

The Way To Freedom

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Chapter 1

“Nora, you’ve got to get Keren back to 8055. Now. Yesterday! Or you’re going to lose her.”

In all my 56 years of living, I can’t remember when I heard words that scared me more than those ones did. Go back to Planet 8055, from which I and my survey team mates escaped (damn near miraculously) ten years earlier? Go back there on purpose, to a world where a post-menopausal woman like me is under an automatic death sentence-where the Ast and their almost equally mysterious (and ruthless) allies rule-and the human inhabitants are doomed to extinction, as soon as the current generation dies off? All that would have been bad enough to contemplate, but Dr. Reiko Ballantine was telling me I must take my nine-year-old daughter with me.

“Are you sure there’s nothing you can do to help her?” I asked my old team mate Rudy Tasker’s wife, who also happened to be the best pediatric endocrinologist in the business. She’d come all the way to Rigel 5, home to me (and for the past decade, to my husband and our daughter, too) to try to diagnose Keren-Happuch Mira Cranshaw Falconi’s curious malaise, that approaching puberty seemed to be worsening...and that, Reiko had just let me know, heralded a much worse problem.

Marc, my team mate throughout my long career as a planetary survey leader and my husband ever since we returned from 8055, sat beside me in the office Reiko had borrowed at Rigel 5’s best pediatric hospital. He reached out for my hand, because we no longer had to act like colleagues now that we were both retired. Retired in mutual disgrace, because of how our careers ended...but

that's another story. A long one, called *Regs*. Maybe you've read it? But if you haven't, don't worry. I'll make sure you can understand this one, without doing that first.

"Yes, I'm sure." Reiko nodded, and then sighed. "Whatever those 'Others,' as you and Rudy always call them, did that made all of 8055's women sterile except you...and made you fertile again, somehow, at the same time!...also affected Keren. While she was *in utero*. That's my best hypothesis, anyway, since what's happening to her is definitely a function of her body preparing itself for menarche. What I'm sure about is that we'll never find the answer here. You've got to get her back to where you conceived her, and-oh, hell, Rudy's going to kill me when I tell him this, but there's no help for it! I'll have to come with you."

She made it sound so simple. Which, of course, it was. But "simple" is not at all the same thing as "easy," and unfortunately she'd made it sound that way, too. So I asked again, not believing I was doing so when my little girl's welfare surely depended on this woman's continued willingness to go far beyond the call of medical duty, "Reiko, are you sure she won't survive if she stays here?"

"Yes. I'm afraid I am. If Keren goes on deteriorating at her present rate, she may celebrate her tenth birthday-but she'll never make it to her eleventh. Not even with any palliative treatments I might be forced to prescribe, if you're refusing to try the one thing that I believe can actually work."

Once again, Dr. Ballantine had no idea what she was saying. Despite being married to a survey op, she was clueless about the impossibility of getting our hands on a ship capable of making the passage from here to 8055-taking it, unnoticed, down to the planet's surface (assuming neither our own forces nor the Ast had stopped us from crossing the interstellar border)-blending into the population there for long enough so Reiko could determine the exact cause of Keren's condition-and then getting back into space, and safely across the border in the opposite direction. Nor did she realize, I felt sure now, what getting stranded on that world would mean.

Especially for women. Surely Rudy had been honest with his wife about our last sojourn there? Technically a survey op wasn't supposed to tell outsiders about his experiences on a world like 8055, but most of us made exceptions for our nearest and dearest.

Then again, not many ops managed to maintain such long-term relationships as those words implied. I'd had Grandmum, and no one else of any significance, waiting back home during my first decade as an op, and I was pretty typical in my scarcity of personal ties. After the old girl died-in a "recreational mishap," which was how the local university described it when their Mathematics Department Chair Creature fell into a crevasse while

chaperoning a Mountaineering Club outing-I had no one left at all. That was about the same time Marc parted company with the mother of his first child, after which we turned to each other for something more than the comradely friendship we already shared.

You had to expect it would be like that, when you chose a survey op's life. You just couldn't get home often enough, or stay there for long enough at a stretch, to be of much use to a spouse. Not when your life's work required spending time (sometimes long stretches of it) on a succession of alien worlds that had populations which Survey Central deemed worthy of study. People to whom their families mattered a lot usually didn't last longer than a mission or two-if they made it through op training in the first place, which they often didn't. And that, of course, was a damn good thing.

Did I dare to open my yap now and ask Reiko a series of blunt questions, until I was sure she knew enough about 8055 to make an informed decision about going there? Or should I just be glad she was so willing, and start making travel plans?

"Good thing Rudy's still on active duty," Marc said from beside me, in the tone he always uses when he's waited long enough and finally decides I must want him to take the point (conversationally speaking). "He'll have to find us transportation, you know. We're not poor, Reiko, but chartering a long-range shuttle's beyond us. Even if we used every credit we've got, plus everything we could borrow."

