

Matushka

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Chapter 1

The morning sky over Narsai's northern continent was streaked with pink and gold dawn. It was unlike Catherine Romanova to wake this early on a day when she didn't have to, on a morning when she could have stayed beside her husband's warmth until he was ready to rise; but here she was on the terrace overlooking her garden, and she was as alert as if it were already mid-day.

She reached for Linc's mind, and felt nothing but rest and contentment. That was good. When the two of them had finally come back here to live, in this comfortable little house on the home-world to whose citizenship Romanova had clung so stubbornly through more than forty years as a Star Service officer, he had been exhausted in every way that a sentient being could become weary. She had wondered for a time whether he would ever be himself again-but he was fine now, the same Linc she had met one day when they were both eighteen years old and had stood at a passenger liner's lounge viewport and had looked out in wonder at their first sight of Terra's blue-green globe.

Two kids from the colonies, Catherine Romanova a human girl from prosperous Narsai and Lincoln Casey a part human, part Morthan boy who had grown up on the far less hospitable world of Sestus 3. Two adolescents who had journeyed to Earth for their plebe year at the Star Service Academy, discovering each other's presence in that liner during their last few hours aboard and regretting that they had both endured weeks of loneliness when they might have been preparing together for the gauntlet they were about to enter.

She had been amazed to meet a male Morthan hybrid who wasn't planning

to become a healer. He had been just as surprised to encounter a land heiress from Narsai who was preparing herself for an off-world career. They had talked excitedly about the new lives both were just beginning, they had commiserated about the difficulty each had faced in choosing a pathway that had seldom (if ever) been chosen before by persons from their respective backgrounds; and then the “prepare for arrival” announcement had been made.

She hadn't seen Casey again until she was a cadet second class, the equivalent of a junior at a traditional Terran university, and she had been put in charge of a company that was headed out for a field exercise. Her first command! Although she knew some of those for whom she had just become responsible, most she did not. In a class of five hundred it wasn't possible to know everybody, for these exercises the cadets were deliberately juggled to place them among as many strangers as possible-and she had looked into the young Morthan man's calm golden eyes, had remembered the day they arrived together on Earth, and had chosen him as her co-leader.

That had been their real beginning together. It occurred to Romanova now, as she sipped the hot chocolate that was her one dietary vice, that if one went by standard dating and ignored all other calendars it had been precisely forty years from that day to this one.

The garden was fragrant at this early hour. She had made a point of filling it with plants that had discernible perfumes, and the heavy dew from last night's autumn coolness was bringing those perfumes out in a way that she seldom experienced them because she was usually out here at the day's end instead of at its beginning.

A single-family house with a private garden, created for pleasure's sake alone. On Narsai that was almost the definition of material success, but that was not why Catherine Romanova had insisted on having space for a garden when she had been shopping for this house as a place of refuge from her rocky first marriage. She had simply wanted to put her hands into soil that she could call her own, and Linc had laughingly told her that her ancestors' genes were asserting themselves at last.

Which might have been true; she had certainly been coming home sore and bruised and in need of healing at that time in her own life, and acquiring this haven had been part of the process by which she'd sought to mend herself.

He was stirring now, in the bedroom that was separated by a few meters of distance and by several bulkheads (no, Katy, they're *walls!*) from the terrace where she was sitting. She could feel him starting to think in his usual controlled fashion, realizing she was not beside him physically and wondering where she had gone and why....

And then, of course, his mind touched hers and he relaxed again. She felt

morning desire rising in him, stronger in the Morthan male than in the human male; and she smiled as she finished her chocolate, and drew her robe tighter around her in a shiver that was partly from the morning's autumn chill and partly anticipation of what would happen to her when she returned to the bedroom and took that robe off and lay down to be held in her husband's arms.

It was a mutual gratification that would have to be delayed, because the front door opened while she was padding through the living room to dispose of her empty cup in the kitchen. Two people entered.

One was a red-haired but swiftly balding man, large and broad-shouldered and human. The other was a tall woman, her body shrouded in a cloak and her face obscured by a scarf that was beaded with Narsai's morning mist.

"Dan!" Romanova said, and let her thoughts touch her mate's mind with a mixture of apology that their intimacy couldn't happen as usual this morning-and of pleasure that someone they both loved was here, unexpected but always welcome.

"Hello, Matushka," the man said, and gave his informally adopted foster mother a tired grin. "Are you and Linc ready for some trouble? Because I'm afraid I'm bringing you plenty of it."

* * *

"This is Rachel Kane," Daniel Archer said, as he sat beside the woman who when she removed her cloak proved to be wearing a Star Service uniform that was tight in the front to a ludicrous degree. That had to be uncomfortable. Yet the woman's face was expressionless, which matched the way she moved-mechanically, and as if every use of muscle required a conscious effort. "You remember me talking about her, don't you, Matushka?"

The kitchen was warm, and it was fragrant now with coffee and chocolate and sweet hot cereals. Yet the tall woman with the fair hair and the green eyes was shivering, and she continued doing so even after Lincoln Casey went back to the bedroom and got an afghan and deftly wrapped it around her shoulders.

Unlike most Morthan hybrids, he could not sense the feelings of just any other sentient being who happened to be near him. There was only one other person whose emotions he could sense, and that connection had taken him years of constant and close association to develop. Nevertheless he had learned his Morthan mother's habit of taking care of the people who surrounded him, so he was the one who saw to it that the new arrivals were fed and that the room was made warmer when he realized that Rachel Kane was still shivering even after he brought her the afghan.

Catherine Romanova was nodding and answering her foster son, and

relying on her mate to do the things he always did. “I remember,” she said, and reached out to take the younger woman’s hands between both of hers. The flesh she touched was cold. “You were the first officer on the *Archangel*, when Dan was posted to her as chief engineer.”

