

Conduct Unbecoming

Conduct Unbecoming

ISBN: 0-7388-5298-8

Published 2002 by Xlibris
<http://www.Xlibris.com>

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Copyright © 2002 by Nina Osier

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

This sample manufactured in the United Kingdom.

<http://www.ebookheaven.co.uk>

2002

Books by Nina Osier

Order in paperback:

[Starship Castaways](#)

[Conduct Unbecoming](#)

[Interphase](#)

[Unfamiliar Territory](#)

[The Way To Freedom](#)

[Mistworld](#)

Order in ebook:

[Starship Castaways](#)

[Conduct Unbecoming](#)

[Interphase](#)

[Unfamiliar Territory](#)

[The Way To Freedom](#)

[Mistworld](#)

Visit Nina's website
[Nina Osier's Homepage](#)

Chapter 1

“What happened? Anja, where’s Rik?”

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

“Commodore, how are you feeling?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

got you away from the H'cpt."

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

* * *

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

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

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

* * *

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

Thanta Orwell, whose ancestors amalgamated into the Protectorate generations ago, had thirty-five years of starship service to help her face Anja down. She also had memories of Anja as a junior officer, and before that as the scared (although still decidedly contentious!) kid whom Rik Boehmer took in

hand during the evacuation of survivors from what was left of Patriarca after the rebels were through there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aye, Commander." There was a pause, an endless several minutes during which a small craft on the H'cpt planet's surface was lifted through layers of atmosphere to intercept the starship's orbit. Then, "We've got it on board. But there are no life signs."

"Oh, no." Thanta drew in a horrified breath. She knew, now, what kind of

message the H'cpt were sending to the Protectorate's leaders-and what her own fate would have been, if her friend hadn't replaced her.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was probably the only time in her whole life Thanta had been acutely conscious of her physical differences from a Human female. Her skin was a pale, delicate lilac in color; Salla's was light brown, like that of most Humans

now (since racial distinctions had vanished during the first few generations after their retreat to sanctuary on Luna). Salla had hair, long strands of black hair. Thanta's scalp had fur on it, as did other, less obvious parts of her anatomy. Fur, for example, cushioned her pelvic bones whenever she sat down. Fur that once had been deep violet, but now was iron gray.

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

"Commodore. Do you hear something?"

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

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

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

Thanta took the blaster from her belt, the blaster with which she was planning to help give Rik his final honor by vaporizing his body, and adjusted its setting. Her face was grim as she said, "Thimor, you can sign the

commitment order if I'm wrong and I'm breaking into a coffin for no damn reason! Because then we'll know for sure that I'm nuts!"

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

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

* * *

Chapter 2

Thanta Orwell's apartment in Terra's capital city of Denver wasn't large, because it didn't have to be. It was suitable for a flag officer, though-she had all of the usual luxuries, and a few that were her own selections.

She didn't spend much time here, anyway. She'd thought that might change, after she retired; but then the chance to live among the H'cpt and prepare their leaders to accept amalgamation came up, and after just a few weeks at home Thanta jumped to answer the new challenge.

It was a challenge that she'd failed to meet, miserably. She wasn't used to failing, and she wondered now whether she'd been wise to attempt a dramatic career change with such minimal transition time. But she was too young by far to stop seeking out work that mattered-which was exactly her reason for choosing retirement, over the promotion that would have meant she could never command a ship again.

Out at the rank of commodore. It wasn't a bad way to wrap up one's career-and it certainly beat becoming an admiral and flying a desk.

She was glad to be at home tonight. Glad she had a home to come to, and that it was a residence she owned so she could share it with any guest she chose.

The medics hadn't kept Rik at the hospital for as long as she'd thought they might. Just as they hadn't been able to state precisely the cause of his "death" at H'cpt hands, they could not say for sure why he'd revived a few hours after his body was taken out of the stasis field that protected it during the weeks it took for the *Solomons* to bring her dead captain home. But Captain Boehmer was beyond doubt a healthy man again now, and since he was an active duty Defense officer the medics would have plenty of future chances to

scrutinize him.

So after several grueling hours' worth of scanning and sampling they released him to go home. "Home," to a wife who'd spat on his coffin while she believed him dead?

Anja had given herself the unpleasant job of telling Rik about that. If Thanta hadn't invited Rik to stay here while he figured out what his next move was going to be, no doubt Anja would have taken her captain along with her to transient officers' quarters on the base. Her former captain now, actually. The *Solomons* had already departed from Terran orbit, leaving Anja to wait here for reassignment. Defender Command liked to shake things up, liked to move the exec out too whenever a captain transferred or retired or died in harness.

