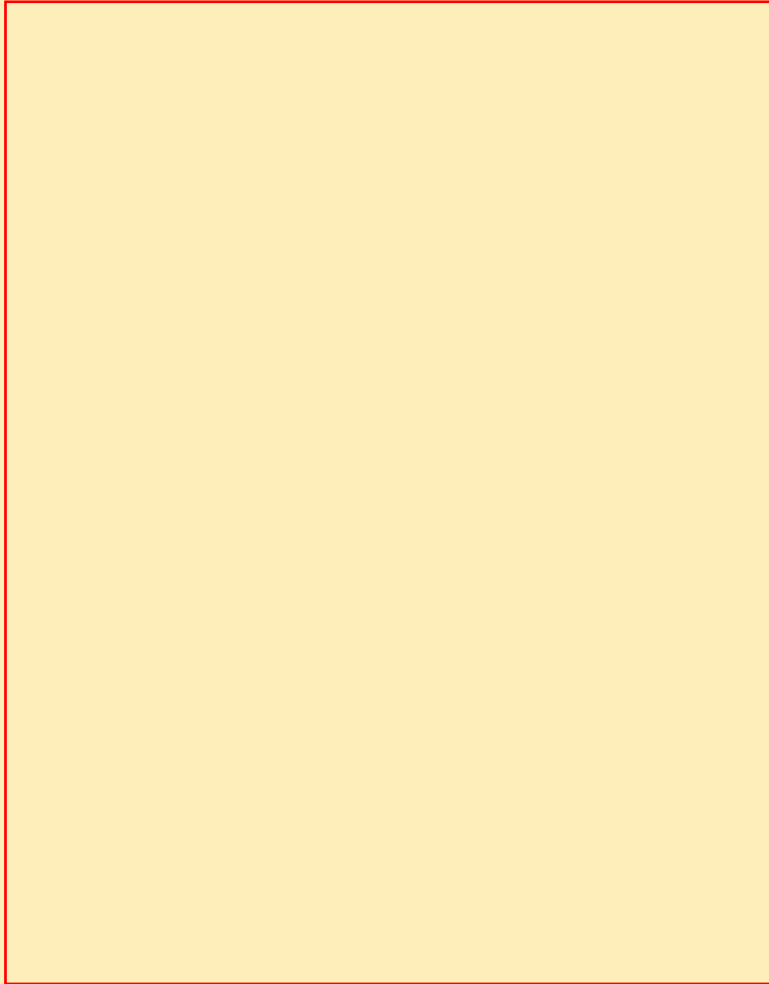


MATUSHKA



by Nina M. Osier

CHAPTER 1

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

She reached for Linc's mind, and felt nothing but rest and contentment. That was good. When the

two of them had finally come back here to live, in this comfortable little house on the home-world to whose citizenship Romanova had clung so stubbornly through more than forty years as a Star Service officer, he had been exhausted in every way that a sentient being could become weary. She had wondered for a time whether he would ever be himself again - but he was fine now, the same Linc she had met one day when they were both eighteen years old and had stood at a passenger liner's lounge viewport and had looked out in wonder at their first sight of Terra's blue-green globe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

she had gone and why....

And then, of course, his mind touched hers and he relaxed again. She felt morning desire rising in him, stronger in the Morthan male than in the human male; and she smiled as she finished her chocolate, and drew her robe tighter around her in a shiver that was partly from the morning's autumn chill and partly anticipation of what would happen to her when she returned to the bedroom and took that robe off and lay down to be held in her husband's arms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dan Archer moved his chair closer, and put both arms around the woman and held her close. He said in a voice that was as fierce as his manner was gentle, "God damn that bioengineering company that supplies the Service with gens, Matushka! I hope we do go to war against the Commonwealth, if the

Outworlds form up our own service I'll join it. The way the government we've got now treats people like Rachel isn't human. Oh, hell, I'm sorry, Linc - but you know what I mean, don't you?"

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

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

The four former officers had stopped talking during the brief meal, in accordance with a strict military custom that Romanova and Casey and Kane had all learned during their Academy days and that Archer had learned after he had signed onto a ship as an ordinary crew member. He had done that as a boy of sixteen, desperate to escape life in the mines of Sestus 4; and with a talent for handling both machines and computers that had made it possible for him to be field promoted into a junior officer's berth. That had happened to him long ago, when he was still less than twenty years old and when his talents had come to the notice of Catherine Romanova's firstborn son Ewan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Kalitha Marin's son by Gladstone Casey had proved to be unlike the usual product of such a union, in that he lacked most of the gifts that made a Morthan hybrid - well, Morthan. His eyes were golden like hers, and his reaching the time of life when females interested him as females and not merely as people had come after almost forty standard years instead of after fourteen or so as was the norm for

his father's species; but otherwise he had nothing Morthan about him, except for the bond that gave him access to his wife's thoughts and feelings and that gave her (full human though she was) access to his.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Romanova smiled then, and moved her chair close to Kane's other side. She said gently, "I didn't have my children because it made sense, Rachel. I had them because I wanted them, and it was my right to do that. It's your right, too. Don't tell me you're a gen and that means the lab that created you owns you, because it doesn't! I don't care what Terran law says, a sentient being should never be classed as someone else's property. Now," and her tone that a moment ago had been tender and maternal became brisk and authoritative. "Linc, call Johnnie at the Farmstead and find out who he's got out there with him right now. Dan, do whatever you need to do to cover your tracks from bringing Rachel here; I want to hear all about it, but not until we've done everything we can do to make her safe and keep her that way. And since she does have to have medical care - I think I feel terrible today. I think I'm going to give Cab Barrett a call, and see if she has time to come over here and give me a checkup."

She gave Rachel Kane's thin shoulder a swift pat, and she rose from the sofa. "Come on, now!

Move!" she said, and realized that for the first time in seven months she sounded like Fleet Admiral Romanova. And it felt good.

CHAPTER 2

In the privacy of the bedroom that was Dan Archer's one settled home in the universe, Catherine Romanova sat on the edge of the bed and talked with Rachel Kane through the open bathroom door. Narsai's sun was fully up now, and its golden light filled the house. They were at the edge of park land here, so taller structures didn't surround this little building and block it off from the sky and the sun and the stars.

Kane sounded more relaxed now, as if being alone with another woman meant that she could stop thinking about how she sounded or what appearance she gave. Which meant, Romanova thought as she prepared herself to listen to the younger officer's story, that the relationship between this woman and Dan Archer might not be one of solidly committed intimacy. They had been lovers, obviously; they were friends and had been comrades, clearly. But Katy herself had stopped putting up any kind of a front for the man who had been her husband long before she first needed to tell him that she was pregnant, and such niceties in Linc's presence had gone by the board while they were still cadets together.

But then, Rachel Kane was a gen. Romanova couldn't imagine what it had been like to be reared in an institution, to be part of an on-going experiment in resurrecting a forbidden technology instead of a child in the home of parents whose love had called her life into being.

"Are you sure it's safe for Captain Casey to be calling anyone and talking about my being here?" was how Kane began, nevertheless, as soon as the shower was off and conversation between bath and bedroom could be heard. "And what about the healer you called, will I be able to trust her not to contact the Terran Embassy and tell them where I am?"

"His name is Lincoln, not 'Captain,'" Romanova answered, and smiled to herself. "The man he's calling is my cousin, and Linc isn't going to mention anything about you over a communications link. Not that Johnnie would say a word to anyone about something I asked him to keep quiet, but it makes sense to be careful even though we don't sanction monitoring of private comms here on Narsai. Linc will just find out whether it's safe for us to send you to the Farmstead, if you need a place to live quietly for awhile. If Johnnie has guests, we'll have to think of something else. And as for Cab Barrett - doctors on Narsai don't turn their patients in! Again, we'll do things discreetly just for the sake of common sense; but she won't care who you are or what interest any civilian or military authorities may have in you. To her you'll be a pregnant woman in need of medical care, nothing more than that."

"It sounds like a dream to me," Kane said as she moved around in the small bathroom, putting on some of Romanova's own night wear since she had arrived with nothing of her own except that uniform which had never been intended to be a maternity garment. "At least I can't be identified as a gen on sight, I'm one of the first group that didn't have a visible marker put on my face soon after birth. Mine only shows up under a personnel scanner. Of course every public building on Terra has a scanner at its entrance, though...is that true on Narsai, Admiral Romanova?"

"Katy." Romanova sighed. "No, it isn't. Never has been, never will be! We've had our share of social and political difficulties here, we're a long way from being perfect; but that kind of intrusion on our citizens' privacy is something we just wouldn't dream of tolerating. A Terran-owned business tried doing

that at its Narsatian outlet a few years ago, and they were forced to either take the damned scanner out or close down."

The younger woman came out of the bathroom, clad now in a winter-weight bathrobe (although this autumn morning was rapidly warming toward a beautiful day) and looking comfortable at last. She sat in a chair, clearly joining Romanova on the edge of the bed didn't enter her mind. She said, "All right. You want to know how it happened, don't you, uh - Katy?"

Better, Romanova thought. She nodded, smiled gently and said, "Yes. Not that you have to tell me a single thing, Rachel; it's enough that Dan wants us to help you. He's like a son to both Linc and me. We love him that way, and if you matter to him that's all we need to know. But I am curious, and of course the more I do know about this the better able I'll be to help."

The woman who had been the Archangel's executive officer drew a long breath. She started talking, slowly and almost haltingly at first; then more rapidly and more naturally, until finally she almost forgot Catherine Romanova was there.

"Dan left the Archangel at Savgorod, when the order came down from Fleet Command throwing all the scramblers out of the Service," Kane said, staring down at hands that were clasped in her lap. "From what the standard calendar says, that was eighteen months ago. For me it was ten weeks ago. He didn't have a chance to say good-bye to me, or to anyone else for that matter. The order was waiting when we reached port, Captain Giandrea implemented it immediately just the way he was required to, and the next thing I knew someone was reporting to my office and telling me she was the ship's new chief engineer. Damned if Fleet Command hadn't even set us up with a replacement for Dan, they did that with all the scramblers who were department heads on starships or at frontier bases. At least they had sense enough to realize that if they didn't do that, they were going to have a lot of furious captains and base commanders on their hands. As it was we lost four more officers off Archangel in addition to Dan, and Giandrea was rushing around filling those berths before we had to sail again."

Romanova nodded, and said nothing because she sensed that to do so would break the quiet spell that Kane was weaving for herself to help her remember easily and speak freely. But the former fleet admiral remembered that order well, because it had been issued by her own office - after she had bitterly and passionately, but unsuccessfully, fought against it when her civilian superior had told her it must be done.

Retirement had first entered her thoughts on that day, and when she had come home to their apartment on the grounds of the Academy and had found its commanding officer - her husband, Captain Lincoln Casey - actually in tears after having had to disband the separate college-within-a-university at which newly promoted "scramblers" were given accelerated training before being confirmed in their field promotions to officer status - that had done it. In forty years, she had never seen Linc cry like that. It had taken some time for them to extricate themselves gracefully from their combined commitments and responsibilities, but from that moment on there had been no question they must do so. Especially when Linc, who like other Morthan hybrids had always been immune to human ailments, began suffering a series of relatively minor but debilitating illnesses - and crushing fatigue, a weariness that had not lifted until after they had arrived here.

The institution to which both had given their lives had betrayed them, and she could listen now to Rachel Kane's tale of a similar betrayal with understanding even though Kane's situation had been a far more personal one.

The young woman continued, "Of course I didn't know I was pregnant then. If I had...oh, I don't know what I would have done! Savgorod's not Terra, I wouldn't have been scanned for a gen every time I moved around there, but it's a small place and I'd have been recognizable just by sight. Anyhow, I didn't realize anything was wrong until we were back out in space. I'd noticed before Dan left that I felt funny. Almost like I did the other times the medics were getting me ready for an ova harvesting session...but that always happened while I was on Terra, before; and I was always told in advance, so I wouldn't have sex with anyone and risk in-body fertilization. It always was a pain, the preparation phase made me horny as hell and then I had to be celibate."

She said that casually - clearly procreation, and the powerful feelings that prompted it, had different connotations for her than they had for Romanova. Not that sex was anything dirty or shameful on Narsai, or on Kesra where Katy had spent most of her married life (her first married life, that was); but in both places it was a private and even rather sacred matter, and most women didn't talk about their desires to strangers in the earthy way that Kane was doing now.

"I sure wasn't celibate that time!" Kane said, and smiled to herself reminiscently. "The last week Dan was aboard, I couldn't get enough of him. We'd been lovers before that, he approached me for the first time months earlier; but until that week it was just a typical shipboard pairing. Junior officer makes the first move on senior officer, so there's no question of the more powerful person exploiting the less powerful one. Senior officer likes the idea, and they bed together whenever their shifts allow it. So you'd have thought the CMO would have known he needed to warn me to either knock it off or have Dan take a contraceptive, that's the kind of thing that everyone on board knows is happening! But it was just my luck to draw a doc who didn't pay any attention to ship's gossip, and I don't suppose I could have expected him to realize all the implications of treating me the way the medics at my creating lab did."

Probably that poor starship chief medical officer hadn't known what to make of being instructed to bring a female gen to fertility and then harvest her, Romanova thought with grim amusement. That would have put him between the proverbial rock and hard place ethically - which wasn't all that unusual a spot, of course, for health professionals whose loyalty to their patients as people must always be balanced against their greater loyalty to the Service to whom those patients belonged body and soul for as long as their oaths were on record. But Kane had been right when she had remarked, a little while ago, that female gens on starships were unheard of. So it was likely that the medic who had been treating her hadn't known how to regard her, as a human woman with all the normal reproductive rights and responsibilities that went with that status or as a sort of walking egg farm.

Who was simultaneously his ship's executive officer. If that medic had been a confused soul who had made an enormous mistake, Romanova found it hard to blame him for it.

Kane was speaking again. "We'd been underway for a few days when I realized I needed to see the doc about why I was feeling the way I was. I did that self-scan in my quarters first just on general principles; I'd noticed that something about taking care of me was making him uncomfortable, and I guess I was hoping I could self-treat if it was just some kind of cycle problem. And then I was sitting there on my berth, looking at three little somethings inside me. And I felt...I don't know what I felt. Not anything I ever expected to feel, anyway!"

Wonder was in Kane's voice, mixed with remembered disbelief. Catherine Romanova recalled a day long ago, when she was still Ensign Romanova and when she had scanned her abdomen in her quarters to diagnose the cause of a missed period - and what she heard in Rachel Kane's tone was familiar. But Romanova had been solidly partnered to George Fralick then, all she'd had to do was tell him and hours

later they had been logging themselves as a married couple. And if anything he had been more delighted than she was by that news of impending parenthood. In all their years together after that she couldn't recall seeing him look more proud than he had looked in the moment after she had said to him, "We're going to have a baby, George. A little boy, about eight months from now."

Ewan, who had been followed not quite a year later by twins Marcus and Bryce. And then, after a gap of twenty-two years - when Katy was in her middle forties, and had failed to conceive for so long that the possibility no longer entered her mind when she made love with George - Madeleine had come along. The daughter she had always wanted, but hadn't been allowed to raise after she gave birth to her.

Kane was speaking again. "I was in shock, that's the only excuse I've got for what I did next," she said. "My captain was my friend, and I put him in the worst position a sentient being can put a friend into. I told him something in confidence that he couldn't keep secret, something he was duty-bound to act on in a way that I knew damned well he wouldn't want to act."

"You told him you were pregnant," Romanova said softly. She had been silent until now, but Kane was looking in her direction; and it was clear that she was expected to say something.

"Uh-huh. Rotten of me, wasn't it? But my other choice was the damned doc, and since he had to be the reason I'd wound up that way...." Kane's mouth twisted. "Poor Paolo! He'd always treated me just the way he would have treated any other officer, my being a gen didn't matter to him at all. And it still didn't matter when I told him about my babies, he didn't even seem to understand that they were the lab's property - for that matter, I was too - and that I had no right to make any decisions about what to do next. He talked about contacting Dan and telling him he was going to be a father, he talked about scheduling me for a maternity post as soon as we hit our next base call. Good gods, the man gave me a hug and congratulated me!"

"Of course he did, you just said you were his friend as well as his exec; and if you had been pregnant and hadn't wanted to be, you wouldn't have been telling him that," Romanova observed, and although she felt bitter amusement at the younger woman's naiveté she didn't smile. It wasn't funny, not in that sense. "You'd have aborted, and unless for some reason you lost work time the ship's healer wouldn't have informed anyone - the captain included. So of course Captain Giandrea thought you wanted to be congratulated. Having a baby is a joyful thing, for most women."

"So I realized, after I saw how he reacted." Kane nodded. "Gods, I was stupid about that! He has three kids of his own and he worships them, of course that's what he thought. And there I was, looking for someone to help me get out of the worst mess I could imagine being caught in. But after awhile I made him understand that, and I managed to do it before he told anyone else."

"So what did he do to help you, that compromised his oath as an officer and his duty as your captain?" Romanova felt cold now. She wondered, suddenly, if Kane's chilled state on arriving here had been entirely physiological after all.

"He didn't pursue me when I stole a lifeboat," Kane answered. "We planned it together. I shouldn't be telling you this, because if you're ever questioned - "

"I won't be, child. You're on Narsai now, not Terra." The older woman cut the younger one off, crisply. "Continue, your story's safe with me. And you're safer for telling it to me in its entirety, instead of holding back something I may need to know in order to help you properly."

"He handled the weapons array himself, he shoved the tactical lieutenant out of his way when I came on scanners after I launched the boat," Kane said, and now there was a trace of genuine humor in her tone. "And I threw out a field of debris, and between us I hope we made it look to the autolog as if I'd been

destroyed. But he took another chance and he contacted Dan, as soon as he was able. Supposedly to tell Dan that I was dead. What he really did, of course, was tell Dan the whole story including the coordinates where Paolo had left me behind."

"How long were you out there in that lifeboat, by yourself?" Romanova felt sick now. She had all too good an idea of what it must have been like for this strange mixture of experienced starship officer and innocent girl, to be all alone between the stars in a frail little shell of a craft that could barely travel at warp speed.

"I didn't put myself into the stasis tube until I had to," Kane said, quite calmly. "That was after I realized that if I stayed awake I was going to run out of food sooner than I expected. My caloric requirements were way above what they normally would have been. I guess three babies will do that, even though it never entered my mind or Paolo's while we were planning the whole thing! And I also realized that if I was going to make it to the nearest settled world alive, I had to put all the ship's power into propulsion and not into keeping myself warm and breathing."

Going into stasis was a wrenching enough experience when you did it under medical supervision, usually with your comrades or even your family beside you; when you knew how long you were going to be out, who would be watching over you while you slept that sleep that was the next thing to death, and when and where you could expect to awaken. To do what Rachel Kane had done, out there all by herself - where had she found the courage, anyway?

Until now Catherine Romanova had felt a certain sense of superiority in this interaction, although she hated having to admit it to herself as she recognized its passing. She was a naturally conceived human, not a gengineered being; she had always belonged to herself, she had experienced life fully for sixty and more years and this younger female had been denied much of that. But would she have done for Ewan, or for the twins, or for little Maddy, what Rachel Kane had done for her babies? When Kane didn't even really know what having children meant - supposedly, at least?

Romanova shuddered. Then she said quietly and positively, "So Dan was able to find you before someone else did. Because of what Captain Giandrea had told him."

"Yes. That's how it happened."

Romanova closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them she asked, "Then Dan's partners know about you?"

The Star Service had paid out a decent severance bonus to each ejected scrambler; that much, at least, the Defense Ministry had done at Romanova's own urging. With that bonus many of the displaced officers had been able to start new lives. Dan Archer had combined his bonus with that of his comrades Johanna Braeden, Sean Tierney, Beth Croft, and Fiona Meredith. Together the five former service people, humans all as it happened, had purchased a surplus ship and set themselves up in business. In a sense it was a come-down, to go from proud Star Service officer to interplanetary trader; but it was better, as Dan said bluntly, than going back to Sestus 4 and grubbing in the mines there as his grandparents had done. His own parents had been traders, and if they hadn't vanished with their ship one day while he was still a child he probably would have been one, too. And clearly his partners had agreed with him; whatever lives they would have gone back to weren't anything that would be an improvement over the free life of the trade-ship.

But then, that was the nature of being a scrambler. They were people who had started with nothing, who had signed on as ordinaries during their youth and who had risen from there on merit alone. They hadn't started with a Catherine Romanova's land and money and genealogy behind them, nor with a

Lincoln Casey's highly educated (although always impoverished) parents.

They were exemplary officers in almost every case, and being obliged to send his favorite Academy College charges home to their old lives before they had had a chance to reap any of the benefits of their new ones had been what had broken Lincoln Casey's health. Or so Casey's wife still firmly believed, now that they were far from the storm center that was Fleet Command on Terra and now that her lover and best friend was himself again.

Was even a little bit bored, lately, although he hadn't yet realized that himself. Nor had she chosen to bring that fact to his attention, there were some things you kept in your own thoughts even in the most intimate of telepathic relationships.

"They only know he salvaged a Fleet lifeboat," Kane said. "He didn't retrieve me from it until just before he sold it back to the goddam Fleet. And Hansie was the only one who even knew there was a stasis tube aboard it, all the time the boat was under tow."

Romanova sighed, because that bit of news was a relief to her. Johanna Braeden was the only one of Dan's partners she knew personally, and the woman could be trusted. She and Dan went back to the days of Ewan Fralick together, Hansie would die slowly before she would do anything to hurt Dan or someone Dan loved.

Or at least cared about and felt responsible for. Did Dan love this gen, this woman who had been his bed partner and his superior officer during his final posting before the Service had thrown him out like so much garbage?

That didn't matter. Kane was here now, Dan had chosen to honor his obligation to her, and he had a perfect right to expect his foster parents to share that obligation with him.

"Ad - I mean, Katy." Rachel Kane was looking at Catherine Romanova with speculative eyes. "I'm curious. Dan calls you 'matushka.' What does that mean?"

Romanova shook herself, coming back from a brief reverie. She answered with a small grin, "It's a bad joke from my field duty days, back when Dan was a kid in his twenties and he was part of the fleet I commanded at Mistworld. I was carrying my daughter then; I was about to go on maternity leave, and I couldn't because we were diverted for that emergency. So I acted as commodore until that engagement was over, and then I hung around and handled the peace negotiations until the Diplomatic Corps could get their people all the way out there. By that time I was wearing civvies on the bridge, because I couldn't fit into even a maternity uniform.

"'Matushka' means 'little mother,' in Old Earth Russian. And while I've never been all that interested in Terran history, so I'm just repeating what I've heard and not anything that I've bothered to verify, I've been told that my surname Romanov belonged to the Russian Imperial family that was last on the throne when there was a monarchy on that part of Terra. I do know that the 'matushka' was what those people called their empress, probably to be sarcastic; but my troops were being at least a little bit sarcastic themselves when they called me that! Anyhow, I liked it and I didn't mind when it stuck. At least with people Dan's age and older, with those officers who've been around long enough to remember Mistworld."

She was about to add that when Ewan had started bringing Dan Archer home with him on every leave, she had grown annoyed at being addressed by her rank in the privacy of her residence. She had asked the young man to call her something, anything, that was comfortable for him that wasn't "commodore" or "captain" or "group leader." She'd somehow been sure he would not be able to handle "Katy," not when he still had to make the transition back to formality when all of them returned to duty.

But Dan hadn't come up with anything at that time, not until they were in the thick of battle at Mistworld - not until after Ewan was dead, and with him Marcus and Bryce.

It was then that Dan had started calling her "Matushka," and his comrades had been delighted with the nickname's appropriateness. But no sooner did she start trying to explain all that to Rachel Kane than she realized this wasn't the right time, that the younger woman didn't need to hear it now and probably wouldn't understand half of it if she did; and the front door's gentle buzzing intervened anyway.

That would be Cab Barrett arriving, and Linc would let her in. Good, confirming Kane's state of health and that of her unborn children definitely needed to be the next order of business.

CHAPTER 3

Whether to stay in the bedroom like a hovering mother once she had introduced her personal physician to Rachel Kane, or to leave doctor and patient discreetly alone, was a question Romanova didn't have to answer. She knew before Casey rapped at the door that he was coming to get her, and why. But she pretended, from long habit when others were present who might not understand the nature of the bond between them, that his summons was news to her when he said, "Katy, I've got two calls for you. If they can spare you in there...."

"They can," Romanova decided, as soon as both Kane and Barrett gave her nods. The young Star Service officer (or former officer that would be, now) looked apprehensive, which was understandable; after all, it was unnerving enough to be pregnant for the first time even when a woman had expected and wanted that all her life. Under Kane's circumstances it must be - Romanova honestly could not imagine how it must be, and admitted that to herself. And of course Barrett wanted the third person out of the way, physicians usually preferred that even when the third person had a clear right to be there. Which Romanova did not.

One of the calls she wanted, it was her cousin Johnnie out on the Romanov Farmstead. The other was from someone she didn't particularly care to hear from at the best of times, and that he had picked now to bother her was typical even though of course he couldn't know how annoying his timing was.

Her ex-husband, blast and damn the man she once had loved so passionately and so tenderly.

She said, "Linc, make George wait. He hates talking to you, but that's what he's going to do if he wants to stay on comm instead of hold until I'm ready for him. I won't make Johnnie wait, not for that bastard!"

"Understood," Casey answered, in a deliberate echo of his manner from the days when he had been her executive officer and George Fralick had been her husband; and none of the three of them had been able to imagine that those familiar relationships could be anything but permanent. But he grinned as he moved toward one of their home's two communications screens while his wife moved toward the other. Plainly his usual compassion didn't extend to feeling sorry for the man who long ago had hurt Katy so brutally, and then had left Linc to pick her up and put her back together.

Romanova watched as her cousin's familiar image formed in the holoscreen, and she smiled at him. "Hello, Johnnie," she said, in a gentle tone that she didn't realize she never used with anyone else.

Not far away her husband realized it, but didn't mind a bit. Katy's early love for her cousin had become something else entirely during the first few years Casey had known her, and he understood just how it was between them now.

"Hi, Katy-love," Ivan Romanov said in a similar tone, within his own wife's hearing and without the least self-consciousness about using that endearment. "What's going on with you? Linc made it sound urgent."

"It could be," Katy answered. "But it's not going to be too difficult for you, not unless Reen has an objection to company right now."

"I think she'd be happy to have company," her cousin observed. "Tena and her husband finished their visit with us yesterday, and Farren's gone back to university. That leaves Reen stuck here with just me. Are you coming out, Katy? I hope?"

"I wish." Romanova's sigh was honestly rueful. She had grown up in the capital city/university town where she lived now, but she had spent long stretches of both her childhood and her adolescence at the farmstead that was both the source of the Romanov family's wealth and her cousin's first love. His love even ahead of Katy, something she had understood and had accepted when she was a romantic adolescent girl and Johnnie was both her lover and her intended husband.

She loved the farmstead, too. It wasn't Johnnie's fault that she hadn't been able to reconcile herself to living there with him all their days, that she had been a curious young woman and had insisted on going to Terra for her education. Her parents had been more indulgent than most guardians of Narsatian land heirs. Probably because they were both professors and themselves had enjoyed the advantages of off-world university experiences, they had agreed to let Katy put off formalizing her union with Ivan Romanov - he the primary heir to the farmstead, she the secondary heir, in their common generation in spite of the considerable gap between their ages. And with that permission in hand Katy had acted with the combination of cunning and decisiveness that would one day make her first a starship captain, then a battle group leader, and finally the commanding officer of the Star Service itself.

She had made her application to the Star Service Academy in secret, at the same time she had made an open application to the Sorbonne. That hadn't been a problem at all, because the Academy was supported by public funds. She didn't have to come up with fees; and since any Commonwealth citizen eighteen years old or of equivalent maturity could apply for admission there without a guardian's consent, she hadn't had to deceive anyone except her parents to complete the process. The only tricky part had been taking the personal interview while the admissions team was on Narsai without anyone Katy knew finding out she had met with them, and she had actually enjoyed arranging that small intrigue.

Once she arrived on Terra, of course, the rest had been easy. After she took the oath, no one could interfere between her and the organization she had joined.

Her parents hadn't spoken to her for years after that, not until she had unfairly put one twin into her mother's arms while George had put the second twin into her father's arms - while small Ewan had clung to her trouser-leg, and regarded his grandparents with curious dark eyes. Although her defection from her duty hadn't impoverished anyone in her birth family because the farmstead's income was handled with great fairness, she had caused them terrible embarrassment. Even after they had allowed her back into their lives when she enticed them with the chance to know their grandsons, the old easy affection between Katy and her parents had never quite been restored.

But Johnnie had forgiven her, promptly if not easily. In his way Johnnie really had loved her, and still did.

After a time during which he had frankly hoped she might wash out of the Academy and be sent home, he had married the cousin who was third heir: Lorena, who was still his wife today. They had produced the one child that Narsatian couples were encouraged to have, and now their grandchild was old

enough for university.

And far from disliking Katy because she had been first in Johnnie's bed and in his heart, Reen still told their cousin from time to time how glad she was that Katy had refused the role that Reen had stepped into with such happiness.

Ivan Romanov was past seventy now, but in excellent health and in superb physical condition. Even today a farmer worked hard, that was still the nature of that life in spite of all technology could do to make the land more productive. Reen had worked beside him through all these years, so now she was slimmer than Katy (who had always fought against her body's determination to thicken, and who was finding that battle more difficult than ever now that she was no longer setting the example in physical training for all the people who until seven months ago had reported to her).

"Linc and I will be visiting you later in the winter, I hope, Johnnie," Romanova said now, and leaned toward the holoscreen as if that could bring her closer to the beloved face within it. "Right now we've inherited a house guest who needs a quiet place to rest. I'd rather not tell you anything about her, not even her name; and I'd rather you and Reen kept her presence quiet once she's joined you. Oh, Johnnie, I can't think of anyone except you and Reen that I'd dare to ask for this!"

"In other words you think it's possible you may be asking us to do something dangerous." Not exactly the smartest thing to say on comm, even on Narsai where privacy was respected; but then Johnnie was no military officer, he was a farmer. But he continued without pausing, "I'm glad you know you can ask us, Katy. Whoever your house guest is, send her along. We'll expect her."

"Thank you, Johnnie. Give Reen my love, I don't have time to ask you to put her on right now." Romanova ended the transmission, and nodded to Casey. The two of them spoke and gestured to each other like any normal couple, the only time they confined their communications to their mental link was when they needed privacy in the presence of others. She said, "I'm ready for George now," in a crisp tone that she often used when she was getting ready to deal with something unpleasant as quickly and as efficiently as she could.

Her former mate's image replaced her beloved cousin's in the holoscreen. He was annoyed at having been made to wait, and with her he didn't try to conceal that aggravation. "Katy! What in hell's going on down there that's so important? I thought you and Casey were retired now, so you can't get away with telling me you had the defense minister on comm."

"No, it was someone more important than Fothingill. I was talking to Johnnie," Romanova said, deciding that there was no reason she should dissemble about that fact. "What do you want, George? It's months until I can have my next visit with Maddy. And where are you, anyway?" The second question came when she realized he had spoken as though he were in orbit above Narsai, and not light years away on Kesra.

"I'm aboard the Archangel, practically over your head," George Fralick said with plain satisfaction. "I've got Maddy with me. Katy, I'm on my way to Terra and I've got no idea when I'll be free to go back home to Kesra. P'Tara died just before we left, K'lor went back to his birth-house that same day, and there was no one else I wanted to leave our daughter with. You always said you wanted me to let her visit you here - so I guess now's your chance."

At this moment Catherine Romanova soundly blessed the fact that her first husband did not have her second mate's ability to read her thoughts and her feelings. She could and did allow her face to register nothing but the simple surprise, and the mixture of suspicion and pleasure, that Fralick would be expecting from her after that announcement. She said sharply just what she knew he would be

anticipating: "George, I'm not putting Linc out of our home. Not even for Maddy. That's what you said I'd have to do before you'd even consider allowing her to visit with me here, and I meant it when I said no deal. If I'd been willing to let you blackmail me with her, I'd have done it thirteen years ago when she was a baby and you thought you could make me stay married to you by taking custody of her away from me."

Oh, gods, why now? When on any day for the past seven months, this offer would have seemed like years of prayers and dreams at last coming true?

Fralick scowled. Like so many other superb politicians and diplomats, the face he showed to his immediate family was not always the one his public saw. He said reluctantly, "Well...she's old enough to understand now, I think, why you're sleeping in the same room with him. And I would rather leave her with you than with anyone else, Katy, with things the way they are right now. Then if anything goes down politically, she won't be on one world and you on another and me on still a third. At least she'll have one parent, if the worst happens."

So that was it, even George thought that war might be coming. Romanova forbade herself to shiver, and she gave up the privilege of reminding him that long ago when they had faced each other in that alien court on Kesra he had claimed a girl-child wasn't safe on Narsai. He had backed that claim by citing Katy's own liaison with her cousin Ivan, starting on her thirteenth birthday as was usual with landed Narsatian women and ending only when she had "fled to safety on Terra" as George had chosen to paint the start of her military career; and he had pointed out that under Terran laws, Ivan Romanov would have been executed for the rape of a minor.

It hadn't been like that, but of course no out-worlder really could understand something so essentially Narsatian. She hadn't been running away from Johnnie, or even from sharing Johnnie's bed. That hadn't been offensive to her! Not that it had been especially pleasurable either, of course, in those years while she was still just a girl and her partner was a grown man; but it had been expected by everyone who loved her, after the first time or two it hadn't been a painful thing, and she had enjoyed knowing that her body had the capacity to give her beloved Johnnie so much delight. There had been a sense of power in it for young Katy, and she had regretted giving that up somewhat more than she had regretted knowing she would never be Johnnie's full partner in the management and primary ownership of the Romanov farm.

Or she had regretted it until George had come along, of course. By then she was a grown woman emotionally, not just physically; and from the first time he had put his arms around her and touched her lips with his, she had realized that she'd missed the whole point with Johnnie. She had known passion with George, real passion that she remembered with amazement now when looking at him disgusted her completely.

He had accused her of being a mother who couldn't be trusted not to prostitute her daughter if she were allowed custody, or even unsupervised visits with the little girl on her own native world; and that accusation had been one of the most infuriating aspects of their messy parting. But then a relationship as volatile as theirs could not have ended less violently, she supposed. Only as she'd explored her bond with Linc afterward, had she finally made the wonderful discovery that it was possible to know both the tender security of her first love with Johnnie and the physical rapture of her union with George in a relationship with one man.

With Linc, who had been her friend for so long before he became more than that; and who now knew how to make her feel things in his arms that no George Fralick could ever make any woman feel. Morthan males had to wait until they were at an age where human males often were slowing down sexually, before they even noticed the opposite gender was there - but then they made up for it. Oh, how they made up for

it!

She put all those thoughts aside now, even as she felt Linc's touch within her mind and responded to his silent question with reassurance. To George Fralick's image in the holoscreen she said, "I want her, George, of course I do. I always have, since the night we made her."

Only Linc knew it when she added inwardly, and in despair, "But what in hell am I going to do with her now?"

CHAPTER 4

"Having a child around right now is going to be difficult, but I don't know what else I can do." Romanova voiced her doubts to her husband anyway, as soon as the commlink to George Fralick was broken. "I've waited too many years for this, Linc. The only way I could have passed it up would be if I thought I'd be putting Maddy in danger - and I may even be doing that, but I still couldn't say 'no.'"

"You'd have been putting other people in more danger if you refused," Casey said positively. "George knows you, Katy. Better than anyone else knows you except me, now. If you turned down a chance to have Maddy with you, he'd want to know why; and he'd find out, too."

An excuse for doing what she wanted with all her soul to do anyway? Maybe. Hell, undoubtedly. Yet Linc had never in all the years they'd known each other given her false comfort, and he wasn't doing that now.

And Linc also knew George Fralick, the man had been his first captain just the same as he'd been Katy's. In those days Fralick had liked the young Morthan hybrid, had taken Casey under his wing and had taught him just as willingly as he had taught Romanova. To be fair, Katy reminded herself now, she had to admit that George deserved a large measure of the credit for the officers both she and Lincoln Casey had eventually become. The first captain a green ensign served under had an influence like no one else's, before him or after him.

Or her, as the case might be. George's example had also taught Katy how to nurture her own junior officers, years afterward when she herself became a captain.

Cab Barrett appeared in the bedroom doorway, emerged and shut that door behind her as soon as she was sure she was not interrupting one or more comm conversations. The Narsatian doctor said with satisfaction, "She's sleeping, and that's what she needs now. Stasis isn't sleep, even though people usually find it comforting to think about it that way."

"Can you tell me how she is, Cab? Or is that going to bother your ethics?" Romanova had moved from her chair to Linc's side, and she was not surprised when he put an arm around her waist. Even after twelve years of physical intimacy, he never passed up an opportunity to touch her.

Nor did she want him to do so, but she was growing very sick of being clad in nightclothes as the morning wore on. She needed to get dressed now, she'd have to hustle and get to the public teleport station so that Maddy wouldn't arrive there alone. It was safe for that to happen, of course; no world was safer for a young girl than was Narsai, contrary to the foolishness George had sold the Kesran authorities. But Maddy Fralick had lived her whole life cloistered within a household that most of the time consisted of a pair of neutered Kesrans, with a father who came and went on diplomatic business and with a visit from her mother once in each two years. So Romanova had to assume that even after the trip from one world to another aboard the starship Archangel, thirteen-year-old Maddy would still find the public

teleport station a confusing and possibly intimidating place. She certainly wouldn't do what Katy would have done at the same age, and confidently summon local transportation and finish the trip to her destination on her own.

Barrett said, "I made sure she didn't mind my sharing my findings with both of you, or with Dan. She didn't understand why I was asking, poor thing; medical privacy's a concept she's never been exposed to, at least not as a right for her to claim."

Of course, she's a gen. She doesn't think of her body as her own, not even now that she's run away from her owners.

Romanova and Casey had shared that thought, for the life of her she didn't know which of them had originated it; and it didn't matter. They both nodded, and Barrett continued speaking. "Anyway! Her fetuses haven't suffered from the time she spent being undernourished, it didn't go on that long and she went into it in perfect health. She needs to rest now, and eat, and feel safe. With any multiple pregnancy there's more need for proper care than with a singleton, but the children should be born normally - although probably a bit early. Again, that's normal with triplets. Where is she going to be living, Katy? I assume you're going to hide her."

"Do you really want me to tell you that, Cab?" Romanova asked the question gently. As a citizen of Narsai the doctor could not be prosecuted for aiding an escaped gen, because Terran laws and Commonwealth treaties were not applicable to Narsatians on their own world; but the Corporate Marshal Service deserved its reputation for ruthlessness, and if one of its operatives did learn Rachel Kane's whereabouts life could be become perilous for those who had helped her.

"Yes. Because if I possibly can, I want to go on taking care of her. I'd like to think that none of my fellow physicians would betray a patient like Ms. Kane, but I can be damned sure I'm not going to - and right now the greatest threat to her health is from her so-called 'owners,' if they get their hands on her again." Barrett's mouth thinned.

"I hoped you'd feel that way," Romanova said, and she smiled as she felt her husband's arm tightening around her. "We're sending her to Johnnie and Reen, Cab. They're both your patients, too, so there won't be anything odd about your going out there to take care of our gen. In fact I should wake her up and get her out of here as soon as I can, but...."

The door buzzed. Casey rose to answer it, and Romanova walked toward their bedroom with Barrett following her. She would get dressed, and talk more with the doctor, while Linc was getting rid of whoever had such poor timing.

"You must be Captain Casey," said a feminine voice that stopped Katy in her tracks. "I'm sorry, I didn't think it was that early on this part of Narsai. Did I get you out of bed?"

Lincoln Casey had never seen Madeleine Fralick, who by rights should have been called Madeleine Romanova, even though he had been the first person to become aware of her existence inside her mother's womb. At the time when Katy came back from a furlough spent with her husband he had kept that piece of information to himself, because he had feared she would send him away if she ever became conscious of the telepathic bond that had grown between them over their years together. She had not done that, though, when in the middle of her life's worst crisis he had finally risked deliberately reaching out to her mind to mind. On that day he had held her and steadied her by a means that no one else on their bridge could detect, and by doing so he had brought her through the one moment in all her years of starship command when she had come close to breaking.

Afterward she had gone to her husband's home on Kesra to give birth to Maddy, just as she had done

with her boys; and when she was about to wean the little girl and return to duty, she had told George Fralick that she was leaving him. George had kept Maddy, so this was Casey's first sight of the girl and her first sight of him.

In spite of never having fathered a child of his own, Casey liked youngsters and knew how to talk to them. He said now, with plain amusement, "You caught us being lazy, I'm afraid. It's the middle of the morning, Ms. Fralick, and your mother was just about to get dressed and come to meet you." "I found my way, it wasn't hard." The young girl was both taller and slimmer than Katy had been at thirteen. In that she was George's child; but she had her mother's coloring, the same coppery hair (as if had been before Katy's had silvered) and the same expressive brown eyes. It was hard to say which parent was more responsible for her self-possessed manner, because that she probably had received from both sides. "Ms. Fralick sounds nice, but I guess you're supposed to call me Maddy. Everyone does. Where's Mum?"

The comm interrupted them, this time. Katy had been standing still, watching the interaction between her daughter and her husband and not daring to rush forward because she wanted what she saw happening. Cab Barrett moved to answer the comm without being asked, and now Romanova went toward her child with her arms held out.

She had just gathered Maddy in, and had discovered that her thirteen-year-old was as tall as she was now, when Barrett spoke up with uncharacteristic sharpness. "Linc, take this," the doctor commanded.

Casey did what Romanova would never have advised him to do if he had asked her; on his way past, he put a hand on young Maddy's shoulder and squeezed it gently.

Oh, no. Would the little girl be calling her father before the Archangel could leave orbit, scared to death that every evil thing he must have told her about Narsai in general and about her mother's second husband in particular had just been proved true?

"I know him!" Maddy said, stepping back from her mother's embrace and frowning with puzzled recognition. "Mum, I know him. How? When did he come to see me, that I don't remember?"

While I was carrying you inside me, Romanova thought, and almost said. But while she was still opening her mouth her husband called to her from the comm.

"Katy, the Triad just exploded in orbit. No one at Narsai Control seems to know who was aboard her, no one seems to know what in hell happened. But whoever was aboard, they're gone. There's nothing left but space junk."

Triad. Dan Archer's trade-ship, his new life and that of his partners, gone.

And Dan with it, too? Hansie, Sean, Beth, and Fiona? Both Casey and Romanova had known all of them, that entire group of scramblers had been among their junior officers at one time or another in the old days aboard first the Titan and then the Ariadne.

"Mum?" Romanova had turned toward Casey, but hadn't moved. Young Maddy was tugging at her arm now in puzzlement. "What ship was it that exploded? And who was aboard her? I don't understand."

"Neither do I, love," Romanova said softly. Her eyes were stinging, and she wasn't sure where her own pain stopped and where her husband's began as she crossed the room swiftly to take him into her arms.

He had been fond of the three young men who had died at Mistworld, but they had been Katy's and George's sons and his sadness over their deaths had been mostly for Katy's sake. But Dan had belonged to both of them; so if Dan really was gone now, it was fully as much his loss as it was hers.

