

## **Interphase**

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## Chapter 1

*“I’m not going to run, Jorge.” Edek couldn’t remember when, in all of his eleven years, he’d heard his father sound so weary. “I think I can make Lord Assman see reason.”*

Males didn’t embrace on Proserpina, not even males who were father and son. But Edek and Everard Fallon weren’t men of Proserpina, so Edek was used to hugging his father in private. He went to Everard, and as he felt his father’s arms closing around him he heard the first sounds from the alley that ended at the clinic’s door.

“Hurry!” said the rich man, whose title and surname Edek didn’t yet know. He was sweating in his fine clothes, reeking of fear.

Footfalls. Angry voices. The boy couldn’t make out many of the words they were shouting, but one was repeated often enough and loudly enough so he couldn’t miss it. “Shaman! Dirty, perverted Shaman!”

No, that was three words. An ugly phrase that he’d heard before, always applied to his father-but always muttered, until now.

“Go with Lord Jotham, Edek. Call him ‘uncle,’ because he’s your protector for now.” Father gave Edek one last squeeze, and then pushed him in the rich man’s direction.

Only later, in the air car the man had parked on the Fallon house’s roof, did Edek realize what his father’s words meant. For all of Everard’s brave words about calling for his son’s swift return, the Shaman knew better.

“Don’t look down,” Lord Jotham warned as he strapped the boy into the tiny car’s passenger seat.

The sun was just sliding down behind the mountains. The city was in full daylight still, but free from the afternoon's glare. Edek not only looked down, into the perpetually shadowed alley that was now thronging with men; he strained against his safety harness to get a better view.

The car lifted. Lord Jotham flew it away from the outer wall, over the alley, so Edek only had to stare downward to see his father stepping from the clinic's door to face the mob.

He couldn't see what happened afterward. But when the car gained altitude, lifting to clear the city's inner wall, he tested the harness to its limits and hurt the muscles in his neck for one last backward glance-and he saw smoke rising from the place he and his new "protector" had just left.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 2

*Meredith Carver Canso's implanted comm chip activated at a most inconvenient moment.* The Astral Guard captain lay on the warm sand of a hidden beach, on an island not far from the resort hotel where she and her husband were spending some precious shared leave time. John's hands were at her hips, about to slide the lower half of her swimsuit down. Its top was off already.

"Damn!" she said, reaching for his wrists and stopping him. "Story of our lives, isn't it? First we have a fight, then we start making love, and then my blasted comm goes off!"

Lieutenant Commander John Yancey sat back on his heels and shook his head. He said, "Answer it! The sooner you do, the sooner it'll shut up and let us get back to what we were doing!"

Meredith grimaced at him, reminded herself that he wouldn't share (or even comprehend) her amusement at the frustrated picture he presented right now, and then changed mental channels so that the person trying to contact her could hear her thoughts. "Canso."

"Irritating, isn't? Having someone call you while you're on vacation?" The words came through as clearly as if they'd been spoken from a meter away, instead of only in the mind of a woman who was surely far away on Solaria Prime. Sitting at her desk in the office of the Judge Advocate General, and using her favorite technology to communicate with someone who right now definitely didn't want to hear from her.

Meredith sighed. She said aloud, "John, it's my mother. Damn, and double

damn!”

“That does it.” Yancey responded by locating his swimming trunks and pulling them on.

Admiral Fiona Meredith Carver hated waiting, and seldom hesitated to interrupt her subordinates no matter where they were or what their duty status. Her daughter wasn't her subordinate, in any sense except that one woman outranked the other; but even to the creche bred, a bio-parent had privileges others in one's life did not. So she intruded on Meredith's thoughts whenever she felt like it, and part of the price of wearing a captain's comm implant (issued only when an officer reached command rank, although civilians with sufficient wealth could buy them at will) was being “available” 25/7. “Well! It's the middle of the day on the resort coast of Sirtis Major, I believe. What kept you from answering for so long?”

