to the *Callon* over the last several years. Was there some thriving black market in stolen Guardship parts, she wondered, that freighters could be turning up left and right with such modifications?

No, not exactly left and right; she'd only seen these modifications on the *Callon*, and now on this unknown ship as well. But she shouldn't have seen them at all, on any civilian ship, so their presence made her uneasy. But she went ahead and did what the watch officer was supposed to do at a time like this; she opened commlink to her captain. "Captain Valeria," she said formally, to let him know that this was the most official sort of communication. "I have a ship on long-range sensors. It's closing with us fast; I'd say it will be within hailing distance within the hour."

"Closing deliberately?" Jock's voice inquired, from where he was working on some private project that was none of her business and about which she hadn't inquired. They were taking care not to become friends, not to grow close to each other on this short passage that was to be their only time together; and while they hadn't decided that openly, it was a tacit agreement that seemed necessary to both of them if they were to part without regret once the search for the youngsters was over.

"Without being a telepath and reading their captain's mind, sir - I'd say it's deliberate." Alana allowed herself a small, grim smile.

"All right. Thank you. I'll be there by the time we're within hailing distance." Jock cut off the commlink without further pleasantries, and actually appeared in the control room just moments later.

He examined the sensor readouts, looked up Alana, and whistled softly. "Damn!" he said. "Can't prove it, but that's a pirate if I ever had one in my sights. The ship's signature has been altered so many times, it's hardly readable."

"Nothing illegal about altering a signature, as long as you register the alteration with Chaitanya Control," Alana reminded him, but she smiled another grim little smile.

"True. But if you do it often enough, no one can prove your identity when you're out of range of Chaitanya. Which is most of the time, of course, for any trader." Jock settled into the captain's chair, which Alana had vacated for him, and ran several scans of his own designing. "Hmm. I could swear I've seen this mess before...." He checked the data against a previously recorded log, moving back almost to the beginning of the month's recording cycle; and then his face became grim.

The second mate arrived in the control room, bent over the console with him as if Alana Robie were not present, exclaimed softly. "Jock! That was the ship that left Chaitanya so quickly, just after the patrol ship cast off its access tube. I was on watch, I didn't have much to keep me occupied sitting there in orbit, so I was noticing things I wouldn't normally notice - and I remember that signature, because it was such a jumble."

"Like I just said, Sela, it's got to be a pirate operating with forged credentials." Jock considered, his dark eyes sober. "We can run, I suppose, but they're as fast as we are and if nothing's wrong we're going to waste an awful lot of time trying to give them the slip. And they might not intend us any harm at all; usually when they've gone to the trouble of getting credentials, they don't board and raid openly. But I'd sure hate to assume they're no threat to us and then guess wrong."

"So would I," Sela said feelingly.

Alana bit her lip, and almost decided to say nothing. These two officers had made thousands of decisions together; they shouldn't need her input to make this one. But she was here, it was her life just as much as their lives at stake if the wrong choice should be made, and if Jock did choose to run it was her little sister who would have to wait even longer for rescue due to the time they would lose. So she said, "They must want something, or they wouldn't be overhauling us. But you're right, Jock, they wouldn't be wasting forged credentials on a raiding ship. So maybe we ought to find out what they want before we decide whether to run or fight or just - talk to them."

Jock's eyes met his temporary wife's, and he nodded. "We'll stay on course and let them continue

closing," he decided. "But let's be ready to jump to a new course the moment we even suspect there's going to be a problem. Sela?"

"Aye, Captain." His cousin moved to the nav console and began working it with concentration. Her face was utterly expressionless.

Alana was glad she only had another few days to spend on this ship with these two officers. This sort of thing was wearing, and she'd never had to tolerate it before. She waited, monitoring carefully, while time passed and the other ship closed with theirs. And when the hail came, she was ready to accept it immediately.

"Valeria, this is Captain Simonds of Stella Maris," came a female voice from across several light-years' distance. "I'm looking for Captain Alan Robie of the trader Callon. Can you advise me of his whereabouts?"

"Sea Star," Alana Robie thought automatically. Not a traditional family ship, then, or it would have borne someone's surname. She could sense trouble; no one ought to be asking openly for her father, and certainly no one ought to be pursuing this particular ship across space with the idea that Jock Valeria might have such information.

No one who didn't already know what had happened out there in that deserted former mining system, several days ago, or who at least didn't know what was supposed to have happened there. But although she caught her temporary husband's eye and let him see her concern, she said nothing. She was thinking, and she knew that he was thinking: If we blast them now, we'll never find out what they can tell us. And that just might mean we lose the kids.

Hell, the kids might even be on board that ship. So Jock Valeria said into the commlink, "This is Captain Valeria. Alan Robie is dead, Captain Simonds. He and my father both died, fighting each other in an old grudge match of a personal nature, six days ago in the Kalath system."

"And where is his ship, then? His daughter, who should have replaced him at his House's head?"

Alana considered again, and then answered. "I'm here," she said into the commlink. "And that's a long story, Captain Simonds, and it's also of a very personal nature. Anyway, what can I do for you?"

Sela Valeria fired every single one of the trade ship's weapons, at full power. Even a pirate wouldn't have expected that to happen at this time, without any overt provocation, without any solid evidence of hostility; and that was what made the volley so fatally effective.

The Stella Maris came apart. Its antimatter propulsion system lost containment, and when that explosion followed the laser cannon's action what remained of the ship - which at that point was already a collection of junk and spare parts - vaporized.

The Valeria rocked, but Alana had the shields up in time. She watched and she listened as Jock Valeria turned on his cousin and second mate, his face white with fury. And Alana put out a hand and put it on his arm as soon as she'd heard him begin with an almost vicious, "What in bloody hell did you think you were doing!"

"Jock," Alana said softly, but using the tone she would have used when acting as Andromeda's first officer. There was steel in her voice, authority no one with less rank than a flag captain would have dared to ignore or to challenge. "They were powering weapons, and their shields were about to go up. If Sela hadn't acted first, they were going to do the same thing to us."

Jock Valeria looked from one of his officers to the other, and his face stayed that terrible dead white. For a moment Alana wondered if she'd gotten through to him, even by using that command voice of hers. But at last he said hoarsely, "Thanks, Sela. But oh, gods, Alana, how are we ever going to find them now? Don't you realize we may just have destroyed the only person who could take us to those children?"

Not "children," Alana thought in some corner of her mind that was still functioning with that starship first officer's midst-of-battle calm and coldness. A grown man, a grown woman - very young, but grown nevertheless; and a spoiled brat of a girl who was nearly grown, and who had good stuff in her that needed to be brought out, perhaps by just such a terrible crisis as she must now be undergoing. Alana Robie was just as frightened for her little sister as Jock was for his siblings, but now for the first time she allowed herself to consider that maybe the outcome wouldn't be a bad thing once she had Kyla back safely.

Which she would do. The possibility that her sister had just died in that ship's explosion did occur to her, but she didn't believe it and she put it far away as soon as it surfaced in her mind.

But she was certain as she could be that this Captain Simonds who had indeed just died before her eyes, was the "associate" of her father's whom Cameron Berkey had been so eager to contact and so determined to shield her from contacting. So undoubtedly things had just become a great deal more complicated, a great deal more difficult.

But the youngsters were still safe somewhere, awaiting ransom or rescue, and she and Jock Valeria were still going to find them and get them out. She told him so now, her hand on his arm pressing warmly instead of restraining his anger as it had been doing just a few seconds ago. "Jock, we'll find them," she promised, reaching up with her other hand and turning his face to hers. "Something's gone wrong with those people's plan, or that woman would never have been out here running us down looking for information. And whatever it is that's gone wrong, the kids are okay or Simonds wouldn't have been bothering with any of that; she must have been too smart for that kind of bluff. It's going to be all right, Jock. We'll get them back safe. I promise."

Sela Valeria was looking at her, plainly disgusted at having lost her captain's attention so completely within seconds of having been the means of saving his ship for him. And Alana could hardly have cared

less, just then. She could see the weight of the past few days bearing down on Jock's shoulders, threatening to crush him; she could see that it wasn't even just the past few days, but that it was more like the past twenty years. Two-thirds of his life, spent parenting a parent who couldn't or wouldn't act that part and let his son be a boy before he had to become a man.

Oh, hell, Alana thought as she took shameless advantage of her legal status - fictional though it might be - and moved close to Jock Valeria, put her arms around him, held him and after a moment felt that he was holding her. She knew that Sela Valeria went slamming out of the control room, but the ship was safe on automatics now and the second mate's departure didn't matter a bit from an operational standpoint. And from a personal standpoint, getting her out of here was certainly a very good thing because Alana knew her temporary husband was going to cry.

And that was fine, he was entitled, it was just what he needed. But he didn't need anyone to see him or hear him but her.

"I know, Jock," she said, standing close to the captain's chair so that his head rested against her shoulder. "Oh, believe me, I know! It's all right. Don't fight it, just let it happen. There. It's all right. It's all right now."

He pressed his face into the fabric of her tunic, and he sobbed. The terrible, deep, tearing sobs of a grown man or woman who never indulges in weeping, but who has finally slammed up against that breaking point where weeping can be the only response other than death or madness. Alana held him, pressed her cheek to his head, and waited. This storm would pass. And when it was over, she would be right here and he would know that he didn't need to be ashamed that she had seen him like this.

In this one curious way, they were two of a kind.

"Oh, gods," Cameron Berkey said softly, as he sat with Alana Robie in the Valeria's salon. He'd come over as soon as the two ships met in orbit high above Chaitanya, in skies that were much less crowded than they had been during the Trade Fair. "So Simonds figured it out, or thought she'd figured it out. And as soon as she was sure, she was going to blow your ship out of space and then - just forget about those three youngsters, wherever it is she's stashed them."

"You knew her name, Mr. Berkey?" Alana asked in one of her quietest and most deadly tones. "One more little thing you chose not to tell me?"

"Chose not to tell you, Captain," Berkey replied, his eyes meeting hers and asking for her understanding. "I didn't lie to you. Not really. And suppose I had told you her name; would it have helped you?"

"I suppose not." Alana sighed. She was tired; sleeping with a man who wasn't her lover, and who wasn't a comrade with whom she must share battlefield warmth in order to survive, was not proving to be restful. She wanted to be alone in her bed, or she wanted Dom beside her. But now it looked as if she was going to be stuck with continuing the current arrangement for a while longer.

Or was she? Jock Valeria was just coming into the salon from the control room, where he'd been listening to a private transmission. And he was grinning broadly. To Alana's amazement, when she rose to greet him he picked her up in his arms and literally swung her as he might have swung a small child. "Alana! One's safe, and we'll find the others because now we know where to look!" he told her, in what was almost a happy shout.

"Well, put me down, then!" Alana said, without half as much annoyance as she really ought to have shown and without feeling any. Which was remarkable; she'd never have dreamed of allowing any other male creature to handle her in this fashion. If any had tried, he'd have been on the deck groaning within seconds.

But she liked this peculiar husband-in-name-only, and this was his idea of simple exuberance. And the stars must know he was entitled, if what he claimed was true. So she asked as soon as her feet were on the deck again, "Where are they, Jock? And which one is safe?"

She was ashamed of that very natural impulse, that little voice in her mind that whispered anxiously, "Oh, let it be Kyla. Please, please, let it be Kyla!"

But he said, with sudden soberness that told her he realized and understood what she was thinking, "It's Xanthe. Apparently she slipped off that blasted Stella Maris while the patrol ship Sela noticed was inspecting it that day. She'd been badly stunned, and she passed out before she could make her presence on the patrol ship known. So by the time its captain found her hidden in a locker aboard his ship, the pirates were long gone and the patrol ship was well on its way back to Guardbase Alpha and we were all on our way out to the Kalath system. It's taken all this time for Admiral Gelsey's message to reach me."

"Then your sister is at Guardbase Alpha?" Alana felt cold, at the same time that she felt relieved for Xanthe Nordstrom's sake. "And that's where we're going next?"

"Yes. Of course." Jock had calmed down enough now so he could sit. He saw Cameron Berkey looking at him quizzically, realized that Alana was looking at him in much the same way, and he suddenly understood. "Oh! If I take you there - back to your commanding officer, back to your ship - and you're married to me...."

"Good-bye, career," Alana said without any attempt at all to soften her words. "Mr. Berkey, you don't know this because it was a private matter; but when things settled down after I invoked blood penalty back at the Kalath system, Captain Valeria proved to be much more of a gentleman than I'd have expected any man to be. He offered to give me divorce papers, once we had things settled to the point

where that was possible. And while I've never believed in breaking one's oaths, marriage vows included, in this case I have to admit that things were just a bit - well - "

"Under duress, I think is the legal term," Jock Valeria supplied, and gave her a smile. "It's no one's business, but I don't think Alana will be angry with me for saying this anyway: it's been in name only. I haven't touched her. What happened wasn't her fault, it wasn't my fault, and all I could see to do was get out of it the best way we could with as much dignity as we could salvage. So now if you're ready, Alana, I'll do what I promised you. And you can sleep in your own cabin tonight, aboard your own ship. All right?"

"It's more than all right," Alana said, and smiled back at him. "Jock, I was a damned fool that day. Mr. Berkey told me so, you tried to tell me so, and I didn't listen to either one of you. But I'm listening now, and I like what I'm hearing."

Berkey reached across the table and touched her hand, in a paternal gesture that made Alana reach back and grasp his fingers in hers. He said firmly, "So do I like what I'm hearing, Captain Valeria. I didn't think you had it in you, but I'm glad! And as for you, Alana - " he squeezed her hand, and looked at her in a way that had much of the foster father and absolutely none of the loyal officer in it - "next time, don't try to be honorable for the sake of someone who never heard of that word. Which, whether either of us likes to admit it or not, described your father perfectly. He wasn't worth it, Alana! And I don't enjoy saying that, after all the years I worked for him. I'd never say it, even now, except to the two of you; and only because I'm afraid if I don't say it, Alana, there'll be a next time for you to pull a stunt like that. And next time you might not happen to pull it with someone like Captain Valeria there to keep you from sacrificing yourself for some - phantom."

Phantom. That was all her father's memory was to her now, Alana realized, and she was glad of it. He was gone, and she was free for the first time in her life. She'd felt free in the Guard, had thought of herself as free; but how easily she'd been pulled right back into that insane universe that Alan Robie had inhabited!

But now he was really gone, and she was really free.

"Do you think we can get it to fly again, Jason?" Kyla Robie asked, with her blue eyes sparkling.

Jason Valeria had never seen her look like this before, eager and interested and ready to plunge into something new - and something that was going to require work, effort, labor. But he was even more excited about this find than she was, and he was glad he could give her a positive answer. "I don't see why not," he said, as he looked up from the engines of the ancient aircar. "Its design is simple enough. It needs to be cleaned up, but there aren't any broken or missing parts; and its power source is solar batteries. So fuel's not going to be a problem."

"Then we can leave here." Kyla sat back on her heels, from where she was watching him within the ancient cavern's lower level. They'd found this level the day after finding the upper level, and here were the fortress's transport vehicles. "I want to - but I'm a little scared, Jason."

"So am I," he admitted, and climbed out of the engine compartment to sit on the metallic deck beside her. "This place is safe for us, at least as long as our supplies last. And we don't know what's outside, or where we should try to go, or - much of anything."

"Do you still believe we might actually be on Earth, Jason?" The first time he'd dared to voice that suspicion, she had rejected it vehemently; but now time had passed, and she'd begun to think it was possible. Not likely, of course, but at least possible. "And if we are, then what could this place possibly have been?"

"I'm almost certain we're on Earth," Jason told his companion now, looking straight into her eyes and speaking with calm conviction. "Kyla, the stars don't lie. I'm no computer and I can't compensate what I see at night for two and half centuries of celestial drift, but I'm seeing Earth's summer sky from somewhere in its northern hemisphere. I don't think that's what I'm seeing; I know that's what I'm seeing."

"It would be perfect, wouldn't it?" Kyla said, her question purely rhetorical. "If the pirates found out that some of the guardian buoys were no longer working, or if they figured out how to deactivate them; and if they had the nerve to just try going back to Earth. What a mother lode of technology! And a whole empty world, too, for stashing captives and contraband."

"Captives and contraband like us," Jason agreed, and grinned without humor. "Do you suppose they've starting using it as a place to build homes, too? Nothing could be more perfect, so I'd expect that would at least come next."

"Maybe." Kyla frowned thoughtfully. "But maybe not. We don't know whether the biohazard had any impact on the ecosystems other than killing humans; we don't know whether this world can support crops, for instance. Even if it can - and since we can see green in the distance at the foothills of those mountains, something must be growing there - we can't assume that whatever grows, is fit for humans to eat. So we could have just a huge waystation and spare parts depot, not a world where people can make their homes."

Jason sat looking at his companion, and hiding his smile because he didn't want to have to explain it to her. She would have been insulted, and he did not want to do that; but he could not help thinking, listening to her now and watching the intelligent light in her blue eyes, that he would not have suspected a few weeks ago when he first saw this young woman that she was capable of such lively and logical thought. She'd come a long way already from the spoiled, brainless brat he'd met that day aboard the pirate ship, when they were both hurt and scared and newly bereft of loved ones.

He was glad she was here with him now, and that was the truth. Not just glad he had another human with him, any other human; but glad he had Kyla Robie.

He said, "That's a good thing to keep in mind, Kyla. If we do get somewhere where there are growing things, we'll have to be very careful about eating any of them. But I still want to take the risk of getting out of here. Do you?"

"Yes." She met his gaze firmly. "I don't want to sit here like a caged songbird and wait for those pirates to come back and get us. Maybe that's the safest thing for us to do, but it doesn't feel very safe and I don't want to do it."

"Good. Then first things first, let's put the solar batteries and their collection panels out where they can recharge." Jason rose. "I'll need help lifting them; they're heavy."

"Okay." Yes, she had changed. That was for sure, if she was offering to work.

Kyla paused as she walked around the aircar toward the battery storage rack beyond it, and she stared at the car's hull. She put out a hand and traced the markings on its side. "Jason, look at this," she said, her tone almost a command.

He came round the car obediently, stood by her side, followed her hand with his eyes. And then he took an audible breath of sheer amazement. "This was a tourist attraction?" he asked, disbelieving. "I've read about things like this - ancient fortresses, ancient battlefields of old Earth that were restored to look the way they had centuries earlier, where people came for recreation and to learn their history; but it always seemed so foolish and so wasteful, I couldn't quite believe it ever really happened."

"I've always thought the same thing about it," Kyla agreed, still tracing the car's lettering with her fingertips. "Who could ever afford to waste resources going somewhere just for pleasure? And who could waste resources making an old structure or an old battleground appear as it did long ago? People need pleasure, of course, but wise merchants set up their rec facilities where people already have to be for business' sake. And the best thing to do with an old structure is to replace it with a new one!"

"Not quite the way these people saw it, I guess," Jason observed. "'Fort San Sebastian, the most authentic reconstruction of an early Spanish military structure in North America!'" he read off from the words Kyla was tracing. "'The first fortification ever built in this part of New Spain!'"

"'New Spain'?" Kyla asked, puzzled. Her mind might have finally come to life during the past few weeks, but she was going to be years filling in the gaps in her knowledge of history as well as technology. What had she been reading all this time? Just romances?

Whatever her father and her chaperone had let her have, no doubt. Jason was still making it a point not to make her feel stupid, so he was careful to answer her in the most casual of tones. "Spain was one of

the countries that colonized, when Old Earth had a mix of technologically advanced and technologically backward cultures," he said, as he turned away from the aircar at last and started choosing the batteries he wanted to take to the surface and place in the sunlight for recharging. "So naturally enough when they claimed a whole section of the North American continent for their ruler, they called it 'New Spain.' Of course there were people already living there at the time, and they were killed off or displaced; but anyway, that's what happened. Eventually 'New Spain' became part of many nations, one of which was the United States. One of the two space flight pioneers."

"And this was a fortress from the early days of colonization, restored for people to visit." Kyla took her end of a heavy battery pack without hesitation, and they started toward the lift with it. "So that's why the lift was disguised; that's why this aircar terminal is hidden underneath the ground. Everything that didn't fit the period of the original fortress, had to be hidden away or disguised."

"Except that the doors were made of wood, they rotted away over time, and no doubt our friends the pirates replaced them with duralloy so they could use the structure for purposes like penning us up!" Jason agreed, making sure he had the heavier burden. "And on that first subterranean level, what we thought looked like a whole history lesson in pictograph form - it must have been exactly that. From first landing on this continent by the colonists, to first landing by humans on the moon, outward to the planets and then on to the stars. 'The brave explorers of the universe' sort of a theme."

"It is exciting to think about, isn't it?" This second lift they'd discovered easily because it wasn't hidden at all on its lower level access points. It had obviously been intended as a service lift, for carrying large and heavy objects from one level to another. And that was just how they were using it now, to load up as many battery packs as it would hold and carry them up to where there was sunlight.