"It would have to be a charter flight, wouldn't it? Or you'd have to buy a ship outright. I guess I'm too used to just getting myself a ticket and then hopping aboard a liner, and winding up anywhere I've ever wanted to travel. So I didn't think about how we'd be getting to 8055 in the first place." Ballantine looked at us both, not just Marc, with the beginnings of wisdom (otherwise known, sometimes, as fear) in those dark eyes with their vestigial hint of Terra's Orient. One of her parents-it would have to be her father, since "Ballantine" must be her mother's surname-had bequeathed to her characteristics seldom seen on the faces of today's homogenized humans. But back on Terra, which was Reiko's home just as Rigel 5 was mine, some regions still had populations that exhibited their ancestors' racial traits. You could identify such people on sight as "Anglo," "African," "Hispanic," or "Oriental"-although Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and so on, were harder to guess. They'd managed to retain their identities, genetically as well as culturally, by keeping determinedly to themselves on their own segments of the home-world's surface.

Those of us whose forebears headed outward to the stars, who established homes for themselves and their offspring on other planets, lost those distinctions long ago. Marc and Tasker and I were (and of course still are) all typical

examples of our kind; with skin tones in varying shades of brown, eyes that can be any color, and hair that can be brown, black, or deep auburn. Seldom will you see blondes among us, and almost never what a native Terran would call a “redhead.”

Did Reiko Ballantine’s ancestral-world upbringing, and privileged adult life, contribute to her obvious naivete about the mission for which she was volunteering? Perhaps. But most civilians were pretty damn clueless, so she probably wasn’t that much worse than the rest. I’d been expecting more from Rudy Tasker’s wife, that was all.

Anyway, Marc had just administered a first dose of reality therapy to our well-meaning friend; and I was grateful. He’d administered enough of that unpleasant tonic to me, after all, during the years of our professional association—which started when Survey Central put him on the first team I ever “bossed,” expressly to serve as my nursemaid.

Sometimes he still plays that role in my life, all these years later. I squeezed his hand, since I was still holding it, and I said, “Good thing Rudy’s not off on a mission. At least he’s available so he can lend us a hand! How about giving him a call, Reiko? And then hauling him in here, so we can get this caper planned while Keren’s big ears aren’t listening?”

* * *

“I had an idea it’d come to this.” Rudolf Tasker was well past thirty now. His wife, Reiko, I knew to be slightly older; but you couldn’t see it by looking at them together. He’d lost his boyishness long ago, and I could remember exactly where and how. That was when he lost his first wife, the 8055 colonist/modern human hybrid girl in whose honor I gave Keren-Happuch Mira Cranshaw Falconi the second of her given names. Her first, of course, being that of both my Mum and Grandmum.

“So what’ve you got in mind?” I asked him, as he stood at the window of the hotel room he and Reiko shared. We’d had to get out of the borrowed office at the hospital when its regular tenant wanted it back. But Keren, who’d been strong enough to go to school today, wouldn’t need someone to welcome her home for hours yet; so the change of scene shouldn’t be a problem. And if she got sick, as she often did part-way through the school day, her teacher could find us anywhere. As long as we wanted to be found.

“I’m on transition leave right now, so going with you’s not a problem. I can get us a long-range shuttle, and supplies for it, too. Nothing’s really that hard, when you’re an incoming sector boss.” Tasker turned slightly, just enough so he could look at the rest of us over his shoulder. “The rest of us” defined as

Marc, and me; because Reiko hadn't arrived from the hospital yet. She'd been hauled into an emergency consultation, the kind that a physician's oath precludes turning down, just as we were all trying to get out through the door.

"Rudy! Congratulations, that's wonderful!" I turned him around so I could hug him. I was fond of this man, in the way that a human woman is fond of younger siblings if she has them-which I never did, in a natural sense. But eight months of being stranded together on 8055 had forged bonds among the three of us, Cranshaw and Tasker and me, that went far beyond a team's normal comradeship.

I meant that it was wonderful for him, of course, since he must want it or he wouldn't have applied. I'd never had the slightest interest in becoming a sector boss, or anything else that was higher on the food chain than team leader. Even *that* title my beloved Marc hadn't cared to wear except once, temporarily and disastrously-so being elevated to the role of "team leaders' boss" had never entered my husband's mind, most likely. But Marc was an anthropologist by training, not an ex-Marine like me or a former military pilot like Tasker. So even leading the team had, to him, been nothing but a distraction. He'd become an op so he could study alien (and estranged human) cultures. He didn't give a damn about anything else, and he'd adjusted so nicely to retirement only because my Grandmum's old university gladly took him on as a member of its faculty, soon after I dragged him home with me.

I wished I could say I'd settled in just as fast and just as well, but for me it was a whole lot harder. There wasn't much for me to do at first except finish gestating Keren. And after that (of course!) bear her, suckle her, and mother her, during the early years when caring for a small human can easily manage to be an adult's full-time job. I'd had a tough time letting go of my daughter, to my chagrin, when she got big enough so that she needed to spend much of every day at school.

I finally went to work teaching classes in both self-defense and wilderness survival, for a privately run "organized recreation" school. I found it satisfying, because I realized my work might spare other people's loved ones from getting the kind of news I'd received after Grandmum's fatal climbing mishap. But the job really wasn't enough to fill all the places in my life that Marc and Keren didn't occupy.

Okay. Time to be honest! I hated *why* I was about to leave my life on Rigel 5 behind, but part of me couldn't help feeling relieved and excited about it. Even though I must go back, instead, to 8055-taking along every single fellow being about whom I cared, into a setting where I knew we would be in constant danger-I still *wanted* to do this. Now that I'd got past the first shock of realizing it could happen, I was growing fiercely glad that it must.

