

The Mad Fisherman's Daughter

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ISBN: 0-595-20217-9

Published 2002 by Iuniverse
<http://www.iuniverse.com>

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2002

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Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

“Where I come from, humans don’t.” The traveler wouldn’t mention that for the past decade and more she’d been using an adopted one. This far out toward the frontier, she didn’t need her identity verified in order to conduct

business. Or to do anything else, either. “Do you have any messages for me?”

“Maybe. I can check, if you want.”

The traveler sighed, and drew out another of the untraceable credit transfer strips with which she'd paid for her passage. She put it down on the counter, because she knew better than to hand it over. That could open her up to charges of offering a bribe, and the seller to accusations of accepting one. Out here such “gratuities” were only customary, and both parties knew it; but they also knew that the laws of the Empire still technically applied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, Chief.” Dammning the expense of the waiting cab, Chris clung for a moment and then collected another kiss. Then she turned away, climbed into the automated craft's tiny cabin, and didn't let herself look back.

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

What was it about being a man from their line? First came Jorge, who worked hard but didn't know how to plan for the lean seasons; and who, after his wife died when Janek was barely seven, never seemed right in his head

again. Then Janek, himself, who imitated his grandfather by going off to fight in the Empire's wars-but who, unlike the old man, came home with something broken inside him that a lifetime of trying different palliatives hadn't managed to mend. Something that his third wife's love could in no way ease, nor could his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren even start to cure its pain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

Eleen, daughter of Ethelle, slammed down the gavel and rendered judgment. "The girl isn't your daughter, Frederick. So you've got no right forbidding her to marry. If you offer her a dowry, it's a gift. If you don't offer her a dowry, that's your choice to make. Do you understand?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even Janek still agreed that they couldn't have permitted that to happen. But Janek didn't seem to realize that for someone who'd lived wild and uncontrolled through his first fifteen years, just adapting to military service (the only place there was left to send Gant, after Janek and Friel both despaired of his settling down to a fisherman's life!) represented a huge accomplishment. So did staying with it long enough to retire, at a precious 20-year pension. And if Gant didn't always feel up to going out to fish with Friel every day, now that he was part of their household again, what right had Janek to criticize him for that? Janek, who even when he was in fine physical condition had sometimes sat muttering on the shore-unable to make himself get up and launch the boat, much less take it out to the fishing grounds and cast its nets high to capture the flying schools?

Janek had good reason for staying ashore, now. And he was wrong, dead wrong, when he grumbled that it was Gant's fault whenever the catamaran's engines malfunctioned. Yes, Gant liked to tinker with them (and for that matter, with any piece of machinery on which he could lay his hands). So had Janek, when his hands could still manage such tasks; and so did Friel, now. It was

coincidence, nothing more, that tied Gant's "tuning" of the engines to most of their major malfunctions.

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

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

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

* * *

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

The kid (Janek could never think of Gant as a fellow grown man, not even now that his only son's hairline was fast receding) fancied himself a mechanical genius, because he'd been an engineering mate on board several different Imperial space stations during his twenty-year naval career. He'd never seen star cruiser duty, which puzzled Janek still. How did an enlisted man, an ordinary, avoid serving at least a couple of shipboard tours while staying in the service long enough to retire?

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

Was he really a raider of the Empire's purse, a burden on its honest taxpayers, because he'd been hurt in ways that his body didn't show? Because

his years in a combat zone, and then his Ast captivity—a time that he couldn't remember—had left him as he now was?

They think I don't know we live most of the time on Eleen's earnings. They think I sat here because I was lazy, all those times when I was younger and should have gone out to fish, but didn't because I couldn't. They think I don't hear, or see, or notice, when I go to Eleen's grove and the children she teaches draw back and stare. Or when the boldest ones mutter to each other, "There he is! The sponger!" Because their parents and grandparents tell them that Gant served his score of years, and earned what the Empire pays him now; but Gant's father, the magistrate's husband, came home early like the coward he is. They said the Ast held him prisoner, but that's a lie because everyone knows the Ast never take captives. So now he lives off the Imperial Purse, and sits on the shore and watches other men do honest work, because he has no shame.