Jason had a hunch that once he had the aircar ready to travel, he would swiftly discover a much easier way out of its subterranean garage. The people who'd used this facility so long ago couldn't possibly have done so if there wasn't a way to get the aircars in and out, quickly and easily. But for now he would be glad one of the half-dozen vehicles that had been left here was in such good condition that he could get it running, and he would worry about finding the service entrance (that thought made him smile a little) once he'd reached the point of needing to use it. Right now he was going to concentrate on getting as many of these battery packs as seemed to be intact, charged up to full and ready for use.

It would probably be smarter if he and Kyla sat tight and waited to be rescued, retrieved, whatever word one cared to use for the pirates' expected return; but he wasn't counting on it. He was a trader-child to his core, and the only person he was counting on to keep Jason Valeria alive was Jason Valeria.

CHAPTER 8

The little yacht (a redundancy, Xanthe Nordstrom thought automatically - all yachts were "little" when compared to other starships) was in trouble. The warning buoy hadn't been as dead as sensors had claimed; it had broadcast some sort of message, so quickly that she hadn't even had time to record the transmission (something that the Valeria's computer would have done automatically, as would the main computer aboard Linn's patrol ship Nova) for later analysis. And then it had fired on the intruding vessel, thankfully without the power or accuracy that would have been necessary to destroy it outright but with enough of both to do some real damage.

Both Linn and Xanthe had been in the control room for the crossing of the Terran Perimeter, of course, and that had made the crisis survivable. They'd been without sensors for several frightening minutes, the ship under power but out of control, and then with helm responding once more to Xanthe's commands but with her having to fly it sensor-blind - in the old parlance, "by the seat of the pants." Not that she'd never done this before, because her brother Jock had been a very tough teacher and he had made her fly this way with him in the co-pilot's chair many times before he would let her operate a shuttle without him aboard it; but this yacht wasn't a shuttle, and although Linn was there beside her there wasn't a thing he could do to help her except keep trying frantically to bring the navigational sensors back on line.

She did the only thing there was to do at that point, of course, and dropped out of warp as soon as she had control. She and Linn sat there then and stared at each other, for just a few moments of necessary relief, both of them gasping and sweating.

"Damn! It was supposed to be dead," her husband said, finally, when he found his voice again. "Either that, or it only lets the pirates by without firing on them."

"Either way, we're past it now," Xanthe said firmly, as her heartbeat slowed toward normal. "So let's figure out what we have to do to get everything repaired, and then let's get back underway."

"Yes, ma'am!" Linn said ironically, with a sudden twinkle in his brown eyes. "If I didn't know better, I'd think I was hearing my mother talk instead of a cadet in her second day of service."

Xanthe made a face at him. "You're hearing your wife talk, mister, and you'd better get used to it," she answered; and then her eyes became very somber again. "Linn, we could turn around and head back to Guardbase Alpha. Maybe we should, because we both know we just took some serious damage. And my being on the papers as senior pilot is just part of our disguise - you really do have to make the final decisions, you've got years of experience over me and I accept that. So what do you think? Should we go back, get proper repairs, start over?"

"No way." Linn shook his head firmly. "There's no guarantee that buoy won't blast us again, if we try to get out past it; I've got a notion it's set to respond to activity coming at it from any direction. And even if we did get past it safely and get back to Guardbase, we'd lose time we can't afford to lose; and my parents might not be able to give us a second chance at this mission. We might wind up not being able to relaunch after we got those repairs. So either we give up completely, or we go on now. And Xanthe, love -" he reached out and took his wife's face between his hands - "Jason is your brother. So you have to decide whether we keep going, no matter who's senior to whom here. I'll tell you right now that if I think you're doing something too risky, or something that isn't wise because you haven't the experience to know better, I will overrule you; but I won't decide this one for you. Which is it going to be?"

"We're going on," Xanthe said positively. "Linn, even if Jason wasn't out there I'd still want to find out about old Earth. Wouldn't you?"

"Yes. And to me it would be worth risking my neck. But it wouldn't necessarily be worth letting you risk yours." He bent toward her, swiftly kissed her forehead, and then let her go. "All right. I have to suit up and go outside, because I know right now that the worse sensor damage is external. Can you find us an orbit around something stable? I don't want to do a solitary EVA outside of a system's gravity. I'll be careful, I'll use a backpack and even a safety tether if necessary, but I'd still like to be in a nice stable orbit in case something absolutely unpredictable does go wrong."

"Without sensors, he wants me to find him a nice stable orbit," Xanthe muttered, her brow puckering in concentration and pretended annoyance. "Hmm. Miracles, are all he wants from me!" But she wasn't quite blind, she still had visual references and she had some sensor functions back; and after a few moments' effort she looked up at her husband and she smiled. "Just what you ordered, sir," she said happily. "A system that's two hours away at sublight maximum, which is how we're going to travel until I have my eyes and ears back fully. It has an asteroid belt and two major planets."

"Good. We'll orbit whichever planet keeps us farthest from that belt, then, because I sure don't want to do an EVA and dodge rocks." Linn got out of the co-pilot's chair and headed out of the control room. "Yell if you need me, sweetheart. I'll start getting my gear together so that we won't lose a minute once we're there."

"Okay," Xanthe responded, and smiled to herself as she laid in the course and felt the little ship respond - sluggishly, with only a mournful echo of its former grace and power - to her commands. She was a silly, sentimental young girl who'd married much sooner than she should have, Jock and Papa and probably even Jason would all be furious with her and would question her decision to take such a huge step at such an early age; but nothing they could say would ever balance out against hearing Linn Gelsey's voice call her "sweetheart." And about what they'd shared last night in the privacy of the yacht's cabin, she didn't dare to think now when she needed all her wits in order to pilot a crippled ship safely.

All she could let herself remember, now, was that she'd been an idiot to feel any nervousness or embarrassment at all. They loved each other, and they'd expressed that love in the most complete and beautiful and joyous way that was possible. The only thing she was sorry about was that with three years

of cadet service ahead of her, she'd had to take precautions against conceiving a child. But that time would come, too, and she acknowledged with part of her mind that it was better this way; much better that they should have time to get to know each other, since their courtship had been so brief, time to make necessary adjustments and time to build a solid relationship into which a child might come in safety and security.

Time passed. She brought the yacht into the system that was their temporary destination, plotted her orbit, settled the ship into it. This was challenging work, without full computer and sensor functions to guide her; but she was capable of it, and on some level actually enjoyed it. Finally she said into her commlink, "Linn, we're ready."

"Ready on my end, too," her husband responded promptly. "Entering the airlock. I'm going to keep an open mike, Xanthe."

"I should hope so," Xanthe said inelegantly, then chuckled. "Don't you dare do anything but keep talking to me the whole time you're out there, Linn! Silence from you is going to scare hell out of me, so please remember that."

"I will. I love you, Xanthe."

Simple, direct, completely unembarrassed to let her know what he wanted and how he felt. That had been her lover last night, that was her husband now. She answered him, "I love you, Linn." And she watched her console as its indicators told her the ship's primary airlock was cycling, that its outer doors were opening, that he was moving out on what long-ago explorers had once described as an "extravehicular activity" so that today's space travelers still called it an "EVA." Such a short term for such a risky maneuver, especially for one envirosuited human in a strange star system far from any ship or base or station that might be able to offer help if things went terribly wrong.

Xanthe Nordstrom watched the blip that was her husband's location, as it moved on her readouts and as the work he was doing gradually began to bring the ship's crippled sensors back to full operation. She was so intent on watching him, and the little ship was still so blind on the side of it that faced the stars and open space, that she never saw what was coming until it happened.

At least the wave of laser fire came from the side of the ship where Linn wasn't working. It would have vaporized a man in an envirosuit, if it had struck him even the most glancing of blows. As it was the yacht rocked, Xanthe was thrown from the pilot's chair because she had had absolutely no chance to brace herself, and she barely heard her husband's startled exclamation over the commlink as her head cracked against metal and consciousness left her.

Torlkinos, the criminal, the revolutionary. How did she know it was him, before she even got her

eyes open? Xanthe Nordstrom was no telepath, but she had a considerable talent for taking a collection of seemingly unrelated facts and putting them together and making sense out of them. And that was just what she was doing now, half-conscious and in pain though she might be with her head throbbing after the crack it had suffered against the control room's unforgiving deck.

She heard a man's voice, unfamiliar but authoritative. She heard other voices, one of them a woman's, some of them belonging - incredibly - to children. There was even a crying infant. Then there was a second man, who sounded annoyed and who was arguing with the first man. What about, she couldn't tell; she couldn't really make out words clearly, partly because the voices were muffled and partly because her head still ached so. But she was sure, long before she got her eyes open, of who this group must be. Torlkinos, his family, and the traitorous mate of the transport ship from which Torlkinos had escaped.

They'd had a shuttle. They'd had supplies. They should have been able to get much further than this, in the time since the transport ship had been taken over and its officers killed and its captain imprisoned. But here they were, nevertheless, and here she was with them. Alive, somehow, but most likely their captive.

Linn. Linn had been outside the ship, in a suit, when the blast had come.

What had happened to Linn?

Xanthe came fully awake with that thought, sat up quickly, and regretted it when a wave of nausea almost caused her to be sick. But she stayed sitting, mostly because if she'd moved to lie back down it would have made her feel even worse; and she looked around her as soon as she dared to open her eyes to the light.

She was in a corner of her own control room, her hands were secured behind her, and she was alone. The people whose voices she heard were in the next compartment, the "salon" that although the yacht was so much smaller than her father's ship was nevertheless just as large on this vessel because no doubt its designers had assumed that anyone idle and rich enough to own a yacht would be idle and rich enough to want to entertain guests aboard it. So it was large enough to accommodate several people in comfort, and that was where her uninvited guests of the moment had congregated.

Should she let them know she was awake? She was spared that decision when footsteps on the deck jolted her abused head, and she cried out involuntarily.

"Ah, so you're with us now," said a male voice that carried natural authority. Its owner knelt beside her, putting his face on a level with hers.

He was a much smaller man than she'd thought he would be. His skin was dark, his hair a lighter color which gave him an unusual but not displeasing look; he seemed to be somewhere near early middle

age, although of course that was a hard thing to estimate with any complete stranger; and he had light brown, intelligent eyes that were regarding her now in a way that measured her and did not seem to be overtly threatening.

"You're Torlkinos," she said, and then damned herself for having given away that knowledge. It might have been useful for him to think she didn't know who he was; it certainly would have been best not to let him know that she was aware of what he and his confederate had done to that transport ship, so many days ago. She might just have signed her own death warrant, and Linn's as well, with that ill-advised little speech.

But the man merely nodded, and did not look surprised. "Yes," he said. "So my fame precedes me again. And you are not the person listed on this ship's registration as its co-owner and senior pilot. Are you, madam? Because if you were, this ship would have been destroyed when the warning buoy fired on it. And if you'd been accompanied by as useless a fop as the man listed as co-owner, that recovery of helm control and partial sensors wouldn't have been possible and you'd have gone right on in out-of-control warp until you either ran out of fuel or smacked right into a star or a stray asteroid or whatever. So suppose you tell me who you really are and what you're really doing out here, and then maybe - just maybe - I can decide to let you live."

"My husband," Xanthe said, remembering and suddenly feeling certain she had no time to waste on mistrust. "He was outside, suited, doing repairs when you shot at us. He survived the blast, because the last thing I heard when I was cracking my head was his voice on the commlink. But if someone doesn't find him soon and bring him back aboard, his air will be gone and he'll die."

"And you expect us to rescue him for you?" Torlkinos asked, his words ironic but his tone oddly gentle. It wasn't difficult to imagine that people would have followed this man. There was something about him, even under these circumstances, that made Xanthe want to trust him; and that was definitely not her natural impulse. "Before you've told us who you are and why you've entered the Terran Perimeter?"

"You can put me in a suit, give me a scooter, and let me rescue him myself," Xanthe countered, almost grumpily. Her head hadn't quieted down one bit, and having her hands secured behind her made sitting awkward. "But that shouldn't be necessary. He's got the standard emergency locator, he must have activated its beacon by now, and you must know just as well as I do that he's out there and needs help. You can detect those things light-years away, for heaven's sake!"

"Yes. You can. And that's why your husband's been smart enough not to activate his beacon, madam, because he knows we're not exactly friends and we might be more interested in finishing him off than in rescuing him." Torlkinos stood up, drawing the young woman with him, and reached to unfasten her bonds. "No matter. I'm not going to leave any fellow human to die of suffocation or cold or both, adrift in a suit. The least I would do for him would be to give him mercy. So let's have you get on the commlink and tell him to activate his beacon, and let's take things from there."

"Let's not," said a second male voice.

The mate from the prison ship. Xanthe knew that must be who was standing just inside the control room's hatch, now, with a blaster pointed at both Torlkinos and at her own body. The mate was a small man like Torlkinos - Xanthe found herself wondering just how that likeness had been overlooked by whoever had hired officers for the prison transport, because a glance at the two of them together made her sure there was blood kinship between Torlkinos and this man. A brother? A cousin? An uncle or nephew? She couldn't guess the exact nature of the relationship, but that there was one didn't seem open to question.

"Steven." Torlkinos spoke softly, quite sadly. "I knew this was going to happen sometime, but I didn't expect it would happen now. What is it? As if I can't guess, of course."

"You're not going to recover her husband," the man called Steven stated firmly. "I'm not going to let you do that. She's coming with us, and we're going to leave her husband right where he is."

"No!" Xanthe said, her hand at her throat and her headache forgotten.

"Of course, no," Torlkinos said, with an oddly reassuring glance in her direction. "We're revolutionaries and freedom fighters, not monsters. Not like Captain Byron. You do know Captain Byron, don't you, madam?"

"Yes," Xanthe admitted, her eyes never leaving the leveled blaster. "My husband and I were part of the patrol ship crew that found him, fifteen days after you left him to die aboard the hulk of his ship."

"Then you know what he did to almost a thousand innocent people? People who were helpless in cold sleep at the time?"

"Yes," Xanthe said again, still watching the blaster's muzzle. "And you're right, it was monstrous. It disgusted me, too."

"Good. I'm glad you know, and I'm glad it offended you." Torlkinos moved to take the blaster from his comrade, with a speed that Xanthe Nordstrom wouldn't have suspected that human reflexes could muster.

He wasn't fast enough. The blaster flashed in his direction, its fire missing Xanthe because its holder had redirected to hit Torlkinos almost point-blank; and that gave the trader's daughter a one-second-long opening.

She took it. The flat edge of her hand slammed down onto the arm that held the blaster, knocking the weapon out of the man's grasp, and making him howl in pain as one of his bones shattered.

Oh, thank you, Jock, for making me learn to do that! Xanthe thought as she scooped up the blaster and backed off out of the fellow's reach. He was hurt badly, but he was more dangerous for it - just like any cornered and wounded beast.

Torlkinos was no longer even in the picture. His corpse lay on the deck, smoking and ruined.

So did the man who'd killed him, a few seconds later. Xanthe hadn't fired her captured blaster, but someone else had fired one from the salon - aiming accurately through the open hatch.

Another female human being was standing there, the blaster cradled in her hands as if it were a very familiar act for her to have fired it, but her face pale with horror and her green eyes wide and wet. She stared at the two men's dead bodies, and only after she'd done so for several minutes did she look at Xanthe Nordstrom at all.

Then the woman said, "It's your fault, you know."

"What?" Xanthe didn't lower her own weapon, but she felt no need to use it just yet. Besides, she had no certainty that she could get off a shot quickly enough to kill this woman without herself being shot in return.

"Don't you know what my husband's brother was up to? We took your yacht because our shuttle's range was exhausted and we were still far from any habitable planet; but when that nasty little man saw an attractive woman, all he could think about was the obvious. A mate, or at least a female for his use, when we got where we were going. We never planned to have just our own family on this escape - we were supposed to be able to take over the whole transport, have a thousand people to start a colony as the bastard prison administrators intended us to do, but on a world of our own choosing instead of theirs." The woman's breast was heaving, she was wrought up and grief-stricken and probably also exhausted; but she looked dangerous, so Xanthe treated her that way and stayed very still and just let her keep talking. "And he knew my husband would never let him do that. Revolution, yes; killing in battle or even in sabotage, yes. But rape, no. Murder of the helpless, no. So he killed his own brother to get you, and to keep you from rescuing your husband. Oh, why couldn't my husband see what he was? What makes us so blind where our own families are concerned?"

At that point a child came up behind the woman, clasped his tiny arms around her legs; and she lowered the blaster, and began to sob. Xanthe moved toward her then, took the blaster, and sighed her own terrible relief. "It's all right," she said gently. "Help me get my husband back on board, and we'll get this ship repaired and we'll get underway again. I can't bring your man back to you, but I can help you keep your children safe and I can get you somewhere where there are other people. Can we do that? And what's your name?"

A second child was clinging to the mother's legs now. A girl of perhaps three, and a boy of perhaps five. Two bewildered little ones. And in the salon the baby was screaming more loudly than ever. For

which Xanthe didn't blame him (or her); she felt very much inclined to join in.

"I'm Nora," the woman said, trying to quiet herself but having to gasp her words between sobs. "Nora Torlkinos."

"Well then, Nora," Xanthe said, and awkwardly patted her arm. "I've got no option but to trust you. Can I do that?"

"I've got no other option, either!" Nora Torlkinos said, and finally controlled her sobs. She rubbed her face fiercely with one arm, then reached down and put a hand on each child's head. "You won't harm my children?"

"Of course not. What an idea!" Xanthe said, almost scornfully. "Right now I have to get my husband. All you have to do is monitor me while I'm outside the ship. Do you know how to do that?"

"I'm not sure," Nora said, and blinked hard. "I have some experience with sensor readouts, but I've never really been trained."

Of course, Xanthe realized sourly. If you take your husband's name, that probably means you come from a culture in which your whole job is bearing his children and caring for them while they're small. I doubt you ever were a partner in his battles, even though there's no doubt you can handle a blaster. But she said, "Just do the best you can. I'll be okay, anyway. This is old hat for me."

She moved to the console, stepping over two bodies as if they were just piles of soiled clothing, and touched the commlink. "Linn," she said, trying to keep her anxiety out of her tone. It had been so long since he'd gone out there; did he still have enough air to keep him conscious? Or was he in coma by now - or even....

No. She wasn't even going to think about that.

His voice didn't respond, but his beacon did. It was far from the yacht - the shock wave of that laser blast must have sent him spinning, and his backpack wasn't powerful enough to deal with that kind of inertia. He was headed even further away, established against his will in a long solar orbit that would if no one intervened keep him part of this star system for as long as it existed. Right now a tiny, living mote; just a few more hours from now one more dead object, like one of the smallest asteroids in the system's belt, spinning lazily on its own axis and following its course around the system's sun until someday by one means or another time ended for this particular star and its planets.

Xanthe locked onto that beacon, pushed past Nora Torlkinos and her frightened children, and headed for the airlock. She donned her own suit without haste, desperately though she of course wanted to hurry; being careless now was the last thing Linn needed for her to do. She took the yacht's only scooter, a small hand-held propulsion unit that had more speed and a much greater range than a propulsion

backpack. She loaded the coordinates into its tiny navigation module from the yacht's main nav panel, and she cycled the airlock and went outside.

She wasn't even halfway from the yacht to her husband's coordinates when she was aware that something was wrong. She turned her head only; she did not dare waste the precious seconds it would have taken for her to slow or stop the scooter and actually turn around to look back at the yacht and at the shuttle that lay docked to its after port.

Good gods, that woman really didn't know a thing about ships. But that wasn't stopping her. The yacht was starting to move, taking the shuttle with it. That in and of itself wouldn't have been a very intelligent maneuver, even if every system on the yacht had been functioning normally; and that was far from the case, so the maneuver went from being unwise to being deadly. As Xanthe watched over her shoulder, and as she bit her lip to keep from wasting precious oxygen on a useless scream, she saw the two joined ships move - slam into a piece of space junk that had been moving near them, until now quite harmlessly, in a similar but separate orbit - and come apart. Not just separate and decompress from being opened to space, because safety systems at both docking ports would have handled that; but quite literally come apart into huge chunks of debris, because the object they'd accidentally slammed into had holed both hulls and the resulting abrupt changes in pressure had torn both small ships apart.

Xanthe Nordstrom had several tankfuls of oxygen strapped to her back, a scooter, and a husband whose air was probably almost gone by now. And the two of them were alone, with no ship to go back to, in a system just inside the Terran Perimeter with no one coming to find them because no one could have any idea where they were or that they needed help.

Nevertheless she kept going. She'd never been allowed to give up, when she was learning to survive as a trader's daughter and someday a captain in her own right; so she did not even consider giving up now. She kept the scooter on course, she closed with Linn's floating, suited body; and when she saw the readouts on his remaining air supply, she took one of her own oxygen bottles and attached it to his suit. Then she pressed her helmet against his, unsure whether she wanted to use the commlink and thinking that speaking helmet-to-helmet would probably take less energy anyhow, and she spoke to him. "Linn! Can you hear me? Are you all right?"