“Yeah. I suppose it’s wonderful.” Tasker’s arms came up to return my embrace, but he did it perfunctorily. I’d hugged him in spontaneous joy on other occasions, so I knew how to read his reaction today. After a few seconds he held me at arm’s length instead, and stared into my face while he said what he’d been wanting to all along. “I didn’t volunteer to go upstairs, Nora. The higher-ups kicked me there, and I had to either accept it or get done.”

“Why?” Marc asked the question before I got my mouth open again.

“Same reason I’ve been told to take a nice, long rest. The last mission I led...well, it broke me. That’s also why Reiko’s on leave from her practice.” Rudy’s full lips twisted as he answered Marc, but went right on staring into my eyes. “Don’t get me wrong. She wanted to come out here and take a look at your daughter, and help Keren if she could. But if I wasn’t an official basket case right now, at a rank that lets the service keep me on payroll because they’re having a hell of a time finding enough experienced ops to replace retiring sector bosses these days, Reiko wouldn’t be free to do any of this. And neither, of course, would I.”

* * *

“It’s that bad, huh?” Marc spoke again, into the hotel room’s quiet. “They’re starting to recruit Big Bosses, are they? Not taking volunteers only, now that it’s been ten years since the military stopped allowing people like you and Nora to transfer over to the Corps before their 20 years are up?”

“That sums it up pretty well.” Tasker nodded, and sounded relieved that he wasn’t going to have to explain all that to us. After which he folded me into his arms again, like a little kid hugging a stuffed toy for comfort, and of course I let him do it. Just as I’d once allowed him to hold me in his arms through most of an impossibly dark night on 8055; so he could fall asleep and stay asleep, after he’d been forced to watch while a gang of drunken men raped his young half-native wife. Over and over until she died, her body literally torn apart by their brutality. I’d wondered then if he would ever be the same.

Well, not the same, of course. It would be ridiculous to expect anyone to come through that horror unchanged. But I had wondered whether he would be able, afterward, to go on living an op’s life and doing an op’s job. If the experience would harden him, temper him, or break him; because I knew from my own long seasoning in our strange profession that it was sure to do one of those three things.

I’d thought he came out on the other side tempered. Made stronger, without losing his compassion or his flexibility. But now he had endured some other horror, which did to him what Mira Alcorn’s death hadn’t managed; and I

suspected that the only reason he was on temporary instead of terminal leave right now was that Survey Central (with its back to the wall personnel-wise) preferred experienced leaders to undamaged ones.

“How do you feel about that, Rudy?” Marc asked the next question gently. As if he were talking to me, during an off-duty moment; or even to our daughter.

“Rotten. If they can’t trust me to do my job on the ground anymore, how the hell am I supposed to trust myself to boss people who have to go there?” My old friend shuddered in my arms, and his hold on me tightened convulsively. “Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut, because now you may not want to go anywhere with me. Especially not back to 8055, with your kid in tow! But both of you were always honest with me, and I-well-thought you had a right to know.”

“You’ve told them now, anyway.” A different voice, Reiko’s voice, came from the hotel room’s far side. I’d heard the door slide open, quietly though such fixtures moved in this luxurious place, but I’d paid it no heed because I knew Marc was there and watching my back. So my old reflexes, the self-protective ones a former survey op never loses, hadn’t kicked in. And as for Reiko seeing me held close in her husband’s arms, well-tough, if she found the sight puzzling or offensive. If the four of us (or five, counting Keren) were going to head out together on the most dangerous mission any of us had ever tackled, then Reiko would damned well have to get used to how the team of Falconi, Cranshaw, and Tasker functioned.

Because it sure as hell did look like that long disbanded team was back in business. As of right now; this very minute.

* * *

Chapter 2

“Well, at least I won’t have to worry about you killing me for wanting to come along on this junket!” Dr. Ballantine echoed her own earlier words ruefully, as she walked past Marc and joined her husband and me by the window. She continued to address Rudy, and if she minded the hug he was still giving me she didn’t show it. “So, I take it you’re already figuring out how to get us there?”

“Uh-huh.” Probably I shouldn’t have been surprised by the calm warmth I could sense flowing between them, as I moved out of Tasker’s arms at last and stood aside so he and his wife could look at each other properly. After all, before she’d married him he had told her (in the one breach of confidentiality I was sure he had committed) about how he’d lent his name to Mira Alcorn during our first stay on 8055; intending only to keep the illicitly pregnant girl alive, in a society so repressive that giving birth out of wedlock was a capital offense. And then how he wound up not only living with Mira intimately, but loving her, too. It wasn’t until we were on board the shuttle bound for home, with Mira dead and buried on the planet behind us, that Rudy bothered mentioning to Marc and me that he had a fiancée elsewhere; and then wondered, forlornly, if his Reiko could ever understand.

I told him that I hoped she would, and I guess she must have. Because she certainly did marry him, not many months after Marc married me—and the only reason we didn’t travel to Terra for that wedding was Keren. You can take a baby on a long interstellar flight quite safely, of course, but I had no interest in doing that with my own tiny daughter. So it wasn’t until years afterward, when

we all met mid-way between our home planets to share a short (much too short!) vacation, that I got my first in-person look at Reiko Ballantine; and Keren-Happuch got her first taste of star travel.

