

## **Mistworld**

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ISBN: 0-595-23296-5

Published 2002 by Luniverse  
<http://www.luniverse.com>

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2002

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## Chapter 1

*“The Commonwealth won’t let any of its member worlds go* without a fight, Mum. But I’m telling you what you know already, aren’t I?” Ewan Fralick gave Catherine Romanova a smile that the former fleet admiral recognized, although during his mortal lifetime her firstborn hadn’t worn the face that formed it. Whenever Ewan expressed his feelings with the physical form he now inhabited, his mannerisms overrode those of the body’s actual owner—one Ishi Sanibello, from the Human colony on Mistworld.

Katy Romanova had thought it an eerie business despite the blinding happiness it afforded, having her three boys who’d perished in a single long ago battle restored when the “Misties” brought their oddly assorted fleet to Narsai. She still found it strange, yet poignantly joyful, at moments like this one...Romanova realized that Ewan/Ishi wanted an answer. He wasn’t asking the question rhetorically, after all.

“I certainly never expected the Diet to be that sensible!” she said, and sighed. “But lately I’ve dared to hope they may let us alone, after all.”

Afternoon sunlight bathed the garden of Romanova’s small home in Narsai’s capital city of MinTar, where mother and son sat on the terrace together and enjoyed a rare moment of peace and privacy. Peace had become especially scarce here during the past six weeks, since Dan Archer (who was Ewan’s best friend from his Star Service days, and Katy’s adopted fourth son as well) and his wife, the fugitive gen and Star Service deserter called Rachel Kane, brought their three newborn babies home from MinTar Medical. With Katy, her second husband, her adolescent daughter, and the Archer/Kane family all crammed into

it, the house that had so often stood empty for years at a stretch was filled now to its capacity-and beyond.

“Not likely, Mum.” Ewan shook Ishi Sanibello’s head. Not for the first time, his mother wondered if the noncorporeal Mistworld natives had deliberately paired the eldest Fralick son’s consciousness-still self-aware in this dimension almost fourteen years after his body’s death, thanks to their planet’s unique environment-with a host of his own gender and approximate age, as of the last time he walked about wearing flesh. “They’ve got to be hurting, after six months without the colonies shipping foodstuffs to Terran markets. The replacement comm relay should have arrived from New Orient a long time ago, shouldn’t it?”

Once again, the youngster was right. Romanova sighed, and nodded. “I never thought I’d see the time when Narsai would spend six months cut off from talking to the rest of the Commonwealth,” she said, and then laughed at herself. “Just listen to me, still calling Human-inhabited space ‘the Commonwealth’! But blessed if I can think what else to call it, love.”

“Neither can I, actually.” Her son chuckled. “‘Cut off from the rest of the galaxy’ would sound pretty pretentious! Although we haven’t been completely. Cut off, that is. I talked to a captain just in from Kesra yesterday. Their link’s working fine, and Terra’s not talking to them, either.”

“Or to Mortha, or either of the worlds in the Sestus system.” Katy hadn’t missed the catch in Ewan/Ishi’s voice when he said the name of his birth-world, where Human residents were no longer allowed-making Ewan, Marcus, and Bryce (her sons by her first husband, George Fralick) exiles.

Which didn’t matter a bit, of course, now that they belonged to Mistworld. Now that they’d become “Misties” themselves (a whimsical nickname bestowed by Katy’s diminutive-loving fellow Narsatians), they might wear borrowed flesh in order to visit other worlds; but afterward they would always return to a home that wasn’t Kesra.

Again Ewan nodded. “I wonder what they’re up to?” he asked, and this time the question really was rhetorical. It had to be, because not even the former Fleet Admiral Romanova-who’d worked directly for the Defense Minister, and commanded the entire Star Service-could answer it.

\* \* \*

“Linc, they are *hopeless*.” Bryce Fralick, utilizing the vocal cords of Mistworld colonist Chad Thorne, leaned hard on the sentence’s final word. He indicated Narsai’s Commissioner of Aquaculture, whose secondary title of Harbormaster gave the man law enforcement powers. Which therefore meant that “Harbie,”

along with Chief Constable Mara Ling, must lead this formerly pacifist world's recently formed militia-to the despair of the former military officers who had the job of coaching them in their new responsibilities.