“What do you think, Mother?” Meredith let the image her eyes were seeing at this moment go through. The green of Sirtis Major's southern ocean, calm in the shelter of this cove. The brightness of sun glinting on red sand. John sitting beside her, looking both physically uncomfortable and far more annoyed than Admiral Carver sounded, with solid biological reasons for feeling that way.

“Not funny,” the older woman said with emphasis, as she shared that last perception.

“I suppose not.” The younger sent back a mental sigh. “All right, Mother. Tell me what's so goddamned important. Because in case you haven't figured it out by now, I was in the middle of something I'd like to get back to!”

“John's what's so important, Merry.” Carver's thoughts lost all other emotional coloration but intensity. “He needs to resign from the Guard. Now. Today.”

“What?” Meredith was too well-trained an officer to let the word explode from her lips, but her vocal cords wanted to utter it. She could feel her throat moving. “Why?”

“Because I assume that if you're fond enough of him to let him do to you what you just teased me about, as part of an exclusive pair-bonding no less, I also assume you wouldn't like seeing him destitute. That's what he'll be if he stays around until the order that just went through my office gets implemented.”

“What order is that?” She ought not to ask. Clearly Admiral Carver must be breaking regulations, or at least bending them until they screamed, by giving advance warning of whatever Astral Guard Command was sending down. Yet she couldn't help the question, because her years of discipline couldn't overrule the way her heart contracted at the thought of John in trouble.

“The creche lobby finally got its way, Merry. You figure it out. I have to go now.” Admiral Carver dropped out of the link with even more than her usual

abruptness.

“Well?” When Meredith let her eyes focus again, John was still sitting beside her. His eyes were on her face, not on her naked breasts. Right now they might almost be colleagues again, junior officers serving on the same starship, instead of two far more senior ones trying to keep their bonding alive with only an occasional shared respite to nourish it.

“Mother was tipping me off about something that came through her office,” Meredith said, staring at her lover’s familiar face and putting every bit of conviction she could muster into her tone. “She wouldn’t be specific, but she did say that ‘the creche lobby finally got its way.’ After I insisted she had to give me a reason, before I’d tell you that she says you ought to resign.”

“Your mother’s always wanting me to resign!” That was their second most frequent topic for fighting. Their first, of course, was Edek Fallon. Meredith’s creche-sib, her career partner whose bond to her was forged long before she met John Yancey. “What’s so universe-shaking about that?”

“John, did you hear what I just said? The creche lobby got its way. What do *you* think that means?” She was mad at him all over again, now.

“Guess you’ll have to tell me. You know damn well I never pay attention to politics, Merry.”

Of course he didn’t. He hadn’t grown up in the deliberately pressured atmosphere of a creche, nurtured from “birth” in preparation for his destined career and then bound forever to those who shared his heritage. So all he knew about the machinations of the Alumni Boards of the Solarian Hegemony’s powerful military child-rearing establishments was whatever made it all the way to public dissemination.

Well, in this case what he didn’t know and didn’t care about definitely could hurt him. Destroy him, in fact, because a man like John Yancey—one who had no creche-mates to watch his back when he made enemies, and (as far as any of his comrades knew) no wealthy natural-born relatives to set him up in a different line of work—would indeed wind up destitute if the Guard abruptly decided it no longer required his services. And if you didn’t have resources, Meredith couldn’t think of a world in the entire Hegemony where you could hope to survive for long.

John believed all he had to do was go on excelling at his job, in order to make it all the way to retirement and coveted half-pay status. So far he’d been right, but that was about to change. Meredith opened her mouth to break her vows to Warrior Creche, as her mother had already broken the same vows by giving her that carefully couched warning. Whether John liked it or not, she would make him listen.

Once again a voice inside her mind distracted her. But this voice didn’t

give her polite (if unwelcome) warning, and she couldn't have stopped herself from hearing it if she'd tried. This communication required no technology to reach her.