"Mum?" Maddy Fralick asked again, standing alone and mystified just inside the door.

"Come into the kitchen, child," Cab Barrett said, and went to the girl and took her by the arm and led her out of the room.

Barrett knew what ship the Triad was, and who had almost certainly been aboard her. And after practicing family medicine on Narsai for more than thirty years, she also knew when it was time to leave a mated pair alone with their grief.

CHAPTER 5

"I think he's coming back," Lincoln Casey said quietly, but with certainty in his tone. "I think someone needs to stay here, Katy."

After the first overwhelming rush of sorrow, that was what Casey had begun saying of Dan Archer; and he was still saying it, now that his wife had summoned an aircar from the public garage and was preparing to board it with Rachel Kane and a small quantity of luggage. Whether he was denying something he didn't want to accept, or whether he really had some kind of Morthan intuition about his foster son's fate, even Katy couldn't tell. She had never known Linc to refuse to face the truth, though, and in the first few minutes after the news of the Titan's explosion had come he had been just as devastated by it as she was. So she had hopes that he might be right in his abrupt switch from despair to optimism - but the only difference those hopes could make right now was to keep him here at home, in case Dan somehow managed to come here, while she took Rachel Kane north to the already winter-bound farm. Sending Kane there alone would, Katy had decided, be far more likely to call attention to the trip than would a family member's escorting her.

Trying to conceal their strange guest's presence from her daughter never entered Romanova's mind, at least not until they were aloft and it was too late for such thoughts. But if Maddy was anything like what she had been at thirteen, or like what her three brothers had each been like at just a little bit older than that (since girls unquestionably did mature more quickly than boys did), then attempting to conceal something from her would have been the most certain way possible to identify it as particularly interesting and worthy of investigation. All children were like that, and the bright ones were more so.

And Maddy was bright, no question about that. She also was far more outgoing than Katy had expected. Based on the girl's almost cloistered life in the Fralick household on Kesra, where humans were a minority and where most Kesrans lived in family groups that were so large their functions were practically self-contained on their islands and floating habitats, Romanova had thought her daughter would be a shy creature whom she and Linc would have to gradually accustom to seeing strangers and to going out in public.

But that independent use of public transport to get herself to their home after the Archangel had teleported her down to the terminal had not, apparently, been a fluke success at dealing with strange situations or new people. Maddy was now sitting in the passenger seat behind the pilot's and co-pilot's chairs, which were occupied by her mother and by Rachel Kane, and she was asking a question about every thirty seconds.

Well, at least bringing her child to the ancestral property of the Romanov family was a perfectly believable excuse for visiting the farmstead right now! And she had always made the trip this way, not by using public teleporters to get from MinTar to the hamlet nearest the farm, so her hiring an aircar wasn't going to raise a red flag with anyone who might be observing her movements today. Ever since she had

gained control over her own finances, Katy had been hiring aircars and eschewing the public teleporters. She hated them.

No one kept logs of how many people rode in an aircar, or even of where that aircar went from the time it was checked out until it was returned. Not on Narsai, anyway. So as far as any observer might know, Catherine Romanova was taking her daughter for her first visit to the ancestral Romanov property as soon as was possible after the young girl's arrival on Narsai; and that would not seem odd, not to anyone who either was Narsatian or who knew Narsatian customs and values well.

The extra person, if her presence should happen to be noticed? One of the dozens of young officers Romanova and Casey had nurtured during their years together, no doubt. Dan Archer was the only one who had been given a permanent place in their household, but they often had young people around them. Guests from their own generation were more the rarity, actually.

"So your name is Rachel, and you're going to have a baby." Maddy spoke as casually as if the three of them were chatting at a social gathering. "Do you have a husband?"

She hadn't asked for Rachel's second name. Whether that was because she realized that its not being volunteered had significance, or whether she was so used to one-named Kesrans that it didn't occur to her that most humans had at least two names, Romanova couldn't guess. Probably the latter.

"No," Kane said calmly. "No husband. And I wasn't planning to have a baby; it just happened."

"Oh." Young Maddy accepted that with perfect equanimity. "What do you do?"

"I was a starship officer. But I left the service, not long ago."

Should Romanova tell her child that it wasn't polite to ask so many questions? But none of them had been impertinently personal, asking whether a person had a partner and what occupation he or she followed were both just normal social inquiries. And Kane was handling it without difficulty, offering responses that were adequate but that didn't reveal information which Maddy should not be given.

Ye gods, the child sounded like George making small talk at a diplomatic reception. He loved those things, while Katy had always despised them.

Yes. Of course, that explained why Maddy had such unexpected poise! She might have lived all of her short life in a human enclave on alien Kesra, but without Katy to insist on a measure of family privacy no doubt George had entertained a constant stream of official company. He could afford it, he loved it, and clearly it had been the salvation of his little girl.

I never thought I'd be glad about that part of George being George, Romanova thought with a carefully suppressed smile. During their time of residence on Terra she and Linc had hosted their young friends often, but their guests were people they could help instead of people whose political or economic influence could help them; so the lively conversations at their gatherings seldom amounted to polite small talk.

"Maddy, look down at the ground," she said now, deciding it was time to divert her daughter before any inadvertent harm could be done. "We're over the plains now. If you watch carefully, soon you'll see our farmstead's boundaries."

"Is it really ours, Mum? I thought it belonged to our cousins, to Ivan and Lorena." Maddy frowned with puzzled interest.

"They like to be called Johnnie and Reen," Romanova said. "Small properties, like the house back in MinTar, can belong to individuals here on Narsai. But farms belong to whole families, Maddy, and that means the Romanov Farmstead is just as much yours as it is theirs. Only they have proprietors' control over it, and a correspondingly larger share of its income, because they earn that with the work they do

there."

"That's not like on Kesra." Maddy's frown deepened. "But on Kesra there aren't that many humans, and on Narsai there aren't any real Narsatians."

Romanova had been calling herself a "Narsatian" all her life, but she responded to the term in the way that her daughter had meant it and not in the way that she had always interpreted it. She said, "True. Narsai has no native sentient species, nor does Sestus 3. Of the five most habitable Outworlds, two were unoccupied when humans first arrived and two - Kesra, and Sestus 4 - have accepted us only as immigrants, and only on a limited basis. Mortha's the only Outworld where humans and native sentients been able to intermarry, to start to meld together into one people."

"We own our house on Kesra, but most human families don't," Maddy admitted thoughtfully. "Most human residents are temporaries, and the government makes sure they leave when they're supposed to. But Papa's ancestors were given citizenship because they kept Kesra from being taken over by Terran colony-agents, over a hundred years ago."

"I know." Romanova smiled now, with both amusement at her daughter's pedagogical tone and with honest reminiscence. "I lived in your father's house on Kesra for more than twenty years, Maddy. I gave birth to all four of my babies there, and it was where your brothers grew up just as you have."

The child knew that, perfectly well. But their visits on Kesra had always taken place in George Fralick's presence. Today was the first occasion since her daughter had been a baby too small to walk or talk that Romanova had been allowed to spend time with her without that constraint, and it seemed that they now must talk about all the things that had gone unspoken before - that even as she introduced her child to the Narsatian half of her heritage, she must deal with the Kesran-resident half that was all Maddy had known until today.

"It's so big," Maddy said now, gazing at the expanse of land below them and seeing how tiny the farmhouse and the equipment barn and the control complex seemed by comparison. "And just two people run all of it?"

"Most of it's automated. But in growing season we bring in hired hands, machines can't do everything." Romanova adjusted the controls, expertly. "We're going down now."

Down, in a graceful descent that she reversed when the readings on the aircar's instrument panel did not jibe with those she had come to expect after having flown into this place a hundred times and more over the years since she had acquired her very first civilian pilot's license.

What the hell...? She didn't say it, because she didn't want to alarm Maddy; but the young woman beside her realized something was wrong, and quietly brought the co-pilot's seldom used control panel on line.

There was a vehicle under cover down there, and its readings didn't belong to the Farmstead's equivalent of the common-garage aircar that they were riding in now. Nor were those readings coming from the type of farm transports that at this season should not have been present, because Narsatians believed firmly that all vehicles should be utilized as continuously as possible in order to keep the numbers of them that must be built and kept operating down to a minimum. While the North Continent farms and ranches were resting under a blanket of winter snow, their vehicles were flown to the two southern continents and were put to use there until spring.

"Mum?" Maddy already knew something was wrong. Of course she did. "We aren't going to land, after all?"

"Yes, we are," Romanova decided, her mouth thinning as she initiated a new approach. "But we're

going to be careful. It looks as if our cousins may already have company."

She wasn't surprised when Rachel Kane quietly moved a concealed blaster holster from inside her trouser waistband to a more normal location against her hip. Her own civilian clothing would have been ridiculously loose on this slim young woman if Kane hadn't been pregnant, but given her current condition the trousers and loose overshirt fit quite well.

Romanova had a small blaster in a holster inside her tunic, concealed under one arm. It was illegal on Narsai, of course, but she got away with carrying it no matter where she went because her native world did not allow any type of routine scanning of its citizens. Only when she entered a military or diplomatic compound did she have to leave her personal weapon behind.

Its shape was comforting now, pressed between her arm and her breast where all she had to do was reach across her body and snatch it from under her clothing. Never once had she been obliged to draw it on Narsai, yet she never went out of her home without it. She would have felt naked - an old cliché, but in this case a completely accurate one.

She considered activating the comm, but did not do so. If something was wrong down there, she'd already indicated her suspicions by having broken off her first approach. She would not reinforce that impression by trying to contact Johnnie or Reen.

How best to protect Maddy? Leaving her daughter alone aboard the aircar wasn't to be considered, she would not have done that even if she'd had a spare weapon to leave with the girl and even if Maddy had been trained to use it. Which she surely had not, not unless George Fralick had completely lost his mind.

Romanova was still considering that when she felt a stab of astonishment that had nothing to do with the current situation. It was an emotion that did not belong to her - a feeling that came from someone else's mind. That mind was familiar, but the cause of its amazement was a mystery to her.

It remained so. Linc had no time to tell her, through the channel of consciousness that had briefly been opened between them, before she felt pain and the normal fear of any threatened sentient being - and then darkness, and the absence of all feeling.

She'd been standing beside the pilot's chair, about to walk to the aircar's exit ramp to disembark. Now she swayed, and had to clutch at the chair's back to steady herself.

"Katy?" Rachel Kane had at last stopped trying to address the older woman as "admiral." She reached out and touched Romanova's arm inquiringly.

"What's wrong with him, Mum?" Maddy wanted to know, her brown eyes wide and alarmed.

"What did you feel, Maddy?" Romanova shivered, and not because the aircar's passenger compartment was too cold.

"The man I met at your house. Linc, Captain Casey. Someone hurt him just now. He was surprised, he felt scared - and then whatever it was that hurt him happened, and then I think he passed out. Anyway, I can't feel him now."

The implications of this development, Katy didn't even want to consider. Did it mean that whenever Maddy was on the same world with them, she and Linc would not know a moment's mental privacy? Gods, she hoped not. Yet this girl had been an unborn baby in her womb on that day above Mistworld, when Ewan Fralick's little raider had raced to the aid of the light cruiser that was foundering and about to enter the planet's atmosphere and be incinerated...the light cruiser that had been carrying both of Ewan's brothers.

Both ships had gone down to their doom, and while Group Leader Catherine Romanova had watched

from the Firestorm's bridge all three of her sons had died. She had come as close to breaking at that moment as she ever had, ever would. But then the man who stood beside her had put his hand on her shoulder - and instead of a simple but completely inadequate gesture of comfort, he had given her the first true embrace of her entire life.

Or so it had seemed, although of course later - much later, long after Mistworld was behind them and her pregnancy had been completed and she had ended her marriage to George Fralick - she had discovered what full union with Lincoln Casey could encompass. But at that moment she had been overwhelmed by love, surrounded by someone else's strength and support and tenderness, and she had been able to close her eyes and stand still and drink it all in.

To drink him in, the essence of the man who had been her friend for so long and whose love for her she had not even suspected until that day.

How could she have guessed that inside her body, the child she carried was also participating in that spiritual union? Even Linc hadn't known that was happening, Romanova was certain that was true. Yet he had suspected something...she remembered the deliberate touch he had given Maddy earlier today, and she recalled that although she had been astounded at the girl's resulting recognition her husband had experienced the pleasure of a scientist whose pet theory has just been confirmed.

"Mum?" Maddy was asking again. "Is he dead?"

"No, Maddy, he's not dead." Romanova shook herself, firmly and deliberately. "But something did happen to him, I felt the same things you felt."

"Are we going back? Right now?" the girl wanted to know. Hopefully, as if she couldn't imagine that her mother would do anything else.

"I want to, but first I have to know what's happened here." This was pure warrior's instinct, something Katy Romanova had bred into her from her star-exploring ancestors and that she had honed through four decades of military training and experience. The wife and the woman wanted to rush back home as fast as this damned slow civilian aircar could take her, true enough; hell, right now she would welcome the use of a teleporter! But what had happened to Linc was connected to whatever was happening here, she knew that without being able to prove it; and besides, there was Rachel Kane still standing beside her and looking at her with puzzled concern.

Retirement hadn't released her from the oath she had taken to protect civilians. And whether or not she could regard Kane that way, there was not doubt about the duty she owed to the three babies the younger woman was carrying.

Besides, Johnnie and Reen definitely were civilians and she also needed to know that they were safe. There should not be a ship with enough power to attain planetary escape sitting in a transport barn on their farm. Something was wrong here just as much as something was wrong back at her home in MinTar, and she couldn't leave one place to return to the other until she had found out what.

"Come on," she said to the young woman, and to the girl, "and keep behind me. Probably Johnnie and Reen are fine, probably everything's just the way it should be; but let's not take chances until we know that for sure."

CHAPTER 6

Lincoln Casey had learned late in life, by the standards of his mother's people, how to touch another

adult's mind and spirit. It was an ability with which Morthan hybrid children were born, first manifesting itself in the bond between mother and infant. Casey had experienced that quite normally; like most non-humans he could recall his own gradual awakening to consciousness within his mother's womb, could remember the mixture of trauma and delight that was birth, and could not really imagine what it must be like to be a full human and have no recollection of any part of life that preceded walking and the use of language. But although Sestians and Kesrans and other nonhumans recalled prenatal existence, infancy and toddlerhood (or its developmental equivalent, for those species that swam or flew or crawled throughout their lives), only Morthans of those species humans had encountered thusfar possessed the fabled gift of being able to communicate with other beings on a mind-to-mind basis.

Casey was as much a Morthan as any of his fellow hybrids in that respect, he remembered the comfort of being able to touch his mother's consciousness at any time during his first months of life. Even when Kalitha had been asleep, baby Lincoln had contentedly cuddled his thoughts to her dreams.

It was normal for a Morthan child to move away from that constant closeness as he or she grew, because like the humans they so eerily resembled physiologically Morthan youngsters needed to separate themselves from their parents in order to live their own lives. Linc had done that, too, as he had grown up. By the time he had completed two standard Terran years of life, he knew how to accept it when his mother refused him access to her mind. He also knew, in a rudimentary way at least, how to do the equivalent to her - although being able to keep her out of his thoughts when she chose to insist on knowing them was an ability he did not develop until he reached what his human father insisted was puberty.

It was, and yet it wasn't, the same thing that happened to his fully human cousins during their teen years. He grew tall in a sudden rush, as they did. His face and the private areas of his body grew hair; his voice deepened, his shoulders became broad, and his upper body developed an adult male's musculature. But although he might from a purely physiological standpoint have become sexually active in his mid-teens, as so many young humans did, he could not have caused a female to become pregnant because the reproductive cells in his semen were not fully formed - would not be, until he had lived for at least an additional two decades (or more) in Terran terms. And he had small interest in attempting union with a female, anyway.

His intellect equaled a human's of his chronological age, looking at him would not have revealed his heritage unless one noticed his distinctive golden eyes; and in every respect except sexual interest, his emotional development kept pace with that of a human adolescent. When he entered the Academy and had to cope with separation from home, with academic and social pressures, and then with learning how to lead others, he proved himself not only just as able as his classmates - he was among the best.

But every other Morthan hybrid he knew at the Academy could and did move easily to unite with the minds of other Morthans, and he could not. And although the minds of other sentient species - humans, Kesrans, Sestians, and so on - could not be understood in the same way as could a fellow Morthan's mind, their emotions could be perceived and thoughts could be exchanged with them. That was true of both Morthan females and Morthan males, although the females with their much earlier arrival at sexual maturity usually paired off with humans and remained on their home-world while the Morthan males left that planet to become Star Service healers and expatriate physicians.

That career hadn't invited Lincoln Casey. A human like his father could become a physician or a psychologist without anyone expecting that he would be able to "read" his patients, but a part-Morthan who lacked that ability would have been setting himself up to fail. And Linc could no longer read anyone,

not even Kalitha, by the time he had passed his fourteenth birthday. Like a man born fully human, he was locked up alone in his body and he had no expectation that was ever going to change.

At first his father had expressed relief when they realized how young Linc was developing, because Gladstone Casey had made the natural assumption that the boy's Terran characteristics were unusually dominant. If that meant that Linc could not exercise Kalitha's mental gifts, it was perhaps too bad; but it should also mean that he would mature sexually at the same age as (or at least not much later than) human males, and that he would therefore be able to live what Gladstone Casey was pleased to call "a normal life for a man."

It hadn't happened that way. Linc was Morthan in his development, yet he lacked the quality that was the Morthan male's great compensation for being unable to service his species' females at the age when they first desired it. And then, when the Morthan male at last did mature, the mate he usually found was a human female - and that union was unvaryingly a barren one. Human males regularly impregnated Morthan females, but no Morthan male and human female had ever produced a conception together. And it had nothing to do with the human woman's fertility, although more often than not she was past the age for natural conception before the relationship with her Morthan mate commenced.

Gladstone Casey had expected his boy to be the first to break that medical barrier, but it hadn't happened. Linc had enjoyed friendships with females of every possible species, first at the Academy and then throughout his career as Star Service officer, but he hadn't been able to figure out why he was supposed to want to lie down in a bed with one (except maybe to keep warm while sleeping) until he was close to completing four decades of life.

When had it begun, his realization that he knew exactly what Katy Romanova was feeling? Very early in their relationship, but at first he had mistaken that dawning empathy for nothing more than what human friends normally shared. A heightened awareness of her facial expressions and their varied meanings, of her body language, of the most subtle tones of her voice; clues that he interpreted with unusual skill, as might any sensitive young human man with a person to whom he was emotionally close. But a day had come when he could not explain that awareness by such means, because he felt her emotions when he could not see her and could not even hear her. And soon after that he had started being able to perceive her thoughts.

He had kept that from her for far too long. For years he had been careful, so careful, not to intrude when her thoughts and feelings were private ones. Yet he had known it before she did when she fell in love with George Fralick, since Fralick was captain to both of them at that time. He had been glad then that he lacked a human man's sexual passions, because if he had possessed them it would have been damnably difficult for him not to intrude on her mentally many times when she and Fralick were nearby and had not the slightest clue that it was possible for him to listen.

More than listen, to perceive whatever Katy perceived. Fortunately the idea of intimate contact with George Fralick hadn't just been unattractive to Casey; it had revolted him, on the few occasions when he had accidentally let his barriers down while Katy was with her husband.

Homophobia? No, it was no more that than it was jealousy. It was simply an instinctive drawing back from a powerful and elemental something that he was not yet ready to manage, that he could no more savor as Katy was savoring it than an infant of three months could chew and digest a piece of raw fruit.

He had been terrified that if she realized he could touch her in this way that was so easy for him, by the time they were command officers in their thirties and she was the mother of Fralick's growing sons,

that she would turn on him in horror. Which she might have...he still felt a bit guilty for having deceived her for so long, but he could not repent of it.

And then his body had starting waking up, and he had begun to understand why fully human males behaved in the impossibly strange ways that they sometimes did.

Being near her made him ache. Watching her had always been a pleasure, Katy was lovely even though she had no great confidence in that fact (and Fralick, damn the bastard, never let her forget it when each pregnancy left her a bit less slender than she'd been before - did the man not have brains enough to realize that it was bearing and nursing his children that had put those few additional kilos onto his wife's frame?). Yet until he was nearing forty, Linc Casey appreciated Katy Romanova's femininity exactly as he had appreciated that quality in his mother. The sight of her was pleasing, in a way that the sight of another man wasn't; there was a special kind of comfort in having her nearby. But by the time his fortieth birth-anniversary had come and gone, if she simply stood close beside him on the bridge he could feel his breathing begin to change.

And if she leaned over him, if she touched his shoulder in the way she had a habit of doing, other things happened. He woke at night, and knew he had dreamed about her, and was embarrassed at what those dreams had caused his body to do.

She was nearing the place in her career when she would be considered for promotion to flag rank, and he was wondering whether the time might not have come when he should separate his life from hers - for both decency's sake, and for that of his own sanity - when she came back from a leave spent with her husband, she embraced her friend in welcome, and Casey immediately sensed a new life within her.

He hadn't sensed her sons' presence while she had carried them, twenty and more years earlier. He had only just learned to follow the working of Katy's own mind, in those days. But he had known small Madeleine was alive inside Catherine Romanova's womb for several weeks before Katy herself had become aware of the changes in her body's rhythms, had sought medical advice (thinking she was simply entering menopause, since she had been in her middle forties by that time), and had been told that she was carrying the daughter she'd wanted for so long.

Still he hadn't told her the truth. He had stayed with her, though, because leaving her then was unthinkable. Somehow he had known she was about to need him in a way she had never needed him before - and that premonition had come horribly and spectacularly true, far above Mistworld, when two ships in Romanova's battle group had become balls of flame and when Casey had finally reached out to her mind-to-mind without even thinking about holding back.

After that he no longer had to touch her covertly, he always did it openly. Her pregnancy with someone else's baby had fortunately kept his sexual interest under control, she hadn't had to deal with that potentially alarming aspect of being in mental and emotional contact with the friend she had thought she knew so well. He had comforted her while her marriage to George Fralick, rocky in its later years at best, had disintegrated even as she grew huge with Fralick's daughter. And then he had had to let her go off to Kesra with Fralick, to give birth to the baby to whose mind he already felt powerfully connected. He had remained on duty, and had not been able to decide whether he hoped that for Katy's sake her marriage might be revived by the new child's arrival - or if he hoped instead that she would finally break with Fralick, once she had borne and weaned the baby.

Even he hadn't expected Fralick to do what the man had done, though. He had not thought that any man who claimed to love his wife would show that "love" by using her baby to try to hold her in a marriage she no longer wanted. Katy had arrived back on the Firestorm after her maternity leave not sad

about the separation but glowing with pride in her new child, as he had seen her arrive back from bearing first Ewan and then the twins so many years earlier; instead she had been barely holding herself together, and as soon as the formalities of her return were over and they were alone she had broken down in his arms.

He had wanted her so desperately that day, but to take her then would have been beyond excusing. He had held her, mentally and emotionally as well as physically; he had comforted her, supported her, loved her. But not until a full year afterward, when she was about to assume her new rank as a flag officer and he was about to take on the role of her adjutant, had they become lovers.

She was ready for it, by then. Fralick was in her past, she was used to the mental intimacy that she and her friend and long-time professional partner now shared, and adding the physical dimension to their existing closeness had only seemed natural.

Katy had been sharing her body in that way from the night of her thirteenth birthday. Linc had never done so before. It had been awkward, at first - but it had also been beautiful. Intensely, incredibly beautiful, and the wonder of it hadn't faded as time had passed and as their physical union had become a thoroughly familiar act.

He was thinking about that now, as he came back to consciousness, because someone was touching his thoughts and whoever it was wanted him to think about his relationship with Katy and how it had developed over the years. But once he realized that was the case, he shut off those thoughts in horror.

"So you're awake now, cousin." A golden-eyed man about half Casey's age was looking at him and smiling when he opened his own eyes. "I'm sorry we had to hurt you, but it was either that or take control of your mind against your will. And that would be against ethics, as I'm sure you know."

"So shooting me with a stunner was a better idea." Casey looked beyond the young man's shoulder, and saw something very familiar. He was in a starship's sickbay. The young man wore a Star Service uniform, that of a physician who held the rank of lieutenant commander.

Which meant he probably was the ship's chief medical officer. But which ship? And since when did the Star Service kidnap one of its own retired senior officers, from the sanctuary of his home?

"Captain? Our guest is awake now," the physician said into a comm unit. Then to Casey he added, "Captain Casey. That's going to get confusing."

"'Mister' Casey will do." Reaching out for the doctor's mind was pointless. To this day, Linc could touch only two minds uninvited. His wife's mind, and - as he had discovered what he thought was still not very long ago - little Maddy Fralick's mind. The fact that this physician was a fellow Morthan hybrid was of no help to Casey whatsoever. His old failing, to which he hadn't given a thought since settling down on Narsai with Katy, confronted him again; and it annoyed him just as much now as it had when he was a little boy visiting his mother's family. The other Morthan children talked without speech, and they left him out...and later, at the Academy, another cadet would see his golden eyes and try to touch thoughts with him and be disgusted when that was possible only if the other Morthan was willing to do all the work.

It had been easier once he became an officer who had some seniority. But from time to time the same thing had gone on happening to him, so he was not the least bit surprised to find it happening to him again now. Everything else about this situation astonished him - but not that.

"Which ship is this? And what in hell am I doing on it?" Casey inquired now, sitting on the edge of the medical bed where he had awakened and putting up a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. He felt the typical post-stunning tightness of his scalp, a sensation which was not quite a headache but that felt

uncomfortably close to the start of one.

"I'd like to be able to answer all your questions, Captain Casey, but for now at least that won't be possible." A slender, dark-skinned human man had entered the compartment while the Morthan hybrid had been speaking. A man who wore four stripes on his uniform sleeves, and who was poker-faced in a way that Casey had long ago learned usually masked feelings that must be put aside for duty's sake.

He did not have to be able to touch humans' minds to know what they were feeling. Many times that was obvious to him, just by observing them.

"At least I can tell you which ship you're on, anyway," the dark man continued. "Archangel. And I can tell you my name, Paolo Giandrea - but that's going to be about it."

The hatch to the passageway opened again, and two humans wearing security uniforms came through it. Casey realized that the Morthan doctor had moved away from him, and knew that although he could not see it a forcefield had been erected between them. He had ordered that done to a potentially dangerous prisoner many times, when he had been the one in command.

"I'm sorry," Captain Giandrea said again. "But I guess I don't have to tell you that sometimes I don't like my orders, Captain Casey. I never served with you, but I've heard plenty about you from Dan Archer - so I know you'll understand there's nothing personal about what I have to do now."

The guards moved forward, stepping through the forcefield where gaps of precisely the necessary size opened to allow them to pass.

CHAPTER 7

"Dan!" Romanova was met at the farmhouse's door not by her silver-haired cousin, but by someone she had not expected to see again unless there really was some kind of afterlife. She respected Linc's intuition, but when it came to someone he loved as much as he loved their foster son she had honestly doubted him. She had been waiting for the results of Narsai Control's investigation into the trader Triad's explosion, which of course would include a scan of the debris for the smallest traces of organic remains - which almost always, except in cases where a gargantuan military carrier or a thousand-passenger civilian liner had suffered disaster, could confirm the identities of those who had died when a ship was lost and the debris was accessible for such scanning. Only if that had been completed without finding Dan would she have let herself begin believing that Linc might be right.

Yet here Dan was in front of her, and much as she wanted to throw her arms around him she could not allow herself that luxury. She could only draw in a breath of startled joy, and exhale it as his name.

"Better get inside, Matushka," Archer said, and stood back from the door to invite the three females to enter.

Once the door had closed behind them, while Romanova was still hearing it seal itself, she found herself gathered into someone's arms; but not Dan's. Ivan Romanov was holding his cousin tightly, with a possessiveness she hadn't felt in his touch since the days almost fifty years ago when she had been a barely-nubile girl and his intended bride. "Oh, Katy. I wasn't expecting you, but after what almost happened to Dan I'm so glad to know you're safe," he said, and gave her a squeeze that took her breath before he kissed her forehead and let her go.

She'd stuffed her blaster back where it belonged, just in time. Now she stepped back from Johnnie's arms, and saw that nearby Rachel Kane was being held close by Dan Archer.

Just for a moment. Then Archer was turning to Romanova, although he kept the female gen's shoulders in the circle of one big arm. He asked tautly, "Were you told about the Triad yet, Matushka?"

"Yes." Katy was aware of her daughter standing beside her, taking the whole scene in with enormous brown eyes but saying nothing. She had to be frightened, yet Maddy was more poised at the moment than Rachel Kane was with all her years of service experience. She put out a hand and touched the girl's arm in reassurance as she continued to Archer, "Narsai Control called us, Linc and I are listed as your next of kin. But he didn't believe you were dead, so when we came out here he stayed behind in case you tried to contact home."

"Oh, damn," Dan said. "I'm sorry. How in hell did Maddy wind up on Narsai, Matushka? Now of all times?"

"Papa has to go to Terra, and he asked Mum to keep me with her while he's gone this time," Madeleine Fralick announced, answering for herself with that calm confidence that so far nothing had been able to shake. "Who are you, and how do you know my name?"

"This is Dan Archer, sweetheart," Romanova said, almost absently as she looked around the huge kitchen - traditionally an enormous room in Narsatian farmsteads, a leftover custom from colonial days where families had been large instead of strictly limited and when it had taken many hands to operate a farmstead like this one - and wondered with coldness in her chest why Lorena did not appear. And where Dan's shipmates were, also. "You've heard me mention him before. He was your brother Ewan's best friend, and now he lives with me and with Linc. So you should think of him as your brother, too, all right?"

"All right," Maddy said, giving assent as if her mother really had intended for her to make a choice. "But why aren't you dead, then, if that's who you are? Your ship blew up, and you were supposed to be aboard her. Everyone said that, anyway."

"Everyone was wrong," Archer answered the child, with a taut grin that paid her the compliment of taking her just as seriously as she was taking herself. "We found the explosive before it went off. So a salvage ship went up instead, with Triad's I.D. code and with enough traces of each of us aboard it so that the debris ought to check out to Narsai Control's satisfaction."

"And Triad is in the equipment barn here." Romanova understood now, and it was so simple that she wanted to kick herself. But the little rented aircar carried no equipment for identifying a warp-capable ship's I.D. signature. Its instruments had barely been able to tell her enough to make her come in with her suspicions aroused; so she really could not have known, and it was foolish to blame herself for not guessing. "But why, Dan? Who would try to destroy a trade-ship in orbit around a peaceful world like Narsai?"

"I don't know, Matushka." Archer gave Rachel Kane's shoulders a squeeze as he said that. "We're all former scramblers, so getting rid of us wouldn't make anyone at Star Service Command shed any tears now that every trained officer they threw away eighteen months ago is apt to be thinking about joining the Rebs. But taking that much trouble to get rid of just five of us, for that reason only? I don't think so. And that leaves Rachel here as the only reason I can think of why anyone might be that mad at me, or at any of my partners - and even that doesn't make complete sense, because blowing us up wasn't going to get her back for her owners. I might have expected them to have one of us grabbed to try to find out her whereabouts, but I wouldn't expect them to kill when it wouldn't gain them a thing. The Corporate Jackals just don't operate that way."

Romanova was barely hearing the second part of what her foster son had said. She was staring across

the kitchen, and she was exhaling with profound relief because Lorena Romanova had entered the room from an inner doorway and was looking at her cousin with eyes that were just the same shade of brown as Katy's.

Reen was a bit younger than Katy was, and her blood relationship to Ivan Romanov was one degree less close; but it hadn't been possible for Katy's parents to have another daughter to fulfill the marriage agreement that Katy had refused to complete, not when Johnnie had already waited an extra decade because Katy's older sister had died in childhood and her parents had then conceived her to replace their lost heir. So the next branch of the Romanovs had been asked to contribute their daughter, and Lorena had acquiesced gladly.

How odd it was, that Reen hadn't known Johnnie throughout her childhood as Katy had known him - hadn't gone to his bed on her thirteenth birthday, to tremendous celebration and warm parental approval, as Katy had done - and yet it was plain that now Reen loved Johnnie in much the same way that Katy loved Lincoln Casey.

The human heart was the strangest of creatures, and no amount of discovering and settling new worlds and establishing new cultures was ever going to alter that simple fact.

Reen came to her husband's side now, and took his hand in a gesture that conveyed intimacy far more clearly than had Dan Archer's embrace of Rachel Kane. She said softly, "They're all battened down to wait it out aboard their ship, dear. They say they don't want to come inside. Now, this must be our guest - but who's the young lady?"

Aboard the starship Archangel, Lincoln Casey found himself staring out of his cell in the brig at a person he hadn't seen since the aftermath of Mistworld.

George Fralick had come into Casey's life on the same day he had entered Catherine Romanova's, when the two green ensigns had been assigned to the small ship that was Fralick's first command. He had been a good captain, Casey remembered. A trifle colorless, it had seemed to the romantic young Morthan hybrid; Fralick was a calm man, who gave orders in a matter-of-fact tone and who left the everyday operations of the ship mostly in his exec's hands. That was of course just what a skipper was supposed to do, but how many commanders were able to resist the temptation to continually make themselves seen and heard?

Fralick had not found it hard to do that at all, apparently. Yet when the proverbial chips were down, when things were going wrong all around them and when his ship needed its captain in full control, suddenly he would be there. Something about him would change, his tone and his facial expression - everything about him - would be altered, and from that moment until the crisis was over Lincoln Casey and every other officer on board the little Raven would gladly have followed George Fralick into the heart of a supernova.

That had to be the George Fralick with whom Katy Romanova had fallen in love. Linc had suspected it early on in his best friend's romance with their young captain, and in later years as he became more skilled at reading her thoughts in addition to sharing her feelings he came to realize that he'd been right. The Fralick whom Katy knew in the bedroom was the same one who was seen and heard on the Raven's bridge when the situation became tense, when the stakes became higher and when the odds got longer.

Yet Linc still wondered, even today as he looked out through another forcefield and saw Fralick standing in front of him in civilian clothing of understated, expensive elegance, whether that romantic and

charismatic leader was the real George Fralick revealed - or just another role that Fralick played to near-perfection.

"Comfortable, I hope, Mr. Casey?" That calm voice, courteous and perfectly correct. Except that Linc Casey had once heard it, not aloud but through a telepathic channel to Katy that he had been only half trying to shut down, berating her unmercifully because three young men named Fralick had lost their lives while she was their fleet captain.

Never mind that on the ship carrying the twins, twenty-six other young people had died also. Never mind that Ewan Fralick had been a captain - as old as his father had been in the days of Raven, as responsible for his own fate as it was possible for a Service member to be - and that he had gone to that attempted rescue of his brothers against their mother and commanding officer's direct orders. Ewan had done just what Katy herself would have done in the same situation, he'd shut off his comm and pretended he did not hear.

The only grief Katy had been spared was that of having to discipline her firstborn child for his act of insubordination. George Fralick certainly had spared her nothing, when the battle was over and the initial peace negotiations were concluded and the professional diplomats finally arrived. Even though she was heavily pregnant with his only surviving child, once he had her alone he'd given her no mercy at all emotionally - and Fralick had the kind of temper that once it was unleashed could make its victim wish he would substitute physical punishment for the wounds his words inflicted.

The marriage had been shaky before, but then it had died. And Linc still wondered how he had managed not to burst into the captain's quarters aboard the old Firestorm, and take that unnaturally calm-voiced monster apart to stop him from tormenting the woman Fralick was supposed to love. The woman Casey did love, then nearly as much as now.

"I'd be a lot more comfortable if you'd left me where I was a couple of hours ago," Casey said now, and met Fralick's gray eyes with his golden ones. "But I don't suppose reminding you that I'm a citizen of Terra through my father is going to do me any good. Any more than my being an honorably retired Service officer stopped you from doing this to me."

"I'm afraid not." Fralick had a way of watching another person, whether supposed friend or declared enemy, that reminded Casey of a scientist watching the subject of an experiment. That was the nature of his calm demeanor, although it had taken the Morthan man more years than he liked to think about to finally figure that out. "Katy made it easy for me, I'd planned a diversion to get you away from her but I didn't have to bother using it. Do you have any idea why you're here, Mr. Casey?"

For twenty years Fralick had called his wife's friend "Linc," and he hadn't stopped doing so until the day he learned that Casey and Romanova had become more than friends. The fact that nothing of that kind had happened between them until after his own marriage to Katy was over, had not changed Fralick's reaction in the least. He always addressed Linc this way now, coldly and correctly and with complete formality.

Fralick was at his most dangerous when he was at his most correct. But Casey did not have to dissemble in order to answer that question with a firm, "No idea at all, George. None."

He had no reason to go back to calling Fralick by a title, or even by his surname alone. If there was a quarrel between them, it wasn't of Linc's making.

"I believe you." Fralick blinked. "Well. It's very simple, actually. War with the rest of the Commonwealth is something we in the Outworlds can't afford. If we allow ourselves to be maneuvered into that situation we're going to lose the independent and co-equal status that we've worked so hard to

attain. Following me so far, Casey?"

At least he'd dropped the "mister." Since he certainly did not mean it as a title of respect, that was fine. Linc nodded. He also stayed seated, on the bunk inside his cell, and let Fralick stand outside.

Damn the man for doing it with such perfect comfort. Fralick continued, "So how do you keep rebel forces from rising, when you have people with combat training and experience on the loose and when they're able to lay hands on at least some of the hardware that could make them dangerous enough to start the war we mustn't have? One thing you do is remove their obvious leaders."

"Huh?" Casey was startled enough so that he reacted to that statement. He had commanded the Star Service Academy for several years, it was true; there was a block of junior officers now starting to work its way up that no doubt had respect for him, maybe even some affection. And during his far longer career as first Katy's executive officer and then her adjutant after she reached flag rank, he had developed his full share of professional relationships and even of genuine friendships with his brother and sister officers; far more friends than he had ever expected he would have, during the difficult years of his childhood and adolescence.

But to picture himself as a possible leader in a war of rebellion (or of revolution, if you were taking the so-called Rebs' viewpoint)? That thought had quite honestly never crossed his mind, and he was amazed that it could have crossed anyone else's.

He said now, "George, that's crazy. If the Rebs were going to look for a leader, it wouldn't be me. It would be...."

His eyes widened, became a more liquid shade of gold. And instead of experiencing a stung ego at what he suddenly knew was the truth, he felt his insides turn over with horror.

"That's right, Casey." Fralick smiled thinly. "It wouldn't be you. Not that you couldn't be a competent flag officer; you never held that kind of rank in your own right, but you're qualified and you could perform well enough to be damned dangerous. But you always stayed in Katy's shadow, because that was where you wanted to be. You're a born No. 2 man, the 'beta wolf' in the pack is how some sociologists used to put it when pack theory was popular among military psychologists. Katy's the alpha, and even though there are still a few older Narsatians who spit at the mention of her name because they remember she refused to follow through with her marriage-promise to the primary Romanov heir - if she was tapped to lead the Rebs, you can bet they'd follow her."

"Of course they would, but Katy's about as interested in politics as she is in becoming a Sestian miner." Casey understood now, perfectly. But he wanted to make Fralick tell him baldly what was going on that had brought him to this prison; so he sat still, and stared at his former captain, and pretended to struggle with the pieces of this already assembled puzzle.

"You're a horrible liar even when all you're trying to do is look innocent, Casey," Fralick said, and he laughed without humor. "Right now Katy doesn't think she's interested, but she's a Narsatian and she could get interested damned fast if something happened to motivate her. She's also a fighter, and I'll bet she's been sitting there in that nice quiet little house just about long enough so that if something worth battling over came and called her name she wouldn't take long to answer it. So the trick for us, for the people who know how important it is to keep the Rebs from coalescing into a real fighting force, is to make sure Katy can't become their leader."

"That sounds damned easy to me. You don't want someone to be able to lead a fighting force? You kill that someone, and your worries are over." Casey said it in a tone so even that he was almost mocking Fralick's famous calm.

And he hit his target, torpedo dead on center. Fralick flushed. The diplomat said quietly, but with the mask down and with hate plain in the wintry gray of his eyes, "That's where I can't do my duty the way I ought to be doing it. You're right, you goddamn Morthan mindfucker! If it were anyone but Katy, I'd have had her killed this morning instead of sending the only child I have left to stay with her. But she is Katy - whether you believe it or not, I still love her - and she is Madeleine's mother, much as I wish she weren't. So if she's ordered to be killed, someone else is going to have to be giving the orders; and right now that happens to be my job."

"And while you have me where you can do anything you want to me, you figure Katy will do what you tell her. Or at least not do what you tell her not to do. Have I got it right, George?" Casey rose from the bunk at last, and walked deliberately to the forcefield and stood as close to it as he could without causing it to shock him.

Golden eyes and gray ones locked, and after a long moment the human man nodded. "Exactly," Fralick said. "If it wasn't for Katy, there's no way I'd have you where I've got you now and not do everything to you that I've ever imagined. The mindfucker who turned my wife against me after our boys were killed, safe and warm and well-fed in the brig - and with no idea of just how lucky that makes him!"

CHAPTER 8

"You've had your house in MinTar for a long time, Katy, but you haven't really lived on Narsai since you were just turning eighteen." Ivan Romanov was sitting in the co-pilot's seat as the rented aircar headed back toward MinTar, with Katy at the controls and with young Maddy once again in the seat behind them. "And since you and Linc did move back, you haven't had a lot to do with local people and I suspect you haven't been paying much attention to Outworld politics. Not even the war rumors."

"No, I haven't," Katy admitted, when her cousin paused as if he expected her to answer him. "I had enough of war rumors before we left Terra, and here on Narsai it's not hard at all to just turn off the holo-casts and forget that the rest of the Commonwealth is there. Cab socializes with us even though she's our doctor; I've known her since we were babies. She tells me how Mum and Dad are doing, and I talk to some of my other old friends from time to time. But mostly Linc and I both just record the occasional lecture for transmission back to the Academy, and work on our own projects, and spend time in the parklands."

Romanova's parents were well up into their nineties now, but on Narsai as on most technologically well-developed worlds that was not the enfeebled very old age that it once had been for human beings. Katy at sixty was regarded as no more than middle-aged. Her retirement had been premature; if not for the crisis in which all scramblers were expelled from the Service, she and Linc would probably have stayed put in their hard-earned power positions for at least an additional decade. Perhaps for longer than that, the Star Service had no mandatory age at which an officer must step down.

Cabanne Romanova, for whom Cab Barrett was named, was still heading up the Narsatian University's main campus at MinTar; and her husband of eighty years, Trabe Kourdakov, was still chairing that university's philosophy department. Katy, their only living child, had not seen either parent since she had divorced George Fralick and had come home to Narsai married to her adjutant and without her baby girl.

Ivan Romanov's face softened as he looked over at his cousin. He said gently, "I know, Katy. Aunt

Cabbie and Uncle Trabe just barely forgave you for not marrying me. They still can't accept your divorce, can they?"

"It's partly the divorce," Katy responded quietly, and spared herself a moment to glance over her shoulder in Maddy's direction. She was not certain she wanted her young daughter to be hearing this...but, she reminded herself firmly, at Maddy's age she had been Johnnie's lover. Besides, sending the child out of her sight right now was something she simply didn't have the ability to do. They had to get back to MinTar, she had to know what had become of Linc.