I wish they might dream with me for just one night. Or do I wish that fate on anything as innocent as a child?

No. But I do wish it on the elders who've taught them to mock me!

With that vengeful thought, Janek slipped down into his waking dream-state. It came to him oftener now than it had when he was younger; and although he still couldn't recall specifics, he felt sure the visions had grown more vivid with the passing of the years.

How could anyone expect a man to endure this, and not be changed by it? This irregular yet unremitting descent into hell, that could (and did) claim him without warning? Drag him down when he least expected it, and then hold him without mercy until it deigned to let him go?

* * *

Chapter 2

*“I don’t believe this,” Christabel muttered fiercely. She stood in the interplanetary freighter’s open passenger hatch, at the top of the fully extended boarding stairs, and wondered whether or not she could force herself to descend. “I don’t believe she sent *him* to meet me!”*

Lissa sat on a folding stool at Gant’s side. The freighter had set down on a wide, flat landing field that the inhabitants of Mandalay Island (the first part of Somewhere East of Suez that humans had settled) kept clear of vegetation and clutter to facilitate such commerce. Although the planet wasn’t on any trade house’s established route, the independents called here at least once in every standard year. In addition to cargo and messages they transported passengers, who otherwise would have had no way to reach or leave Somewhere East of Suez. Passengers such as Christabel had been, in her late teens; and passengers such as she was now, coming “home” after more than a score of years spent elsewhere.

This, she told herself as she stared down at her half-brother and his corpulent (and much younger) wife, is ridiculous. He’s a bastard, yes. But he doesn’t know that about himself-and with Lissa there, he’ll be on his best behavior, anyway.

I wonder what she’s like? And is it possible that she really loves him?

Christabel doubted it. She thought it far more likely that Lissa, young and friendless, and with neither beauty nor wisdom to help her make her own way, had simply latched onto a single man who was (for whatever reason) willing to take her.

Well, nothing’s changed, anyway! Mother’s either “too busy” to come and

greet me herself, or she thinks if she sends Gant she can force mending of the rift between us.

Well, forget that. I made that rift for damned good reason, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep it open wide. Just as I'd keep a fire-break clear of brush, and other flammables!

"Ms. Tyrone?" She'd given the freighter's elderly steward her adopted, off-world surname, when old-fashioned Imperial courtesy made the man insist he couldn't address a passenger by what he called her "Christian" name. Which made him notably unlike her only fellow traveler, a brash young physician headed toward another frontier world that was building him a hospital in which to practice. He'd taken delight in addressing her without surname or honorific, and had quizzed her about her destination's "fascinating" (as he called it) culture every time sharing the captain's table for meals forced her into his company. So when she wondered whether or not she should seek the young doctor's advice, as what had once been regular monthly bleeding now stopped and started, dragged on and (just as she was about to force herself to speak up) stopped again, except for a slow and annoying seepage, she felt thoroughly relieved that she wouldn't have to accept that condescending kid's help after all.

Yet as she heard the old steward's gentle voice from behind her now, she wanted more than anything else in the universe to turn around and step back inside the freighter's protecting hull. To stay on board, and lift back into space when the ship left again a few hours from now-to know that she was already on her way back to Sienna, their apartment, and the Sector High Court's bench.

Back to being "Justice Christabel Tyrone," a person who wielded power and commanded respect, instead of-as she must become again, the second her feet hit her native planet's dirt-Janek the mad fisherman's youngest, and only unwed, child.

She drew a breath, bracing herself. She took the first step, and then the second. Descending the freighter's boarding stairs with at least as much trepidation as she'd felt while mounting another set, to take passage on a similar ship, over two long decades ago.

* * *

On the headland, Janek still sat although the sun had long since passed overhead and then sunk down behind the trees. The Eastern Ocean, he realized as the dream faded at last, was heaving its night-time swells toward the shore below his refuge. The sky had turned dark blue, on its way to blackness, and the first of the planet's nine moons was rising.

