

Exile's End

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Chapter 1

It was a fine day for a kidnapping.

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

Valeria was always represented, though. Like most of the older Houses, that family held several ships and deliberately scattered them across the established trade routes in order to cover as much territory and consistently gain as much profit as possible. This year the old man's own ship, which according to custom bore the House's name on its superstructure, was itself in orbit above Chaitanya Spaceport. Of course, everyone in the trading community knew that Anders Valeria himself would probably take little part in the Fair's proceedings; but he was there, and his ship rode in one of the more coveted orbits where shuttle access could be had by an almost direct rise from the surface instead of by a circuitous routing in order to avoid everyone else's orbits and everyone else's shuttles. Everyone respected Anders Valeria, and because they knew the

cause of his weakness almost everyone excused it by never mentioning it where any of his family members could hear.

But everyone knew, of course, that Anders Valeria would spend most of his time in a wine-fog in his cabin while his eldest child—a thirty-year-old son—ran things, for all intents and purposes as if his father were already dead. When his fellow traders spoke of this at all, carefully out of the Valeria family's hearing, they agreed that it was fortunate for everyone that Jock had both his father's gifts for starship trading and his long-dead mother's calm, sober personality. If Anders had bred another like himself as his firstborn, that ancient House would have been in deep difficulties by now. It had taken young Jock the entire nine years since he'd completed his military obligation and returned to his father's ship to get the House back on an even keel; it had been tottering dangerously by that time, with Anders Valeria's young second wife dead and his attention focused solidly on chemical consolation rather than on his business or even on his ship.

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

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

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

Which was why they were arguing now, uncharacteristically, as the shuttle they were co-piloting lifted from Chaitanya's surface toward their father's ship

and as night began to come down on the hemisphere where Chaitanya Spaceport was located. No longer were they young enough for curfews, but staying dirtside to sleep hadn't even occurred to either of them. It was almost beyond imagining, to voluntarily sleep anywhere but in the safety of the *Valeria's* familiar compartments.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was no reply except static. At his side Xanthe tapped her own comm, and tried for another contact. "Chaitanya Control, this is *Valeria* shuttle,"

she said, with the outward calm of a lifetime already spent encountering and dealing with the sometimes terrible surprises that were part and parcel to a trader's life. "We're being tractored, apparently not by our own ship. Control, do you copy?"

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

"You're paying us well for this," the woman countered, returning his unholy grin. She did not have his horrible facial scars, but her smile was somehow not one bit less distorted. "So. We'll take the young Valerians somewhere very safe, and we'll release them only when you give the word. And, of course, when you pay the other half of the fee for their-ah-detention."

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

"A moment, Captain." The woman touched her private comm, listened intently to a message that was not audible to other ears, and then nodded in satisfaction. "I have more good news, although you may not see it that way. The

young Valerias are safely aboard my ship-and so is young Mistress Robie.”

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

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

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

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

necessary, in order for him to do to Anders Valeria what he'd planned and dreamed of doing over so many long and strangely empty years.

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

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

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

If Alana knew the truth, she might do something stupidly "moral" about it. She would have to know, of course, but not until his plan was so far in motion that she would have no option but to go along with it; and then he would be dead, and whether she liked it or not she would have to give up that so-called military career of hers and captain her father's ship-at least until Kyla came of age and married.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anders Valeria would be dead, too.

* * *

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

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

flagship.

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

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

Thank goodness. It's Papa, not Kyla, was Alana's first-although perhaps unworthy-thought. She sat in the offered chair, with the captain sitting beside her instead of across the desk as was usual; and she answered without hesitation, "Years, Captain. I haven't been home since I was twenty-one."

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

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

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

They were staring at her-admiral and flag captain, husband and wife, two fellow humans who had thought they were giving her terrible personal news and who had prepared to give her every kind of support she might need while she absorbed the shock. How could she tell them, now, that all she wanted them to

do was let her stay right here and go right on doing her job? And to bloody hell with the House of Callon, the freighter that bore its name, and-might as well think it even if you can't possibly bring yourself to hurt these good, kind people by saying it in front of them!-to particular bloody hell with Alan Robie.

"Alana?" Captain Sullivan asked again, even more gently.

"Is there a personal message for me from Mr. Berkey, ma'am?" Commander Robie gave herself a firm shake. She wanted nothing more than to declare herself done forever with her father and his House, but she remembered now that her captain had said the message came from the *Callon's* first mate; and Mr. Berkey she remembered with respect, even with affection. If he was the person who needed her back there-only for a few days, of course, no matter what!-then perhaps she must consider going. At least she must listen to it, if the message was from him.