Oh, what a stupid question. But he gasped, and answered her. "I think I am. Must have passed out, though, for a few minutes there. What happened, Xanthe? I remember the ship's being fired on; I remember deciding I shouldn't turn on my beacon until you let me know it was okay; and I remember that happening, finally. Where's the ship? And who fired on us? And why?"

Well, talking was going to use oxygen and that probably wasn't smart; but neither was it really going to matter very much, since before another day's worth of time had passed they were both going to be dead. She might as well allow them both the comfort of talking to each other just as much as they wanted to, because it could only change the outcome of this situation by just a few minutes' time at best. So she locked her suit to his with a tether, and she told him the whole story.

And they floated there together, with the scooter still almost fully charged but with nowhere for it to take them, and they held to each other despite the barrier of the suits and they talked. They turned both their beacons on full power, of course, because at this point it didn't matter if even the most savage pirate in the galaxy found them; but no one was going to find them here, and they both knew it well enough.

But each pretended, for the other's sake, that someone would hear and someone would come.

CHAPTER 9

"Blood penalty?" Flag Captain Anna Sullivan asked, as she lifted an ironic eyebrow at her still-on-leave executive officer. "Alana, sit down. Talk to me. And for once, let's put the rank aside and speak as one human being to another. Maybe even as one woman to another, if you don't think that would be fatal."

Alana Robie had asked that this conversation be private; she didn't think she could face Admiral Gelsey and his powered chair and his kind brown eyes just now. How odd, that she should be afraid of an admiral's human side instead of his rank and his power to punish her. But Alana was well aware that she'd already done a good job of punishing herself for this particular offense, and now all she really wanted was to find out what her captain intended to do with her and then get it over. But of course what she said was, "Yes, ma'am," and of course she sat.

She'd been called to the flag captain's personal quarters on the Guardbase itself, not on board the ship; there would have been no way for her to board Andromeda without being seen and recognized. Somewhere nearby she knew that Jock Valeria was renewing an acquaintance with his uncle the admiral, who hadn't seen him since Jock was a boy of twelve; and Jock had offered to come with her to her captain, renewing the promise he'd made to her back at Chaitanya that he would explain what had happened and that he would take the blame. The problem was that it wasn't his to take. It was hers, she knew it, and she had to deal with it by herself.

"Here, you need this whether you know it or not," Sullivan said brusquely, and put a glass into her exec's hands. When Alana tasted its contents, she found herself drinking something sharp and distinctly alcoholic.

Which she didn't object to doing. From the day Anders Valeria had died, there had suddenly and mysteriously ceased to be anything with a beverage alcohol component available from his ship's stores.

Whether Jock had ordered that to happen, or whether Sela had taken such an act upon herself, Alana couldn't guess; but she understood it easily enough. However, right now Captain Sullivan was right and she did need a drink. Or something to jolt her and calm her at one and the same time.

"Now then, tell me what happened," Sullivan said, as she sat down next to Alana on the sofa to which she'd guided her guest. Guest? Prisoner? First Officer? Alana had no idea what role she was supposed to be playing. "With background. All of it, Alana, and I do mean all."

There was no doubt about the command in her captain's tone, however much kindness was mingled with it, so Alana took a breath and she started talking.

"You'll already know some of this story, Captain," she said, without apology in her voice. "But since I can't really guess which parts you know and which you don't, I'm not going to skip anything. You did say to tell all of it?"

"I did say that, and I meant it," Sullivan agreed, encouragingly rather than impatiently. She put down an urge to place a maternal hand on the younger woman's arm, remembering how Alana had reacted the last time she'd innocently done that; instead she leaned back against the sofa's cushions, to give Robie some distance and the sense of safety that distance seemed to bring her, and she waited.

"When my father did his patrol ship tour more than thirty years ago, his shipmates were Anders Valeria and Nadia McLean," Alana began softly. She closed her eyes and lay back, her hands still cradling the glass that was now half empty. "Papa came from a colony world where the culture was very different from life in the Guard or life on a trade-ship. He found it really difficult to work with women as his equals, for instance. But he had all the right talents to make a good officer, he worked hard, and he did try to fit in. His shipmates seemed to like him, anyway. Until the tour was over, and there was no reason he couldn't start paying attention to Nadia McLean as man to woman - which of course he realized he couldn't do while they were teammates! - and he found out that she already had a fondness for Anders Valeria."

Alana opened her eyes briefly, as if she had to check and make sure her captain was listening. Anna Sullivan nodded and smiled. "Yes, that's the part that I knew," she admitted. "But it helps me to hear how it's been presented to you, Alana. Sometimes facts do get very different treatment depending on who's repeating them. Please go on."

Alana took another swallow from her glass, then continued. "Papa wasn't happy with Nadia's choice, but he accepted it," she said. "He met my mother, Treena Callon, when he was hired as a junior officer aboard her father's ship. I'm not just sure how Grandfather happened to have an opening that didn't get filled by a relative, since ours has always been a 'House' with only one ship; but for whatever reason he hired Papa, and Papa started paying court to Mama almost immediately. I suppose it's the oldest story in the universe, poor man marries the boss's daughter."

"Yes, that's quite old," Sullivan agreed, when a pause told her she was supposed to say something.

"Mama died when I was five years old. I'm not supposed to know what happened, but I do." Alana's closed eyes squeezed more tightly shut now. Her hands closed around the tumbler that she held until Captain Sullivan was glad it wasn't actually made of anything as fragile as real glass. "They'd always fought, loudly and sometimes physically. I didn't know all married people didn't act that way; but that night I knew something was different. I could hear them right through the wall from my cabin to theirs. So I got up and I went in. The door between wasn't locked. I went in, and then I just stood there and watched."

Not touching Alana Robie right now was the hardest thing Anna Sullivan could make herself do. The mother in her wanted to gather the younger woman into her arms, wanted to hold her and comfort her and tell her to let that lost five-year-old give in to grief at last; but if she touched Alana now, even in the most distant and formal way, she was going to shut off the flow of words. And if that happened it would almost certainly destroy all chance of rebuilding the trust that was required in order to re-establish their professional relationship, along with the beginnings of the friendship that Sullivan had so hoped she might find in this bright, talented, gifted young woman. So she remained absolutely still, and this time she said nothing. She just waited.

"He hit her until she didn't move anymore, until all she did was lie still and moan," Alana said, and unconsciously hunched her shoulders as if to ward off physical blows. "Grandfather had died just before they were married, so there was no one I could go to - no one I could tell. All of a sudden I heard myself start screaming, and I couldn't stop. Papa didn't hit me, even though I expected he would; but I don't know why I expected that, because he'd never hit me before that and he never did afterward either. He could make me cry just by saying the right words, though, so I suppose he didn't need to hit me."

Alana drew another deep breath, deliberately straightened her shoulders as if she'd just realized she was shielding herself, and continued. "I remember the first mate, Mr. Berkey, coming in and picking me up and carrying me out of my parents' cabin," she said, her tone so calm that its lack of emotion was almost frightening. "I screamed, I cried, I fought - I wanted to go back to my mother. He didn't let me do that, of course. And when I did see her again, she was dead and her body was laid out for disposal and I was supposed to say good-bye."

Another long pause. Anna Sullivan was about to say something, almost anything to break the silence, when Alana continued and Sullivan was thankful she'd stayed quiet. Alana said, "I didn't understand then that my father had married my mother only for Grandfather's ship. I didn't understand that she should have been its captain, not Papa; but she married him at eighteen, without putting in her cadet service, and of course once he had her and had the ship he made sure she didn't go anywhere by getting her pregnant with me. And I especially didn't understand that if Papa loved anyone at all, it was Nadia McLean and he never forgave Anders Valeria when she died. He didn't do anything to cause her death, but Papa thought he did and that was enough."

"Yes," Anna Sullivan said softly, when she saw that this time a response from her really was

indicated and that Alana was waiting for it. "That's just how it was. And of course, the fact that Anders took Nadia's child from her body instead of leaving her intact at death only made - your father - hate Anders more."

"That's certainly the truth," Alana said feelingly, opening her eyes and this time sipping instead of gulping from what remained in her glass. "Most of our cultural groups seem to have that bias against doing anything to 'desecrate' a dead body; the same surgery that would be routine to save the mother's life by delivering the child that won't be born naturally, becomes almost a crime if the mother's heart stops beating before the incision's made. But with Papa's background, I think it was even harder for him to accept than for most people. The fact is that he didn't accept it, actually. So I grew up knowing he hated Anders Valeria, but not knowing why; and when he remarried after my mother's death, this time because he found a woman he liked and not to get control of a starship, even that didn't seem to change him."

"Your sister was born of that second marriage," Captain Sullivan said, encouragingly. "Kyla, the girl who's missing now."

"Yes. And Papa loved her as a daughter, which he certainly hadn't done with me. I was the son who arrived with the wrong equipment!" Alana smiled at her own joke, with the utter lack of humor that it deserved. "But that didn't prevent him from trying to kill Anders Valeria, fifteen years after Nadia died. My stepmother had just died, too, and I've always thought that was what set him off. Anyway, he tricked Valeria into meeting him at the place where Nadia had died and he goaded him into a fight. And Papa got the worst of it. The scars Valeria gave him were Papa's trademark, from then until...."

"Until the next time he goaded Anders Valeria into a fight," Sullivan supplied gently. "Which was very recently, I believe."

"Yes!" Alana looked up from her glass, which she had been studying as if she were reading off the words she said from a viewscreen somewhere inside it. "Papa had it all set up. He had Valeria's two younger children, the eighteen-year-old twins, kidnapped and held so that Valeria would do anything Papa wanted in order to get them back safely. What Papa didn't plan on was that his 'associate' who set up the kidnapping double-crossed him, and took our Kyla too." She smiled, and it was a smile as cold as any that she'd ever seen on her father's face. "I suppose his associate knew him just a little too well. Anyway, when I got home on my leave of absence that was what I found. Kyla kidnapped, instructions for me to take the Callon and go to the place where Nadia McLean had died. Papa would meet me there, his message said. He'd found out he was dying of some kind of syndrome - would you believe it, I can't remember the name? - and that meant he was ready for a second try, a final try, at Anders Valeria. The man was dying, and that was all he could think about to do!"

"Physical syndromes aren't the worst illnesses," Sullivan said, again interjecting a gentle remark into a silence that seemed to be stretching out too far. She didn't mind spending the time, but she was honestly afraid that Alana was going to stop talking at some point. And that she couldn't allow, the whole story had to come out or there was no way she could deal with it and put it into the past.

"No. They surely aren't." Alana shuddered. "Anyway, Valeria didn't let him live this time. Valeria killed my father and then killed himself. Captain, please keep that part private, can't you? I've never told my hus- oh, dammit, I mean Jock Valeria! - that his father actually did kill himself. He thinks they somehow killed each other, and I've let him believe that."

"Sounds like a reasonable thing to me," Sullivan agreed. And hid a smile. She hadn't missed that slip of Alana Robie's tongue. So that was it? Romeo and Juliet, no less - a Valeria who loved a Robie? Well, why not? It would be hard on a certain lieutenant commander, of course; but stranger things had happened, and would happen again.

It wasn't quite like that, though, she soon discovered. Alana continued, "The worst thing was what happened next. My father had gone to the Kalath system in a yacht that he'd bought when he knew he was dying and wanted to finish with his last plan. That yacht had been outfitted with enough firepower for a patrol ship, and its weapons were locked on the Valeria and keyed to a deadman switch that my father carried with him when he went out to fight Anders Valeria. I was lucky enough to pick it up on sensors just in time. I blew that yacht to atoms, and then - I guess I blew my own mind to atoms right along with it, for a little while at least."

"Is this where the blood penalty comes in?" Sullivan asked, and pursed her lips thoughtfully. She was beginning to guess that if there had been a marriage, it hadn't exactly been Romeo wedding Juliet.

"It is. I went over to the Valeria, and I offered my weapon to Jock Valeria. It's an old custom, and I'm sure you know that I don't always follow old customs - but right then, at that time and place, I just had to do it. I don't know why, but I felt that I couldn't go living with my father's guilt on my shoulders and that this was the only way to get rid of it."

"Which meant you didn't plan to go on living at all," Sullivan observed, without irony.

"Did you ever hear of an old psychological theory called magical thinking?" Alana looked directly at her captain for the first time since she'd started speaking, and she smiled - again with absolutely no humor. "That's about where I was right then. I knew I was killing myself, but I don't think I believed it; which is really fascinating when you consider how much death I've seen in my career, how certainly I do know that it's real and it's permanent and it's always horrible. Anyway, the plain fact is that I was out of control and if Jock Valeria hadn't figured out something to do with me - fast! - I'd have reacted to his refusing to kill me, by taking my own life. But instead, he - to use his words - 'took my life, and not my death.'"

"In other words, you married him," Captain Sullivan said, and this time she did let herself smile and she did let some warmth creep into her eyes. "Are you still married to him, Alana? Because a few moments ago you slipped up and almost referred to him as your husband."

"I got used to thinking of him that way, even in just those few days," Alana admitted, and blushed

suddenly and deeply. "But no, I'm not still married to him. He told me after I'd calmed down that there was no way he was going to take a woman whom he didn't love, who didn't love him; and that he'd divorce me just as soon as he could. And at first I was almost angry."

"Until you found out being divorced wasn't something new for him?" Sullivan asked, and smiled still more broadly.

"Yes! How did you know that?"

"I knew that because if you've internalized enough of your father's cultural heritage to be worried about this whole issue at all, then you've internalized enough of it to be horrified when you found out the man you'd just married already had a living wife. A living ex-wife, to be sure, but I doubt that made a difference to you just then."

"It didn't," Alana admitted, and sighed. "Since then I've started to think about it, and I'm not so sure; maybe Jock is right, and sometimes a relationship does die and the best thing to do is bury it before it buries you. But in any case, the facts are: I married without your permission, Captain. That's a breach of discipline, even if I was on leave of absence. And having not consummated the marriage, and having ended it in the legal and civil sense, still doesn't change the fact that I'm guilty of an offense that I would discipline if one of my own subordinates had committed it."

What does she think I'm going to do? Sullivan thought, pity in her thoughts although she was careful to keep it out of her eyes. Make her walk the proverbial plank, for that? But what the flag captain said was, "Alana, look at me."

The younger woman had averted her gaze as soon as she'd finished speaking. While she had described her offense, she'd looked into her captain's face without flinching; but when she was through she had looked down, and now her fair skin was flushed and her eyes were suspiciously bright. But she looked up, obediently, and firmed her jaw as she did so. And she waited.

"Alana, if some other young woman on Andromeda had done this - married hastily without your permission, then ended it with her partner's consent and come to you without any attempt to conceal her actions - what sort of discipline would you give her?" Sullivan was having a difficult time not to smile, but long practice made it possible for her to succeed. "Be honest, now. Don't try to impress me with how tough you'd be, because I'm not going to believe you."

"I'd figure out the lightest wrist slap I could give her, assuming she was a good officer and I thought she was worth salvaging," Alana said, and was surprised to realize that what she'd said was the precise truth. "In fact, I'd only log it if I thought she hadn't learned her lesson and might pull another stupid stunt like that sometime down the road. If I was sure in my own mind it was a one-time thing, something she'd done under stress - especially stress of a sort that would never be likely to be repeated...." Her voice trailed off, and suddenly she felt herself starting to smile. "Oh, no!" she said, when she saw her captain's

answering smile. "You mean you aren't even going to log it, Captain?"

"I most damned certainly am not," Anna Sullivan said in her firmest, gruffest tone. "Do you think I want a blemish on the service record of a woman who promises to be one of the best first officers I've ever had? Who's capable - although I probably shouldn't be telling her so! - of filling my boots one day, when she's got the experience and is ready to carry an admiral's flag into battle? Alana, forget it. All of it. You've been put through hell, and it's over now. Just let your friends - and I hope by now you're starting to realize that I'm one of those friends, not some god sitting off on a mythical Olympus somewhere - help you pick up the pieces. Which should start by getting Kyla back safely, I think. All right?"

"All right, and more than all right," Alana said, and reached out to take her captain's offered hands with neither the reluctance nor the embarrassment that gesture had caused her just a few weeks earlier when Sullivan had offered it. "I probably shouldn't have told you everything that I did, Captain - but - "

"But you definitely should have, Alana. Knowing what makes you tick can only help me when we're working together; and besides, I meant it when I claimed to be your friend." Sullivan pressed the younger woman's hands firmly, then released them. "Come now, let's go find Jock and Mace. We've got to figure out how to get two freighters past the Terran Perimeter, because the undercover mission we just sent to retrieve your sister and Jock's brother wasn't an ideal solution and I'm damned glad I can send backup after them so soon."

"The Terran Perimeter?" Alana asked, her voice rising half an octave.

"Yes. You heard me. Mace has had the tough job this afternoon, you see; he's been having to tell Jock that he allowed Xanthe to get married at eighteen, begin her cadet service, and head inside the Terran Perimeter on a cross between an undercover duty mission and a honeymoon. All of this while Jock no doubt thought his little sister was safe here under my wing!" Sullivan grinned as she rose from the sofa, walked to the desk that occupied a corner of what seemed to be her living room, and touched a commlink there. "Mace," she said casually, which indicated that her husband was elsewhere in their quarters instead of on duty aboard ship or in an office aboard the Guardbase. "Ms. Robie and I have finished our conference. All's well. How are you and your nephew doing?"

Jock Valeria had started off ready to go into a true Valeria rage, even at his mother's brother, even at the Admiral of Guardbase Alpha (not that as a civilian he needed to stand in awe of his uncle's rank); but now he was calm, and he was both startled and a bit saddened at just how glad he was to see Alana Robie walking into the room. Even though she had of course been on her own ship most of the time during their shared passage from Chaitanya, he'd still talked with her every day and had still had a comfortable sense of having a friend nearby.

Friends had never been a big part of his life, except during his cadet days. Traders were isolated by

the very nature of the lives they led, and when Carlie had left him much of his already small inclination to socialize had left him with her. Alana Robie was, oddly enough, the first person outside his immediate family with whom he'd had an ongoing personal relationship in all the years since Carlie. He was going to miss her.

Which didn't mean he was going to make any attempt to hold her. She would be eager to get back to her life here, now that he'd set her free; now that her captain had made her understand that she'd committed no unpardonable sins, and obviously Anna Sullivan had done that successfully because the two women were entering the room together looking satisfied and comfortable.

"Alana," he said, rising to greet her. "Did Captain Sullivan tell you about what's been happening with Xanthe?"

"Not really," Sullivan answered, apologizing to Alana for interrupting by giving her exec a quick glance. "And Jock, for heaven's sake - I'm your aunt! I'm Alana's captain, not yours."

"Sorry," Jock said, and grinned. "I remember calling you 'Aunt Anna,' an awfully long time ago."

"Not so long as you think. You were already almost as tall as I was," Sullivan said crisply, and further embarrassed him by kissing his cheek. "But then, you grew up fast."

Admiral Gelsey cleared his throat. "Hello, Commander Robie," he said formally to Alana. "You're still on leave of absence, I take it?"

"Sir, either it's that or I'm seriously out of uniform!" Alana said, having caught the twinkle in his eye and for the first time since she'd met him feeling free to respond to it. "Your wife - I mean, Captain Sullivan - said something about Callon and Valeria following an undercover mission that's disappeared inside the Terran Perimeter. So am I going to stay on leave of absence for a few days longer?"

"If that's your choice. This isn't an assignment that you're obliged to accept; it's 'volunteers only,' Alana." Sullivan took a seat near her husband and took his hand, something Alana was realizing the flag captain often did when only friends and family were present.

How odd that she now was thinking of herself that way, without its being the least bit uncomfortable. She said, "Whatever it is, Captain, I'm in. I just want my sister back."

"Good," said Jock Valeria, who took a chair and offered her the one beside it. "I just want to know what's become of Xanthe and her new husband, and to get Jason back as well."

"Xanthe and her new husband," Alana repeated. "So I did understand you, Captain; it's their undercover mission. But just who did she marry? I didn't realize she had a - friend."

Mace Gelsey and Anna Sullivan looked at each other, and promptly burst out laughing. Which left Jock Valeria to explain, since he was smiling but not laughing, "The patrol ship that picked her up was under Linn Gelsey's command, Alana. And while he is my cousin, he's no blood kin to Xanthe at all. So when they decided they liked each other that well, there was nothing to prevent them from marrying - and she is of age, even though I have to say I'd have thrown a fit if I'd been here when she made that decision."

"Oh!" Alana said, and then found that she was smiling too. "I knew Cadet-Lieutenant Gelsey was due back at base soon, but I didn't make that sort of connection with what happened to Xanthe."

"No reason you should have," Captain Sullivan said, now that she trusted her voice again. "And of course he's Ensign Gelsey now, a full-fledged Guard officer on his first mission. And Xanthe is a cadet who will still have boot camp and patrol ship ahead of her when they get back, which certainly isn't an ideal situation but which she insists she understands and can accept."