Yet Johnnie was making her talk about subjects that he had to know were delicate ones. Why?

"It was partly your divorce, but it was mostly that you left your child on Kesra," Johnnie said bluntly. "I'm sorry if you didn't know that, Maddy, but it's the way things are and there's no sense trying to keep it secret from you now. Your mother's parents think she should have stayed with you and your father until you grew up, no matter what."

"My father thinks so, too," Madeleine responded, in a tone that was such a precise echo of her much older male cousin that Katy wanted to laugh. "But my father's not always right. Anyhow, what does that have to do with a war we may be going to have?"

"Your grandfather holds Senior Chair on the Narsai Council," Ivan Romanov answered the girl, as Katy's mouth tightened. That fit of insane amusement had ended as quickly as it had struck her, and she was blessing this strange child of hers for redirecting the conversation back to where it belonged.

She was also wondering whether she should have headed from the Farmstead directly to the nearest public teleport facility, the quicker to get back to MinTar. But no, although this way was slower it was less likely to arouse the suspicions of anyone who might be observing her movements. Admiral Romanova teleporting when she didn't have to was a sight guaranteed to make anyone who knew her habits very suspicious indeed.

"I thought he was a professor," Maddy said, frowning. "He and Granma both."

"They are, but here on Narsai we don't believe the government should be headed by professional politicians. The Council is a hereditary body, and its Senior Chair is often held by a scholar." Johnnie Romanov might have spent his entire adult life running a farm, but he was not an ignorant man. He understood his society and how it functioned, and following politics by every remote means possible was his favorite way of amusing himself during long winters of physical isolation. "Your grandfather has held the Senior Chair for the past seven years, Maddy. Your grandmother held it before him, and I won't be surprised if she holds it again when he's ready to take a rest."

"So what has this got to do with going to war?" Maddy didn't sound like a Romanov now, she sounded like a Fralick.

Katy reminded herself, firmly, of how much she once had loved the man who was this child's father. And she said, "I'd like to know that, too, Johnnie. And before we get right on top of MinTar, please!"

"All right." Ivan Romanov was well aware that his conversations tended to ramble, and he seldom took offense when an exasperated listener asked him to come to the point. "Uncle Trabe is an Isolationist. So are most of the Council's other members, which isn't surprising. Being conservative's natural when you're past a certain age, that seems to be true on any world and for any sentient species. But as you know, Katy, the Council can't always control what the commissioners do."

"Commissioners?" Maddy asked. Clearly Narsatian government hadn't been one of the subjects her tutors on Kesra had made her study.

"A commissioner runs Narsai Control," Katy explained, and wished with all her soul she had decent

scanners at her disposal. She hated flying along blind like this, able to navigate and to communicate but not able to do much else. "A commissioner oversees trade with the other Outworlds, and with Terra. A commissioner makes sure the farms are run according to all environmental regulations. And so on, there are sixteen professional and commercial guilds and all their commissioners are popularly elected. Councilors serve by inheritance, just as Johnnie said, although within the Council itself the seat order is elective."

"Oh," Maddy said, as if she had understood. Which she probably had. "But the Council decides matters of state? They'd make the decision, if the other Outworlds started fighting against Terra and Narsai had to join one side or the other?"

"Yes. We believe that type of decision is best made by people descended from our original settlers, that it's far too important to be left to popularly elected leaders." Katy had learned that line of catechism by heart almost as soon as she could talk, and she said it now automatically. But it had a hollowness in it, today, that she'd never heard before.

Her sons had never asked her questions about Narsatian government. The boys had been like her in that way, they didn't care about such things. Civilian government had to be dealt with as the ultimate policy maker for the military, but that was the only way it really had mattered to Katy until now; and it never had mattered at all to Ewan or to his brothers.

But Maddy had more of George in her, in that respect at least. She said now, "That sounds to me like the balance of powers between branches that most self-governing planets try to set up. But it's gotten out of balance, if the people on the Council don't know or don't care what everyone else on Narsai really wants them to do."

"Give this child the Senior Chair, and tell Uncle Trabe to take a rest!" Johnnie Romanov said, and he grinned sardonically. "She just said in two sentences what I've spent the past year trying to tell him, and I haven't been able to get through. Maybe we ought to fly on over to the university right now, Katy, and introduce Uncle Trabe to his granddaughter."

Katy did not dignify that suggestion with a reply. Instead she said quietly, "So you think the Council will do whatever it takes to keep us neutral. Is that right, Johnnie?"

"That's exactly what I think. And eliminating half a dozen scramblers, each of whom could have captained a Reb ship, was a pretty good morning's work if there's any truth to the rumor that the Commonwealth has agents on Narsai and that our policies concerning strangers give them one hell of a lot of maneuvering room."

Katy's stomach turned over, and she swallowed hard in an effort to calm it. Turning a blind eye to anything that happened among visitors on Narsai, or even among residents who weren't native-born citizens, was a very old tradition; even her otherwise gentle father would never question that custom's morality.

She would not have done so herself, in the days before she'd left Narsai to live most of her adult life elsewhere. And she had lulled herself into believing that during the intervening decades, as Narsai's rigid reproductive customs had gradually ceased to be enforced with the old vigor, probably other traditions had also been relaxed.

If she had not believed that, she would never have risked bringing Linc to live here with her. She was a Narsatian citizen, anyone who committed a crime against her would be prosecuted; but Linc was a dual citizen of Terra and Mortha, not Narsai, and no local authority would protect him if some other off-worlder tried to do him harm. His status as her husband by Service-logged marriage would not help him,

because according to the customs of Narsai he was nothing more than a person of the opposite gender who was a guest in her household.

Maddy, although born on another world and fathered by a non-Narsatian, was nevertheless just as well protected here as Katy herself was. Her sons hadn't been, because citizenship was conferred upon a child by its same-gender parent.

Thank gods for that much, at least. Katy said now, "Maddy. Listen to me, and do what I tell you even if you hate it. When someone asks your name - "

"I know," the girl interrupted, a rudeness she hadn't once committed in her mother's hearing before now. "Papa already told me, and he recorded me that way when I had to register with Narsai Control before I could teleport down. I said I was Madeleine Fralick when I met Linc only because he called me that first."

Bless you, George; or damn you, George? Katy could not make up her mind. But as she used what pitifully little scanner capacity she had in this vehicle to check out her house before the aircar was set down at its front, she said to her cousin exactly what she thought next. "Johnnie, the stakes in this game just went up. Didn't they?"

Her cousin caught what she did not say, could not say in front of Maddy unless the time came when she absolutely must. Ivan Romanov nodded, though, when she stole a glance in his direction.

Fralick knew a great deal about Narsatian laws and customs, and he had deliberately given his daughter their full protection at the expense of his own ego. So the odds were enormously high that Fralick knew what had become of Lincoln Casey, who was not present in the house they were about to enter.

The scanners couldn't tell Katy that, but her mind could. Linc wasn't there. Either that, or only his corpse was; because even his dormant consciousness was missing from their home.

The Morthan physician walked into the Archangel's brig, and the guards retreated. Lincoln Casey had witnessed that reaction from full humans to a Morthan hybrid's approach many times, and he still could not determine whether it was awe or whether it was disgust.

One thing was certain, many full humans were afraid of Morthans to at least some degree. They were sought out to be trained as healers because their ability to read their patients' thoughts and feelings was so useful for that purpose, yet humans seldom completely overcame an instinctive disquiet about allowing themselves to be invaded in that way. It was tolerable when it was being done for medical purposes, but when the Morthan wasn't there to provide care the humans around him usually preferred to go elsewhere if they could do so.

The exceptions, of course, were the human males who became mated to Morthan females. And the elemental discomfort most humans felt around Morthans was probably very much connected to what they knew (or at least believed) about such unions; female Morthans weren't called "loreleis" in Terran Standard slang for no reason.

The offspring of those unions should have been losing their mental abilities progressively as the generations progressed, because as Terran males continued mating Morthan females their hybridized children naturally possessed less and less Morthan DNA. Yet as far as he knew Lincoln Casey was the first child of such a mating who had not developed the normal telepathic talent, or at least hadn't developed it in at all the usual fashion.

Most Morthan males did what this fellow had done, they shook their heads in exasperation and they left Mortha - young adults ready to make lives of their own in every way, except for their complete lack of readiness to reproduce. Sometimes they took their human brides back to Mortha, later on when they did at last become sexually mature; sometimes they stayed wherever their wives induced them to settle. But since offspring never resulted from such pairings, the Morthan bloodlines were only preserved in those extremely unusual circumstances where a mature Morthan male was able to obtain a much younger Morthan female as his partner.

In other words, about one child in ten thousand born to Morthan females had a Morthan sire. Yet the species did not die out; in its hybridized form, it thrived instead.

Linc Casey had never been able to guess whether he was simply a freak of nature, or the precursor of a time when Morthan blood would become so diluted that one day his people's alternately prized and feared abilities would begin to fade out; would surface from time to time only. All he knew was that in today's society, he was an oddity who his mother's species saw as deficient and whose golden eyes frightened his father's people because to them any being with those eyes was a potential violator of their minds.

The physician let himself in through the forcefield, effortlessly. He held out a med-scan unit and started taking the prisoner's readings without saying a word.

He didn't have to, not out loud. As Linc looked up at him, golden eyes met other golden eyes. Contact was established, and conversation flowed freely after the healer had create the necessary channel.

"You're comfortable, Mr. Casey? Fralick's not having you abused in any way?"

"He'd love to, but he doesn't dare. Not now, anyway," Linc answered, and could not suppress his pleasure at being able to talk to someone this way again after seven months on Narsai with only Katy to touch his thoughts. Katy, and very briefly young Maddy.

Many of his fellow Morthans refused to converse telepathically with him, but he sensed no reluctance in this man's mind. If anything the doctor was eager to make this connection - but then, he was the only Morthan on board this ship and no doubt he too had found out how lonely mental isolation could be.

"They're going to get rid of us just the way they did the scramblers," the doctor said now, and he started a second scan. Which wasn't needed, but which gave him an excuse to remain longer. "Or not quite the same way, because now they're starting to regret treating the scramblers as well as they did. They thought if they gave them separation pay and sent them back to their home worlds, there'd be no hard feelings; and instead, the scramblers are starting to form up the core of a rebel fighting force."

Coldness settled into Linc's chest. He had expected that to happen, although he had not discussed it even with his adored and implicitly trusted Katy. He had expected it, but on some level he had gone on hoping he might be wrong; and he had given his wife enough distress during his time of illness back on Terra. From months of anticipating an ugly civil war, at least, he had been able to spare her.

But he had been wrong to do so. Now she was alone down there on Narsai, and she was going to have to decide whether to protect him or to lead her people if war came. It was a choice no one should ever be required to make, and if she had to do so it would be at least partly his fault because in presuming to "protect" her he had quite possibly withheld from her the knowledge she now needed in order to protect them both.

"If that's the only stupid thing you've ever done in your life, Mr. Casey, then you are incredibly lucky." The physician had followed his thoughts effortlessly, partly because the doctor had full Morthan

mental capabilities and partly because Casey had made no attempt at all to think privately. "So. Back to the rest of us Morthans in the Service. The damn fools in the top offices are debating what to do with us right now, and I'm not sure whether we'll wind up being shipped back to Mortha or if they'll actually be smart enough to kill us."

"If they try to send all of you back to Mortha, will you go?" Casey added to that thought a polite reminder that he still had no name by which to think of this man. "Doctor" was, after all, only a title just like "Lieutenant Commander."

"I'm a Marin, just as you are. The one of my given names that I use, and that's on my Service record, is Kerle." All Morthan surnames came from the mother to the child, so this really was one of Linc's own distant cousins. His human father had insisted that he be called Casey on the official records, though, and since Linc had actually been born on Sestus 3 that insistence had been respected. "Probably most of us would go, we're conditioned all our lives to heal and it's not natural for us to fight back against what full humans want to do to us. But you're not the only exception to that, cousin; not anymore."

Lincoln Casey had been an oddity at the Star Service Academy forty years earlier, because Kerle Marin was correct. Morthans did not train to be military officers, not unless it was as medics. Morthans could be physically violent if they were driven to it, to protect their own bodies from immediate harm or to defend their young children or their mates; but if they had the slightest choice, they always opted to get clear of the conflict instead of seeking a physical solution. That young Linc wanted to learn to be a warrior, even in a service where exploration was an equally important function, had astonished and shamed his mother and her people. And his physician father, although fully human, had been no closer to understanding his son's dreams than were Kalitha and the rest of the Marin clanstribes.

"There are others of us who are damned sick of being called 'mindfuckers,'" Kerle Marin said now, in the silent link between them. "Mostly young ones, mostly males of course. But on Mortha the human residents don't much like the way their Terran relatives treat them when they try to go home, and most human fathers of Morthan children are angry when their families won't accept their offspring."

That was true. Linc's own human father had been an unfortunate exception; usually a human male who united his life with that of a Morthan female, promptly forgot all about any prejudices he might have possessed before that union and settled in to live on Mortha as if he'd been born there. Such men usually doted on their young ones, and only experienced psychological conflict about their chosen lives when their sons experienced the consequences of their mixed heritage in delayed (by human standards, anyway) sexual maturity and in their resulting flight from life on Mortha.

Gladstone Casey had done something unheard of in taking Kalitha Marin away from Mortha while she was carrying their child. And in refusing to sire more children with her, he had done something else that was not at all acceptable behavior for the human mate of a Morthan female. Linc had always wondered whether growing up as he had, far from others with whom he might have interacted telepathically, had stunted his mental abilities in the same way that a child could become physically stunted by lack of proper nourishment.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it's the other way you've often thought it might be, and as our Morthan heritage becomes more and more diluted the time will come when all of us will be more like you than not." Kerle Marin's thoughts became more urgent. "I have to go soon. That bastard Fralick thinks you can't communicate with me this way, he somehow has the stupid idea that you can only talk to your wife mind-to-mind. So we have that much going for us, anyway; and now that we've linked once, I believe you'll be able to contact me just as easily as I can contact you. You really aren't like a full human. With them I

always have to do the initiating, and even then the 'conversation' is pretty much one-sided."

"I hope you're right," Linc answered, and carefully did not allow his smile to reach his face. "But I never could do that with another Morthan, not since I was young enough to link with my mother."

"That may be because no other Morthans helped you develop your abilities," his cousin answered, thoughtfully but with painful bluntness. "I think you've been denied a lot of interaction that the rest of us just expect to have, and I wouldn't be recognizing that now if I hadn't been the only telepath on this goddamned floating city for the past three months. I can't tell you how good it feels to touch someone else's mind and not have to do every single bit of the work!"

With that the doctor put his scanner away into its belt pouch, and stepped out through the forcefield and said loudly, "Guard! He's fine, I can tell Ambassador Fralick that he isn't going to suicide unless something changes to make him want to do that. Now let me out of here, I've got patients to take care of who really do need care and I want to get back to them."

Linc lay back on the bunk in his cell, and still did not permit himself to smile. It was likely that he was being watched, at this and every other moment throughout the starship's artificially scheduled twenty-four hour day. But there was bittersweet amusement in his thoughts, nevertheless, as he realized that his newly discovered cousin had used his exit to remind Casey that a Morthan hybrid was capable of turning his body off and dying at will.

CHAPTER 9

"At least neither you nor Maddy needs to be afraid," Ivan Romanov told his cousin as they stood together inside her home. "I wouldn't be surprised if that's another reason why Fralick sent her down here, so that she'd be out of the way and anything she might witness wouldn't be an issue after he got hold of Linc."

The house was so terribly, unbelievably empty. "I bought this place because I thought I needed somewhere to be alone," Katy Romanova said, in a voice that was needlessly hushed. "That even more than so my sons could have a place to stay on Narsai, a place that could be another home for them. But now I realize I've hardly ever been here by myself, and I don't want to be!"

Johnnie put his familiar arm around her, and she leaned into him and absorbed comfort from his touch. There was a lot to be said for relationships that went back to a time when she had not been Fleet Admiral Romanova, not yet even a lowly cadet. It sometimes was wonderful to be held by someone who had been an adult while she was still a child, someone who had loved her then and who still loved her now.

He turned his head and kissed her, his lips pressing against her temple through her hair. It was a gesture that the few times George Fralick had seen it, had sent him into one of his prolonged sulks. But Linc never minded when Johnnie caressed her, Linc understood what the old bond meant.

What it really meant to a pair of Narsatians, not what it appeared to mean to a human male of Kesran upbringing or to a Morthan hybrid who'd grown up in exile on Sestus 3. But Linc didn't have to rely on appearances, Linc knew what went on in his wife's mind and in her heart.

"Mum?" Maddy sounded like a little girl, now. But that was a normal thing at thirteen, to ricochet wildly between child and adult and to do so without warning. Even if the girl hadn't had what must surely have been the strangest day of her short life...and it was going to get stranger, Katy thought as she put out

the arm that wasn't around Johnnie and drew her daughter close.

"The only Star Service ship in orbit when we both felt Linc leaving us, was the one your father and you came here on, Maddy," Katy said in her gentlest voice. "I'm not saying George is responsible, after all he's a civilian diplomat. But I do have to think that Linc is aboard the Archangel, I just don't see what else could have happened to him now that I've got the background straight."

"I think so, too," Maddy said, just as seriously and with adulthood back in her tone. "Are we going after him, Mum? Or are you going to call Papa and ask him to make Captain Giandrea bring Linc back?"

So simple, that solution. So easy and so obvious. If her father had done something to hurt her mother, it had to be a mistake; once he understood that, he would fix it. Even though the girl couldn't help knowing that George Fralick detested Lincoln Casey, she clearly did not realize that her beloved "papa" was capable of harming the woman who had been his wife and had given him his children.

But Katy knew just how much he was capable of injuring her, that although he would not allow anyone else to do her harm he had no compunctions whatsoever about hurting her himself. And he hated Linc, far more than even Linc himself could suspect.

Katy cuddled her daughter close, and said softly, "I'm not sure what we're going to do next, love. But your papa's not going to be able to help us with this, we're going to have to do it ourselves."

Not able? A falsehood, perhaps. Or perhaps not, because returning Romanova's husband to her unharmed was something George Fralick probably was genuinely incapable of doing now that he had finally managed to separate them after so many years of wanting to do so.

In the cavernous equipment barn at the Romanova Farmstead, Daniel Archer shook his head as he looked at his little trade-ship and marveled that Hansie had been able to set it down so precisely. But then, Hansie had been the finest pilot in the Star Service; any order that had taken away her commission for reasons unconnected with her behavior was a stupid order conceived (although not given) by a pack of fools.

"I never can believe that anything valuable can be moved from one world to another in such a small ship," came Rachel Kane's soft voice from Archer's elbow. Executive officer of a starship she might once have been, but for the first time in her life this woman was experiencing what it felt like to have her fate in her own hands. She was accustomed to being responsible for other lives, for a powerful ship, for choices that could affect millions of other people's futures; yet she was completely new at deciding how to spend any of her own time except for a few hours of "relaxation," because until now her whole life had been mapped out and all she had done was her duty.

"Perspective!" Dan said, and grinned. "I was just thinking how lucky we were to get anything as big as the Triad out of sight, on a world like Narsai that's either wide open spaces or crowded cities and not much in between."

"I don't understand why she hasn't been detected by now." Rachel reached out a hand to caress the ship's hull, with a look of wonder on her face that her companion understood well. How often was it possible to touch a ship from the outside, with one's bare skin? Not often, unless the ship was a minuscule shuttle or a lifeboat like the one that had sheltered Rachel for months while she and her unborn children lay suspended and awaiting rescue.

"If this were Terra or Kesra, or even one of the Sestus worlds, she would have been," Dan answered. "I'm not sure about Mortha, I don't know as much about how things work there. But on Narsai, you don't

scan someone else's farmstead from a ship or satellite in orbit to find out exactly what equipment's in the maintenance barns and what crops are growing and how many people are in the farmhouse. It's not just impolite, it's not allowed."

"So our safety right now depends on Narsatians being polite to each other?" Kane cocked her head, and the humor she'd learned from her classmates during her Academy days curved her mouth for a moment.

"You could put it that way, I suppose, but it wouldn't be quite accurate. It's not just a question of courtesy, Ms. Kane; it's a question of respect for custom that has the force of law. And if a visiting ship is detected making intrusive scans, its owners are invited to take their trade elsewhere." The voice that answered her wasn't Dan's voice, it was that of Reen Romanova. The silver-haired farm woman had come into the barn quietly, but not quietly enough to startle the two former military officers. If she had done that, one of them might have hurt her before realizing who she was - and Reen knew that. She wasn't familiar with many such people, but her cousin Katy was also her close friend.

"I can't imagine how you make policies like that one work here," Kane said. "But then, I can't imagine being a civilian."

"Well, you are one now!" Dan patted her shoulder, in a gesture that might have been a lover's caress or a comrade's reassurance but that he probably intended as both. "So, Reen. Narsai Control thinks they found us?"

"I believe so," Reen answered. "Katy just got condolences on your death from official sources, anyway. And the caller wanted to know why they found an extra person's DNA traces in the wreckage."

"Let me guess," Archer said, and he grinned. "An extra human female? Age about 30, which made her younger than any of the three human females who were supposed to be aboard the Triad?"

"Yes." Reen looked directly at Rachel Kane. "Odd DNA, too. If they didn't know better, they would have thought that trader had a gen aboard. But that would be impossible, of course, because gens are too valuable to be sold as slaves or as indentured servants."

Archer laughed aloud. Kane looked as if she couldn't decide whether to give him a hug, or hit him. After a moment she inquired dryly, "What did you use, Dan? To give them a nice clean sample of my DNA without making them realize you planted it?"

"Oh, that was easy. I just kept the stasis capsule from your lifeboat when I sold the boat itself back to the Star Service as salvage." Archer was still amused, although less ebulliently so now. "Had to get it off there anyway. We could sterilize the rest of the boat to conceal that you were ever aboard, but that capsule we'd have had to destroy. And that seemed like a hell of a waste, since I knew the time might come when we'd want to convince someone you weren't just missing but good and dead."

"When can we get off Narsai? And who was it that set us up, anyway?" Kane's sense of humor was stiff, even after years of practicing its use. On one level she admired and enjoyed her lover's mirth, but on another level she found it unsettling. Even downright annoying, sometimes.

"While I was off the ship getting you hooked up with the Matushka, the Archangel showed up in orbit and they sent over an inspection party. Triad's a Commonwealth trader, not registered out of a particular port of origin, so unfortunately they had a perfect right. They went everywhere - and if Hansie and the others hadn't gone right along behind them, she tells me, that surprise package would have gone up without us having any warning at all. When I found out Fralick was aboard the old Angel, when Maddy showed up, it started to fall into place. I already had the politics right - he's the Isolationists' main standard bearer, and one of the things they need most right now is to prevent ex-Service officers like us

scramblers from joining up with the Rebs to provide them with trained leadership." Dan passed a hand over his jaw.

He continued, "I wouldn't expect Captain Giandrea to order assassinations, but probably all he actually did was go along with the inspection to humor Fralick. That bastard's slippery as hell, there's not much I'd put past him - and he hates me almost as much as he hates Linc. He blames Linc for the Matushka leaving him, me for not having the decency to die when Ewan did, and both of us because we're in her life and he's out of it. So maybe I overshot when I made sure you got reported dead along with the rest of us, Rachel, but we didn't know Fralick was anywhere near Narsai when Hansie and I had to make that judgment call. And we did think it might be connected to you, at the time that was an assumption we had to make."

"So how long are we stuck here for?"

That some hosts might have thought her speech a rude one, did not enter Kane's mind. Fortunately Reen Romanova understood her real meaning, and notified Archer with a quick glance that she wasn't taking offense. The Narsatian farm woman said, "You're welcome to stay with us as long as you like, Ms. Kane. Dan knows that, he's been here many times. But since Narsatian laws and customs don't protect outworlders in any way, I suggest that you may be safer if you do leave as soon as you can. Hiding you is the only way we have of protecting you. If you are located here, there'll be nothing I can do to help you afterward."

Dan nodded and said, "Reen's right, you know. Now that the Archangel's left orbit I'm only going to wait until I've touched bases with the Matushka again. After that we're getting out of here. I thought letting you lie low on Narsai was a good idea, Rachel, but things are a hell of a lot different now than they were when I set this up."

Trabe Kourdakov looked again at the hard copy communication on his desk, and then he looked out the window of his office. He could see the northern parklands from here, and to the city's south lay one of Narsai's very few mountain ranges.

He loved MinTar, he always had. His own parents had been professors at this university, and he had hoped that if his daughter could not reconcile herself to living full-time on the Romanov Farmstead that maybe spending part of her time on faculty here might solve the problem. But Katy had done what it pleased her to do, first as a girl of eighteen by entering the Star Service; then as a young woman, by marrying a man who called Kesra instead of Narsai home.

Still, Kourdakov had been fond of the grandsons Katy and her husband had brought here so long ago as babies. And it had been fun having three of them instead of the usual one, or at most (to great social disapproval) two children that Narsatian families were allowed to produce. He had been glad for Katy that on Kesra she hadn't been pressured to abort one of her twins when she found out she was carrying not a second singleton, but both a second child and a third child simultaneously. That pressure would not be as great here on Narsai nowadays, of course; but Katy's boys had been born a generation ago, when traditions were stronger.

And then those boys had died in battle, under their mother's command. Little though he knew about warfare, Trabe Kourdakov was a descendant of people who had crossed light years of space to get here from Earth in an era when that had not been a safe and routine journey. He realized that in space people still died sometimes, and that in war they died often. He and his wife had grieved for their grandsons; he

and Cabbie had been ready to welcome Katy home and comfort her, as much as any parent could be comforted, because they knew what it felt like to lose a child. They had lost Katy's sister, after all; and while Katy had filled the dynastic gap in the Romanov line and had blessed their home with childish sounds and activities once more, neither Cabanne Romanova nor Trabe Kourdakov had pretended - even to each other - that Katy replaced their lost Madeleine.

Katy had gone directly back to Kesra after the battle and subsequent negotiations at Mistworld, though, so her parents had had no chance to console her. They had waited, expecting that in due time she would come to see them with the new daughter she named for her sister whom she hadn't known. For them to go to Kesra did not enter either of their heads, and that he could have done that did not cross Kourdakov's mind now.

After little Madeleine's birth Katy had once again done what pleased her, instead of her duty. She had left her husband - not to go back to her career (something her parents had learned to accept after more than twenty-five years of watching her do that again and again), but to become an unmarried woman once more. And she had not first brought her daughter home to Narsai, to be raised where a Romanova's daughter certainly should have been brought up. Incredibly, she had bowed to an alien judge's custody decision and had left the girl with her husband on Kesra.

Her formal union some months later with the Morthan man who had been her friend and comrade throughout her career was just one more unpleasant surprise for her parents. Human women sometimes did marry Morthan males; and while Kourdakov personally found the rumors about those hybrid creatures' sexual prowess disgusting, he supposed what women who weren't Narsatian heiresses did was their own business. But his Katy was a direct descendant of her world's original settlers! She had a social position that was worth protecting; her ancestors' dignity should have meant more to her than whatever it was her second husband did to her in bed, that could make her forget everything that was decent.

Fralick had to have been right, she'd probably been giving herself to the mindfucker all along. Only through genetic verification had the poor fellow even been sure that Madeleine was indeed his child, and not that pervert Casey's.

Like most human males (George Fralick included), Trabe Kourdakov knew intellectually that matings between Morthan males and human females were sterile; but in his gut he was sure that sometime, somewhere, some human woman was going to become the first to bear a child from such a union. All of Kourdakov's intelligence and scholarship could not overcome his instinctive reaction to the idea of his daughter lying in a Morthan's arms; as far as he was concerned, Katy had allowed herself to be contaminated.

So he'd had no contact with his child since before her boys had been killed, until now. Until this moment, when he looked up from the message after perusing it one more time - and realized that he really was hearing his daughter's voice, that after all this time he really was seeing her face.

CHAPTER 10

"Hello, Dad." Most Narsatian children used that form of male-parent address. Maddy's "Papa" to George Fralick was very much a Kesran-human speech pattern, although her "Mum" to Katy was typically Narsatian.

The Standard language was spoken recognizably on all the Outworlds just as much as it was on

Terra, but it did have its varying accents and permutations. Dan Archer to this day could barely open his mouth without identifying himself as a miner's grandson from Sestus 4, for example; and Lincoln Casey had worked hard to eradicate the last traces of Sestus 3 country-folk inflection from his speech.

"Catherine." Trabe Kourdakov addressed his daughter that way when he thought it necessary to be formal with her, and after so long a separation he could scarcely be anything else. They had lived just a few kilometers apart for the past seven months, but had not seen each other; and through all the years since her divorce from Fralick, they had not spoken once.

Until now. She was standing in his office's doorway, with her mother at one of her shoulders and with a brown-eyed girl at the other.

Damn Cabbie, she could be sentimental at times. Which was why Kourdakov was glad he occupied the Senior Chair of the Council just now, because although Cabbie had done a good job of leading Narsai while the role was primarily that of a ceremonial parent-figure the present was a time when hard decisions must be made.

He'd never understood how Katy could do the job of a starship commander, and later that of a fleet admiral. Katy could be just as sentimental as her mother. But perhaps he hadn't seen her in action when the situation required that she be as pragmatic as Trabe himself was capable of being; maybe, just maybe, what he had always thought of as her willfulness was that kind of strength coming out in her after all.

At any rate she was taking a gamble by coming here right now, and she had to know that. She wasn't a stupid woman, he knew that much about her for sure.

"This is Maddy," his daughter said now, and gently pushed her own daughter forward into the room. "Her father wants her to stay with me until the possibility of war is over."

The possibility of war was never going to be over. Not as long as food grown on Narsai had to be shipped to Terra or one of the other Inner Worlds, even in years when it was needed more by lean-rationed colonies such as Farthinghome or Claymore. Not as long as Outworld people like Katy Romanova were welcome to give their lives in service to the Commonwealth's defense force, but their home-worlds' delegations on the Diet consisted of a single ceremonial representative from each planet (or incredibly, in the case of Sestus 3 and Sestus 4 which were so drastically unlike even though they orbited the same star, a single representative from one system!). A representative who could make speeches and give advice, but who could not vote; while from every ancient nation-state on Terra itself, and from every identifiable region of each of the Inner Worlds, came a representative who had full voting powers.

Having Katy as Fleet Admiral of the Star Service had given Narsai more potential for power than it had ever possessed in the past. From time to time during her tenure in that post she had come close to speaking with one or the other of her parents on official business, but she always chose to have an adjutant make the contact for her (an adjutant who was not her husband, since by then Casey had been given command of the Academy). So neither Cabanne Romanova during her Senior Chairship of the Council, nor Trabe Kourdakov after that Chair became his, had used their relationship to the Fleet Admiral as they might have been expected to utilize it.

It had been almost amusing, sometimes, to hear other philosophers singing his praises for practicing such unbending ethics. How little those admiring colleagues knew about how things really were!

But now she was here, and Kourdakov was involuntarily reaching out a hand that had grown thin with time's passing to take the firm young hand of his grandchild. The girl was looking at him with typical brown Romanova eyes, eyes just like Cabbie's; and she was saying softly and in perfect accentless Terran Standard, "Hello, Granfer. Mum says that's what I should call you."

"Hello, Madeleine." He used the full name, not to be formal this time but to make himself get used to it. He had never called his own Madeleine "Maddy." "So you've finally come to see us, have you?"

"Papa didn't want me to before, but he said it was all right to come now," the child said, and she smiled. Not shyly, but nevertheless with a certain reserve.

"Dad, do you know where my husband is?" Katy had waited to ask that as long as she could. In battle she was capable of waiting out an enemy forever, if that was what she had to do in order to win; but now her adversary might be the man who had held her hands while she had learned to toddle, the man in whose arms she had learned how to dance. It was possible that the same voice she could remember reading her bedtime stories had offered Narsai's support if George Fralick took her husband away to be imprisoned and threatened in order to control her actions, and that possibility was so horrible that she had to know whether or not it was true.

Trabe Kourdakov's surprise was genuine as he asked, "What are you talking about, Katy? As far as I know your Morthan's wherever he usually would be at evening first-hour. And I think you and your mother had better come in here and shut the door, because this comm I've just read through about six times without being able to decide how to answer it is about you."

"Is it what you were expecting, Trabe?" his wife asked. She stepped into the office, pulled Katy in with her, and sealed the entrance with a light touch.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is." Kourdakov held out the message, and watched as Katy took it and read it and tried to absorb it.

"Mum?" Maddy asked. She was standing between her grandparents now, and each of them was holding one of her hands. And although she had seen neither of these two old people until today, she looked comfortable; it was only the expression on her mother's face that was troubling her, the way that Katy's normally dusky rose cheeks had turned chalky white.

Katy sat down in the guest chair. She said quietly, "I'm being called back to active duty, Maddy. I guess that's one way for the Service to make sure I won't answer any Reb draft - but I've got to admit I wasn't expecting this, even if your grandfather was."

"If you refuse to do what they tell you, it's treason. Isn't it, Mum?" Young Maddy spoke first, ending the hush that had filled her grandfather's office.

It was indeed coming on toward evening. The girl had eaten a swift meal at the Romanov Farmstead, hours ago; but she was just a child, she had to be tired and she must be getting hungry again. Katy found herself focusing on those maternal concerns, and realized as she did so that they were a way she could distract herself just as much as they were issues to which she truly must attend.

But Maddy didn't look or sound tired, and her question was exactly the one that was in the mind of each adult. Cabanne Romanova asked quietly, "Is she right, Katy? Can't you refuse, especially if you have a personal crisis that needs your attention right now?"

"Retirement doesn't cancel my service oath, Mum." Katy shook her head. "Only resignation would have done that, and frankly I don't know whether it's possible to resign after accepting retirement. That's one issue I'm sure the Judge Advocate General has never had to rule on!"

"But didn't you just try to tell us that something's happened to Linc, that you don't know where he is?" Long ago, when Lincoln Casey had been simply her daughter's comrade, Cabanne had liked the man and had enjoyed talking with him about Morthan culture and biology. She had found him far less

inhibited about such matters than were most members of his species, and with that frankness he had more than made up for his lack of knowledge in some areas. The old woman found she did not like hearing that Casey was missing, no matter how many times during the past twelve years she had thought she wished he would disappear from her daughter's life. "Surely you won't be expected to drop everything and take passage to Terra, they certainly ought to give you time to arrange your affairs here. And if you have a family concern, for gods' sake if your husband is missing....!"

"Surely nothing, Mum," Katy said, in a way that just missed rudeness. "Linc is gone, yes. He vanished from our home sometime while Maddy and I were away from it today, and I know damned well he didn't just disappear because he wanted to! But even if I had him right here beside me, I'd still be wondering what in hell I'm going to do now. I feel like that Terran general must have felt, the one in the North American civil war - what was his name?"

She looked automatically toward her father, who although his professorship was in philosophy had forgotten more Terran history than many scholars had ever studied. Kourdakov supplied, "Robert E. Lee, Katy. A graduate of the old United States of America's equivalent of our Star Service Academy; a general in his country's army, who finally decided to side with the rebels because he found that he couldn't take up arms against soldiers from his home district. Or his home state, as they called it then."

"Yes. Anyway, I know just how he must have felt!" Katy sighed. "Whichever side I come down on, if the worst does happen I'll be fighting against people I care about. I wonder if that General Lee person ever considered just running away to live in some other nation-state?"

"Well, Katy-love, you won't have to do that." The old paternal endearment slipped out on its own. Not that Kourdakov had been trying very hard to hold it back, of course. He was interacting with his only living child again, and remaining cold and formal with her was something he had known at the conversation's start he would not be able to do for very long. "There's a new Commonwealth accord we've been able to obtain for Narsai, that you probably don't know about because there hasn't been time to publicize it since it was finalized. None of our citizens can be accepted into the Star Service now without the Council's consent. So although in your case there's obviously room for interpretation - you're a retiree being recalled to duty, not a prospective cadet about to take the oath - we may be able to block that recall, at least temporarily. If you want us to. And that's why the order came to you through me as Senior Chairholder on the Council, instead of being routed directly as such a comm would have been before the new accord."

Katy was glad she was sitting down. She stared at her father, and then she shook her head. She said, "Let me understand this, Dad. That's a new 'right' that you've 'obtained' for Narsatian citizens? Which will make sure that no other eighteen-year-old can do what your daughter did, and sign up at the Academy against her or his family's wishes. Very good! It took you forty years but you finally fixed the problem."

"Your mother said you'd take it this way when you found out about it." Kourdakov had braced himself, and now he knew it had been with reason. "Actually we on the Council were thinking about Narsatian sailors on merchant ships, running up against Terran press gangs."

"That was how you sold the other members the idea? I'll retract that 'very good,' then, Dad. I'll have to make it 'spectacular,' instead." Katy smiled, bitterly and crookedly. "I came here to see if the captain of the Archangel had the Council's consent when he ordered my husband kidnapped, because I'm damned certain that's what has happened to him. I also wanted to know if Narsai Control knew more than what their grief counselor told me about the explosion of a trade-ship called Triad, in orbit this morning. But I guess coming to my father was the wrong thing for me to do! You'd think I might have learned that by

now, though, even if I haven't been paying attention to every puff of hot air that the Council blows." She rose from the chair, nodded to her mother, and reached for her child. "Come on, Maddy. Visit's over."

"Are you going to answer the recall order, Katy? Or are you going to stay here and resist it, or leave Narsai to join the Rebs while you still can?" Cabanne Romanova did not leave her husband's side as her daughter headed for the door, but she spoke quickly in hopes of getting an answer.

"She won't have to do anything she doesn't want to do," Trabe Kourdakov said, his voice suddenly the ringing one of a philosopher in debating form. "Katy, give me that hard copy. I've already 'lost' the message itself; it's been erased from university computer storage, even the record that it came in is gone from the relay at the orbital comm station. Now let's lose that hard copy."

"This won't solve it, Dad." But Katy's eyes were stinging as she turned back. She gave him the sheet of flimsy fiber-based material, and she watched as it turned into fine gray ash. "When I don't answer, they'll just go around you and contact me directly after all."

"True. But now you have some time before that happens, and now you have forewarning. And if you can't think of something to do with those advantages, then I'll be damned if I can imagine why you ever were given command of a lifeboat - let alone command of the whole Star Service." Kourdakov grinned tautly. "Face it, Katy, it's a preemptive strike on the Commonwealth's part and it's a brilliant one. They're scared to death the Rebs will tap you and you'll agree to help them, so they're pulling you back before that can happen."

"You're right about that, Dad." The former Fleet Admiral gave her father back an exact duplicate of his own grin. "I had it figured that way myself."

She paused in the university's coffee shop and bought two sandwiches, and ate hers without tasting it. She gulped coffee, and made sure Maddy had a beverage that was familiar to a child who had spent her entire lifetime on another planet.

Should she have left the little girl with her grandparents? One would think that the home of the Senior Chairholder of the Narsatian Council would be a safe place for anyone.... But one would also have thought that the home of the former Fleet Admiral of the Star Service would be a safe place for her husband, who was also an officer of many years' experience. And it hadn't been safe there for Linc, not at all.

She would have to keep Maddy with her. In her sight at all times, and preferably within her reach.

Damn. She had loved her boys, but she had felt encumbered by their presence when they had been under her command as officers on other ships. To have a little girl of thirteen on her hands was galling, now when she needed desperately to be free to move swiftly and do whatever it took to go after the Archangel and get Linc back.

CHAPTER 11

Daniel Archer was trying not to pace the control room of his ship, because there really was not enough deck space to permit such an activity. He had been able to pace in the engine room of the Archangel, and Rachel Kane had been able to pace on the starship's bridge; but here they did not have that luxury, even though they were the compartment's only occupants.

Archer's co-shipowners were not happy, to the extent that even his old friend Hansie Braeden was deliberately avoiding him right now. Hansie had known there was an occupied stasis tube on the lifeboat they'd salvaged, but that it had contained a gen? They were in this much trouble because their captain and senior partner had been sleeping with a goddamned gen, and then hadn't been willing to surrender her to the authorities when she turned up pregnant and in stasis? Because they were sure, every one of them, that it was for sheltering that gen - however briefly - their ship had been targeted for destruction. And Archer was choosing to let them think that, since no one else aboard Triad was likely to believe what he had deduced as the real reason.

"You shouldn't have tried to help me," Rachel Kane said softly to her lover, as she sat in the navigator's chair and watched Archer's face as he sat in the pilot's seat. "Even now, you should leave me behind when you make your run for open space. Tell your friends you didn't realize you were putting them in so much danger, get them out of this mess, and then they just may forgive you."

"You don't sound much like a command officer!" He reached for her hand, and once he'd captured it he squeezed it tenderly. "That won't work, Rachel. Even if I was willing to leave you, which I'm not, I'd be lying if I told them I didn't realize I was putting them at risk. I knew - I kept them in the dark, about some things I'm still keeping them there - and they're right to be mad as hell." With that the ex-engineer reached out to the comm, which was beeping for attention. "What the hell? Oh, Reen, I'm sorry. I don't know when I've been this jumpy! What is it?"

"Get everyone off that ship, now," Reen Romanova said bluntly from somewhere inside the farmhouse. "The Archangel's back in orbit, and I've just decided not to respond to a call from her captain asking if anyone down here knows what's in the barn that doesn't belong there. Quick, there's no time!"

Archer slapped the emergency alarm, the civilian vessel's ear-piercing equivalent of a military starship's "red alert." He bellowed into the comm pickup, "Abandon ship! Everyone out, now!"

He reached up and steadied his pregnant companion on the access ladder's final rungs, since lowering a ramp would have taken time that they did not have. Once her feet were on the barn's floor, they turned together and they dashed out through a forcefield that prevented cold and bad weather from entering the building without keeping solid objects such as humans from moving in and out of it.

A moment after they were clear of the barn, the ship started to move. It took the structure's roof along, it ascended slowly and almost painfully - as if it were fighting not to rise.

Reen called from the farmhouse's door. "Get in here! We're going underground, hurry!"

Her two guests obeyed her. They dashed inside the farmhouse's kitchen, and followed Reen into a lift that took them far underneath that room.

Even from the shaft's lowest reaches they felt the explosion. Hansie had made it to the Triad's control room and had brought the engines on line, she had fought to break the Archangel's tractor beam with everything the trade-ship had...the farmhouse was rubble, and a crater yawned where the maintenance barn had been, when the three people who had fled to safety underground returned to the surface. Not at the point from which they had descended, but half a klick away.

There had been a time in Narsai's history when another interplanetary war had threatened. Most farmsteads still possessed a network of underground tunnels and shelters dating from that time, so that if their residents were forced downward they would not be obliged to re-emerge in a predictable spot where an enemy could be waiting to pick them off.

People in Star Service uniforms were already on the ground scanning the rubble when the three survivors looked out of the remains of a small outbuilding where they had come back to the surface, and

the sight made Dan Archer's stomach contract sickly.

He and Hansie had managed to get away with their swift switch of ship's I.D. codes, and with the Triad's descent into hiding, because even though someone on the Archangel's inspection party almost certainly had planted the explosives Captain Giandrea and his officers hadn't been looking for Dan and his partners then.