It was a good idea to keep Rik away from Anja right now, in Thanta Orwell's opinion. Rik probably was just as clueless as any other male about such matters, but as a girl Anja Britton had had a hellacious crush on her mentor...and while it wouldn't be wrong for them to come together romantically now that they were both mature adults, and were no longer assigned as a command team, this was not the time for Rik to find out how Anja felt about him in the personal sense.

Right now Thanta felt almost as protective toward Rik as she had in the days when he'd been one of her officers, a young subordinate for her to train and to guide. Besides -it was her fault he'd endured the trauma of being executed by the H'cpt. He had taken her place, so everything that followed after was her responsibility. Except, maybe, Salla's inexplicable (and inexcusable) behavior.

"What are you thinking?" She asked Rik that after she'd watched him eat a light evening meal, something she had reason to know was among his favorites. As for what Thanta herself was thinking...this wasn't the first time she had wished that her body and his were structurally compatible.

It was just as well that wasn't true, though. It always had been just as well, and tonight it was even more so.

"I'm thinking that I want to talk to my wife. And I can't. She's not answering." Rik lay back in one of the comfortable chairs in Thanta's living room, and uttered a sigh that could mean he was glad to be alive and safe-or could just as easily mean he was sad, and puzzled by his wife's rejection. Thanta, who knew him so well, suspected it was a combination of both.

Was he a handsome male, by the standards of his species? Certainly he gave the lie to the cardinal doctrine of amalgamation, that the more varied one's genetic make-up was the more useful one could be in service to the Protectorate. Rik Boehmer was one hell of a fine officer, among the best that Thanta Orwell had known. He was smart, he was courageous, and he had nerves of duralloy. That others like him might be living out their entire lifetimes on Luna, isolated

where their gifts were wasted, was damned near criminal. But was he attractive, by the standards of his own kind?

Thanta thought he must be, since his people valued his genes enough to literally plead with him to come home and breed. Certainly other kinds of females thought so, considering how Anja looked at him sometimes. And how Thanta herself had been known to feel, sometimes, in his company....

She broke off that unacceptable line of thought with speech. "I'm sorry, Rik," she said gently, leaving her own chair and coming to kneel down on the carpeted floor in front of his.

Regular features were a sign of attractiveness among Humans. Yes, he had that characteristic. Males should have sturdy frames, and well-developed muscles. He had those characteristics, too.

Dark hair and dark eyes...there weren't many Humans born these days who didn't share that coloring, since the relatively smaller numbers of so-called "Caucasians" had of course been absorbed by the darker races. Light brown skin, a warm and pleasing color even to Thanta's eyes.

Rik no longer had as much hair as when she'd first known him, of course. One thing Humans did not do, ever, was alter their genetic codes to get rid of undesirable traits. They still had children born to them who reacted with unpleasant, or even dangerous, symptoms to common substances-in other words, who suffered from the ancient curse of allergies. Sometimes Humans had poor eyesight, requiring mechanical or surgical correction. Sometimes they couldn't hear well, from infancy onward and not as a disability associated with extreme old age. So a tendency to lose all or part of one's hair at a certain point in adulthood, usually affecting males whose fathers also exhibited that trait, was a small matter by Human standards. It didn't make Rik look odd to the eyes of a true amalgam, because there were plenty of species that naturally had nothing covering their scalps.

He reached out and put one of his hands on her shoulder. Human males had big hands. He said softly in reply, "I know you are. Thanks for inviting me here, Thanta. I'd have been okay in transient quarters-but this is better. Quieter, more private."

"I don't mind if you want to keep trying to get your wife to speak with you. Maybe if you do it enough times, she'll decide to forgive you for whatever in the universe she thinks you did wrong." Thanta spoke with a faint touch of black humor, something she wouldn't have dared to do right now if she hadn't known this man so well. "But I'm going to bed. It's been one hell of a long day, and I'm tired."

"You wouldn't think I ought to be tired, after sleeping for how long?" Yes, Rik still had his own equally twisted sense of humor. He grinned at her as he

asked that rhetorical question. “I’d like to turn in, too, and try calling Salla again in the morning. Thanta...”

“What?” She rose, and stood looking down at him.

“You’ll think I’m six different kinds of fool. But we know each other well enough so that if you don’t want to do this, you’ll tell me and you won’t be angry because I asked. I don’t think I want to lie down alone tonight. Would you mind awfully just sleeping beside me?”