So he had no right to be surprised, or angry, when he heard Eleen's voice

calling his name. “Janek! Where are you? Janek!”

The dream lingered, even now. As always, he couldn’t recall its specifics; and as always, he thanked the Father that was the case. He only knew that it left his mind quivering with terror, and his body cloaked in sweat.

“Janek! How long have you been sitting there?” After all the years he’d been coming here, of course his wife knew exactly where to find him. “I suppose you’re so stiff, you’ll hardly be able to get up! Here, take my arm.”

She moved in beside him, small and strong and solidly real. She pushed one shoulder under the arm he didn’t use for leaning on his stick, and took part of his weight as he struggled to his feet. She asked as she did that, “Did you forget? I had to send Gant and Lissa to meet the freighter.”

“Christabel!” Janek groaned as he remembered. “Oh, no. I wanted to be there, Eleen!”

“I know. So did I.” She could chide with the best of them, when she lost all patience with her life mate; but for some reason Eleen wasn’t angry with Janek tonight. Was it because she’d been truly worried when he didn’t come home before sundown? Because she didn’t really feel like going out to meet their daughter (the only child they’d had together), and didn’t want to admit it? Or did she have some other reason, one at which he couldn’t begin to guess?

Eleen never did anything without a reason. Nor, he remembered, did Christabel. In that mother and daughter were very much alike...in that, as well as in their ability to argue cases and render judgments. Which was one reason why their world needed Christabel back now, a barrister who’d operated in a far wider sphere than Eleen the Magistrate ever had. A Christabel who never would have existed, if she hadn’t left home all those years earlier—for cause Eleen still didn’t believe, and that Janek devoutly wished he could avoid believing.

“Janek! Are you all right?” Eleen gave her husband’s thin body a shake. “Come, it’s late! And dark, and getting windy, too.”

As usual, his wife was right. Janek nodded, and asked as he started putting one foot in front of the other, “What’s Lara fixing for supper?”

“You and your almighty stomach!” Eleen answered, with a snort that didn’t hide her relief as she heard the return to normalcy in his voice as well as in his words. She didn’t understand his strange moods, let alone the visions that caused them; but she knew just enough about them to be properly afraid. “Bright scale, of course. They were always Christabel’s favorite.”

Should he bother to disagree? To remind his wife that their daughter didn’t, in fact, like that particular fish very much at all?

No. Bright scale was a delicacy, so of course (to Eleen’s way of thinking) it had to be Christabel’s favorite food. And in Eleen’s universe (which far too often wasn’t at all the same one that Janek found himself occupying), things

always were the way they ought to be; because Eleen simply didn't allow herself to perceive any deviation from that norm.

She's what my grandmother would have called a "Pollyanna," and she thinks that's her own greatest virtue. Maybe it is, sometimes. But it's hard to get out of a speeding starship's way if you refuse to believe what your scanners tell you...and it's damn frustrating, if you're standing behind the helm chair and shouting into the conn officer's ear, and the ship still stays on collision course.

But she was a good woman, his Eleen; and most of the time her need to control everything and everyone around her worked for Janek, and not against him. In younger days he'd resented it, and at times he'd fought against it, but he was past all that now.

He leaned on her shoulder, and put all his strength-both physical, and mental-into keeping up with the homeward pace she wanted to set.

* * *

Gant reached for his half-sister, and wondered why she took a backward step toward the star freighter's boarding stairs. He said in his heartiest voice, "Chrissy! Why the hell don't you dye your hair? You'd look ten years younger."

She did look nice, little Chrissy come back from her long absence (for most of which, of course, Gant himself had been off-world). Her face hardly had more lines on it than did Lissa's, and his wife was so much younger that she'd been in the service for only a year when he'd met and (less than a month later) married her. Lissa in those days was slimmer than Chrissy, whose figure looked pretty average for a human woman getting close to mid-life. But having unlimited quantities of food at her disposal had been new to Lissa, as an Ordinary Fourth Class; and it was an ill wind that blew no one anything good, as Great-Grandmother on Dad's side would have put it, in one of her endlessly spouted proverbs, fables, and poetry snatches.