"If she said so, then it's true," Jock decided, when he realized that Sullivan was looking at him with a question in her eyes. "You did right to trust her judgment - Aunt Anna."

"There! That wasn't so painful, was it?" Sullivan asked, with a twinkle of her own. "Mace, have you figured out how we're going to get Callon and Valeria through the buoys?"

"Yes, Anna. I have the coordinates ready for them right here." Admiral Gelsey took two data pads from his desk and gave one to each freighter captain. "One last question, though - I've had your ships resupplied, you're ready to sail except for this. Is there on either ship any person you think should be left here? Anyone you don't want to trust on a passage like the one you're about to undertake?"

Alana thought of her own people aboard Callon, and she shook her head. Then she thought of a certain mate aboard Valeria, and she decided to be silent.

Jock also shook his head.

"Very well, then," Admiral Gelsey said; but paused when his wife touched his arm.

"Alana, if you want to see Lieutenant Commander St. Pierre it could be arranged," Captain Sullivan offered, that familiar kindness in her eyes once more.

Alana felt her heart almost literally leap in her breast, but the hope died because she couldn't allow it to live. She said quietly, "Thank you, Captain. I didn't know anyone was aware that Commander St. Pierre is - special to me - but I don't mind that you know, and thank you for offering me this. But it's better for him not to have to keep this secret."

"Yes, of course it is. Well, that's it, then! Let's do it," Captain Sullivan said, and rose. "Good luck,

captains. I'm afraid you're going to need it."

"Commander St. Pierre?" Jock asked, on the shuttle that would carry Alana first to Callon and then would carry him on to Valeria. He gave his former wife a speculative, but not an angry, look.

"My second-in-command on every mission I've ever led, since I've been a regular Guard officer," Alana answered, her blue eyes steadily meeting his dark ones. "My best friend for most of that time; my tactical officer, these days; and my lover. My husband, I hope, if I live long enough to get back to him and answer the last question he asked me when I was leaving Andromeda a few weeks ago."

"Good lord, woman!" Jock said, and burst out laughing. "And you never told me that? You are full of more surprises than anyone I've ever known!"

"Am I? I don't mean to be," Alana countered, and fought against joining that infectious laughter of his. It was one battle that she lost completely.

CHAPTER 10

They were ready to leave now. Jason Valeria and Kyla Robie had brought the aircar out of its long entombment, discovering that just as Jason had expected there was a vast door to the garage that opened and allowed the aircar to exit via a sloping tunnel; its entrance and exit on the arid plain outside the fortress was well concealed, and in fact for a few moments Jason feared that the weight of two and a half centuries' disuse would hold that opening shut and trap them. But it groaned and complained and finally gave, and they were free. Just to be certain, though, he lifted the aircar on its antigravs and took it over the wall and landed it inside the fortress. There he and his companion made one last review of their supplies and made certain that they had everything aboard that they might need and that the aircar could safely carry.

He was elated, and he was nervous. And to tell the truth, he was also genuinely afraid. But in some part of his mind he'd become certain, over the past days, that no one was coming back to retrieve them and that if they didn't take this step they would one day come to the place where they would regret not having done so. At least outside the fortress they could look for other sources of food and water, other

places to shelter themselves, maybe even (if luck was really with them) find an old spaceport and an operable or repairable ship. Who could say what they might find, if they just had the courage to go looking? And if they stayed inside the fortress and waited to be rescued, there was a very real chance they might die there still waiting. He was getting more and more inclined to think so, anyway, and Kyla seemed content to be guided by whatever theories he was following.

Not that she couldn't think, and not that she had any trouble expressing what she thought. She was very good at both, he was discovering! But he'd been right about their prison being located on Old Earth, he'd been right about the lift and right about the aircar; and she was beginning to be very comfortable relying on him in those areas where he had experience and training that she lacked.

Nevertheless she turned to him as they were about to lift from the fortress and move away from it across the high plain toward the water - the ocean or lake that was visible on the far horizon, since both of them recalled that humans on Old Earth had always preferred to build their cities at the edges of large bodies of water - "coasts," that was the word - and she said softly, "Jason, I'm scared. Are you?"

"Yes," he admitted, without hesitation. "You bet I'm scared. But we have to do this, Kyla, so being scared doesn't make a difference. Except maybe to remind us to be careful. Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Kyla said, and snugged her safety harness (something no one ever wore in space, but that was necessary within a planet's atmosphere due to its gravity and its weather systems) and closed her eyes. "Let's go."

Jason touched the controls, and was pleased at the smooth way the little craft responded to his commands. It wasn't at all like handling a shuttle, of course; but it certainly beat trying to walk over all the kilometers of plain (and who could guess what else?) that lay between the fortress and the ocean.

Soon they saw what must once have been a highway, cracked and overgrown but still clearly visible on the terrain below them. They saw ruins, where once there had been structures much less solidly built than the ancient fort where they had been sheltered. They saw what might once have been farmlands, because the plant growth seemed to have a pattern to it that no random action of nature could have produced.

Jason's fear was subsiding. He was starting to enjoy himself, and when he stole a glance at his companion he saw that she was enjoying herself too.

Now, he thought, I'll have to bring up the subject of teaching her to fly this thing. I'm a good pilot, and I've got stamina; but I'll need her to back me up, and there's no reason she can't learn. I wonder if she'll be eager to, or if she'll give me an argument? No time like the present to find out, I guess!

He asked, "Kyla, did you ever think you might like to take a turn at flying this critter?"

She turned her face to his, and she gave him the loveliest smile he'd ever had from her. "Oh, could I?" she said, plainly delighted with the idea.

Well, that was one less problem he had to deal with. Good. Jason smiled back at his companion, and began explaining the basics of in-atmosphere piloting of a rather primitive but very serviceable craft.

The emergency beacons were detectable almost as soon as the two freighters moved past the warning buoy at the Terran Perimeter. Callon picked them up first, of course, thanks to those illegally acquired sensors installed by her previous captain; Alana Robie had no sooner informed Jock Valeria, and they had no sooner altered course to intercept, than Valeria too began to "hear" the beacons.

The buoy had fired a weak laser blast at each ship as it had entered the forbidden zone, but with shields at maximum the freighters hadn't even trembled. Alana found herself wondering, though, if that yacht Linn and Xanthe had brought through here had been as fortunate. The buoy might have had more power, although they'd come through just a day earlier if all the calculations she and Jock had made were correct (or even largely so); and the yacht certainly hadn't had the shields the freighters had. So she wondered as soon as she heard those beacons just what had happened, and knew in her bones that something had occurred that wasn't good.

There was a star system nearby the buoy, relatively speaking. The emergency beacons were broadcasting from within that system. Someone had had the skill and the imagination to link the two beacons together, so that while each still had a distinct "voice" their combined power let them reach out beyond the range of either beacon broadcasting separately; otherwise even Callon might have sailed right on past, without altering its course after passing the warning buoy on its way directly toward Earth.

But as it was the two ships moved surely and swiftly toward the beacons, and within minutes after they entered the system the Callon was tractoring two envirosuited figures into its cargo bay. The entire bay was then repressurized, and Captain Alana Robie was through its airtight doors as soon as equalized pressure allowed them to open for her.

"Alana!" She heard Jock Valeria's voice on her commlink, but she had no attention to spare for him just now. She was stripping the helmet from one suit, and Cameron Berkey was beside her and stripping the helmet from the other suit.

A brown-haired, brown-skinned young man gasped as the ship's atmosphere hit his face. The inside of his helmet was frosted, and Alana wondered if his extremities were going to require careful rewarming; but he breathed on his own, so she turned her attention to his companion.

The dark-haired young woman was already free of her suit, because Berkey had got it off her immediately so he could place her flat on the deck and begin forcing pure oxygen into her lungs. For a

few tense moments she lay there, her face blue, her chest rising only in response to Berkey's action; but then she coughed, and she breathed. And then she cried.

And Alana could have cried with her, from sheer relief. After which she finally turned to the comm and said, "Jock, they're all right. Linn and Xanthe both. I've got no idea why they were floating out here in suits, I've got no idea what's become of their yacht; but they're here, and they'll be fine."

From Valeria's captain she heard a sound that might have been an "aye," or that might have been a sob. She couldn't tell which, and she didn't care. She said, "So get over here, can't you?" in an almost cross tone, and she cut off the comm so she could get back to work on her patients.

"I still can't stand to think about those little children, that baby," Xanthe Nordstrom said, and shuddered as she cradled a cup of hot soup between her cold hands. She was feeling much better after breathing pure oxygen for an hour; perhaps because of her previous (and really quite recent) experience in the patrol ship's locker, her body had proven more sensitive to oxygen starvation than had her husband's. He, on the other hand, had been more sensitive to the incredible cold of space as it had begun to creep into his envirosuit and sap his body's warmth. So he was recovering now from frostbite of fingers and toes, but it didn't look to either Jock Valeria or Alana Robie (both of whom were used to serving as medics in the absence of more skilled help) as if he would lose any of those digits. Even if he did, Linn said cheerfully, he'd manage. His father had always managed, hadn't he?

Which remark made Xanthe stop sipping her soup, and reach out to him across the narrow aisle that separated their two bunks and put a grateful hand on his arm. That she could do without hurting him, at least.

If she hadn't had the spare oxygen bottles, and if she hadn't known just how to marry both their air supplies and their beacons together as they floated there in space, both would be dead by now. Or she might be living, and Linn might be long gone. So Jock had told her, when he'd had them brought over to his ship since that was where they obviously belonged, and so she would never tell Linn.

He didn't need to know that, so it would be her secret.

Jason. They were still going after Jason. And that was all that mattered, now that Linn was safe; but she still couldn't put the three small Torlkinos children and their foolish mother out of her mind.

She had told Linn that story as soon as he was able to hear it, and she hoped she wouldn't have to tell it too many more times although she realized that debriefing back at the Guardbase was inevitable. It wasn't just the dead children that unsettled her, or even how close she and her husband had come to dying out there. It was the whole evil intensity of the encounter, the fact that someone as close as a brother - Torlkinos's own brother - could do what that man had done, just to lay hands on a woman against her will.

But Torlkinos died protecting me, she thought as she took her hand from Linn's arm and once again sipped at her soup and felt its warmth spreading through her grateful body. So it balances out, in its own strange way. And what Nora did was out of fear and ignorance; she'd never have harmed those children deliberately, although she was certainly more than ready to leave Linn and me stranded.

The mysteries of the universe were just a bit too much for Xanthe Nordstrom today. She finished her soup, she put the cup aside, and she slept. She was aware as she did so that her own brother, Jock who had taken care of her ever since she could remember, was standing in the cabin's doorway and watching over her and waiting until she was sleeping safely before he would leave her.

Linn was already asleep, and his face was the last thing Xanthe saw because she turned toward him as she felt herself drifting off. She needed to see him there, his chest rising and falling steadily, so that she could let herself relax and let sleep take her without a struggle.

Even if Jock was watching, Linn still belonged to her and to her alone.

The aircar's batteries weren't holding a solar charge as well as Jason Valeria had hoped. So far they could manage to keep flying during most of daylight's hours by using the collection panels that covered the aircar's roof to charge the batteries that weren't being used to operate the engines; everything had to be switched over when they stopped for the night, though, so that they would have fresh power for the next day's journey, and that was a nuisance. But he was dreading the time when they would lose some of each day to recharging, because he could see that it was coming.

They were almost across the plains, he thought. Soon they would reach the coast, as they were calling it because until they checked the water for salinity they had no way of guessing whether it was lake or sea. Even then they might not know - Jason recalled that there had been such phenomena on Old Earth as salty lakes and fresh-water "seas" (one called Galilee, for instance?). Hopefully there at the water's edge they would find ruins that would contain some of the things they needed for survival, because supplies were getting low along with battery life and he was getting just a bit worried.

He hadn't chosen to protect his traveling companion from those worries. The idea had occurred to him, of course, but he'd noticed that Kyla Robie reacted with maturity when she faced a crisis and that she reacted with childishness when he treated her like a child. So he did with her as he would have done with his twin sister Xanthe, and he told her his thoughts and he listened to her ideas.

Only with Xanthe, of course, he would have deferred his own judgment at times. And he wasn't ready to trust Kyla in that way, because she still hadn't made up for seventeen years as a house pet. That was a cruel way for him to express it to himself, Jason realized, but it was all too accurate. And he

suspected that she would agree with him, now - that she had long since admitted it to herself, although what she might have admitted to anyone else if the subject had been broached was of course another matter entirely.

"Jason!" He'd been piloting almost on automatics, as they got nearer to the time when they must find a stopping place for the night and as he began to get very tired. Kyla was turning into a good pilot - from somewhere she'd inherited the right reflexes - but she was still inexperienced and lacking in stamina; so he'd been giving her the morning shift, when she was rested, and had been taking over himself after their fairly long mid-day layover for food and rest. Which meant that he got the sun in his eyes as it set each afternoon, while he trusted Kyla to keep watch for a campsite as night began to come down.

So far they'd seen no animal life whatsoever. Which answered his question of days ago back in their fortress-prison cell; the bio-weapons that had killed all Earth's human population had also done away with all its non-sentient lifeforms as well. The plant life was flourishing, taking over the ancient roads and fields and the occasional ruined building; but they were utterly alone on this world, and it was a strange feeling even for a space-born human who was accustomed to seeing dead and empty worlds. Because this world had not been meant to be dead or empty, and yet it was.

"I see it, too - but what is it?" Jason asked, as he altered the aircar's course to investigate. "It" was a structure of some sort, looking rather like a raised roadway but yet different because it didn't have the broad flat surface of a road. It rose out of the landscape on a series of regularly-spaced, supporting columns, and it moved in one direction toward the faraway mountains and in the other direction toward the coast.

"I don't know," Kyla answered, shading her eyes with her hand against the lowering sun's rays. "I could swear I've seen something like it, though, in an old book of images...."

"So could I," Jason agreed, and adjusted the controls so that the aircar lifted and soared over the structure. At which point he knew what it was. "An aqueduct!" he exclaimed. "That's what it is!"

"A which?" Kyla asked, frowning in puzzlement.

"An aqueduct," Jason repeated. "A structure that carries water aboveground from one place to another, instead of using underground pipes. Sometimes the ancients used them for various reasons, but only in climates where the weather never turned freezing. Which makes me feel a whole lot better already, because I'd been wondering just when we were going have to deal with winter coming. I guess never, is the answer in this part of this world."

"Good," Kyla said, and stared interestedly down at the aqueduct. "Can we use the water, do you think? Because it's flowing, even after all these years."

"Probably. We can test it, anyway; I know how to do that." Jason looked ahead, spotted a place

where he could land the aircar and slip in underneath the structure's supports for some protection through the night. And that particular support had a staircase chiseled into it, plainly so that some long-ago maintenance person could get access to the aqueduct in order to tend it.

Not that it had needed much tending, if it was still functioning after two and a half unattended centuries.

"Are you going to land us on it?" Kyla asked, breaking into his thoughts with her voice.

"No; it's old, it might not take an aircar's weight," Jason told her. "I'm going to set us down under it. It's late enough now that we should be camping, anyway. We can climb up those stairs and check the water and investigate anything else that looks interesting. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, and grinned. A time or two she'd thought his asking her opinion was rhetorical, and she'd been annoyed; but by now she knew that if she had an objection or a comment, he wanted to hear it and he was going to take it seriously. So she was happy, and when they were on the ground and it was time to do the evening's chores she was ready and willing to work.

How different that was, from what her life had been before. But this was reality, and that was only a memory - almost a dream.

"Jason," she said suddenly, as they started up the ancient stairs toward the aqueduct's surface.

"What, Kyla?" He'd heard no urgency in her voice, so he did not stop climbing as he answered her.

"I wonder if my birthday's come and gone. We really don't know what date this is, do we?"

"No, we don't," Jason admitted, and now he did stop. He turned back toward her, where she'd been following him up the steeply-inclined staircase, and he looked into her face from where he stood a half-meter or so above her.

"I think I'm eighteen now," she said. "I'm grown up. If I want to when we get back, I can start my cadet service." And then she waited, to see whether the sky would fall on her for having said such a thing.

Before, back on her father's ship, she hadn't even been able to imagine such a future for herself - let alone verbalize the thought. When had she begun to dream that she might have a life like Jason's, like her big sister Alana's? A life that didn't consist of what Papa wanted her to do, which was marry someone he chose for her and have children?

Not that she wouldn't like to marry someday, of course; not that she wouldn't like to have children - maybe, if and when she felt ready to give up some of her new-found freedom for that responsibility. But right now she was watching her companion's face, and she was willing him to give her the affirmation she

needed: the "yes, you can do this; yes, you have the same right to a life of your own as anyone else does."

And it came, so matter-of-factly that she could have wept from relief. What had she expected, that Jason would tell her to forget it and go back to her father like a good little girl when they finally found a way off this lost world? Because of course he smiled at her; and of course he said, "That's just what I'm going to be doing, Kyla. And if it's what you want, too, then for god's sake do it! And be damned to anyone who tries to stop you." He turned away then, and squinted into the dying sunlight. "Come on now. Let's celebrate that birthday, whenever it was, by finding out we've got a source of pure water. Because we do need it, our own supplies are getting awfully low."

"I can't believe Papa's gone," Xanthe Nordstrom said softly, brushing a hand across her face and looking so much like the little girl she'd once been that Jock Valeria wanted to go to her and gather her into his arms. "I didn't even miss him when you brought us aboard, and now I feel awful about that; but he was always in his cabin, hardly came out of it for anything the last couple of years, so it just didn't occur to me that anything was wrong."

"Plenty was wrong, actually," Jock heard himself say, and was amazed at his own bluntness. "It had been for a lot longer than the last couple of years, Xanthe."

"Yes. But we never talked about it, did we?" The young woman looked up at her brother, from where she sat across the salon's dining table. They were alone together in the salon, because Jock had wanted privacy to tell his little sister about their father's death. He'd already told Linn Gelsey, and had been surprised when Xanthe's husband decided this was a matter in which he should play no part.

That young fellow was wise beyond his years. Xanthe did need her big brother now, and not her husband. Linn could comfort her later, now that the two of them had recovered physically from their ordeal and had been moved into Xanthe's own quarters. At the moment the young Guardsman was in the control room with Sela, and the Valeria and the Callon were moving at high warp toward the coordinates of Old Earth.

"We never talked about a lot of things," Jock said now, and put out a big hand in his sister's direction. "Which wasn't smart of us, but I can't go back and change any of it now."

"No. And Papa's at peace. Finally." Xanthe put her small hand in her brother's large one, and she smiled through her tears. "Maybe we can all have some peace, now. What are you going to do about Sela, Jock?"

"Sela? What about her?" Jock was completely puzzled. "Now that I'm captain, I've moved her up from second mate to first mate. When we're in port next time, I'll need to hire a junior officer. What else do you mean, Sis?"

Oh, lord, but males were dense creatures at times! Xanthe glanced at the passage door that led toward the control room; she didn't want to risk being overheard. Then she said carefully, "Jock, I'll come right out and say it; I guess that's the best way. You either need to find that woman another berth on another ship, fast, or you need to start paying attention to her as man to woman. Because ever since the day she came aboard, she's had her grapples out for you. I thought you just didn't have anything left, after dealing with Papa every day, and that was why you didn't react to her. I had no idea you just didn't know."

Jock sat still, stared into his little sister's earnest dark eyes - eyes exactly like his own - and held her hand in his and thought. The silence between them stretched out comfortably, so he did not have to hurry to break it. At last he squeezed her hand before releasing it; and he sighed. "I didn't know," he admitted quietly. "I hadn't any idea. But now I can see - well, no wonder she clashed with Alana while I had her aboard! As my first mate and as my wife, no less. If that was how it was, Sela did well not to do or say more than she did."

"I'd like to have been an observer on commlink," Xanthe admitted, and grinned at the thoughts her imagination was conjuring up. "That must have been an interesting passage you had from the Kalath system back to Chaitanya! But seriously, Jock, now you know and now you'd better do something about it. How do you feel about Sela, anyway?"

"I don't feel anything at all about Sela," her brother said, with obvious sadness. "It would be convenient if I did, because she's a damned good officer and I do like her. But that's not enough. I've had one love in my life, and I'd rather be alone the rest of my days than settle for anything less the second time around."

"That's what I thought you were going to say," Xanthe told him, nodding for emphasis. "But do give it a few days, Jock. Now that you know - now that the possibility's there, and now that Papa's not around to demand everything you have left to give after you've tended to your ship - Sela might start looking a lot better to you."

"I doubt it. But I guess I'll be giving it those few days, and probably more than that; because we have quite a distance to go before we see Guardbase Alpha again." Jock would have said more, but at that moment a klaxon sounded; and he heard Sela Valeria's voice over the shipwide comm system, calm but urgent:

"Red alert! Captain to the control room. Hands to stations!"

Jock moved, and so did Xanthe. Even before the birthday that had made the twins adults, they'd had responsibilities and they'd been assigned battle stations. Xanthe moved toward hers now, which took her to a weapons console because she had the reflexes and the sharp eyesight that made her a natural for that particular assignment.