“Yes. That was me.” Kane spoke at last, in a raspy voice and so softly that if Romanova hadn’t been leaning toward her already she doubted that she could have made out the words. “I’m sorry, I was alone for so long that I’m having trouble communicating now that I’m with people again. And it was so cold....” Her shivering turned into a shudder.

Dan Archer moved his chair closer, and put both arms around the woman and held her close. He said in a voice that was as fierce as his manner was gentle, “God *damn* that bioengineering company that supplies the Service with gens, Matushka! I hope we do go to war against the Commonwealth, if the Outworlds form up our own service I’ll join it. The way the government we’ve got now treats people like Rachel isn’t human. Oh, hell, I’m sorry, Linc-but you know what I mean, don’t you?”

Casey smiled, and set a mug of hot coffee at his foster son’s elbow. He answered, “I’m part human, kid. Remember? And I know what you’re trying to say, yes. But suppose you tell us just what happened to your friend here, and suppose while you’re doing that we all try to get some food into us. She’s never going to warm up until she eats, and she’s much too thin for a woman who’s carrying children.”

* * *

“How did you know it’s ‘children’?” Rachel Kane asked in a voice that was steadier now. She had eaten a bowl of hot cereal laced liberally with sweetening, she had downed two cups of steaming chocolate, and although she kept the afghan held snugly about her she was no longer shivering.

The four former officers had stopped talking during the brief meal, in accordance with a strict military custom that Romanova and Casey and Kane had all learned during their Academy days and that Archer had learned after he had signed onto a ship as an ordinary crew member. He had done that as a boy of sixteen, desperate to escape life in the mines of Sestus 4; and with a talent for handling both machines and computers that had made it possible for him to be field promoted into a junior officer’s berth. That had happened to him long ago, when he was still less than twenty years old and when his talents had come to the notice of Catherine Romanova’s firstborn son Ewan.

Romanova loved Dan Archer for his own sake now, but her attachment to him had deep roots in his connection to her long-dead child. She looked at him

this morning, as he sat in her kitchen beside the unlikely guest he'd brought home, and she thought of the first time Ewan Fralick had presented that gawky red-haired kid to her in her office aboard the old *Firestorm*-and she smiled at the memory. Bringing home yet another human or part-human stray was the best means she could imagine to honor Ewan's memory.

She felt a gentle inner tug, and looked up and heard her husband saying, "There wasn't any Morthan empathy involved, I'm afraid, Commander Kane. I know that you're a gengineered being because Dan already mentioned that. I also know from what I've heard and read about gengineered females that when your owners are ready for you to reproduce, it's done in batches. And you're about to burst out of that uniform, which means that you're either well along in your pregnancy or you're carrying more than one child."

"Very good, Captain Casey!" The young woman laughed, only a trifle harshly. "I'm a bit of an experiment, you know. Until me, female 'gens' were considered too valuable to risk in the Service and no gen had ever made it all the way through the Academy. And if I could get my hands on that damned ship's surgeon who started getting me ready to breed without bothering to tell me about it...!"

She shuddered then, and Archer put his arm around her again. He said softly and very gently, "Rachel, I'm sorry. If I'd had any idea! I always took responsibility myself, when I was with a woman that I knew I could make pregnant. But that wasn't supposed to be possible for you, dammit all!"

"It's not your fault," Kane answered him. She turned in the shelter of his arm, and she put her head down onto his shoulder.

Oh, gods. They're Dan's babies.

Romanova honestly wasn't sure whose thought that was, her own or Casey's. It didn't matter, in any case they shared both the realization and the horror that went with it; but she was the one who said practically into the silence that now filled the little house, "First things first! Why don't we drop the rank, Dan was booted out of the Service months ago and Linc and I are both retired. And it looks as if you're out of it now, too, Rachel. I should take you to see a healer right away-but I don't suppose that would be very smart, would it?"

"No, it wouldn't." Kane did not lift her head off her lover's shoulder, but she relaxed there and turned enough so she could regard Romanova with those startling green eyes of hers. "I know I ought to see a medic, I haven't been able to do that since I realized I was pregnant. But you're right, I deserted. And that means Dan and I are putting you at risk just by being in your home. So seeing a doctor right now is out of the question, the only way I could do that would be to turn myself in."

"And if you did surrender to the Terran Embassy here on Narsai, what

would happen to you?” That was Casey again, using what Romanova in one of her more acerbic moods was apt to call his bedside manner. His parents had both been medics-his father a traditional Terran-born allopathic physician, his mother a Morthan empathic healer-and although he had never had the least inclination to follow in either’s professional footsteps, he could and did adopt a healer’s mannerisms sometimes.

That had been part of what made him a superb executive officer, Romanova remembered with a smile that she quickly hid. He’d known instinctively when, as she had inelegantly expressed it, “to pat shoulder or kick butt.” This was his shoulder-patting mode, and Rachel Kane was responding to it just as scores of junior officers had done during the years when Lincoln Casey had stood at the head of a starship’s crew and had managed that crew on his captain’s behalf.

“Nothing except the end of my Service career, probably, if I went back to Terra now like a meek little lamb and let the creche-doctors take my fetuses out of me and do whatever they wanted to with them. I’m a valuable piece of property, I wouldn’t be executed like a regular deserter.” Kane’s eyes hardened, and so did her tone. “If I’d gone right to sickbay as soon as I realized what was happening to me, the ship’s surgeon would have just aborted the pregnancy and that would have been that. But now that I’m carrying three twelve-week-old fetuses that as far as I know are healthy and developing normally-I don’t trust the bastards who run my creating lab not to experiment with these babies for awhile first, before they’d actually dispose of them. What they wouldn’t do is let me go on carrying my children until they’re ready to be born, or transfer each of them to an incubation field. That’s what they would have done with embryos made from my ova and a male gen’s sperm, if I’d been harvested as I should have been instead of getting pregnant the old-fashioned way.”