The years had gone by so quickly. Keren was nine now. She'd been four then. Wiry, bouncy, and in perfect health. A state she maintained until just a few months ago, when she started showing the first physical indicators of approaching puberty. Things so ordinary that, although I sighed about their relatively but by no means abnormally early appearance, didn't look to me like reasons to yell for medical help-and Reiko Ballantine was the first doctor, the only doctor, to confirm the connection Marc and I both eventually made between those natural changes in Keren's body and her insidious illness.

The doctor was speaking again, still addressing her husband. "How soon should I have my patient ready to travel?" she wanted to know. "And how do you want me to handle outfitting myself with a decent tool kit?"

Tool kit? Oh, yes. She undoubtedly meant diagnostic equipment to help her find the exact biological cause of Keren's ailment, plus whatever medical supplies she might need to administer those "palliative treatments" of which she'd spoken earlier. Since Keren might get worse during the trip to 8055, enough worse to require such intervention...I didn't like to think about that possibility, but it was Reiko's duty to think about it. And plan for it, too.

"Tell me what you need, and I'll get it. In the meantime, just go ahead with whatever you'd be doing if we were all getting ready to take a, well, vacation trip together. Because that's what I'll have to tell-well, never mind who! The guy who's going to lend us our transportation. I hope I can put everything together by this time tomorrow, because the sooner we leave the less chance anyone may try to stop us." Tasker glanced at his chrono.

"I hope you can do it sooner than that, love," Reiko told him. "Because for that little girl I examined this morning, every day counts. Every hour, even."

"It's really that serious?" Rudy stared at her.

"Yes. It is." She stared back.

That was when the hotel room's comm went off. And though this wasn't his room, *our* room, Marc found the noise startling enough and aggravating enough so that he (being nearest) palmed the unit without hesitating. "Hello?"

He answered like a civilian, of course. We'd both been civilians for a long time now.

"Looking for Alliance Citizen Marcus Cranshaw," a standard computer-generated voice announced pleasantly.

"Found him," Marc said, with obvious surprise. "Who's asking? And why?"

It couldn't be Keren's school calling, because her teacher would have used

the personal comm units we both carried. Units that would only accept calls from the few people we had given permission to contact us “anytime, anywhere,” because as a Rigel 5 native I’d been taught in childhood to value my privacy; and because Marc had embraced that part of my culture with delight.

All artificial voices are created female, for some reason lost to antiquity. But the next words to come out of that comm unit were in different, and obviously genuine, feminine accents. “Hello, Dad,” the new voice said. “Or would you like me to call you ‘Father,’ instead? Or ‘Pop’? Or maybe just plain, well, Marcus?”

* * *

“Who the hell are you?” my husband asked the unseen person, his tone gone gruff. “The only kid I’ve got is nine years old, and you’re not her.”

He wasn’t telling a lie, exactly, but he wasn’t telling the truth, either. He’d signed away his paternal interest in his first child without even knowing whether his then-lover, one Shannon Flagston, was carrying a male embryo or a female one. It was that or have Shannon in his life forever, because she’d pulled an ancient stunt that most women now regard as too stupid and duplicitous for words. One that nevertheless ought to scare all men who have love affairs outside of marriage straight onto the most foolproof male birth control that modern medicine has to offer. Yup, Shannon “got herself pregnant” (ridiculous phrase, but this time damn near true) on purpose, in hopes Marc would abandon his survey career and settle down with her.

Marc didn’t do that. He called her bluff, by signing off and setting her free. And since she hadn’t sought his consent beforehand, she couldn’t force him to assume responsibility. Not for the child, or for her while she carried it. He soon vanished, as far as Shannon Flagston was concerned, when Survey Central shipped us off on an especially long mission; and that was, thankfully, the last we heard of her.

Of course Marc didn’t take the hint fate had offered him, and start doing something about his own fertility. If he had, I could never have conceived Keren...or maybe I would have, anyway? Since the “go between” species that took possession of 8055 soon after we got stranded there, when the Ast conquerors handed it over to them as a reward for diplomatic services rendered, had the reverse effect on me when they rendered all of 8055’s women sterile-making me fertile again, when I had every reason to believe that I stood zero chance of conceiving?

Perhaps whatever masculine birth control measures Marc might have taken would have been reversed just as handily, since it hadn’t occurred to me until

this minute that we had no idea whether or not the Others' (creative name for them, that) "treatment" of 8055's population had done anything to the men as well as to the women. Like 8055 folk themselves, we'd stupidly ass-umed that fertility (or lack of it) was a female matter entirely.

Which made us dumb, dumb, dumb, since we had reason to know better...oh, well. Anyhow, Marc was typically male enough so that he didn't see fit to alter his own body chemistry to prevent himself from making anyone pregnant, despite what had happened to him with Shannon. And I won't claim that I'm sorry he didn't, since I can't for a minute regret having brought Keren into the universe. I never would have planned her, especially not under her conception's terrifying circumstances; but now that I've got her, I wouldn't dream of wishing her gone. Ever.

The female voice remained disembodied, since Marc hadn't requested visual from the comm's control pad. It was saying, "My name's Rebecca Flagston, Mr. Cranshaw. Since you sound like you want to be formal for now, I guess that's what I'd better call you. Have I started any bells ringing yet?"

Marc swore. Then he said, "Your timing stinks, kid."