She "heard" no words. Only a wave of terror, a mental scream that brought her off the sand and onto her feet. She gasped, "Edek! Edek, I'm coming!" Then she ran, still topless and unaware that was the case, into the water. She threw herself down to swim at the earliest possible second.

Behind her, the man she'd abandoned paused only a moment before he shook his head and grunted in disgust. He got up slowly, stared after her for a time, and then shook his head again. After which he picked up her discarded swim-bra, tucked it inside his trunks for discreet and easy carrying, and followed her into the sea. He would swim the narrow channel at a far more leisurely pace, because he already knew there was no point in hurrying. By the time he got back to the resort, his wife would have her private shuttle out of the garage and her course laid in and approved by Sirtis Control. He'd wind up having to freight the few possessions she was sure to abandon in their room to her ship, along with the scrap of material that ought to be containing her breasts as she first swam and then ran. *Damn good thing Sirtis society's so tolerant about public nudity, isn't it, Merry my love?*

With that whimsical, yet also profoundly resentful thought, Lieutenant Commander Yancey settled into a splashy, energy-wasting crawl. By the time he came ashore, he hoped, he'd have spent both of his frustrations. Unsatisfied sexual arousal, and fury at the competitor whose claim on Meredith Carver Canso so irrevocably outweighed his own.

\* \* \*

*"He'll be all right,"* a voice Lieutenant Commander Edek Fallon didn't recognize said in a tone that wasn't at all reassuring. The woman (at least, the person sounded female enough) was running her hands over him as she spoke, doing an old-fashioned "body survey" instead of, or in addition to, a medical scan. "Huh? What's this?"

She'd encountered the raised pattern of flesh that decorated the inside of his right wrist. Not many people now living on Hegemony worlds would know what it was, of course; and he'd grown damned tired of explaining it. But not tired enough (yet, at least!) to ask a colleague to remove it for him.

"Some kind of tribal marking? A ritual scar? That's odd in a man who's creche bred-*isn't it?*" The second voice sounded familiar, although it didn't belong to a friend. Edek remembered it from yesterday, when he'd toured one of

the vast bio-labs that were Bra d'Or's claim to fame. Or at least, that were the main reason for holding a medical convention on this world.

Merry would say that he ought to play possum (whatever that phrase might have meant originally) for awhile longer, in hopes he might find out something useful about these people while they thought him unaware. But what worked for Merry, the born daughter of Warrior Creche, didn't always work for Edek the late arrival...and come to think of it, why was he so sure these people meant him harm? He couldn't remember the event that rendered him unconscious. Maybe he'd simply fainted, and his hosts were now doing their best to render aid.

No. If he'd fainted (which he had no reason to do), he should be waking up in the last location he recalled; and that was a walking trail on the grounds of the hotel where he and most of his colleagues were lodging. This was the first time since he'd finished his medical training and returned to the Guard afterward that he'd attended a function that wasn't military-sponsored, where his uniform stood out in each gathering instead of being just one more in a sea of similar costumes. It was also the first time since med school that he'd been this far away from his sib, for this long.

The woman said sharply, "He's awake! Dr. Fallon, I know you can hear me."

Damn. So much for playing possum. Edek opened his eyes and looked up at her. A familiar face. Why? From where? And why wasn't his comm implant working?

"I'm Ardis Hall," she said, with a slight smile. "Yes, you've seen my face before. But this is the first time you've met me."

"I never was much good at riddles. Suppose you just tell me what the hell's going on." Edek lay still, and let himself take in his surroundings.

Doing so didn't offer him a great deal of enlightenment. This looked like a compartment on board a starship, or a room in a modern building on any world in the Hegemony. Metallic surfaces; muted colors; tasteless, odorless air. He rested on a survival cot, which seemed out of place in this not at all primitive setting.

He looked at the woman again, and then at the man who stood near the other side of his cot. He said, "Administrator Chalfont."