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

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

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

"Alana, I know this is the last thing you want to hear when you're just settling in on board your new ship," Cameron Berkey began informally (he never had been expected to call his captain's children by anything except their given names), "but I need you back on the *Callon* for at least a few days. Your father was diagnosed with Deneva Syndrome just about as soon as we arrived at Chaitanya to get ready for the Fair, and the next thing I knew he'd disappeared. There's a message being held at his bank for you, coded to your biometric seal; I suppose it's a will, or power of attorney, or at least instructions of some sort. I wouldn't be able to access it, anyway, and the message he left for me specifically says you're to come home and take care of some business for him. I don't think he's dead, Alana. Your father's not the suicidal type, no matter what

state of health he's in; and what checking around I've been able to do shows that the day he was diagnosed, he purchased a yacht. It's warp-speed capable and it's operable for one pilot only. So who knows what he has in mind? Anyway, please do come as soon as you can. You are needed, Alana, or I wouldn't ask you-I'd just pass on your father's request and leave it at that."

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

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

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

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

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

Alana loved nothing better, now that they'd finally become lovers after

being friends for so very long, than to enjoy the visual contrast their bodies made when they lay close and touched each other. Long before the start of their intimacy, she'd loved the way Dom's hand looked on hers when he touched her simply as comrade to comrade. And distressed as she was feeling right now, she still was intensely aware of the feel of his body against hers; of the strength of his arms around her, of the roughness of his cheek when he bent to press it against hers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But it's human."

"Yes. It sure is. And this time I'm not going to try to think it through, Dom; all I'll do is give myself one hell of a headache, because there's nothing logical or sensible about the way this message has me feeling." She reached for the data pad, which she'd placed beside the bed when the door had announced a visitor, and she touched its controls and allowed the message to scroll across the screen where her companion could read it with her. She didn't want to hear Berkey's voice say the words again. Once had been more than enough.

"So it's not just your father; it's his first mate. Your old friend, the fellow

who almost raised you himself after your mother died.” In the eight years they’d been together, Alana Robie had told Dom St. Pierre more than she’d told anyone else about her childhood and youth; and if she hadn’t told him everything, she was sure that he sensed much of what she’d deliberately held back. He was without doubt the most perceptive human being she’d ever met.

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

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

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

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

“What, Dom?”

“I’m not going to see you again until you get back, am I?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The freighter *Callon*’s longtime first mate was a massive man, not obese but built like one of the great oaks of Earth’s fabled forests. He had, no matter what his captain’s daughter might claim, grayed considerably during the eight years since she’d last seen him; and his brown face was lined in places it hadn’t been before, Alana realized when after a moment she stood back and studied him properly. But he was as happy to see her as she was to see him, and his broad grin showed it plainly. “I was about to tell you it’s time you called me

something other than 'Mister,' Alana," he said, turning from the hatch and walking with her toward the two seats at the shuttle's console. "But I just realized-you should still call me 'Mister,'" because now I'm going to have to start calling you 'Captain.'"

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

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

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

As they talked, they worked; two expert pilots, clearing their little craft for liftoff and then accomplishing that task smoothly and swiftly. The shuttle rose toward its orbiting mother ship, and the stars began to appear in its viewports as Chaitanya's atmosphere was left behind. Cameron Berkey sighed. "Captain," he said, using her new title with deliberation in his tone. "Your father hasn't been heard from. But your sister and her companion have disappeared, too, and no one's been able to trace them."

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

Chapter 2

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

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

She got her eyes open, finally, and then shut them again at the pain that even dim lighting caused her. She lay very still for a deliberate moment, letting her mind explore her body; and what she felt reassured her. She was stiff and sore, as if her muscles had all contracted so tightly that they'd been slightly strained (a common enough reaction to stunning); her head still ached, and she

knew her eyes would be sensitive to bright light for as long as another hour or two; but that was the extent of her injuries, and she was thankful. In all her eighteen years she'd never before been the target of a stunner, and she knew that some humans reacted much more seriously to its action on the nervous system. Some people even died, although of course that wasn't the intent of the person firing the weapon. But, as her elder brother Jock had always told her when overseeing her practice shots, you didn't fire a stunner at anyone or anything that you weren't willing to kill if necessary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

No, someone had gone to a lot of trouble to get the Valeria twins into that cabin in reasonably good health; so that same someone would be motivated to keep them that way. Xanthe climbed the ladder with a starborn child's nimble ease, despite the throbbing that still filled her skull.