Captain Lincoln Casey, one-time commander of the Star Service Academy, rolled his golden Morthan hybrid eyes in agreement with his stepson. But he schooled his voice to say firmly, "They'll get it eventually, Bryce. They've got to, for their people's sake. And if there's one thing I've learned since I started living here full time with your mother, it's that Narsatians are loyal to their world and to each other! So the least we can do," he glanced at Marcus Fralick (as embodied by Mistworld colonist Dram Andersen) to make sure both younger men were hearing and understanding him, "is stay with them for as long as they're willing to keep trying."

They ought to be how old by now? In their thirties, since the Fralick twins were green ensigns when the ship aboard which they'd been serving together vanished in a fireball over Mistworld. Along with Ewan, a very junior captain who'd turned off his comm-the better not to hear when the battle group's commodore, his mother (the very senior Captain Catherine Romanova) ordered him not to take his own small ship down into the planet's upper atmosphere, to aid the doomed one carrying his brothers.

They no longer looked a bit alike, these two who'd been born physically identical, because their hosts weren't related. And because their hosts were men barely on the high side of twenty, they looked as if they hadn't aged during the years their mother (and their mother's husband, who'd been her executive officer at the time of their deaths) thought them gone forever.

The impression that time hadn't passed for the three younger men, Lincoln Casey knew now, was false. Whether or not the Fralick brothers had "grown up" in the sense they would have if they'd continued living in their own bodies for the past fourteen or so years, they had definitely gained both experience and maturity from their lives as adopted members of the noncorporeal species inhabiting Mistworld's upper atmosphere. The species that started fighting back, by the only method they could use, when combat between the Star Service battle group under Catherine Romanova and invaders attempting to dislodge Commonwealth homesteaders on the planet's surface inadvertently began killing them-the native beings whose existence neither side in that conflict suspected.

Casey still found it incredible that the Mistworld folk should-even as they defended themselves-have attempted to salvage the essence of each individual being whose body they destroyed. Their efforts hadn't worked for everyone on board the incinerated starships, of course. But Casey was vastly grateful that it had worked for all three of his wife's sons, and not just because he loved her. He'd spent most of his military career nurturing young officers-first as

Romanova's XO, and later (after spending the intervening years as his by then wife's adjutant, when she'd made flag rank but hadn't yet risen to Fleet Admiral) commanding the Academy. So he'd grieved both personally and professionally for the three promising youngsters called Ewan, Marcus, and Bryce Fralick, and having them back-even in these altered forms-delighted him in ways that had nothing at all to do with his love for their mother.

For Katy who was reaching out to him now, through the telepathic bond they shared (as did any mated pair, when one partner was of Morthan or part-Morthan ancestry). Letting him know that Narsai's Harbormaster and Chief Constable had just run out of time for drilling their units in the accurate use of personal firearms, and for the other defensive preparations that were planned or already underway.

Peaceful Narsai, where possessing weapons had been against the law for so long that neither Harbie nor Mara had ever needed them to enforce the planet's laws, would soon be either a conquered planet under enemy occupation or a world at war. Casey looked out over the floor of the vast indoor arena that in better times had served as MinTar's main recreational center-a floor that was still marked off for the playing of Narsai's favorite team sport, a vague descendant of the ancient North American one called "basketball"-and shook his head before he bent to the broadcast booth's commlink. From here he could address everyone on the floor, half a dozen meters below this enclosure that was tucked between banks of spectator seats on the narrow end of the arena's trapezoid. Keeping the three formally trained and off-world born coaches out of sight, to avoid undermining Harbie's and Mara's authority with their militia recruits.

*I got used to giving people bad news back when we were still junior officers,* he told his wife via their own most private of commlinks, as he gathered breath and steeled his nerves to say what must be said. *But I'm damned if I've got any idea how to tell people like yours-people like ours, Katy!-what we both know they'll almost certainly be facing, by this time tomorrow.*

\* \* \*

Ewan Fralick and Ishi Sanibello both watched Ewan's mother as Catherine Romanova sat at one of her home's two comm terminals and stared, with her face turned away from its screen, toward the garden. Her firstborn son had no idea, until he came to know her as one adult to another during the last six months, how much she loved that garden...and this house...and her home-world itself, for that matter.

*She must have found it hard to leave, and live on Kesra all those years with*

*your father*, Sanibello observed to Fralick, in one of the thousands of silent thoughts they'd exchanged since (as a Mistworld-manned Rebel ship's commander) he'd found himself paired with a disembodied Human "battle survivor" instead of being chosen to host one of the planet's natives. Initially Sanibello felt disappointed that he must lend his flesh to Fralick, when he'd hoped for the honor of embodying a true Mistworlder. But now, after months of having Ewan so close to him that each felt like part of the other, Ishi Sanibello sometimes wondered what it would be like one day when the ship now orbiting Narsai took them back to Mistworld. When Fralick, no longer needing physical form, would slip free and once again join the planet's natives in its atmosphere's upper reaches-leaving Sanibello alone, inside this body that they'd shared for so long.