"Yes." The man nodded. "These people are going on a long journey, Doctor, and they'll be needing a physician. I think you may be willing to help them, once you've heard their story. Do you know a woman called Alice Hanscom?"

Edek sat up, swinging his long legs over the edge of the cot as he did so. His head didn't protest, and neither did his stomach. Good; whatever means they'd used to render him unconscious hadn't done him harm. He answered, "Of

course. She was Mater, our crèche parent, when Merry and I were growing up together. Later she was Mistress to all of Warrior Creche, after our group was grown and gone.”

“Merry would be Captain Canso. Your partner. Yes.” The woman stepped closer as he got to his feet. “Take a good look at me, Dr. Fallon. Who do you see, really?”

It was eerie. Like looking into the face of a ghost, except that-presumably-ghosts were supposed to stay the same age forever. The age at which they’d died. Weren’t they? If one believed in such nonsense, which Edek didn’t. He was a doctor, a trained scientist; and he was his Shaman father’s son, who knew that the spirits of the dead didn’t linger in this transient reality.

“I see Mater, but not as old as she was when I knew her. And Mater’s dead. Has been for the last couple of years.”

“Very good. We use the initials, usually, of the person from whose DNA we were made. So instead of Alice Hanscom, I’m Ardis Hall. How do you do?”

\* \* \*

Roderick Canso pointed his fighter’s nose directly at the asteroid’s naturally hollow heart. He pushed his engines to maximum as he calculated his course, and then he chuckled at the gasps that came over his commlink.

One voice didn’t gasp, though. That voice said, “Lieutenant Canso! Either cut your speed by half, or alter your course! Now!”

“Too late,” Rod answered, grinning into his solitary cockpit and reflecting that he’d only spoken the truth. Then the Stone Ring surrounded him.

It really did look like a ring, when viewed from sufficient distance. Close up, though, it looked more like a tunnel boring its way through a mountain. A mountain that was perpetually on the move, tumbling through space as part of a vast debris field. Big rocks, tiny rocks, and dust-motes, captured by the gravity well of a star that was the last one out before the galactic Arm ended in open space.

Rod’s group leader was right, of course. Only a daredevil would head into the Stone Ring’s heart at full throttle. But the whole idea of holding practice maneuvers in this forsaken place was to test one’s piloting skills to their limits, wasn’t it? And since Group Leader had seen fit to split his people into teams, and since the hottest pilot on the opposing team had been on Rod’s tail just before he started his run toward the Stone Ring...well, Ms. Smart-Ass wasn’t behind him now. She’d broken off as soon as she could see where he was headed, and she wouldn’t be waiting for him on the Stone Ring’s other side because his comrades would get there first. Group Leader was standing off to

observe the exercise, and Lieutenant Canso's team knew who was boss for the time being. Which meant they were going to take care of him.

*What a rush! I wonder if I'm the first pilot to go through this thing at more than a centenarian's crawl?* Canso had time enough for that thought, and then he was on the Stone Ring's other side. He circled back, and stared through his forward port when he couldn't believe what his scanners were telling him.

Instead of other asteroids and the Stone Ring's isolated star, he saw a Solaria-class sun in the distance. Beyond, the blackness of open space. And below him, in orbit around that inviting yellow sun-a planet. A planet of blue and green and brown, with white and gray weather systems moving across its surface.

The Stone Ring was still there, but now it orbited the planet. Sedately and stably, no longer wildly a-tumble. Piercing its hollow center with a speeding fighter wouldn't be much of a thrill ride now.

How could this be? Any of it? And the worst part was, that wherever *this* was-he was here all alone.

\* \* \*

### Chapter 3

*The world below was so beautiful, and so welcoming, that* Roderick Canso had spent much longer there than he should. He knew for sure he was going to catch hell from Group Leader, because the entire outfit would have to hang around and wait until he showed up back where he belonged. But once he returned whence he'd come, and reported this place's existence, the Solarian Defense and Exploration Service would send its science teams through. After that he might (if he was lucky) get credit as this planet's discoverer, but by then it wouldn't be *his* world any longer.