“Nice, huh?” Dan Archer asked, with a twisted little grin. “An ordinary bastard like me has no business contaminating a gen like Rachel with his inferior offspring!”

Lincoln Casey winced, and so did Catherine Romanova; but each did so for a different reason.

“Inferior offspring?” Casey knew what those words meant, because he had been called by them times enough when he was a boy and his mother’s family had visited Sestus 3 or she had taken him to Mortha for one more disastrous visit. Half human, born after his mother had left Mortha with one of the young human physicians who came there to study each year...but that by itself was in no way unusual, because almost every young Morthan woman preferred taking a human husband who was her contemporary to mating with a male of her own species (who would necessarily be much older, because Morthan males took

many more seasons than did their females to attain sexual maturity).

But Kalitha Marin's son by Gladstone Casey had proved to be unlike the usual product of such a union, in that he lacked most of the gifts that made a Morthan hybrid-well, Morthan. His eyes were golden like hers, and his reaching the time of life when females interested him as females and not merely as people had come after almost forty standard years instead of after fourteen or so as was the norm for his father's species; but otherwise he had nothing Morthan about him, except for the bond that gave him access to his wife's thoughts and feelings and that gave her (full human though she was) access to his.

Inferior offspring, that was both what his Morthan relatives had called him and how his parents had wound up regarding him in their different ways. And Catherine Romanova was reacting to what Rachel Kane had just said with another kind of unpleasant recognition, because she knew what it was like to have her reproductive potential regarded as someone else's property.

Thank goodness Narsai's laws and customs had changed during the years since she had been young, since the time when she had defied those who claimed to love her most and had accepted exile as the price of being able to have the children she wanted with the man she loved as their father.

That man hadn't been Lincoln Casey, who when Katy Romanova was ripe for childbearing had been an outwardly mature man—a fully competent Star Service officer, her comrade and her friend—but who hadn't been aware of her in that way yet at all. At that time in both their lives Linc had still been as puzzled and as vaguely disturbed by the mention of sex as a fully human boy of perhaps eight or nine standard years.

Now the two of them touched minds again, and again they separated after giving and accepting reassurance. Then Romanova asked in a mother's gentle tone, "Rachel, you know how many babies you're carrying and exactly how old they are. You did scan yourself, then, before you left your ship?"

There was a great deal more she wanted to know about that. How had this young woman been able to desert successfully, anyway, from a Star Service vessel where she had occupied the executive officer's post? Where had she been, and for how long, that she'd arrived here half frozen and starved and suffering the psychological effects of long-term isolation? And if Dan was the father of her children—now, there was the greatest puzzle of all; because Dan had been dismissed from the Star Service, along with every other "scrambler" (Service vernacular for those officers who had been elevated from ordinary crew member status), a full eighteen standard months earlier.

But right now what mattered was figuring out how to keep this frightened mother-to-be safe and as healthy as possible. So Romanova listened with relief as Kane answered, "Yes, of course I did. I don't have any idea how many eggs

my body released, three would be an awfully small harvest; and I don't know how many actually were fertilized and didn't implant. But by the time I realized something was wrong and I did the scan, there were three embryos and they'd implanted and they were growing normally. And I still don't have any idea why I didn't just head straight for sickbay and get that corrected, it would have been so easy then. Except that-somehow, I just didn't want to. I don't know why, it still doesn't make any sense to me at all."

Romanova smiled then, and moved her chair close to Kane's other side. She said gently, "I didn't have my children because it made sense, Rachel. I had them because I wanted them, and it was my right to do that. It's your right, too. Don't tell me you're a gen and that means the lab that created you owns you, because it doesn't! I don't care what Terran law says, a sentient being should never be classed as someone else's property. Now," and her tone that a moment ago had been tender and maternal became brisk and authoritative. "Linc, call Johnnie at the Farmstead and find out who he's got out there with him right now. Dan, do whatever you need to do to cover your tracks from bringing Rachel here; I want to hear all about it, but not until we've done everything we can do to make her safe and keep her that way. And since she does have to have medical care-I think I feel terrible today. I think I'm going to give Cab Barrett a call, and see if she has time to come over here and give me a checkup."

She gave Rachel Kane's thin shoulder a swift pat, and she rose from the sofa. "Come on, now! Move!" she said, and realized that for the first time in seven months she sounded like Fleet Admiral Romanova. And it felt good.

* * *

Chapter 2

In the privacy of the bedroom that was Dan Archer's one settled home in the universe, Catherine Romanova sat on the edge of the bed and talked with Rachel Kane through the open bathroom door. Narsai's sun was fully up now, and its golden light filled the house. They were at the edge of park land here, so taller structures didn't surround this little building and block it off from the sky and the sun and the stars.

Kane sounded more relaxed now, as if being alone with another woman meant that she could stop thinking about how she sounded or what appearance she gave. Which meant, Romanova thought as she prepared herself to listen to the younger officer's story, that the relationship between this woman and Dan Archer might not be one of solidly committed intimacy. They had been lovers, obviously; they were friends and had been comrades, clearly. But Katy herself had stopped putting up any kind of a front for the man who had been her husband long before she first needed to tell him that she was pregnant, and such niceties in Linc's presence had gone by the board while they were still cadets together.

But then, Rachel Kane was a gen. Romanova couldn't imagine what it had been like to be reared in an institution, to be part of an on-going experiment in resurrecting a forbidden technology instead of a child in the home of parents whose love had called her life into being.

"Are you sure it's safe for Captain Casey to be calling anyone and talking about my being here?" was how Kane began, nevertheless, as soon as the shower was off and conversation between bath and bedroom could be heard.

“And what about the healer you called, will I be able to trust her not to contact the Terran Embassy and tell them where I am?”