*I never thought about it at the time*, Ewan answered his companion, *because I was a kid and they were my parents. So of course they lived together; I took that for granted! But, yeah. She must have loved Papa an awful lot, at least when she married him, to get her to live anywhere else but on Narsai.*

*How come you can't talk to her mind to mind? Like a real Mistworlder would, and like the husband she's got now does?* Sanibello had been wondering that, in the part of his consciousness that Fralick didn't share, ever since they'd arrived here.

*Same reason I wouldn't have been able to talk to you that way, before we got paired for this voyage.* Ewan sounded amused, not at all surprised, and-to Ishi's astonishment-more than a trifle frustrated, too. *I need a native to carry me whenever I want to communicate by mind-talk. Just like Narsai needs that new interplanetary comm booster, before it can punch real-time transmissions through to other planets again.*

*Oh.* Sanibello, like most of Mistworld's Human colonists, was a farmer. Not a star sailor, by training or even by inclination. So whenever his body commanded the ship that had brought him here, and that would take him home again, he "stepped aside" and gave Fralick full control. At first doing so had frightened him-but not half as much as thinking he must command that starship by himself would have, of course!

Ewan Fralick knew how. Clothed once again in a mortal body, he'd thrilled at the chance. And had he not been there, six months ago when the Mistworld-led Rebel fleet swept into Narsatian space and found itself facing a Star Service heavy cruiser determined to engage them in battle-with that cruiser's captain not a bit interested in pausing to ascertain the newcomers' actual intentions-Ishi Sanibello didn't doubt that the untried Rebels would have been obliterated, in spite of their technically superior numbers.

Instead the brief conflict ended with the Commonwealth vessel blown



apart, and with minimal damage done to Narsai's orbiting infrastructure of habitats, communications satellites, and solar power collectors. It had cost the Rebel fleet six of its fifteen oddly assorted vessels, though...which didn't prevent Ewan Fralick from grieving for the civilian deaths he learned about later. As well as for everyone he'd known aboard those destroyed ships, because people who died while away from Mistworld were gone forever.

*If our ship had been one of them, Ewan, neither of us would be anything right now except dead.* Sanibello joined his hosting-partner in acknowledging that brutal fact, as they both looked at a comm screen in Catherine Romanova's living room. As a direct feed from Narsai Control showed them not one Star Service warship, but an entire battle group-everything from tiny raiders up to a trio of heavy cruisers and a dreadnought-approaching Narsai's star system, silently, from out of deep space.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 2

*Madeleine Fralick threw her thin body down onto an empty bench* beside the MinTar Lycée’s main playing field, and glowered at the game from which she’d just been ejected. She loved living on Narsai with her mother, her mother’s husband, her foster brother Dan Archer, and Dan’s new family, but she hated this school with an adolescent girl’s full and dramatic passion. The one thing she missed with all her heart about Kesra, and the Fralick compound that was her home before she came here with Papa on the starship *Archangel*, was having her lessons privately.

“Maddy?” She didn’t expect to hear the familiar voice from farther back on the sidelines, reaching her easily despite the din from youngsters who were once again charging down the field. “Are you hurt?”

“No. Coach put me out of the game. Again.” Madeleine sat up, since sprawling along the bench’s length to keep others from trying to join her no longer seemed necessary. She hated telling distant cousin, family friend, and school physician Cabanne Barrett that particular truth, but lying about it never entered her mind.

Barrett sat down at Maddy’s side, and said simply, “Oh.” She put a warm hand on the girl’s bony shoulder, and for a time they watched the game together.

“I shouldn’t have kicked Benny Ling’s shin,” Maddy said after a few moments of silence on the bench and continued shouting and squealing on the field. “But he shouldn’t have called me a ‘Kesran neuter’ just before the coach restarted play, either!”

“That wasn’t very nice,” Narsai’s Commissioner of Medicine agreed, and

gave the shoulder under her hand a squeeze. “And it was interesting timing, now, wasn’t it? Sounds to me as if he wanted you mad enough to foul him! Are you that good a player, that he wanted you out so his team could win the match?”