She laughed. And although her voice was of course higher-pitched than his, she had his laughter. Unmistakably. She said, "Sorry. I guess it does, at that! Look, I'm in the lobby of this palace. I chased Mr. Tasker and Dr. Ballantine all the way here from Terra, and I know something's the matter with your other kid. Whatever you've got going on, I want in on it. May I come up now? Or d'you want me to keep on talking to you from here?"

All four of us had gone pale, and we were staring at each other. In between the rest of us staring, of course, at Marc. He looked at me, his old habit of being an op under my command asserting itself even though on this outing we would all be (I supposed) under Tasker's command; and I grabbed the chance to hiss, "Get her up here! PDQ, before she spills anything else while she's using a goddamn hotel comm system!"

What would we do with her, with Ms. Rebecca Flagston who was Marc's daughter and therefore (technically, at least) my stepdaughter? Who knew a whole lot more than she had any business knowing, and who was using that knowledge to force her way into our lives-at the one of worst times she could have chosen? I gave brief but serious consideration to taking her down as she came through the door, and keeping her unconscious until we were safely off Rigel 5 and on our way to 8055. But for that, I would need Dr. Ballantine's cooperation; and I doubted I'd be getting it, thanks to that inconvenient thing known as "medical ethics."

Marc looked belatedly at Rudy, and our one-time junior team mate nodded. I couldn't tell what Reiko was thinking, when I finally glanced at her. Not that it

mattered right now; but I should get to know her as well as I could, and as fast as I could, if we were going to be team mates. And we were. That much, we'd already settled.

"Okay. Get up here," Marc said to the comm, echoing my advice. "And daughter or no daughter, you'd better not come through the door with anyone behind you. Or wearing a wire, either."

Such an antiquated expression, that term for a concealed listening device. Ops like us, who've worked in technologically regressed human societies like that of 8055, are probably the only Alliance citizens (except maybe some Terran history buffs?) who get an accurate mental picture while hearing those words. Yet no one who speaks fluent Standard is apt to misunderstand the term's meaning; nor did young Ms. Flagston. She said, "Got it. Dad." And then the impudent brat rang off...which is another antiquated expression, of course. One that made me recall standing at a wall-mounted "telephone" in the Village Grandmother Tiara's kitchen, before the Others took control of 8055 and destroyed its infant communications system.

Along with its roads (whole sections of macadam pavement, which made movement by internal combustion-powered "trucks" and "automobiles" possible over long distances, melted by energy beams directed downward from orbit). Not to mention its power generating plants, its bridges, its manufacturing facilities, and all of its identifiable public buildings-such as hospitals. Police stations (or "public safeties," as the 8055 folk called them). Schools, and more. Burned to the ground without warning, killing everyone who had the bad luck to be trapped inside...I shook myself to get the memories under control, because I couldn't afford to let them divide my attention right now.

The brat was at Rudy's and Reiko's door already. I wondered if she'd really made that call from the lobby, or only from down the hall. Marc wisely stood aside while Reiko let her in. Rudy stayed across the room, standing now with his back to the window-which didn't worry me. No one outside could see in, even though my home world's sunlight came through the "glass" to give us daylight.

To my surprise, the kid (well, at what-26, according to my mental arithmetic?- she was that exactly, to me!) didn't say a word to Marc after she came in. As the door sealed itself behind her, she looked right at the man by the window. She said with sudden formality (and it was real formality, this time), "Sector Boss Tasker? Trainee Recruit Flagston, reporting for duty."

* * *

Rudy was *not* expecting her. Definitely. But he said with aplomb, in words that

sounded familiar because I'd once said similar ones to him: "Don't call me 'Boss,' kid. Rebecca, you said? Don't call me 'sir,' or even 'mister.' Call me Tasker, or Rudy. Because if you call me any of those highfalutin' titles, you're apt to get me killed."

"Yes, it's Rebecca. I hate being called 'Becky.'" She nodded, and her eyes (green eyes, not at all like Marc's, although her face was a feminine echo of my husband's) got big. "Look, I'm gonna be honest with you, sir. I mean Rudy! Central knows about what you're planning."

"They do, huh?" Tasker didn't budge. Nor did his tone, or his facial expression, reveal a thing. Even I couldn't tell for sure if she'd surprised him, let alone whether or not he believed her.

"Yes. I'm assigned to be your orbital support op. I've been briefed on all the latest long-range dope about 8055, and I've got requisition authority for the outfitting you're going to need. Not that we can go on an official survey mission to an Ast-held treaty world, you realize! But word is that the Ast haven't been near it once, in the whole ten years since your team left." Those green eyes looked us all over now, except for by-passing Reiko (who hadn't been part of that team). "Neither has anybody else, which sort of has to include those 'Go Betweens' you reported the Ast gave it to. So Survey Central wants you to get back, after you make this little junket you're planning. I got asked to volunteer for the job because Central knows damn well whose daughter I am, even if Sky Marshal Hapsburg is my father-of-record."

Good Lord. Shannon Flagston had married, or at least established a household with, Igor Hapsburg? The guy who now ran both the Star Service, and the Ground Troops (or "Marines," as those of us who'd served in the latter outfit always called it)? If Trainee Recruit Rebecca Flagston was Marshal Hapsburg's legal offspring, she had "pull" written all over her despite her current lowly status.