She soon found her husband beside her. She sent him to Jason's old station, the weapons console on the opposite side of the control room. At a time like this the small command area seemed crowded, with captain and first mate at the main consoles; second mate at navigation; and two junior officers at the weapons consoles unless senior crewpeople had to be moved up into those chairs, but that meant the ship was ready to fight with all her strength and all her speed and all her maneuverability.

Xanthe found herself watching Callon on the monitor, and envying Alana Robie her illegally enhanced vessel. Captain and exec could fight Callon by themselves if necessary, so sophisticated were its systems. But she knew Valeria well, had grown up learning to handle every console and repair every system on her father's ship; so she put that disloyal thought out of her mind, smiled at Linn, and then fastened her full attention on Jock.

They were facing a battle line. They'd been about to pass by at fairly close range a star system just light-years from Earth's star Sol; Xanthe recalled that this system had an M-class planet, which had been settled early but had never developed into a major population center because although it had a human-friendly atmosphere its other characteristics were such that making it into a home was just too much work. The early explorers had used it instead as a base camp, a jumping off point to reach toward the rest of the galaxy where there were many other planets that were far better suited for human habitation.

But someone was living in that system now, and in fact it looked to be a whole lot of "someones." There were five antique starships facing the two freighters, each of them a military ship of one classification or another; Xanthe had a hunch that Linn, service brat that he was, could have told her exactly what each ship's class and crew complement and armament and power rating might be. It was true that many of the starships plying today's spaceways were as old as these, if you reckoned their ages strictly by launch dates; but today's ships had been maintained and modified and cared for lovingly over the centuries, while these five old vessels had lain uninhabited and neglected for so many years before someone had come along and found them and done what was required to put them back into service.

And only what was required, from the look of them now. It was pitiful, Xanthe thought, to see ships under power that looked like these did. But her sensor readouts told her clearly that there was nothing wrong with the armaments on board those vessels, so she had to take them seriously even though their outward appearances might tempt her not to do so.

She heard Alana Robie's voice over the open commlink, and realized that the Interstellar Guard commander had of course assumed de facto control of the situation. Obviously Jock accepted that, because he not only wasn't protesting; he was listening to Commander Robie's voice with just the same attitude as everyone else in Valeria's control room, waiting for her to give the orders. Robie's voice was calm and authoritative: "This is Alana Robie, commanding freighter Callon. I'm accompanied by freighter Valeria. We are in your space because we're attempting to retrieve family members who were taken from us by force. Can you assist? Please respond."

She was using her command voice, but she was not acting as a Guardsman and she plainly thought that was to her advantage. No deceit here, just a highlighting of the most useful part of the truth. And she

was rewarded, because instead of a warning shot (or worse) in reply she got a masculine voice: "This is the Governor of First Earth Colony, speaking to you by relay from our world's surface. You're not what most people would call 'pirates,' yet you've come inside the Terran Perimeter and you are on a direct course for Earth. Who told you that it was possible to get past the buoys now that they've started malfunctioning? And what do you really intend to do once you reach Earth?"

"Reduce speed to one-half sublight," Alana Robie said, without bothering to take herself off open commlink. Jock Valeria nodded to his first mate, not needing to repeat the words in order to have them implemented on his ship as well as on Callon. "Governor. Excellency. We didn't know First Earth Colony had been reoccupied, and we certainly didn't expect to meet a battle group here. We have no quarrel with you; all we want to do is pass by unharmed, because we believe our kidnapped family members are on Old Earth and we simply want to retrieve them. And then, of course, take them to safety."

"You leave me with a dilemma, then," came the Governor of First Earth Colony's disembodied voice. "I've had no qualms about letting pirate vessels pass by from time to time, because they have no motivation to inform the authorities back in the inhabited galaxy that our settlement is here. Besides, it's been a very useful arrangement on both sides; we've let them pass, and in return they haven't raided us. And because we're in forbidden territory, we haven't had to worry about the authorities deciding to take away what we've built here and give it to 'regular colonists' who 'deserve' such a hospitable world. It wasn't a bit hospitable fifty years ago when our parents first took the risk of coming here, but we've worked and we've terraformed and now we do have a real home. And protecting it is a lot more important to us, quite frankly, than you are - Captain."

Xanthe Nordstrom looked at her husband, and Linn Gelsey looked back with sober eyes. They nodded to each other. Then Xanthe secured her channel and spoke into her own commlink. "Captain Robie," she said formally, and felt the oddness of that address as she did so.

"Yes?" came Alana's voice, also over secured channel.

"I think I know who these people are. Torlkinos was trying to take his family somewhere, had hoped he was going to take that whole transport full of prisoners to the same place."

"Here?" Alana asked. "So you think First Earth Colony has been resettled by prisoners who've escaped from authorized transports?"

"That's just what I think, Captain. And if that's true, no wonder they're afraid of what will happen if we go back to Guardbase Alpha and tell the authorities there about this place."

The Governor's voice intruded at that point. "Captain Robie," he said. "Are you still there?"

"Yes," Alana answered, back on the open channel. "My apologies; I was conferring with an officer. Sir, I know who your people are and why you're so concerned that your settlement remain a secret. I don't

know quite what I should tell you. You're all transported prisoners, aren't you? First or second or even third generation, by now; and you've been accepting fresh transports from time to time, in fact you're expecting one any day now."

"How?" the Governor's voice rasped.

"Never mind how; but Torlkinos and his people aren't coming. And no, we didn't kill them. We just happen to know about it because one of my officers saw the wreckage." That was another convenient "truth," but Alana wasn't about to place Xanthe in danger by telling the whole story right now. Later, maybe - but this was definitely no time for such details. So Commander Robie continued, "Excellency, we're just what we appear to be: civilians who have no quarrel with you. We've been allowed to make this passage to Old Earth, even though it's against the law, because certain authorities within the Interstellar Guard have become aware that the buoys are degrading and that soon anyone and everyone will realize it's now possible to return to Old Earth. As civilians, we can undertake this mission and at the same time retrieve the family members I've already mentioned. And then we are bound to return to Guardbase Alpha and tell those authorities what we've learned. So now, Excellency - we've dropped out of warp, we're ready to fight your ships if that's what we have to do. But it's not what we want to do, I can assure you of that. All we want is to pass through your space safely, get our youngsters back, and then return to Guardbase Alpha. And I can promise you that the authorities to whom we'll report are highly placed, responsible, and in no way interested in harming people like you."

"Captain Robie, everyone is interested in harming people like us." The Governor sounded very tired. "That's a given. But while you and I have been talking, my Council has been conferring; and they've reached agreement."

There was a pause. Xanthe looked at her brother, at her cousin Sela, at her husband. She wished she could look at Alana Robie, who was commanding this soon-to-be-battle; but the commlink was audio only, for security's sake, and she didn't have that privilege.

And it did make sense, because the enemy could only gain advantage by seeing the interior of either freighter's control room.

Finally the Governor's voice came again, and it was even more weary than it had been before. "Captain Robie," he said. "And Captain Valeria, would it be, on a ship of that name?"

"It would," Jock acknowledged, his shoulders straightening proudly. He had tolerated being excluded from the conversation, but he hadn't liked it much and he was glad to be brought into it now.

"The Council's decision is to let you pass. We always knew this moment would come, you see. Now we must either be like the pirates, and kill innocent people in the name of protecting ourselves; that's just what the Guard did, so long ago, that made the pirates what they've become. Or we can choose to behave as a free and self-governing and decent society, one that may have been founded by transported criminals

but that has left that behind forever. We're making the latter choice, even though we realize its risks; so you may pass. This is First Earth Colony, standing down."

The commlink was cut almost before Alana Robie could say, in a tone that made no attempt to disguise the depth of her feelings, "Thank you, Excellency. To all of your Council and all of your people, thank you." Then she said, still on open channel so that the commanders of the battle group that still faced the two freighters could hear her voice, "Captain Valeria, are you ready to resume our former course and our former speed?"

"I certainly am, Captain Robie," Jock responded, and grinned at Sela because she was beside him and because he needed to grin at somebody right now.

"Then let's do it!"

And the battle group dropped away, left behind as the freighters went to warp, without any attempt to follow.

CHAPTER 11

It was a spaceport. No one had to tell either Jason Valeria or Kyla Robie what they were seeing, even from a distance. There was the control tower; there were the maintenance structures; there were the enormous pads where ships capable of in-atmosphere flight would settle themselves delicately on antigravs and come to rest.

It was a spaceport, it had been interfered with quite extensively since its long-ago abandonment, and that posed a real dilemma for the two young humans. Should they investigate it, see whether they could find a way to communicate off-world (unlikely because of the vast distance that stretched between Earth and Guardbase Alpha, the nearest inhabited world as far as they knew) or perhaps even a ship that could be repaired sufficiently for interstellar flight? Or should they give this place a wide berth, since where the pirates had come once they might at any time come again?

Jason and Kyla sat in the shade of a grove of trees that appeared to be a deliberate planting - more likely the offspring of such a long-ago planting, maybe, or could "palms" (if Jason remembered the name correctly) live for that many years? - and they discussed this decision just as they'd discussed so many

decisions during the days of their travels together. They were getting quite skilled at working things out, even at fighting when they needed to do that. Fighting without doing each other's egos irreparable harm, and then apologizing and making up and moving on.

Not that any human who'd grown up with the intense relationships fostered by the close confinement of starship life wasn't already quite skilled in managing such matters, but they were still new to each other and the dynamics of being with an opposite-sex person who wasn't a relative were certainly making a difference in all aspects of their lives.

"Jason, I just don't want to have to turn away from our best chance to get out of here and start looking for another chance somewhere else," Kyla said, as she sipped from a coconut that she'd figured out how to pierce in order to get access to its sweet milk. To their relief, they'd found that the biohazard had not rendered all Earth's plant life unsafe for human use; any plant that had once been food, could now be food again for this new generation of humans. With their supplies dwindling and with the problem of water taken care of for as long as they'd followed the ancient aqueduct, food had become the next issue. Fruits and nuts weren't going to be a complete answer, of course, but now that they'd reached the coast at last they were finding such resources and they were enjoying them.

"I don't want to do that, either, Kyla," Jason said honestly, "but it's obvious the aqueduct is functioning as well as it is because someone's taken the trouble to repair it. I did wonder how it could possibly have withstood the passing of so much time without clogging up! And it's obvious that someone's helped themselves to most, if not all, of what's useable out there on that landing field. So are we going to be taking a big risk by hanging around here, and if so is it going to be an acceptable risk? Acceptable balanced against whatever we might gain, I mean."

"I just don't see that we can afford not to do this," Kyla countered. "Damn! This thing is hard to open."

Jason smiled. He'd never heard her swear before, and it amused him instead of offending him. He said, "Give it to me. I'll get it open." He enjoyed seeing his companion learn to take care of herself and gain confidence that she could do so, but he also still liked to take care of her himself sometimes. There was something elemental about that, which he accepted without needing to understand it.

She handed the large hairy sphere over, and Jason studied its contours and the grain of its shell for a moment before he tapped it. And watched it split beautifully. "There!" he said, and handed the pieces back.

"How did you do that?" Kyla asked, having realized that it wasn't a matter of brute strength after all. "Did you figure out where it could fracture most easily?"

"Yes. That's just how I did it." Jason was as ridiculously pleased as if she'd been his pupil or his own kid sister.

Oh, damn. He hadn't thought of Xanthe in at least a day. "Kid" sister his twin had never been - she'd been born five minutes ahead of him and had never let him forget it! - but it hurt him, now, to realize that he could go for hours without remembering she'd ever existed. Was this what it was like, to lose someone you'd loved? Did you really find yourself forgetting, after awhile, and was that how the pain finally became bearable?

He stood up, by way of shaking those thoughts, and gazed toward the entrance to the spaceport. It was just down the ancient street from the park (there, he'd finally remembered what such a place was called!) where he and Kyla were resting and snacking and conferring. He said, "We'll do it. You're right, if we don't we'll always think we should have taken the chance. Finish your coconut, and let's get going."

"I'll keep the rest for later," Kyla decided, rising to stand beside him. "I want to do it now, before I get nervous! Don't you?"

"Yes." He'd found that there was no point trying to hide it from her when he felt afraid or hesitant; she always detected it anyway. They stowed the gear they'd been using, they climbed back into the aircar, and they headed it toward the spaceport.

The port had been savaged, not salvaged. That was what Jason concluded, as they toured it by moving the aircar from wreck to wreck (or from hulk to hulk, as those words might apply). Parts that couldn't be used had been thrown down wherever the work crews had happened to toss them; hulls had been sliced open with cutting torches and then left bare to the weather; and although this was an arid climate, nevertheless the ill effects of that exposure were plain to be seen. The afternoon's search of the landing field was not only not productive, it was discouraging.

"Shall we stay here tonight, or shall we go back to that - park, is that the word I want?" Kyla asked, wiping her sweaty forehead and grimacing when her hand came away gritty as well as moist. "Oh, I'm grubby! But I guess that doesn't matter. We're not going to find anything, are we, Jason?"

"Not among the ships, we're not," Jason agreed, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. He set the aircar down, let its power die out in order to conserve the batteries, and he let his gaze center itself on the ancient control tower.

Kyla's eyes followed his. She said, "That's next, then? The tower?"

"Look that way," Jason responded, and unbuckled his safety harness and climbed out of the aircar. "Let's go. We have an hour of daylight, no more, and I don't want to spend the night here. That park's open and defensible. This place would make a terrific trap."

Kyla nodded, unfastened her own harness, and followed him.

The lifts inside the tower didn't work. They had to locate the stairwell, and then they had to climb.

There were many levels - Jason hadn't realized he should count them, but after he did think of that he noticed that the doorway at each new level had characters that he presumed must be numerals painted above it. Unfortunately, though, they were characters that were in no way familiar to him. So when they finally emerged at the tower's control deck level, he could only be certain that they'd climbed the ten levels that he had actually had the presence of mind to count - plus quite a few more, each of which he was feeling in his leg muscles.

It looked very much like a ship's control room. Or perhaps more like a warship's bridge, Jason thought; he hadn't in his whole life actually been on a battle bridge, of course, but he knew what they were supposed to look like and this certainly was similar. Only the viewports were enormous, giving the impression that the whole chamber was open to the sky, although of course that wasn't the case; the chamber was constructed of a transparent duralloy that allowed full visual, but that kept out the intense solar rays that would have interfered with vision and also kept out weather and air currents and other disturbances.

Kyla reached for his hand, as she often did in a new situation when she wanted reassurance. He clasped her fingers for a moment, then deliberately released her. He said, in the hushed tones that people usually reserved for the presence of the dead, "Well! The bastards didn't come in here, anyway. Everything seems to be just as it was left."

"Finally," Kyla agreed, with relief. "No one's torn this place apart and left the pieces everywhere. Do you think we can use any of it, Jason?"

"I don't know. But we haven't time to find out, really, because it's a long way back down and we already agreed we mustn't spend the night here." Jason didn't want to think about what it would mean if anything happened to disable their aircar. It was true that in all their travels they'd seen no other living creature, so the possibility was unlikely; but he still wasn't willing to chance it.

Kyla made a face. "Oh! We have to climb back down now, and climb back up tomorrow? Yes, I suppose we do. Oh, drat."

"You can say 'damn' in front of me whenever you want to, you know," Jason said mildly, as he allowed himself one small delay before enforcing the decision to start back to the aircar. He moved toward the tower's main control panel, and he let his eyes wander over its silent readouts and its touchscreens with what was almost greed in his gaze.

Oh, he couldn't wait to play with this. He moved in closer, and rested his hands lightly on its surface.

And then snatched his hands away, startled. Had something moved? Some surge of long-dormant energy, reawakening at the first human touch this place had known in more than two centuries?

No, he didn't think so. All seemed to be as before. But he stayed where he was for a moment longer, staring and resisting the temptation to touch the panel again.

Finally Kyla put a hand on his arm. "Jason, we have to either go or stay right now!" she said firmly. "It will be dark by the time we get back to the car, at this rate. Please, come on. I don't want to spend the night up here."

"Neither do I," Jason admitted, and gave himself a small disciplinary shake. He turned away from the panel, and followed Kyla as she took his hand and led him back toward the stairwell.

Going down, of course, didn't take as long as climbing up. They were safe in the aircar while it was still dusk, and although twilight was brief on this part of Earth they still made it back to the abandoned park before the light was entirely gone. Making camp in the dark wasn't a problem. They'd done that more than once in their travels.

"Jason!" Kyla exclaimed, a few minutes later when light bathed their campsite.

It was so bright, it made the park as visible as it had been by day. The light lasted for perhaps ten seconds, then was gone. And it was back perhaps thirty seconds after that.

It was pulsing upward from the spaceport's control tower. It must be visible, Jason thought, for many kilometers' distance even on the ground. From space he was sure it could be seen clearly; that was probably its function, to give visual guidance to any crippled incoming craft that had lost all sensor capabilities and that would have to come in by "seat of the pants" reckoning alone.

"Oh, damn!" Jason said, and wished he knew some really impressive curses. "Kyla, did I do that? I must have, when I just brushed my hands across that panel. Oh, dammit, dammit, dammit! If anyone's anywhere in the whole solar system, they'll see that beacon and they'll know someone's here. What a nitwit! What a complete idiot!"

"Hush," Kyla said, with surprising authority in her young voice. "You couldn't have known. I could have done that just as easily as you did. So quit swearing, Jason, and let's get out of here. Or let's decide to stay put and hope that's safer than running the aircar around in the dark, or using its lights and notifying anyone who might be looking for us exactly where we are. What's it going to be? You decide, you're the pilot and it's your call."

Jason calmed himself, taking several long breaths and clearing his mind as Jock had taught him to do when an adrenaline rush was causing problems instead of helping to solve them. Then he said, "You already said it, Kyla. If we try to move out now, we're going to be telling the whole universe just where to find us - or we're going to be risking a smashup, which is certainly the last thing we want to do. So let's eat and let's try to sleep, one of us at a time while the other keeps watch. And in the morning, let's be up and ready to run like hell."

"Yes. That's what we'll have to do." Kyla nodded. "But if you think I'm going to sleep tonight, you're crazy. And I don't think you're going to sleep, either."

"But we should try," Jason said gently. "Shouldn't we?"

"I guess so." Kyla scrubbed a hand at her eyes as something occurred to her and she found that it was a thought she didn't want to have. "Jason, I'm sorry. I talked you into investigating that spaceport, and it looks as if I was wrong."

"Forget it. You couldn't have talked me into anything I didn't want to do in the first place," Jason said, and awkwardly patted his companion's shoulder. "Or if you have to have some guilt, you can balance it against mine for touching that stupid panel. Now, whether or not we can make ourselves sleep we can at least make ourselves eat something. And we'd better. Okay?"

"No, it's not okay," Kyla said softly. But she reached up her free hand and put it on top of his.

The beacon kept flashing. It would flash the whole night through, so intensely that the two young humans nearby could only get away from its brightness by hiding their faces while they tried to sleep. One at a time, as Jason had said; and with total lack of success, as Kyla had said.

In the morning, as the daylight arrived, the beacon seemed to shut itself off. Jason found himself wondering if it had some kind of reset mechanism, so that daylight would shut it down not just for today but until some other fool set it going again; but he decided not to even voice that possibility. He wasn't going back there. He and Kyla were getting out of here, before anything else happened to them.

"It should be easy to locate them," Alana said, looking at Jock Valeria's image on the viewscreen because transferring from ship to ship just to converse was of course not practical. "Just two human life-signs on what's supposed to be an empty world. If there's no one in orbit when we get there, it should be very simple."

"And if there is someone in orbit, we blow them out of space without asking too many questions," Jock growled. He had not let any of their subordinates know it, but he had not liked Alana's decision to negotiate instead of fight at First Earth Colony. He had let Alana know it, though, as soon as he had opportunity to speak with her privately.

"Agreed, Jock." Alana sighed. She was accustomed to giving orders that were not always appreciated, and as long as she was obeyed that didn't trouble her when it happened within the Guard's command structure; she hadn't been taught to think of command as a popularity contest, after all. But working on a fairly co-equal basis with a fellow captain in a civilian setting was quite another matter, she

knew that, and she wished she had not been obliged to offend her comrade. But she'd done the right thing, she knew she had done the right thing, and her regrets were more for Jock as her friend than for any damage to their professional relationship. "Provided we're not outgunned as we were at First Earth Colony. I don't see that committing suicide is going to help those kids, do you?"

"Yes, I'm still angry," was Jock's response; but now he was smiling. "Alana, sometimes I feel as if I really am talking to an ex-wife when I talk to you! Do you realize you just read my mind?"

It wasn't hard, was what Alana thought. But what she said was, "Sometimes I feel the same way, Jock. If everything had been different except just you and me...."

"Yes," he said, and nodded. "We could have had something after all, couldn't we? Oh, well. There's always Sela."