So once he realized he was safe here, he'd indulged in a few hours of exploring. No superiors called him to task for violating regulations when he landed his fighter on a grassy riverbank. No medics insisted that he keep his helmet on while he disembarked, and walked to the water's edge.

The air that scanned as merely "breathable" held a wonderful misty dampness. Canso could smell flowers on its breeze. The water, although he didn't drink it, tasted sweet when he dipped up a double handful and touched its surface with his tongue.

Cold. Just what he expected from a mountain stream not far along on its journey toward a far-off ocean.

A world like this one, empty of sapient life? What greater treasure could a human find? Part of Rod Canso wanted to keep the secret forever, but the rest of him couldn't wait to get back to his own universe and share it with those to whom it would make him a hero.

"And here all I ever thought I'd be was the Service's best space jockey!"

he told himself out loud, just before he climbed back into his fighter and sealed its hatch behind him. He couldn't believe he'd already spent an hour on the ground.

That, added to the time he'd spent flying around and scanning before he decided to risk landing, made nearly four hours out of contact. It would be four whole hours, at least, when he emerged from the Stone Ring again; but he couldn't be sorry.

Nor could he let himself doubt that duplicating the maneuver which had brought him here could and would take him back. He didn't understand the physics of it (he had a pilot's knowledge only of that science, after all), but he knew what he'd done. And he knew, also, that where he'd ended up could not possibly be in his own reality-because the very stars were wrong. Here he wasn't at the tip of a galactic arm, but far down on it even though this galaxy (like his own) formed a vast pinwheel in the heavens.

"At least I didn't panic!" he announced to his cockpit, while he calculated the run he was about to make. "I'll bet a lot of people would have, if this happened to them. After all, who the hell's trained for jumping from one universe into another?"

The thought made him chuckle, it was so ridiculous. He guided his helm in a long, velocity-building approach to the stable target that the Stone Ring presented on this side of the-what *did* you call a bridge between universes?

He'd have to ask someone that, some scientist who dealt in what until now had been pure theory, once he was back among his fellow humans. The Stone Ring looked positively weird in a peaceful planetary orbit, instead of tumbling crazily through asteroid-littered space-but he was thankful for its steadiness, since it represented his only hope of getting home.

He gunned his engines. He headed in, and came out on the Stone Ring's other side.

Then he pulled up sharply, desperately, to avoid colliding with the debris that greeted him there. He was, indeed, back where he belonged!

"Canso to Group Leader. Sorry about the search I just put you through, but..." He stopped talking as reality hit him.

He was alone. The Stone Ring's familiar asteroid field surrounded him, and both its sun and the stars he scanned in the distance looked just the way they were supposed to look; but no other fighters awaited him, within the field or standing off beyond it.

Or did those stars look "just the way they were supposed to," after all? Something was different here, even though his instincts as well as his scanners told him that this universe was truly his own. Something; but what?

"Oh, *God*." He cursed softly, not wanting to believe but unable to avoid it.

Even the stars moved, after all, with the passing of time-and that was how his current scanner readings differed from the ones he'd recorded when he last verified his surroundings from these coordinates.

Four hours in the universe he'd discovered, had passed as forty years in this one.

\* \* \*

"Mr. Yancey, please have a seat." Fiona Carver was being formal for all sorts of reasons. The most important of those reasons, of course, was simply that she'd never met her daughter's husband before. She was used to thinking about him as "John," but didn't feel inclined to address him that way now that they were speaking face to face. She was meeting him this way now both for security's sake, to take care of business she didn't dare conduct via any type of commlink, and because it only seemed decent. After all, her staff had destroyed his career by implementing the latest general order.