Suspicious woman that I am, I just had to ask. And I didn't bother introducing myself first, because I had an idea it wasn't necessary. "Tell me, Rebecca. If your dad here and I didn't have a sick little girl who needs for us to take her back to 8055, would Survey Central still be wanting us to go there right about now?"

"Yes. When Father talked to me about this, and asked if I'd be willing to do it," and now a very serious Rebecca Flagston clearly didn't mean for that paternal title to indicate Marcus Cranshaw, "he called that part 'serendipity.' But I told him he shouldn't say that, ever, about a child being sick enough so she might die. Is she really that sick? My little half sister, who has such a funny name?"

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Chapter 3

When she got a look at her “little half sister with the funny name,” Rebecca Flagston lost her last doubt about the gravity of Keren’s medical condition. As soon as she got a chance to say something to me in a private murmur, she admitted, “I thought any kid who could go to school couldn’t be all that sick! But I guess I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

“Yes,” I said, and left it at that. We were on board the long-range shuttle by that time, working together like any pair of ops to verify its stores and language prep and fuel status. You’d hardly have guessed, if you’d been watching us, that I was ten years’ worth of retired and Rebecca nothing more than a trainee; because I found myself falling back into the routine as if I’d never had the long hiatus, and she clearly hadn’t been doing any sleeping during her classes at Op School. Now, if the geniuses who run that place would only add “proper address of a superior while on field duty” to their list of lessons that should be absorbed at the cellular level—so the newbies would stop arriving for their first missions spouting “sir” or “ma’am” this, “team leader” or “sector boss” that—I’d think they were doing one hell of a fine job, instead of just a damn good one.

Keren had her good days, and she also had her bad days. One of the former could turn into one of the latter without warning, but you couldn’t tell that by looking at her and seeing a wan, weary, hardly-able-to-get-out-her-tracks nine-year-old. Nor could you tell, just by looking, that she now had far more bad days than good ones.

Should I tell her older half-sibling that this, dammit, happened to be one of

Keren's good days? Nah. She'd find that out fast enough, during the weeks it would take us to get from Rigel to 8055. Weeks that I could now assume would be uneventful ones, since Survey Central had made this an unofficially sanctioned mission-and I appreciated that. My flash of eagerness to get back into harness regardless of the price turned out to be just that, a flash. One that went away as soon as I had to pack up my little girl's clothes and toys, and give a quartermaster her sizes so we could take along some 8055-appropriate things for her, too.

No decent parent would want to subject a youngster of either gender, let alone a female child, to a society like 8055's. But the thing that really got to me was realizing that I must plan, as I talked to that quartermaster, for Keren to need larger sizes in the clothing that Survey Central was providing for her; because we were surely going to be gone for months, and possibly for a year or more. And sick as she was, Keren kept right on growing. That was one of the reasons she looked so awful, even to eyes like Rebecca's. Eyes that weren't familiar with her previously rounded face, and body that was sometimes-well-borderline chubby. She kept getting taller as her illness progressed, but while she did that she didn't gain weight correspondingly. In fact, she lost weight instead. So she looked like a rail now. Her brief spell of being merely svelte was long over.

I wouldn't let myself think about the shape she might be in by the time we reached 8055. She would be getting one-on-one, 24/7 care from the best doctor in the business while we were in transit, and we'd be on our way to the only place in the universe where she could survive long-term without a "cure." That would have to supply reassurance enough, even for (I might as well admit it, at least to myself!) the panicky and heartbroken mother of a mortally sick only child.

"I'll bet she looks like I did, when the doctors at Pine Valley got through with me." Marc made that observation on what was sure to be our last night out, as he and I bedded down in our cabin (with Keren nearby, but not sharing the same compartment). We'd made the trip in less time than even I had hoped-but still, it had taken far too long for my daughter's well-being.

"She looks worse than you did," I told him, and didn't think I was fibbing. He'd been in tough shape, of course, when Tasker and I tracked him down (after he jumped ship during my absence, and set out to single-handedly find and recover one Thomas Alcorn-an op he'd left behind on 8055 many years earlier, during his one brief stint as a team leader). Because 8055's humans have lived so long away from the rest of us, and because of the original colonists' method of populating their new world as fast as possible (using now outlawed accelerated gestation tanks to grow the resulting embryos, after combining ova

and sperm cells that made the trip frozen), there are serious differences in the ways our bodies and theirs function. Differences that had the staffers of “Pine Valley”—a home for the incurably ill, where Marc landed after a vehicular mishap—doing their well meaning damndest to force his alien body chemistry and vital signs to conform to their understanding of what was normal, and poisoning him in the process until his outraged body refused to have anything to do with food. Since his language conditioning hadn’t taken properly, no doubt thanks to his haste in self-administering it, he’d been unable to tell them what was wrong. And so, by the time we found him, he was well on his way to vital organ shutdown.

Lying in our berth now, with him beside me—older, but strong and healthy, and carrying a normal amount of flesh on his big frame—I shuddered at the memory of how he’d looked then. Tied into an old-fashioned, wheeled “invalid chair” because he was so weak that he’d have slid out if he’d been left there unsecured. Emaciated, pale, and (the only time I’d ever seen him thus) utterly beaten. He had given up, and was sitting there waiting to die.