“No. I’m that bad a player. Benny’s on the same team I am, Doctor Cab.” Maddy sighed, and then made a face as the situation’s ludicrous quality finally hit her. “No one wants me on their team, no matter what we’re playing! I’m way ahead of everyone else in my classes, but when we have to do stuff that’s physical-and that’s got to be done in groups, not by ourselves-I always make a mess of it. I guess I can’t blame them for not wanting me to make the whole team look stupid. But I just hate it when someone makes fun of me because I always lived with my Papa, before he died last year!”

Not even Benny Ling, of course, could have been ridiculing her for being one of the Lycée’s few female students who lacked a betrothed husband. Most landed (which was the same thing as saying “upper class”) Narsatian women still sealed that key relationship on their thirteenth birthdays, although they went on living with their parents and only visited their new partners. Maddy’s Kesran-Human father had been wrong in thinking that if he let the girl’s mother have even temporary charge of her, early and arranged matrimony must be the sure result.

Far from it, and he ought to have know that would be the case! After all, hadn’t Mum left Narsai (forty years ago, when customs were far stricter) for a Star Service career? Hadn’t she abandoned her betrothal to cousin Johnnie when she did that, and hadn’t she later incurred her own parents’ mortified wrath by marrying where she chose? Papa himself, first; and then later (and even worse, in the eyes of Granfer and Granma!), Maddy’s now-beloved stepfather, Lincoln Casey.

Barrett slid her arm around the girl, and Madeleine knew this silence was that of an adult searching for the right words to “clarify” for a child something that really couldn’t be explained. Not, anyway, without admitting that the adult universe-just as much as that of the adolescents at MinTar Lycée-possessed some serious moral flaws. Finally the doctor said, “There’s no excuse for that kind of so-called teasing, Maddy. If your coach heard what Benny said, I think there ought to be two kids on this bench right now. Not you alone.”

Doctor Cab was like Mum, and like Linc, Mum’s husband. She never pretended the adults were right when they most certainly were not. Maddy sighed at the reassurance that blunt admission gave her, and then she asked so softly that she half hoped the woman beside her wouldn’t be able to hear: “Did I make a mistake when I decided I didn’t want to register for school using Mum’s name? I know Narsatian women don’t use their fathers’ surnames, but I’ve

always been Maddy Fralick. Not Maddy Romanova. And it just didn't feel right, for me to stop using my Papa's name. It was hard enough knowing it was partly my fault when he died, without doing that to him afterward!"

"Who told you it was partly your fault that Ambassador Fralick died, Madeleine?" Doctor Cab's voice had an edge, now. A dangerous edge. And nothing good had ever come to Maddy Fralick, in all her short lifetime, as a result of someone calling her by her actual given name instead of by its diminutive.

The girl answered the question anyway. "No one said that to me exactly. Not that I remember. But I helped Mum and Linc get me away from Papa, when he wanted to take me with him and leave for Terra. I helped kill Marshal Vargas, when he and Papa were trying to take Rachel and Dan and their babies away, too...." Oh, no. She wasn't going to cry, was she? Not again, and especially not here! Not where everyone who would love that, who would simply adore that, could see!

"Maddy." The doctor's voice got firmer, but it also regained its kindness. "I helped do those things, too! Don't you remember? They were things that had to be done. And as hard as they were for you, because Ambassador Fralick was your father and you loved him very much, they were the *right* things to do. Besides which," the edge came back into Barrett's voice, "he didn't die while all that was going on, and I hope you aren't feeling guilty about ridding the universe of scum like Vargas! Your father died of a cerebral hemorrhage, an artery bursting in his brain, a long while after he'd left Narsai on the corporate jackal's shuttle. You had nothing at all to do with that. So you've no reason to blame yourself, and if anyone else has they've been wrong. Just plain wrong. You do see that, don't you?"

"Yes." Maddy sniffed, and felt vastly thankful that she wasn't going to break down after all. She'd done so much crying, since Mum insisted on enrolling her in the Lycée and then made her attend it-and she hated to cry. Always, this child of two starship captains (George Fralick who'd gone on to become Kesra's ambassador to the Commonwealth, and Catherine Romanova who'd become the Star Service's Fleet Admiral) despised herself when she lost control.

"It would have been easier for you here if you'd registered as 'Madeleine Romanova.' I can't tell you otherwise, and it's what you know already." Doctor Cab's tone gentled still more. "But by now I don't have to tell you that children can be cruel to each other for all sorts of reasons. Who knows if it was because you use your father's name, that Benny chose the words he did to make fun of you just now? If all he wanted to do was get you off the field for the rest of the match, he probably said whatever he thought had the best chance of upsetting

you.”