"Oh? So you woke up and noticed, did you?" This wasn't why she'd opened a secured channel, but Alana was far too amused to close it down just now. She missed this, it was so much like what she shared with Dom - someone to talk to frankly, someone who gave no quarter and asked none even on the most personal of playing fields.

"No. Xanthe rapped me between the eyes with a rifle butt."

"And?"

"And I still don't know what I'm going to do. Anyhow, I realize now I probably owe you an apology for a few things that happened right under my nose that I never even saw."

"Accepted," Alana said, and smiled. "I have to get back on sensors, Jock, and they're in the control room. Callon out."

"Valeria out," Jock said, and sat at his desk in his quarters for a few minutes after the screen went blank. This compartment had never felt as empty before Alana had come and gone as it felt now. It was crazy, but he actually did miss that woman.

Aboard Callon, Alana Robie made her way from what had been her father's quarters - which she had used just now for privacy's sake, but which she had no desire whatsoever to inhabit considering what she had witnessed there almost a quarter-century earlier - to the control room. Berkey greeted her there, yielding up the captain's chair with his usual easy manner. "We'll be in Earth orbit in less than an hour, Captain," he told her, in a calm tone that made her envy him. Assuming, of course, that he really felt that way and wasn't merely a superb actor.

As superb an actor as she was an actress, because she'd had years of experience appearing dead calm when she was afraid or excited or merely agitated. She answered him, "Very good, Mr. Berkey. Is there

any sign of habitation on any of the former bases or space stations elsewhere in the Sol system?"

"Negative, Captain. There's a power source operating on Luna, where of course there once was extensive settlement; but there are no life signs there. I can't scan Earth's surface until we're considerably nearer, though, because of the density of its atmosphere."

The atmosphere in which human life had evolved; the air that was the pattern for every atmosphere the humans of Alana Robie's universe had artificially formulated to sustain their lives. Yes, she was excited. She was thrilled, and what starship captain wouldn't have been? Trader or Guardsman or whatever, to be doing this was a privilege that far outweighed its risks. But she settled herself into her chair and began scanning for her own benefit, and she hid her excitement even from her old teacher and foster-father. During the next hours she would be much better off functioning as Commander Robie, not as Alana; and in order to do that she needed to get in character now and stay there until all was over.

"What in hell is that?" Berkey wanted to know, quite suddenly. "On visual, if you can believe that?"

Alana looked up. Earth's night side faced them at this moment, and on its surface she saw - nothing. She opened her mouth to speak, to ask her first mate just what he thought he'd seen down there; and then she saw it, too.

A flash of light, sustained briefly and then extinguished. It stayed out for perhaps thirty seconds, then it flashed again. Steadily, rhythmically, on and on.

"Well," Alana said softly. "That's either the best place to look for them, or the worst place to look for them. Which do you suppose it is, Mr. Berkey?"

"I don't know," the mate answered her. "But I suspect it's the first place we're going to look, isn't it, Captain?"

"I suspect so." Alana smiled. "Plot us an equatorial orbit, Mr. Berkey, and request that Valeria plot a polar orbit. That will allow us to scan the entire planetary surface within the shortest possible time."

"And will put that beacon's source within our initial scans," Berkey observed as he moved to obey her.

"Exactly," Alana said. Her smile grew wolfish. "But as we go in, I want to make a complete orbit of Luna and make damn sure we know what that power source is and that it doesn't pose any threat whatsoever. I don't trust the bastards, Mr. Berkey."

"Neither do I, Captain," the mate said, and grimaced rather than grinned. "Looks as if they really did abandon those youngsters, doesn't it?"

If we're lucky, Alana thought soberly as she nodded instead of replying with words. If they didn't just execute them early on, which is possible in spite of all evidence we think we've seen to the contrary.

But she wouldn't say that out loud, and she wouldn't let her thoughts dwell on it for long. She would only acknowledge the possibility, because that she must do or she wasn't worthy of sitting in this captain's chair.

The blast of energy from the old Luna Station would have been fatal if Callon's shields had not been set at maximum. As it was the freighter rocked and shuddered; and Alana cursed as she fought the helm. This was much too close an orbit for navigational shifts, even small ones! But she recovered, managed to dodge the ancient space junk that seemed to be filling the skies everywhere (good lord, why couldn't the damned pirates have wanted some of that stuff and taken it away?), and spoke into her commlink: "Valeria, stay clear! The old Luna Station has some kind of armament that's set to fire automatically when it's approached from space."

"I saw," Jock Valeria's voice responded wryly. "Do you suppose the pirates set that up, or our ancestors?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Alana said without rancor. "Anyhow, stay clear. Are you ready to establish Earth orbit?"

"Yes. Polar orbit for us, equatorial orbit for you; so there'll be minutes at a stretch when the planet will be between us and we'll be unable to communicate. Too bad we can't use their old comm satellites, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's too bad; but it's the way it is. Let's do it, then. Callon out."

CHAPTER 12

The aircar died a few kilometers from the spaceport. They were still within what had been a metropolitan area; and that wasn't good, really, because here the food sources were limited and the only water source was the aqueduct - which they must leave if they didn't want to backtrack. The "coast" had proved to be exactly that, because the body of water on which the metropolis bordered was decidedly a salty ocean.

They would have to make the best of it, of course. What else could they do? They sifted through their supplies and their equipment, they made up backpacks, they began walking. Staying put simply wasn't an option.

Walking in the full sun of day wasn't an option, either, because their fair skins (more sensitive than the skin surfaces of planet-born and reared humans would be, even, thanks to their having spent their childhoods in starship compartments) wouldn't stand for exposure to direct and powerful sunlight for more than very brief periods of time. So they decided that they would sleep during the day's most intense heat, walk during the cooler hours at its beginning and its ending, and forage and rest during the part of the night that wasn't bright enough for travel. When moonlight or starlight allowed them to travel safely, though, they would make use of it.

They were getting hungry now, and that meant they would soon be weakening. All the more reason to use their strength now, Jason thought, and when he said so Kyla agreed with him.

But she was scared. He didn't blame her; he was scared, too.

The spaceport beacon promised to operate every night now that it had been activated, and its power supply seemed to be limitless. Sometimes Jason found himself thinking that they should have stayed there, that if they'd kept looking through those particular ruins they would have found all they needed for survival; but now the beacon made it just too dangerous, so returning wasn't a possibility. Even though now he was sure, and was angry with himself because he was so sure, that except for the beacon they could have stayed there in complete safety because they were alone on this world and nothing would have harmed them.

Just when he was most certain of something like that was usually when he was proved wrong, he'd discovered over the eighteen years of his lifetime; and this was no exception. On the afternoon of the day after they lost the aircar, he saw dust up ahead and he knew it wasn't being raised by air currents. He said to Kyla, "Let's find a place to hide. Quick."

"Do you think those are people making that disturbance?" Oh, she was getting good at this survival business. Just when she was probably going to die, after all.

But Jason said honestly, "Can't be anything else!", and he took her arm and drew her with him into an abandoned building.

"Hello?" The voice spoke, or rather called out, in Standard Language. "Look, we have scanners and we know you're there. Two of you, a male and a female, late adolescents or young adults. So why don't you come out and say hello? We aren't going to hurt you."

Jason and Kyla looked at each other. After a moment Jason shrugged, and Kyla nodded.

They walked out of the building into the late-afternoon sunlight, their hands held out in plain view so that no one could imagine they had weapons and ideas about using them. They saw a group of twenty-some fellow humans, about evenly divided among males and females; none was dressed in anything better than rags, but that pretty closely described what the young traders were wearing now themselves. The leader (or at least the point-man) of the group carried an odd-looking object that Jason suspected was an ancient version of a blaster rifle. Many, although not all, of his companions seemed to be wearing belt knives. Some of the women carried infants in slings on back or breast; none had small children clinging to them, however, and there were no older children or young adolescents in the group.

Which meant, Jason reasoned, that either this was a fragment of a settled community where the children had been left to wait for their parents with other (probably older) adults; or that this was the whole group, and that it had been stranded here just about long enough for babies to be born. He would have bet on the latter, if he'd been required to support one theory or the other.

The group's leader smiled and deliberately held his rifle at arm's length, where it was clearly no threat. He said, "Welcome to Earth! Or didn't you know that's where you'd been landed?"

"We figured it out," Jason admitted, and willed himself not to relax precisely because he could feel himself wanting to do so. That was the most dangerous time in any first contact situation, and although these were fellow humans and not aliens this was still a first contact if ever he'd experienced one. "Who are you and how did you get here?"

"I should make you two go first with explanations, you know," the man said, and grinned in a way that showed missing front teeth and other teeth badly decayed. "But I won't. Let's walk together toward the beacon, since that's where we are going, and talk as we go. No sense wasting travel time."

"We're the ones who set off that beacon, and we didn't mean to do it!" Jason said, putting Kyla's arm firmly through his because it suddenly occurred to him that some of the men were looking at her in a way he didn't like. His gesture was intentionally possessive, and he noticed that she understood him and didn't resist. She had not said a word. He suddenly realized that she was not accustomed to meeting new people (or even alien beings, for that matter) as he was, and that she was probably feeling at best shy and at worst afraid. But just now was not the time to break the mood he'd established, so he did not speak to her. He just held her with what he hoped was reassurance, and felt her clinging to him in response.

"Oh? How did you do that?" the leader asked, still without offering an introduction. He walked beside Jason, and he kept right on heading toward the spaceport.

"I touched a control panel in the old tower. I didn't think I touched anything, actually - I just brushed my fingers across it - but that was all it took," Jason said, feeling like a small child admitting to mischief. "And ever since then that beacon flashes all night, every night."

"No matter how you did it or even why you did it," the leader said, and grinned. "Now maybe

someone who can help us will see it. Now maybe we'll be rescued. That's why we started out to find the beacon, as soon as we saw it flashing. Wouldn't you say it should be visible far out into space?"

"I'd say it would be." Jason stopped walking and put out his free hand in formal greeting. "My name is Jason Valeria. This is Kyla Robie. We were kidnapped."

"Hello, Jason. I'm Williams. No first name - at least none that humans can pronounce. I wasn't kidnapped, I was condemned. As were all of us." Williams gestured at his group, all of whom had stopped walking when he had done so in order to accept the young trader's offered handclasp. "We're criminals, you see. We escaped a transport ship, more than a year ago; we stole a shuttle; and we overshot the place we thought we were heading. And for awhile we thought we'd do fine here on Old Earth, once we figured out that's where we are. But unless we can find our way to a climate where there's dependable rain and fertile soil, the fact is that we're never going to have a decent life here and we want to either find a way to move to a better site or we want to get off this world and go somewhere else."

So Jason had guessed right. They'd been here just long enough for children to be conceived and born. And they were transported criminals; and he had Kyla to protect.

But he knew that "criminal" was a very relative term that covered behaviors ranging from stealing a few credits' worth of food to feed one's starving child, all the way to revolution and mayhem and premeditated murder; so he swallowed hard, and decided it wouldn't help matters for him to assume the worst. He said, "Well, Mr. Williams, all Kyla and I want to do is go home to our families. So I guess we want the same thing you do, really."

"It seems that way, doesn't it? And no 'mister,' please. Just Williams." The man resumed walking, and so did his band; so Jason and Kyla did, too. "And who would your families be? I'd guess Anders Valeria and Alan Robie as your fathers, except that those two are legendary enemies and therefore I'd hardly expect to find their children together even under these circumstances."

"But we are together," Jason said, and looked at Kyla and smiled. "And we think it's just as strange as you do. No one ever told us why - we were kidnapped separately, out of our ship's shuttles during the Trade Fair; we were brought to this world from Chaitanya, and we were dumped. And no one's coming back for us, I'm sure of that now, although for a long time we did expect we'd be ransomed."

"Everyone expects to be ransomed at first," Williams said. "But almost no one ever is."

Beside him, Jason felt Kyla's shudder. He pressed her arm as comfortingly as he could and he inquired, "Do the pirates know you're here, Williams?"

"If they do, they don't give a damn," the convict answered, with a rusty little laugh. "No reason they should. We're no threat to them, and we've no value to them either. So they don't bother with us. But that beacon may call someone other than the pirates. So we're going to go sit right on top of it, and we'll be

there if someone comes. You can come with us, if you like; you seem to be pretty short on supplies - " he looked shrewdly at Jason's thin face - "and we'll share what we have. Because if you really are who you say, your people are rich and powerful enough so they won't give up until they get you back. And if they do come for you and we've helped you stay alive, will they help us in return?"

They'd help you anyway, just because you're humans, was what Jason thought. But what he said was, "I'm sure they will."

"Good," said Williams. "Because we don't need you, you see; and it sure looks as if you need us. Wouldn't you agree, ma'am?" And he looked at Kyla, addressing her for the first time.

Kyla's pale face flushed, and she averted her eyes and clung to Jason's arm. But Jason felt anger in her touch, not just fear; and he was thankful for that.

She might be needing that anger, and she might be needing it soon.

"There are settlements of various sizes scattered all around the globe, quite literally," Jock Valeria observed, once again on intership comm with Alana Robie; but this time there was no need for privacy, so both captains were in their control rooms. The channel they used, however, was carefully secured. As far as they knew there was no one around who had the capability of listening to them - but who could say that for certain? "I've scanned everything from a city of 50,000 that's got some sort of manufacturing facility operating, down to little groups of half a dozen souls."

"Our scans are similar," Robie affirmed, resting her chin in her hand the way she sometimes did when she wanted to think. "Although that 50,000-population with manufacturing capability is certainly the prizewinner! Where did you find it, Jock?"

"In what was once called the Far East, where the nation of China was probably located."

"Interesting," Robie said. "But not very helpful to us right now. How in hell are we supposed to find two lost kids when we've got this sort of population spread to choose from?"

"We could start with that beacon," Jock suggested. "I'm not sure what it means, but - I've got a feeling about it."

Cameron Berkey snorted, but managed not to let the derisive sound be broadcast to the other ship. Alana gave him a look. She said, "Well, if you've got a feeling you've got more than I have to go on! Mr. Gelsey, are you there?"

"Yes, ma'am," Linn Gelsey said automatically, forgetting for the moment that he was not speaking as an ensign to a full commander. Or perhaps he was, because although Alana Robie was on leave of absence she still held her rank and he was definitely on an active duty (if clandestine) mission.

"You and I are the Guardsmen here, so I believe going down there is our job. We'll take Callon's faster shuttle. It's small, but we'll only be four even after we get Jason and Kyla aboard." Alana deliberately chose to speak of that possibility as, instead, a certainty. "I'll pick you up in fifteen minutes; can you be ready by then?"

"I'm ready right now," Gelsey told her.

"Commander Robie," said Xanthe Nordstrom's voice.

"Yes, Cadet?" Alana knew what was coming, and she used the younger woman's lowly title quite purposefully although until now she'd called the girl nothing but "Xanthe" and had spoken to her in nothing but the most friendly of tones. But she didn't sound friendly now. She sounded like a flagship exec talking to a green cadet.

Xanthe either didn't yet know enough to be intimidated, or under these circumstances she didn't care. "Ma'am, that's my twin brother down there. I know I haven't been through the training that you and Linn have had, but - "

"But you also haven't been through three years of patrol experience, as has Ensign Gelsey; or through eleven years of both ranger and starship service, as I have," Alana said, cutting her off firmly but with less sharpness than she might have chosen to put into her tone. "And you can believe me when I say this, Cadet: going into a situation where you may have to fight, with a loved one at your side, is the hardest thing duty can ask of you. I know, I've done it many times. And you are not going to do that for the first time on my watch. Understood, Cadet?"

Xanthe bit her lip, across the intervening space on Valeria; and she thought for one mad moment of reminding Commander Robie that she had managed quite well to face death with a loved one beside her, not very long ago and not (in interstellar terms of distance) very far away. But she decided that nothing was going to change if she pushed, and that she might need to play that particular card another time when stakes were higher. So she said, "Understood, Commander."

"Very good, then. I'll see you shortly, Ensign Gelsey. Callon out."

Linn Gelsey was grinning when he boarded the shuttle and joined Alana Robie. He said simply, "Thank you, Commander."

Alana grinned back. "You're welcome, Ensign," she acknowledged, without pretending she didn't know for what she was being thanked.

The two freighters had altered their orbits now, so that they could stay in contact with each other and with the shuttle as it dropped gracefully toward the surface. Alana tried to match what she was seeing to old map images from her history lessons, and finally came up with the correct label: Baja California. Southwestern United States of America. Mexico.

Arid land; some of it nearly empty, some of it at one time heavily populated. Ocean, but little water for human use except what was brought from the mountains. High plains, ancient ruins - ancient even in those days. Terraformed deserts turned into farmlands that must have required intensive irrigation; and beyond them at the ocean's edge, metropolitan settlements with mass transit centers and the highest technology of that era's development.

Which was at least as high as what she had available to her right now, and maybe higher in some critical areas such as life sciences and medicine. The past two and half centuries had been spent trying to hold on and recover, not advancing.

It was daylight, early morning, where they would be landing; the beacon was just shutting itself down after its busy night's work. Alana piloted, and Linn scanned. And he looked up with puzzlement on his face. "I have a group of human lifesigns," he said, frowning. "The exact count, including some infants, is 29. The rest are all adults, although some are as young as - Kyla or Jason. The oldest person seems to be around 35 or so."

"Hmm," Alana mused, stealing a glance at his readouts. "So either this is the wrong place, or our two have joined a larger group. Or been placed with it, I suppose, since the pirates might have done that on purpose. It might have suited them for some reason, although what that would be I can't imagine."

"Neither can I," Linn agreed. "But I can imagine two people alone in this kind of place wanting to join other humans if they could."

"Yes. That would give them a better chance for long-term survival, provided they chose the right kind of group." Alana decided at that point to stop speculating. She wasn't sure she liked the mental pictures it was giving her, since one of the two people they were discussing was her just-about-helpless baby sister. "I was going to set us down out of their view, but maybe that's not the best strategy; that would mean we'd have to approach them on foot, and there are a lot more of them than there are of us. Maybe we'll do better just dropping in on them, since obviously this is no first contact situation where we're going to scare the wits out of primitive folk. They'll know what a shuttle is, all right."

"Commander, the downside of that is that they could have weapons powerful enough to shoot us down," Linn said, reminding her of the obvious without any of the hesitation she often saw in officers as young as he was.

"True. So we'll have to be damned careful, now won't we?" Alana countered, and grinned at her ensign. "By the way, you just did the right thing to call my attention to something I might have

overlooked. I didn't, as it happens; but you were absolutely correct to remind me."

So the shuttle dipped downward, and within minutes it was settling itself onto the cracked pavement of what had long ago been a city street.

Jason Valeria had slept badly, but at least he had slept. He'd managed that by doing so with his arms wrapped around Kyla Robie, because otherwise he would have spent the entire night worrying about her. She was attracting far too many meaningful looks from the male members of this group of convicts they'd joined.

Perhaps, Jason reminded himself as he had so many times since yesterday afternoon's meeting, he was being overly suspicious. There were plenty of reasons these people might have been transported, and after all most of the males seemed to be attached with one degree of formality or another to one of the females.

Except the leader, of course. Williams didn't seem to be attached to any of the women, and he was the man who'd spent the most time looking at Kyla. And that was disgusting, because he was almost old enough to be her father.

Okay, so that was stretching it; but he was definitely much older than she was, and for him to look at her that way was appalling. And frightening.

The group had divided itself into much smaller gatherings, four or five people at most, for last night's meal; and the same pattern repeated itself for breakfast. Williams placed Jason and Kyla with himself again this morning, just as he'd done last night.

They were finishing the meal, which was frugal but was better than what the two young traders would have eaten if they'd still been traveling alone, when a sound they hadn't heard since Chaitanya made them glance first at each other and then joyfully up into the sky. "A shuttle!" Kyla exclaimed, leaping up and waving her arms as if the little ship's sensors couldn't possibly tell its pilot she was there.

Jason found himself doing the same thing. It was involuntary, a cross between a cry for help and a dance of joy. A joy that died quickly when he saw Williams pointing that blaster rifle in his direction.

"Yours?" the convict asked shortly.

"How should I know until I see its hull markings?" Jason countered. He reached for Kyla, who had stopped jumping and calling out just as abruptly as he had. Her face was dead white, and she stepped close to him without his having to draw her there.

Unfortunately, there was recognition in her eyes. Williams saw it, and he smiled in satisfaction. "Not one of yours, then, Valeria; one of hers," he decided, the blaster rifle's aim holding steady. "House of Callon, operated by Robie; not House of Valeria."

The rest of the convicts were silent, and nearly motionless. But Jason had the distinct sense that if he or Kyla should make any hasty or threatening moves, especially any directed at Williams, his people would be all over them within the instant. So he stayed very still, and was glad that Kyla seemed willing to do the same.

The Callon's shuttle settled itself, and kept its propulsion units on-line. A very wise idea, since that meant she could lift again without pause if that became necessary. A voice that Jason had never heard before, but that was plainly familiar to Kyla, came over an outside address system: "Put down that rifle, mister!" it said, without preamble and with absolute authority. "Now!"