“His name is Lincoln, not ‘Captain,’” Romanova answered, and smiled to herself. “The man he’s calling is my cousin, and Linc isn’t going to mention anything about you over a communications link. Not that Johnnie would say a word to anyone about something I asked him to keep quiet, but it makes sense to be careful even though we don’t sanction monitoring of private comms here on Narsai. Linc will just find out whether it’s safe for us to send you to the Farmstead, if you need a place to live quietly for awhile. If Johnnie has guests, we’ll have to think of something else. And as for Cab Barrett-doctors on Narsai don’t turn their patients in! Again, we’ll do things discreetly just for the sake of common sense; but she won’t care who you are or what interest any civilian or military authorities may have in you. To her you’ll be a pregnant woman in need of medical care, nothing more than that.”

“It sounds like a dream to me,” Kane said as she moved around in the small bathroom, putting on some of Romanova’s own night wear since she had arrived with nothing of her own except that uniform which had never been intended to be a maternity garment. “At least I can’t be identified as a gen on sight, I’m one of the first group that didn’t have a visible marker put on my face soon after birth. Mine only shows up under a personnel scanner. Of course every public building on Terra has a scanner at its entrance, though...is that true on Narsai, Admiral Romanova?”

“Katy.” Romanova sighed. “No, it isn’t. Never has been, never will be! We’ve had our share of social and political difficulties here, we’re a long way from being perfect; but that kind of intrusion on our citizens’ privacy is something we just wouldn’t dream of tolerating. A Terran-owned business tried doing that at its Narsatian outlet a few years ago, and they were forced to either take the damned scanner out or close down.”

The younger woman came out of the bathroom, clad now in a winter-weight bathrobe (although this autumn morning was rapidly warming toward a beautiful day) and looking comfortable at last. She sat in a chair, clearly joining Romanova on the edge of the bed didn’t enter her mind. She said, “All right. You want to know how it happened, don’t you, uh-Katy?”

Better, Romanova thought. She nodded, smiled gently and said, “Yes. Not that you have to tell me a single thing, Rachel; it’s enough that Dan wants us to help you. He’s like a son to both Linc and me. We love him that way, and if you matter to him that’s all we need to know. But I am curious, and of course the more I do know about this the better able I’ll be to help.”

The woman who had been the *Archangel*’s executive officer drew a long breath. She started talking, slowly and almost haltingly at first; then more

rapidly and more naturally, until finally she almost forgot Catherine Romanova was there.

* * *

“Dan left the *Archangel* at Savgorod, when the order came down from Fleet Command throwing all the scramblers out of the Service,” Kane said, staring down at hands that were clasped in her lap. “From what the standard calendar says, that was eighteen months ago. For me it was ten weeks ago. He didn’t have a chance to say good-bye to me, or to anyone else for that matter. The order was waiting when we reached port, Captain Giandrea implemented it immediately just the way he was required to, and the next thing I knew someone was reporting to my office and telling me she was the ship’s new chief engineer. Damned if Fleet Command hadn’t even set us up with a replacement for Dan, they did that with all the scramblers who were department heads on starships or at frontier bases. At least they had sense enough to realize that if they didn’t do that, they were going to have a lot of furious captains and base commanders on their hands. As it was we lost four more officers off *Archangel* in addition to Dan, and Giandrea was rushing around filling those berths before we had to sail again.”

Romanova nodded, and said nothing because she sensed that to do so would break the quiet spell that Kane was weaving for herself to help her remember easily and speak freely. But the former fleet admiral remembered that order well, because it had been issued by her own office—after she had bitterly and passionately, but unsuccessfully, fought against it when her civilian superior had told her it must be done.

Retirement had first entered her thoughts on that day, and when she had come home to their apartment on the grounds of the Academy and had found its commanding officer—her husband, Captain Lincoln Casey—actually in tears after having had to disband the separate college-within-a-university at which newly promoted “scramblers” were given accelerated training before being confirmed in their field promotions to officer status—that had done it. In forty years, she had never seen Linc cry like that. It had taken some time for them to extricate themselves gracefully from their combined commitments and responsibilities, but from that moment on there had been no question they must do so. Especially when Linc, who like other Morthan hybrids had always been immune to human ailments, began suffering a series of relatively minor but debilitating illnesses—and crushing fatigue, a weariness that had not lifted until after they had arrived here.

The institution to which both had given their lives had betrayed them, and

she could listen now to Rachel Kane's tale of a similar betrayal with understanding even though Kane's situation had been a far more personal one.

The young woman continued, "Of course I didn't know I was pregnant then. If I had...oh, I don't know what I would have done! Savgorod's not Terra, I wouldn't have been scanned for a gen every time I moved around there, but it's a small place and I'd have been recognizable just by sight. Anyhow, I didn't realize anything was wrong until we were back out in space. I'd noticed before Dan left that I felt funny. Almost like I did the other times the medics were getting me ready for an ova harvesting session...but that always happened while I was on Terra, before; and I was always told in advance, so I wouldn't have sex with anyone and risk in-body fertilization. It always was a pain, the preparation phase made me horny as hell and then I had to be celibate."

She said that casually-clearly procreation, and the powerful feelings that prompted it, had different connotations for her than they had for Romanova. Not that sex was anything dirty or shameful on Narsai, or on Kesra where Katy had spent most of her married life (her first married life, that was); but in both places it was a private and even rather sacred matter, and most women didn't talk about their desires to strangers in the earthy way that Kane was doing now.

"I sure wasn't celibate that time!" Kane said, and smiled to herself reminiscently. "The last week Dan was aboard, I couldn't get enough of him. We'd been lovers before that, he approached me for the first time months earlier; but until that week it was just a typical shipboard pairing. Junior officer makes the first move on senior officer, so there's no question of the more powerful person exploiting the less powerful one. Senior officer likes the idea, and they bed together whenever their shifts allow it. So you'd have thought the CMO would have known he needed to warn me to either knock it off or have Dan take a contraceptive, that's the kind of thing that everyone on board knows is happening! But it was just my luck to draw a doc who didn't pay any attention to ship's gossip, and I don't suppose I could have expected him to realize all the implications of treating me the way the medics at my creating lab did."