Eating her fill and more, as many times a day as her duties would let her go near a dispensing unit, made Lissa's superiors threaten her with discharge if she didn't return to her previous mass. So Lissa kept on eating, delightedly, once she was safely wed to Gant; and soon enough her superiors "punished" her by giving Gant and Lissa their fondest wish. When he took his twenty-year pension and went home to his father's and stepmother's house on Somewhere East of Suez, he could take his wife with him instead of leaving her to finish out her hitch.

Every now and then, Lissa announced she was going to shed some of her excess flesh. Usually when the huge body to which she hadn't become accustomed gradually during childhood and adolescence, as did humans for

whom being that large came naturally, had caused her problems by breaking furniture on which she'd tried to rest her bulk-by exhausting her if she tried to do physically demanding work, at Lara's side-or, on one notable occasion, by complicating the healing of a cracked bone in one of her ankles. Gant always greeted that announcement supportively, and then made damned sure his wife had her favorite foods in front of her. Whenever, and wherever he could arrange it, until she forgot all about her most recent resolve to escape from the prison he'd helped her to build...one forkful at a time.

"Gant." Christabel ignored his question. She stared at him for a moment, with their father's gray eyes; and then she turned her gaze toward his wife. "Lissa. It's nice to meet you, finally."

The younger woman had heaved herself onto her feet, and was standing at Gant's elbow. She reached out, hauled her sister-in-law into her arms, and kissed Christabel's cheek. After which she handed her over to Gant, without the slightest clue she did it against Christabel's wishes. Lissa's hearty, "Hello, Big Sister!" drowned the other woman's outraged gasp.

Gant heard it, though, and it gave him good reason to wrap strong masculine hands around his half-sister's upper arms and keep her where he wanted her while he kissed her, too. She'd never liked being touched, had Chrissy, and that just wasn't healthy. Not to mention that it was insulting, when she shrank even from her own family's caresses!

Christabel stepped backward, and as she did so she put a foot down, hard, on one of Gant's. "Sorry," she said as he uttered a gasp of his own and (involuntarily) opened his hands and let her go. Her eyes found his again, and they held no apology at all.

"Mama's waiting for us!" Lissa reminded, speaking as she always did when in a public place-in a tone just slightly louder than any other woman Gant knew would have used. "Come on, Chrissy. I'll sit in back with you, while Gant drives the flitter."

* * *

Somewhere East of Suez had no planetary government. On each of its islands people lived in family groupings, practiced their common faith, and followed the means their forebears had devised for settling disputes and punishing misdeeds so egregious that the community couldn't simply leave them "within the household's walls." It was a young world, in culture if not in geology; and so far (under its present tenancy, at least), it hadn't known war.

Was that because its settlers were ex-star sailors, soldiers, and marines, all of whom had had enough of fighting before they came here? Or had the humans

taken a lesson from their unknown predecessor residents, who'd evolved-built the cities whose remains Christabel played in as a child-aspired to exploring space, and then obliterated themselves? Leaving behind those ruins, so crumbled by time's passing that the few researchers who'd tried to work here gave up in disgust; and a mantle of discarded satellites, booster rockets, and other primitive artifacts that the veterans who wanted this place for their own destroyed before the archaeologists arrived (in lieu of the survey teams, who weren't interested unless a world's native sentient life forms were still around for them to study)? "Hazards to navigation," Christabel remembered her great-grandfather saying, while she was small and they lived at the same fireside. "If they hadn't wiped themselves out, they'd never have been able to get off this world and into open space, anyway. First planet on record that ever actually succeeded in walling itself in, with its own orbiting junk!"