But they were now, and that was for damned sure.

"Thanks for waiting so long, Johnnie." Katy found her cousin still there when she returned to her home as twilight became full darkness, and that didn't surprise her.

Maddy had done what she ought to have remembered a young adolescent was very likely to do, and had suddenly fallen sound asleep in the aircar. Her mother was untroubled by lifting the girl's weight - she might have put on a couple of kilos since she'd stopped taking full combat training, but she had remained active enough so that she could handle Maddy easily. But what she was supposed to do with a sleepy child, when she was smack in the middle of a crisis, she had no idea.

Johnnie took the girl from Katy's arms, and put her on the sofa and covered her with an afghan. And inquired softly after he had done so, "Did you think I'd leave you until I knew what you're going to do next, Katy? I take it things didn't go very well with Uncle Trabe."

"They did and they didn't," she answered. But before she could say anything more, before she could start to tell him about her first conversation with her parents in as many years as Maddy had been alive, she felt something she had not hoped to feel again any time soon.

She stiffened, and closed her eyes. She swallowed, hard. And without words she cried out.

"Linc! Oh, Linc, it is you."

"Yes, Katy, it's me. Listen fast, if anyone up here realizes we can do this they're apt to put me under sedation or into stasis. I'm in the brig aboard the Archangel. I'm not sure - "

Love had enveloped her, she had clearly perceived a familiar masculine strength and tenderness. And then the loved presence was gone, thankfully not in a burst of fear and physical pain like the one she had felt some hours before - but in an abrupt vanishing of the connection. One second he was with her, they were touching as intimately as if she had been holding his body in her arms; and the next instant he was completely absent from her universe.

Then she heard Maddy's startled cry.

"Mum?" The girl was sitting up on the edge of the sofa when Katy turned toward her. She had the afghan tangled around her, and she was struggling sleepily to get free from it. Her eyes were wide open, though; and she looked as frightened as she sounded. "Mum, was that a dream I just had? I thought I heard Linc's voice, but he's not here."

Katy gently brushed Johnnie's comforting hand aside. She went to her child, sat down beside her and unsnarled the afghan. She said, "You did hear him, Maddy. Just for a minute, then someone stopped him from being able to talk to us."

"Do you mean they killed him?"

Oh, gods, the directness of the young! But Katy meant it with all her soul when she answered firmly, "I won't believe that. They did something to make him unconscious, and that's certainly not good; but anyone who's gone to the trouble of kidnapping him and keeping him alive for this long, isn't likely to kill him unless they absolutely have to."

"I heard him say Archangel." Maddy yawned, and reached up to scrub a hand across her eyes. "I thought I heard 'brig.'"

I wonder what you'd have heard if Linc and I had been making love? Katy thought, and then was ashamed of herself. Not that marital privacy wasn't a completely legitimate concern, but right now it was one that did not matter. One that might never matter again.... She crushed that thought by asking, "Maddy, is your father the only civilian passenger on the Archangel?"

She hated to ask even that innocent a question; she, at least, had vowed never to use her daughter as a source of information about her ex-husband's activities. Nor had she ever deliberately said or written anything to Maddy that would have reduced her father's standing in her eyes - but that kind of fair play might now be on a very short course toward becoming an unaffordable luxury, because finding a way to leave Maddy safely out of it while she went after Linc was not going to be possible.

"I think so," the girl answered, her drowsiness returning as fatigue reasserted itself. What was the difference between the Greenwich Mean Time that was followed by all starships, and local time in the Narsatian city of MinTar? Lord knew how long it had actually been since the child's "day" had started. "I was lonesome on the way here, Mum. Papa didn't want me to talk to the officers, and there wasn't anyone else on board I could have talked to."

The comm's announcer signal sounded then, and Katy moved toward it. She was aware of Johnnie taking her place at Maddy's side, putting his arm around the child and saying something to her in a soft paternal voice; and in spite of everything, Katy smiled to herself. How would that sight affect George Fralick if he could see it, she wondered? The Johnnie Romanov who had been Katy's own lover, from the time she was thirteen until she had left Narsai at eighteen, sitting on a sofa with his arm around thirteen-year-old Maddy.

Fralick would probably have a stroke. Which right now didn't bother Katy one bit, even when it was her former husband's face that greeted her when she accepted the transmission.

"Katy? Where's Maddy, is she all right?" was the first thing Fralick said, his voice a tense demand.

"She's here with me, she's tired out but otherwise she's fine." Romanova glanced toward her daughter, and saw that Maddy had roused again at the sound of her father's voice. "Do you want to talk to her?"

"Papa?" Maddy sounded puzzled, and sleepy.

Her voice made it to the pickup, because Fralick's concerned face relaxed. But he said softly, as if to himself, "I should have left her on Kesra, nothing's going the way I expected. Damn! But it's too late for me to rethink that now."

"Much as I've wanted to have her with me, for the past thirteen years - I have to agree with you this time, George." Katy nodded sadly. "Now, dammit, tell me what's going on. I know you have Linc up there in your brig. And don't try to tell me you're a civilian passenger and you had nothing to do with it, because I'm not going to believe you!"

"Got your recall order yet, Katy? If so, you're going to have to refuse it." Fralick had hesitated only a moment before he decided to plunge ahead, and not worry about what a sleepy little girl just barely within hearing might pick up of the conversation. He didn't want to wait while his ex-wife corrected that situation; in fact, he really did not want Maddy out of her mother's sight.

He had misjudged the situation, misjudged it badly. And George Fralick hated it when that happened, even when the stakes were far lower - personally and officially - than they were right now. He went on, "The idea of taking your - husband - along to Terra with us, was to make sure you wouldn't

agree to help the Rebs. But I wasn't expecting the Star Service to recall you to duty, I only just found out about that when we got back here and I picked up the latest dispatches; and I'm telling you right now you'd better not accept that recall. Back in command of the Fleet is the last place I want to see you, I want you to stay right where you are."

"I have no intention of going back to the Fleet, George." She hadn't been sure until this moment how she would finally answer that order. Her father had bought her time that she needed to get Linc back safely, but once that most pressing of concerns was answered she would still have to face the moral implications of that order - and now she knew how she was going to respond.

She wasn't going to return meekly to Terra and let the Star Service put her out to some kind of pasture there, nor was she going to lead that Service to victory over her own native world. If George had thought he needed to hold someone she loved hostage to keep her from doing that, or to keep her from providing the so-called Rebs with her services, then George knew less about his own former wife than he did about anyone else in the universe.

Now, that was entirely possible. After all, George looked at her through a film of assumptions; while he looked at other people clear-eyed, for the most part anyway.

At least he had caught himself before he had called Linc by that dreadful vernacular term that was often substituted for "Morthan." Probably just in case Maddy could hear him, because Katy could not imagine that her ex-husband had denied himself the pleasure of using that word in order to spare her feelings.

"That's good," Fralick said, and nodded his head thoughtfully. "I'll see that you aren't penalized, Katy, if we do succeed in fending off a war. And I still think that's possible, if hotheads like the ex-scramblers can be neutralized in time."

"So why did the Archangel turn back, after she'd sailed for Terra?" Romanova sensed a diversion in progress, and she moved swiftly to flank her former husband before he could escape.

Whether he could or could not protect her from being charged with treason if war didn't come, so that the Star Service continued to have a legal claim on her - or if war did come, but the Outworlds lost it - wasn't a matter she could address right now, so she chose to put it out of her mind. At worst, she thought, she might wind up permanently stuck on Narsai. There was no way her native world would allow one of its citizens to be extradited to Terra, especially not for a "crime" that was almost administrative in its nature. At best the recall order would be rescinded when the current crisis was over, and her failure to respond in time for her to be of any use could be blamed on the lost message that hadn't been relayed to her by the Narsatian Council.

"Pursuing a fugitive, of all the stupid reasons." Fralick scowled. "I can't believe that has priority over getting a diplomatic envoy to a negotiating table, but that's why we were turned back!"

"A fugitive? What kind of a fugitive?" Katy schooled her face into perfectly normal puzzlement.

"The kind that makes a bio-engineering company send a Corporate Marshal all the way from Terra to Narsai," Fralick answered. "A long-range shuttle carrying one hailed us, and he insisted that we come about and follow him in. He intended to catch up with us here anyway, but you know how tricky it is to match schedules when you're operating over interstellar distances."

Romanova nodded. She thought of Rachel Kane coming into this room starved and frightened and shivering, and she suppressed a shudder. But she said with apparent innocence, "I don't see why any company would send a Marshal all the way to Narsai, George. Gengineering of sentient life forms is illegal here. Hell, we don't even gen our cattle!"

Fralick turned away from the comm pickup he was using, and he spoke loudly to someone Romanova hadn't suspected was in the same compartment with him. "Giandrea!" he said, not rudely but with the kind of informality that sometimes passed for friendliness with people of his social standing. "Would you please explain the situation to Admiral Romanova? Since one of the people Marshal Vargas is looking for lists her home as his permanent residence, she and I are both concerned about our daughter's safety there."

Katy Romanova had bluffed a lot of enemies during the years of her service career, but it had never been harder for her to keep up an act than it was right now. They were seeking not just Rachel Kane - that she'd expected, from the instant she'd heard that a corporate marshal had become involved - but the marshal also knew about Dan Archer's part in this? She had accepted the possibility, but hearing it confirmed still jolted her.

Dan. Bound to her first by shared sorrow when her own boys had died; and since then, by many years of love. She and Linc desperately needing an adult child in their lives, Dan needing somewhere to call home and someone to be his family.

There were only two people in the universe whose safety mattered to her more than Dan's did. One of them was in the brig aboard the starship from which her former husband had just been speaking to her, and she had no idea what his state of health was although she was certain he was still living. The other was the little girl whom Johnnie Romanov had just resettled on the sofa across the room from her.

She hoped she would never have to choose between Linc and Maddy, because for the life of her she didn't know how a choice like that one could be made. Protecting Dan if she could still do that was a high priority; but if she had to decide during the next few moments, she knew she would let him go. Right along with Rachel Kane and the three unborn babies that belonged to both of them, if that was what it took for her to keep Linc and Maddy safe.

A person she did not recognize, dark-skinned and slim and of indeterminate age, appeared on the comm's viewscreen as George Fralick moved away from its pickup. A deep voice said, "Paolo Giandrea, Admiral. I apologize for what's happened to your husband, but I'm sure you know there are some orders an officer obeys even though he hates them."

"I understand that, Captain." He wore the four stripes which said that was his rank, not simply his title as commanding officer of a ship. But anything in Archangel's class did rate a full captain, the three stripes of a commander usually were considered sufficient only for vessels up to and including light cruisers. "Can you tell me if he's well? I can't imagine that he went willingly when he was taken away from here, and until just now no one had told me where he was."

If no one up there was bright enough to realize that a Morthan hybrid's wife could hear him when he called out to her telepathically, then she certainly wasn't going to remind them of that fact. Yet she really did want Giandrea's answer to her question, she was not simply trying to rattle him - although that would be a perfectly good strategic move, too.

"Our chief medical officer is monitoring Captain Casey's health, Admiral. I haven't had any adverse reports about him, that's as much as I can tell you." Giandrea's tone was guarded, as if he wanted very much to say more but knew he could not.

That was all right. Unless the Archangel was a very unusual ship, its CMO would be a Morthan hybrid. Like Linc. Better than Linc, much as Katy hated to think of her husband in those terms; but the fact was that most Morthan hybrids could do much more with their telepathic abilities than Linc could, and hopefully the one who was caring for him now would feel some sense of duty toward another member

of his species. Or at least a physician's compassion and decency toward a person who was being imprisoned only to gain control over the actions of someone who loved him.

Romanova nodded. She said, "Thank you, Captain Giandrea. Continue, if you please."

"Well." The man swallowed, as if that gave him time to collect his thoughts. "About eighteen months ago, just before the general order that discharged all officers who weren't Academy graduates, something completely unprecedented happened aboard my ship. My executive officer stole a lifeboat and tried to desert in it. Or at the time we believed she only 'tried' to desert, because of course we fired on her when she refused to come back aboard; and the readings we got afterward indicated that we'd destroyed her. But since then the lifeboat she stole has been found, a trader picked it up as salvage and sold it back to the Service at Narsai."

"What does that have to do with the Corporate Marshal who met you and made you come back here? He must have started out weeks ago, and I still don't understand why a Marshal would be involved in a Service officer's desertion." The block of ice in Katy's chest was getting larger and colder. Oh, Dan, why couldn't you have just blasted that lifeboat after you got Rachel off it, instead of selling the damnable thing?

But she knew the answer to that, his partners. In order to keep Rachel's existence secret from them, of course Dan had been obliged to do what they expected him to do with that valuable piece of salvage. And he would have thought he'd done an adequate job of erasing its identification codes; and he should have been able to, after all the man was a fully qualified computer science engineer.

But so were other people, and some of them were right here on Narsai. Damn!

"Oh, he was sent out to investigate as soon as my report on what had happened got back to the right people. You see, my executive officer was a gengineered human - the first gen that the HR Solutions Company ever designed especially for command-level military service. We've been using gens as ordinaries for years now, and they've worked out so well that we're getting close to no longer needing to impress crew members at all. But Rachel Kane was the first gen who was ever created with the abilities it takes to command a ship, to lead people who aren't other gens." Giandrea swallowed again, clearly that was a mannerism he used unconsciously when he was unhappy or nervous - or both, as he was right now.

He continued, "She was good, too. So damn good, I sometimes forgot she wasn't just another human officer! I thought of her as a friend. I wish I could be glad to know she didn't die when I had to fire on that lifeboat."

"So where does the Marshal think she is now?" Might as well ask that straight out, Romanova thought. Giandrea was hurting so much that she did not want to make him draw this out any longer, and she'd let him tell her enough of what she already knew so that she was not likely to slip up and accidentally reveal knowledge that she could not have gained from him.

"He knows where she is. She's dead now, after all. But not aboard the lifeboat, that survived to be picked up by the trade-ship I mentioned. It was called the Triad." Giandrea's gulps were fast becoming annoying.

"That was my foster son Dan Archer's ship," Romanova said, still trying to speed the younger officer up. "I was informed earlier today of his death, when the ship exploded in orbit. No one seemed to know why that happened, but positive DNA identifications were made of Dan and of the others who owned Triad with him."

"They also found Rachel Kane's DNA, and I wish that was the end of the trail." Giandrea suddenly squared his shoulders, firmed his jaw, and stopped that nervous gulping. He said in a starship

commander's steady tones, "But it wasn't. There was something peculiar about the debris, and although Narsai Control told us they couldn't possibly scan the surface of your world for the Triad if she still existed - if the debris was false - we could do that, and we did. And we found her."

"Where?" Ivan Romanov had come to stand at his cousin's side, and now he bent over her shoulder toward the pickup. His big farm-hardened hands gripped the back of her chair, and Katy found herself thinking that she was glad he wasn't squeezing her that way. She suspected he could have broken bones with that clasp.

"Who are you?" Giandrea wanted to know, quite reasonably since no doubt he had thought he was giving all this information to a person who still possessed high-level clearances.

"This is my cousin, Ivan Romanov," Katy interposed swiftly. "Proprietor of the Romanov Farmstead on the Upper North Continent."

"Oh. Then I have to give you my condolences, Mr. Romanov." Giandrea's face relaxed from tension into sadness. "The Triad was detected inside a structure on your land, just a little more than an hour ago. We attempted to bring her out using a tractor beam, but whoever was in command put up a fight. And I'm afraid whoever that was didn't just destroy the ship, and the people aboard her, and the building where she'd been hidden; there's not much left standing at all in that area now. Just a small out-building or two, and those pretty badly smashed up. I am sorry, Mr. Romanov. I hope you and your family were away, and that's how the fugitives happened to choose your property as a place to conceal themselves?"

CHAPTER 12

"I can't believe I ran away like that," Daniel Archer said softly.

"What?" Lorena Romanova sounded distracted, and she had good reason. She was working on a piece of technology that she understood and he did not, for all his starship engineer's certification. It had been around since Narsatian colonial days; and if she could get it operating, then the three of them - Reen, Dan, and Rachel Kane - would be able to get to the next farmstead without having to walk there via the underground passage that had (as far as they knew, at least) remained open in spite of the havoc that the Triad's death throes had caused on the surface above them.

Moving away from the Romanov Farmstead via any kind of surface travel right now was a certain way to wind up in the hands of the Star Service. The mop-up squad wouldn't hang around forever, but even after they returned to the ship the monitoring from orbit was sure to continue; and Archer had an uncomfortable feeling that whoever was directing the search for Rachel Kane (Captain Giandrea, under orders he hated but had to obey? or someone else?) was not going to be fooled this time into assuming she was dead.

Dan himself would be the target of a formal order to apprehend, as well, since by now the authorities had to know who had given shelter to the fugitive gen. Whether or not they knew more than that about his ties to her, he had no way to guess.

But in any case, by seeing to it that Rachel got off the trade-ship without waiting to take care of the rest of his people Dan Archer had done a thing he never could have imagined himself doing. He looked at her now in the dim light of the underground passage's ancient lumipanel, and he repeated dully, "I ran away. I left my people behind, and saved myself."

"You couldn't have saved them, Dan. All you could have done was die, too." Rachel's physical

stamina was superior to that of a randomly conceived human, but she was still less than a day away from her lifeboat ordeal's end and she was also burdened with three unborn babies. She had curled up in the tiny cabin of the ancient railcar while Reen worked on its propulsion system, and she was half asleep when she realized her lover was addressing her and not the universe in general.

"But I still shouldn't have left them like that." Archer sat down beside the woman who was carrying his children, and slid an arm around her - whether to give comfort or to gain it, he could not have said right then. The temperature this far underground was constant, but that unvarying temperature felt cool to a human being at rest. So she nestled against him for warmth, not only in an effort to give consolation; and soon she was asleep.

Reen Romanova went on working. And at length she said softly, "Shove over, Dan. Let's give it a try."

There was just room enough for the three of them inside the little railcar. It moved forward silently, glided along a course that was a scant meter wide and that lit up the darkness just before them and just behind them in a world that otherwise was utterly black.

The air that had been trapped here unused for generations was stale, but breathable. How fast they were moving, Dan could not estimate; but at least the woman beside him did not wake.

The shame of leaving his partners, his crew, dead behind him was something he would have to put away for later reflection. Right now he was selfishly thankful that Rachel had survived - and that since she was still living, he was alive too.

"We're not fugitives, we don't have to hide. Not yet, anyway."

So Katy had said, as she and Johnnie had gathered up the sleeping Maddy and had bundled her into a second aircar. The one they had used earlier in the day had been returned to its garage.

Johnnie was piloting, and when she would have a chance to rest again Katy could not guess. So she reclined the co-pilot's seat, curled her body as best she could within the safety harness's confines, and willed herself to fall asleep.

It was a skill she had mastered long ago, in cadet days; and it was just as useful now as it had been back then. Not only did it give her the edge of being rested for whatever she had to do next, it also kept her from having to endure a season of helplessly anticipating a future she dreaded and could not control.

She had been dreaming, and it was hard to come to the surface when she knew that consciousness was going to bring her a reality far less pleasant than the inner world of memory to which her dream had taken her. But she had to wake up, it was Johnnie's voice and not Linc's voice that she was hearing from close beside her...and although the seat that cradled her body was comfortable enough, it was definitely not the captain's berth back on the old Firestorm.

That had been her last night aboard the ship which was her final command as a captain, before she moved up to flag rank. She had waited for that night before she extended an invitation to her long-time executive officer, to the man who was her closest friend and dearest love, to share that berth with her.

Just why it had seemed so important to consummate the change in their relationship before they left their old lives behind them forever, she could not have said then and was no better able to say now. Linc had been nervous about that night, terribly and understandably so; maybe it had been for his sake that she'd wanted their first lovemaking to happen in familiar surroundings, but telling herself that was the only reason felt very much like an excuse.

Maybe she had needed to go into her career's next phase with that particular change behind her, and not ahead. And he had waited so long and so patiently for her to be ready; they had both known, almost from the day she came back aboard after leaving George Fralick's home on Kesra once she had borne and weaned Maddy, that Linc would be her husband now. But she had come back to him after that battle with George broken and hurting, her soul raw from the deaths of her sons - from their father's verbal brutality in blaming her for those deaths - and from having been made to choose either a continued life with a man who'd managed to kill her love for him, or separation from her baby daughter.

Staying and turning into the bitter, crippled thing that she knew such a life would make her, could never have benefited Maddy. So Katy had made the decision, the most painful one of her entire life, to let George raise their last child without her when what passed for a family court on Kesra would not consent to letting her take the baby to live even part of the time with her family on Narsai.

And then after one last outrage, she had reported for her final tour of duty aboard the Firestorm knowing that she had no business to be in command of anything just then.. Not even of a lifeboat, because she had been functioning only by reflex. Like a ship no longer under power but moving steadily through space until something interfered with its progress, she had let the momentum of years spent in training and of far more years spent practicing her profession carry her along. Linc had stood between her and the tasks for which those automatic responses would not have been enough; for weeks after she came "home" he had gone on commanding the ship in fact, although not in name.

His love had given her the priceless gift of the time she needed to grieve and to heal; and when she was herself again (an altered self, of course, but that fact did not surprise her - and fortunately it did not seem to disappoint him), the mental and emotional intimacy of that grieving-time remained between them. And he needed her now, as man needing woman; and she needed him, in exactly the same way.

And so they came to that night, when they no longer had to maintain the professionalism of captain and executive officer but had not yet launched their new on-duty relationship. They had held each other many times before, sharing comfort as friends and comrades; but they had never kissed, had never touched in any other way but as friends.

He was shy and gentle, and she was astonished at just how much that gentleness aroused her. Not that George had handled her roughly, because except on one occasion he certainly had not; but something profoundly moved her about seeing this big man, whose courage she knew better than anyone else in the universe could have known it after two decades as his commanding officer and even more years than that of serving beside him as his comrade, so eager and needing - and so uncertain.

The connection between their minds had been that night's salvation, she still believed that was true with all her soul. He hadn't had to wonder how she felt about his first clumsy kiss, he had known for certain that the taste of him intoxicated her in a way no one else's touch ever had. And he had known, from the thoughts that kiss called up within her mind, how to alter the alignment of his mouth against hers; just where she needed the gentle probing of his tongue, just when she wanted him to stop for a moment and give her time to make her own explorations.

She had taken his hands and had put them on her body, and had guided him while she let him feel the pleasure those touches gave her. Many times since that night she had been the one to caress him, but that first time she had known without having to be told in words that what he needed most of all was to prove to himself that he could please her - and so she had lain back in the bed, had squirmed and whimpered under his touch, and when the right moment came had spread her thighs and lifted her hips and guided him tenderly into her warmth.

After that he needed no more guidance, he was thoroughly male and his body knew what to do. And the newness of the experience for him made it new for her as well. She had known two previous lovers and had given birth to four children, but she had never before been touched exactly like this - on every level where it was possible for two sentient beings to communicate, until there was no sense of being separate left.

Those few brief moments of time had changed her, had made her part of him forever in a way she never could have become part of Johnnie Romanov or of George Fralick. Neither her girlhood lover nor her husband of more than twenty years was able to make love to her as Linc could, forging a union in which sheer physical pleasure was overwhelmed by an ecstatic oneness of spirit that might subside after release came and they were obliged to separate - but that never again would be entirely absent.

Wherever he was now, and whatever had been done to him to make their connection useless on a conscious level, that bond still existed. Katy could still feel it, and while right now it was giving her more discomfort than pleasure it nevertheless consoled her just because it was still there.

Because he was still there, still living even though he could not speak to her nor she to him.

"Katy?" Johnnie spoke just a trifle more loudly, but still tried not to raise his voice enough to wake the little girl behind them.

Katy opened her eyes at last, and then had to reach up and wipe tears from her cheeks. She said softly, "It's like it was a couple of times when Linc and I had to be separated by so much physical distance that we couldn't find each other. I know he's out there someplace, I know he isn't dead; but I can't touch him. And I'm so used to touching him, Johnnie!"

"I won't say 'I know,'" her cousin answered, his voice still very gentle. "But I am sorry, Katy-love. We're almost in, I just talked to the officer who's in charge of the Archangel's landing party and - they haven't found them. Not Reen or Dan or the Kane woman, anyhow; the rest they did find, in what was left of the ship."

"Oh, Johnnie, I'm the one who should be sorry!" Katy sat up, and ran a swift hand through her hair by way of making herself presentable. "Here I am fussing and crying because my husband's in the brig up there, and you're wondering whether your wife is alive or dead."

"I'm betting she's alive. But I don't want those bastards from the Service to know it, not right now anyway." Romanov flashed his cousin a taut grin. "There are things you never learned about the Farmstead, Katy, because you never did actually marry me."

"I won't ask you what that means," Katy decided after a moment of looking at him carefully and thinking that maybe she did not know him that well after all. Never once in staid, straitlaced, calm Johnnie had she seen an echo of their space-exploring ancestors' wild blood - but she was seeing it now.

Yes, George, I said straitlaced. We may believe in starting our unions early here on Narsai, but you'd be amazed at just how exclusive those unions are and at just how we despise people who break their marriage vows once they've taken them. But I've never talked with you, have I, about how my parents ignored me after I left you? As far as they're concerned I'm still your wife, and every time Linc touches me I'm committing adultery.

She put those thoughts aside, and glanced over her shoulder to see how George's daughter was doing. Maddy was cuddled up on the passenger seat, her eyes closed, breathing with the light regular breaths of a sleeping child.

Which changed even while Katy watched her. Maddy's eyes opened, she sat up so quickly that the safety harness clutched at her as if it had detected a crash in progress, and she uttered a cry that Katy

heard herself echoing.

"What the hell?" Johnnie wanted to know. He was setting the aircar down as he asked that question, and then he was speaking over its comm. "Lieutenant, this is Romanov again. I told you I have my cousin and her daughter aboard with me? Well, something's wrong with both of them. Have you got a medic in your shore party? No? Well, someone better do something damned quick! They're both having all they can do to keep breathing, and I don't have a clue about why."

CHAPTER 13

The teleporter the landing party had brought down from the starship, so that their people could move back and forth to the surface with ease instead of making constant shuttle trips, took Catherine Romanova and her daughter from the Romanov Farmstead to the Archangel in less than a second of elapsed time. She knew what was happening, because she could hear the voices around her and could feel the hands that touched her; but she was helpless, she could not respond in any way. She could not even open her eyes; she perceived Johnnie's worried voice and the landing party commander's exclamations and then the warmth of the teleporter washing over her, but she paid them little heed. It was taking all her concentration to make her chest rise and fall, as she persisted in breathing even though she could feel a terrible hand trying to grasp her lungs and hold them still forever.

Maddy was probably in a similar state, if indeed the little girl was still alive. After that one startled cry, she too had clutched at her throat and had started fighting for air. But this was one time when Katy could spare no attention even for her child, because if she did not keep herself alive then she could do nothing more for anyone.

Linc, where was Linc? Her distress was shared, just as the sensations of their lovemaking had always been shared. He, too, was fighting against that invisible hand. He, too, was breathing only out of sheer cussedness...out of pure determination to go on living until someone made that hand release him.

Sickbay. She had been rushed there from the teleport platform, a journey she had made many times before on other starships. She was aware of Maddy near her, in a way very much like that in which she was aware of Linc. That should have been frightening, to feel her child's mind in addition to her husband's - and for both of them to be as scared and as close to dying as she was - but at least they were together.

Three beings. Woman, man, and child; the little girl who was George Fralick's by biology and upbringing, but who had learn to recognize Lincoln Casey's mental touch in the days when she was developing from zygote to infant within the shelter of her mother's womb.

How funny that was, hilarious really, that Fralick was so jealous of Casey's intimacy with his ex-wife - but he hadn't a clue that his child was, in this vital sense, also Casey's child. In the last stages of oxygen deprivation before unconsciousness would claim her, when she knew she was losing the battle to live, Katy Romanova wanted to laugh and could not do so.

And then quite suddenly she could breathe again. The hand inside her chest was gone, and she was gulping air so enthusiastically that she soon felt a mask being pressed to her face and heard a voice instructing her, "Breathe slowly, Admiral. You'll hyperventilate, you'll make yourself ill. That's it, that's better. Relax, you're going to be all right now."

"Maddy?" she asked, as soon as the mask was taken away. It had been there only to break the frantic cadence of her breathing, to help her slow down before she did indeed go abruptly from starving for

oxygen to flooding her system with too much of that precious gas.

A man with golden eyes was standing beside her, but he wasn't Linc. He said, "She's all right, Admiral. But you both had a close call. Ambassador!" And he turned away from his patient, and spoke in no-nonsense medical tones to someone she could not see. "That settles it, I think. Putting Captain Casey into stasis isn't just a death sentence for him; somehow it's also a death sentence for Admiral Romanova here, and for your daughter."

George Fralick's voice answered, "That doesn't make a damned bit of sense, Marin. I know Casey's a mindfucker like you, but he always said he was a defective one. Couldn't do a thing, according to his medical files when he was serving as a junior officer under my command - "

"How many years ago?" The medical officer called Marin, which should make him part of Linc's own clanscribe on Mortha, spoke harshly now. "Ambassador, this woman may be your former wife; but she's Captain Casey's mate now, and when he went into respiratory failure in that stasis field she went right along with him. That doesn't always happen to a Morthan's mate, but it's a phenomenon I've seen before. And when the partner's a human it's worse, because she has no skills to help her resist experiencing her husband's physical distress."

"Why in hell was my daughter affected, then? What has Maddy got to do with that damned mindfucker Casey?" Fralick wanted to know.

"I hope she can't hear you, George." Katy's voice was thick, because her throat was raw from her battle to live. But she had a little strength now, enough so she could turn her head at least and search for him with her eyes.

"She can't. She's recovering, but she lost conscious and hasn't regained it yet." That was Marin cutting in, his tone even more severe. "But Admiral Romanova is right, Ambassador. However it is that her daughter, your daughter, was affected by Captain Casey's condition, hearing your anger at him is only going to frighten the child."

"Linc," Katy said. She directed the single word at Marin, and her tone made it into a Fleet Admiral's demand.

"I removed him from the stasis field just as you and your daughter were being brought into sickbay, Admiral. He started breathing normally immediately, and if it wasn't for the sedatives still in his system he'd be fine now. Just as you and Madeleine will be, after a few more minutes to recover." The medical officer scanned Romanova's body, and nodded in satisfaction. "Yes, you're fine already. You just need to rest, you've had a hell of a shock."

"I don't have time to rest." She struggled to sit up now, and was not surprised when Marin grumbled but helped her. If he'd been a starship physician long enough to rise to the rank he now held, then he had seen this type of behavior many times; he knew the only way to keep her prone would have been to restrain her, physically or chemically, and he was prepared to do neither just now. "George! You know Morthans often die in stasis. Dammit, what kind of cooperation did you think killing him was going to get you from me?"

She was mad now, and a glance toward her daughter's gurney made her more so. The girl lay completely still, except for the rise and fall of her chest. Her dusky little face was pale underneath its natural skin tones, and her body was completely limp.

"Damn you, answer me," she said to the child's father, and she bit off each word as if he were the greenest ensign she'd ever seen and quite possibly also the stupidest.

"No, Katy. You answer me." That command voice would have worked for her with just about any

fellow human she'd ever encountered, and with most nonhumans as well. But it wasn't going to work with George Fralick, not with the man who still thought of her as the woman whose body had no secrets from his and whose womb had carried his children. To Fralick, she had discovered at the end of two decades and more of responding to him with eager passion - even after the rest of their relationship had become alternately tense and distant - a woman who had lain beneath him in bed was and would always be someone he had proved he could dominate, could "possess" in the sense she had heard that word used in certain annoying old novels and stage plays.

What to her meant the sharing of love and the giving and receiving of pleasure, to him conferred a certain contempt on the partner whose body was invaded in the act of union and who for nine months afterward became increasingly ruled by the new life that his invasion could so easily begin. She had learned that to her cost, and seeing that knowledge confirmed now did not surprise her in the least.

But it made her angrier still, so that now the heat of her fury turned cold. And that was good, because that was when her intellect kicked into high gear and Catherine Romanova became a truly dangerous opponent.

George Fralick did not know that. He had been her captain, long ago at the start of her career; but he had never gone into battle with her in command, and in their private disagreements she had always held back the part of her nature that was ascendant now.

Always she'd had the children to think about, first their three boys and then small Maddy. Always, even that last night in his home on Kesra when his parting gift had been to take her against her will, Katy had held back from using her full fighting capacity against George Fralick. On that night she had known the only way to escape him was to kill him, or hurt him so badly that the Kesran authorities would have condemned her just as if she had killed him; and she had also known that on Kesra marital rape was a legal oxymoron, and the fact that she had been present in his house voluntarily while still his wife would have been all the defense Fralick needed for his actions. She had known he could be vain, she had known that where she was concerned he could be both irrational and possessive; but that he would deliberately hurt her, physically hurt her, had not entered her mind before then.

In order to live - so that baby Maddy would not have to begin her life with one parent being executed for having murdered the other while she lay in her crib in the next room, and while the Kesran house-servants pretended to hear nothing because what happened behind a married couple's bedroom door was not their business - Katy had stopped fighting at the moment when she knew what it would cost her to continue. And now she saw the same look on her former husband's face that she had seen on it then.

Only now she wasn't lying naked under him in a bedroom in his home on Kesra. Now she was in a starship sickbay, she was (damn and blast it!) the former commander of this and every other ship in the whole Star Service fleet, and that meant he was on her turf whether or not his vanity would allow him to see that.

Why hadn't she seen it, until this moment? What in hell had happened to her eighteen months ago on Earth, anyway, when the order ejecting the scramblers from the Service had come down from civilian authorities above her and Linc had started getting sick for the first time since she had known him? He'd been wounded in battle before, of course; but her husband had never once been ill. Morthans, the species that healed others, did not get sick.

And that had scared her, that had made her helpless. In just the same way, in spite of the drastically differing contexts, that being physically violated by George Fralick had temporarily robbed her of all that gave her personal power and self-confidence even though her yielding to him had been a conscious

choice.

A terrible choice, but one she knew that thousands - hell, more likely millions - of other human women had made before her, when trapped by circumstances that made yielding a lesser evil than the consequences of offering resistance.

She wasn't helpless now. But Linc was, and Maddy was, and she was the only person in the universe who could protect them. She said to Marin, "Comm, if you please, Commander!" And then when he held one out to her, with shock in his golden eyes, she said into it in the same tone: "Captain Giandrea. This is Fleet Admiral Catherine Romanova, Retired. I want to lodge an official complaint against George Fralick, citizen of Kesra. I'm charging him with attempting to kill three citizens of other Commonwealth Accord worlds. Myself and my daughter, Madeleine Romanova, citizens of Narsai; and Lincoln Casey, a citizen of Terra by his father's birth and a citizen of Mortha by his mother's birth."

"Admiral Romanova! You made it, you're alive!" Giandrea answered her promptly, and his relief carried plainly over the comm. "Ma'am, that's wonderful news. But I have to tell you that this ship was placed at Ambassador Fralick's disposal by the order of my superiors, and that even the diversion back here to Narsai to cooperate with the Corporate Marshal - "

"He wouldn't have acceded to that if he'd had the kind of authority that he seems to think he has," Romanova said sharply. She lifted her eyes, and looked straight into Fralick's eyes.

And knew she was right. She went on, "If he couldn't say 'no, we're not going back' to a Corporate Marshal, that means he's still expected to obey all the normal laws of the worlds that are part of the Commonwealth. And it also means that if you've allowed him to bully you into cooperating while he's violated the rights, and the person, of a civilian who has neither been charged with a crime nor made any threats against anyone you're supposed to be protecting - "

"It's my understanding, ma'am, that I'm under Mr. Fralick's orders. If he had told me to ignore the Marshal's hail, I would have done that." Giandrea had hesitated, but now he was plainly making up his mind and digging in his heels. "I'm sorry, but that's how it is. So I'll record your complaint, but until we reach a Star Service base or until I receive other orders...."

"That does it," Romanova said, much too quietly now. This she had not wanted to do, this she probably was going to regret five minutes after she did it; but under these circumstances that hardly mattered. If she failed to use the one weapon she had at her disposal now, Linc was going to die - she probably was, too - and although she did not believe George Fralick would deliberately harm his own child, the man plainly didn't understand the implications of his actions well enough for her to have confidence that he wouldn't wind up killing Maddy, too. So to hell with it, she would sort out the moral issues later; and in the meantime she would use everything she had to protect those for whom love had made her responsible.

She said, "Get me a yeoman, Captain Giandrea. And you get down here, too, because I need a command officer to witness what I'm about to do. Which is respond officially, on the record, to a 'recall to duty' order that reached me a few hours ago in my father's office. I'm going to accept that recall, and then I'm going to countermand the order you were given that puts you under Mr. Fralick's control. And don't try to tell me I can't do that, because I know Archangel's home port is New Orient and that means your orders were issued by a commodore. So I goddam well can do that, or anything else I see fit to do, unless you want to contact Fleet Command on Terra and let me make my complaint to my successor there! And I would love to do that, Captain. I almost hope you'll let me."

CHAPTER 14

Johnnie Romanov was thankful, immeasurably thankful, that his daughter and her husband had not appeared here; and that he knew his grandchild would not be doing so because that grandchild's university was not located on Narsai. His heirs knew all the proprietors' secrets about the farmstead, and right now his most pressing concern was to make sure the landing party from the Archangel went on being ignorant of those secrets.

If the missing trio had made it into the tunnels, and if they had managed to get the ancient railcar operating, they would arrive at the Wang Farmstead sometime tomorrow. If the rail system failed them (which it very well might, testing it was something that hadn't been done within Johnnie's memory), walking that many clicks would take them...how long? He didn't know, and when he thought about how pregnant that female gen already was he wondered if she could make it that far. Or if Reen could, because although his wife was in good health that would still be asking a lot of a woman who was accustomed to working hard but not to forced marches.

But Archer would be able to do it, the man was in his physical prime and looked as if he hadn't slacked off endurance training after he had been kicked out of the military. So someone would be coming up from the underground at the Wang place, and now Johnnie needed an excuse to go there without being trailed by the Service people who were still swarming all over the ruins of his own home.

A complex that dated back to colonial times had been laid waste. That should be bothering him terribly, but until he found Reen and held her safe in his arms again it wasn't going to trouble him at all.

How long since Katy and her child had been ported up to the starship? He checked his chrono, and was astonished that it hadn't yet been thirty minutes. He felt as if he had wandered around the wrecked farmstead for hours, getting in the landing party's way and trying to learn whatever he could about his wife's fate without leading those people anywhere near the tunnel exits that might still be intact.

"Mr. Romanov! Comm for you." The landing party's leader, a harried-looking lieutenant junior grade, had been remarkably sympathetic both in his response to Katy's and Maddy's desperate need for medical assistance and to Johnnie's own need to be allowed free access to what had recently been his home. He could easily have bundled the Narsatian man back into his aircar and told him that this site was off-limits to civilians until his people were finished with it, but instead he had merely kept a personal eye on the bereft farmer's movements.

Johnnie moved back into the aircar, preferring privacy for whatever communication this might be. Hopefully it would be the Wangs, asking if he was all right...and that would tell him what he wanted most to hear.

Instead Katy's voice greeted him, and so did her image in the aircar's tiny holoscreen. "Johnnie! Anything to report yet?"

"Not yet. Katy, I didn't expect you'd be back on your feet this fast! Is Maddy all right, too?" Romanov slumped into the pilot's seat. Suddenly he was aware of how long it had been since he'd got out of his bed that morning - almost yesterday morning, now - and of how alone he'd been feeling, after his cousin and her child had left him.

"We're both fine. Johnnie, I didn't have a choice. I had to accept the recall, getting myself sworn back into active service immediately was the only way I could see to solve what was going on up here." Katy's familiar face was tense, and she paused to glance away from the pickup for an instant before she continued. "What I can't do, unfortunately, is pull that landing party back until they've satisfied the

Marshal as to whether Ms. Kane died aboard the Triad or whether she's still a fugitive. We aren't at war, so there's no state of emergency that would justify me in countermanding a standard mutual aid order like the one Marshal Vargas is operating under."

"Where IS this Marshal Vargas, anyway?" Romanov had been wondering that all along, and now he hoped to get an answer. That Katy had abruptly reversed herself on the recall question, was an event that hardly registered with her cousin just now. It didn't matter to him, not compared to finding Reen alive.

"No one seems to know, Captain Giandrea included. And I don't like that, Johnnie. I don't like it at all." Katy glanced away from the pickup again. Then she said, "Tell me what I can do to help, I'm giving orders that you're to be put through to me immediately whenever you call. That's all I can do right now, as far as I know - correct?"

"Unfortunately, yes. But thanks, Katy. I'm glad you and Maddy are all right now. And Linc?" Johnnie's brain was foggy with a mixture of fatigue and worry, but he did remember that Katy's husband was up there on that ship and that he had been taken there as a hostage against her. But that should have changed, now that she'd acted in the last way George Fralick had expected she would act.

Somehow Johnnie Romanov wasn't surprised. He had quit being surprised by anything Katy did, on the day when she had commed to him from the Star Service Academy on Terra to tell him directly about her entrance there instead of at the civilian university she'd supposedly gone to Earth to attend.

Sweet, compliant little Katy, pushed too far in a direction where she didn't want to go, suddenly turning and doing exactly what she wanted and needed to do instead of what everyone around her was telling her she had to do. Yes, he'd seen that phenomenon before. More than once, in fact; but somehow whenever she did that she usually astounded those her reversal affected the most.

"He's waking up and he needs me, I have to go." The comm went blank, and as it did so Katy's image was already moving swiftly away from its pickup.

Johnnie Romanov sat for a moment longer, then realized that if he did not move out of this comfortable seat he was going to doze off. He shook his white head violently, heaved his big frame out of the aircar, and trudged back across the scarred dirt to find out what the scanning crew was doing as they swarmed through the remains of his devastated home.

"Shhh, it's all right." Katy said the words with both her voice and her thoughts, and as she did so she stroked her husband's head.

How long had they had him sedated, anyway? Not too long, because he hadn't been a prisoner for a full standard twenty-four hour starship day as yet; but during that time he had been stunned, knocked out chemically, put into stasis where he had come close to dying - and then pulled back just in time for his body to win its desperate fight to live. So she didn't wonder that he was drifting groggily back to consciousness, and that she felt fear and remembered pain and terrible aloneness as his thoughts found hers and clasped her tightly.

For these few moments she must depend on Giandrea to hold things together on her behalf, and if the man deserved to be a captain at all then he should be capable of doing that. She had given him the legal foundation he needed to stand on, now she must trust him to keep George Fralick in check until she had done what no one else could do - which was make sure Linc recovered from what had almost been his death.

A stupid, pointless, and downright ignominious death it would have been, too, for a man who had

served the Commonwealth so long and so well. Not that most deaths weren't stupid and wasteful, Katy had long ago learned that the noble sacrifice was the exception rather than the rule for those who gave their lives in service; but what had almost happened to Linc was beyond excusing.

And now she was trying not to blame herself, because she knew perfectly well that if she had answered that recall order from the surface of Narsai it would not have made a difference. George would never have let her get aboard the Archangel, any way but the way she had come - in an emergency that he hadn't anticipated and had not been able to control, so that she was there before he could prevent it. As it was she suspected that only the distraction of Maddy's presence, with the child's life in even more peril than her own, that had made it so simple for her to snatch control of the situation from under Fralick's nose.