Probably that poor starship chief medical officer hadn't known what to make of being instructed to bring a female gen to fertility and then harvest her, Romanova thought with grim amusement. That would have put him between the proverbial rock and hard place ethically-which wasn't all that unusual a spot, of course, for health professionals whose loyalty to their patients as people must always be balanced against their greater loyalty to the Service to whom those patients belonged body and soul for as long as their oaths were on record. But Kane had been right when she had remarked, a little while ago, that female gens on starships were unheard of. So it was likely that the medic who had been treating her hadn't known how to regard her, as a human woman with all the

normal reproductive rights and responsibilities that went with that status or as a sort of walking egg farm.

Who was simultaneously his ship's executive officer. If that medic had been a confused soul who had made an enormous mistake, Romanova found it hard to blame him for it.

Kane was speaking again. "We'd been underway for a few days when I realized I needed to see the doc about why I was feeling the way I was. I did that self-scan in my quarters first just on general principles; I'd noticed that something about taking care of me was making him uncomfortable, and I guess I was hoping I could self-treat if it was just some kind of cycle problem. And then I was sitting there on my berth, looking at three little somethings inside me. And I felt...I don't know what I felt. Not anything I ever expected to feel, anyway!"

Wonder was in Kane's voice, mixed with remembered disbelief. Catherine Romanova recalled a day long ago, when she was still Ensign Romanova and when she had scanned her abdomen in her quarters to diagnose the cause of a missed period-and what she heard in Rachel Kane's tone was familiar. But Romanova had been solidly partnered to George Fralick then, all she'd had to do was tell him and hours later they had been logging themselves as a married couple. And if anything he had been more delighted than she was by that news of impending parenthood. In all their years together after that she couldn't recall seeing him look more proud than he had looked in the moment after she had said to him, "We're going to have a baby, George. A little boy, about eight months from now."

Ewan, who had been followed not quite a year later by twins Marcus and Bryce. And then, after a gap of twenty-two years-when Katy was in her middle forties, and had failed to conceive for so long that the possibility no longer entered her mind when she made love with George-Madeleine had come along. The daughter she had always wanted, but hadn't been allowed to raise after she gave birth to her.

Kane was speaking again. "I was in shock, that's the only excuse I've got for what I did next," she said. "My captain was my friend, and I put him in the worst position a sentient being can put a friend into. I told him something in confidence that he couldn't keep secret, something he was duty-bound to act on in a way that I knew damned well he wouldn't want to act."

"You told him you were pregnant," Romanova said softly. She had been silent until now, but Kane was looking in her direction; and it was clear that she was expected to say something.

"Uh-huh. Rotten of me, wasn't it? But my other choice was the damned doc, and since he had to be the reason I'd wound up that way..." Kane's mouth twisted. "Poor Paolo! He'd always treated me just the way he would have

treated any other officer, my being a gen didn't matter to him at all. And it still didn't matter when I told him about my babies, he didn't even seem to understand that they were the lab's property-for that matter, I was too-and that I had no right to make any decisions about what to do next. He talked about contacting Dan and telling him he was going to be a father, he talked about scheduling me for a maternity post as soon as we hit our next base call. Good gods, the man gave me a hug and congratulated me!"

"Of course he did, you just said you were his friend as well as his exec; and if you had been pregnant and hadn't wanted to be, you wouldn't have been telling him that," Romanova observed, and although she felt bitter amusement at the younger woman's naiveté she didn't smile. It wasn't funny, not in that sense. "You'd have aborted, and unless for some reason you lost work time the ship's healer wouldn't have informed anyone-the captain included. So of course Captain Giandrea thought you wanted to be congratulated. Having a baby is a joyful thing, for most women."

"So I realized, after I saw how he reacted." Kane nodded. "Gods, I was stupid about that! He has three kids of his own and he worships them, of course that's what he thought. And there I was, looking for someone to help me get out of the worst mess I could imagine being caught in. But after awhile I made him understand that, and I managed to do it before he told anyone else."

"So what did he do to help you, that compromised his oath as an officer and his duty as your captain?" Romanova felt cold now. She wondered, suddenly, if Kane's chilled state on arriving here had been entirely physiological after all.

"He didn't pursue me when I stole a lifeboat," Kane answered. "We planned it together. I shouldn't be telling you this, because if you're ever questioned-"

"I won't be, child. You're on Narsai now, not Terra." The older woman cut the younger one off, crisply. "Continue, your story's safe with me. And you're safer for telling it to me in its entirety, instead of holding back something I may need to know in order to help you properly."

"He handled the weapons array himself, he shoved the tactical lieutenant out of his way when I came on scanners after I launched the boat," Kane said, and now there was a trace of genuine humor in her tone. "And I threw out a field of debris, and between us I hope we made it look to the autolog as if I'd been destroyed. But he took another chance and he contacted Dan, as soon as he was able. Supposedly to tell Dan that I was dead. What he really did, of course, was tell Dan the whole story including the coordinates where Paolo had left me behind."

"How long were you out there in that lifeboat, by yourself?" Romanova

felt sick now. She had all too good an idea of what it must have been like for this strange mixture of experienced starship officer and innocent girl, to be all alone between the stars in a frail little shell of a craft that could barely travel at warp speed.

“I didn’t put myself into the stasis tube until I had to,” Kane said, quite calmly. “That was after I realized that if I stayed awake I was going to run out of food sooner than I expected. My caloric requirements were way above what they normally would have been. I guess three babies will do that, even though it never entered my mind or Paolo’s while we were planning the whole thing! And I also realized that if I was going to make it to the nearest settled world alive, I had to put all the ship’s power into propulsion and not into keeping myself warm and breathing.”