“That’s probably just what he did,” Maddy admitted. She sat up straight, pulled away from the one-armed embrace in which she’d found a few moments of comfort, and stared at the pile-up of adolescent bodies that some confusion or other had caused near one of the goal lines. Narsatian “games” tended, she thought (she’d *always* thought, even when she knew about them by vicarious means only!), to be far more violent than sports on other Human-settled worlds. Which made them a fascinating contrast to the rest of this orderly, peaceable, eminently civilized society. Did such free-for-alls serve Narsatians as a sort of safety valve?

She must ask Linc, since her stepfather was a fellow outsider who liked his adopted home’s people in general and who loved one Narsatian-Maddy’s mother-more than anything or anyone else in the universe. She couldn’t ask Mum, whose feelings might be hurt, and she certainly couldn’t ask either of Mum’s parents. And as for her brothers, Ewan and Marcus and Bryce-they knew less about Narsatian life than she did, and would understand only that they didn’t like having their little sister hurt.

Linc would tell her what he thought, though, and Linc would be honest. Using the ability she’d acquired from being touched by his mind while she developed in her mother’s womb, in the days when Catherine Romanova commanded a ship called *Firestorm* and part-Morthan Lincoln Casey was her first officer and close friend, Maddy reached without words-sought her stepfather’s thoughts-and found them.

She forgot all about Narsatian sports, and about the pain of being ridiculed by her classmates, too. Her long-limbed body went rigid in terror, just as MinTar’s civil emergency sirens (a relic from Narsai’s colonial era, last used to warn of a never-repeated alien invasion and recently reactivated as one of the city’s many preparations for possible interstellar hostilities) started to blare.

\* \* \*

The sirens penetrated to the interior of the aircar carrying Daniel Archer and Rachel Kane home from MinTar Medical, and set their trio of tiny babies wailing. Neither parent (a bachelor who’d never held an infant until his own arrived, and a female gen who was the first of her kind to attempt the task called motherhood) felt entirely secure, even after six weeks of practice, at diagnosing their infants’ cries and correcting the most probable cause. But this time, as the adults glanced at each other in consternation, they didn’t worry at all about how to quiet their children.

“Gods,” Archer muttered, instinctively scanning overhead although the

former starship engineer knew (as did his wife, a former starship XO) that what threatened Narsai now lay far beyond its skies. “So it’s finally happening, is it? The Matushka hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but I always knew damn well it would!”

“So did I,” Kane answered, her tone equally hushed. Her face white, and her hands on the aircar’s controls as she told the hub that guided in-city traffic to let her pilot manually instead of bringing the communally owned craft to safety at the nearest public garage. “Katy thought the government and military people she knew had enough power to make everyone else see reason, but I always agreed with you. Even though this is one time I’d have loved to be wrong!”

“Not even the Matushka,” Dan repeated the nickname that he’d given to his foster mother, which the entire Star Service had subsequently adopted for her, “can work that kind of miracle, love. How close are we to home?”

“Just a couple of minutes more. We’ll be there before we know it.” His wife bit her lip, tuned out the sirens as well as the babies, and concentrated fully on her piloting. Not because it required unusual skill (compared to conning the *Archangel*, it took almost none); but because if she didn’t force herself to focus on the mundane task, she might not be able to keep from adding her own frustrated screams to the aircar’s interior din.

\* \* \*

The Matushka, whose imperial Russian ancestors were often called “little mother” and “little father” by their subjects-and whose advanced state of pregnancy at the Battle of Mistworld had saddled her with that title forever, apparently!-stared at her home’s primary comm screen while Ewan/Ishi stared at its secondary one. The first shrieks from the emergency sirens, almost hurtfully loud even in this neighborhood away from MinTar’s center, brought her out of the trance and onto her feet. She barked, “Get everyone to the University, Ewan! As soon as they arrive here! Can you send me there now? To Dad’s office? That’s where I’d better be, when he has to hail that dreadnought. It’s almost within ordinary comm range already. Gods, that fleet’s moving fast!”

She’d thought that her world would have a day’s worth of grace. Of time to prepare, emotionally as well as strategically, for the Commonwealth battle group’s arrival. But she’d obviously been wrong.

\* \* \*

Moving matter via a conventional teleporter required units at both ends, just as did any wireless communication or power transmission. Unless you were using a

teleporter on board one of the ships that the Human colonists on Mistworld had located in subterranean hiding places, at the direction of their disembodied fellow residents, after those natives decided that appealing to “their” Humans’ more prosperous cousins on worlds like Narsai was the best method (and maybe even the only one) of ensuring survival for those on the planet’s surface.