From now on, only creche-reared persons could hold command rank. That same order dismissed all officers whose loyalties the Creche Alumni Boards deemed suspect, for refusing to accept "voluntary" demotions or-in the case of some XO's like John Yancey, who hadn't yet made the jump to full commander-transfers to "more appropriate assignments."

In a cruelly pragmatic way, of course, all that made sense. People with the talent, intelligence, and drive to qualify for command were by definition more dangerous than their comrades whose careers took other directions. So giving non-creche officers who could adapt to their loss of actual or potential command a chance to remain, and dumping without recourse those who could not, probably looked just fine to the bureaucrats who drafted resolutions for the Council's speechmakers. For that last job, Admiral Carver suspected, ice water in one's veins rather than a mortal being's blood must be the most important qualification.

She shook herself mentally, although not physically, and glanced at the man who sat beside her in her office's conference area. She'd put Yancey across the table, of course, from both of them. "Dr. Thorsen. Why don't you explain your offer? I haven't told Mr. Yancey a thing about it, so he's got no idea why I've asked him here even though he was cashiered two weeks ago."

"I assumed you had your reasons, ma'am." Yancey kept his eyes on Carver. "But I'm getting the feeling that when I accepted passage here, I obligated myself already-to something you didn't tell me about until now."

This was a proud man, but one who had no illusions about his status in the universe now that he'd lost his commission. Unless he convinced a civilian

captain to give him an officer's berth, his spacefaring days could continue only if he signed onto a merchant vessel as an ordinary. At well past thirty, he wouldn't be an attractive prospect for such a berth; and his Guard experience was apt to work against him, not for him, there. Who needed an ordinary crewman who could (and probably would) second guess the captain?

So he'd taken a chance on Fiona Carver's request that he come to her office on Solaria Prime for a post-discharge debriefing, at the Guard's expense. He sat before her now in civilian clothing (even the most dedicated officers usually owned a small wardrobe of civvies), and he held her eyes with his for a moment before he shifted his gaze to the admiral who commanded the Guard's medical service.

"You didn't obligate yourself, Mr. Yancey. Except that if you decline the offer I'm about to make, you'll leave here unable to remember it. Is that understood?" Thorsen, a slim man who looked as if he hailed from a light-gravity world, stared back when Yancey finally looked at him. "If you're interested, I have a mission for you."

"Huh?" To Carver's ears, that syllable sounded not just incredulous-but suspicious, also. Yet she could hardly blame Yancey for feeling that way about anything a flag officer said to him now. If only the proud bastard had listened to the warning she'd risked giving him! An officer who resigned could apply for any civilian position the Hegemony had to offer, by retaining his or her prior security clearances-but one who'd been dismissed was barred from such jobs, under normal circumstances.

Having an admiral request your services made a difference, though. Carver frowned, thought about contacting Meredith to let her daughter know what was going on here, and decided against it. She hadn't talked to Meredith since that little chat two weeks ago, and she was still too annoyed to break the silence between them.

"I need a person transported from a remote base to Guard Medical's headquarters facility. Discreetly, Mr. Yancey. If you accept the job and complete it successfully, you'll get to be a captain after all-of-a-civilian ship, that will belong to you free and clear. If you refuse, as I've already said, you can walk out of here without penalty. Except that I will have to wipe this meeting from your memory, and replace it with an alternative that you'll never realize isn't genuine."

"What happens if I accept, and then take off in the ship you give me to carry out the mission?" The former starship exec's gaze didn't waver. He leaned forward, letting Thorsen know (perhaps deliberately-or was this man that subtle?) that he wanted to accept although his words and his tone both conveyed indifference.

“What do you think?” Thorsen smiled, and he no longer looked like a healer.

“I see.” Yancey nodded. “Well. Where will I get my crew?”

Fiona Carver needed all of her hard-learned courtroom acting skills to suppress her sigh. He’d accepted the job! Someone she could trust would be holding Rod’s life in his hands.