Going into stasis was a wrenching enough experience when you did it under medical supervision, usually with your comrades or even your family beside you; when you knew how long you were going to be out, who would be watching over you while you slept that sleep that was the next thing to death, and when and where you could expect to awaken. To do what Rachel Kane had done, out there all by herself-where had she found the courage, anyway?

Until now Catherine Romanova had felt a certain sense of superiority in this interaction, although she hated having to admit it to herself as she recognized its passing. She was a naturally conceived human, not a gengineered being; she had always belonged to herself, she had experienced life fully for sixty and more years and this younger female had been denied much of that. But would she have done for Ewan, or for the twins, or for little Maddy, what Rachel Kane had done for her babies? When Kane didn’t even really know what having children meant-supposedly, at least?

Romanova shuddered. Then she said quietly and positively, “So Dan was able to find you before someone else did. Because of what Captain Giandrea had told him.”

“Yes. That’s how it happened.”

Romanova closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them she asked, “Then Dan’s partners know about you?”

The Star Service had paid out a decent severance bonus to each ejected scambler; that much, at least, the Defense Ministry had done at Romanova’s own urging. With that bonus many of the displaced officers had been able to start new lives. Dan Archer had combined his bonus with that of his comrades Johanna Braeden, Sean Tierney, Beth Croft, and Fiona Meredith. Together the five former service people, humans all as it happened, had purchased a surplus ship and set themselves up in business. In a sense it was a come-down, to go from proud Star Service officer to interplanetary trader; but it was better, as Dan

said bluntly, than going back to Sestus 4 and grubbing in the mines there as his grandparents had done. His own parents had been traders, and if they hadn't vanished with their ship one day while he was still a child he probably would have been one, too. And clearly his partners had agreed with him; whatever lives they would have gone back to weren't anything that would be an improvement over the free life of the trade-ship.

But then, that was the nature of being a scrambler. They were people who had started with nothing, who had signed on as ordinaries during their youth and who had risen from there on merit alone. They hadn't started with a Catherine Romanova's land and money and genealogy behind them, nor with a Lincoln Casey's highly educated (although always impoverished) parents.

They were exemplary officers in almost every case, and being obliged to send his favorite Academy College charges home to their old lives before they had had a chance to reap any of the benefits of their new ones had been what had broken Lincoln Casey's health. Or so Casey's wife still firmly believed, now that they were far from the storm center that was Fleet Command on Terra and now that her lover and best friend was himself again.

Was even a little bit bored, lately, although he hadn't yet realized that himself. Nor had she chosen to bring that fact to his attention, there were some things you kept in your own thoughts even in the most intimate of telepathic relationships.

"They only know he salvaged a Fleet lifeboat," Kane said. "He didn't retrieve me from it until just before he sold it back to the goddam Fleet. And Hansie was the only one who even knew there was a stasis tube aboard it, all the time the boat was under tow."

Romanova sighed, because that bit of news was a relief to her. Johanna Braeden was the only one of Dan's partners she knew personally, and the woman could be trusted. She and Dan went back to the days of Ewan Fralick together, Hansie would die slowly before she would do anything to hurt Dan or someone Dan loved.

Or at least cared about and felt responsible for. Did Dan love this gen, this woman who had been his bed partner and his superior officer during his final posting before the Service had thrown him out like so much garbage?

That didn't matter. Kane was here now, Dan had chosen to honor his obligation to her, and he had a perfect right to expect his foster parents to share that obligation with him.

"Ad-I mean, Katy." Rachel Kane was looking at Catherine Romanova with speculative eyes. "I'm curious. Dan calls you 'matushka.' What does that mean?"

Romanova shook herself, coming back from a brief reverie. She answered

with a small grin, “It’s a bad joke from my field duty days, back when Dan was a kid in his twenties and he was part of the fleet I commanded at Mistworld. I was carrying my daughter then; I was about to go on maternity leave, and I couldn’t because we were diverted for that emergency. So I acted as commodore until that engagement was over, and then I hung around and handled the peace negotiations until the Diplomatic Corps could get their people all the way out there. By that time I was wearing civvies on the bridge, because I couldn’t fit into even a maternity uniform.

“‘Matushka’ means ‘little mother,’ in Old Earth Russian. And while I’ve never been all that interested in Terran history, so I’m just repeating what I’ve heard and not anything that I’ve bothered to verify, I’ve been told that my surname Romanov belonged to the Russian Imperial family that was last on the throne when there was a monarchy on that part of Terra. I do know that the ‘matushka’ was what those people called their empress, probably to be sarcastic; but my troops were being at least a little bit sarcastic themselves when they called me that! Anyhow, I liked it and I didn’t mind when it stuck. At least with people Dan’s age and older, with those officers who’ve been around long enough to remember Mistworld.”

She was about to add that when Ewan had started bringing Dan Archer home with him on every leave, she had grown annoyed at being addressed by her rank in the privacy of her residence. She had asked the young man to call her something, anything, that was comfortable for him that wasn’t “commodore” or “captain” or “group leader.” She’d somehow been sure he would not be able to handle “Katy,” not when he still had to make the transition back to formality when all of them returned to duty. But Dan hadn’t come up with anything at that time, not until they were in the thick of battle at Mistworld-not until after Ewan was dead, and with him Marcus and Bryce.

It was then that Dan had started calling her “Matushka,” and his comrades had been delighted with the nickname’s appropriateness. But no sooner did she start trying to explain all that to Rachel Kane than she realized this wasn’t the right time, that the younger woman didn’t need to hear it now and probably wouldn’t understand half of it if she did; and the front door’s gentle buzzing intervened anyway.

That would be Cab Barrett arriving, and Linc would let her in. Good, confirming Kane’s state of health and that of her unborn children definitely needed to be the next order of business.