Even an uncrowded world with plenty of resources usually turned into a battleground if humans lived there for very long; and sharing a common religious and philosophical tradition (the other reason these particular people had settled here) certainly hadn't stopped conflicts from exploding on other planets. So Chris felt unwilling pride in this, her native place, as she watched flitters' night-lights passing on the way to where the star freighter sat grounded. The people of this world would come to the freighter's landing spot, take care of whatever business they had to conduct, and then go home without causing trouble. On other frontier planets freighters operated from orbit, because their captains didn't want to risk landing; but on Somewhere East of Suez, they knew they could set down and stay as long as they liked in safety.

The flitter ran in near silence, so during the rare moments when Gant's bride stopped chattering Christabel could hear the voices of people on board other families' vehicles. Sounds carried easily across this planet's vast expanses. She could hear, also, night surf battering the Eastern Ocean's rocky shores as the flitter came closer and closer to her parents' compound...no, she couldn't call that dwelling her "home." The planet, yes. The house, never.

Had she been foolish to come here, thinking it the only way she could help? Should she have stayed with Sienna on Eunice, and appealed her home world's case to the Empress's Own Bar of Justice?

No. The Empress didn't give a damn about the people who lived (or rather, even after more than a century, squatted illegally) on the frontier planet with the misspelled and picturesque name. Calling herself to the High One's attention by taking their case before her Bar might cost Justice Tyrone her place on the Sector Court's bench, since she'd won it by merit and not through patronage; and she could lose her citizenship in the Empire, too, since the status of people born on Somewhere East of Suez was problematic at best. She'd established her

claim to citizenship, when she arrived on a fully participating Imperial world and petitioned for access to that world's university system, by demonstrating that she was an Imperial Navy veteran's daughter; but that could change in a heartbeat, if the Empress willed it so. And pushing the Empress to take notice of the problems of those to whom she owed nothing as a group (whatever the Empire might owe to individual war veterans like Janek) was a damn sure way to annoy her, Christabel reminded herself now.

After annexation, Janek and Gant and others like them would stop receiving their pensions, disability allowances, and other off-world monies. The Empire's star freighters wouldn't land here anymore, so ordinary communications (as well as credit transfers) would no longer reach this remote world. The humans of this place would be on their own as never before, as aliens in another species' territory.

Unless a certain Empire-trained barrister could negotiate for them either title to their world, or (failing that, which Christabel had to admit seemed likely) the right to go on living here and yet retain their ties to the rest of humanity.

Oh, Mother, help me! I can't even think about tackling this task in my own strength alone!

With that unspoken but heartfelt prayer, the traveler braced herself to climb out of the flitter (or rather, to fairly leap out of it so that Gant wouldn't have time to leave his seat after landing and come round to lift her down). To set foot on not just home world soil, but that of her parents' compound, for the first time since she'd left it as a despairing and angry girl of seventeen.

* * *

Chapter 3

Under the sea's surface, in the deep places beyond the shelf surrounding the great island called Mandalay, a scaled creature of green and gold and warm brownish hues moved with swift grace. Toward the shallows, under cover of night; but following one of the channels formed, over eons, by the passage of salt-impregnated rivers from the island continent's heart all the way to the ocean's depths.

The swimmer knew she had to get past the coastline's dangerous, air-breathing inhabitants while the darkness held. In the deeps where she spent much of her life, the bright-scaled creature neither knew nor cared what happened in the air above; but when she needed to reach the high mountain lake of her birth, the creatures inhabiting the rest of her world presented the journey's chief danger.

It wasn't always like this. Arvin (for so the swimmer was called) could remember, when she'd made this trip as a first time mother-to-be, roaming the shelf's shallow waters and feeding happily on the rich vegetation there—the vegetation that her colored scales were meant to blend with, green and brown, and gold from sunlight penetrating the clear shallow waters of the coastal shelf. Then she hadn't been forced to slip into the river's mouth at night, or stay within the deeps of the channel.

She hungered, as she swam, for the nourishment that she could smell all around her. In the ocean she ate microscopic plant life, and once she reached the lake of her birth she would have plenty of kelp; but no other food had the same nutrients, or the same exotic flavors, as did the shallow-water mosses and

seaweeds.