He wasn’t suggesting intimacy, not even of the sort that they might have shared if they’d chosen to do so. Couples didn’t have to be capable of joining biologically, after all, to give each other sexual pleasure—many amalgams were like Thanta, in fact, and never could know the experience called intercourse. Yet Rik wasn’t asking her for caresses, or for anything else except the comfort of being near her.

“After you woke up this morning alone inside that coffin? And almost didn’t get anyone’s attention before you died in there?” Thanta put words to what he’d experienced, blunt words so that she could watch how he reacted to them.

His body flinched. Something stirred in his eyes, too.

Yes, he was genuinely afraid of going to sleep alone tonight. For that she could not blame him, could not even consider thinking less of him.

She added, “My bed’s wide enough for two, Rik. And I wouldn’t mind a bit. Come on, let’s go get some rest.”

He smiled at her, and now his dark eyes filled with relief. He nodded, and reached for her hands.

She pulled him up, easily with her superior physical strength. They walked together, side by side, across her living room and through her bedroom’s wide doorway.

* * *

Thanta woke at dawn. Her apartment had windows, unlike those deeper inside this massive building. Once in awhile she felt a pang of guilt, that someone who wasn’t at home all that often should keep this place tied up while people who spent their lives on Terra must occupy those inner flats.

She’d never felt guilty enough about it, though, to consider giving this up. After all her years of living aboard starships, waking to pre-dawn twilight and then the first golden rays of Sol was far too delicious.

Someone was spooned against her back. In the first muzzy moments of consciousness, she couldn’t remember bringing a lover home with her last night...she didn’t do that often, but of course she did it sometimes.

Not last night, though. Rik. Yes.

The sunlight must be hitting his face now, too. He stirred, and groaned softly. She could feel something hard pressing against her furred buttocks-oh, that was right. Human males often experienced sexual arousal upon waking, as a simple reflex; and that was where their organs were located. It meant nothing, except that Rik's revived body was functioning normally.

She pulled away from him, and turned to look into his face. His eyes were open. His brown skin showed a flush, red blood suffusing the capillaries of his facial skin...what?

Oh. Of course. For him, waking up like this was probably an embarrassment.

"Morning. You look like you're feeling better." She smiled at him, glad that she didn't feel the least bit embarrassed-and that even if she did, her physiology wouldn't give her away by involuntary means. "Rik. I never said thank you. I should have."

"What?" His blush faded, and puzzlement filled his eyes.

"You took my place. You died, and I didn't have to." She levered herself up on one multi-jointed arm, and stared down at him. "I still don't understand why, though. What did the H'cpt think they were gaining? By holding a hostage at all-and then, by killing that hostage and sending the body back to us?"

He wasn't going to respond to her thanks, one way or another. He didn't have to; nor had she really been required to offer him such words. They were not merely friends, but fellow officers, and some things were understood between them automatically. But there were times when what one sentient being did for another went far beyond what duty required, and then it was only decent to acknowledge it.

"I don't know what they thought they were doing," Rik said now, lying still and gazing back at his friend and long-time superior officer. "But I can remember more now than I could yesterday, when the medics were asking me questions and my head just didn't seem to want to work."

"Yes?" Thanta moved deliberately, so that her shadow was over his face and the rising sun's light wouldn't shine into his eyes and blind him. She waited.

"I don't think they meant to kill me. I'm not sure what they really were trying to do...but I do know why they accepted me in exchange for you, when I offered myself."

"Why was that?" His pause went on too long. Was he afraid what he was about to say would offend her? Thanta refused her own impulse to frown. Instead, she used her voice to prompt him gently.

"They already knew that whatever they wanted to do to you, wouldn't work. They hoped it might work with me. But I guess it didn't, because I died

on them. The last thing I remember down there, is that leader-what was his name? I couldn't say it!-putting his hands on my head. I felt like he was setting me on fire. I yelled, and he looked just amazed and he took his hands away. And that's when I passed out...died, as far as anyone else knew, I realize now. I've got no idea what he was trying to do, but I'm sure he failed. And that's probably why they sent me-I mean, my body-back to you."

He looked so scared. No wonder he hadn't been able to remember, not at first. Thanta lay down again beside him, and gathered him into her arms.

He clung to her, his face buried against one of her bony shoulders. That was when the apartment's entrance chime sounded.

"Damn," Thanta muttered. She kept her arms around her comrade as she raised her voice and said to the bedside pick-up, "Door unit. This is Orwell. Who's there?"

That pick-up would respond only to a limited, carefully chosen selection of hails; to all other conversation within her bedroom it was deaf, and thankfully so. After all, this was supposed to be a private place.

"Salla Gardner," another feminine voice responded.