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

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

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

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

* * *

Cadet-Lieutenant Linn Gelsey of the Interstellar Guard patrol ship *Nova* was feeling disgusted and disappointed. He had been so certain that he would find an irregularity in that freighter's logs, its authorization codes, its crew roster-somewhere! Because until and unless he found such an irregularity, he could take forced boarding of the ship only as far as a computer search. He couldn't physically check all its compartments, verify that the three missing young people (and two missing older adults-one elderly female, the Robie girl's "companion"; one ordinary crewman from the *Callon*, who had been piloting since neither the girl nor her old chaperone knew how) were not aboard-or, as he would have much preferred, find them and free them; not unless he could first gain search privileges by finding something suspicious on sensors from his own ship or in the suspect vessel's own computers. And he'd been able to do neither,

so he was returning to his patrol ship without having accomplished a blankety-blank blasted thing.

He hesitated at the access tube's entrance, still glancing around him, still hoping he might see or hear or otherwise detect something-anything-that would serve as sufficient cause to begin a thorough physical search. There was nothing. The freighter's captain, a middle-aged woman who was hard of face but polite of manner, was looking at him quizzically (and with, he suspected, carefully concealed amusement). "Lieutenant, if you're finished-I'd like to get underway as soon as possible," she said finally, giving him more courtesy than he merited by treating his rank as though it were regular Guard instead of cadet service only. "I have a deadline to meet, you see."

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

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

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

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

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

Which was fine with the captain of the pseudo-trader, of course. She allowed herself a small sigh of relief as she returned to her control room, gave the orders that were necessary to seal the docking port and let the patrol ship

retract its access tube, and then gave the additional orders that would take her ship away from Chaitanya Spaceport as fast as possible.

* * *

Linn Gelsey was sitting in the pilot's chair in the patrol ship's control room. A ship this small couldn't dignify its command center by calling it the "bridge," although he'd heard enough green cadets use that conceit; that even included his two shipmates, before he had set their thinking straight on their first day as a team. Since he was a Guard brat and they were glorified civilians-Angel Niarchos from a colony world somewhere far out on the edges of settled space, Tom Pullen a trader's son putting in his required three years so he could get master's papers someday when he would inherit his father's starship-they had accepted the correction without being particularly annoyed. That, of course, had been two years ago. The three of them had spent their first phase of service, as did all cadets, in the most basic sort of training ("boot camp," as it was called for reasons long ago lost in time) aboard a base station or a full-sized warship; then they'd been assigned to the little *Nova* together, and since their teaming had worked as well as did most such combinations they had been allowed to stay together for the rest of their required tour.

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

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

could admit it if you'd been mistaken and as long as you learned from that mistake. And, of course, as long as your mistakes weren't too frequent and as long as you managed to survive them!

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

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

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

"Linn," said Angel's insistent voice. Her tone made him suspect that she'd had to speak twice to get his attention, which was not acceptable because he was after all sitting in a patrol ship's sorry excuse for a captain's command chair. "Look at this. Please."

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

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

"What?" came a sleepy but startled response.

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

Which kid would it be? And how had it been possible? But it had to be one of those three youngsters, because neither of the older missing ones was likely to

have been swift or agile or even small enough to make that secretive journey through the unguarded access tube while the patrol ship and freighter had been docked (he hadn't had his end guarded because he had no need to take such a precaution; the freighter captain had not done so, of course, because her whole goal for the inspection had been to appear as innocent and as harmless as possible).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Linn Gelsey had never been sorrier to have to admit to being himself. "Ms. Nordstrom, you're all right," he said softly, his tone deliberately even and calm and reassuring. "You're recovering from a severe stunning, and from having fought its aftereffects when you should have been resting. But if you'd rested,

you wouldn't have escaped, would you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If necessary, he would ask that *Nova* be diverted and allowed to pursue that ship herself. When he thought about how close that young woman in the bunkroom had come to dying before Angel had detected her presence in that locker, he was angry enough to personally throttle that captain who'd so successfully deceived him just a few hours earlier. It might not make his

comrades happy to have their current mission's length extended and their release from service delayed, but he was sure they would back him willingly if he made such an offer; and even if they didn't like it, they would have to go along.

* * *

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

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

He gingerly moved off the bunk, found a fold-down washstand such as was common to crew quarters cabins, and splashed his face with cold water. He took

a few sips of liquid, but not too much; although he'd never been stunned before, he had had a very empty stomach before after an illness and he knew that too much cold water was apt to make him sick all over again. Mostly he just wanted to rinse his mouth, cool his hot face, and try to get himself feeling human.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of the universe's great mysteries.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But she did. The blue eyes he'd thought so lovely flashed at him, and the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

didn't try to retain them. Young Ms. Nordstrom attempted to escape, and-well, we couldn't let her do that. So...."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

said, because right now he didn't care.

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

She interrupted him. “Xanthe,” she said. “If you’re Jock’s cousin, I can’t let you call me ‘Ms.’ Besides,” and her dark eyes took on a mischievous look, “I’m not used to it anyway. It sounds like something my mother would be called.”