They’d come a long way, Ishi Sanibello thought as he and Ewan Fralick sent their combined thoughts skyward and felt an answering touch from someone aboard the only one of those ships that remained in orbit. The others, eight out of the nine (seven of which were alien-built) to survive their battle with the *Archangel*, had started homeward loaded with foodstuffs. Sanibello could remember when Humans like his parents feared their planet’s long established residents—who were “natives” in that sense only, since they, just as much as the Humans, had come from somewhere else originally. Too long ago to remember from where, or why, though; and Misties didn’t seem bothered by the lost of their history.

In his boyhood he’d been scared to death of the Cloud-Folk, mostly because his elders told him that was how they felt about the strange beings. But now, the young man Ishi Sanibello shared flesh and consciousness with one of the Cloud-Folk’s adopted children. He had traveled all the way to Narsai aboard one of their ancient, reactivated starships, and he reached out to ask for remote transport as easily and as naturally as if he were speaking to Katy Romanova again. Yet the person to whom he made the silent request was kilometers away, in orbit.

*That’s not the biggest mystery about all this*, Ewan Fralick told the man whose body he shared, in a thought that held genuine amusement despite the approaching danger on the comm screen. *My mother hates teleporters. She always has, and she goes out of her way to avoid using them. So I have trouble believing that I’m hearing her right, every time she asks us to do this!*

Mistworld teleporters could do what Commonwealth units could not. In answer to Sanibello’s request, Catherine Romanova’s body—the solid one of a physically strong and active, but by no means slender Human woman in her early sixties—disappeared from the living room of her home. A moment later her face appeared on the comm screen (replacing, mercifully, the images of the on-rushing battle group), with a different room visible behind her. “I’m here, Ewan,” she said. And then added, “Thanks, Ishi. Pass that thought along to whoever did it for me, will you? I’ll see you when you get here, after you’ve sent Dan and his family-Cab Barrett’s bringing Maddy from the Lycée-and-oh, damn. I need one more thing! Check on Johnnie and Reen, please, before you do anything else. I’m not sure they’ll be willing to come into the city, but someone should at least make sure they know what’s going to happen. And when.

Romanova out!”

Her image vanished, and that of the battle group returned. After which Ishi Sanibello asked Ewan Fralick, in his driest mental tone: *Doesn't that feel strange? Having your mother talk that way, to you, on a comm call?*

*Nope*, Fralick answered, still sounding remarkably cheerful. *Right now she's not being my mother. She's being my old commanding officer. The Matushka!*

*Oh. I see.* Sanibello didn't, of course. Not really. But right now it didn't matter, because right now he-or rather *they*-had more important things to do.

\* \* \*



### Chapter 3

*Trabe Kourdakov, current holder of the senior chair position on the hereditary Narsai Council, watched with relief as each member of his daughter's family arrived at MinTar University. The aging philosopher thought about all the years when his only living child and her offspring had stayed away, and then marveled at how natural it felt to have them here with him now. Not just Katy and her children (four times as many as a Narsatian woman normally produced!), but Katy's second husband, too. And her foster son and his wife, with their three infants; which, if Kourdakov reckoned them to himself as great-grandchildren, put him over the allowable limit already. Before Catherine's proper heir, Trabe's granddaughter Madeleine, was even betrothed.*

Ah, here was Maddy now! Dashing down the University Admin Building's hallway as she and Cab Barrett got out of the lift, throwing her arms around him, and saying, "Granfer! What's happening? Why is everybody acting so scared?" in the voice she'd inherited from Katy, that Katy had inherited from her own mother. From Cabanne Romanova, MinTar University's president and a Council member in her own right, whose husky tones (not changed a bit by entering her nineties) came to him from the nearby door of the conference room where their family would wait out the crisis.

"Come inside, Madeleine, and we'll tell you everything. Granfer and your mother have their own work to do right now. In his office, not in here where the rest of us are going to wait for them."

Madeleine. The name of Trabe and Cabbie's first child, the daughter who'd died in girlhood-obliging them, since they were thankfully still young enough, to

conceive a second heir. Katy.

That kind of draconian population control, enforced mostly by overwhelming social pressure, was one of the reasons why Narsai remained prosperous centuries after its settlement. Another, in Trabe Kourdakov's opinion, was keeping the real political power in the hands of the original land-grant settlers' descendants, instead of allowing late-comers and tradesfolk to make decisions on their world's behalf. The Commissioners, elected heads of a short list of the planet's most vital trades and professions, governed their own members and advised the Council as necessary; but no one could speak for Narsai except the Councilor who held senior chair. And right now, that would be Trabe Kourdakov.