Rik stiffened. Then he pulled free of Orwell's embrace, and he sat up. His dark-skinned face was pale now, startlingly so.

Thanta sat up, too. She said to the pick-up, "Admit!"

Then she asked softly of Rik, "That is what you want me to do, isn't it?"

He nodded. He whispered hoarsely, "I want to see her. Of course I do! But, Thanta-don't you know what it means, what she just said?"

Thanta didn't know. She shook her head.

"She's stopped using my name. She's not my wife anymore."

With those blunt words, he was off the bed and headed toward the apartment's entrance. Leaving Thanta to rise more slowly, since it seemed clear to her that this first encounter between Salla Gardner (who had been Salla Boehmer less than a complete standard day earlier, when she'd come to bid her husband's corpse a scornful farewell) should take place without a third person present.

So divorce was that simple, for a Human woman? Not that it was much more complicated for couples or mating-groups on Protectorate worlds, but at least it always required that the other party or parties to the union be notified before dissolution actually happened.

Not so among Humans, apparently.

* * *

Anja Britton woke up sweating, and with her limbs trembling. She lay in her bed in a single (thankfully!) room at transient officers' quarters, that glorified hotel

which was a fixture of every Defense Forces base throughout the Protectorate, and she stared at the bedside chrono and tried to clear her thoughts and calm her body.

So much of panic was purely physiological. Patriarca's children were good at managing their flesh-forms, at insisting those containers obey the spirits within them. They had to be good at that, because their spirits were volatile ones.

What had she been dreaming about, anyway, to cause this level of response? Oh, yes. Rik.

Of course, Rik. She'd last seen him at day's end yesterday, discharged from the base's medical facility and getting into an air car to head home with Thanta. With Commodore Orwell.

That was probably a damned good idea. All at sea as he'd been, cut off from his so-called home on Luna by his crazy Human wife's rejection and still reeling from his strange experience at the hands of the H'cpt, he needed someone familiar to look after him...and Anja knew that someone shouldn't be her.

Later, maybe, if his excuse for a marriage really was over. If the woman who'd used Rik as her stud, since he seemed to have no other function in Salla's life except to support her financially and impregnate her whenever the timing of his home-visits made that possible, really was through with him-then maybe Anja could fill a very different role in his life at last, now that they no longer had to work together as a command team. But right now, he was definitely better off with Thanta who had no mating-drive related interest in him. Salla Boehmer, in that nasty little speech beside Rik's coffin, had accused the commodore of just such impropriety-but more than likely the Human woman didn't realize it was anatomically impossible, not to mention ludicrous.

Now, what was it she'd dreamed about Rik?

Anja couldn't remember. All she knew was that it wasn't erotic, like most of her dreams about her friend and mentor and (now former) captain. This dream was weird, and frightening, and...far too real for comfort.

* * *

Chapter 3

Salla Gardner closed her eyes for a moment, as another contraction claimed all of her attention. She'd been through this four times before, twice with healthy daughters resulting and twice as the unavoidable prelude to disposing of culls. She knew what to expect from her body in the hours while it prepared itself to give birth.

Daughters had greater value than sons, strictly speaking, because one male with quality genes could service multiple females. Salla hadn't been disappointed with her firstborn, Chantal, who was ten years old now; nor with her second girl, Layla, who was five. Between her girls, and again after Layla, had come the cull pregnancies. Which the midwives detected in time to spare the family from being surprised at the end of a full nine months' gestation, but Salla was obliged to endure labor and birthing because her first cull termination came at fifteen weeks and her second at twenty weeks.

She'd had to wait until the problem became visible on a womb scan, since Human health care practitioners didn't utilize DNA analysis for any kind of diagnosis or treatment. DNA analysis was evil. That it could spare a woman from conceiving, carrying, and then bearing a child that couldn't be allowed to live, made no difference. It was the Protectorate's signature technology, the cornerstone of the horror called amalgamation. The horror that Human DNA itself had made possible, in the beginning-generations upon generations ago, when other sentient species first arrived on Terra.

Out-of-body conception and gestation was, of course, just as unthinkable for today's Humans as anything else that even sounded like artificial interference in the natural process of baby-making. Salla Boehmer had accepted

her role as child-bearer from the day she'd realized what it meant to be a human girl who would one day be a woman, and until now she hadn't dreamed of rebelling.

But this was too much! This time, although she couldn't avoid passing through the pain of labor or the trauma of giving birth, the awful aftermath wouldn't be her problem. It would be Rik's problem.

Rik's, and that of the horrifically deformed creature he really loved. Which Salla hadn't believed, despite all evidence to the contrary, until a night not quite nine months past.