When Arvin and her fellow race-mothers could still feed on those delicacies, they'd borne more children and stronger ones after they reached the lakes where they'd mated a full solar rotation earlier. Children who would feed in the same shallows throughout their growth, from iridescent fingerlings who left lake and river behind shortly after birth, into adults-males who would swim upriver to live in the salt lakes, or females who would spend a virgin season at sea before making their first homeward-bound breeding passage.

For the part of the year that was warmest (although their world, since it didn't orbit its star on a tilted axis, didn't experience drastic seasonal weather variations), both genders shared the rich kelp fields. They socialized, communed, and loved. Then, as the highland waters cooled, the females left the lakes and returned to the oceans. They lived there, following ancient routes from deep to deep, until it was time to go once again to the lakes. To give birth, for those females who'd bred last year; and to breed anew, for those who'd borne then and had spent their months at sea recuperating. Or to breed for the first time, for those who'd reached maturity since the last completed cycle.

The males spent their cold seasons asleep, burrowed deep into the highland lakes' muddy bottoms. So far the air breathers who rode the ocean's surface and netted up the bright scaled beings' growing children hadn't investigated those briny lakes, or at least hadn't found them interesting enough to discover and exploit the life within them. As long as that didn't happen, Arvin reminded herself while she swam with powerful tail-flexes against the river's undersea current, her kind could and would continue. They would be fewer, and smaller, than before; but the air breathers couldn't and wouldn't catch them all. The air breathers would continue catching far more of the bright scales' distant cousins, who if they were self-aware at all certainly didn't show any evidence of it by their behavior. Those monotonously one-hued swimmers still took to the air, and couldn't learn to alter their actions-no matter how many times the air-breathers cast their nets, and brought the silver swimmers down to the water again as captives.

As food, Arvin knew, although she'd refused to believe that until the first time she encountered remains of a finned creature with bits of cooked flesh still clinging to its skeleton. Not that she'd understood what the horrid alteration in that flesh, an alteration quite unlike that wrought by natural decay, meant, until an elder explained it to her...an elder who'd witnessed what they did to one of his own kind, killing it by slitting its belly and removing its entrails, while he lay (then little larger than a fingerling, and easily hidden) concealed by water-weeds a perilously short distance from where the air breathers kindled a fire and then placed the bright scaled one's corpse over it.

Arvin had no idea how, or why, such savage things had come to share the bright scales' once peaceful world. And truly, she didn't care. Wishing them gone, however heartily she might do that, was pointless; but learning better ways to avoid them, and making sure that she and every other female who lived to sexual maturity bred as often and as copiously as possible, would help to ensure her kind's survival.

If only the foods that young ones needed could be found somewhere other than in the shallows! A female could breed and bear without those foods, as Arvin had been doing now for most of her life; but immature bright scales could never reach adulthood unless they spent their growing seasons feeding in their planet's danger zones.

If only we could talk to them, Arvin thought, but didn't broadcast in her kind's clicking, squealing speech to the other females in her pod. *We know they don't have to eat us. They just want to, and they could stop if that changed! If they had any idea that we, too, can think and feel, surely they wouldn't choose to harm us anymore.*

Assuming, of course, that going out on the water's surface in objects they've constructed actually does mean that they're intelligent. Arvin added that caveat, in her mind's isolated silence, when she remembered that some of the elders still argued against the theory that any air breathing creature could reason and be self-aware.

* * *

“So, Chrissy! You've come home to help your family, and it's about time. Will you be taking over some of your mother's classes at the grove? Or looking after Lara's grandchildren so she can work in the gardens?”