* * *

Chapter 3

Whether to stay in the bedroom like a hovering mother once she had introduced her personal physician to Rachel Kane, or to leave doctor and patient discreetly alone, was a question Romanova didn't have to answer. She knew before Casey rapped at the door that he was coming to get her, and why. But she pretended, from long habit when others were present who might not understand the nature of the bond between them, that his summons was news to her when he said, "Katy, I've got two calls for you. If they can spare you in there...."

"They can," Romanova decided, as soon as both Kane and Barrett gave her nods. The young Star Service officer (or former officer that would be, now) looked apprehensive, which was understandable; after all, it was unnerving enough to be pregnant for the first time even when a woman had expected and wanted that all her life. Under Kane's circumstances it must be—Romanova honestly could not imagine how it must be, and admitted that to herself. And of course Barrett wanted the third person out of the way, physicians usually preferred that even when the third person had a clear right to be there. Which Romanova did not.

One of the calls she wanted, it was her cousin Johnnie out on the Romanov Farmstead. The other was from someone she didn't particularly care to hear from at the best of times, and that he had picked now to bother her was typical even though of course he couldn't know how annoying his timing was.

Her ex-husband, blast and damn the man she once had loved so passionately and so tenderly.

She said, “Linc, make George wait. He hates talking to you, but that’s what he’s going to do if he wants to stay on comm instead of hold until I’m ready for him. I won’t make Johnnie wait, not for that bastard!”

“Understood,” Casey answered, in a deliberate echo of his manner from the days when he had been her executive officer and George Fralick had been her husband; and none of the three of them had been able to imagine that those familiar relationships could be anything but permanent. But he grinned as he moved toward one of their home’s two communications screens while his wife moved toward the other. Plainly his usual compassion didn’t extend to feeling sorry for the man who long ago had hurt Katy so brutally, and then had left Linc to pick her up and put her back together.

Romanova watched as her cousin’s familiar image formed in the holoscreen, and she smiled at him. “Hello, Johnnie,” she said, in a gentle tone that she didn’t realize she never used with anyone else.

Not far away her husband realized it, but didn’t mind a bit. Katy’s early love for her cousin had become something else entirely during the first few years Casey had known her, and he understood just how it was between them now.

“Hi, Katy-love,” Ivan Romanov said in a similar tone, within his own wife’s hearing and without the least self-consciousness about using that endearment. “What’s going on with you? Linc made it sound urgent.”

“It could be,” Katy answered. “But it’s not going to be too difficult for you, not unless Reen has an objection to company right now.”

“I think she’d be happy to have company,” her cousin observed. “Tena and her husband finished their visit with us yesterday, and Farren’s gone back to university. That leaves Reen stuck here with just me. Are you coming out, Katy? I hope?”

“I wish.” Romanova’s sigh was honestly rueful. She had grown up in the capital city/university town where she lived now, but she had spent long stretches of both her childhood and her adolescence at the farmstead that was both the source of the Romanov family’s wealth and her cousin’s first love. His love even ahead of Katy, something she had understood and had accepted when she was a romantic adolescent girl and Johnnie was both her lover and her intended husband.

She loved the farmstead, too. It wasn’t Johnnie’s fault that she hadn’t been able to reconcile herself to living there with him all their days, that she had been a curious young woman and had insisted on going to Terra for her education. Her parents had been more indulgent than most guardians of Narsatian land heirs. Probably because they were both professors and themselves had enjoyed the advantages of off-world university experiences, they had agreed to let Katy

put off formalizing her union with Ivan Romanov-he the primary heir to the farmstead, she the secondary heir, in their common generation in spite of the considerable gap between their ages. And with that permission in hand Katy had acted with the combination of cunning and decisiveness that would one day make her first a starship captain, then a battle group leader, and finally the commanding officer of the Star Service itself.

She had made her application to the Star Service Academy in secret, at the same time she had made an open application to the Sorbonne. That hadn't been a problem at all, because the Academy was supported by public funds. She didn't have to come up with fees; and since any Commonwealth citizen eighteen years old or of equivalent maturity could apply for admission there without a guardian's consent, she hadn't had to deceive anyone except her parents to complete the process. The only tricky part had been taking the personal interview while the admissions team was on Narsai without anyone Katy knew finding out she had met with them, and she had actually enjoyed arranging that small intrigue.

Once she arrived on Terra, of course, the rest had been easy. After she took the oath, no one could interfere between her and the organization she had joined.

Her parents hadn't spoken to her for years after that, not until she had unfairly put one twin into her mother's arms while George had put the second twin into her father's arms-while small Ewan had clung to her trouser-leg, and regarded his grandparents with curious dark eyes. Although her defection from her duty hadn't impoverished anyone in her birth family because the farmstead's income was handled with great fairness, she had caused them terrible embarrassment. Even after they had allowed her back into their lives when she enticed them with the chance to know their grandsons, the old easy affection between Katy and her parents had never quite been restored.

But Johnnie had forgiven her, promptly if not easily. In his way Johnnie really had loved her, and still did.

After a time during which he had frankly hoped she might wash out of the Academy and be sent home, he had married the cousin who was third heir: Lorena, who was still his wife today. They had produced the one child that Narsatian couples were encouraged to have, and now their grandchild was old enough for university.

And far from disliking Katy because she had been first in Johnnie's bed and in his heart, Reen still told their cousin from time to time how glad she was that Katy had refused the role that Reen had stepped into with such happiness.

Ivan Romanov was past seventy now, but in excellent health and in superb physical condition. Even today a farmer worked hard, that was still the nature of that life in spite of all technology could do to make the land more productive.

Reen had worked beside him through all these years, so now she was slimmer than Katy (who had always fought against her body's determination to thicken, and who was finding that battle more difficult than ever now that she was no longer setting the example in physical training for all the people who until seven months ago had reported to her).