* * *

"Salla! Oh, thank gods." Rik Boehmer gathered his wife into his arms the moment the door to Thanta Orwell's apartment closed after her. It was awkward to do that with Salla so huge, so very pregnant with his son-but he loved the way she felt against him. He'd had to miss this part of each of her earlier pregnancies, because the Defenders had always required him to be elsewhere when his wife gave birth.

His former wife. But maybe she hadn't told anyone else about her decision to end their union...after all, it had to be a very new decision. Maybe when she'd had a chance to think about its ramifications, after she'd had this baby and recovered from the physical and emotional upheaval that child-bearing involved, she wouldn't want to go through with it.

He hoped not. He hadn't married this woman for love, because until the first night he spent in her bed he hadn't laid eyes on her; but he loved her now.

As much as a man could love a woman he saw infrequently, and for short periods of time; but who nevertheless was always in his thoughts because she'd given him his children, and because her welfare and theirs was his primary responsibility after his duty as a Defender. Human males could take multiple wives, if they were financially able to support more than one household, but Rik had never considered taking another woman in addition to Salla. To her he was faithful, even though before committing to her he'd enjoyed an unattached male Defender's normal share of intimacies with females of widely varying anatomies and ancestries.

He wondered as he held Salla now whether she had any idea there'd been others before her, or if she cared that he'd given up his roaming after marrying her. Or if she thought about such matters at all-she probably didn't. To Salla, sex meant procreative intercourse.

Which was wonderful, but not by any means the only kind of pleasure that interested Rik. Sometimes he'd wished he could forget his sense of loyalty to

this woman, and treat his life with her on Luna as one existence and his life among his comrades as though it took place in another dimension.

For some reason he couldn't do that. Whenever he came close to trying, guilt moved in to claim him-and Rik Boehmer had a low tolerance for guilt.

That was, of course, exactly how his father convinced him to take a wife in the first place. He hadn't planned to do so, hadn't intended to wed a female of his own species and make babies with her. He'd known going in that such a union would be messy, and painful, and that in the end at least part of him would regret it.

But he no longer listened to that part, at least not willingly. He loved his girls, and by now he also loved Salla. Enough so that he was enormously relieved to have her in his arms, to be able to hold her and know she was safe and willing to talk to him after all.

She stiffened. But something about her moved-her belly rippled.

"Damn! Salla, we have to get you to a hospital!" That cleared his thoughts, with the same abruptness as a starship's blaring red alert klaxon.

"No! You know better than that, Rik!" She hissed her refusal, as soon as the contraction ended and she was able to get words out again.

"Well, then, we've got to get you back to Luna." She was right. A Human child couldn't be born here. Being born outside of the community on Luna meant being denied a place in that community, permanently.

"No time. Besides, I came here on purpose. As soon as I realized I was in labor...and thought I'd have time enough to make the trip. Just about." She stepped back from him, and stared up into his face.

She wasn't making sense. Had she decided to join him in the universe apart from Luna, as he'd sometimes wished she might, even though he had never once asked her to do that? If so, what was the problem with bearing their son in a hospital-and why had she left their daughters behind?

"Salla, what are you trying to do? Tell me." He put his hands on her shoulders, and gripped her hard.

"What do you think I'm doing? This child's another cull, Rik. Another mistake! Only this time you're going to be the one who has to dispose of it, you and your ugly purple whore. Either that, or you can raise it with her if you want to. I don't care what you do after it comes out of me. But this time you're going to have to watch while it's born, and then you're going to have to figure out what to do afterward. And I'm not going to a mutants' hospital. I won't let a 'physician' who designs monsters get anywhere near me."

If she'd stayed on Luna, of course, she would have one or more midwives attending her by now. They would give her excellent care-but if her child was born with any clearly non-Human characteristic, no matter how insignificant,

they would take it away from her and destroy it. Usually such “deformities” were discovered during crude image-based prenatal scans, and were dealt with immediately; but sometimes the scans failed, and nine months of waiting ended in the worst disappointment that Human parents could suffer. Yet the same baby born here, on Terra itself, would be shielded by the laws of the Protectorate and welcomed as one of its citizens.

Did anyone not born on Luna know what culls were, anyway? Rik had lived his whole adult life, except for brief visits, away from the reservation; and he’d never heard the word mentioned, at least not in the way that his culture used it. It seemed impossible that his people had managed to keep such a thing secret, but it was also impossible that Salla had come here to Thanta’s apartment with the clear intention of giving birth.