When I knelt beside him that day, and put my arms around him (both because I wanted to, and because that gesture suited my assumed role as his 8055 native wife), he passed out with his head on my shoulder. I’d thought for years afterward that I would never feel my heart breaking more painfully, at any sight, than it did when I saw the tears in his eyes just before he fainted...but now I knew I’d been wrong. I’d had a long time, now, to feel the same way—and worse!—when I looked at Keren, and realized that she was losing ground instead of gaining it.

“I was afraid you’d have to tell me that!” Marc said, and sighed as he slid his arm around me. “Well, we’ll have her on the ground on 8055 by this time tomorrow. And then she should start to get better, if Reiko’s theory is right.”

“It had better be!” My voice came out as a growl. I wasn’t letting myself think beyond finding that out, although soon enough afterward Dr. Ballantine would have to start figuring out a way to keep my daughter well when we left 8055 again. Because that we must do. Staying there, to live out our lives in a doomed society that even in its better days had been an ultimately fatal residence for any woman, none of us would willingly consider.

“At least once we’ve hit dirt, my other kid won’t be bugging me to talk to her. That part’s gonna be a relief.” Marc sounded as if he meant to strike a lighter tone by speaking about something other than Keren; although he could no more get his mind off her than I could, of course. But merely mentioning Rebecca Flagston made him go tense beside me, so automatically that I wondered if he realized he was doing it.

“She’s as friendly as a puppy,” I said, and hoped I didn’t sound as if I were

rushing to defend her. “And we’ve been cooped up together for a long time. Would it really hurt you that much to make friends with her? Answer her questions? Tell her what she wants to know, about her mother and you?” Oh, dear. I definitely did sound preachy, now. But as much as I knew Marc hadn’t wanted to become Shannon Flagston’s husband, I also knew (because he’d told me) that he had wondered about their child in later years, and had wished he could meet her. So why in hell couldn’t he do his part, after he’d been granted that wish, to forge a relationship? Some sort of a relationship, even if it wasn’t exactly the kind that Rebecca herself might want?

Marc grunted. Then he said, “Yeah. It would.”

Well, I couldn’t argue with that definite a statement. Especially since, husband or no husband, Marc’s rapport (or lack of it) with his daughter by Shannon Flagston was none of my damn business.

Which he would undoubtedly tell me, if I had the gall to push him further now...and I would deserve it. And neither of us would have gained a thing. So I shut up, and snuggled into his arms, and went to sleep. Proving, just by doing so on what ought to have been one of the most anxious nights of my life, that “once an op, always an op.” Which for team leaders, goes double.

I think Marc did the same thing, but of course (since I was already asleep by then) I can’t be sure.

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“We don’t dare carry transponders. I remember what it feels like to have one start to self-destruct while it’s still inside my body!” Marc vetoed Reiko’s offer to wink at an Alliance-wide policy against implanted rather than carried bio-tracking devices, a policy that has made on-ground op monitoring harder in the years since its adoption-while making the citizens of all our worlds feel safer, and justifiably so. “Besides, anything like that is just going to advertise our position. If the Others start hunting for us, I’d like to make it at least a little bit of a challenge for them. Wouldn’t you, Nora?”

Tasker should be running this show. He was senior to me now, in rank if not in number of years of experience (where Marc had us both beaten anyway), and his experience was much more recent. But when I glanced at him, my one-time newbie op gave me a look that told me plainly he had no interest in bossing the mission. Not now that we were about to have Rebecca set us down, near the place where we’d last walked on 8055’s soil, and leave us there. So I said, “Let’s hope they aren’t paying attention, Marc. Because when they do, not much gets past them! I agree with him about the transponder implants, Reiko. Forget ‘em. Too damn dangerous.”

“Then how will you find us, if we lose our comm units? Or if these ‘Others,’ these ‘Go Betweens,’ have another technology-busting spree?” Ballantine addressed our pilot, and used bad grammar. I’d never heard her do that before. Was she getting nervous, at last?

Yup. She was. I could smell her, and that, too, was a first.

“I’m putting myself into cold sleep as soon as I hide this thing,” Rebecca Flagston indicated the shuttle around us, “on one of 8055’s moons. I’ll either wake up when one of you signals me for recall, or in exactly one year. And then I’ll come down to the place where I dropped you off, and you’ll have to find a way to be there. That’s the best we can do.”

The kid was an op already, in attitude at least. While Dr. Ballantine, of course, was a civilian despite the “nerves of steel” that medical folk are supposed to possess naturally and then cultivate even more. The older woman’s pale golden skin turned white as she nodded. She’d accepted the plan without protest, but I was glad we hadn’t told her its specifics beforehand.

Would Survey Central send someone after us, if we didn’t come home in due time? Since apparently they had their own reasons for being interested in 8055, ones stronger than our normal “so the Alliance can decide what to do about this possible new member world and/or trading partner” motivation? I doubted it. I’d never been involved in a clandestinely approved mission before (indeed, I’d had no clue such things could happen), but I had the impression that if we got into a bind we would have no one but ourselves to get us out again.

So be it. I spoke to my daughter in 8055’s far-drifted version of the language that all mainstream-educated humans now speak, and watch her face to gauge how well she understood me. “Ready, Keren? Do you think you can walk the way I showed you, so you won’t trip?”