Linc's arms were reaching for her now, the doctor had raised the head of the medical bed enough so that was possible. And she was leaning into his embrace, and then she was cradling him against her.

"My love, my love, my love." Holding him was like holding some severed, and now restored, part of herself. He quieted in her arms, slowly relaxed, and finally managed to speak to her - although it was in a voice she scarcely recognized.

"Katy. How long?"

"It's 2349 hours," she said, glancing up at the chrono near his bed. "Linc, I had to take command. After you were brought up here a recall to duty order caught up with me, and I was dodging it and trying to figure out what to do about it; and then when my bastard of an ex-husband had you put into stasis, I started dying along with you and so did Maddy. We were brought aboard, the doctor here took you out of stasis against George's orders - and when I got my wind back, the next thing I did was yell for a yeoman and a command-grade witness."

"Admiral Romanova," another voice said, with apology in its tone. "I'm sorry to interrupt you right now, but you need to know this."

Katy sighed, and turned her head toward the comm. She did not move away from her husband; in fact she tightened her arms around him as she said tautly, "Romanova here. What is it, Captain?"

"Ambassador Fralick has left the ship. He and Madeleine were ported to the Corporate Marshal's shuttle, just a couple of minutes ago."

"Damn! Oh, damn, damn, damn, damn!" Katy heard the series of monosyllables exploding from her lips, but her mind was listening to her husband's mind and he was listening with all his fast-returning strength for someone else's thoughts.

"I can't find her, Katy. But that may not mean a thing, she may not have regained consciousness yet from what my going into stasis did to her." Regret was in Casey's thoughts, poignant and sincere. "Damn, I wish being attuned to me didn't have that kind of effect on either of you!"

"It's not your fault," Katy told him, still without audible words. "And I accepted feeling pain with you a long time ago, Linc. I know you could have shielded me, and you would have, if you'd been conscious instead of sedated when the stasis field started working - but if you had done that, I'd never have found you in time. But Maddy - "

"I know. Fralick probably thinks he's protecting her from me, Katy. And maybe this time what the man's trying to do is right, maybe it really isn't safe for the kid to be around me if anything that harms me is also going to harm her. Damn, I didn't have this kind of spillover from my mother's mind - not when I

was Maddy's age, anyway!"

"But your parents didn't have the kind of telepathic connection you and I have, you've told me that," Katy objected, taking the time for this exchange even though she knew Giandrea was waiting on the other end of the open commlink for her instructions and probably couldn't comprehend why she was hesitating. The Morthan doctor, of course, knew why. He was courteously not intruding on the married couple's communion with each other, but he knew perfectly well what was happening between them in sickbay's apparent silence.

"True. My father found telepathy repulsive, unlike most humans who take Morthan mates he avoided that part of being intimate with my mother as much as it was possible for him to avoid it. I - don't think they slept together all that much, in fact, because you and I both know what effect that has over time on mind-to-mind bonding!" There was a flash of rueful humor in Casey's thoughts, which he squelched quickly. "I never knew what it was like to have his mind touch me while I was in my mother's womb. Which I realize now is probably exactly why I got stunted the way I did, I always assumed that because he was human it shouldn't have made a difference - but now I think it sure as hell did. Because it's pretty clear that my being around you while you carried Maddy did something to her. Something I started off thinking was wonderful when I finally got to meet her, but it doesn't seem very wonderful now that it's damned near killed the poor kid once and it's caused Fralick to haul her off."

"If it helps, my love, Maddy thought it was wonderful too." Katy kissed her husband as she sent that thought in his direction, and with it she sent every gram of love and reassurance that she was capable of projecting. "You'll be okay now. There wasn't a recall order for you, so for now at least you're still a civilian. Stay that way, all right? Until it works better for you to be something else, at least."

She took her arms from around him then, and she rose from his bedside and turned away. He let her go, but not without trailing a hand along her arm so that his fingers brushed against hers to maintain their physical contact through the last possible second. She said crisply to the younger golden-eyed man who was standing nearby, "Take good care of him, Doctor. Captain Giandrea! I'm on my way to your office. When I get there, I want Ambassador Fralick standing by on comm to talk to me. And tell Narsai Control to get ready to punch a transmission through to Fleet Command, the next thing I'll want to do is talk to them."

Well, it wasn't exactly the next thing she wanted to do; but it most definitely was the next thing she needed to do.

CHAPTER 15

"We've got them!" The triumphant bellow came from the throat of an unassuming, wiry little man in an unmarked jumpsuit, who had not been present at all when Johnnie Romanov had last looked over the work party's progress.

It was a moonlit night on the North Continent of Narsai, now. That particular moon hadn't risen until the night was half gone, but even before that the landing party from the Archangel had been going about its business in the illumination provided by their own portable light sources.

Johnnie Romanov had fallen asleep in the aircar, after having given in to temptation and calling his nearest neighbors at the Wang Farmstead. He had told them what had happened here, had listened to their outrage and their sympathy, and had said that three people were unaccounted for. And then he had known

he was understood, because Clara Wang had responded with a promise to "let you know if we hear anything, Johnnie."

In other words she and her spouse would watch their end of the ancient tunnel system, and if anyone reached them there they would be ready to give aid.

There was nothing more he could do, except talk to his daughter at her home in a far-off city. No, she did not need to come here and be with him; in fact he hoped she would not, because this was not something he wanted her to see. After that call he had curled up in exhaustion, figuring that whatever happened next he would be better able to cope with it if he rested while he was free to do so.

Now he swung himself out of the seat, and was just in time to see that the landing party's principals had congregated around a battered outbuilding where Romanov knew perfectly well the tunnel system had an access point. Somehow it didn't surprise him when he reached the building, having dashed across the space between it and the aircar, to hear the landing party's military commander saying to the little man in the plain jumpsuit, "We'll have them out of there shortly, Marshal. Congratulations."

"Your people did superb work, Lieutenant," the small man replied in that surprisingly resonant voice of his. Then he turned as Romanov approached and asked, "What can I do for you, Mr. Romanov?"

A trap, Johnnie realized immediately. This Corporate Marshal knew damned well that he, the farmstead's proprietor, must have been aware of the fugitives' location all along - and he was hoping to hear something that would amount to an admission of that knowledge.

He schooled his face into worried innocence, which really wasn't difficult because he certainly was worried, and he asked a question in return. "Did you find something, Marshal? You are the Marshal that HR Solutions sent after the missing gen, aren't you?"

The small man's eyes were light blue, so light they almost seemed colorless under these conditions. He studied Johnnie still more carefully as he answered, "I'm Vargas, yes. And we found something, all right, Mr. Romanov. Your ancestors had shelters, a place to go in case of alien attack on Narsai?"

"I've been told they did," Johnnie responded. "But - are you telling me the people whose bodies weren't found, went underground? Into an old shelter?" He let his voice rise with hope, even though that was decidedly not what he was actually feeling.

"Underground, anyway. And they're coming up now, all three of them. One would be your wife, I think." Vargas studied him a moment longer, with the air of a man who had all the time in the universe. He turned away only when there was fresh activity within the outbuilding's ruins.

The railcar started reversing its course after it had traveled some distance through the ancient passage toward the next farmstead. However, at that point its doing so was almost welcome; because it had stopped, brought to rest against rubble that blocked its course, and Dan Archer had to scramble back aboard it hastily in order to keep from being left behind.

He said to Reen Romanova, who had literally hauled him inside when he hadn't quite made it on his own, "Damn! I'd just made up my mind we were probably going to have to do this anyway, I couldn't see any chance of getting through that blockage without the kind of power and equipment that we just don't have - but I was hoping we might get back to where we started and find that no one's still looking for us there."

"Someone has to be, the remotes didn't activate by themselves," Reen answered him bluntly. She was starting to look haggard in the weak light of the lumipanel.

But she was in better shape than was the much younger woman beside her. Rachel Kane barely opened her eyes when Dan sat down at her other side, and when he put his arm around her she muttered unintelligibly and sank back into sleep.

She was armed; so was he. Reen was not, she'd had no reason to carry a weapon on a civilized world and inside her own home. But two blasters against everything a starship landing party could throw at them, was about as unequal a contest as Dan Archer could imagine.

And he knew all about what they were being drawn back into, because he had been part of such landing parties in the days before he'd become a senior engineer. And Rachel Kane, as a command officer, had led those parties many times.

Just how would the members of this particular party react, anyway, when two of the people they'd been sent to capture emerged from underground and were seen to be their own former executive officer and chief engineer? Not that there hadn't been personnel changes during the more than a year that he and Rachel had both been off the Archangel, but he was willing to bet that a good number of that landing party's members would turn out to be men and women who would recognize him - and that even more would recognize their former exec. Now, that could be worth something in delayed reaction times.

So could the usual human reluctance to do harm to a pregnant female. With a trapped animal's desperation, Daniel Archer thought and planned and struggled to find alternatives.

And as he did so the railcar carried him relentlessly backward to the place he least wanted to go in the entire universe right now, and the woman who carried his children lay limp against him and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

George Fralick kept his ex-wife waiting, which of course was a typical negotiator's tactic for putting an adversary at disadvantage. Which bothered Katy not at all, since she had a heavy starcruiser under her control and Fralick was aboard someone else's warp-capable shuttlecraft. Still, no one could have guessed that from Fralick's demeanor when he finally appeared in the holoscreen in Captain Giandrea's office. "Katy. Sorry to leave you without any explanation like that, but - "

"Cut the crap, George." She was speaking to him without measuring her words, because even though he had their daughter with him she now felt that she had nothing to lose where this man was concerned. Once she had needed him. He was her boys' father, and she was a Narsatian woman for whom unfaithfulness to a spouse wasn't thinkable. Whatever marital companionship she received would have to come from him, as she had viewed her future then; and their sons really had loved him even though he hadn't always seemed to understand that they were her children, too, and that some of their values and character traits had come from her. Then the boys had been gone, and even though George had been verbally abusive to her after that tragedy - hell, the man had been nothing less than cruel - still, he was the father of the little girl in her womb. And besides that she had felt sorry for him, and had convinced herself he must be insane with grief. He would get better; and after the baby came and they were a family again, they would both be able to heal.

It hadn't happened that way. She'd had to leave, or lose everything in life that kept her sane. Even his withholding Maddy from her hadn't been enough to change her mind. And then on the last night she would spend under his roof....

She had visited that house many times afterward, because he would not let her see her daughter anywhere else. But she had taken someone along with her each time, someone who wasn't a Kesran

servant who must turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to what happened between master and mistress, and she had never stayed there overnight again. And even with a fellow Service officer beside her (always a friend who, of course, knew nothing about what she'd suffered on her last night of residence there), Katy Romanova had done few things in her life that had required as much courage as had walking back into that place which had once been her home.

She pushed that memory aside, because if Linc should innocently reach for her she did not want him to find it in her mind. This one recollection she had withheld from him, as far as she knew with complete success, during even their most intimate moments of shared pain and shared rapture. She had made it plain to him, the first time they'd talked about their ability to speak mind to mind (which had happened long before the end of her marriage to George, back while she was still pregnant with Maddy), that there would always be private areas of her thoughts and that she expected him to stay out of those areas; and he had agreed to that, had in fact found it a completely normal and necessary desire. Even after they became lovers, he had gone on respecting the citadel at the heart of her individual consciousness. But to think about something which aroused emotions this powerful, at a time when she knew he might need to touch her, would be foolish. He might quite unintentionally pick up a stray thought from among the ones she did not want to share with him, given these circumstances; and she might find herself suddenly obliged to push him away, at just the moment when he needed her most urgently.

Besides, that was over. The only way George could hurt her now would be through Maddy, and George wasn't going to harm his own child. In fact George would never let anyone else hurt her, hurt Katy; that was a privilege that he had reserved for himself, because in his eyes she was still his property.

She looked into his face and she continued, "I've got incoming from Bill Tanaka at Fleet Command on Terra. Anything you'd like me to tell him, George?"

"No. But I'd like you to tell me what you'll do if he orders you to lead an attack on the Rebs, Katy." Fralick still didn't get it, that was plain. His tone and his choice of words indicated that he was still talking to the woman he felt he'd conquered, hundreds of times over the course of a long married life; and then in one final and decisive demonstration of his power to take control of her body and compel her will to bend to his.

And all that was over now, dammit. Katy asked softly, as she might have asked any other stuffed shirt of a diplomat who was being stupid enough to bait her, "Wouldn't you like to know the answer to that, George?" At which point she cut the commlink.

"You didn't ask him how your daughter is?" That question came from Paolo Giandrea, who was sitting in a guest chair in his own office and watching the woman who'd taken over his chair with astonished eyes.

"I know she's all right, or he'd have told me in graphic and heart-rending detail just exactly how she wasn't all right," Katy said, with a ghost of a grim smile playing about the corners of her mouth. "Trust me, that's experience talking and not speculation! And much as I love my daughter, right now she's not my top concern. Not while I know she's safe, and believe it or not she is safe with her father. He didn't know harming Linc would harm her, and frankly I didn't know it either. Now!" She changed the commlink's settings, and said to ops, "I'm ready for Admiral Tanaka now, Ensign."

Another familiar face appeared in the holoscreen. This one had almond-shaped black eyes, black hair that was showing white at its temples, and the smooth golden skin of a human whose ancestors had been bred in Earth's so-called Orient. But Willard Tanaka had grown up on New Orient, actually, and was therefore just as much a colonists' descendant as was Katy Romanova.

And yet if war came he would not be finding himself on the other side of the battle from his birthplace, because New Orient was a so-called "Inner World"; one of the first Terran colonies, now regarded as a co-equal part of the mother planet's political structure.

There were six "Inner Worlds," plus Terra itself. The rest of the Commonwealth consisted of Narsai, Kesra, Mortha, and the Sestus System with its two inhabited worlds, plus additional planets located even farther out and inhabited almost entirely by non-human species that had entered the Commonwealth purely for the trade advantages their membership brought.

Narsai and Sestus 3 were completely human worlds, with no greater populations of aliens and hybrids than had Terra (percentage-wise, anyway). Narsai was a place of crowded cities, where population growth was strictly limited and rich agricultural lands were carefully managed - with the result that there was always food for export, and that life for most Narsatians was comfortable. Sestus 3, by contrast, was sparsely settled - but that was because it had so little to recommend it. With its stinking (although perfectly breathable) atmosphere and its sparse soils and wildly uneven climate zones, it was positive proof that there could be such a thing as a Class M world where humans seldom chose to live if they had the option of living somewhere else.

Kesra, of course, belonged mostly to its indigenous species with their incredibly long life spans and their huge extended families. The native Kesrans did not overrun the relatively small land areas of their planet, though, because within each family most of the adults were deliberately neutered or naturally infertile males and females. Only one or at most two breeding pairs were allowed in each such group, in each generation. The humans who lived there were mostly transients, with just a few permanently resident families like that of George Fralick - whose forebears had been rewarded for helping the Kesrans, with the gift that to a Kesran was the most valuable thing one could be offered. Land enough for a residence, on their land-poor planet.

And then there was Sestus 4, where the main usefulness of humans was to serve the indigenous species through dangerous labor such as that which Dan Archer's grandparents had died performing in the mines; and then there was Mortha.

On Mortha there were millions of humans, and more millions of part-humans, and a relatively small number of more or less "pure" native Morthans. Mortha was the wild card of the Outworlds, because so many of the men on Mortha had been born on Terra or one of the other Inner Worlds; and because there were so many Morthan hybrids scattered throughout the Commonwealth, utilizing their unique gifts as healers of both the bodies and the minds of just about any other humanoid species they encountered.

"Normal" Morthans did not become fighters, which was one reason why Lincoln Casey had been such a fiercely driven cadet when Katy had first known him. To prove that he could do anything a fully human warrior could do, had been what motivated him in those days. Yet if Morthans as a species had been willing and able to go into battle as did their Terran counterparts, they would probably have been far more dangerous; because the abilities that they used to heal, could have been used just as effectively to devastate. What better advantage could there be, than to perceive an enemy's thoughts and feelings?

Again, Linc was different. He could not touch just anyone's thoughts, he could only touch Katy's - and now, little Maddy's as well. So Linc would never face the choice of whether or not to use his late-blooming and still terribly limited gifts to do harm. But the idea of a Morthan who might turn his mental abilities toward tormenting other beings, in the manner of humans who since time's beginning had killed and tortured their fellows, was an idea that frightened Katy Romanova like no other.

So the Rebs were trying to gather a fleet, were they? And rumor said they were forming it up out

beyond Mortha; that was the first thing she had learned from Paolo Giandrea, when she had asked him for the swiftest possible briefing on why he had been conveying George Fralick to meet with other Commonwealth representatives on Terra. Somehow that didn't surprise her, because peaceful Mortha was without a doubt the safest bulwark in the universe that the Rebs could have placed between themselves and the Star Service ships patrolling the vast distances among the Outworlds. And right now, obviously, the Commonwealth's more powerful members were concentrating on negotiations with the Outworlds' official representatives instead of massing military power to find that rumored Rebel fleet and wipe it out.

Yet if Sestus 4 should ever stop sending the Inner Worlds the ores their industries required, or if Narsai ever declined to send foodstuffs - or if Mortha stopped absorbing excess human males, and refused to send out its own men to become healers all over the rest of the human-explored galaxy (and yet never to sire offspring of their own, which no doubt made them particularly acceptable additions on worlds where population pressures were an issue) - that was the day when Terra and the other Inner Worlds could be counted upon to send as many ships as it took to destroy the Rebels, until the so-called trade balance was restored.

It was no balance, it was more like tribute. Katy Romanova knew that, but until now that had always been the Narsatian Council's concern and not hers.

To the man in the holoscreen she said, "Hello, Bill. It's been a long time."

"Too damned long, Katy! We'd started wondering if you and Linc had died after you left Terra, and no one had bothered to tell us." Her successor as Fleet Admiral gave her a warm, genuine smile of comradeship. "So you accepted recall. That's good, we need you."

"But you don't need my husband?" She deliberately used the words that defined the relationship, and not Linc's name. She needed another rumor confirmed or denied, and now was as good a time as any to try to make that happen.

Her tactic worked. Tanaka sighed, his smile disappeared, and he answered her with an old friend's bluntness. "Katy, we're not accepting Morthan officers anymore. Linc won't be getting a recall, and from what I remember of his health just before you both retired - isn't that just as well?"

"Maybe. Although Linc is perfectly well again now, thank goodness." Romanova leaned back in the captain's desk chair, and regarded Tanaka thoughtfully. They had never served on the same ship, but he was a member of her Academy graduating class. She knew the man, had socialized with him from time to time over more than forty years and had served with many officers who had shared his bridge and his wardroom.

He was a decent person, who if he had to face her on a field of battle would kill her without hesitating but who would never dream of looking her in the eye and lying to her while they were still supposed to be comrades. So she asked him openly, "What's going on, Bill? You say the Service isn't accepting any new Morthan officers, but Linc was the only one the Service ever had that wasn't a medic of one kind or other. Are you getting rid of those, too?"

"Yes." Tanaka nodded, heavily. "It's taking time, of course, because we can't do with them what we did with the scramblers and just hand them bonuses and their walking papers all on virtually the same day. Doctors are hard to replace, and harder to do without! But if we go to war with Mortha on the other side, Katy, we simply can't have hundreds of them - thousands of them - in our starship sickbays and our base hospitals, with access to the minds of the people whose tactical decisions are going to direct that war. I know, except for Linc Casey there's never been a case of a Morthan or a Morthan hybrid who did anything violent except in self-defense. Immediate defense against an immediate threat, at that. But

having them living among us is a risk we can no longer afford to take, so they're being mustered out of the service and sent back to Mortha. And those who work in civilian health care are going to follow, I expect, although of course that's not my policy arena and I'm speculating a bit now."

"And just how is Mortha supposed to react to this idea?" Katy wanted to close her eyes. They were burning with fatigue, and now they also stung with angry tears. Damn! I can see a piece of errant stupidity coming at me four-square, and there's probably not a thing I can do to stop it, she thought with sadness so deep that it made her recently abused chest ache all over again. "Where are the people there supposed to put these thousands of refugees? All of whom are trained for a profession for which there's damned little demand on Mortha, because only the full humans there get sick with any regularity?"

"You know, I've always wondered about that." Tanaka's reply had the flavor of an attempted diversion about it, yet the remark was obviously a sincere one. "If they never get sick, how come their world isn't overpowered by its own population? I mean, what do they die of?"

"They die when they're ready, because they will themselves to do that. For a Morthan who's mated to a human, that happens when the spouse dies unless there are young children left behind who need a surviving parent's care." This was something Linc had told her early in their friendship, without the least self-consciousness. So Katy had honestly thought most people knew it, yet now she believed it was news to Bill Tanaka.

Damn, that piece of stupidity was getting more errant by the second!

"Do you really expect me to believe that a perfectly healthy Morthan just shuts him or herself off, because of being widowed?" Tanaka was genuinely incredulous. "What happens when they divorce, for pete's sake?"

"They don't. Oh, sometimes a human spouse leaves a Morthan mate; but the reverse never happens. And what I just described isn't unvarying, there are such things as Morthans who stay unmated and Morthans who prefer their own gender. But even for them there comes a time when they know they should leave, and then they do exactly that. It's not suicide, Bill; not in the way you and I understand that word as humans." When Linc had first told her about that particular aspect of his maternal heritage, Katy herself had been just as shocked and disturbed as the man in the holoscreen was now. But that was long ago, and now this was just one more thing about Linc that she accepted and had trouble remembering another human might not.

"All I can tell you, Katy, is what's happening from the Service's point of view. I can't tell you why the Defense Minister is making the decisions she's making, except that I do know the Diet has been voting in a pattern that practically forces her hand on some of these points." Tanaka checked his chrono. "Enough Fleet politics! Report, Admiral. That's your rank now, by the way."

"I assumed that," Romanova said, and grinned a sardonic grin. There could only be one Fleet Admiral. She had given up that post voluntarily, and now she was looking at her successor without any expectation that he would step aside (or be pushed aside by his civilian bosses) to make way for her return.

She told him what had happened - except for the arrival at her home the previous morning of Dan Archer and Rachel Kane, and those events afterward that would have made him aware of her involvement in that situation. Her aircar flight to the Romanov Farmstead she presented as Maddy's introduction to her mother's ancestral heritage, and when she spoke of her return to the Farmstead with Johnnie she treated the events there as a tragic surprise.

Which they really had been, after all. That HR Solutions wanted its property returned was not

surprising, but that the corporate marshal pursuing the runaway gen had had the incredible luck of being able to intercept the Archangel and compel the starship's return to Narsai amazed her. The Archangel would probably not have come into port at Narsai at all on its run from Kesra to Terra, providing VIP transport to Ambassador Fralick, if George hadn't wanted to bring Maddy to her mother for safekeeping. Even then, if the starship had departed just a few hours earlier she might have missed making contact with the marshal's shuttle.

But on such pieces of luck, good and bad alike, was all of history based. Right place, right time; wrong place, wrong time; or any variable combination of those critical factors, oftentimes decided who lived and who died. Not just which individuals, but which worlds and which civilizations and which species.

But Katy Romanova had nevertheless always believed in making her own luck whenever she could, and she was going to attempt to do that one more time. She watched Tanaka carefully while she gave him her report, and she noticed that he did not glance at his chrono even once.

Yes, that gesture had been a ruse. A means of convincing her to stop asking inconvenient questions, when in actuality Tanaka was willing to spend whatever time was necessary to bring Romanova up to speed.

None of the information she was giving him was even half as valuable as what he had just told her, without saying a word.

CHAPTER 16

"Reen." Dan Archer spoke softly to the farmstead woman, as the old railcar moved closer and closer to the place where they knew their would-be captors waited. "You don't know Rachel's a gen. You don't know anything about her, except that I brought her to your home and asked you to take her in. Do you?"

"Dan, getting the truth out of me is going to be the easiest thing in the universe. You know that, you have to know that." Reen Romanova gave him a tired smile. "I'd love to keep Katy and her little girl out of this, and Johnnie too - but I don't see how."

"You and your husband, and the Matushka and her daughter, are all civilians and citizens of Narsai," Dan reminded her. "The Star Service can't do a thing to you unless your government agrees to give you up to them. I'd be wondering how your government was going to react to what's happened to your property, except that I suppose I get the legal blame for that; I'm the only surviving owner of the Triad, and it was the ship resisting a tractor beam that actually did all the damage."

"I wonder if anyone's going to remember my citizenship, or care about it," Reen replied. But Dan was right, and she felt herself sitting up straighter as she gathered her resources to face whatever was waiting for them when they reached the underground chamber where the railcar's course terminated.

Rachel Kane dragged herself to wakefulness, because someone was telling her she had to do so. Dan. Dan, whose voice had been her anchor during the hours since she had awakened from the pseudo-slumber of stasis.

She was so heartily sick of having to be taken care of, and she was even more weary of having to base every decision she made on the welfare of the three small lives inside her. Until now everything had

been so simple, compared to this.

She had spent her childhood, or what passed for a childhood among gens, learning at a rate that she now realized was at least twice as rapid as that of a bright but typical naturally conceived human child. Learning, exercising, practicing her skills; that had been her life, until the Academy.

There she had been placed among what she and her fellow gens had contemptuously called "wildlings" for the first time, and she had found out what unhappiness felt like. And because no one could become an officer without learning how to lead - even though all cadets would not eventually reach command status, still every one of them must be capable of giving orders and creating strategies - for the first time she had been required to think independently and creatively. Behavior that in the gen-creche had earned her correction, here was expected from her.

And young Rachel had discovered that she was not simply able to do that, she excelled at it. Although she was still required to report regularly to those HR Solutions scientists who were her creators and managers, although she knew she was unlike her classmates because even those whose parents were dead or estranged from them still knew who those parents had been, she tasted personal freedom for the first time; and that balanced the unhappiness of being different. That made up for the uncertainty of having to learn all over again where the limits on her behavior should be placed, and which of her personality traits she should squelch and which she should nurture.

The other way in which she was different from her classmates was that each of them, with a very few exceptions, had some plan - however vague, at that age - for eventually mating and reproducing. Rachel could not expect to do that. She was allowed, was even expected, to be sexually active; but her capacity to produce offspring did not belong to her. It belonged to the company, to HR Solutions, just as did her own life.

If a superior officer ordered a "wildling" human to his or her death, that individual experienced conflict in obeying. But in this way Rachel Kane was like her fellow gens who inhabited the crew quarters of starships instead of Officers' Country, like those who worked in mines and factories where the tasks were particularly dangerous or particularly boring. When she was given an order, her instinct was to obey it. Period.

Or it had been, until she was encouraged to begin thinking creatively. Until fear that for her had been a purely animal reaction to physical danger, began to be the same as for the wildlings she once had scorned; until one day she realized, shaking in the aftermath of a particularly nasty brush with the end of her own existence, that she wanted to go on living just as much as did any of the wildlings who were now her daily associates. They, too, were willing to give their lives up in response to duty; but their instinctive drive to live was coupled with a longing for all the future's imagined experiences, and that had always been a foreign concept (indeed, almost an unknown concept) for the gen called Rachel.

To be sorry you might die today, because a year from now you expected to return to a home where a civilian spouse waited? To realize that an elderly parent or a sibling would grieve for your loss, and hope not to be the cause of that pain? To think about the offspring you might have created, and never would if you died now?

Rachel Kane had never known parents or siblings, and of course she never would. But it had slowly dawned on her, as the years of her young womanhood slipped by, that it was not impossible that she might someday want one of her sexual liaisons to become more than just a safety valve. It had occurred to her that if she had not been genengineered to ovulate only when medically stimulated to do so, she might have had a child like any other female human being.

She had almost been glad the latter wasn't going to be possible for her, though. And the former had been just an idle fantasy, really not something she ever expected to fulfill. She was lucky, and she knew she was lucky, just to have the freedom that she did; her life had much more scope than did that of her one-time creche-mates. She was fond of telling herself (although she had never dared voice the thought to anyone, not even to those she shyly began to refer to as her "friends") that she had the best of both lives. She had a gen's freedom from family entanglements, a gen's absolute assurance that a massive economic power would take care of her all her days; yet she had a wildling's ability to create, mentally if not physically, and she had a life of excitement and variety that even the gens who lived on a starship's crew decks never tasted. The "ordinaries" who were gens rather than wildlings never left their ships, unless it was to go to a new assignment or to be cycled out of service when they grew too old to be useful and had to be disposed of.

That she had refused to anticipate. The chances were that she would die somewhere with honor, in the performance of her duty, long before she was a feeble old woman who could no longer perform as a command officer. She had hoped for that outcome, anyway; but only after she had lived as full and as long a life as possible, because life was something she had learned to savor.

And then had come this pregnancy. Not the familiar routine in which ripened ova were harvested from her body, to be taken away and used as the gengineers of HR Solutions saw fit; but three actual embryos, implanted and developing inside her womb.

Three creatures that while she understood they were not yet "babies," nevertheless were lives that combined her characteristics with those of the man whose union with her body had called these zygotes into being.

She had been frightened, but far more than that she had been awed. And she had known, in those first moments after she astounded herself with the discovery of those new lives within her, that she wasn't going to give them up without a fight.

Was what she felt for Daniel Archer what wildlings called "love"? She didn't know, wasn't even sure she was equipped to know. But she did understand that he felt something for her, something that went further than responsibility for what they had conceived together. She hadn't led wildling humans (and assorted aliens and hybrids, as well) for a full decade, hadn't become a heavy cruiser's executive officer, without learning a thing or two about those wildlings' emotions.

Duty might have made Dan Archer take care of her, but duty would never have caused him to hold her in the curve of his arm as he was holding her now. Gently, protectively, as the ancient railcar halted; and at the last moment before they were pulled bodily out of its cabin by people wearing Star Service uniforms, Dan murmured something she could not hear and swiftly touched his lips to her cheek.

A male human did that because he was emotionally attached to a female, not because he felt obligated toward her.

Now, what was her duty in this situation? To have her out of his way might make it possible for Dan to escape from the trap that was closing around them, and it would certainly be better for the lives she was carrying to die quickly than for them to be taken out of her (now, or when they had developed into viable infants) and used for the company's purposes. What had not disturbed her at all on her own account, somehow horrified her on her children's.

Yet she had not been trained to give up, not as a small gen in the creche nor as a Star Service cadet nor as a command officer. And although she had the capacity, as did all gengineered beings, to end her life swiftly and painlessly if she needed to do so - in fact, that was what she was supposed to do if the

alternative was to let the technology that had made her fall into unlicensed hands - she was not ready to do that, not just yet anyway.

She let herself go limp in the hands that grasped her, and when shackles closed around her wrists she allowed it to happen. She lifted her head, though; she opened her eyes, and saw that the old Narsatian woman who had been so kind to her was gone already. Dan Archer was being shackled by the uniformed people who held him, and the lift to the surface was coming down for a second load.

They must have taken the woman called Reen up first. Hopefully that meant she was thought to be innocent, a civilian caught unknowingly in someone else's intrigue.

"Move, you gen-whore!"

She hadn't been called that in a long time, although she knew that civilian women who were gens received that abusive form of address quite routinely. Why did it make a female a prostitute, she wondered, to be egg-harvested instead of impregnated as the result of a sex act? The insult was stupid, and its use said very little for the intelligence or the creativity of any person who uttered it.

She saw Dan's jaw clenching, and was thankful when that was his only reaction. He had sense enough to know that getting himself injured was not going to help her, and that hearing that epithet one more time was not going to do her any real harm.

Would it really be giving up, to just go to sleep now? She hadn't felt like herself since leaving the stasis tube, and now she wondered almost forlornly what had become of the energetic woman she had been before. Did every expectant mother feel this way?

"Hold on. Help's coming, Commander Kane."

She knew the mind that touched hers. It took all her lifetime of discipline not to let her surprise and joy show on her face, or in her body's posture; but she had felt mental contact with Lieutenant Commander Kerle Marin many times, because he had been on the Archangel with her for more than a year before she had fled in that lifeboat. Like all Morthan healers, he touched his patients with his thoughts far more often than with his hands; scanned them far more reliably with his mind than with his medical instruments. And Rachel Kane had been his patient, and in this moment she forgave him for having prepared her for egg harvest without telling her he had done so.

"I didn't do that to you," came the denial, in that soft voice inside her head. "I refused. So someone relayed the order from HR Solutions to the senior corpsman on my staff, and gave him specific instructions not to tell me about it. And he wasn't trained as well as he should have been - and that's why what he did, he did incorrectly. I'm sorry, Ms. Kane. If I had obeyed that order, you wouldn't have been put into such a terrible position. But it wasn't a directive from the Service, so it wasn't binding on me as an officer - and I was damned if I was going to harvest a female's ova like some kind of crop. That's something no person reared on Mortha could ever do."

"Thank you," Rachel thought, and closed her eyes as the bright light of a Narsatian sunrise blinded her when the lift reached the surface at last. "I do wish you'd told me, Doctor, but I don't wish you'd gone ahead and harvested me. I can't explain it, it doesn't make a bit of sense, but even right now I'm glad something happened to me that was drastic enough to make me run away. Just a few minutes ago I thought I was ready to die, rather than go back!"

"You won't have to do that." The Morthan healer's thoughts were as gentle as his remembered voice. "The Matushka is back in command, Ms. Kane. She knows what's happening down there, and I'm sure she must have a plan."

"Are you saying this to Dan, too?" Archer had also been Marin's patient, so that ought to be possible.

And as she forced her eyes open and looked at her lover, Kane knew it was the case.

What even a full admiral could do to help either of them out of this situation, Rachel didn't know. Especially when that admiral was herself a party to their crime, when any move she made to help them might seal her own doom. Yet this was the first time Kane had ever heard of a Morthan healer involving himself in any situation outside of his sickbay, and the Matushka was the Matushka - not just any flag officer, but one who had earned her reputation for acting unconventionally in her personal life and unpredictably in both her leadership strategies and her battlefield tactics - so once again, however unreasonably, Rachel Kane was allowing herself to feel hope.

Madeleine Fralick woke to find herself in a place she did not recognize. She had been in Mum's house, had fallen asleep while Mum was talking to someone. Cousin Johnnie had been with her, and she was sure she remembered him picking her up in his arms and carrying her outside. The air had been cool, and it had been dark.

Then from time to time she had almost roused, and had realized she was aboard a vehicle and that Mum and Johnnie were talking. The next thing she remembered was not being able to breathe.

She could do so now, though, and the fear she'd felt then was only a memory. That she had been teleported from Narsai's surface to a ship in orbit had to have been a dream - yet when she looked around her now, she realized that part too had actually happened.

Where was this? Not the Archangel, a huge ship with commodious compartments and (unless you were unlucky enough to live among the ordinaries) a decent amount of privacy. She lay on a bunk in a tiny sleeping compartment, and she saw that this cabin was intended for double occupancy.

She sat up, and swallowed to ease her dry throat, and realized further that this cabin didn't have a private head. And why had she been left alone to recover from whatever it was that had happened to her? That she really, truly thought had come close to killing her?

Her legs were a trifle rubbery, so she stayed beside the bunk and held onto its edge after she eased herself onto her feet. She heard a voice in her mind as she did so, and instead of being startled or frightened she welcomed it with vast relief. "Linc!"

The day before yesterday, she had not met her mother's second husband. Today she felt as if an additional father had entered her life - no, more as if he had always been part of her life - and the touch of his thoughts comforted her as nothing else could have done just now.

"Maddy, do you know where you are?" The question was gentle. Yet she sensed urgency, and there was also apology in Casey's mental tones.

He felt responsible for what had happened to her. But he could not have been, and besides that she understood that this was not the time to ask for explanations. She answered, "On a ship. In orbit around Narsai, I hope, because I'm by myself in a bunkroom and I just woke up. Where's Mum?"

"She's here with me, on the Archangel. Your father took you with him when he left, Maddy. It's a long story - one I don't even want to be the person to tell you, in fact - but your mother decided to go back on active duty, and when she took over command your father decided he didn't want to be on the ship anymore. So he ported you over to a long-range shuttle that belongs to the Corporate Marshal Service."

"But everybody hates them! They're horrible people, they track down slaves and make them go back to where they escaped from!" Maddy remembered what her Kesran caregivers, the female neuter P'tara and her neutered male counterpart K'lor, had told her about the marshals - specifically, that misbehaving

children should be careful of them! - and she shuddered. She was much too old now to believe that the marshals were a threat to disobedient little girls, but she still believed they were evil because the two people who had loved her and cared for her the most had told her that was true.

Papa loved her, and it was because of Papa that K'lor and P'tara had worked in the Fralick household, of course; but Papa was so busy with so many other things. And until yesterday, she had seen Mum only in alternate years - and then only during visits on a few successive days for a few hours each session, with carefully regulated and monitored communications substituting for direct contact the rest of the time. Yet right now she wanted with all her soul to go back to Mum and to Linc, and when she heard her father's voice outside the half-open hatch she did not feel the relief that she knew she ought to be feeling.

The man whose mind was touching hers sensed both her distress, and its cause. He said in his silent way, "Don't be scared, Maddy. He thinks he's doing what's best for you, and he'll take good care of you if he can. Stay with him for now, and whatever you do don't let him know you've talked with me. That's going to make him angry. Very, very angry."

"I know it will. And I won't do it." Maddy almost nodded, because communicating in this way was so new to her. But she was glad she hadn't done that, because the hatch opened fully just then and her father stepped through it.

"Well! Awake finally, are you, Madeleine?" Sometimes he used her formal given name, usually when he was feeling especially sentimental and didn't want to express that feeling. He came to her now, and took the kind of med-scanner that was in any modern household's bathroom and checked her vital signs with practiced swiftness. "And you're fine now. Good, I thought if I got you far enough away from that mindfucker Casey you'd recover."

"That what?" Maddy asked. Not that she didn't recognize the vernacular term for sexual intercourse, even she had not been that sheltered; but hearing it used in a compound word with "mind" was completely new to her. And whatever it meant when used that way, she suspected it was no compliment.

"Sorry, love. But he almost killed both you and your mother, and you at least I could protect. So I did." Fralick sat down on the edge of one bunk, and pushed her toward the other so that she automatically sat down too. "It's time for you to understand what he is, Maddy. And that's why I never left you alone with your mother until yesterday, and now I'll never do that again. I'm sorry, I made a terrible mistake when I brought you to Narsai; but I had no idea Casey could get at you, too, and I figured you were safe from Romanov."

"Papa?" Maddy was thoroughly confused now. But this was her familiar father, and although he clearly was angry his venom wasn't directed at her; so she sat still, and waited for him to explain himself.

"Mads, we don't allow Morthans to set foot on Kesra and we have good reasons. Do you know what they can do to other people's minds?" Fralick paused, clearly expecting an answer.

"They can feel other people's emotions, and sometimes they can read other people's thoughts. That has something to do with how they heal, the Morthans that leave Mortha and work as doctors." Maddy chose her words carefully. Even though she could not believe that her father would, or even could, really do anything to harm Lincoln Casey, she still knew instinctively that Casey had been right when he'd instructed her not to let Fralick know they could speak mind to mind.

"Yes, they can. And that's not natural, Maddy. That's not right, it shouldn't be allowed. I've always thought so; but when Lincoln Casey first knew your mother, and then when they both first knew me, he wasn't supposed to be like other Morthans. He was supposed to be no different than a full human, except for those eyes of his. If I'd known that through all those years, while he and your mother were serving on

ships together and I was off somewhere else in the Diplomatic Service, she was letting him do whatever he wanted to her in private..." Fralick flushed. He was not used to talking about such matters with his female child, and doing so now embarrassed him. But clearly he thought it was important, clearly he was making himself do this because he felt that he must.

"Papa, you don't mean Mum made love to Linc while she was your wife." Maddy, by contrast, was not the least bit embarrassed. But she was surprised, because however many times George Fralick might have thought about his ex-wife's suspected unfaithfulness he had never once mentioned such a possibility to their daughter. He had not said much of anything to her about Katy, one way or the other, because he knew that if he did so and if the family arbitration authorities on Kesra found out about it his extremely favorable custody and visitation arrangements were very apt to be altered to give Katy more access.

"I think she must have," Fralick said now, with brutal honesty. "She let him into her mind, anyway, and that's as bad as letting him bed her - or worse. Which is why I used the word I did. Even though it's not a polite word, it's certainly an accurate one for Lincoln Casey and for every other Morthan male who dares to touch a human woman."

"But they're married now," Maddy said. She could think of nothing else to say, and now she wanted her father to stop. Even for an inquisitive girl of thirteen, there were some things that plainly it was better not to know - or at least, it was better not to find out from one's father.

"That's disgusting, but true. And somehow when Casey had a medical problem a little while ago, when something made it hard for him to breathe, his condition made you and your mother both have similar difficulties. I understand why, with her; when a human woman sleeps with a Morthan, she lets him inside her mind at the same time she - well, you know how that works, Maddy." Again, Fralick blushed.

"Yes. P'tara told me, and she showed me pictures of how humans do it because she's Kesran and they don't do it the same way. With them it takes - "

"I know what it takes." Fralick cut his daughter off. "Anyhow! I wasn't surprised your mother got the spillover from Casey's problem, and I can't be sorry for her because she's spent years getting herself into that kind of attunement to him. But I was scared to death I was going to lose you, and the only connection you've got to the man - if I can call him a man - is that he was around your mother almost all the time she was pregnant with you. You're my child, I had that checked a long time ago and he had nothing to do with conceiving you physically; but I guess he must have had some kind of prenatal influence on your mind. Something that never would have showed up, never would have affected you through your whole lifetime, if I hadn't been stupid enough to bring you to Narsai."

Maddy sat very still. Her papa had checked, to see whether or not she was his biological child?

He no doubt meant that to reassure her, as it had reassured him when he had done it; but for Maddy that act had the reverse connotation. Papa's love for her depended entirely on her being of his siring? If she had been made from some other man's genetic material, he would not have taken care of her through her babyhood and would not be looking at her now with that jealous fervor shining in his eyes?

Although putting words to her feelings now was beyond her, Maddy knew the difference between protectiveness and possessiveness. What she saw in her father's familiar gray gaze now was not something that comforted her. Instead, it scared her.

But Linc was right, she could not let him see that. After a moment she said, with her mother's sure sense of tactics and with all of George Fralick's own careful diplomacy, "Papa, you weren't stupid to bring me here. You didn't know, and I don't think Mum knew either. But what are you going to do now? You didn't tell me yet what ship this is, even."

"I didn't, did I?" Fralick's face had been rigid with hate. It relaxed now, and he smiled as he became Maddy's beloved father once more. "We didn't get far underway yesterday, aboard the Archangel, before we were hailed by a corporate marshal. He'd come all the way from New Orient, looking for a gen who ran away. He had orders from the commodore at New Orient instructing Captain Giandrea to cooperate, so we had to come about and return to Narsai since that was where he expected to find the gen."

"Did he?" Maddy remembered not to say specifically, "Did he find her?" Because that would have revealed that she knew the missing gen's sex, and that would have been disastrous.

She felt no guilt at all about this deceit. She had seen her father in action at enough parties to realize that he would have done the same thing, and would have regarded it as a neat bit of verbal footwork rather than as even the most innocuous of lies.