\* \* \*

“Do you at least know where you are, Edek?” Meredith let annoyance color her silent question. She knew exactly where she was, of course. In her quarters aboard the heavy cruiser *Hira*, pacing the deck.

“No. Not yet. But Merry, until you have to declare me missing when I don’t report back from leave-I’d rather you didn’t come charging in and ‘rescue’ me. I want to learn more about these people, and I’m not afraid of them.”

“You sure as hell were afraid when they were taking you down in that conference center’s garden!” Captain Canso knew she sounded waspish, and didn’t care. After the mental scream that had made her forget all about her husband and would-be lover, abandoning him on a Sirtis island beach-the scream that made her swim madly for land, half naked, and summon her shuttle-she’d “heard” only silence from her sib. Silence that went on for days, during which she traveled from Sirtis to Bra d’Or; since there was no sense in returning to her ship while fully half of her officers and crew were still on leave.

“Dr. Fallon left the conference early, and didn’t say where he was going.” Even when she cut red tape all the way up to the conference center’s managers, that was the best she could get. Explaining that the missing man was her creche-sib, and that she’d heard him calling out to her across space, would be pointless. Only a few non-Guard people even knew what a “sib” was, and the way sibs could communicate mind to mind-sharing their thoughts and emotions at will-was something such bonded pairs tried to avoid revealing to outsiders. So how she’d learned what little she knew about Edek’s disappearance, she kept to herself.

Even among the thousands of creche alumni now serving in, or retired from the Guard, Meredith Canso’s bond with Edek Fallon had to be unique. Crèches accepted half-grown youngsters like the orphaned Edek from time to time, when they had reason; but as far as Meredith knew, no other child immersed in creche culture at as late an age as eleven had managed to bond. And conversely, there were plenty of creche kids who grew all the way to adulthood as singletons despite starting their lives in a reproduction lab-both of her parents, for instance.

She knew her mother as well as most creche-made humans did, but she'd known her father not at all. Maybe that was why, when the boy with the strange out-world accent and the even stranger mark on the inside of his right wrist joined her cottage during her final pre-puberty year, Meredith gravitated toward him in a mixture of protectiveness and fascination. He talked about so many things that she'd not only never seen, but never even imagined! Of course Mater never encouraged young Edek to tell his new companions tales about what it was like to live under the care of one's bio-parent; but short of cutting the boy's vocal cords, Mater could hardly have silenced him twenty-five hours a day. So Edek talked, and Merry listened. Except when Edek needed to learn the ways of the creche...quickly, before its challenges killed him, as they had the boy whose place in the cottage he filled. Then it was Merry who taught, and Edek who heeded her.

Sometimes sib partners were of the same gender, but far more often female and male gravitated toward each other. And when they reached maturity, and active duty, the Guard respected their lifelong platonic relationships as it didn't pretend to respect those binding conventionally married (or otherwise "involved") couples, whether het or homo.

It made sense. Sibs, after all, didn't try to set up housekeeping and produce children together. Nor did married Guard couples, of course; but sometimes the latter pairs wanted to try it. Sometimes they couldn't be satisfied with applying to a creche, arranging for its lab to combine their reproductive cells, and then taking a shared interest in the offspring that resulted.

No wonder the Guard discouraged marriages that continued after reassignment separated the partners, but bent over backwards to keep sibs together. Posting sib pairs to the same ships and bases presented few problems logistically, because they usually balanced each other well. Seldom did both partners wind up following the command track, or practicing medicine, or wanting to run a starship's engine room. And in that respect Meredith Canso, heavy cruiser captain, and Edek Fallon, ship's surgeon, fit the "typical sib pair" profile exactly.

Yet she'd done what creche-reared officers almost never did, despite being half of a stable pairing. She'd married, when she contracted that relationship with a fellow officer during her first tour of shipboard duty, for life. And what was worse, she'd done it with a wildling. A man who'd been born from a natural, random conception, not made in a crèche's repro-lab; one of the still necessary, but ever shrinking, number of officers who hadn't come to his plebe year via first a creche and then pre-Academy.