Christabel hadn't let herself hope that Belva would be absent from the great outdoor hearth, at the center of the courtyard formed by the rambling buildings of Janek's and Eleen's establishment. Warm season or cold one, no matter what the family was doing, Belva would be there-except when she was at her own parents' home, making sure the servants there were doing as ordered. Listening briefly to the elders' complaints, and then heading back to the compound of her dear friend Eleen; where, she told anyone who would listen, she felt more at home than she did in the one where she'd been reared. Her parents had off-world investments, giving them a cash flow that made hiring servants (also from off-world, since no native son or daughter of Somewhere East of Suez would take such work!) and building a house of quarried stone possible. While Eleen, for all her status as teacher and magistrate, was the wife of a man whose off-world income came from Imperial disability

payments... whenever she mentioned that, of course, Belva turned up her nose.

“I don’t go by ‘Chrissy’ anymore,” Christabel said, as she stepped through the gap that was the courtyard’s only direct entrance. “And I haven’t come home to teach, or baby sit, or anything like that, Belva. I’m here to do whatever I can do about the Ast annexation, and after that’s settled I’m going back to Eunice.” *At least, I hope I am!*

“Oh? And how are you planning to do that, if the freighters can’t call here anymore?” Belva cocked her dark head inquiringly. She was mid-way between Christabel’s own age and that of Eleen, a spinster who (Christabel knew, because she knew everyone’s history in the whole of Mandalay) had gone off-world to be educated, returning at an age that made her no longer marriageable. She’d spent the years since then attaching herself to first one married friend, and then another; until, during Christabel’s teens, she settled her attentions on Eleen, the third wife of Janek.

Whenever she’d managed to pry her “friend” away from husband and hearth in years past, Belva had lost interest soon afterward. But Eleen, although she wouldn’t send Belva packing, hadn’t shown the faintest sign of wanting to leave Janek, either. How that could have gone on through all the years of her absence, Christabel on one level couldn’t imagine-yet on another level, she couldn’t picture this hearth without Belva crouched beside it.

Belva damned well believed that the freighters would continue to call, and transfer both messages and funds to Somewhere East of Suez from the Empire’s far-off capital. Otherwise Belva would be on her way to catch the soon-departing freighter that had brought Christabel here, and the younger woman knew it was so.

So the whole damned planet’s in denial. Why doesn’t that surprise me?

Is Belva still here because, as magistrate-and as the mad fisherman’s wife-my mother really can’t have any other kind of friend, except this one? The kind that wouldn’t know enough to go away even if Gant and Friel each took an arm and hauled her?

The air vibrated around her, and Christabel lifted her eyes away from the hearth. Away from Belva, sitting fat (to the normal degree of a middle-aged human who didn’t suffer from lack of food, and who didn’t have to do strenuous physical work, either) and content beside the glowing coals; from Lara, who was just straightening up after tending the fragrant contents of a grate that lay before those coals (no doubt planning to turn and greet her half-sister, although that practical woman wouldn’t have dreamed of spoiling the dinner by dropping everything to acknowledge Christabel’s arrival); and away from Gant, who was busy settling Lissa on a seat that his wife’s weight couldn’t possibly collapse.

“Daddy?” Christabel said, as she felt his presence before she saw him

coming out of the night.

He was in one of his spells. She could always feel him coming then, although he seemed perfectly normal to others (even to Eleen) until the strangeness overwhelmed him and his old terrors exploded in ways they couldn't ignore.

"Christabel." Her father always called her by her name. He never shortened it to "Chrissy," which she hated; or even to "Chris," which she no longer minded now that she'd heard Sienna say it many times with love. "I'm glad you're home, girl. Come here!" He made an effort, standing in the entrance-gap with Eleen beside him (and with both pretending that he hadn't been leaning on his wife's shoulder, as well as on his stick, in order to make it home from the headland where she'd undoubtedly found him), to hold out an arm that didn't want to be lifted that far. Not this soon after he'd taken it down from Eleen's shoulders, weary and twisted as that arm now was.

Christabel remembered a Janek who sometimes went out to fish with Friel, although he couldn't manage it every day. She'd heard, of course, from Eleen and from Lara, that her father's body was deteriorating right along with his mind (faster, in fact, Lara often said); but when Janek sent his youngest child a message of his own composing, he never spoke of such things. She could hardly make herself believe what her eyes now told her, but she had to believe what her flesh could feel when she took the few steps that were necessary and put her arms around him.