Walking at all was a big effort for her, these days. But my little one got up from her seat in the shuttle’s one common living compartment, where we’d gathered for this final pre-mission briefing, and demonstrated her ability to cope with a skirt. She’d never in her life, of course, worn such a ridiculous and inconvenient garment. Her alternative outfit had loose-fitting trousers, the kind that Western Continent women and girls sometimes wore. I hoped we wouldn’t be going to the more repressive and dangerous Eastern Continent at all, this time. But if we did, none of us females would be able to wear trousers there. Not even the diaphanous Western Continent variety.

“Good,” I said, and smiled at her. She smiled back, and sat down again. She didn’t talk much nowadays. She’d learned (heartbreakingly) to save her breath for other things.

Keren’s first-time experience with language conditioning had been successful, then. We were ready. I said to Rebecca, “Take us down, Pilot!” And,

because I'd decided I liked my husband's older daughter-and because I felt sorry for anybody who must spend the coming year in cold sleep, a state I've avoided entering ever since I came out of a six-month stay in it years ago to find out about my Grandmum's fatal accident-I smiled at her just as warmly as I'd smiled at my own baby.

That was how I still thought of Keren, and I was worse about it now that she'd been sick for what seemed like so long.

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I'd rather have taken a pod down to 8055's surface, but this class of long-range shuttle only carried one for escape purposes. So we had to have Rebecca set us down; there just wasn't any other way to do it. Of course we chose a secluded spot in the high mountain valley called "Landing Place," where the colony ship *Way to Freedom* set down centuries ago. It was also the place from which we'd lifted off in a remote-piloted shuttle, sent by the Others who held this world after getting it from the Ast, ten years earlier. After we found the hidden *Way to Freedom* in its cavern, Tasker used its comm system's dissembled components to put together a transmitter, and let the Others know we were down there-a survey team from the modern Alliance, trapped behind enemy lines when the border shifted. They blew the old ship to kingdom come, of course, just before they sent us rescue. The mountain where it had for so long lain concealed, they blasted wide open; and the resulting earthquake killed people all over the valley, in each of the Landing Place's four villages. I remember that very well indeed, since the only reason I didn't die that night was the fortuitous way the support beams came down around me as the hut in which Marc and I were sheltered got shaken to pieces.

So many memories this place held. In the darkness of 8055's night side I couldn't see the ruined mountain, but that only made my déjà vu feelings get stronger. After all, we'd left here in the middle of the night. As Trainee Operative Flagston expertly piloted our oversized shuttle, with the rest of us strapped into flight chairs beside or behind her (while Rudy, our other professionally qualified pilot, rode shotgun), I found myself reaching for Marc's hand. I wouldn't have done that in the old days, but we'd been married for a long time now.

Keren was sitting with her doctor, not with me. Which only made sense. Funny to think that the last time we were in these skies, she was so small that I was still carrying her inside me.

I could see the villages now. We were timing our arrival for the edge of full darkness, so that we would have continued concealment for as long as

possible afterward. In another few minutes the ground below would be night-enshrouded, but right now I could still make out the huts of the nearest enclave, as well as tended fields and herds of domesticated animals. All of which left me feeling vastly reassured. "They're a long way from extinct, looks like!" I said to my husband, and knew he'd shared my concern when I saw him nod.

The people here could so easily have been wiped out during the years we'd been gone, by plague or by war. Even though they'd never been prone to the latter scourge before, the stresses of terrible, involuntary change on their society's structure could easily have sparked it by now. Or they might have been done in by sheer impatience on their conquerors' part, by the Others deciding to rid their new possession of its previous residents sooner instead of later. By massacring the humans, instead of waiting for them to die off naturally after they lost the capacity to breed.

The shuttle got us down without difficulty. We unstrapped. We headed for the cargo ramp, extended it, and (after a quick scanner sweep of the area to make sure we didn't have company) started tossing out the items that we'd decided we absolutely must have with us for our stay here.

That was when the shuttle's engines started to howl. Started to make the one noise that (aside from complete silence while light-years from nowhere in uninhabited space) any star traveling human hates most to hear: the at first guttural, and then increasingly high and urgent, sound of a hyperlight drive going into overload.

Rebecca, who had hit dirt with us to help with the offloading and then tell us good-bye, turned and started to run toward the control room. (Or cockpit, would be a more accurate term for the small compartment from which she flew this tiny starship.) Marc grabbed her, and used his greater mass, reach, and just plain muscular strength to haul her outside with him.

With the rest of us, too, since no one else was dumb enough to try to go deeper into the doomed shuttle. We wouldn't have had a prayer of surviving the detonation, though, if the thing had stayed on the ground. Nothing human could hope to move that fast-not even a woman (me) who'd snatched up her far-too-light child knowing she must run for both their lives, and certainly not a man who was dragging his adult daughter.

I realized the small ship was rising when I heard the clang of its cargo hatch, after the boarding ramp retracted, and then the overload sound began to lose volume even as its pitch kept right on building. Still, I didn't slow down one bit. When the shock wave came, it knocked me down and on top of Keren. Then every meter's worth of distance that I'd gained, by staying on the move until the last possible second, proved worth it; because the force and heat that struck my back were quite bad enough. If they'd hit my frail daughter

unshielded, or driven my body onto hers with stronger impact, finding a cure for her illness here on 8055 wouldn't have been a problem anymore.

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