Why? The answer to that question was simple. Meredith Canso loved John Yancey. Which was why she'd taken a risk for him that she ought not to have

taken (or should that be *another* risk? Since committing to their life contract while she was still a junior grade lieutenant could have wrecked her career?). On her way from Sirtis Major to Bra d'Or, frantic to locate Edek and terrified by her inability to hear her sib's mental voice, she'd nevertheless remembered her husband-and realized that he truly hadn't understood the oblique warning her mother transmitted by comm chip, and Meredith relayed to him, on that blessedly private island beach.

So she'd used her shuttle's conventional comm system, and although she encrypted the message she didn't phrase it obliquely. She couldn't use the relatively more secure (although far from untraceable) means of comm chip transmission, because John didn't yet rate an implant; and there was no sense sending him an additional warning at all, if she didn't state his peril in unmistakable terms.

After that she wasted no energy fretting about what she could neither control nor change.. Her mind was taken up instead by things she hoped she could change, as she fought to locate her sib-and then, after she could "hear" him again and knew he'd been silent while his kidnappers took him off Bra d'Or in the mental and physical suspension of stasis-as she argued with him, when he insisted on helping his abductors instead of trying to learn his prison's coordinates so she could (as he'd so aptly put it) come charging to his rescue.

She'd been arguing with him about that ever since, while she traveled from Bra d'Or back to Sirtis Minor where her ship lay waiting, and she still hadn't won. Which fact she couldn't believe! And she didn't dare to check on John, to learn whether or not her mate had received her blunt message in time-believed it-and then resigned in time, too. So that though he was out of the Guard forever by now, he could go on living a mobile, space-traveling life that she could share. She must wait for John to contact her, or not only would she risk attracting the wrong kind of attention (since surely Hegemony Security would be monitoring everyone the general order affected); she might also put it into someone's head to check the Hub's chip contact log to see where she'd obtained the information she passed to her husband, to spare him the general order's worst impact.

*Damn you, Edek, for setting a universal record for lousy timing! The last thing I want to do is lead Security back to my mother!*

Her unshielded annoyance leaked through to Edek even though she hadn't deliberately aimed that thought at him, and she heard her sib's mental chuckle. Then he told her, "Merry, as far as I can tell these people are being truthful. They've brought me here to help them. They do need an experienced doctor, not the two or three medical students that have joined them so far. And I've got to admit it, I'm fascinated! Who would have imagined that organ proxies could develop their own functioning personalities? And start living their own lives,

ones just as real as those of the individuals whose bodies theirs reproduce?”

“Bullshit!” Meredith answered, with a snort fully as inelegant as her choice of expletive. “You’re never going to convince me that ‘Ardis Hall’ is anything more than a physical copy of Alice Hanscom. Of Mater. And since Mater’s dead, and doesn’t need that collection of duplicate organs anymore, it ought to be disposed of decently. How the hell did the people running storage at that stasis farm screw up so badly, anyway, as to let the thing get loose?”

She heard her sib gathering his thoughts, preparing to answer her. But before he could, she heard another voice; and this unfamiliar one she perceived with her ears. “Captain Canso?”

“Here.” She responded to her cabin’s comm with irritation. After all, she was still supposed to be on leave-or at least, on her way back from it. Who, except her own people, knew otherwise?

The door between her day cabin and the corridor beyond retracted even though she hadn’t released it. Two men in uniforms stepped through the opening. One of them was familiar: her first officer, looking miserably unhappy. The second one she’d never seen before, and his uniform wasn’t Astral Guard. Outside in the passageway, she glimpsed other figures.

A Hegemony Security goon, accompanied by half a dozen Marines. What the hell?

“You’re under arrest, Captain. Please don’t give me any trouble.” The Security officer held out a pair of wrist shackles, and looked at her with eyes that said he rather hoped she might try.

\* \* \*

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