Culls. Children who proved that no such creature as a pure Human existed; that during the short time (historically speaking) between when Rik’s ancestors welcomed other sentients as visitors to Earth, and when a horrified remnant fled the mother planet to sanctuary on Luna, irreversible contamination took place.

What truly “pure Human” DNA might be like was so lost to time now, that the most sophisticated medical care Rik received from Protectorate-trained doctors had never caused one of those physicians to ask him, “What’s this? What other ancestors did you have, Captain Boehmer, other than native Terran stock?” He’d feared that question terribly during his first complete physical, as a youngster applying for admission to the Academy. And when he wed Salla, he did so knowing that they might lose 50 percent of the offspring they conceived to culling.

Those would be considered good results, actually. The huge failure rate in Human reproduction was why women must spend their pre-menopausal lives continuously pregnant, and why men whose fathers caused a high percentage of “good outcome” conceptions were strongly encouraged to breed-preferably with more than one wife.

Proper reproductive medical care, Rik now knew, could excise all of the leftover alien DNA from his species. The science to do that had existed for hundreds of years, since before anyone began preaching the ideal of amalgamation. But none of today’s Protectorate-trained doctors, who believed with all their souls that having one heritage only made a being inferior, would dream of helping Luna’s Humans to do such a thing; and Human medics scorned the Protectorate’s bio-technologies as perverted, as fundamentally evil.

So Human couples went right on conceiving babies who couldn’t be allowed to live, and the midwives dutifully identified and destroyed them. It happened over and over again, even in the purest of families.

Men almost never had to deal with it directly, though. No wonder Salla

hadn't just let Rik come home to Luna in time for the birth of his deformed son—that couldn't give her the kind of vengeance she craved.

Bearing the baby here on Terra would, though. Yes, the woman knew precisely what she was doing; and she was so set on it, that she was willing to risk giving birth without a trained caregiver in attendance.

It was damned near unbelievable, and yet it was true.

* * *

Did Rik realize what this looked like? Thanta wondered, as she stood in the doorway between kitchen and living room and waited for a moment to come when she dared intrude on the Human couple beyond. Rik was still in night attire, and so was Thanta. This apartment had a second bedroom—but there was no particular reason to expect Salla would assume that Rik had been sleeping in it.

He hadn't been, after all. Thanta considered beating a silent retreat so she could get dressed, could at least greet the one-time Mistress Boehmer with that much dignity...but, no. There might not be time enough for her to do that. She wasn't eavesdropping deliberately, but she'd nevertheless heard most of the conversation in the next room with her rather more acute than Human ears.

An ugly purple whore. So that was what Salla thought of Rik's friend and comrade, who'd given him shelter and comfort last night while his children's mother gave him notice he was no longer wanted.

It ought not to have hurt. But it did just the same.

So this woman intended to bear her child right here in Thanta's apartment, did she? Orwell wondered hazily whether allowing a birth to take place without summoning medical help violated any laws. She had no idea—this wasn't a situation she'd ever anticipated facing.

She would take her cues from Rik, would let him lead in this territory where his experience must be greater than hers (although his, too, was probably woefully inadequate). Right now it was time to show herself. She walked through the door into the living room, and said briskly as she did so, "Hello, Mistress Boehmer! I'm glad you came to see Rik. How are you feeling?"

She didn't like deceit, but there really was no point in letting the Human woman know about her own keener hearing. Rik already knew about it; he was glancing at her now in mingled embarrassment and gratitude.

"Mistress Gardner again, now." Salla grimaced, and put both hands on her stomach. "Rik!"

The door chime rang for the second time this morning. Thanta looked at her two guests' startled faces, and said decisively, "Use the guest room, Rik.

She's going to give birth, isn't she? And there's no time for a hospital?" Again, she would allow Salla Gardner a gentle fiction by pretending she hadn't overheard.

"Fraid so," Rik said shortly. He picked Salla up, easily, and carried her toward the guest room's nearby door.

As soon as it closed to conceal them, Thanta opened her apartment's door to the common hallway. She was not nearly as surprised as she should have been to see Anja Britton and Thimor standing there.

That this pair was showing up to check on Rik, in person, wasn't a bit odd. That they were doing it at this early hour, was very much so.

Thanta stepped back, inviting them to enter. She expected that Salla anyway, and Rik possibly, would be furious-but Thimor's arrival solved a huge problem.

There was a doctor here now. Nothing as rare as an obstetrical specialist, of course, but nevertheless a trained physician-oh, yes, this was a wonderful idea.