And although she already knew enough about Mum to realize that Mum did not like lies in any way, shape, or manner, she also knew that Mum would want her to protect that woman who had three babies inside her belly and who had looked so tired and thin and scared. And she knew what a marshal was, her Kesran caregivers P'tara and K'lor had told her often enough when she was small that if she misbehaved the marshals would come and take her away.

"He just did," Fralick told his daughter, with a satisfied grin. "He needs to get instructions from her owners now, whether they want her returned to their gen labs or just what they do want done with her; and he needs to determine whether the man who was with her when she was caught is the only person who should be charged, or if she had other help. So it'll be awhile before he heads this shuttle back toward New Orient, and then on to Terra; but he'll have to take us, because I'm not putting you back aboard the Archangel while your mother's aboard it. And you're certainly not going back down to Narsai, or anywhere else where you might get within Casey's reach again. I'm lucky I got you back alive once. I can't risk letting him near you again."

CHAPTER 17

"Vargas to Archangel." The voice that Paolo Giandrea had been dreading to hear again was the first thing the captain did hear, as he dragged himself into wakefulness from much-needed sleep.

He rolled out of his berth, and sat on its edge to palm the comm. And he mentally damned the ops officer who had put the corporate marshal through to his quarters without asking, and as he did so knew that he was being unreasonable. Corporate marshals were people to whom even starship officers were conditioned from childhood to give deference, at least starship officers who weren't Outworld-reared humans or aliens.

He had one Kesran neuter among his juniors, one who should have become male if his family's breeding requirements hadn't caused him to have that development halted just before puberty began. The fellow could breathe nearly as well with gills as with lungs, and was a decided asset at times for that reason alone; but he was going to leave the ship as soon as his term was up, unless war came and everyone's commitments were extended indefinitely, because he found being the only one of his kind here a very lonely business. (Or, of course, unless he and every other nonhuman officer in the Service got walking papers at the conflict's declaration.) There was also one Sestus 4 native aboard right now, a female whose several rows of sharp teeth were even more frightening for being the crimson hue of human blood.

The young woman's own blood was an almost colorless fluid, and she was a usually gentle creature whose lavender eyes became the maroon of anger only when someone who was supposed to obey her did not do so quickly enough. That was the nature of Sestians, as Dan Archer had explained to his captain when he had been the Archangel's chief engineer and that first Sestian officer had arrived on board. They saw themselves as superior to every other species, as the natural rulers of the universe; and they had a great deal of difficulty coping in situations where they could not enforce their perceived mastery by corporal means.

Archer knew about that, his people were among the humans who mined under Sestian supervision and who were the sorriest group of Homo Sapiens in the whole galaxy. But they were supposed to be living on Sestus 4 voluntarily, and that made them subject to its laws; so unless they left as Archer had done in his adolescence, there wasn't a thing other humans could do to help them.

Still, Giandrea was hoping that this one Sestian officer would also depart from his ship very soon now. Ejecting all aliens, not just Morthan hybrid healers, from the Star Service was something he was hoping for with pleasure.

Actually he was going to miss the Morthans. They were the only nonhumans he had ever liked or trusted. He much preferred Marin, for example, to this creature named Vargas whose voice was ruining his rest now.

"Captain Giandrea, are you there?" Calm and almost courtly, but with the steel of absolute demand underneath its surface, the voice spoke again.

"Here," Giandrea said, and swallowed the "dammit" that wanted to follow.

"I have the gen, Captain. And the trader who gave her aid. I'm electing not to prosecute the Narsatian family on whose property, and in the company of whose matriarch, she was found; because unfortunately the local laws are most protective of Narsatian citizens, and because requesting over-ride of those laws would hardly be feasible when the family in question includes the head of the current government. However - " Vargas changed his tone, suddenly allowing a predatory note to creep into it - "there are two accessories to this crime aboard your ship who can be prosecuted, and I intend to take them into custody as soon as possible."

"Who do you mean, Marshal?" Giandrea felt cold. He knew already, of course, but asking the question at least made Vargas tell him baldly.

"Admiral Catherine Romanova, who although she is a citizen of Narsai is now on active duty with the Star Service and therefore subject to the laws of Terra. And her spouse, one Lincoln Casey, who holds dual Terran and Morthan citizenship."

"Let me get this straight. You want to arrest my superior officer?" Withholding Casey from this vulture wasn't going to be possible, but if anything could be done to keep the Matushka out of his hands then Giandrea planned to do it.

He wished he could bring the admiral into this conversation now, but knew that if he did so Vargas would realize where his loyalty lay. And that would be pure folly.

"No. But I'm telling you I intend to do that, and I expect you and your people to give me full cooperation." With that, the corporate marshal cut off the transmission.

Giandrea was wide awake now. And even though he knew he was doing exactly what Vargas expected him to do, it was no crime and it was necessary. He tapped his comm again and said, "Giandrea to Romanova."

Silence. Then ops, inquiring in puzzlement, "Captain? Were you trying to contact Admiral

Romanova?"

"Yes. Where the hell is she?" That commlink should have found her, anywhere on board the Archangel.

Which meant she was not on board any longer. Giandrea's fierce relief was mixed with a rush of fear, because he could not guess at the consequences of whatever action the Matushka had taken - but if she had smelled the proverbial coffee and had put herself out of the corporate marshal's reach, he only hoped she'd taken her spouse along with her. Even though he suspected things might get unpleasant as a result, he was still glad when ops answered just as he had hoped.

"She and Mr. Casey ported down to MinTar, Captain. She said something about a meeting with an official of the Narsatian government."

Right. As Vargas had just so helpfully pointed out, Catherine Romanova's father held the senior position on the Narsatian Council and her mother held one of its other chairs.

She had taken herself and her husband to safety, and in this case there was nothing cowardly about that action. It was nothing else but smart.

What in hell was Tanaka going to say about this, though, when the Fleet Admiral called back looking for Romanova a few hours from now as he was scheduled to do? And if she wasn't going to return to the ship, how was the Matushka planning to avoid being charged with desertion - an offense for which even the Narsatian senior councilor would have difficulty blocking her extradition - as well as with the simpler capital crime of being an accessory to theft?

The Council of Narsai assembled not in an ornate chamber of an official government building, but in a conference room at the university library. That was in keeping with the colony's traditions, because just about every structure was made to serve as many purposes as it could. Like keeping vehicles which on any other world would have been privately owned in constant, communal use, refusing to give control over public buildings to one organization or another made it possible for Narsatians to conserve more of their lands for agriculture - and to use all of their planet's other resources with equal efficiency.

Catherine Romanova sat quietly beside her father, in the circle of chairs that was the meeting's standard structure. Only today that circle was a large one, because the Council's members had been joined by the Commissioners who ran Narsatian industry (such as it was) and operated Narsai's commerce and oversaw its professional guilds.

There had never been a combined meeting like this one before, although it had often been proposed. If there had been time to debate its wisdom beforehand, Katy was sure, it would not have been happening now. But Trabe Kourdakov had acted decisively, and so both Councilors and Commissioners were now assembled together in response to his summons.

On Katy's other side sat a person who had no business to be present at any official proceeding on Narsai, but she had refused to attend without her husband. Since without her this meeting would be pointless, her father had consented; and no one else in the room seemed particularly surprised to see Lincoln Casey.

But then she knew all the others who were present, and during the years since her second marriage they had had time to become accustomed to seeing her with her Morthan spouse. Her own parents were the only Narsatians of any real status who had refused to have anything to do with her after that marriage. Others here had thought less of her for forming this union, some had even had the nerve to chide her

because of it; but gradually they had accepted that union's reality, and at least (as she had heard one of the commissioners saying in supposed confidence to her mother, just before today's proceedings had begun) Casey was willing to live with his wife on Narsai.

It was odd, how much respect that had gained for him among the members of both groups combining here.

"Are you all right, love?" She sent that thought to her husband now, without turning to look at him. She herself was weary, but except for a couple of naps during the past full standard day - one in the aircar with Johnnie at its helm, the other on a sofa in the captain's office aboard the Archangel - she had not slept. And would not be sleeping any time soon, from the way this second day of crisis was shaping up.

"I'm fine, Katy." And he was. She felt all his familiar strength, physical and emotional, and allowed herself to luxuriate for just a moment in that mental embrace before she turned her attention back to the gathering in which she must play her part.

If he hadn't had a fellow Morthan providing his medical care last night, he would not have been this fortunate. It was unlikely that Casey could have survived his brush with stasis if Marin had not been there, because a non-telepathic doctor might not have realized what was happening to his patient until the situation became irreversible. Katy knew that she was lucky, so very lucky, to have him beside her today at all.

"You know my daughter," Trabe Kourdakov was saying, addressing the room without bothering to stand. There was no need, and indeed it would have been impolite for him to put his head above those of the others who were present because on Narsai all citizens were equal. The Senior Chair was a concept necessitated only because someone had to call meetings, someone had to be responsible for seeing that decisions were carried out once reached, and someone had to keep records.

"Right now she's once again officially an officer in the Star Service," Kourdakov continued. "That was necessary when she received an official recall order, which was binding on her as a retiree. However, there's now a window - which may prove to be a brief one! - during which she could tender her resignation, since as of this moment we're still at peace. She hasn't done so, not yet, and if she does she'll be sacrificing all benefits earned during her career. It breaks tradition for a member of the Commonwealth's military to address this body, but it also breaks tradition for Councilors and Commissioners to share a meeting. So I trust you'll listen what she has to say. Katy?"

That was typical Narsatian informality; for Kourdakov to style his child "Admiral Romanova" would have been an insult to everyone else in the room. Katy had to remind herself not to rise, as she would have been expected to do when addressing a body with this much power in any other setting, before she began to speak.

"How I handle my choices about serving, or not serving, wouldn't normally be anyone's problem but my own," she said, in the quiet but powerful voice that she had learned to use when she needed to make herself heard but did not want to intimidate the people who were listening to her. "I was debating whether to answer the recall order or to protest it, under the Council's new policy concerning Service entrance by Narsatian citizens; but then my husband was taken aboard the heavy cruiser that's now in orbit, and since our law doesn't shield him I was forced to reclaim my rank in order to gain his release."

"What was he charged with, Katy?" The concept of parliamentary procedure was barely remembered on Narsai. While no one would have dreamed of trying to take the floor away until she was through speaking, it was entirely acceptable - indeed, it was expected - that anyone could break in and ask her a question, at any time.

Those old ways were coming back to her now, more easily than she had thought they might. She answered, "There weren't any charges. My former husband, the ambassador from Kesra to Terra, was aboard and the ship had been placed at his disposal. He wanted to guarantee that I wouldn't answer the recall, so he had my husband kidnapped from our home. And now instead of my husband, Mr. Fralick has our daughter to hold hostage against me."

She did pause then, to allow the breaths of outrage that she heard drawn all over the room. A woman's daughter was her heir, and by the reckoning of these Narsatian leaders George Fralick had done something beyond defending in keeping a mother and her girl-child apart.

Katy added, "But then, I would have brought her home with me after she was born if her father hadn't prevented me from doing that. He wouldn't let me have her, not even for a visit, because he told the legal arbitrators on Kesra that if she grew up here I'd force her go to a cousin's bed when she came of age."

That was a decided sore spot with Narsatians, to be reminded of how other societies sometimes viewed their marriage customs. Things were different now than they had been nearly fifty years earlier, when Katy Romanova had gone to her cousin Ivan on the night of her thirteenth birthday; but any suggestion from an outsider that Katy's parents had been neglectful of her welfare, that her first lover had been a pervert to take her that young, or that her society had encouraged her to sell her body to seal a land claim, was a suggestion that was calculated to infuriate any one of these people. Even those who had supported dynastic reform most passionately, still would bristle if their elders who had followed those customs were condemned for doing so.

"George finally brought my daughter to me not because he'd changed his mind, but because as everyone here knows there's a good chance we may be looking at war between the Outworlds and the rest of the Commonwealth," Katy continued. "He was on his way to Terra, and he didn't want to risk taking her there; and even he realized that if war did come, Madeleine would be safer here with me than alone on Kesra. No one ever knows when the Kesran government may suddenly decide to kick a long-resident human or other 'alien' family out. They have a history of doing that without warning and without reasons that make any sense to us."

More nods. Some of these people had traveled and some had not, but all of them were sufficiently educated to know that her assessment of Kesran xenophobia was on target.

"The starship was on its way to Terra when it was turned back toward Narsai by a corporate marshal's hail. All of you have heard, I'm sure, about the destruction of the buildings at my family's farmstead yesterday?" Katy drew a breath. She suspected that was the only reason her father had been able to put this historic meeting together, because commissioners and councilors alike had been outraged by that event but hadn't known how to respond to it. Narsai had no weapons. It had depended on Terra's fleet for its defense ever since the earliest days of settlement, and its internal law enforcement mechanisms made no provision for dealing with an off-world organization committing offenses on Narsatian soil. Could the actions of a Terran corporate marshal even be considered criminal here, or were those actions just as legal on Narsai as on Terra? That was a question on which Commonwealth law had never been tested, because this was the first time a marshal had come to Narsai - on an enforcement action, anyway.

"The marshal had sense enough not to try to arrest my cousins, the farmstead's proprietors. He took the gen, a gengineered woman escaped from service, that he'd been sent to track down and recover; and he also took my foster son, the Sestian human man who's lived in my household even since my own sons

were killed. And he had a right to do that, because our legal system offers Dan Archer no more protection than it offers to my husband."

Now Katy deliberately reached out and took Lincoln Casey's hand. It was important for them to see her acknowledging her connection to him, for them to know that whatever happened she would never abandon her mate in favor of her ties to her birth family.

She said quietly, "Technically I'm just as guilty as they are. Dan brought that woman to my home yesterday morning, half starved from being stranded alone aboard a lifeboat for eighteen months - for so long that if she hadn't finally made use of a stasis tube, she would have died. She left the ship she was assigned to, as the first gen to be used as a Star Service officer instead of as ordinary crew, because she was pregnant by a nongen. By Dan Archer. They were lovers, before he and all the other scramblers were thrown out of the Service."

"I didn't think a gen could have sex unless it was designed to be a courtesan," remarked one of the older commissioners, who was chief operating officer of Narsai's central communications system. Since his observation came closer to being a question, he was not out of order; and the looks on other faces around the circle clearly indicated that he was not alone in that belief.

"A gen is just a person like any other, except the DNA that went into that individual was chosen by a scientist in a lab instead of being part of a random conception. A gen isn't an android, or an extra-smart animal, or a clone whose brain development is deliberately curtailed so that it's 'alive' only to serve as a spare parts source." Katy looked at each face in that circle, in its turn; and she held Linc's hand tightly, on her knee where their entwined fingers could be seen by everyone. "Somewhere on our world right now, there's a woman with three babies inside her who's wondering whether she'll be allowed to carry them or if they'll be taken out of her by force because they have a 'genetically inferior' father. And whichever way it happens, she's also wondering if those babies are going to be allowed to live and grow up - or if they'll be killed mercifully - or used by the corporation that owns her and owns them, in ways she's probably trying hard not to think about."

Every woman in this room was a mother. Each Narsatian woman had her child, even if that required medical intervention to accomplish, because it was a cultural obligation. Most had carried their own pregnancies, and had known at least once the same moment that Katy had known four times over - when the scans that had been done while the baby was in the womb were finally confirmed, when a warm little body was put into her arms and she could inspect her child for the first time. Ten fingers, ten toes; lungs that drew breath, a voice strong enough to squall....

Relief, of the sweetest kind imaginable. And now each woman in this circle was shuddering at the thought of what it would have meant to have that little creature torn out of her arms, and taken away.

"I understand that our system doesn't protect her, or her babies' father, or the children she's carrying," Katy said now, and looked from face to face again. "And it's true that if she were a Narsatian woman, she would be encouraged by her physician to have the extra fetus selected out; but we no longer insist on that, it's optional now when the third child is part of a multiple pregnancy. Our law is silent on whether or not I did anything wrong by aiding her, but because I've accepted recall to the Star Service I'm accountable now to a different authority - and if I were to do what my duty says I must do, I'd be calling that corporate marshal and making arrangements to surrender. Not just myself, but my husband also, for whatever action the Terran courts or the Judge Advocate General might want to take against us."

"You aren't going to do that, I hope, Katy?" That was her mother's voice, asking the question with concern but still managing to sound very much like a councilor.

"No. I'm not sure what I am going to do now, actually, because claiming Narsai's protection for myself but letting my husband go if the marshal asks you to allow his arrest is completely unacceptable. So is just leaving that pregnant gen, and my foster son, where they are now. But all those issues involve only a few individual beings - and I'm sure each of you is very much aware that the fate of a few people isn't all that important compared to everything else that's happening right now."

There were nods all around the circle. And when Romanova stopped talking, the commissioner who headed Narsai Control spoke up and claimed the floor.

"Many of us expected that the Rebs would tap you as one of their leaders, Katy," she said bluntly. "I've never understood wanting to fight with anyone, about anything. That's why we have the relationship with Terra, that's why we make our payments to the Commonwealth. So that they'll keep the Star Service operating, and people like you will be there whenever there's an invader that has to be kept back from our space."

Romanova nodded. Although Narsai had not faced the possibility of invasion in generations, other Commonwealth worlds had experienced such threats within her lifetime; and there had also been armed conflicts among former Terran colonies, located far away in other sectors. She and Linc had been in on many of those battles, from the time they were new-made ensigns serving under George Fralick's command until she had attained flag rank. And even after that there had been several years when she was a rear admiral commodoring a starfleet, not a vice admiral stuck in an office.

She responded, "And as long as our people are content to let it be that way, Jangbu, Narsai won't have a reason to join the conflict. The problem is that if the Rebs do start a war, Narsai is a natural base for Commonwealth forces just as Mortha is the natural base for the Rebs."

"Mortha can't be happy about that." Cabanne Romanova spoke up for the second time, thoughtfully. As she did so, Katy's mother looked at Katy's husband.

Linc Casey had never lived on Mortha, he had only visited there a few times - briefly and unhappily, and long ago. His reaction to the implied question was a slight but visible shrug.

"They're not, I'm sure," Katy affirmed. "But the Commonwealth's other option is Kesra. That means they'll choose Narsai, because Kesra's population is almost completely native sentient - and they can be damnably paranoid about even the small number of human residents that they already have. Believe me, I've lived there and I know."

She paused. And because she was so busy focusing on what she needed to say next, when she had just thought about what it had been like to be the Narsatian wife of a human resident of Kesra, a memory of George Fralick that she hadn't meant to revisit while Linc was attuned to her thoughts flashed into her consciousness and caught her unaware.

For thirteen years she had kept this one thing secret from her second husband. When she had come back to the Firestorm after her divorce and had fallen apart in his arms - while they had made love for the first time - and through every moment of mental and physical communion between them since then, she had kept it safely concealed. But now the forbidden memory intruded, and before she could banish it a single vivid image spilled over from her mind into his.

She felt his hand tighten until she wondered if he had crushed the bones of her fingers. He perceived her pain, and it made him relax that brutal grip almost immediately; but the real damage was already done.

She didn't look at him, but she felt his eyes on her - and felt his mind probing hers, with an urgency to which she could not possibly respond in this very public setting. All she could do was tell him, in

silence and with terrible firmness: "Later."

Old habits asserted themselves then, and he obeyed her. Even without sound, that word had been uttered in the Matushka's command voice.

CHAPTER 18

Katy had hoped no one else would notice the by-play between wife and husband, but of course the small silence drew puzzled looks in their direction. Nevertheless long practice had kept her face impassive, even when she had been hurt by that powerful squeezing of her hand.

She resumed speaking as if nothing had happened, because nothing had happened that she had any intention of explaining. She said, "So if war does come, I think that instead of welcoming Commonwealth forces onto its surface Kesra is quite likely to deport all its human residents - even those whose families have lived there for generations. Of the other two Outworlds, Sestus 4 would probably execute or simply starve their human population if they could no longer ship their ores to Commonwealth markets; they wouldn't have a use for their miners any longer. And Sestus 3 would go on pretty much as it is now, because they still haven't got much beyond being able to feed their own population agriculturally and their need for industrial goods is supplied by Sestus 4. Unless Linc wants to correct me on that, he grew up on Sestus 3."

"No, you got it right." Her husband gave her a look that probably puzzled everyone else, but that she understood perfectly. She had just made him speak to her normally, when that was the last thing he had wanted to do, and this was one of the rare times when he was really angry with her.

He was sick inside, he needed to be alone with her and talk to her. And right now that could not happen.

But they had lived this way for more of their life together than not; constrained by those around them, forced to wait for privacy to take care of their own and each other's emotional needs. This time was worse than any other such occasion either of them could remember, but they would get through it.

He pressed her hand very gently, and she returned that clasp.

"So who in hell is it that wants this war? Who are the Rebs, anyway?" A young commissioner wanted to know that, but her question brought mutters of agreement from all around the circle.

"Outcasts." To Katy's amazement, her mother took over at that point. Cabanne Romanova had been the source of her daughter's rather deep voice, a voice that was more powerful than it was melodious and that demanded to be heard. When everyone looked in her direction, the former Senior Chair Councilor continued.

"Katy just reminded us that Kesra, even more than Narsai, wants no part of immigrants," she said. "Even if anyone would want to live on Sestus 3, it actually has very little space available for settlers - most of its usable areas already belong to large landowners; and Sestus 4 is a hellhole for humans, a refugee would go almost anyplace else before he or she would voluntarily go there to live. Yet Terra's started supplying gens to take over job functions that up until now gave employment to the Inner Worlds' lower classes, and as a result those people are being displaced by the thousands."

"So? Isn't that what the newer Outworlds are for? Planets like Farthinghome, like Claymore. And the one in the Mistworld system where the locals agreed humans could live on the surface, while they stayed in the clouds? There's always been excess population flowing outward from Terra and the rest of the Inner

Worlds, and that's what's always happened to it." The young commissioner was frowning. "Kesra's the only other world that I know of where population growth is prevented as successfully as we prevent it here on Narsai, and that hardly counts because Kesrans obviously don't reproduce the way humans do."

They certainly did not. The idea of routinely neutering all but two humans within each family group, in order to allow that pair to breed without the need to limit the number of their offspring, was appalling to everyone present - even though except for Lincoln Casey they were all Narsatians, who had accepted since childhood that one youngster was the best possible family size and that third babies simply should not be born on their world.

"So you're saying that these outcasts as you call them, these people who are trying to settle in places like Farthinghome and Claymore and Tenzing, are where the Rebs get their ships and the people to operate them? And that the reason they want the Outworlds separated from the Commonwealth is so that the established planets will stop sending food and manufactured goods to the Inner Worlds, and make those things available to them instead?" The youngest of the councilors was speaking now. The older ones were looking troubled, but were saying nothing.

"Yes, and I believe she's right." Katy Romanova's tone was one of finality. "They can't look beyond Mistworld for trading partners, you see. The sector beyond Mistworld has no M-class worlds, not for so many light years that even our deepest probes haven't yet reached a place where planets humans can use start occurring again."

"Like coming to the end of a dock and falling in, and you can't swim. So you either drown, or you take away someone else's flotation device and let him drown instead." That, of course, was the Harbormaster. The commissioner in charge of Narsatian aquaculture was called that, facetiously and affectionately; and while his analogy sounded ridiculous, he nevertheless had grasped the situation in which the settlers of the newest Outworlds now found themselves. "So can't the diplomats get Terra to understand that, and let us sell those people the things they need?"

"The gens have to eat, too, Harbie. Terra can't let us send 'their' supplies elsewhere, even if we could afford to practically give our produce away to people who can't possibly pay us for them at full market prices." Tart but truthful words, from a councilor who was not one of the youngsters.

Good, Katy Romanova thought with satisfaction. At last they were starting to grasp the situation, and were reluctantly grappling with it. It was late, so late, for them to be entering this game seriously - to stop trusting the Terran Ambassador and the Narsatian delegate to the Commonwealth Diet to take care of their world's interests, when neither of those personages had a solid commitment to anything except the welfare of their own financial accounts - but Narsai's leaders were trying now, and they were intelligent people.

Basically decent people, too, or their world would not be the peaceful and orderly place that it was. That it had been for centuries now, even its total population holding stable in a way that no other human-inhabited planet had ever managed to achieve.

"So what do you think, Katy? Should we join the Rebs, and kick the Terrans to hell out of our sector?" That was Cabanne Barrett, representing the medical profession on Narsai. That she had treated the gen called Rachel Kane had not been mentioned, and wouldn't be. A doctor's movements through the community were a confidential matter, that was a basic principle of Narsatian privacy right along with the lack of pattern recorders in the public teleport system and the lack of tracer technology in the community-garaged aircars. Narsatians trusted one another, in a manner that was inconceivable to those reared elsewhere.

Learning to be suspicious had been Katy Romanova's most difficult adaptation to life among non-Narsatians. She sometimes thought, now, that one reason George Fralick had attracted her so strongly in her youth was that he played the duplicitous games that were foreign to her so skillfully and with such outward charm.

She answered, "If you're asking me what's the morally correct side to be on, I'd have to say it's the Rebs' side. I hate what the Commonwealth's becoming under Inner Worlds domination, Cab. I hate a system that can treat a human being's body like a factory for reproductive cells, and that can deny a young woman like the one I've described to you her freedom and her right to bear her own children - just because she was made to order in a lab, instead of being conceived the usual way by a pair of lovers. The way Commonwealth worlds are using gens is slavery, no matter what name you use to dress it up, and it's as hateful now as it was hundreds of years ago when wars were fought on Terra to get rid of it."

She glanced around the circle, saw that every other person in it was still listening, and continued. "I hate throwing people out of their service careers because they didn't graduate from the Academy, as if that were the only measure of loyalty that could possibly mean anything. And I hate it that after generations of encouraging Morthan men to leave their homes and devote their lives to taking care of us humans, now we're going to force them all to go back where they came from because Terra is running scared of any and all nonhumans living among its own people."

This last announcement was news here, she could tell. And while Narsai had never developed any real dependence on Morthan healers, as the strong guild headed by Cab Barrett attested, still that news caused heads to shake in puzzlement and voices to murmur in disbelief.

"Insane," Cabanne Romanova said flatly. "They can get away with dismissing the healers from the Star Service, of course; that's a discrete population, and it operates on strict top-down orders because of its nature as a military organization. But how do they propose to get rid of all the Morthans on staff at hospitals and clinics on all the Inner Worlds? If they could do that, who would replace those healers? And what would Mortha do with them, once they all arrived back there?"

"I've asked those questions, of someone who should have had the answers; and he didn't have them." Katy remembered Willard Tanaka's impassive golden face, seen via holo-transmission not all that many hours ago, and she shook her head. "What I can tell you, though, is that it's no new thing for a civilized society to decide that a sub-group is dangerous and to eject all that sub-group's members even though the society actually needs them. Repeatedly in ancient Europe, nation states ejected their Jewish populations. One in the twentieth century actually attempted to murder every Jew they couldn't manage to deport from their territories, and they came damnably close to succeeding."

She glanced toward her father for confirmation, and Trabe Kourdakov nodded. "She's right," he said. "I can give you other examples. Ancient British landlords shipping the food grown by Irish peasants away from their country, and leaving their tenant farmers to starve literally to death. African tribal leaders cutting off food supplies to their enemies' civilian populations, and then calling the result a 'famine.' It's horrible to think that people today could do the same thing, but when you consider how most of even us here feel about Morthans...."

"I believe the term is 'mindfucker.'" Lincoln Casey spoke up uninvited, and in spite of his wife's warning thought just before he did so. His voice was soft, but it carried just as well as hers had; he, too, had given many orders on the bridge of an embattled starship.

"Not you," Cabanne Romanova said gently. "You can't probe our minds in this circle, Linc, and all of us know that. But if you could, we'd find you frightening - and we can't help that."

"I know. But I'm telling you why I don't find it surprising at all that this is happening. I'm only surprised that it didn't happen any sooner." Casey's thoughts touching his wife's mind were bitter. That he could be accepted as nonthreatening by this group of full humans, because he was crippled by Morthan standards, was not the comforting thought that Katy's mother seemed to believe it should be. Even she, kind soul, could not comprehend that instead it was the most galling of insults.

Katy comprehended it, though, and although she still wished her husband had stayed silent she pressed his hand with consoling tenderness. Then she said to the circle, "I've probably committed treason, espionage, illegal disclosure of confidential information - and who knows how many other different crimes, by talking with you the way I have today while I'm a flag-ranked officer on active duty in the Star Service. But I'm also a daughter of Narsai's founders, I'm in the middle of everything that's happening right now and that's going to happen, and I honestly don't know where my real duty lies. For a little while I thought I knew, when accepting recall meant I could take control of that ship up there in orbit; but that was before the damnable corporate marshal got his hands on Rachel Kane and Dan Archer, before I had to start thinking of myself as an accessory to their crime."

"Rachel Kane?" A young commissioner tilted her dark, curly head thoughtfully.

"Yes, that's her name. The gen I told you about, the woman who's pregnant with Dan's three babies."

The gen had a name. Clearly that hadn't entered the minds of most of these people, and it just as clearly made them uncomfortable because having a name made her seem real to them.

"We can't solve the war question this morning, not when this is the first time we've even discussed it in session," Trabe Kourdakov announced, and now his philosopher's debating voice penetrated every one of his listener's distracted minds and brought them back to the present. "But we have to deal with the matter of this corporate marshal, so-called, causing destruction of Romanov ancestral property. And we may wish to deal with his being able to come to our world and make off with four people to whom his employers mean to do harm. Lincoln Casey and Daniel Archer are citizens of Terra, and Rachel Kane is in legal terms a piece of property rather than a human being; but my daughter Katy is a Narsatian citizen, and I will be damned if I'll let her status as an officer in the Star Service be the reason I give her up to that corporate jackal."

"The purpose of our withholding legal protection from non-citizens wasn't so they could abuse each other without penalty." From across the room, a commissioner who had studied history before taking charge of Narsai's transportation system spoke up thoughtfully. "It was simply to discourage them from settling here permanently. In the beginning we extended citizenship to the spouse of a Narsatian, if that spouse became resident here. We acknowledged the adoption by our citizens of children from off-world, and we didn't treat opposite gender offspring differently than same gender offspring as long as there was one Narsatian parent."

"What are you suggesting, Pal?" Cab Barrett asked that question, in a gently prompting tone.

"Only that the Council has the authority to restore the practice of older customs at any time. If a thing was done once, even very long ago, it can be done again. If the Council wishes." Commissioner Pal inclined her head toward Senior Chair Councilor Trabe Kourdakov, in one of Narsai's rare gestures of respect for an authority figure.

Kourdakov waited, mentally polling the room. While he did so the Harbormaster spoke up, in an almost plaintive tone. He said, "Last year I answered a distress call from a pleasure boat. One of its owners was the Terran-born husband of a Narsatian woman, and he'd drunk too much and had lost his temper and beaten his own child to death. The Terran embassy declared that the little boy was Narsatian,

because he'd been born on this world and his father hadn't registered his birth with them - but our custom said he was Terran, because that was his father's world of origin. So except for the child's mother all the people involved were outside our legal system's control; and I couldn't turn the bastard over to anyone to be punished, even though I can tell you that if I'd witnessed what he did I sure as hell would have stopped him. I don't care whether our laws and customs covered the situation or not, I wouldn't have let that happen."

"It seems to me that we have the power to prevent something evil from happening now." Cab Barrett spoke carefully, and did not look at Casey or Romanova because she did not want to remind the others in the circle of her close friendship with them. "Senior Councilor, I propose on behalf of the Commissioners that we return to our ancestral customs concerning the family members of our citizens. Let's extend our legal system's protection to the husband and the adopted son of Katy Romanova, and to her unborn grandchildren and those children's mother."

It was not unanimous, but it didn't have to be. It was a clear majority, with the Councilors casting votes that were counted and recorded by Trabe Kourdakov and with the Commissioners expressing their guilds' opinions.

The Harbormaster, who possessed law enforcement powers as had his long-ago predecessors back on Earth, and the often idle Chief Constable of Narsai, stayed behind with Katy Romanova and Lincoln Casey when everyone else left the meeting room.

Katy looked up into her husband's face, and she finally felt free to give him a taut little smile. They both knew that this was only the first part of the battle won. They now had backing if they were able to get Rachel Kane and Daniel Archer away from the corporate marshal before that marshal's shuttle headed out-system, but for all their titles the two officials who were going to offer assistance now knew almost nothing about how to accomplish that rescue. Such skills simply weren't necessary in Narsatian society, not even for those whose jobs were supposed to include dealing with miscreants.

On Narsai almost all "criminal" behavior was nonviolent. The constabulary saw far more cases of economic fraud and electronic eavesdropping than it did of assault, and the murder rate here was the lowest of any human-inhabited world where such statistics were kept. That was why a professional warrior like Katy Romanova was just as much an aberration among her people and on her native world as Lincoln Casey was among Morthans, and on Mortha.

And that was why the two of them would now have to decide what needed to be done, and would then most likely have to do it, in order to free Kane and Archer from the corporate marshal's custody (since a direct request from Narsatian officials had a comet's chance in a supernova of accomplishing that end). In the meantime there was also Maddy Fralick to think about - Maddy who Linc's mind assured his wife was still aboard the marshal's shuttle, and still safe; but no longer happy about being with her father, and worried that when the marshal left Narsai she was sure to be taken along. There was Paolo Giandrea on the Archangel, who might or might not be under orders to get Katy Romanova back so that she could be arrested for treason (or perhaps for desertion, or both). And then there was the very personal matter of what Katy's mind had inadvertently let Linc view at last, after keeping that memory secret through all their years of otherwise full intimacy.

One thing at a time, Katy told herself and also told Linc, as they faced the Harbormaster and the Chief Constable (more familiarly known to their fellow citizens as "Harbie" and "Mara"), and tried to determine the fastest way to get that pair out of their way without giving offense.

CHAPTER 19

The Terran Embassy on Narsai was a place Daniel Archer had never visited, because he was a citizen of Sestus 4 although for him that citizenship was meaningless. Meaningless, because on Sestus 4 humans were beasts.

Maybe that was why he had had no trouble at all seeing a gen as a person when he had the chance to know one, he thought now as he sat beside Rachel Kane and watched the wintry Narsatian plains sweep past and tried not to imagine what awaited them once Marshal Vargas got them inside that embassy. They were being taken there, and not up to the orbiting long-range shuttle, because the Marshal of course needed proper facilities to contain and interrogate his prizes; and for some reason it wasn't possible to take them aboard the Archangel.

Maybe that was a blessing, and maybe it was a disaster. Dan Archer wasn't sure which to call it, he only knew that it surprised him. Even though he had made eye contact with several members of the Archangel's landing party, and had realized they loathed having to capture their ship's former chief engineer and its former executive officer and then turn them over to the despised Marshal Service (otherwise known, popularly, as the "Jackal Service" although few would use that phrase openly); still they had done it. And he knew that once he would have done the same thing, and would have thought of it as just one more unpleasant duty.

A gen was property, a person who helped living property to escape was a thief, and thieves deserved their punishment when they were caught. Dan Archer had believed those things completely, and he was sure the people in that landing party believed them too.

"I wonder why we're not being taken to the ship?" Rachel had finally started to wake up, now, after having slept so much during their time underground that she had frightened him. She couldn't scrub at her eyes with her hands, as she clearly wanted to do; but she was blinking in the winter sunlight that streamed into the vehicle's cabin, and she was turning her head to look at Dan.

"Good question," was all he got out, before the Marshal turned from where he was occupying a co-pilot's seat - he had someone from the Embassy piloting for him, and that was it for other occupants of this vehicle. Marshals worked alone, and that was why although his shuttle probably had some kind of accommodation for a passenger or two he hadn't brought a teammate along on this venture. He didn't have such a thing.

Didn't deserve one, Archer thought as he stared at the stunner that was now pointed in his direction. Vargas said in his resonant voice, "Shut up, thief."

He made it sound like a good idea.

Paolo Giandrea stared at the holo-image of Fleet Admiral Willard Tanaka. He was not used to interacting directly with that level of authority, his boss was a commodore (as Catherine Romanova had so bluntly reminded him) who ran New Orient and who sent ships out to this sector when there was call for it. Routine patrol was how this mess had begun. A side trip to Kesra to pick up Ambassador Fralick and his child, another side trip to Narsai to drop off that child there...Giandrea had chafed at both errands, the latter one in particular because it so clearly demonstrated personal "pull" operating at its most petty level; but now he was glad he had come here.

"The regulations for dealing with locals are clear, Captain," Tanaka was saying, as he thoughtfully steepled his long-fingered hands before his chest. The holo was showing him from the waist up, so that gesture was plainly visible. "Is Daniel Archer an officer in the Star Service?"

"No, Admiral. He was discharged eighteen months ago." Giandrea had made damned sure this conversation was being logged. He wanted no confusion later on about whose authority had backed him in the actions he suspected he would soon be taking.

"What's the legal status of Rachel Kane?"

That was more difficult. "Sir, I logged her as killed while attempting to desert. Now she's clearly alive, after all; and I suppose that since she's alive, she's still the property of HR Solutions."

"Also correct. And they want her back, badly. They want to study her, they want to know whether it was in her genetic mapping or in her training that they went wrong. They can't figure out why allowing her - hell, requiring her - to learn to think creatively and make independent judgments in her work, caused her to do the same thing in other areas." Tanaka smiled a crooked, sardonic little smile. "Damn fools in their lab coats! They let one of their gens develop into a complete person, and then it surprised them when she had the gall to claim a sentient being's right to live."

"But she's still property from a legal standpoint, sir." Giandrea concurred fully with what Tanaka had just said, yet he was astounded that a superior officer had said it. And the objection he was raising was a genuine one, legally Rachel Kane had no more "personhood" than did the chair in which he was sitting.

"Yes. And if she were not property, she'd be a deserter. That makes it damned difficult to deal with Admiral Romanova today."

"What?" Giandrea shut his mouth to cut off that undignified exclamation.

"I just got through talking with her, Captain. She had me on conference with the office of the Senior Councilor, or whatever in hell Narsai's excuse for a government calls its chief executive. That just happens to be her father, isn't that convenient for her right now? And she was claiming Daniel Archer, and Rachel Kane, and if you can believe this - because I damn near can't believe it - their three unborn children, as civilian citizens of Narsai who are entitled to immunity from Terran law and from Star Service regulations. She made the same claim for her husband, the former Captain Casey; and with him it's going to be easy enough. Unless the Defense Minister wants to countermand me and recall a 'mindfucker' from retirement to active duty, Romanova gets upheld where he's concerned. With Archer, too, since he was discharged. If Narsai wants to claim him no one has the right to contest them, except the authorities on Sestus 4." Tanaka allowed himself another grin at that, because it was a ridiculous notion.

"I'm glad, sir." Giandrea sighed, and then spoke from his heart. "Dan Archer was a good officer, I hated to lose him when the scramblers were pushed out. And Captain Casey may be Morthan, but he gave the Service one hell of an impressive career."

"Not to mention that Katy Romanova did the same, and she gave three sons too." Tanaka was of Romanova's own generation, Giandrea recalled. He wasn't sure whether Tanaka had personally experienced Mistworld, a battle that took place back while Giandrea himself was still a cadet. But there wasn't an officer in today's service who didn't know the story of the Matushka, the fleet captain who had lost all three of her adult children in a single blazing moment - and who instead of crumpling and having to be replaced, had pulled herself stoically together and had gone on to win what was technically considered to be a victory.

The "little mother." Romanova was not tall, but neither was she "little." She was a solidly built woman, almost plump now that she had retired and no longer trained regularly in military gyms. But

mother she certainly was, and at Mistworld she'd also been visibly pregnant.

That women could command, that women could fight, that women could take physical and psychological punishment and dish it out, were all givens and had been for centuries now. But that anyone could do what Romanova had done at Mistworld and come out of it sane, was incredible. The nickname she'd been given there had not only stuck to her, it had become a proud symbol for those who served under her command through the rest of her career.

Just a few months ago that had been the entire Star Service. If Romanova wanted a favor from the Defense Ministry, she was probably still going to be able to get it. And even though Lincoln Casey was a Morthan hybrid, a despised "mindfucker" as the vernacular more and more often expressed it these days, the Service now included many officers who had been trained while he commanded the Academy. George Fralick had realized that, and had been canny enough to keep Casey out of sight as much as was possible while he'd been imprisoned aboard the Archangel - and Giandrea had been given special instructions in making up the landing party that had snatched Casey from his home on Narsai, that anyone who might feel personal loyalty to the man must be excluded from that chore.

"Sir, what am I supposed to do?" Giandrea realized he sounded like one of his own young children, but he felt exactly that bewildered. He knew what the right thing to do, the moral thing, was in this situation; and he was certain, now, that the commanding officer of his entire Service concurred. But how to do it legally? That was the question, and it mattered because he could not sacrifice his career over the fate of a gen and he did not expect Tanaka would do that either.

He thought about the other gens he had on board, and wondered if any of them had the potential to do what Rachel Kane had done; and he shuddered. It would almost serve his society right, if those modern-day slaves revolted just as their ancient counterparts had been known to do; but he could not help hoping it wouldn't happen on his watch.

"The Defense Minister is disgusted with this whole business, Captain." Tanaka was speaking again, and he was looking that way himself. "She's instructed me to give the Narsatian government whoever and whatever it claims as its property, she doesn't want to create an incident where Star Service personnel have to back up the Corporate Marshal Service to get 'one lousy gen' - and I quote Ms. Fothingill exactly! - off Narsai. Those people are peaceable to a fault, but seeing that happen in their capital city would just beg them to shift their sympathies from us to the Rebs."

"That makes a lot of sense, sir." And it did. And it sounded like Romanova's reasoning, not that of Minister Fothingill; but after all Fothingill had been in office during Romanova's final months as Fleet Admiral, so no doubt the old working relationship had reasserted itself as soon as Tanaka had put the two women in touch.

Which he wasn't admitting he had done, but Giandrea could read a viewscreen. And the writing on this one was plain for any literate being to see.

"So, then, Captain! Even if Marshal Vargas has already moved his prisoners inside the Terran Embassy, you have authority there and you're instructed to use it. Archer is to be released immediately, as a free citizen of Narsai. The gen called Rachel Kane is to be turned over to Admiral Romanova or her designee, and since we can't ignore the property rights involved her family has agreed to pay HR Solutions the gen's fair value. Which is considered to be somewhat less than the value of the Romanov property that the Marshal Service had your people destroy, on that company's behalf, in locating Kane and taking possession of her."

It was perfect. Hell, it was poetic. It was pure Matushka, with a distinct flavor of Lincoln Casey

aiding and abetting...and it was making one tired, disgusted starship captain smile at last.

"Aye, aye, sir," Giandrea said to his fleet admiral.

I understand your order, and I will obey it. That was what the ancient nautical expression actually meant, and Giandrea had never used it with greater sincerity.

"What the hell?" In spite of himself, Dan Archer muttered the question under his breath. The vehicle that carried them was turning around, was heading away from MinTar just moments before it should have touched down inside the Terran Embassy's compound there.

Marshal Vargas didn't have time to deal with his prisoner, even if he had heard that forbidden murmur. He was busy with a comm that he was taking in hush mode, and then he was talking to the pilot - the woman the Embassy had sent as its representative, to the Romanov Farmstead where Archer and Kane had been captured.