"Linc and I will be visiting you later in the winter, I hope, Johnnie," Romanova said now, and leaned toward the holoscreen as if that could bring her closer to the beloved face within it. "Right now we've inherited a house guest who needs a quiet place to rest. I'd rather not tell you anything about her, not even her name; and I'd rather you and Reen kept her presence quiet once she's joined you. Oh, Johnnie, I can't think of anyone except you and Reen that I'd dare to ask for this!"

"In other words you think it's possible you may be asking us to do something dangerous." Not exactly the smartest thing to say on comm, even on Narsai where privacy was respected; but then Johnnie was no military officer, he was a farmer. But he continued without pausing, "I'm glad you know you can ask us, Katy. Whoever your house guest is, send her along. We'll expect her."

"Thank you, Johnnie. Give Reen my love, I don't have time to ask you to put her on right now." Romanova ended the transmission, and nodded to Casey. The two of them spoke and gestured to each other like any normal couple, the only time they confined their communications to their mental link was when they needed privacy in the presence of others. She said, "I'm ready for George now," in a crisp tone that she often used when she was getting ready to deal with something unpleasant as quickly and as efficiently as she could.

Her former mate's image replaced her beloved cousin's in the holoscreen. He was annoyed at having been made to wait, and with her he didn't try to conceal that aggravation. "Katy! What in hell's going on down there that's so important? I thought you and Casey were retired now, so you can't get away with telling me you had the defense minister on comm."

"No, it was someone more important than Fothingill. I was talking to Johnnie," Romanova said, deciding that there was no reason she should dissemble about that fact. "What do you want, George? It's months until I can have my next visit with Maddy. And where are you, anyway?" The second question came when she realized he had spoken as though he were in orbit above Narsai, and not light years away on Kesra.

"I'm aboard the *Archangel*, practically over your head," George Frallick said with plain satisfaction. "I've got Maddy with me. Katy, I'm on my way to Terra and I've got no idea when I'll be free to go back home to Kesra. P'Tara died just before we left, K'lor went back to his birth-house that same day, and there was no one else I wanted to leave our daughter with. You always said you

wanted me to let her visit you here-so I guess now's your chance."

At this moment Catherine Romanova soundly blessed the fact that her first husband did not have her second mate's ability to read her thoughts and her feelings. She could and did allow her face to register nothing but the simple surprise, and the mixture of suspicion and pleasure, that Fralick would be expecting from her after that announcement. She said sharply just what she knew he would be anticipating: "George, I'm not putting Linc out of our home. Not even for Maddy. That's what you said I'd have to do before you'd even consider allowing her to visit with me here, and I meant it when I said no deal. If I'd been willing to let you blackmail me with her, I'd have done it thirteen years ago when she was a baby and you thought you could make me stay married to you by taking custody of her away from me."

Oh, gods, why now? When on any day for the past seven months, this offer would have seemed like years of prayers and dreams at last coming true?

Fralick scowled. Like so many other superb politicians and diplomats, the face he showed to his immediate family was not always the one his public saw. He said reluctantly, "Well...she's old enough to understand now, I think, why you're sleeping in the same room with him. And I would rather leave her with you than with anyone else, Katy, with things the way they are right now. Then if anything goes down politically, she won't be on one world and you on another and me on still a third. At least she'll have one parent, if the worst happens."

So that was it, even George thought that war might be coming. Romanova forbade herself to shiver, and she gave up the privilege of reminding him that long ago when they had faced each other in that alien court on Kesra he had claimed a girl-child wasn't safe on Narsai. He had backed that claim by citing Katy's own liaison with her cousin Ivan, starting on her thirteenth birthday as was usual with landed Narsatian women and ending only when she had "fled to safety on Terra" as George had chosen to paint the start of her military career; and he had pointed out that under Terran laws, Ivan Romanov would have been executed for the rape of a minor.

It hadn't been like that, but of course no out-worlder really could understand something so essentially Narsatian. She hadn't been running away from Johnnie, or even from sharing Johnnie's bed. That hadn't been offensive to her! Not that it had been especially pleasurable either, of course, in those years while she was still just a girl and her partner was a grown man; but it had been expected by everyone who loved her, after the first time or two it hadn't been a painful thing, and she had enjoyed knowing that her body had the capacity to give her beloved Johnnie so much delight. There had been a sense of power in it for young Katy, and she had regretted giving that up somewhat more than she had regretted knowing she would never be Johnnie's full partner in the

management and primary ownership of the Romanov farm.

Or she had regretted it until George had come along, of course. By then she was a grown woman emotionally, not just physically; and from the first time he had put his arms around her and touched her lips with his, she had realized that she'd missed the whole point with Johnnie. She had known passion with George, real passion that she remembered with amazement now when looking at him disgusted her completely.

He had accused her of being a mother who couldn't be trusted not to prostitute her daughter if she were allowed custody, or even unsupervised visits with the little girl on her own native world; and that accusation had been one of the most infuriating aspects of their messy parting. But then a relationship as volatile as theirs could not have ended less violently, she supposed. Only as she'd explored her bond with Linc afterward, had she finally made the wonderful discovery that it was possible to know both the tender security of her first love with Johnnie and the physical rapture of her union with George in a relationship with one man.

With Linc, who had been her friend for so long before he became more than that; and who now knew how to make her feel things in his arms that no George Fralick could ever make any woman feel. Morthan males had to wait until they were at an age where human males often were slowing down sexually, before they even noticed the opposite gender was there-but then they made up for it. Oh, how they made up for it!

She put all those thoughts aside now, even as she felt Linc's touch within her mind and responded to his silent question with reassurance. To George Fralick's image in the holoscreen she said, "I want her, George, of course I do. I always have, since the night we made her."

Only Linc knew it when she added inwardly, and in despair, "But what in hell am I going to do with her now?"

* * *

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