Being touched made him wince, and she knew it wasn't her own dislike of unsought physical contact operating. She hadn't inherited that, not from Janek or from Eleen. She'd acquired it, from spending too much of her adolescence in the same household with Gant.

Dad was on the bad spell's down-slope, not building toward it. Good. But Chris could still see the images left behind in his mind, as she touched him...and she didn't find it odd that he could not recall them after each vision was over.

Did he know that she could sometimes read him like this? When she'd mentioned it, as a puzzled small girl (in the days when his visions came months apart), Janek had told her in the only angry words she'd ever heard from him that, "I'd rather be dead than think I'd passed my curse along to you! Don't talk about that to me, Christabel!" So she hadn't mentioned it again, at least not after she got old enough so she could remember the consequences from incident to incident-and now, she realized as she drew back, Janek didn't remember it at all.

He and Eleen were both good at that, at putting out of their minds forever those memories they found too disturbing (or too foolish, as Eleen would phrase it) to retain. As a girl Christabel had thought of that as a talent, a gift she wished she might have inherited instead of Janek's affinity for being interested in things

forbidden; but during her years with Sienna, and her years as a barrister, too, she'd learned to see it for the self-deceptive curse that it was.

Knowledge, after all, was power. All kinds of knowledge, because how could you protect yourself against evils of which you were keeping yourself willfully unaware?

She put the images she'd gleaned from her father's mind away, to be analyzed as soon as she found herself alone again. Instinct told her they would have both usefulness, and meaning.

* * *

The meal was over. Thank goodness. Christabel hadn't eaten fish since she'd arrived on her first Imperial world at seventeen, to batter her way through its bureaucracy and enter pre-university on the strength of her status as a disabled veteran's offspring. She'd never cared much for the taste, but she knew that now—just as in her girlhood—she must eat what her home world had to offer, or go hungry. Yet choking the flesh of the bright scales down came harder now, even harder than she'd anticipated it would.

What didn't come harder was looking into the proud faces of her mother, her sister, and her brother-in-law Friel, and thanking them for the celebratory meal. She knew now she'd never be able to change their certainty that by offering her the increasingly rare and hard-to-catch fish that was Somewhere East of Suez's greatest delicacy, they'd honored her and pleased her.

Well, actually, they had; even though as she lay down to sleep (finally!), alone at the edge of the headland's trees because she didn't need privacy for love-sharing on this warm night, she could feel her stomach fluttering every time she thought about what she'd put inside it. She understood, now, that sometimes you must accept the spirit of the gift and not worry yourself about its substance. Standing up to Belva and Gant for calling her "Chrissy" and trying to push her back into her long-outgrown "place" as the family's unmarried daughter was one thing, and accepting her mother's and Lara's and Friel's honest, but slightly misguided, expressions of affection was another thing entirely.

She could almost feel the fish swimming around inside her, as she lay down on the pallet she'd brought from the house and closed her eyes at last.

Had Belva left yet? One of the reasons Eleen was always so tired, of course, was that Belva stayed by the family's fire until far into the night. She didn't have to rise early, to go out and earn her bread; and she certainly didn't have Eleen's obligations to others. So Belva delayed going to her parents' hearth every night, and Eleen didn't lie down until long after her husband was sound

asleep.

Christabel listened with all her attention, and heard voices murmuring within the compound as well as surf breaking along the headland's shore, and a slight breeze stirring the tree-leaves in the forest. She sighed, and tried to settle her body more comfortably. She was no longer used to lying on the ground, and no amount of padding was really going to be sufficient until she regained her former hardiness! She murmured the same prayer to the Mother that she'd said on every night of her life, no matter where she was in the galaxy and no matter who was (or wasn't) lying beside her. Then she drifted off in spite of the noises, because she couldn't remember being quite this tired.

* * *

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