Kane was sitting up straight, now, beside her lover. She was a valuable commodity, she had been fed after their capture and that seemed to have revived her just as much as the rest she'd had during their time underground. Archer hadn't been, and his stomach had been protesting about its emptiness until now.

Now that was the least of his concerns, and even his body knew it. Turning back before entering the Embassy meant that something had changed. That could be a good thing - but the chances were that it was quite the reverse.

George Fralick hadn't personally piloted a ship for many years, but this was only a shuttle and he felt confident about bringing it safely down to Narsai's surface. It was a warp-capable shuttle, one that was large enough to accommodate the needs of up to four persons (human persons, specifically) for months at a time, but it still responded sweetly to his touch. And he remembered how much he had once loved piloting a starship, and he smiled even though right now the situation in general was not something to smile about.

Maddy sat beside him in the co-pilot's chair, not because she could operate the ship's controls but because he was damned if he was letting the child out of his sight. Even here, where nothing and no one ought to be able to get at her, he wanted to be able to glance over at her and see that she was unharmed. And if, Powers Beneath the Waves forbid it, something else managed to go wrong - as things so often seemed to when he locked horns with that blasted ex-wife of his! - he wanted Maddy where he could be sure of taking her with him, if he had to get out of this ship without warning.

She knew enough not to touch anything, that was one advantage to having a thirteen-year-old instead of a smaller child. Maybe that was one compensation for having to deal with an adolescent now, with a separate person who was capable of questioning his actions and who was starting to demonstrate her mother's aggravating tendency to challenge him.

He hadn't viewed her assertiveness in that negative way when it had been a two-year-old's "no!" or a four-year-old's "I can do it myself, Papa." And her curiosity he had encouraged, of course, because he was proud to have such an intelligent daughter and because he wanted her someday to succeed him as the intermediary between Kesra and Terra. She was the only child he was ever going to have, since making a second family didn't tempt him one bit after everything Katy had put him through. So his whole future

was invested in her, and that was the only reason he had been willing to risk bringing her here to Narsai and giving her mother's people access to her at last.

It had been the worst tactical error of his life, but now all he could do was try to mitigate the damage. There was no point in thinking that if he could make the decision over again, he would place young Madeleine with another human family on Kesra during his absence even though he knew that if war was declared every human on that world would be told to leave it immediately.

It had always been shaky, the relationship between the few human residents of Kesra and the native species of that world. Sometimes Fralick had honestly considered taking his family and starting over with them somewhere else, although certainly not on Narsai where grown men bedded little girls and their parents applauded (and where Katy's family had political and social and economic clout that secretly awed him) - and not on Terra, where if he no longer represented Kesra he would be without status or connections except for those remaining from his long-ago Service days....

And that was why he hadn't done it. As Kesra's ambassador, for as long as peace lasted, he had power and dignity and economic security. As much of those things in his way as Katy had in hers, on Narsai; and he wasn't going to give them up, not unless and until he had to do that.

Not until someone wrested them out of his dead hands, actually. Yet he had not been willing to risk sacrificing Maddy while he held onto his status on Kesra, because Maddy was the one person left in his life whom George Fralick genuinely loved.

His little girl, who was fast turning into a woman. His little girl, not that mindfucker Casey's.

The shuttle settled down onto the Narsatian plain, and he was proud of that landing. Light and smooth, he hadn't lost his touch.

The in-atmosphere vehicle was waiting. Fralick had set down at precisely the correct coordinates. He would get the Marshal and his prisoners aboard, and they would lift off again and head out-system. From there they would make a straight run toward Terra, and there wasn't a captain alive who would dare to interfere with a Corporate Marshal Service shuttle.

Once on Terra, he would deal with this Captain Giandrea and with whoever had made that stupid bastard think he could get away with turning gens - and thieves who stole them - over to sentimental idiots like the Narsatian authorities. Not that Fralick personally gave a damn about this so-called Rachel Kane, and that Daniel Archer had survived the Triad's destruction was an error he meant to see corrected. Fralick detested that pet junior of Katy's, whom she had adopted as if having another young man around could somehow make up for the sons she had lost with her incompetence at Mistworld, nearly as much as he hated Lincoln Casey. But he did give a damn, considerably more than that in fact, about Giandrea's allowing Casey to escape after the Morthan pervert had invaded little Maddy's thoughts and had come so terribly close to causing the child's death.

How to make Casey pay for that? Fralick was going to find a way, but not right now. Right now getting Maddy as far away from the mindfucker as possible was her father's top priority.

CHAPTER 20

"I knew it," Romanova said softly. "I knew no corporate marshal would ever obey an order to give up a prisoner to anyone except the business that commissioned him."

She and Casey, and the two Narsatian officials who had taken on the job of assisting them, were at

Narsai Control now. She had spent considerable time, longer than she had wanted to devote to that business, on comm to far-off Luna talking first to Fleet Admiral Tanaka and then also to Tanaka's boss. And then she had listened while Captain Paolo Giandrea spoke to the Terran Ambassador to Narsai, and had smiled as she heard another transmission coming in from Luna (incredible, considering the power it took to punch through at this distance! How many real-time transmissions did that make, within the past standard day?) confirming what Giandrea had said.

The people inside that compound had their own sovereignty to uphold. If they permitted Marshal Vargas to bring his prisoners into their sanctuary, their little bit of legal Terran soil here on Narsai, then they would be honor-bound (or at least legally bound) to release the two "Narsatian citizens" at the heart of this messy situation; but they would have to do it in defiance of the Marshal, and that they did not want to do. So someone inside had commed to the approaching vehicle, and had told Vargas he would not be allowed to land on embassy property.

Vargas had come about, of course. And now the corporate marshal's long range shuttle was landing, on the plain outside MinTar, and the in-atmosphere vehicle was meeting it there to transfer Vargas and his captives. To hell with orders given by Terra to its ambassador here, the marshal was responsible only to those who had hired him - and he did not dare go back to them empty-handed.

"He'll do what Hansie Braeden did with the Triad, if Giandrea tractors him," Casey said quietly now. "He'd rather immolate himself and his prisoners along with him, than give them up."

"I know," his wife answered. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the back of a flight controller's chair, and leaned over the man's shoulder and watched the screen on which all in-atmosphere traffic in this district was being tracked. On other screens were all the satellites and habitats and trade-ships that orbited the planet, and among them was one blip that was the Archangel.

Like the being for which it was named, the starship could easily have reached down and snatched anything as tiny as an aircar from Narsai's surface. But no aircar was built to stand vacuum, so that wasn't a solution; and Linc was right about what Vargas would do once he had his captives aboard his shuttle. He would tear the small ship apart before he would allow it to be tracted up to Archangel, knowing that once there he would lose custody of his prisoners and they would be sent back down to Narsai as free people.

He would probably give up Archer, if someone suggested that possibility. But giving up the gen he had been commissioned to reclaim wasn't an option. Losing her, let alone surrendering her willingly, would be professional suicide.

And Katy wasn't going to risk having him immolate himself, because her child was aboard that shuttle and Maddy would die too if it was destroyed.

Maddy. It all depended, now, on a little girl of thirteen and on her connection to a man who was not her father in the biological sense - who hadn't raised her, either - but who was connected to her, mind to mind. With a bond that would have been fading at this stage in her life if he had been her parent, but that instead was asserting itself with the power of something that had been denied expression for far too long a time.

"Let me see the control panel, Maddy." Lincoln Casey's physical eyes were closed, the better to focus on what he was seeing via Madeleine Fralick's eyes. "Can you reach everything?"

"Of course I can, I'm as tall as Mum now if I'm not a little bit taller." The girl's mental tone was tart.

She sounded very much like Katy when Katy was annoyed.

"Good." Linc smiled inwardly. He knew just how to handle that irritation; having the child behave as the mother would have was incredibly convenient for him right now.

He was aware that Katy was leaving him, because for him to quarterback what Maddy needed to do it was best that he stay right here at Narsai Control. (Where had that term come from, anyway? He knew what "quarter" meant, both as the fourth part of a whole and as a word meaning "mercy." "Back" was a body part, and a direction. But how had the compound of the two words come to mean "to give direction to others"? He was going to have to check that out in a linguistics database, the next time he thought of it while he wasn't trying to do it.)

Katy would be boarding a shuttle, this one sent down to her from the Archangel. Nowhere on or near Narsai was there such a thing as an armed vessel, small or large. There were civilian ships in orbit that carried arms, of course, but none of them had a role to play in this situation. So Admiral Romanova required, and was being given, backup from the Star Service to implement the orders of the Defense Ministry concerning the release of two civilian citizens of this world.

There was another good reason for Casey to stay put, and it wasn't one that made him proud. The last thing Katy needed right now was for him to wind up in enemy hands again. He had spent more than forty years as an active duty officer, from plebe to commander of the Star Service Academy; and that meant he should not feel the slightest need to prove his courage, that he should not be ashamed if this one time it was best for everyone if he kept himself out of harm's way. Yet to stay here in this safe place, and work through the eyes and ears and hands of his wife's young daughter while Katy herself flew off into what could swiftly turn into a combat situation, galled him to his core.

You're a civilian now, dammit. Accept that, and help Katy and be glad you have a means to do that instead of having to just sit on your ass and wait this out, Casey told himself sternly.

A few months ago he had wanted to be a civilian. He had been appalled by the Star Service's actions in expelling the scramblers, and he had been physically and mentally worn down by living as an atypical Morthan on Terra.

Never until he took command of the Academy had he been required to go regularly into public places among civilians, and find himself the target of hateful stares because he had golden eyes but wore a command officer's imposing braid instead of a healer's innocuous insignia. During his years as a starship exec, and then as a flag adjutant, he hadn't had to deal pleasantly with diplomats like that toad Fralick (how could he once have looked up to that man as his first captain, anyway?); hadn't had to socialize with them. When he was obliged to talk to them, which had sometimes happened during his tenure as a flag officer's aide, he had done so from what he now realized was a position of superior power - perceived superior power, anyway - and if they had scorned him personally, it hadn't mattered.

But it mattered very much, when he was in command of a service academy instead of a ship. Even though in theory the Academy was run no differently than any other base would be, even though he supposedly had the same absolute power as would any captain aboard his own command, theory sometimes was just that. The fact was that he had loved "his" scramblers, and their adjunct training program, because while he was among them he knew that the respect he received belonged to him - and that it was respect, and not fear of his authority and of his power to punish. Not that the cadets and faculty members of the Academy's standard programs did not respect him, too, because they did; but he was not at ease with them, and enduring almost daily doses of civilian contempt exacerbated his discomfort until the time he spent with the scramblers became his psychological relief valve.

Then that safety valve had been taken away, a whole generation of officers who'd been smart enough and brave enough to merit field commissions had been betrayed (jettisoned like refuse, actually); and he had been given the task of telling them so. And something inside him had collapsed.

A Morthan who could get sick. That was the final insult. Not only was he unable to touch the mind of anyone except his wife, which meant that he was crippled in his ability to use the gifts of his mother's species; now he'd lost the one advantage that his heritage really had conferred upon him, his unfailing physical health.

Yes, at the time when he'd come to live here with Katy he had wanted to be a civilian. But now it broke his heart that she was going out there, back in uniform (fetched from home when?) and with a blaster belt worn legally and openly because Star Service officers could carry arms even on Narsai, and he had to stay behind and wait for her.

Linc, are you there? Don't let go of me!

A little girl's thought, brave but frightened. In his moment of self-pity he had let his mind wander, and had almost failed in the one task he could perform right now.

And this he could do precisely because of who and what nature had made him. Perhaps it wasn't so bad to be Lincoln Casey, after all, because although any Morthan hybrid could have touched Maddy telepathically there was no other who could have guided her through what she might soon have to do.

Healers didn't know how to pilot, how to shoot, how to fight. He did know those things; they had been his life. And now that knowledge was going to be lent to young Maddy, and with any luck it would keep her alive at least - and hopefully, it would keep Dan Archer and Rachel Kane alive as well.

Paolo Giandrea stretched out on his office sofa, a luxury that went with command of anything the size of a heavy cruiser or above. Roomy compartments were one of the perks that went with being assigned at this exalted level.

In a few minutes things were going to come together down there on a northern plain of Narsai, and he had left instructions that he should be awakened when that was about to happen. Not that his exec, the fellow who had replaced Rachel Kane and who definitely wasn't a gen, could not have managed very well on his own; but Giandrea would have felt that he was abandoning Admiral Romanova, and Dan Archer, and Rachel herself, if he had not made it his business to be on the bridge while what he suspected just might be the first-ever rescue of a piece of human "property" from the hands of a corporate marshal was being accomplished.

Besides, he didn't trust Fralick. And Fralick was in the middle of this, too.

Apparently he himself had managed to get away with the role he had played in Kane's escape from her owners. No one, Marshal Vargas included, seemed to suspect that the gen had had his assistance in her flight from the Archangel eighteen months earlier. Giandrea was vastly relieved about that, not only for the sake of his own hide (capital punishment for grand theft had been reinstated on Terra a few centuries earlier); but also because being a thief's children could bar his youngsters from higher education, and certainly would blackball their entrance into any of the major professions. He still wondered why he had taken that kind of a risk for Kane, but the fact was that he still had trouble forcing himself to believe that the finest executive officer he'd ever had was a gen and not just a rather poorly socialized young woman.

Dammit all, he couldn't have let his friend - his friend! - be forced to submit to a medical procedure

she didn't want, be deprived of children she had never expected she'd be able to bear. Giandrea's children meant more to him than he knew how to articulate, so he had had no trouble at all comprehending that Kane was willing to risk dying rather than give hers up.

That was a no-brainer. And therefore, helping her had also been a no-brainer.

He neither particularly liked nor disliked Morthans, but treating a retired officer the way Captain Casey had been treated was also a repulsive thing. And he hoped that as part of whatever was about to happen, Admiral Romanova would get her daughter back; he understood that Ambassador Fralick's custody of the girl had been perfectly legal, and no doubt the man did love the child, but to keep her from her mother all these years was another thing that just wasn't right.

A lot of things weren't right, and like so many other officers Paolo Giandrea was proud that as a member of the Star Service he could sometimes fix a few of them. Not as many as he wished, but some; and that was more than most people were able to say.

His comm whistled. His exec's voice said, "Captain, the Marshal's shuttle has landed on Narsai. And our shuttle has picked up Admiral Romanova, and they're going in."

There was commotion on the bridge, where Commander Tarag should be waiting politely for Giandrea to acknowledge so he could sign off. Instead his voice carried sharply through the commlink even though he wasn't speaking into its pickup. "What? How long, and how many ships?"

Giandrea knew. He swung himself off the sofa, glad he hadn't given himself the indulgence of loosening his uniform or removing his boots while he rested, and he dashed out of his office.

He needed to be on the bridge now, all right, but what happened to a few people down on the winter plains of Narsai no longer seemed very important to him. When he got to the bridge his exec was staring at a viewscreen that showed fifteen incoming bogeys.

Impossible. The Rebs had ships, some of them bought at those damn fool surplus auctions when it would have made better sense to scrap any outmoded vessel or weapon for its components than to sell it to someone who might turn around and throw it back at the Commonwealth's own forces someday; some of them refitted civilian vessels, some of them strange alien rigs that they'd acquired through alliances that no sane group of humans would ever have made. But what were they doing at Narsai, in force? Because fifteen ships was a fleet, in anyone's language, and those had to be Rebs.

Damn. Tanaka had argued for placing just such a fleet of their own here at Narsai, and he had been told that the locals would not like it - which was true, but irrelevant - and that the resources were needed elsewhere.

Well, the verdamtig resources were needed here today for sure. And Paolo Giandrea had just his one ship, which even though it was probably more powerful than any four of those Rebs was nevertheless incapable of fighting using fleet tactics while it was by itself.

He was going to make his one ship count for all it could, though. Giandrea moved to his command chair, and said to Tarag in a calm voice that was meant to soothe his own apprehension fully as much as everyone else's, "Report, if you please, Mr. Tarag."

This was why they trained. No one could ever truly be ready for a moment like this one, but Paolo Giandrea and his people were as near to it as any band of warriors had been since humans first began escalating the quarrel of one man with another into organized battles of group against group.

The first concern was to get clear of Narsai, both so he could maneuver freely and so that the planet would be spared any inadvertent damage from the coming conflict. Taking out satellites and habitats on which civilians depended was a tactic for terrorists, not something he would do and he hoped not

something the Rebs would do. After all, their whole problem was that they needed what Narsai and Sestus 4 and other such worlds produced, wasn't it? So it would make no sense, aside from being completely immoral, for them to damage Narsai's ability to go on growing and exporting crops or Sestus 4's ability to mine and ship ores.

Someone needed to tell the Rebs that, though. They came in too fast, so that it was not possible for the Archangel to get completely clear of Narsatian space before the shooting started.

CHAPTER 21

"I won't have to do anything to hurt my papa, will I?"

Maddy Fralick sounded like the child she still was. Linc focused his thoughts on her, with Katy there too but at a separate level - right now there was no need for him to cause mother's and daughter's minds to touch, and if he did so he suspected that both would be confused.

Neither of them needed that. Katy had to concentrate, and so did Maddy.

"I won't ask you to," he assured the little girl. "And remember, Maddy, I can't make you do anything and I'm not going to try. All I'm going to do is guide you, and I won't even do that if you'd rather I didn't."

"I don't want Papa to take me to Earth on this ship," the child said, with a firmness that was all Katy. "I still love him, but he's not like he was on Kesra. I'm scared, Linc. I want to stay on Narsai with Mum, and with you."

"And we want you to do that." He sent the assurance back with all of his mind's warmth, and realized that for the first time in his life he had an idea of what it might mean to be a father. He'd called Dan his foster son, and he had nurtured more young officers than he could remember during the years of his service career; but this was different. This was being a father in the sense that a Morthan was, that so few males of his kind had been able to experience since humans had first found their world and the interbreeding among the two species had begun.

It was something he was glad he hadn't missed. To hell with being able to touch just anyone's mind, as his fully gifted cousins could do. It was likely that none of the males among them would ever understand what this felt like, to have a young mind known during its coming to self-awareness in its mother's womb turn to him in love and recognition and cling to him in trust.

He wasn't going to let this little girl down, any more than he would have let Katy down. He no longer felt embarrassed or cheated because he was physically sheltered at Narsai Control. The two females out there on the winter plains were relying on him, and his very physical safety was going to make it possible for him to focus exclusively on them at a time when his being able to do so might make every difference.

But something was wrong. The people here were agitated, they were talking to each other in raised voices and they were afraid. He wished he had sought a private room, now, and that he hadn't chosen to sit in a vacant controller's chair so that if he needed to see what was going on in Narsai's skies he could do so.

What was going on in Narsai's skies wasn't a problem, but what was happening in space within the planet's star system decidedly was. He told Maddy, silently, that he must shift his attention away from her for just a moment; he reminded her that she could regain that attention at any time, she only had to let him know what she needed. He knew that Katy was already aware of whatever was going on, and that his mind was only following hers as he refocused.

No longer did he see the instrument panel in front of Madeleine Fralick. He saw the viewscreens at Narsai Control, and in their holo-imaged depths moved sixteen predatory shapes.

One of them, the largest, was Archangel. Fifteen of them varied in size, but those fifteen maneuvered with deadly precision.

The heavy cruiser lasted longer than Casey would have expected. Giandrea was a good captain, damned good. But with those odds, the Matushka herself might not have been able to get out in one piece; and Giandrea, to his credit or his folly, wasn't trying to do that. He had attempted to get far enough clear of Narsai so that the planet's orbiting infrastructure would not be damaged, but outright flight from the battle clearly was not his intention - that he might have pulled off.

No, he was only trying to get clear enough to fight back. Trying to defend the world below against this flock of raptors, which was all Casey could think of as he watched them dipping and swirling and seeking an opening in the Archangel's defenses.

There were birds like that on Sestus 3, where he had grown up. They were carrion-birds, primarily; but from time to time a flock of them would attack a living animal, and when they did that it looked just like this.

Just as ugly, and just as hopeless. Except that animals cried out when they were hurt, and the Archangel couldn't do that. Not as she appeared in the viewscreens of Narsai Control, anyway.

Such a terrible silence. Giandrea, the captain who had risked not just his career and his own life, but also his family's future, to give Rachel Kane a chance at her freedom. Kerle Marin, the healer who was Linc's own cousin by clanstribes reckoning as well as in species; who had kept him alive, and who had encouraged Dan Archer when Casey's foster son had been under the surface of the Romanov Farmstead and awaiting capture by the corporate marshal by giving Archer the simple knowledge that someone knew what was happening and that help was being planned. Those were the only two people Linc knew for sure on board that ship, but considering how many officers he'd known during his career - and especially how many he had trained, during his tenure as commander of the Academy - the odds were that if he ever saw this particular casualty list, he was going to recognize many more than just two of the names on it.

Archangel took six of her tormentors with her. But finally she died, in a burst of released energy that even when translated through a holo-screen was almost blinding.

Linc felt Katy's bitterness, and knew that she had witnessed it also from wherever the Archangel's shuttle was located at this moment. There had been no time to get it back to its mother ship, Giandrea hadn't issued a recall order and whoever had command of the shuttle had had brains enough not to attempt that on his own.

But Fralick didn't know what had happened, because Maddy did not know. Casey realized that as soon as he thought to direct his attention back to her, and he carefully screened out all that he had just seen as he did so.

Fralick was concentrating on going to the Marshal Service shuttle's hatch, to assist as the two prisoners were transferred from the civilian aircar. And while he was doing so, Casey saw to it that little Maddy quietly transferred control of all the shuttle's systems - starting with its helm - to the co-pilot's panel.

Good; there was no provision for the helm to ask who was giving it commands. The Marshal Service was seldom guilty of raw hubris, but Casey almost grinned when he realized that in this one thing they were sadly overconfident. Anyone could operate this shuttle, it requested no I.D. whatsoever! It allowed a thirteen-year-old to take control, and then to lock that control in.

The trick would be to keep the damnable corporate jackal from killing his prey rather than risk surrendering it alive to someone else, Katy thought as her pilot brought the Archangel's shuttle down almost on top of the larger craft. They were too close to be fired upon, literally; and as the belly doors retracted a tangle-net dropped into the space between the Narsatian aircar and the Marshal Service shuttle.

It surrounded the small man who had to be Vargas, and of course it also enveloped his two prisoners. Designed to restrain a prisoner from committing self-harm as well as from lashing out at others, the net tightened only in response to struggling within its strands; but it did that relentlessly. And it knew the difference between living flesh, which it would not crush or even compress dangerously, and a weapon.

Vargas lost the blaster rifle he had been holding, it was flattened. But the web did not crush the rifle's power pac, it also "knew" that to do so would cause an explosion.

Vargas uttered one curse. He did not fight; he let the web take him, relaxed within its strands.

He had never been more dangerous than he was at this moment, a predator caught in a trap but still conscious and physically unharmed. Just restrained, and furious, and ready to fight the instant he once again became able to do so.

If Dan Archer had possessed the power to kill Vargas at that moment, he would have done exactly that. And he would have felt he was doing the universe a service, because the look Vargas sent in Rachel Kane's direction was the most intense look of hate that Archer had ever seen on an otherwise human face. The corporate marshal was helpless, in a sense it would have been a cowardly thing to shoot him while a tangle-net held him fast; but that was probably the only time when it was going to be possible to kill a creature as ruthless as this one, and Archer knew it.

From the shuttle above them a widely dispersed stun-beam flashed blue. Archer had just time enough to wonder whether Rachel Kane and her unborn babies could absorb that energy safely before he lost consciousness.

Bringing a physician - a civilian one, anyway - along on this sort of a ride was definitely a first for Katy Romanova. But although she had gone through three pregnancies resulting in four healthy babies while on active duty status, retreating to Kesra only when in her final trimester (with Maddy, in her last month actually), she hadn't been subjected to the kind of physical battering that she knew Rachel Kane might be in for before this day's work was over. So she had asked for Cab Barrett's company, and her friend and doctor had joined her immediately while the Harbormaster and the Chief Constable had been left behind.

Stunning, a good idea? Of course not, Barrett said when asked, but neither was the stasis that had saved her patient's life earlier; and one thing was certain, getting Kane away from that damned jackal was the top priority right now. Whether or not anyone else wanted to come out and say so, keeping the children she was carrying alive had to be secondary.

Katy nodded, and when the time came to use the wide-dispersion stun beam she did so. There was no better way, not unless she wanted to try to hit Vargas only with something more deadly - and she wasn't about to attempt to work that closely with three people inside the same tangle-net.

The hatch of the marshal's shuttle was still open. On the monitor she saw George Fralick coming to

its edge, which placed him inside the airlock but did not expose him to fire from the larger ship that still hovered overhead, gently suspended on its antigravs until it could retract the net with its three passengers.

Fralick had a blade in his hand. He was going to cut the marshal loose, and Romanova was sure he knew how to calibrate that blade's settings so that it would be effective against a tangle-net.

She said within her mind, "Linc! Have Maddy shut the hatch, now!"

Her husband was still reeling from what had just happened out in space, and all around him at Narsai Control people were scrambling to try to figure out how to defend their world against the incoming Rebel ships. She, too, was profoundly distressed by the Archangel's loss - and how Narsai thought it was going to do anything, since it was a world without weapons, she did not know - but halting what they'd begun here was not going to help those larger events one bit. So she made that demand, and felt Linc gathering his resources and relaying it, and knew that he was deliberately and successfully shielding Maddy from the knowledge they both had of what was happening far beyond Narsai's northern hemisphere winter skies.

The hatch slammed shut at Fralick's back. Katy could not see it happening, of course, but she could see her ex-husband's reaction. He turned, and stopped trying to free Vargas.

"Retract net!" she ordered her own people, and then gave Cab Barrett a grin. The Narsatian doctor was pale under her skin's natural olive darkness. If Katy who had fought so many other battles had been disturbed by the one that had just been lost in space above them, then Barrett must have been flabbergasted by what she had seen; but somehow she still managed to smile back.

Lives were being saved, and that was what Cab Barrett's existence was all about.

"I'm going down to the other shuttle now," Romanova announced. Suddenly that seemed to be her job, somehow George Fralick down there alone with Maddy seemed to be her responsibility. Her unfinished business, that needed to be resolved right now before she had to start dealing with the new crisis that was inbound from space.

"Incoming teleport," the shuttle's copilot announced. The two crewpeople from Archangel had gone on doing their jobs here, in spite of what they knew had happened to their ship and to their comrades; and Romanova thought as she watched them that she had never seen more complete professionalism in the face of terror and loss.

"Linc? Is it - "

Romanova's thought was answered instantly. "Yes. After you wanted her to slam the hatch, the next thing seemed to be to get her out of there before Fralick can get it open. Which ought to give him a good reason not to fire on you while you're heading back here, I think?" Her husband sounded quite pleased with himself.

The person who materialized on the shuttle's small porter platform leaped down from it the moment she had control of her limbs, and she threw herself against Katy. And with all thoughts of going anywhere right now banished from her mind, Romanova gathered her daughter in and held her as gratefully as she had in the first moments after Maddy's birth.

CHAPTER 22

"Ma'am." The shuttle pilot spoke softly to Romanova, after she had finished hugging her child and as she was about to leave the cabin for the cargo bay where the three people in the tangle-net were reposing

in unconsciousness.

"I know," Romanova said, just as softly. "But he's committed no crime in the legal, provable sense, Lieutenant; and he's my little girl's father."

It did seem like a gross tactical error, to fly off and leave George Fralick in possession of a warp-capable shuttle at the start of what promised to be either a hostile occupation or - what? This was a situation unlike any of the others Romanova had faced during her career, though; and she could tell herself without stretching her credibility that destroying or disabling that shuttle in order to kill Fralick would be a stupid waste unless it was the only way to prevent him from killing someone else. Which it wasn't, not yet anyway.

She said, "Circle back, Lieutenant. But give me time to deal with what's down in our cargo bay."

To Maddy she said firmly, "Stay up here, love. Cab, come with me."

A cornered animal, that was still what Marshal Vargas reminded her of when she saw him lying in the tangle-net's mesh. She said to the doctor, "Scan him first. Stay out of his reach while you do it! If he's not still dead to the world, I don't want to find that out the hard way."

She herself deactivated the sections of the net that held Rachel Kane and Daniel Archer captive. She was no physician, but like most Service officers she was a trained field medic. She scanned Kane first, and was able to assure herself that the woman's vitals weren't shocky. And within her abdomen there were still three heartbeats, although Romanova's knowledge base stopped her there. She could not tell whether those heartbeats sounded the way they ought to, or if they were too fast - too slow - ?

Whatever, they were alive anyway. And if Kane was getting ready to miscarry, Romanova thought, she ought not to have vitals within acceptable limits. So the admiral moved next to her foster son, and scanned his body and grinned with relief.

Dan was fine. Healthy as the proverbial horse. Even as she finished the scan he stirred, and groaned, and tried to sit up.

She wanted to help him and comfort him, but she did not dare to take the time. She turned toward the still-imprisoned marshal instead, and saw him moving within the tangle-net just in time.

Cab Barrett, for all her brilliance as a doctor, knew nothing about self-defense. Vargas must have gone deliberately limp as soon as he gained enough awareness to feel the mesh around him, which meant he had some play inside it now. It would tighten as he tried to use that play, of course; but he could reach toward the Narsatian woman as she bent over him, and he was doing that.

Romanova's blaster left her belt without her giving it conscious thought. She brought the beam to its tightest possible focus, to avoid hitting Barrett, and she fired.

"One less jackal in the universe," she muttered as she stood there afterward, her breast heaving because the incident had taken her so completely by surprise. But she was pleased, in some corner of her mind, that her reflexes still were all that they should be.

Barrett had uttered a shriek, and now she was shaking. But after a moment she took her hands away from her face and she said in a choked voice, "He would have killed me, wouldn't he, Katy?"

"Yes. Or if he thought he could make it work, he'd have used you for a shield to force me to release him. Anyway, he won't do anything more to hurt anyone." The moment those words were out of her mouth, though, Romanova sensed their wrongness.

What was it she'd heard about marshals, through the Service grapevine that functioned across even the most unbelievable interstellar distances? They almost never died in the line of duty, but when they did....

She grabbed Barrett and hauled her across the cargo bay. She hit two controls on the nearest panel, simultaneously. One to set up a forcefield that would keep everything on her side of it in place for the next few moments - herself, Barrett, and the two humans who were trying so hard to wake up. The other to open one of the belly doors again, the one on which the corporate marshal's body rested.

The explosion still made the deckplates quiver, but it was outside the shuttle and they were inside it. They were unharmed.

"Matushka?" Dan Archer spoke the familiar title both interrogatively and shakily. He was sitting up now, and his eyes had found Romanova.

"Mum!" That was Maddy, crying out to her mother via comm.

"Katy?" Linc's voice inside her mind, concerned and tender.

"It's okay, it's over," Romanova told all of them, and drew a breath to still her own body's impulse to tremble. That had been close, much too close.

Rachel Kane cried out, and drew her knees up. And that caused Cab Barrett to hurry to her patient's side, her own recent terror forgotten.

"Admiral, we're almost back to where we left the marshal's shuttle." That voice from the cabin had recalled Romanova from the cargo bay, after she had once again closed its belly doors. She could not stay with the young woman who was in such clear physical distress, she could only leave her in the hands of her lover and a very competent physician.

They would probably prefer to lay her out down there, anyway, instead of trying to get her up into the cabin where there was no place for her to lie down and no room for anyone to work over her.

George. What in hell to do about George? That was a question Catherine Romanova seemed to have spent far more of her life asking herself than really ought to have been necessary, and she'd never asked it with greater exasperation - or with more at stake - than she asked it now

Linc's mind said to hers, "Katy, if you need to kill him in order to be safe, do it!"

"If I have to, I will," she answered, and her mental tone was that of a promise. "But not unless it's necessary, Linc."

He didn't understand that. The image that had inadvertently passed from her thoughts to his a few hours ago, in a library conference room where an entire world's leaders had been assembled, had made it impossible for him to comprehend why she hadn't killed George Fralick long ago. And that was a matter that she and her husband would have to work out between them, when they had leisure again for a personal conversation; but right now it had no place in her thoughts, and allowing it to distract her could get everyone who was with her killed. So she pushed it away, out of her consciousness, and was relieved when after an instant's rebellion Linc followed her lead and did the same thing.

"What's going on with the Rebs?" she asked him, and also asked the shuttle's crew, as she came back into the cabin and took a moment to squeeze Maddy's shoulder in reassurance.

"A stray shot from the battle killed almost a thousand people aboard Habitat Three," Casey's thought answered her. "We also lost a comm satellite, a long-range booster."

"Damn, now calling for back-up's not going to be possible." That one probably hadn't been a stray shot, it was the first thing she would have aimed at if she had been commanding that rebel fleet. But she hoped with all her soul the deaths on the orbiting habitat hadn't been deliberate, because if the Rebs were people with that kind of disregard for life then she hated to imagine what Narsai was going to be like if

occupation was what her world now must face.

"Fralick's got that thing underway, ma'am." The lieutenant at their own craft's helm looked grim. "Do we let him go, or do we take him out?"

"Oh, gods," Katy Romanova muttered, and felt the same helpless fury that she had last known lying on a bed in a house on Kesra - her nightgown torn off, her baby daughter asleep nearby, and with the man who had once promised to love her forever poised above her and about to force his body into hers.

That damned bastard. And once again Maddy was the reason she must hold back from killing him, because then to do so would have been to guarantee that her baby would grow up orphaned - her mother executed for her father's murder, since on Kesra a mated female simply had no right to refuse her male's advances - and to do so now would mean that Maddy must spend the rest of her life with the memory of hearing her mother give the order for her father to be shot down before her eyes.

She hadn't done it then, and she wasn't going to do it now. So as the lieutenant asked again, "Ma'am? Admiral Romanova?", she gripped the back of his chair and she stared at the viewscreen from over his shoulder.

And at last she said, "He's heading up toward orbit, Lieutenant. So let him go, we need to get back to Narsai Control while we still can make it there."

She heard her daughter's sigh of relief, and a moment later the girl butted her head against her mother's shoulder like a leggy colt looking for its dam's attention.

She did look just about like one, too, Romanova thought absently as she put her arm around the child and held her close. And then from the hatch leading down to the cargo bay she heard Dan Archer calling to her, "Matushka! How long until we can get to a hospital? Or can we port Rachel to one right now? Dr. Barrett says if these kids don't go into stasis the second they come out of her, we're going to lose them. We're probably going to lose them anyhow, but in a hospital they might have a chance."

There was something wrong about those ships. Lincoln Casey had been a starship command officer for most of his adult life, and he knew just by watching the blips. The peculiar readings that went along with them only confirmed it; of the nine ships that remained after the Archangel had taken six with her into oblivion, he was certain that seven had not come from any yard operated by human shipwrights.

Yet two definitely had, which made the puzzle even more baffling. Not that one space-going species could not appropriate and fly another's ships, he himself had prize captained a few alien vessels during his junior officer days; but with every sense he possessed focused now on the actions of those holo-imaged blips, and on the thousand different readings that they were generating on Narsai Control's tracking computers, he was certain that he was looking at a mixed fleet.

Morthans did not fight. As far as he knew, he was the only individual of his kind who had ever wanted to become a Star Service officer; so those ships out there could not be "manned" (ridiculous, inappropriate word!) by people from his mother's home-world. Sestians, natives of Sestus 4, occasionally contributed a member of their species to the Service; but those individuals did not rise far, and they usually didn't stay long, because they were notoriously unable to grasp the idea that they must take orders from humans. In other words, as they saw it, from animals. And Kesrans seldom deigned to leave their watery world at all, although Linc did know there had been one Kesran aboard the destroyed Archangel.

But it was beyond imagining, even for him, that an influx of crew members from the three nonhuman sentient species that inhabited the Outworlds as he knew them could account for the strangeness that

emanated from the ragged formation in that holoscreen. It was just too alien, and although he did not like Sestians or Kesrans much he did not find them strange - just annoying. And Morthans, even when he had been a child and his cousins had taunted him, were still just as much part of what he was as were humans.

There was nothing familiar out there. The fleet wheeled, and came in toward Narsai in a fan formation that was clearly intended to place that world's globe within its center.

The ships in orbit around Narsai included armed freighters, twenty-three of them just now; a passenger liner, which had a few defensive weapons but which really was not equipped to fight anyone or anything; and the usual assortment of shuttles, private yachts (rarely affected by Narsatians, though, so there were only a couple of them while an Inner World of similar population would have had dozens cluttering up its orbital pathways), and work-boats for the habitats and satellites that also accompanied Narsai in its annual journey around its sun. In other words, there really wasn't anything out there that could even consider challenging the fleet of warships.

Maybe some of them could run, though, if their captains had brains enough to realize it was time for that. Yet Casey knew after decades of having protected civilian shipping that civvie officers weren't trained that way. Heading for open space when they were in trouble was the exact opposite of what they were taught to do, so he was sadly unsurprised to see that although Narsai Control's commlinks were crackling - alive with frightened voices transmitting questions, making demands for explanations that right now the controllers could not supply - the civvies were staying put.

One blip was not doing that, though. Even on a controller's monitoring screen that particular blip generated a code all its own, a "top priority" indicator that was supposed to tell everyone who saw it (and every navigational computer that read it) that the vessel it represented was not to be challenged or interfered with in any way.

"Coming through!" was what that code said, and it was a rare circumstance under which anyone who recognized it would do anything else but give it full heed.

George Fralick aboard the Corporate Marshal Service's long-range shuttlecraft. So small that the alien fleet probably wouldn't bother to pursue him, so fast that he could be at New Orient - the closest Star Service base to Narsai - in two weeks' time, easily, if he headed straight there at the shuttle's maximum warp.

I never thought I'd be cheering for Fralick again! Casey thought, as an incredulous grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. But now I've got to. I guess Katy's right, that guy who was our first captain still is inside that stuffed shirt someplace.

"Of course I'm right!" came his wife's thought, acerbic and half-distracted. "He's smart, he's got guts, he can think on his feet. That's why he was a good captain, and he hasn't lost any of it."

"He's still a goddamn bastard," Linc responded, as he gave himself a physical shake to break out of the near-trance that watching the monitors with such utter concentration had caused him to enter. "A sick bastard."

"Yes. That, too, and someday it's going to catch up with him. But right now every prayer I know how to say is going with him, because if he can get through and send help back to us he may be the only hope we've got." Katy's thoughts became even more distracted. "I'm going to get my parents, Linc, as soon as we drop our patient off at MinTar Medical. And I'm ditching this uniform, that may make me a coward but right now I don't feel the least bit duty-bound to identify myself as a Star Service flag officer. I'm not sure whether Narsai Control is the worst or the best place you could be right now, because depending on that fleet commander's strategy it could be his next target or it could be the facility he most needs to

preserve for his own use later; but I'm going to bet my credits on that last option, it's what I'd do. So I'll see you there. Please tell the watch commander not to shoot when we come in low and fast and don't announce ourselves first."

"Your patient?" Linc realized he had missed some key events aboard the Archangel's surviving shuttle, while he had stared in fascination at the alien fleet's maneuvers. "And you know that fleet's not under human control, Katy?"

"Of course it isn't. It still may be the Rebs, though, if they've allied themselves with another space-traveling species. From what I've been hearing they are desperate enough to do that, and while I can't imagine what alien species they could have hooked up with it's clear that most of those ships weren't built from any design we've ever seen before. Could be that it's Rebs using ships they got from another species that actually has enough vessels so they can sell them cheap - but there's something about the way they're handling themselves that feels funny to me, something that makes me believe all those captains can't possibly be Rebs and humans."

She paused, awaiting his response. Casey answered her, "I read it that way, too."

"Good." All their professional lives they'd served as each other's sounding boards, and even though neither liked that conclusion the fact that they had reached it independently gave it an astronomically higher chance of proving to be the truth. Romanova continued, "Rachel's gone into labor, Linc. Months too soon. I had to use a wide-dispersion stunner to get Dan and her separated from Vargas, and afterward when I scanned her she seemed to be okay; but then suddenly her body had just had enough, and now we've got to get her to proper care or at best the babies are going to die."

And at worst, of course, so would Rachel. Katy didn't say that, but she didn't have to.

CHAPTER 23

Linc felt the mental touch with disbelief. It couldn't be, because Kerle Marin had been aboard the Archangel; and he had seen the Archangel die, just minutes ago. Yet there was no mistaking it, this was another Morthan's mind - and it had to be someone who had touched him before. It was not possible for even a Morthan to reach across space, even at this quite manageable distance, to touch a consciousness that was not already familiar. Establishing a new connection required that the two individuals be in physical proximity to each other.

"It's me, cousin." Marin sounded - what? Bemused. The sorrow of losing his shipmates a short time earlier, the physician's outrage at the destruction of so many lives, and his personal grief for those few beings who had treated him as an equal instead of secretly fearing him - Captain Giandrea, in particular - came through as well; but Marin was a mortal being, after all, and he was not pretending he wished he had died with his ship. And however it was that he'd wound up aboard one of those Reb or alien vessels, clearly he had already been able to get past the resulting fear and sense of strangeness.

"I believe it, but I wish I knew how." Linc responded even as he tried to broaden the communication to include his wife; and he winced when someone else, not Marin, prevented him from doing so. "Ouch! Who was that? What in hell's going on, cousin?"

"I don't understand it all myself just yet, but I do know that they scanned the Archangel before she blew and that they took me off because I'm Morthan. And they also took off every gen who was still alive at that point, and a really furious Sestian and a really puzzled Kesran."

"How? You can't teleport unless you've got compatible equipment at both ends! And I don't believe you and all those others hopped onto porter platforms when your ship was about to go up around you, when there wasn't an ally in sight." Casey knew what he was talking about, because he'd been there. Clearly in his case the proverbial chestnuts had always been pulled out of the fire successfully, or he would have died in action long ago; but trying to port someplace was the last thing that crossed your mind, if you were on a lone ship engaged in battle with an alien foe.

"Of course we didn't. So now we know that's one technological barrier that someone else has broken, even though our own scientists are still telling us it can't be done." Amusement now came through from both Marin's mind, and from whoever was the third party in this conversation in which he was now revealed as intermediary rather than principal.

"So these people snatched you with a porting technology that goes beyond what we know about, that doesn't need equipment at both ends." Linc repeated the thought, as much to let him collect himself as to have it confirmed.

"Yes. And now they want to meet with Narsai's top brass, Linc. Don't be afraid, the fact that Narsai has hardly got a weapon to its name is exactly why the only loss of civilian life so far has been aboard the habitat that stopped a wide shot - that wasn't deliberate, in fact it's a...."

"A sorrow to us," the mental voice that Marin's had been masking came through plainly on its own now. "Destroying the warship was regrettable, as well; but to that we had no alternative."

"Let my mate hear what you're saying, please." Casey had never wanted the touch of Katy's mind more than he wanted her with him right now. "If you really do want to deal with Narsai's leaders, you'll need to deal with her too; and I just scared hell out of her by trying to touch her, and then cutting off."