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

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

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

“And they serve together?”

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

“No, of course not. My mother was my father’s partner, and that’s usual for us traders.”

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

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

“So they tell me. I didn’t know her, Xanthe, and my father’s not one to do a lot of talking about the dead.” They walked together through the short passage that led from galley and mess to control room, and Angel Niarchos gladly got

out of the pilot's chair and handed Linn a data pad. "Thanks, Angel. You're relieved," he said almost formally, and gave her a stern look when he realized his crewmate was gazing rather speculatively at Xanthe Nordstrom. He was getting very tired of saying, "She's my cousin, Angel! Lay off!"

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

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

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

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

It was cruel, the way traders and guardsmen treated physical and mental disability that manifested itself at the beginning of life; but when Earth had so suddenly become uninhabitable all those years ago, the resources available to her marooned children out in space and on the colony worlds had been so terribly limited. And what was worse, the hospital facilities of Earth were gone too and with them so much medical knowledge and healing technology that Xanthe sometimes thought the everyday miracles described in the old novels of pre-biocaust Earth must have been made up along with the rest of the stories; surely such things couldn't have happened routinely. Yet she knew that they

had. Once it would not have been considered at best odd, at worst immoral and cruel, to deliver the child after a pregnant woman died. Back in those days it had been a simple matter to place the infant in artificial life support and nurture it that way until it reached the age at which it would normally have been pushed out into the universe to live on its own.

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

Jock Valeria had felt this way before, and he'd always known that at times he would feel this way again. The first time had been when he was thirteen years old and his young stepmother, Leah, had died; he remembered lying in his small

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

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

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

some fascinating new fact or be challenged to master some intriguing new skill; or he would be forced into a fight, and his strong young body would assert its desire to go on living and the exhilaration of battle would temporarily lift his spirits.

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

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

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

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

He’d brought Carlie home to his father’s ship, already his wife by courtesy of a quick ceremony conducted by their commanding officer just minutes after they officially left the service. Carlie had taken to patrol ship life so naturally, so happily, despite her dirtside-dwelling background that he was certain she would fit right into the *Valeria’s* routines and customs; and he could hardly have been more wrong.

At least they hadn’t committed the sin of bringing children into the hell that their marriage soon became. If he had been free to go elsewhere with her, away from his drunken father-away from the demands that the House immediately began to make upon him, for Anders had plainly been waiting only until his eldest child’s return to drop his last pretense of staying sober for even the most vital occasions-away from the twins, who by then were lively preteens

and desperately in need of loving discipline and careful teaching and just plain nurturing that Anders no longer had the capacity to give them-then Jock was still sure he and Carlie could have worked it out. They'd been happy together as friends and comrades on their patrol ship, and they'd been almost crazily joyful together during those honeymoon days after they became lovers and before they arrived aboard the *Valeria*. And he knew they both had tried, really tried, to make it work between them in the days and weeks that had followed. But he'd never been able to blame Carlie for leaving him at last, although the way she had done it-a message on a data pad, found at his bedside when he woke one morning to find himself alone-had damned near killed him.

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

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

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

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

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

The message was character-based only, so that it could not carry any of its recorder's own biometric identifiers. It was nominally addressed to Captain

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

Aboard the freighter *Callon*, Alana Robie was speaking via ship-to-dirtside comm with Chaitanya Control. “Yes, those two bodies are the woman Phillida Clarkson and our crewman Vance Torgelsen. No, I don’t want to claim them. Perhaps they have families somewhere; I’d suggest that someone search the population database and find out. But to me they’re just two of my father’s

employees, and while I'm sorry they've died I don't accept responsibility for their corpses." She cut off the communication at that point, not seeing any need to listen to more outraged protests from the civilian official at Control who wanted to deal with those two bodies even less than she wanted to deal with them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A.R."; not "Love, Papa." Alana had expected nothing different, but part of her still had nerve enough to be disappointed. She lifted her eyes to her

companion's, and saw him nod. "So he does want you to do something specific, Captain?" the mate inquired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In any case, Alan Robie was no longer in the *Callon's* control room and to Berkey that meant that his first duty was now to Alana-not to her absent father. She was the person he was calling "Captain," and to him that was all that mattered. So he said, "Captain, I knew where your father was ten days ago when I sent you that emergency comm asking you to take leave and come home. I've talked with him since your sister disappeared, and I know what happened to her-although not where she is, or I'd have had her back here and safe by now."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. Exactly." Berkey nodded. "So now you know all that I know about it, Captain. And I really do believe the best thing you can do to protect your

sister's life, is to go ahead and follow your father's instructions.”

* * *

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