"And just why should I, madam?" Williams replied, without changing his stance and with a look of utter reasonableness on his face. "You can kill me and everyone else here, I know that; but if you don't want me to kill these two youngsters, you're not going to fire."

Alana Robie was not in a mood to negotiate. She asked bluntly, "What do you want for them, then? And make it reasonable, or you won't get it."

"Oh, I'm a very reasonable fellow," Williams said with a grin. "I want that shuttle, thank you very much."

"Don't be ridiculous," Robie's voice shot back. "Even if I trusted you enough to bring you aboard, which I don't, there are too many of you - by several factors - for this shuttle to carry. So try something else, mister. Something reasonable, as I said."

"That's reasonable," the convict countered, his grin growing broader. "You can't possibly be here alone, you came from a ship in orbit; and I happen to know that a freighter of Callon's size carries three shuttles. So have one of the larger ones sent down, on remotes if you don't want to risk a pilot, and let me have it. Then I'll give you these kids. Deal?"

Alana hesitated deliberately, letting the man think she was reluctant. It never did to let a person like this one realize he'd struck an easy bargain. At last she said, her tone grudging, "Deal. But we're sitting right here, with weapons locked on you, until then."

"I didn't expect anything else!" Williams said gaily. "But you won't mind if I let the kids sit down? The girl looks like she's about to collapse."

Kyla did look that way, too, Jason thought when he looked at her face again. He began to gently lower her...and was astonished when her arm, the one that had been behind his back for so long, moved

swiftly after her hand touched the ground.

Williams yelled. The blaster rifle fell out of his hands as the sharp rock Kyla had driven at him with all her strength slammed into his forearm and caused the hand that gripped the rifle to open involuntarily.

Jason had its muzzle in his own grip within the next instant, and he swung it like a club and it crushed the convict's skull. And then he had turned, and the rifle was pointing at everyone else in the group. Except Kyla, of course, who was at his side.

Over the in-atmosphere public address system of the Callon's shuttle, Alana Robie first swore and then laughed aloud. "Damn you, Kyla!" she exclaimed. "That was the stupidest thing I've ever seen you do! And also the bravest, and what matters is that it worked. Get aboard, now, both of you!"

"Who in hell is that?" Jason asked his companion as they moved toward the shuttle's opening hatch, backing carefully so that they constantly faced the group of convicts they were leaving behind.

"That's my sister," Kyla said proudly, and stole a chance to smile up at him. "I knew she'd come. I wasn't so sure about Papa, but I knew Alana would never leave me here."

CHAPTER 13

As soon as the shuttle had lifted, Alana Robie gave the controls to Linn Gelsey and turned toward the two youngsters. That was exactly how she had been thinking of them all this time, of course; but when she'd met Xanthe, who was Jason's twin, she ought to have realized that they were grown. Kyla's eighteenth birthday had taken place - when? A week ago. Alana wondered if the girl even knew it.

And now that she had her here at last, Alana wondered what she was going to do next. All Kyla's life she had hidden the fact that she loved the child with a fierce protectiveness, probably the more so because she'd been allowed to play almost no role in her half-sister's care and she had so wished she might - make things easier for her? Protect her from Papa? No, neither of those phrases described what she'd wanted to do. Papa and Phillida had made things only too easy for Kyla, and instead of driving her and making demands on her as he'd done with Alana he had seemed to dote on his younger child.

But "seemed" was the operative word there, Alana thought now as she moved slowly from the pilot's

chair toward the blonde girl who bore her so little physical resemblance but who was looking at her now with an exact mirror-image of her own hesitant and almost frightened expression. Papa hadn't loved anyone, really. He'd just had favorite possessions.

"Oh, hell!" Alana said, in a sudden growl, and put out her arms. "Come here, you."

"I'm dirty," Kyla said, but she came anyway. "And I don't think I smell very good."

"I don't care," Alana answered, and then had to laugh. How like Kyla, to worry about that now! "Try coming off a ranger survival course sometime, and you won't smell any better."

Her baby sister was just a centimeter or so shorter than she was, now. And it was a woman's body she held in her arms, not a little girl's. But most surprisingly of all, Kyla was hugging her back with considerable strength - a strength she certainly hadn't had when she had left the Callon for a pleasure excursion on Chaitanya. Alana didn't need to have been there at the time to know that. Kyla's strength still nowhere near matched her own, but hers was the result of years of Guard training and she didn't expect any civilian's to match it.

"You grew up, kid," Alana said, as she finally took her sister's shoulders in her hands and held her at arm's length. "And it looks good on you."

"Where's Papa?" Kyla wanted to know. "And they - I mean she, the woman who kidnapped us and then left us here! - said Phillida was dead. Is that true, Alana?"

"Yes, they killed Phillida," Alana said with sudden weariness. This was the part she'd been dreading. "Along with the crewman who was piloting for you that day. And - Papa's dead, too, Kyla."

"Oh!" Alana was glad she had realized, had always known, how different was Kyla's view of their father from hers. Otherwise she might not have known how to respond when her little sister's face contorted at that news, when her eyes filled and she turned - not to Alana for comfort, but to the young man who'd been standing behind her and waiting patiently to be noticed. Jason Valeria folded Kyla Robie in his arms and held her, with an utter lack of hesitation that told Alana plainly they'd grown very used to consoling each other during their weeks of enforced comradeship.

And being a Guardsman who was accustomed to seeing close friendships forged by shared adversity, she did not take it for anything but comradeship. She patted Kyla's back, which was heaving with sobs now, and she returned to the pilot's chair. After a moment she heard Jason settling himself and Kyla on one of the shuttle's rear benches. His voice was deep for so young a man's, and its tone was a tender murmur as he comforted his companion.

Oh, lord, someone was going to have to give him exactly the same kind of awful news. He, too, had lost a flawed but much-loved father, and he didn't know it yet. Well, Alana Robie wasn't going to be the

one who told him. She'd just done as much of that sort of thing as she could handle, and she was surprised she'd gotten through it without starting to bawl herself. Not for her father, whose loss was probably a net gain as far as the universe was concerned; but for Kyla, who was genuinely bereft and who had every right to show it.

There was no time for that now. Berkey's voice was on commlink, and although his tone was calm she read agitation under its surface. "Callon to shuttle," he said. "What's your ETA, Captain?"

"We'll be boarding within five minutes," Robie told him, putting all the past minutes' turmoil far down in her mind. "What's happening, Mr. Berkey?"

"Incoming ships, Captain. They'll be here in thirty minutes, I should say, if they maintain their present speed."

"How many? And can you identify them?"

"Seven. A whole damn starfleet. And no, I can't identify them yet."

Alana made a decision. "Mr. Gelsey, I'm sorry but you and Mr. Valeria are going to have to ride this one out aboard Callon," she announced. "I won't have time to drop you off. Sorry."

"That's all right, Commander," Linn Gelsey responded, and gave her a grim little smile. "I'm an extra body on Valeria anyhow. And I'll bet you can put me to work aboard Callon, can't you?"

"You're damned right, I can," Alana told him, with an answering smile. "Mr. Valeria, you heard?"

"I heard," said that deep young voice from behind her. "Kyla, are you okay now?"

"I will be," said her sister's voice; and there was the sound of vigorous nose-blowing. "What can I do to help?"

There's been a miracle, Alana thought as she headed the shuttle straight for Callon's welcoming belly doors. But she said, "I'll tell you when I need you, you can count on it!", and made a firm mental note to find something. Anything.

The shuttle was gathered into the freighter's docking bay, the doors were sealed, the bay was repressurized. And its passengers were down its ramp and headed for the control room, at a dead run.

"Valeria, what's your status?" was the first thing Alana Robie said when she reached the captain's chair and slammed a hand onto her commlink there.

"We're standing by at stations," came Jock Valeria's calm voice. "Mr. Berkey tells me you have them

safely, Alana."

"Yes." She'd forgotten, momentarily, that Jason hadn't yet communicated with his family. She beckoned to him with a motion of her head, called him to her side at the console.

"I'm right here, Jock, and I'm fine," the young man said, as he came to stand between captain and first mate so he could share her commlink and her viewscreen.

Berkey was the one who realized what was about to happen when Xanthe Nordstrom's image appeared on that screen, when her voice filled the control room with its delighted cry of: "Jason! Oh, Jason!" The Callon's first mate reached out and grabbed the slender young man who stood beside his chair, or Jason Valeria would undoubtedly have landed in heap on the deck.

He didn't pass out, but he'd never in his life come closer to that disgrace. His throat closed off; he wanted to answer his twin, and he couldn't.

Xanthe was dead. He'd finally accepted that, he'd finally come to the place where although he still missed her and still grieved for her he no longer found himself looking around for her constantly, no longer thought of her as living and no longer secretly hoped there might have been a mistake.

And now, there she was in front of him; her image only, it was true, but certain evidence that her living body was just kilometers away aboard the Valeria.

"Jason?" Her voice again, anxious and urgent. "Jason, what is it? Answer me!"

He leaned gratefully on Cameron Berkey's strong arm. His head stopped spinning, and he was able to control his voice although he knew it sounded hoarse and stricken. He said, "Xanthe. I thought - I was told you were dead. And I believed it."

"Oh, no!" his twin exclaimed, and the tenderness in her voice was just the balm he needed. "Jason, they knew better. Oh, who could be that cruel, to tell that kind of a lie?"

"The same kind of people who could murder a harmless old woman like Phillida," Alana Robie heard herself saying, and was surprised because she'd never had any use for Kyla's childhood nurse and had never concealed her dislike. "The same kind of people who could abandon two captives to live or die the best way they could, once they'd been paid for their ransom and once they realized they didn't have to go to the trouble of actually keeping their part of the bargain. Mr. Valeria, I'm more sorry than I can tell you to interrupt you and your sister right now; but we have incoming bogies, and I need you to get to a station and out of my way. If you please."

Jason shook himself, deliberately. He felt Berkey's arm withdraw, no longer needed; and he gave his twin sister a wide, joyful, loving smile. He said, "I'll see you in awhile, Xanthe. Oh, gods, you look

beautiful!"

"So do you, little brother," Xanthe answered him, and brushed a hand across her own cheek because she had tears to get rid of before she could take up her battle station again. She moved out of the pickup's visual range.

Jason moved toward one of Callon's weapons consoles, since that was the station he knew best and since Linn Gelsey (whose name Jason still didn't know, hadn't asked, at this moment didn't care) was motioning him to do so. Kyla was looking lost when her sister noticed her and said sharply, "Ms. Robie, please monitor communications. You can use the backup sensor station."

Which was busywork, particularly when performed by someone without training; but Kyla didn't know that, and her face brightened. At least she knew which station to occupy, Jason noted as she gave him a glance and as he gave her a wink to let her know he was all right and to let her know that she was going to be all right too.

"Two freighters, two transports, three smaller vessels that are most likely Guard patrol ships but aren't displaying Guard signatures," Berkey announced, as the atmosphere in the Callon's control room became very businesslike and as the link to Valeria became passive (although of course it would be held open throughout whatever action might be coming). "That's no battle group, Captain."

"It certainly isn't," Alana agreed, her brow puckering as she considered what she was also seeing on sensors. "And those transports are fully loaded with people. Not people in cold sleep, either; conscious, living, breathing people. Which means they can't possibly be legitimately contracted prison transports - so what the bloody hell are they instead?"

She didn't have to wait for an answer. The comm sounded a hailing tone, and an unfamiliar voice filled the control rooms of both Callon and Valeria. "Unknown vessels," it said in gravelly but nevertheless feminine tones. "Please identify yourselves. You are in our claimed space, and will be presumed to be hostile unless you prove yourselves to be otherwise."

"This is Captain Alana Robie of freighter Callon," Alana responded. "In company with freighter Valeria, under Captain Jock Valeria. We're here only to retrieve family members who were kidnapped and stranded on this world. We've just accomplished that, and all we want now is to be on our way."

"In which case you'll tell the Guard that you've been to Old Earth, and that you've survived the experience?" The unknown woman's tone was dry. "Can we afford to let you do that, Captain Robie?"

"Whether you let us do that or not won't make a difference," Alana answered, straightening her shoulders even though the transmission wasn't on visual just now. "The Guard already knows the buoys have degraded; the Guard already knows the biohazard has decayed, and that people can survive on Earth again. So if you want to fight us, I'm sure you will; but you won't be gaining a single thing by doing so."

And we're capable of fighting, madam. Don't doubt that we can damage you if we have to, although all we want to do is pass by you safely on our way home."

"But isn't Earth supposed to be 'home,' Captain?" This time the woman laughed audibly, although without much humor. "Home to all humans? Even to us."

"Please explain," Alana said. Suddenly she felt that battle wasn't inevitable, after all; that something new was happening here, and that if she let this strange person talk to her maybe there would be no fighting and killing at all today.

No more than had already happened down on Earth's surface, that was.

"The Guard," the woman's voice said bitterly. "The damned Guard! Two and half centuries ago my ancestors tried to come out from Earth's system to find a refuge with their brothers and sisters who'd been safe in the colonies when the final war broke out. And what did our brother and sister officers do? They killed us. They tracked us down like animals, until hiding from them became the whole goal of life for an entire generation."

"Then you are...?" Alana inquired, prompting gently when the pause became too long for comfort.

"What you probably call 'pirates.' What an ugly name! We call ourselves 'exiles.' And today we're coming home, a little earlier than we'd intended because the admiral of Guardbase Delta found the place most of our people called 'home' for more than two hundred years and he had it destroyed. What you see here, on these transport ships, is what's left of our population." The transmission's visual kicked in at that point. Alana Robie could see a woman of mature and dignified middle age - a matriarch, a stateswoman of sorts - silver-haired, straight-shouldered, regal. "Captain Robie, what you've known and called 'pirates' have been the fringe elements of our population mixed with the fringe elements of yours. We, the Exiles, have spent the last two centuries making homes and trying to survive just like every other group of humans cut off from Earth by that last war. The difference has been that every other group - whether traders, or colonists, or Guardsmen - has been able to do what they did openly, while we've had to hide for fear of being hunted down and exterminated at last. As no doubt the admiral of Guardbase Delta believes he's finally succeeded in doing, when he sent his fleet and the Gamma fleet as well to blast our system to rubble."

"What system was that, Madame?" Alana still had no name, no rank, no title by which to address this woman; but she plainly merited respect, and Commander Robie gave it instinctively.

"You don't need to know its name, Captain. Suffice it to say that we hid our homes by making them within an asteroid field, hollowing out the rocks and creating what amounted to enormous space stations that looked - and scanned, thanks to our particular brand of shielding! - just like the natural objects they'd been before we started work on them. We lived by raiding, as you well know. And sometimes by trading, carefully and under false papers, depending on what we needed and how we could best get it. Our leaders

were never happy with those arrangements, but since we couldn't grow all the foodstuffs we needed within our artificial environments - and since we certainly couldn't manufacture all the goods we needed there - we had no choice. For us, to raid was to survive. But I'm sure you're not believing this, even while I'm telling it to you, because you've had the bad luck to be exposed to our very worst elements or you wouldn't be here now." The woman paused, and looked straight into Alana Robie's eyes in her image on the viewscreen.

"Jock, are you getting all this?" Alana asked softly, splitting the screen so she could see her fellow captain aboard Valeria. She had had to shut him out once, in the heat of battle; but she didn't have to do that to him now, and she wasn't about to if it wasn't necessary. Besides, she had a feeling that she was going to need his full and undivided support in the hours just ahead. And she wasn't going to get that from a civilian captain by running over him roughshod. She would have to ask for it, and she would have to deserve it. By his standards, not by her own.

"I'm getting all of it, Alana," Jock acknowledged, his face so guarded that for once she had no idea in the universe of what he might be thinking.

"Madame, you're right that we were brought here by some personally terrible events," Alana resumed as she reset the screen so that the older woman's visage filled it again. "And fortunately for all of us, the people responsible - some of them yours, some of them ours! - are dead now. So I've got no quarrel with you if you want to bring your surviving citizens 'home' to resettle Earth. And I hope you'll have no quarrel with me, that you'll let me pass by you safely and go back to the colonies."

"And if I do that, what will happen? You say that the admiral at Guardbase Alpha already knows about this, that Earth can be reoccupied in safety. If so, why hasn't he communicated that to the other admirals at the other Guardbases?" The matriarch tilted her silver head inquiringly.

"I can answer that if the Captain will allow me to," Linn Gelsey spoke up from his station, adding himself into the transmission. "I'm Admiral Gelsey's son, Madame."

"Let me see his face!" the matriarch commanded, plainly addressed her imperious words to Alana Robie. When Callon's captain complied, the matriarch smiled. "Ah. I know Gelsey's face, and I'm seeing it as it was years ago when I look at you. Go ahead, son. I'm listening."

"My father hasn't communicated what he knows about Earth to the other admirals because he has no proof," Linn said frankly. "I was sent here on an undercover mission, to find out as much as I could about the actual situation and then to report back to him. As things were when I left Guardbase Alpha, my father had no more power to override the law and allow traffic between Earth and the colonies than - than I did. It just wasn't possible for him to do that, and if he'd spoken about it to the other admirals they'd have thought he'd lost his mind."

Alana drew a breath. She had taken a gamble when she allowed Linn Gelsey to speak without

knowing what he would say, and just now she wasn't at all certain she'd made the right choice. His honesty had been complete, and that meant that the incoming vessels' commander now knew just how vulnerable Callon and Valeria really were. If they vanished - just didn't return to Guardbase Alpha - no one was going to come after them. All these so-called "Exiles" needed to do was open fire, blast the two freighters out of Earth's skies. It wouldn't be a cost-free choice for them, of course, because Alana had meant it when she'd promised them a fight and she was more than capable of delivering on that promise; but she already knew the likely outcome.

But maybe not. She'd fought against longer odds than these, and she was still alive to fight again today.

The matriarch conferred with someone off-screen. Then she turned back toward the pickup and she said, "I haven't always lived in the seclusion of our own system. Like many of our people, and virtually all of our leaders, I've been part of your 'larger society' for certain periods within my lifetime; and during one of those periods I served with the man who is now Admiral Gelsey. Son, you're mistaken about your father. He will send someone after you if you don't come home. If necessary, he'll come after you himself. And the same thing is true of your mother, Anna Sullivan."

Ye gods, Alana found herself thinking. These people, these "pirates" or "exiles" or whatever we choose to call them, have been slipping in and out of our organizations almost at will? Even serving in the Guard at times? That either means that we are incredibly stupid and that our security measures are impossibly bad, or that these people have never really meant us any harm. That two hundred years' worth of enmity, of death and pursuit and destruction, has been for nothing.

And in any case, she realized, when the admirals of Guardbases Gamma and Delta attacked these people's homes they must have killed thousands of innocents. Babies, children, old people. And now this woman, who is responsible for protecting what's left of their population, is actually considering trusting us?

Just who are the savages and the criminals here, anyway?

Alana spoke into the pickup, said crisply, "Madame, will you let us pass? Because you're right, I know Admiral Gelsey and Flag Captain Sullivan just as you do; and they won't abandon their son. Nor will they leave a situation like this one to fester without investigating it fully, no matter what the investigation may cost them. They know better, and that's the truth."

The older woman's sigh was audible. She said, "You may pass, Captain Robie, Captain Valeria. And may the Higher Powers go with you."

Fire arched out from Valeria's laser banks. The convoy was within range now; that had happened while they'd been talking, with the various pairs of eyes on sensors tracking as the ships moved closer and closer to each other but without anyone's remarking on it because it didn't seem necessary to do so. But

from the woman on the Exiles' ship there came a startled cry of betrayal, and from Jock Valeria there came a roar of outrage. "No!" he bellowed. "Dammit, belay that! I didn't give an order to fire!"

It made no difference, of course. Returned fire came from all of the Exiles' ships, seven banks of weapons targeting two freighters; and what Alana Robie saw happening to her vessel's shields terrified her.

She said sharply, "Hold your fire! Evasive maneuvers only, all power - including weapons power - to reinforce shields!" And she dove Callon toward Earth's moon, counting on her own clear memory to tell her where she must not go in order to avoid a blast from the automatic weapons array hidden on its ancient surface installations, placing its solid mass between her ship and the Exiles' next volley.

If they didn't return fire now, if Jock could gain control of the situation aboard his ship - because Alana knew without any trace of doubt just who had fired that unauthorized blast - then they might have a chance. Maybe, just maybe, the matriarch who'd been so willing to let them go in peace would realize what had happened and would accept the gift of a certain nitwit's life (because Alana had no doubt that Sela Valeria had been unable to resist another opportunity to play the trigger-happy hero) as payment for whatever damage her ship had suffered from that blast. It was the best chance they had, anyway, and Alana was taking it.

The only flaw in her reasoning was that as long as she had the moon's mass between her ship and the matriarch's, she was cut off from commlink as well as shielded from weapons fire. And it wasn't going to take long for the older woman to send one of those former Guard patrol ships after her.

"Alana, incoming ships!" Cameron Berkey exclaimed, for once too excited to remember to address his foster daughter as "captain." "And one of them is Andromeda!"