"What's happening, Thanta?" Thimor asked the question with off-base, off-ship informality. "Anja hauled me out of bed and babbled about Rik needing help. I tried to get it through her thick head that if he was in any kind of medical trouble, you'd have called the hospital-but she wouldn't listen. She wasn't going to give me any peace, or my poor mate any peace either, until I got dressed and came over here with her."

Thanta gave Rik's recent exec a curious look. She knew that natives of Patriarca possessed certain unusual talents...and she also knew that Anja was well aware of just how forbidden it was for her to use those talents.

Anja stared back, so defiantly that Orwell had no doubt at all the younger woman had gained her awareness of Rik's need by highly inappropriate means.

It didn't matter. Thanta asked pleasantly, "Thimor, when was the last time you delivered a baby?"

"What?" At least this physician was a female who believed in bearing live young, believed in it enough to be doing so. Thimor still looked understandably amazed. "In training, of course! Who's having a baby? And why not in a hospital, with a doctor who's prepared?"

* * *

Inside Thanta's guest room, Rik realized for the first time that his being in nightclothes-even though he wore a perfectly modest set of pajamas-and Thanta's being in nightclothes, too (although hers were no more revealing than his)-and this bed not looking one bit as if it had been occupied last night, might give his former wife a false and unsettling impression. But right now it hardly

mattered. He put Salla down, setting her on her feet rather than on that pristine bed, and he wondered whether Thanta had anything waterproof to protect it from what was about to happen.

He wondered who the hell was at the door at this hour, and why it was taking Thanta so long to send whoever it was away. And since he couldn't accomplish much in the meantime, not unless Salla let him know that she was so close to giving birth that no delay could be tolerated in making her ready, he found himself demanding in a hushed yet unintentionally harsh tone: "Why, Salla? Do you really think I've been going to bed with Thanta all the time I've been married to you? Because, dammit, I haven't. In case you're interested, I slept beside her last night. Because I wanted to be near another warm body, and that's all that happened. Why did you have to pick now to get this mad at me? And what about our girls? What happens to them?"

"You know how things work, Rik. If you want to take the girls, that's your right." Salla's face was pale, but her eyes were furious and her jaw was set defiantly. "But if you'd rather leave them with me, you'll have to go on supporting my household."

"I know. And I wouldn't dream of doing anything else. Salla, don't worry. Of course I'll leave my daughters with their mother, and of course I'll go on taking care of them. And of you, too." There was fear in her anger, fear that melted Rik instantly. Salla aroused protectiveness in him, on an elemental level where females who were his comrades never had. "But I still want to know why you're doing this now."

"Because when I thought you were dead, I was glad! And because this baby was cursed, as far as I was concerned, a long time before I found out he'd be a cull." Salla sat down on the edge of the bed. "I didn't want him from the start, Rik."

"Why?" He sat down beside her. She stiffened, which was the only thing that stopped him from automatically slipping an arm around her swollen body.

"You really don't remember, do you?" She turned her head, and looked up into his face and scrutinized him quite calmly. "I can see you don't. All right then, I'll tell you. You do remember the night we made him. Don't you?"

"Yes. Of course I do." During Rik's furlough a bit less than nine months earlier, they'd made love only once. So that was when this child had to have been conceived; there was no other possibility. "Salla, I'd been away so long. I was so glad to be with you again-and I thought, at first, you were glad I was back."

"I was, at first." Her eyes softened for an instant, and then grew harder than ever. "I seem to remember letting you know that. Then you fell asleep-and I'll bet that's all you remember."

"It is. Except that in the morning, when I tried to kiss you, it was like kissing a statue. The rest of the time I was home, every time I touched you-you pulled away from me. Or tensed up, just the way you're tensing up right now." He stared at her in hurt, and in bewilderment. "And now you're telling me you were glad when you heard I was dead. Salla, what did I do?"

"Not a thing, Rik. You just said the wrong woman's name while you were falling asleep. Her name, while your hands were still on me."

"Oh, *gods*, Salla!" Tears sprang into Rik Boehmer's eyes, and he barely noticed them. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"How could I? And why should I have had to?" She wasn't crying. Her eyes were blazing now. "You have a perfect right to take more than one woman if you want. But you said you never would! You promised me, Rik!"

"And I always kept that promise. Salla, I..."

She cut him off. "You kept it physically, yes. I don't doubt that. Rik, don't you understand? You didn't even know what you were saying; you were half asleep! And that makes it worse! That's why as far as I'm concerned, our marriage ended months ago-not just yesterday!"

She broke off, and clutched at her belly again. Sweat popped out on her forehead, and although she didn't make a sound otherwise her breath rasped between clenched teeth.