"Go with your Granma," he said to young Maddy, after returning the girl's embrace and wishing he could go with her into that conference room. He truly felt better qualified than anyone else on Narsai to speak for his people now, to whoever commanded the Commonwealth fleet which would soon come within ordinary hailing range; but that didn't mean he wanted to do it. He certainly did not. It was simply part of his duty, one of the obligations to which he'd been born.

Obligations that he would one day pass on to his daughter, who was waiting for him in his office on the opposite side of the hallway. That Katy, in her turn, would bequeath to Madeleine—since the boys, Katy's sons, belonged to Mistworld now in ways that no power in the universe could hope to alter. All of which should have coincided, of course, with Katy's co-inheritance of the Romanov Farmstead as "resident holder," in life partnership with her cousin Ivan—but she'd refused to take that pathway. So another Romanov woman, Ivan's next-closest female cousin Lorena, held that honor now.

"Are Johnnie and Reen coming?" he asked his daughter, as he stepped into his office and closed its hallway door behind him.

"No, Dad. They're riding this out at the Farmstead." Katy sat at the comm terminal, with her lips pursed whenever she wasn't speaking and her eyes fixed on the screen. Right now it displayed a long-range visual of what looked to Trabe Kourdakov like a whole damned star fleet. How could he have been so naïve as to imagine that the Commonwealth might let Narsai and the other Outworlds go without a fight?

"I suppose that makes as much sense as anything else does right now." Kourdakov thought about the Farmstead as he'd visited it so often with Cabbie, especially during their daughter's adolescent years while Katy was betrothed to Johnnie Romanov. He'd truly believed that his girl and her unavoidably older (since Madeleine, the first Madeleine, ought to have been Johnnie's bride) husband-to-be were learning how to care for each other, that love was starting to

grow between them...so he'd been more surprised than anyone else, when she called from Terra shortly after arriving there for advanced schooling at age 18. To say that she'd gone not to the Sorbonne, where Trabe and Cabbie were allowing her to spend several years of study despite the resulting delay in formalizing her union with Johnnie, but to the Star Service Academy instead.

She'd applied there secretly, months earlier, while still on Narsai. She'd known what she was going to do, surely, the last several times she spent a weekend or a school vacation with Johnnie at the Farmstead-in the ancestral house that was gone now. Destroyed, along with everything else but a few small (and severely damaged) outbuildings, when the starship *Archangel* put a tractor beam on Dan Archer's freighter *Triad* as it lay concealed in the Farmstead's cavernous equipment barn. A tractor beam that the *Triad's* pilot fought with all the power the smaller vessel possessed, until its overloaded engines blew and took out the Farmstead along with the ship itself.

Johnnie and Reen had been compensated for the damage to their property, and now they were rebuilding. Trabe Kourdakov hadn't yet steeled himself to go out there and see the prefabricated cottage in which they were living while they got the equipment barn and other structures vital to the Farmstead's operation reconstructed, though. Everyone else-Cabbie, Katy, even Katy's youngsters-had gone, and had come back with reports on the rebuilding's progress. But Trabe found that he simply couldn't bear to think about seeing the Farmstead without the home that had sheltered so many generations of Romanovs, and Kourdakovs as well, sitting stalwart and solid and apparently eternal at its heart.

Which only proved that as he led his people now, the current holder of the Council's senior chair must watch himself to make certain he focused his thoughts on the future instead of looking backward; instead of worshipping Narsai's past. Their ancestors had had the guts to leave all they knew behind, to strike out across space and set down roots in a new world's soil-and when a still mysterious alien assault destroyed much of what they'd built during their first years here, they'd found the courage to build it again. The courage to stay here, instead of gathering up their children and going back whence they'd come.

*We need that kind of nerve now!* Trabe Kourdakov told himself sternly, as he pulled a chair to Katy's side and sat down. *And it's my job to set the example. Just the way my daughter's doing already.*

"Trabe, this is Shannandore Neilsen at Narsai Control." Except for using titles when speaking to one's older relatives, informal address ruled in this culture. Trabe Kourdakov was "Professor" or "Doctor" only on the University's faculty roster, and the title page of each of the papers and books he'd published. "We can get through to them now, if you want us to hail them. Or we can wait for them to open communications first. Which would you rather?"