"My god," Alana whispered reverently. She saw them now, just as Berkey did, on her sensors. Andromeda, Admiral Gelsey's flagship, leading the Guardbase Alpha starfleet. They must have left the minimal defense force only back at the base, because she saw destroyers - patrol ships - everything, a fleet twenty vessels strong.

The flagship was too far out for the moon's mass to intervene and block communications. A familiar voice reached Alana's ears just as easily as it must have reached those of the Exiles' leader. "Marina Castellano, if that's really your name," said Admiral Mace Gelsey, obviously addressing the person that Alana had been thinking of as "the matriarch" because she'd been given no other identifier to use. "This is Admiral Gelsey aboard Andromeda. You know me, you've known me since I was a green cadet. If you stand down now, without doing any further harm to civilians, you and your people will be allowed to settle on Earth as you've been planning to do. But if you fire on any of my ships, or if you fire again at those civilians, I'll engage you and there'll be no mercy. What are you going to do, Marina? I'm giving you one minute to decide."

Good gods. He'd known the woman since he was eighteen years old. Alana found herself wondering, with quiet terror, just who else in Guard or civilian society as she'd known it might be one of those people, and she unaware of the truth?

"I don't need one second, Mace," came the matriarch's confident voice. Confident, and vastly relieved, Alana realized as she listened. "I know you, and I trust you. I wish you'd arrived ten minutes ago, though! I - didn't want what just happened."

Without even thinking about it, Alana had been edging her ship away from the moon's protection so she could see what was happening and so she could hear Castellano's transmissions as well as Admiral Gelsey's. Now she saw the last thing in the universe she'd wanted to see, although of course she had on some level been prepared for the possibility; and she heard herself gasp in horror.

Where Valeria had been, there was wreckage. The ancient freighter was gone, and with it - Jock. Xanthe. Sela, too, but who gave a damn about her?

From the control room's respective port and starboard weapons consoles, Alana heard two young men echo the sound she herself had just made. And then she heard Jason Valeria say softly, "No!"; and she heard Linn Gelsey say just as softly, "God!"

A big brother; a twin sister and young wife. Two lives out of the dozen that Valeria had actually been sheltering when the Exiles' fire had blown it apart. But Alana could not think about that right now, so she didn't. She said into her pickup, "Admiral Gelsey. This is Commander Robie aboard Callon, reporting."

"Then the ship that was destroyed...?" came Mace Gelsey's inquiring voice. His tone was so tightly controlled that Alana wished she could reach across the intervening kilometers of vacuum and put her hand on his shoulder, could somehow comfort him for all the pain that he wasn't allowing her (or any other listener) to hear.

"Was Valeria," she answered him just as levelly. "And by whatever grace there is in the universe, your son happens to be here with me aboard Callon. Ensign Gelsey, please speak to your father."

No one had ever asked Linn Gelsey to do a more difficult thing, and Alana knew it; but the young Guardsman wet his dry lips and forced words through them. He said, "I'm here, Father. And I'm all right. But my wife!"

"Later," Admiral Gelsey's voice responded, and this time the tight control was gone. All his relief, and all his sadness at what he'd just been told as well, came through clearly and unashamedly. "So Xanthe was aboard Valeria, was she?"

There was nothing to do about it now. But Jason Valeria had put his head down on his folded arms,

his console and his tasks forgotten, and he was sobbing.

Good gods, Alana thought. One minute he's told his twin is living, after he's already grieved and accepted her death; and now he has to lose her all over again. This time almost before his eyes, and this time with absolute certainty that what's happened is real and genuine and irreversible.

Kyla left her station, after a glance at her sister for permission to do so, and stood at Jason's side and put her arms around him. Without hesitating, he turned and buried his head against her shoulder.

Linn Gelsey sat as if someone had hit him with a paralysis beam, without tears and without words and without hope. He must have been hearing his brother-in-law's sobs, but they had no visible effect on him.

Alana had seen things as cruel as this happen before, to people under her command - to people whom she'd fought to protect - to her peers, her comrades; but never had she been quite as closely connected to those who'd suffered such a tragedy as this one. She pulled her command mantle close around her now, and she spoke firmly into the commlink. "This is Callon, requesting permission to dock with you, Andromeda," she said.

Flag Captain Anna Sullivan's voice answered her. "Permission is granted. Welcome home, Number One! And welcome home to you, too, Ensign Gelsey."

Linn Gelsey's eyes sought Alana Robie's, and she saw that his armor was also back in place. She nodded to him, silently and approvingly.

He'd had a terrible loss, but he would survive it. And at least, Alana thought as she maneuvered Callon toward the flagship's massive bulk, he had had the courage to grasp those few days of happiness that as it turned out were all he could ever have with his love. What a wise pair they'd turned out to be, with the apparent folly of their early marriage (and yes, they could have loved each other without making that commitment; but Alana suspected that giving and receiving those lifelong promises had of itself been a joy to them).

It isn't loss that destroys us, Alana thought as she keyed in the docking codes and followed the flagship's resulting instructions. It's regret. It's grieving for what we've failed to claim, for opportunities we've bungled; and that kind of grief, at least, Linn Gelsey will never have to taste.

She had tasted plenty of that kind of grief, and she knew that part of her was gone forever as a result. But still she was here, still she was whole after a fashion because other parts of her had taken over for what had died, and she had Kyla safe in her control room and she had Dom waiting for her aboard Andromeda.

In other words, since she also had the echo of her captain's "Welcome back!" fresh in her ears, she

had everything that really mattered. She gave Cameron Berkey a smile in response to his questioning touch, his hand on her arm asking whether she was going to be all right; and he smiled back at her, relieved and happy.

Everyone has scars, Alana thought. And that's okay. Some scars, like the ones my father insisted on wearing all those years when he could have had them repaired, are marks of evil; but most scars are just badges of survival.

And that's the only kind of scar that I'll allow myself to keep.

Callon's hatch clamped together with one of the flagship's docking ports. Alana cut power to the thrusters, then stood up and stretched. She hadn't been in that chair for more than an hour's time since the shuttle had returned her to Callon from Earth's surface, but she felt as stiff as if she'd been there for days.

Jason Valeria was still sobbing. To which he was entitled. She left him in her little sister's capable hands (when had she ever imagined using that adjective to describe Kyla?), and she gave the ship to Berkey for what she'd already decided would be the last time. Then she headed for the hatch, and moved with one sure step from her childhood's last painful echo back into her own secure and chosen future.

CHAPTER 14

It was very, very strange to see Marina Castellano sitting in Flag Captain Sullivan's office. But that was what Alana Robie was seeing, and there was also a certain rightness about it even though she almost hated to acknowledge that rightness.

"Marina and I shared patrol ship duty together many years ago," Admiral Gelsey was saying, as he filled a glass and handed it to the Exiles' leader. "Never mind how many years ago we're talking about! Of course I had no idea then who she was. But I've since learned that it's become a very common thing, for people from the hidden system to come out and take military training under false papers. Marina is right when she's told you that the 'pirates' as we've known and fought them have nearly always been - how did you put that, Marina? - oh, yes: the dregs of both societies. The people who couldn't fit into either as contributing members, who just had to get their living by killing and stealing and who seemed to get their pleasure the same way."

"But all of my people took the blame for the actions of those few," Castellano said quietly, as she accepted the glass and sampled its contents. "Ah! It's been years since I've tasted a wine like this one. Some things we never did get inside our 'hidden system,' as you call it, Mace."

"Admiral," Alana Robie began, with more hesitation than she was accustomed to using even with her superiors. "I still don't understand. How is it that when we left the Base you couldn't even admit that you knew the possibility of going back to Old Earth existed; and now you can bring your whole fleet here openly? What changed in that short a time?"

"Everything, Commander." Gelsey spoke formally, but his brown eyes were as kind as ever. "I learned that my counterparts at Guardbases Delta and Gamma had located the Exiles' hidden system, and that they'd moved to attack it without even asking the opinions of the admirals of Alpha and Beta Guardbases. Beta, as it turns out, tends to agree with me - and I was appalled at what Delta and Gamma had done. How many of your people died, Marina?"

Castellano took another sip of wine. She answered, "Five thousand, four hundred and fifty-seven," without any effort to hide the bitterness in her voice. "More of them were children and elders than were not. Our active adults tended not to be in their homes, not for extended periods; so those who were present at the time of the attack were those least able to defend themselves."

"It always happens that way when the military decides it's somehow justified in attacking civilians," Flag Captain Sullivan observed, as she came back into her office after a rather lengthy absence. "Mace, I let him go back on duty. I didn't like it, but the medics certified him and if I'd overruled them I'd have looked like a mother instead of a commanding officer."

"You did right, Anna." Gelsey put out a hand to his wife in that familiar gesture; apparently Marina Castellano's presence was no deterrent to him. Sullivan moved to his side and took his offered hand and held to it tightly. "He'll have a very rough time, and it won't be brief; but he'll make it. And perhaps being on duty is the best thing, as long as he isn't making critical decisions just now."

Alana cleared her throat. She said, "Forgive me, Admiral - Captain - but I think your son would be able to do anything he had to do, even now, if duty asked it of him. I've just had a chance to judge him under the worst possible conditions, and I don't think I've ever seen a young officer perform better."

"Thank you, Commander. Your opinion is worth having," Sullivan said formally, but she met her exec's eyes and her calm gaze spoke silently of gratitude. Suddenly Alana was very glad she'd established more than a strictly professional relationship with this woman. Apparently being able to give comfort was something that flowed from having once been able to accept it - a concept that she might have considered at best foreign, at worst evidence of sentimentality and weakness, not long ago.

Admiral Gelsey was speaking again. "Commander, what will your sister be doing now?" he wanted to know. "She's passed her eighteenth birthday; is she going to begin cadet service?"

"Yes," Alana answered, and smiled. "Our father would be horrified, I'm afraid - he never intended her for that, or prepared her for it! - but she's been through a lot during the past few weeks, and she's proved to me that she has what it takes to be a good officer. So she wants to sign on, and I won't discourage her. Not that I have any real say, of course, since she's of age!"

"And what about the Valeria boy?" Anna Sullivan asked gently. "He's been through even worse hell than my son has, when I think about it. Losing his whole family, including his own twin! What will he do now?"

"It's worse than you know, Captain," Alana said, her eyes somber. "Apparently when Xanthe escaped from them, his kidnappers handled her absence by telling Jason she'd been killed. He believed them. Then he saw her just once more, by commlink only - damned near fainted when he realized she was alive - and less than an hour after that, she really was dead. I'm sure he's distressed by losing his father and his older brother, but the way he lost his twin is just monstrous."

"Is someone with him?" Sullivan wanted to know, characteristically. Ever the good mother, Alana thought - with appreciation now, where once she would have thought those words with scorn.

"My sister's with him," Alana said. "And no, I don't think there's anything there but a friendship; they really are just kids, and they've done awfully well to team up together and keep each other alive the way they did. I know what he'll be doing, though, because I asked Kyla before I left them together and she told me. He's been planning on cadet service ever since he can remember. I suppose he'd thought it would prepare him to go home someday and either succeed his brother on the Valeria, or take command of one of the House's other ships...." Her voice trailed off as she mentally followed that thought.

"He can still do that if he wants to, then," Mace Gelsey observed. "The ship called Valeria is gone, but the House is still in existence and young Jason seems to be its heir-apparent. But I doubt that's even occurred to him as yet. I wonder at what point reminding him of that would help pull him out of his grief? Not yet, I think. Right now it would probably feel like an intolerable burden, not like a reason to go on living."

"Probably," Alana agreed. "But I still think someone has to remind him of it soon, because if he doesn't express his intention to claim his rights you can be sure one of his cousins will be glad to claim them for him."

"He may not even make that choice," Captain Sullivan reminded them, as she released her husband's hand so she could move behind her desk and touch her commlink. "Sullivan to St. Pierre," she said. "Status, Commander?"

Alana started at the sound of her lover's familiar voice. She hadn't heard it since the day she'd left Andromeda to begin her leave of absence - a leave that was now officially over. She had yet to go to her quarters and get back into uniform, but that was only a formality.

"St. Pierre here, Captain," Dom's voice said calmly. "The transport ships are in parking orbits, and their escorts have disabled their own weapons as you ordered they should do. We're assisting in scans of the planet to find the best possible location for these people to establish their settlement. Is there any other information that you wanted?"

"I think that will do for now, Commander. Sullivan out." The flag captain cut off her commlink and addressed her exec again, as if the intervening conversation with her second officer hadn't taken place. She said, "Young Valeria may find that the last thing he wants to do is go back to a trader's life, especially if it means he has to take one of his cousins' ships by putting whoever's commanding it three years from now out of a berth. From what I've been hearing, Alana, I think he'd make a fine Guard officer. Would you say so?"

"I can't judge him as easily as I can judge my own sister, Captain - but from what I've seen and from what I've heard of him from her, I'd have to say yes," Alana agreed. "He's smart, he thinks on his feet, and he certainly has courage."

"Well, those are the requirements, aren't they?" Sullivan refilled Castellano's wine glass, and then prepared glasses for herself, for her husband, and for her exec. "I've never been much of a traditionalist, but today I think I may actually have to propose a toast. 'To coming home!'" And she raised her glass, in an ancient and familiar gesture.

"To Earth!" Admiral Gelsey countered, his eyes meeting his wife's eyes and beaming with such love that Alana Robie found herself looking elsewhere in embarrassment.

"To our exile's end!" Marina Castellano said.

They raised their glasses in response, and they drank. And a few minutes later Alana was out of the flag captain's office, and in the lift on her way down the flagship's decks toward Officers' Country.

Her quarters were as she'd left them. She could hardly shed her civilian clothing fast enough, although she did pause to caress one last time the once-coveted trader captain's gold braid on her collar. She had time before the shift-change would bring Dom down from the bridge; so she took a long, comforting shower, as if the steaming water could wash away considerably more than the sweat of battle and the tension of loss. Her own, and the losses of those with whom she'd shared the weeks just passed.

Her hair was loose and damp; she would have to rebraid it and put it up in its usual arrangement around her head. "Like a crown," Dom was fond of telling her. "Like a beautiful dark golden crown."

She slipped into uniform, feeling as if she donned another skin rather than a simple costume of utilitarian fabric. She touched the three hard-earned pips at her collar, and she smiled into her mirror. She took her time with the braiding of her hair; it was a task so familiar that she could have performed it in

pitch darkness and at warp speed, but she'd always enjoyed it and therefore preferred not to rush. It reminded her powerfully of being a little girl again, a very little girl who sat on Treena Callon's lap and listened to a lullaby while her long blonde hair was brushed and braided and arranged to a loving young mother's satisfaction.

Would she ever do that with a little girl of her own? If so, the child's hair would definitely not be blonde. Not with Dom for a father.

The door to her cabin chimed. She said, "Come!"

And there he was, just off duty (the duty shift she would have been pulling if she'd returned just eight hours earlier), his dark face split by a wide white-toothed grin and his dark eyes shining and his big arms open in welcome. "Alana," he said, just standing there inside her door (just far enough inside so it could automatically slide shut behind him) and waiting for her to come to him.

She didn't walk into his arms, she flew. And was caught, and held fast, and cradled close.

"Oh, Alana, you've been gone a hundred years!" Dom's voice said into her ear. "Tell me everything that happened. I don't know any of it, Captain Sullivan said you were all right and that was all she could tell me. Are you all right, love? Really all right?"

"Of course I am, Dom!" She laughed, and she finally drew away from him far enough so she could look into his face. "The question is, are you? I'm afraid I've left you to do two jobs during one of the biggest crises the Guard has ever faced."

"Doesn't matter," he said positively. "It's over now, and you're back, and I can see that you really are all right or you wouldn't be fussing over me first thing. So come on, tell me about it. I know you lost your father - that story's been all over the ship for days - and - "

"And don't you dare tell me you're sorry," Alana said darkly, drawing her lover with her toward her berth. "I wonder just how that story got out, if it's been all over the ship for days?"

"I don't know," Dom admitted, and sat with her and gathered her into his arms again. "Okay, so you don't have to be sorry. Considering what you've told me about that man - and considering that I'm sure there's an awful lot you haven't told me, too! - I don't blame you. What are you going to do about his ship, Alana? Because seeing you in that uniform tells me that I don't have to be afraid you're going to make yourself give up your career and fill your father's chair. Until I came in just now and saw you wearing your rank again, I've got to tell you I was afraid of that. And I don't know what I would have done, if you'd left me."

"Well, I haven't left you and I'm not going to!" Alana said, and kissed him. "Uh, oh. If you keep doing that, you're never going to hear any of what you just asked me to tell you."

"All right, all right. I'll behave." Dom laughed, and tucked her against his chest and rested his chin on the top of her head. "We've got the rest of our lives to make love. Talk to me, Alana. Tell me what I need to hear."

"Well! First of all, Mr. Berkey's been managing much of Papa's business for years; and he's always been just as capable of commanding Callon as any born trader captain there ever was," Alana began, settling herself comfortably and nestling into her lover's warm arms. "I don't know what Kyla's going to wind up doing with her life, and at this point I'm sure she doesn't know either; but she's somehow or other managed to grow up during the past few weeks, and now that she's had her birthday she's going to start serving her cadet tour. Then she'll have all her options when she's twenty-one. She can take over the House and command of Callon if she decides she wants to do that; or she can leave that to hired help - even though I feel like a traitor to call Berkey 'hired help!' - and pursue a Guard officer's career. Or she can do something else completely, if she wants to. Anyway, what she won't be doing is what Papa intended for her to do. She won't be marrying someone he'd choose for her and living like some kind of caged bird the rest of her days."

"Good," Dom said, and kissed her crown of braided golden hair. "And what about that young man she's been tending ever since they came aboard? Is he part of her future, do you think?"

"How did you know about that?" Alana asked, then realized how he had known and laughed at herself. "Oh, what a stupid question! You've been acting first officer, of course you know who comes and who goes and everything they do while they're aboard. No, I don't think he's part of her future. They've been stuck with each other for quite a long while and they've made the best of it - I think they've been good for each other, even - but that's as far as it goes. I did ask my sister that question, about the last thing before I left her with him a little while ago, and she didn't leave me in any doubt that she wants her cadet tour to start with her standing on her own. And to her, that means without Jason Valeria to prop her up. Apparently he had to do quite a lot of that at first, and if so she's right to want to separate herself from him. For the time being, anyway; who knows what might happen if they meet again later when they've both completed cadet service and when they've both figured out just where they're headed?"

"Who knows, indeed," Dom said softly, and shifted his grip on Alana so that she lay back against one of his big arms. He looked down into her eyes, and suddenly talking about trade-houses and freighters and younger sisters was out of the question. Suddenly there were only two people alive in the universe, and both of them were right here in this cabin.

"Dom, do you still want to ask me the same question?" Alana whispered, her throat tightening as it occurred to her that it was possible he might have regretted it after she'd left without giving him an answer. "Because you don't have to, you know. If you want to just pick up where we left off, and see what happens from there, I won't blame you - I won't even remember that we talked about more, unless you still want me to...."

"Alana, I still want you to marry me." Her lover's dark eyes were filled with that old intensity, and

once again she had the feeling that she was about to fall into them. For one moment Alana remembered another man, another pair of dark eyes into which she'd felt herself falling...but Jock Valeria was dead, what had happened between them was private, and now she would not even mention him to Dom.

"I've waited all this time for an answer," her lover was telling her. "I'll wait even longer if I have to - if you haven't been able to think about it, considering all that's been happening to you while we've been apart - but I was really hoping you could answer me now. And you know what I want to hear."

"Yes," Alana whispered.

"Yes, you know what I want to hear? Or yes, you'll marry me?"

She laughed. And she said firmly, "'Yes' to both questions, of course! Oh, Dom, I love you. And when I'm with you, I feel loved. If that isn't reason enough for a marriage, then what is?"

"Being together for the rest of our lives, instead of just 'until the Interstellar Guard do us part,'" Dom answered her, still holding her face, still looking down at her just as intently. "Having children together, and grandchildren. Growing old together if we're that lucky. Those are reasons, too, Alana."

"Yes," she agreed, and smiled at him. "But I wouldn't want to do any of that with a man I didn't love. Remember me, Dom? That twenty-eight-year-old virgin you had to be so patient with? I still feel foolish about that, you know."

"And I'm still telling you that was the best surprise I've ever had in my life, even though what you did before we were together isn't my business and I had no right to expect it," Dom said, and kissed her. "Alana, don't feel foolish about being who you are. You're just too blasted honest to pretend anything you don't feel - on the personal front, anyway! - and that's one of your greatest strengths."

"It's probably also my greatest weakness," Alana said, but she was still smiling.

"Probably. But I want you just the way you are, and I hope you feel the same way about me. Now - " and he gently reached behind her collar, his fingers searching for the fastenings of her tunic - "you've gone to such a lot of trouble to get back into that uniform, and I can hardly wait to get you out of it again!"

"So let me help," she said, and she suited her actions to her words.

THE END

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