She had done this before, but always with her mother at her side. Always with at least one experienced midwife nearby, waiting to help her when it was time. Always in her marriage-bed, bearing her child in the same place where she'd conceived it...was she insane, to have put herself in this position? Far from home, with a man she despised and a woman she hated as her only companions?

Rik shook his head in wonder. He'd fought in a hundred battles, and at least that many smaller actions. He'd led his people into some horribly dangerous situations, and he knew what it felt like to be wounded; he even, now, knew what it felt like to "die" and then live again.

And he couldn't imagine hating anyone the way this woman who was about to bear his child clearly hated him.

He asked as Salla's body finally relaxed, "What's wrong with the boy? Why is he a cull? And who told you he was, anyway?"

She took a small data reader from a pocket in her skirt, and she put it wordlessly into his hand. Rik accepted it, and thought as he did so how glad he was that Human women wore skirts. It was too bad they couldn't also wear trousers when the occasion made those safer or more comfortable attire, of course-but one thing about his native culture that was always going to stay with him, was his appreciation for the way a woman clad in traditional garb looked

when she moved.

Protectorate women, amalgams, never wore skirts. To them the garment was obscene, a blatant announcement of sexual availability.

It didn't mean that at all on Luna, though. It only meant that women were different than men, and accepted their role.

He read the data swiftly, and then looked up at Salla in surprise. "This report's from just yesterday!" he said accusingly. "And it's from a Protectorate medic, not one on Luna. How the hell did you wind up getting a full scan before you went home, after you-um-came to say good-bye to my corpse?"

He wouldn't let her realize he knew just how she'd offered that farewell. That was something he would now work hard at forgetting, although of course Anja was right to tell him about it when he asked where Salla was after his revival.

"I fainted, at the public transport station. I suppose because I was upset, and it was hot, and so many men were staring at me because of the way I was dressed..." Salla flushed. Angrily, not with embarrassment. "The officials wouldn't let me go home until I submitted to a scan. The doctor gave me this to give to my own physician. He said it was the normal thing, to pass along the results after he'd attended someone else's patient."

"Oh. I see." Rik did see, far too clearly now.

Of course the medics on Luna, with their primitive methods for verifying the condition of an unborn child, hadn't picked up this baby's "defects." They were scarcely that at all.

Hell, this baby wasn't defective. Rik and Salla's son wouldn't have the brown skin of a Human child, and he wouldn't grow the fine hair on scalp and body (and, eventually, jaw) that Human males should grow.

He would have purplish skin, a blend of lilac like Thanta Orwell and brown like his parents. And while he would otherwise look completely Human, while he would have a normal male's primary and secondary sexual characteristics and a Human's arrangement of internal organs and a Human's skeletal structure, his body was going to grow fur where those of other Human men grew hair.

It seemed to Rik like the bitterest practical joke the universe could possibly have played on him, or on Salla. Or, for that matter, on Thanta who was the unwitting cause of so much of Salla's pain; that the non-Human strain surfacing in this baby should cause him to resemble her.

Yet Rik also felt relieved, down to the depths of his soul. On Luna the child would be doomed, a monster, a "cull"; but since the boy was being born on Terra, all that mattered was whether or not he came out whole and healthy. Not what color he was, or whether his body grew fur or hair. And the same scan that

confirmed his non-Human appearance, also said that he was perfect.

Must his father now start planning to care for two families-one on Luna, and another on Terra? This was going to get complicated. Yet Rik Boehmer was happy now, for himself although perhaps not for Salla, because now he knew he could welcome this baby without wondering whether or not he'd done right by giving it life.

The bedroom door opened just as Salla braced herself against another contraction. Rik looked up into Thimor's calm face, and saw that the physician's Blaintain eyes betrayed agitation she didn't show in any other way. Those eyes were transparent right now, totally colorless.

But the doctor's tone was almost jovial as she said firmly, "Well! I thought you'd had children before, Mistress Gardner? You must know that tensing up is the worst thing you can do during labor. Don't worry, Commodore Orwell explained to me that you don't want to go to a hospital-and since you're a citizen of Luna, not of the Protectorate, that's fine. I'm still a doctor, it's still my job to help you the best way I can. Rik, we need protective sheeting for that bed. Suppose you tell Anja and Thanta that, and then get back in here as fast as you can and help me? I assume you can stand the sight of a little blood. And I hope there's no Human taboo about the father being in the room during a birth, because I'm going to need that help-and you know a hell of a lot more about this woman's anatomy than Thanta does, or Anja. They're females, but they're not Human females. Believe you me, that does make a difference!"

* * *

~~ Order your [paperback](#) or [ebook](#) today ~~