The other mind considered the request, and for a moment it reached beyond Casey's consciousness. It went deep into his being, to places it could not have gone easily without his consent. It had the power to go there anyway, he knew that instinctively from his memories of a time when he had been a helpless infant and his mother's mind had been able to do as she wished when she handled him; but now, as then, there was no malice in the power that touched him. If he had resisted, this being would not have committed the mental equivalent of rape by forcing its way where he attempted to block its entry.

This was distasteful, the human parts of his mind were not places this being even wanted to go. But before Katy could be allowed into the link, his intentions must be ascertained - on a level where undetected deceit was impossible.

A few seconds by the chrono, an eternity while it was being experienced. At last the invader withdrew to normal levels of telepathic communication, and Linc Casey sighed his relief. And then the strange voice said, "Prepare her. Then we will talk."

Catherine Romanova had not intended to debark from the shuttle at MinTar Medical, but it had become necessary. Hauling Rachel Kane up to the porter platform in the cabin was out of the question, so the shuttle had to set down in the hospital's huge receiving lot; and with what was going on in space above them broadcast to every viewscreen on the planet, even the hospital's emergency personnel were not willing to come outside and bring their newest maternity patient in.

So there was no solution except for Romanova to join Dan Archer and Cab Barrett in doing that, and of course Maddy trailed along beside her mother. Katy wanted her there, right now she wasn't letting her own baby out of her sight.

Four lives, three of them not even technically begun. Probably it was ridiculous to take risks to save them right now, with everything else that had happened and was about to happen; but Katy Romanova could not possibly have written those little lives off, not when she could do something that might help them. She and Dan handled the stretcher, with Cab hovering along beside and with Maddy bringing up the rear. And as they went she wondered if she could get civilian clothing for the two surviving Star Service officers still aboard the shuttle, since she had every intention of commandeering an outfit for herself while she was here. If she had to spend the rest of this episode wearing someone's surgical scrubs, with just her underclothes beneath, that would be fine. There were times when any uniform, let alone that of an admiral, functioned like a sign that read, "Please shoot me!"

The OB/GYN team met them in emergency reception, and Rachel and her lover and her doctor were all rushed through into the treatment area without red tape. Narsai's informality had its advantages; at a Terran medical facility there would have been wrangling about who was responsible for payment, and whether or not Dan Archer had a legal right to accompany the patient, and whether Barrett had authorization to treat her. Here no one dreamed of putting any of those issues ahead of caring for the patient - whatever had to be sorted out, could and would be dealt with later.

Katy stood outside the set of doors that had been closed in her face, and she waited for her chest to stop heaving as she put a reassuring arm around her daughter. Maddy asked softly, "Mum? Will Papa be okay?"

Of course. Maddy hadn't heard the conversation Katy had had with Linc, because somehow during the past few hours Casey had finally mastered the trick of shutting the child out when he wanted to talk to his wife alone. They'd been so distracted, though, that Katy had not even realized the difference.

What a blessing that was going to be! She squeezed the child gently as she said, "He got away, Maddy. Hopefully he'll get all the way through to New Orient, and he'll tell the authorities there what's happened."

"Then are you glad you didn't let that lieutenant shoot him down?"

"Yes. I'm very glad I didn't do that." For more reasons than I understand myself, little girl, Katy added mentally.

Then she stiffened, and she leaned on her daughter's surprisingly strong young shoulders without realizing she was doing so.

"Katy. I have contact with someone on one of the ships. It's nothing I initiated - he, or she, or it, was looking for a telepath down here and found me." Her husband's thoughts were more formal, more structured, than in their usual mode of communication; but if a third being was about to join them, then the formality was not surprising. What was astonishing was that anyone but Maddy, or possibly a Morthan healer, could be communicating with Linc by this means.

"Mum, you need to sit down." Maddy's voice came from far away, and the child was right. She drew Katy with her to the waiting area and its seats, and she settled her mother there as if for the moment their roles had been reversed.

It didn't occur to the Kesran-reared child to request medical aid, not even here in Narsai's most advanced facility. That was a blessing, because Katy wasn't sick. She simply was too absorbed inwardly to direct her own body's outward behavior, and now that she was no longer required even to maintain balance enough to stand that didn't matter.

But she did say to her husband, "Linc, let Maddy know I'm okay. I'm scaring her, and I don't want you bringing her in on what we're going to have to do next."

He did as requested. Beside Katy her daughter relaxed, and then assumed a protective posture that would have been comical if the situation had allowed for humor.

Hopefully the hospital's staff had other things to do besides notice a distracted-looking woman in a Star Service admiral's uniform, sitting in its emergency admissions waiting area with a slim pubescent girl who looked very much like her seated at her side. What Katy Romanova had to do now didn't involve her body at all, but if anyone disturbed that shell it would interrupt something that definitely ought not to be interrupted.

"Who are you?" She asked the most natural question first, before she was even sure that questions from her would be welcomed. She had to know that, she had to have a frame of reference or she could not participate in this process in any meaningful way.

"Who are we would be a better question, Admiral Romanova." The being was amused that she had thought changing her body's coverings would conceal her identity. But that amusement was surprisingly gentle, it had no flavor of scorn as her mind tasted it.

She was "tasting" amusement? Senses for this being were rather different than the five she had always experienced, or even the sixth one with which she had made so many split-second decisions and had so often kept herself and her people alive when her five normal senses by themselves would have failed her.

"I am not like you, no. Your mate feels the need to assign me a gender, but I cannot classify myself in that way." More amusement, followed by a brisk desire to proceed with business. "I am speaking for everyone aboard the vessels that survived your warship's effort to destroy us, but my species is not the only one present here. As your mate has already learned, there are Morthan hybrids like him among us; and I do mean like him, and not like the Morthan that thinks of itself as 'Marin.'"

"You mean Morthan hybrids whose telepathic abilities are limited? And who are capable of fighting?" Katy grasped that immediately, because she had always felt certain that Linc couldn't be the only one of his kind. The first, maybe; but not the only one. And now that was being confirmed.

"Yes. Exactly so. Also we have full humans whose fellows have rejected them for reasons beyond their control. There are some who think of themselves as 'scramblers'; I sense that this term has meaning for you, also, and that it is not a negative meaning."

"Not at all!" Katy answered, and thought deliberately of her foster son.

"Excellent. And this one of whom you think with such affection, on whom you place such value, is also a member of an additional despised human sub-grouping. The Sestian female we have taken aboard would consider him a beast, would she not?" This amusement was different. Clearly the being did not approve of the Sestian's attitude - although for some reason it had thought saving her life was worthwhile, when the Archangel was about to die and only a relative few of those aboard could be rescued.

"Yes. Dan's grandparents were miners on Sestus 4, and you seem to understand exactly how it is for humans who are stuck with having to live there." Romanova knew that her body had sighed, and she hoped she wasn't alarming Maddy. But she could do nothing now to communicate directly with her daughter, not without breaking this communion that absolutely must not be disrupted.

"Just so. There are others like him here with us. Not only from his particular group, but a variety of other humanoid creatures whom your mind and that of your mate think of collectively as 'rebels.' That term I do not quite comprehend; who gave the government of a far away world authority over all of you here? I understand that individuals who claimed to represent you may have made such assertions on your behalf, but has any of you affirmed this personally?"

"That wouldn't be possible," Romanova said, and was surprised to think that she was defending Terra's right to govern the Outworlds via the Commonwealth even though her Star Service oath obliged her to do exactly that. Never in her life had she been more aware of the dichotomy between Admiral Romanova and Katy, the girl who had once been female heir to the Romanov Farmstead.

She wondered in a tiny, uncontrolled corner of her mind whether Johnnie and Reen were all right, and remembered that Marshal Vargas had left them where he'd found them. So they, at least, should be safe now - although no doubt they were at least as frightened as any other civilians on Narsai, and maybe more so because they were so much better informed than were their more typical contemporaries.

"To be locked alone within a body; how terrible that must be!" There was genuine sympathy in the voice that no longer seemed alien to her. "But that is true for all of you, even for those called Morthans who have some telepathic abilities. But we digress, and there is no time for that just now."

"Who else did you rescue besides the Archangel's healer? And why did you make this alliance with the Rebs?" Along with the strangeness, Katy's fear was abating. Like just about every other living creature she'd ever encountered, this one was capable of destroying other living things if it was given the right (or the wrong, as it were) conditions to require or justify doing so; but it wished her no harm. She was certain of that, to her very core.

"The humans who were brought into existence to be used by other humans, the 'gens' as you think of them who were aboard the warship, we had a duty to free if we were able," came the answer to her first question. "And we do not know any Kesrans or any Sestians, so we claimed the opportunity that was offered to us. But you have known us before, Catherine Romanova; and you also, Lincoln Casey. And when you recognize us, then you will realize why we have made this 'alliance' as you call it - although to us the concept is not the same thing that it is to you, because we are not locked up alone in corporeal bodies. But you will remember that we had difficulty with this concept before, although after many rotations of accepting and caring for individuals cast out by your 'Commonwealth' we now understand you much better than we could understand you then."

Long-unvisited memories surged up now to fill Katy with re-created pure terror, until Linc's mind wrapped hers in loving reassurance. And although she had asked him to keep Maddy out of this, and he had agreed and at the time had acted to accomplish that exclusion, she now felt her child's consciousness with her as well.

"It's okay, Mum," came the girl's thought. "Even though they've changed a lot, I can still remember these people from before I was born. They can't scare me the way they're scaring you."

It should have been humiliating, to have her thirteen-year-old take her mentally by the hand and lead her. But it wasn't. Instead, it was a profound relief.

"Papa doesn't need to bring back a fleet protect us from them," Maddy added, with both wonder and assurance in her tone. "They didn't come to hurt us. They wouldn't have destroyed the Archangel if it hadn't attacked them the minute they arrived. And they got rid of the comm satellite only so that they'd have time to talk to us, because they knew if they didn't do that people here would do whatever the Commonwealth told them to do instead of thinking for themselves about what's best and what makes the most sense."

A child's clear vision could be the most useful thing in the universe, Katy thought as she felt herself being steadied by these two who were holding her so lovingly. Linc on one side, Maddy on the other, just as if they had been standing together physically instead of Linc's being seated in a flight controller's chair several clicks away across the city; while she and her daughter sat in a medical center's emergency

waiting area amid the unnatural hush of a hospital that right now wasn't admitting anyone, because not a soul dared to venture out of whatever shelter it had found.

"I knew the cloud-beings on Mistworld," Katy said at last, after she had calmed enough to be coherent again. "They're the only species I've ever even heard about that are sentients without corporeal forms."

"Then you recognize us now, Katy?"

"Yes!" Of course she did - although what the sentient, but noncorporeal, life forms of Mistworld's upper atmosphere were doing aboard starships off Narsai baffled her completely. And Maddy was right that they were not exactly as she remembered them, either; but after more than a decade of associating with the colonists who lived on their planet's surface, she supposed it would be ridiculous for her to expect them to be unchanged.

At its beginning what happened at Mistworld thirteen years ago had been like a dress rehearsal for the war that might be starting in Narsai's space now. Certainly it had been sparked by the same issue: conflicting claims on limited resources, by groups who needed those resources in order to survive.

Mistworld had been the last truly inviting M-class planet to be discovered in the Outworlds, out beyond Mortha where most of the available planets were marginal or downright hostile to human existence. No sooner were Commonwealth homesteaders established there, then those homesteaders had been attacked - by a flotilla sent from an overcrowded principality elsewhere to dislodge them, to clear the planet for that principality's own settlers. The homesteaders had called for Star Service protection, and a battle group commanded by Catherine Romanova had arrived at Mistworld to drive the invaders back to their own sector.

Romanova had anticipated making short work of that assignment, since she had more ships than the enemy did; and at first, things went just as she expected. Then both sides started losing ships - not to each other, but to energy discharges from the planet's upper atmosphere. Her sons had been among the first of her people to die that way, when one of those deadly blasts had engulfed two vessels - one already crippled by a conventional shot from their known enemy, the other rushing to its aid before it could be incinerated as it was drawn down into Mistworld's atmosphere.

For both fleets to gather their survivors and retreat was not an option at that point, because the settlers were still there and stranded. The invaders had fled, and hadn't been heard of again; but Romanova had been obliged to stay and determine what was causing those devastatingly accurate energy discharges - and to find a way to halt them, so that traffic could move once again between the planet's surface and space beyond it.

To withdraw, to abandon the settlers and wait off-shore while a fast shuttle made the trip back to base and summoned more sophisticated scientific aid, would probably have been the wisest course of action; and for the pregnant Romanova to have claimed a berth on that shuttle would have been completely understandable, too. But while she had thought about doing that, at the same time that she and Linc had been alternately savoring and grappling with their first mind-to-mind communications in which she played any conscious part, other minds had joined them.

These beings who lived in Mistworld's atmosphere had not objected when the first settlers arrived, because travel through their domain by humans who wanted only to reach the planet's surface or to return from there to space had no effect on them at all. When the ship-against-ship conflicts began, they were not

concerned because the initial fighting took place further out than the levels where they existed; but as the battle intensified, and as it shifted and came closer, they had started feeling its effects. So they had begun fighting back, in the only way that they were able to do so.

They told Romanova, when she asked them how they knew she was the fleet's commander and the person with whom they should negotiate peace, that they had no real concept of what a "fleet" was or a "commander." But after the fighting had stopped, when they explored the minds of those few creatures aboard the remaining ships that could accept telepathic contact, they had discovered that if they did not disclose both their presence and their true nature they were very likely to be located and eliminated without their enemies' ever realizing that they were fellow sentients. Then they had sought to know which of the bewildering array of individuals - these scraps of consciousness isolated within fleshy envelopes, as humans and even Morthans appeared to them - had the power to control the others' actions. And they had been relieved to learn that although the individual they sought was among the "humans" with whom they could not communicate directly, her mind was nevertheless accessible to them because of its strong ties to that of a more flexible being.

Today Romanova was credited for the successful negotiations that had followed, with Casey's role left out of the historical accounts. That omission still suited him. He had cooperated completely, had eased his friend and captain through the strange experience and its naturally attendant terrors. He had, in fact, been grateful that her need for his help had made it impossible for her to draw away from him after the shock of learning that he could perceive her thoughts; but he had not particularly wanted anyone except the cloud-beings (as humans soon started calling them) to know what he had done. And Katy had respected his wishes; so when the Commonwealth's scientists and diplomats arrived and telepathic interpreters took over to finalize the treaty, her bond with Linc became a private thing once more.

A private thing, a sacred thing, that Casey had permitted those strangers to violate only because the survival of both of Mistworld's resident species had depended on it. But never once after they left Mistworld had any third being except Maddy been allowed to share in his communion with his love, until now.

The human settlers surviving on Mistworld had remained there. They were permitted to replace their communications link to the rest of the Commonwealth, to resume traveling through the atmosphere to and from orbit; in most ways the terms that emerged from the final round of negotiations allowed them to go back to their lives almost exactly as they had lived them before. But they agreed to ban energy discharges within the cloud-beings' zone of residence, and they were required to open an on-going dialog with those beings in order to avoid future misunderstandings.

Katy Romanova had never expected to encounter the cloud-folk again. Certainly not here, in her home star system; and certainly not with the cloud-creatures traveling in ships the way humanoids traveled. But they were here, she recognized them unmistakably now, and the soft voice inside her mind was continuing to speak.

"When you understood what we were, you led your people to make peace with us. And there are some among your own kind who condemn you for that even now, because to them it seemed an unnatural act on your part."

The voice was gentle, as if its owner or owners understood perfectly what losing her boys had meant to this human mother. But other humans had indeed accused her of lacking normal feelings, for

negotiating peace with the beings responsible for her children's deaths; and the first to charge her with that had been George Fralick, arriving on the first ship to reach Mistworld in response to her appeal for diplomatic and scientific back-up. And while Katy had never been able to blame her former husband for his grief-driven fury, at her and at the cloud-folk, the memory of how viciously he had raged at her was just as hurtful now as it had been then.

"Of course I did." She felt herself swallowing painfully as she acknowledged that recollection. "If I couldn't have done that, I'd have had no right to call myself a captain. Being able to admit it when a fight is caused by misunderstanding is something every command officer has to be able to do, otherwise you go on wasting lives long after you could have stopped the killing."

"That is why we are willing to deal with you now, on behalf of the many humans and other corporeals - on our own world, and on less hospitable worlds nearby - who have become our responsibility." The word "responsibility" was not a precise rendering of the alien concept, Romanova knew that; but it was as close as her own thoughts could express its true meaning. "We came to Narsai because Narsai is best able to supply the support that our charges need, but finding you here is good fortune. For us, and for those who think of themselves as your superior authorities. There are many beings now among our corporeal charges who can communicate as we do, but we nevertheless need you or someone like you to speak for them with those of your own kind who have the power to change that which needs changing."

"So you want me to stand in the middle for you again?" It was very clear now.

"Someone must. Your superiors trust you, we trust you, and it is your world that will suffer most if war comes because the aid our corporeals need is not given. Will you help us, Katy?"

She would not be forced to do this. If she refused, she would not even be blamed. But no one needed to force her, because this was what she wanted; and Linc was with her in it, and so was Maddy.

She said softly, and with all her being: "Yes."

CHAPTER 24

What felt so much like a single being, an individual, was not that at all. The divisions among the cloud-dwellers were not distinct boundaries, as was the case with every other life form Katy Romanova had ever encountered.

Deliberately planted colonists from some far-off other world? Castaways, stranded in a place to which they had managed to adapt? At any rate these beings had not evolved on the planet whose atmosphere they now inhabited, and when they had come there they had been corporeal. And until humans also came there to explore and to colonize, they had been unable to leave.

"We allowed the original band of humans to remain on our planet's surface because it seemed to us that what they did there would not affect us, and because it saddened us that so many like them were killed when we were forced to protect ourselves," the single voice that represented all of the cloud-folk told Katy now, as she sat with Linc and Maddy in the university library in the middle of the circle formed by Narsai's councilors and commissioners. Calling those people together for a second meeting had taken some doing, because they were almost all frightened of traveling so soon after the battle that had taken place in their star system - the first battle to be fought there, or even nearby, in centuries.

But at last they had come, most of them anyway. And now they were listening as a perfectly normal

human female whom they had known all her life told them what these "Others" (as the cloud-folk now chose to designate themselves) wanted.

On those ships out there, Katy Romanova said, were not just the mysterious Others; but also humans, and displaced Morthans, and assorted people of other species. And gens - because the Others could see nothing different about gens, to the Others a human was a human was a human.

"How can they travel in ships, if they don't have bodies?"

That intriguing question was posed by Cab Barrett. The doctor was free to attend this gathering because Rachel Kane, once safely admitted to a modern medical facility, had agreed to let her unborn children be transferred from her body to incubation fields where the three fetuses could develop just as normally as if she had been able to continue her pregnancy.

She had been unwilling to consider that before, because as long as she was property her babies were property too. But that was no longer an issue, and for her safety and theirs the transfer had been made. Now she was recovering, with Dan Archer still hovering protectively at her side as though he could not quite let himself believe no second corporate marshal would arrive and try to take her away.

"Each of them travels in concert with a humanoid, with a corporeal person," Kerle Marin supplied, and looked at Romanova for confirmation as he spoke. He was finding this experience new and exciting, and not unsettling at all. "It's not 'possession' in the way I'm afraid some of you may be inclined to think about it, though! The Others can be one being, or a billion beings; which, and how many, depends on what seems needed from moment to moment."

"And just why would such a being bother with trying to help displaced humans, and Morthans who are cast-offs because they lack healing gifts, and gens who've escaped from their owners? Especially why would they take responsibility for them, in such numbers that their own planet's resources can't keep pace?" That was Cabanne Romanova, speaking calmly because she was too old to be afraid of anything now except harm to her mate or her daughter or her granddaughter. And clearly this fascinating new turn of events did not threaten any of them, so she was enjoying it instead of shrinking from it.

"Because they're compassionate people and dislike seeing others suffer, is one reason. But also because although you might not think so, living in a body has its advantages." Lincoln Casey was participating in this set of negotiations openly, instead of covertly as he had done thirteen years earlier. Then his intimacy with Katy had been newly disclosed even to her, and he had been afraid of spoiling it forever before she could discover its possibilities for shared joy; but he had no such fears now. His bond to his wife was solid and tested and secure, and although he still did not relish intrusion on its sanctity by the Others he could tolerate the encroachment without having to fight against Katy's fear and his own resentment.

"Such as?" Cab Romanova asked. She smiled as she did so, because she liked her daughter's husband and she no longer bothered to hide that fact.

"Such as being able to operate the controls of a ship. Such as being able to build a ship; or to reactivate ships that have been stored in caverns on Mistworld, for thousands of years since the time when the Others' ancestors came there." Casey answered that question, too. It was knowledge he hadn't possessed until the words came out of his mouth, and he looked toward his wife in astonishment. Of his own volition he asked her, "Did you know that already, Katy?" It didn't seem possible that she could have picked up something that had bypassed him, while he was serving as her conduit in communicating with the Others; but the information had come to him so matter-of-factly that he wondered if he was expected to possess it already, and had somehow missed it during the turmoil that had been a constant part of this

process thirteen years earlier.

"No. I knew they came to Mistworld from somewhere else, that they were colonists too. But I didn't know until just now why those ships are so obviously not anything a human designed." Katy smiled. She was excited, probably even more so than Linc was.

"The humans have given us many things, just by living on our world," Kerle Marin resumed, with a different tone in his voice that left no one in any doubt that the Others were speaking through him now. "But without help from their own kind, they cannot cope with the influx of other noncorporeals that is overwhelming both our world and the other less hospitable ones where the people you call 'rebels' have their origin. So we have agreed that that our charges must create a new relationship with other corporeals, such as you humans on Narsai. We had every thought this could be done peacefully - but those of our charges who said that would not be possible, have been proved correct."

"Is it still important enough to do anyway, even if it can't be entirely peaceful?" The old philosopher, Trabe Kourdakov, asked that question. He frowned as he did so, because he was not happy about all this in the way that his wife was.

But he was a pragmatist, not an idealist, and he accepted the answer that came to him not from Marin's throat but from his daughter's. "Yes, it is," Katy Romanova announced firmly, her voice clearly expressing another intelligent creature's thoughts. "Life has not only the right to survive, but the duty to do so. If you did not believe that, your ancestors would not have traveled here from Terra to build this rich society in which you take such justifiable pride. It was a costly business, your histories tell you that. But you would say it was worth the cost, would you not?"

Yes, they would. On that point not one person present could dissent.

It had been many hours since the alien fleet's arrival. Although she'd had time for some sleep, Katy Romanova was nevertheless worn out when this second assembly of Narsai's two leadership groups finally adjourned. And she sensed that beside her, Linc was exhausted too; and as for young Maddy, the girl was in Linc's arms being carried like a three-year-old instead of a leggy young woman of thirteen.

"Do you think if we agree to help these people, these 'Others' and the humanoids with them, the Commonwealth will allow us to do that?" Katy's mother was at her side as they walked out of the conference room. If she was tired, this almost centenarian woman had to be much more so. Yet Cabanne Romanova's eyes were bright, and Katy had the distinct notion that if she had told her mother the Commonwealth would undoubtedly pound hell out of Narsai for sending its disposable resources somewhere other than the Inner Worlds that answer would not have fazed her.

What she said was, with absolute honesty, "I don't know, Mum. I suspect they won't be happy, but leaders like Fleet Admiral Tanaka and Defense Minister Fothingill should remember Mistworld thirteen years ago. If they remember it well enough to take all this seriously - that's the first step toward dealing with both the Others and the Rebs in a way that won't be a total disaster."

And then she yawned, and crawled after Linc into an aircar that would take her little family back to its home at last.

CHAPTER 25

George Fralick was in luck. Traveling at the maximum cruising speed which the corporate marshal's long range shuttle could muster, he was only a day out from the Narsai system before he encountered a

starship.

Here in the reaches between inhabited systems, sending a comm all the way to Terra - or even to New Orient - was not possible. One ship alone could not muster the necessary power, that had to be drawn from a star and it required booster equipment that normally was installed only in planetary orbit. So the captain of the ship that found Fralick and took him aboard had a decision to make.

To head for Narsai, and attempt to deal with the situation there on her own? Or to continue on course toward New Orient, and from there let Fralick report everything he had seen so that higher authorities could determine what should be done next?

Sally Greenberg did what any captain would have done, she ordered her ship to come about. Nine against one? Lousy odds, to be sure, but unlike the Archangel her ship would have the advantage of knowing what it was sailing into instead of being taken by surprise while in planetary orbit. She'd been in worse fights, and to those people on Narsai it might make all the difference whether help came in a day's time or in several weeks' time instead.

It was like an omen, Fralick thought as he stood beside the trim young woman on the bridge of her ship and watched while the viewscreen began to show the first clear images of Narsai's sun. His first and only command had been named Raven; and that was also the name of this vessel, built years after his Raven had been decommissioned and many times larger and more powerful. But that had been a lucky ship for him then, and he was convinced that this Raven was going to be another lucky ship for him now.

"We're being hailed by a freighter, Captain," came a voice from ops. Fralick did something he hadn't done in years; he came damned close to answering, as if he had forgotten all the time that had passed and once again thought he was in command here.

Greenberg didn't notice. She said, "On screen, Ensign."

A grizzled fellow in civvies appeared, and identified himself promptly. "Angstrom, Tor. Wondering if you're headed into Narsai, Captain...?"

Damn, the bastard was Narsatian. Both the accent and the lack of decent formality even with a Star Service command officer gave him away.

"Greenberg. Commanding Raven," the Service officer responded with a glimmer of humor in her eyes. Plainly she wasn't as bothered by Narsatian antics as Fralick was; but then, she hadn't been subjected to Katy Romanova for the past forty years. "Yes, that's our destination. I understand that you've had some trouble there, Captain Angstrom."

"We thought so, too, at first. And you Star Service folks aren't going to be happy, there was a ship lost." Angstrom was not just Narsatian, he was lower class Narsatian. Barely literate, probably, although he had to know his maths and his sciences or he wouldn't be able to command anything that was warp-capable. "But I thought you might already have heard something. Some bastard of a stuffed shirt diplomat named Fralick managed to get his tail between his legs and run during the battle - all fifteen minutes of it! And after our people were able to talk to their people, the ones from Mistworld, it got straightened out okay. Looks as if we've got new trade opportunities, and a place to settle population overflow so we might not have to be so damned rigid about family size, instead of being about to be conquered and occupied - or just plain blown to hell, the way it looked like for awhile there."

"I'm Fralick." To have denied it, or even to have remained decently in the background, was impossible for him right now. Greenberg at first looked surprised, then affronted; and she was within her rights, this was her bridge and the Kesran ambassador should have kept his mouth shut until she gave him leave to speak. But he rushed on, because this was one of the few times in George Fralick's careful life

when he could not control his own mouth. "Yes, I managed to escape before the Rebs shot me up along with the starship they destroyed. And a whole orbital habitat, too, if my instruments were reading correctly. How many human lives was that, Captain Angstrom? At what point will your expanded trade opportunities give you payback for their deaths?"

"Too bad, but the Star Service shot first and the Misties just shot back," Angstrom responded, not at all abashed to learn that the personage he had just maligned had heard him do so. "Don't know who hit the habitat. For your information it wasn't destroyed, although people on it did die - but if we did know whose shot went wild, that couldn't bring any of them back. Damned shame, of course, but letting a war start over it wouldn't help anyone either. Just more people dead, is all we'd get for doing that."

Greenberg braced her shoulders. She was a pretty woman, Fralick had noticed that immediately; willow-slim in a way that Katy never had been, not even before three pregnancies and then retirement had put extra flesh onto her already rather large-boned frame. Yet Katy had always attracted him, she still did whenever he somehow wound up in the same room with her.

Why? He still didn't know, not even after forty years.

Greenberg was saying, "So you're telling me I don't need to rush the rest of the way in and rescue the good people of Narsai, Captain Angstrom? You think they're all right?"

"Well, ma'am, at least I'd suggest you might want to comm them at Narsai Control as soon as you get within range. They can tell you a lot more than I can, but when I left things seemed to be going along fine. No one tried to shoot at me or keep me from sailing, anyway, and in my experience keeping every ship in harbor is the first thing a real enemy does." Angstrom gave Greenberg the confidential grin of one old salt to another, and to Fralick's absolute disbelief Greenberg grinned back.

"Safe journey, Captain," she said formally. "Ensign, end transmission." Then without looking at Fralick she added, "Now start hailing Narsai Control. Let me know the minute you get through to them."

In their bedroom in the little house at the edge of MinTar, Katy Romanova and Lincoln Casey were just waking. It was morning - the second morning since Katy had taken her peaceful walk out to the terrace and had savored the early-autumn beauty of her garden, and had come inside expecting to discard her robe and spend a passionate half-hour in her husband's arms. Instead Dan Archer had brought Rachel Kane through the front door - George Fralick had called from orbit, demanding a haven for Maddy - and since then, there had been no more peace until just a few hours ago.

They had slept now, until both were rested. When Linc reached out into another of the house's three small bedrooms and sought Maddy's mind, he discovered that the little girl was still slumbering soundly.

He let his wife know that. And then, very gently, he reached into her thoughts and he touched painful old memories.

This time she let him. She was ready now, she wanted that last barrier between them to come down at last. And although he was just as outraged as she had known he would be, just as angry with Fralick and just as hurt for her sake, the disgust she had feared never manifested itself in his thoughts.

"You really were scared that I wouldn't want you anymore, if I knew George forced himself on you and you didn't kill him for it?" Linc was holding her, her head tucked against his shoulder and their naked bodies pressed as close as if they had just made love. But they hadn't, and this morning that might not be going to happen as usual - not because of any distaste for the idea on Casey's part, but because right now Katy Romanova didn't want even this man to touch her in that most intimate of ways.

She whispered with her voice as well as with her thoughts, "Of course I was. I was a starship captain, for gods' sake! I should have been able to protect myself, that shouldn't have happened to me! But it did - and if I'd fought back in the only way that would have worked, I'd have lost Maddy completely. And probably my own life, too, because while a human's never been ritually executed on Kesra killing my mate would have been apt to make me be the first."

"And do you really think I wish you'd taken that risk? Either of those risks?" Linc's hand cradled her head, and his lips brushed tenderly against her hair. "Katy, the only reason I'm the least bit upset with you is that you didn't tell me about this a long time ago. But Fralick, on the other hand...! The bastard. How could the skipper I looked up to when I was twenty-two years old, have done that to you? Or to any woman, for that matter?"

"He thought because I was his wife, he had that right. I know it sounds crazy, but from the way he acted afterward - as if it was nothing, as if he couldn't figure out why I was so hurt and so shaken up - I'm sure he really didn't believe he'd done anything wrong." Katy sighed, and shifted in her husband's embrace so that she could look up at him. "'Just one more time, after hundreds of other times,' he said."

"He had to know he'd hurt you." The golden Morthan eyes that met her human brown ones were grim.

"Yes, he knew that. But he thought it was my own fault, because I fought him when I should have cooperated. Linc, he'd been a good lover; it may not be decent for me to tell you that, but it's true." Katy blinked back tears that until now she hadn't shed. "When we were young he made me think I was in heaven, and even later on the physical part usually gave me just as much pleasure as it did him. That had nothing to do with why I wanted to divorce him, that last night before I left was the only time in more than twenty years together that he ever took me by force."

"But that time he did," Linc answered. "And there's no excuse, Katy. None. I don't want to hear about his culture, I don't want to hear that he blamed you and you bought at least a little piece of that argument. He should have been executed, not you, and you know that as well as I know it even if you don't want to admit it to me."

"But I still didn't want to see him dead." She shook her head, and the tears spilled over at last although they did so in silence. "I can't explain it in a way that you'll understand, Linc. He's Maddy's father, he's someone I once loved almost as much as I love you. I wanted him where he could never hurt me again - but I didn't need revenge. And if I was going to go on being part of my daughter's life, even the small part of it that was all the Kesran authorities would allow, I couldn't have it even if I did want it."

And that was at the heart of the bargain she'd made with perdition. She had not seen it before, but as always when she laid a problem out before Linc and looked at it with him she saw things that had eluded her while she did the analysis alone.

"He's Maddy's father," Casey repeated, as he put up a hand and gently brushed at the tears on his wife's cheeks. "And you did what you had to do, to protect her and to protect your relationship with her. But that's all it was, Katy. Wasn't it?"

She hid her face against him then, and she sobbed. The pain and humiliation and outrage of thirteen years past spilled out with her tears; and with them also came the grief for the love that had still been present - wounded and starved, but lingering - and had died at last, in those moments when Fralick had taken final advantage of that tenderness and in doing so had battered it out of existence forever.

Sally Greenberg felt the hair rising on the back of her neck, but the cause of that phenomenon wasn't the transmission she had just received from Narsai Control. What she had been told had astonished her, there was no doubt about that. But being able to surrender assumptions when they were proved false was one skill a starship captain couldn't live without; so she was already adjusting to idea that "Misties" (as the Narsatians with their fondness for name-shortening had already christened them) from Mistworld had come sailing in here yesterday, and had started negotiating successfully with the local authorities. Misties who were somehow allied with those renegade humans who until today Greenberg had referred to as "Rebs" right along with the rest of her associates, but whom she now had been forcefully reminded had committed no offenses to earn that nickname unless one counted fighting back when a Star Service ship had fired on them without warning.

She still found it hard to accept that as fine an officer as Paolo Giandrea had done that, but she was obliged to accept it because there were too many trustworthy witnesses to yesterday's events - Giandrea's chief medical officer among them. And she did know that every captain was human, herself included, so although it was hard to grasp it certainly was not impossible to believe.

She had allowed Ambassador Fralick to sit with her in her office while she talked with Narsai Control, and she had given him a ferocious glare every time he had been about to butt in. Now the transmission was over, and he was the one who was glaring at her. So she opened hostilities by asking, "What are you thinking, Ambassador?"

She wondered whether he still deserved that title or not, since she had heard sector-wide news more recently than he had heard it and he probably didn't yet know that Kesra had finally evicted its small number of human residents. So although she hadn't heard specifically that Fralick was included in that expulsion, she rather expected that he had been - and that either the Kesrans were going to let their always lackadaisical participation in the Commonwealth lapse entirely, or they were finally going to appoint someone of their own species to represent them.

In any case she concurred with the label the freighter captain had used for Fralick. She'd read her history, she knew that once this man had been a valuable diplomat; but now he was just what Angstrom had called him, a stuffed shirt.

If that wasn't being too kind. Fralick said, "You're taking your ship into a trap, Captain."

"I don't think so." Greenberg's eyes narrowed. "But I appreciate your concern, Ambassador, and I promise you we're going to use caution."

"Caution? Against creatures that can take over human beings' bodies?" The diplomat's voice rose a notch. Plainly that notion frightened him, with a fear that was genuine and not worked up in an effort to convince her she ought to feel it too.

"That isn't what the Morthan healer, that Marin fellow, said." Mentally Greenberg made a note to check with Fleet Command to see whether she really was going to be required to replace her ship's own staff of Morthan medics when she returned to base at the end of this patrol. She did not want to do that, she couldn't imagine a sickbay that was stuck using human doctors. "He said that the Misties - "

"Misties"! Give them a cute nickname, and suddenly they're as safe as pets to have around!" Fralick exploded, then. "Captain, my sons died at Mistworld. All three of them. I never blamed the natives there half as much as I blamed the captain who was playing at being a commodore, who lost them - "

"Your wife, at that time, as I recall." Greenberg was too young to have fought in that battle, but it had been required study in command school by the time she'd landed there. "And the thing that amazed me was that after she understood what had really happened, she was able to take charge of the

negotiations in spite of her personal losses. And of her physical condition at the time, I might add."

"And now my last child is down there on Narsai with her, and her mindfucker of a second husband. And the woman's selling her own people out all over again!" Fralick's face was flushed now, dark red with anger. "Captain, the people you just talked to admit that she's at the heart of this mess too. You have to go in ready to fight, in fact the smart thing would be to - "

Greenberg cut him off. "I'll decide what's the smart thing for me to do, thank you, Mr. Fralick," she said crisply, and she stood up. "Dismissed."

The last time a Star Service officer had said that to him, George Fralick had been a young captain honorably resigning his commission in order to accept his first diplomatic assignment. He had proudly returned his commodore's salute, and he had left the man's office with his head held high.

Now Fralick stormed out of Sally Greenberg's office, reflecting as he went that she was a lowly commander and an idiot and....

And forty years of carefully controlled anger, used rather than released even while he had taught his wife her place by forcing her to yield to him that one last time before she had left his house - even when he had snatched Madeleine from sickbay aboard the Archangel, and had taken the ungrateful child away from that mindfucker Casey to safety on the corporate marshal's shuttle - yes, even during the incredibly infuriating moment of humiliation he had just endured from Sally Greenberg - spilled over. Inside George Fralick's brain, the pressure became too much and an artery exploded.

He was dead before his body hit the deck outside Captain Greenberg's office hatch, and even the Morthan surgeon who examined him less than five minutes later could do nothing to change that fact.

CHAPTER 26

"Mum, what's going to happen?" Maddy Fralick was choosing, for now at least, to go back to using her father's surname even though she understood that was not consistent with Narsatian customs. And Katy Romanova had not protested that decision, she still had no intention of doing anything that would diminish her former husband in their young daughter's eyes.

"I don't know, love. Except that whether or not I get approval of my request to return to retirement status, I'm not going to leave you and Linc and go back to Terra." Katy smiled, and reached out to ruffle her child's coppery hair.

Maddy made an undignified face. She was beginning to think of such caresses as childish, after only a few days of allowing herself to enjoy them fully now that she was with her mother full time and finally could have such maternal attentions without a disapproving presence such as her father had always been.

She was still grieving for him, of course. That was natural, it was only to be expected. But she was coping with a thirteen-year-old's considerable resilience, and she was both an intelligent girl and an unusually realistic one for her age. She realized that life as anything but Kesra's ambassador would have been a tremendous loss of status for her father, and if he'd had to die at least he had done so without being required to face that particular awful news.

She said now, "I meant about the Misties. I know it'll take about four weeks before the Raven makes it to New Orient and either they come back, or some other ship does, to bring us a new comm booster relay so we can talk to Terra again. What'll happen if they tell us then that we can't trade with the Misties after all, that we're supposed to be fighting them instead of helping them learn how to get enough food out

of their land?"

Again Katy said, "I don't know, love. But I do know that Narsai is an independent world, that our participation in the Commonwealth is just as voluntary as Kesra's was. As long as our people believed there were 'Rebs' out there getting ready to attack us, we thought we needed the Commonwealth to protect us; but we may not think that way now. Not if it's put to the test, which I hope it won't be."

"What about the Morthan doctors that the Commonwealth doesn't want anymore? And what about the gens?"

Katy sighed. Thirteen was in its way as bad an age for questions, as three had been! But she said patiently, glad to have her girl here to pester her on this quiet evening while they sat inside their little house because it was now too cold outside on the terrace, "The Morthan doctors will find other places to work, Maddy. The Star Service may succeed in eliminating them from its ranks, but I really doubt that official xenophobia is going to extend to every single world in the whole Commonwealth. And even if it does - we're only just learning this, but the Commonwealth isn't the galaxy."

"And the gens? Will they all be freed someday, like Rachel and her babies?"

"I hope so, but I'm afraid that may take a lot longer," Katy said. From being a haven for just herself and her husband, this tiny home had gone to being filled to its capacity. Although it would be months yet before the three little lives now sheltered by incubation fields at MinTar Medical could come home, their parents already had. Dan's bedroom was occupied now by both Dan and Rachel, who would stay there until their family was "born" and grew old enough to travel safely. Then they had ideas about going to Mistworld, although right now those were only ideas. Time would tell. At any rate Rachel was starting to recover, was beginning to behave like the starship exec she had been - and Katy had decided that she liked her.

Before she had pitied her for her situation, and had been awed by her courage; but she hadn't been able to pin down the other woman's real personality enough to be sure just what she was like. She had trusted Dan, though, and now she could see that her trust had been well-placed. Rachel Kane might have begun her adult life with only a rudimentary idea of what being human really meant, but she had learned.

Learned well enough so that tonight she and Dan were out making up after a genuine fight, the kind of quarrel every couple had from time to time but that they had never before experienced. It wasn't fun, but it was normal. And while "normal" was not a good thing in and of itself, in this case it was profoundly reassuring.

The front door opened and closed. Katy looked up from her daughter, who of course was the other cause of this home's being filled to capacity - she had been installed in the third bedroom, and it was already a typically adolescent mess! - and then she rose so quickly that she almost leaped up, like a girl again herself, to embrace her husband as he came through the living room and into the kitchen. "Linc! You're late."

It wasn't a complaint, it was a cry of relief. Linc wrapped his arms around her and held her close, kissed her as if Maddy wasn't even there.

Maddy didn't mind. One thing about her that was not like most girls of thirteen, was that she was not embarrassed by her mother and stepfather displaying their affection for each other. That was something she'd always longed for in her first home, and had never been able to see there.

Although for the life of her, Maddy thought now, she couldn't imagine Mum kissing Papa like that - even though of course at one time in their lives they must have been in the habit of doing a great deal more than kissing. Otherwise she wouldn't be here, nor would any of her three brothers have been

conceived.

Something, or rather someone, touched Maddy's thoughts; and that someone was not Linc. She frowned, because although the touch wasn't frightening it seemed strange to her.

Her parents (she thought of them both that way, and in doing so had no sense of disloyalty to George Fralick's memory) had finally finished kissing each other. They were standing still, with Mum's head on Linc's shoulder, and they were talking together so softly that even from just a couple of meters away Maddy could not make out their words. And of course she couldn't hear their thoughts unless Linc wanted her to, and right now he did not.

She almost hated to disturb them, but she had to. The question was going to burst out anyway if she tried to hold it in. She asked, "Mum, can dead people ever talk to live people?"

Katy turned, and tucked her shoulder under Linc's arm so she could face her daughter without moving away from her husband. She responded with a puzzled, "Why do you want to know that, Maddy?"

"Because Healer Marin just told me that another ship's come in from Mistworld, and the Others have a surprise for you on it. He asked me to tell you, because he was afraid it might be too much of a surprise if someone didn't get you ready for it first." Maddy frowned again. "People who lose their bodies on Mistworld - they don't always 'die,' you know."

"I didn't know," Katy said, and she moved to a chair. She had a feeling she needed to be sitting for whatever she was going to hear next. She kept Linc's hand in hers, and drew him with her until he was seated beside her with his arm once more draped protectively around her shoulders.

Ample shoulders, but George was no longer around to know or care if she was "fat" by his reckoning. And Linc didn't care in the least, Linc made love to her body but it was Katy herself with whom he was in love. And Linc, bless him, knew the difference.

"Having trouble with the words, hon?" Linc asked Maddy now, using a typically human paternal endearment and taking tremendous pleasure in being allowed to do so.

"Yes. I need you to help me, Linc." The child looked at him with Katy's eyes, and if he had intended to hesitate that look banished any such ideas from his mind.

He let down the barriers. And somehow, incredibly, from Kerle Marin's mind on a Mistworld starship to the three joined minds in the kitchen of Katy Romanova's small home in MinTar, there flowed thoughts that two of those minds recognized.

"Ewan! Marcus! Bryce!"

Katy sagged, unaware that her body had to be supported against her husband's arm to keep her from toppling out of her chair. It couldn't be, it wasn't possible...!

But it was.

THE END

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