Father and daughter traded a small, grim pair of smiles. Shannandore, whose given name was a local corruption of the Terran word “Shenandoah,” had a habit of putting Standard words together in ways no one else ever thought of. Katy nodded, and Trabe said to the pickup, “Hail them, please. After they’ve left us without interplanetary communications for the past six months, they show up with a whole battle group? I think it’s only reasonable for me to ask them why.”

Again, Admiral Romanova nodded. Right now she didn’t look at all to Trabe Kourdakov like Katy, his daughter. She looked like-well-a Star Service flag officer.

Like someone who didn’t belong at all to peaceful Narsai. Not for the first time, Kourdakov wondered how he and Cabbie had managed to engender such an unlikely offspring.

She stayed beside him, so that the visual pickup would show them both to whoever answered from that oncoming flagship. So that if she said anything, her words would go out through space just as his would.

They waited. They waited until, with the battle group’s image still filling the screen before them, Shannandore Neilsen’s voice said, “I’m sorry, Trabe. No matter what frequency we use to hail them, they just aren’t responding. We know they’re hearing us, but for some reason I can’t imagine they just don’t want to answer.”

\* \* \*

*I’m sorry, Katy. Not one of those ships has a Morthan on board. So we can’t find out what they’re up to by that means, either. I guess we’ll just have to wait until they’re ready to tell us!* Lincoln Casey’s thoughts touched his wife’s, gently and with real regret.

*Well, we did hear that the Commonwealth’s been enforcing its edicts against letting Morthan medics practice off the home-world. So I don’t suppose I should be surprised that the Service has managed to get rid of its Morthans, too Already.* Catherine Romanova answered her lover and life partner as she studied the images on her father’s terminal. *I recognize the flagship, Linc. She’s Aragon, which the last I knew carried Lita Benedon’s flag.*

*Uh, oh.* They both remembered Benedon, because she’d been another member of Captain George Fralick’s contingent aboard the *Raven*. So long ago that Linc and Katy had both been ensigns reporting to the patrol ship for their first duty assignments; while Lita was a slightly more experienced junior officer, who soon made the small but infinitely important jump from ensign to lieutenant, junior grade. She’d finally advanced from command to flag rank during Romanova’s last month as Fleet Admiral. Katy wondered, and opened

her mind to Linc so that he could wonder with her, what the Defense Ministry meant by choosing this particular officer to lead what looked far too much like an occupation force to rebellious Narsai.

Looking at the situation, just for a moment, from a purely Terran or Inner World perspective, of course. Since from Narsai's viewpoint, a sovereign world could hardly be considered "rebellious" for redefining the conditions of its membership in a voluntary organization like the Commonwealth.

*One thing about it, Katy.* Linc resumed their silent conversation with a wry chuckle. *Benedon must be glad she doesn't have a "mindfucker" running her sickbay!*

*True.* Romanova shared her husband's brittle mirth. *Lita certainly wasn't fond of Morthans! But I'll bet the quality of medical care on board Commonwealth ships has gone straight to hell, compared to what it was before.* With Morthan hybrid physicians who could reach into their patients' minds and perceive their emotions practicing in starship sickbays, and in hospitals and clinics all over the Commonwealth (although rarely on Narsai or Kesra), diagnosis of Human ills had been transformed. While Human suspicion of Morthan mental abilities grew stronger with each new generation, instead of abating as the otherwise uncannily *homo sapiens*-like aliens repeatedly proved their utter lack of interest in using those abilities to do harm...Katy tried, now, to remember the first time that she'd heard a Morthan hybrid called "mindfucker" by one of her fellow pure Humans. When had that ugly term come into common use, anyway?

*My mother could remember hearing it when she was a girl, Katy. Even on Mortha, before she married my Human father and left to live with him on Sestus 3.* Linc's thoughts lost their previous trace of ironic humor. *I wish we'd had ships come in from Mortha during the past six months. I'd like to know whether or not there are enough "new Morthans" like me to give my mother's world a chance at defending itself, if what's happening to Narsai right now means there's going to be war after all.*

\* \* \*

*Well, that's probably exactly why the Commonwealth never sent us that replacement comm booster!* Katy answered, with irony enough for two. And with a wave of fierce, protective love sent in her husband's direction, one that carried with it memories of all the times during the past 40 years when she'd been glad he wasn't like the Morthan hybrids born before him. Glad that he, unlike his mother's species and (as far as anyone knew) all of its Human-sired descendants before him, was as capable as any "pure Human" of aggressive

behavior. That he'd been able to serve at her side, through all those years in the Star Service-and that he was with her now, in this new life, as her full and permanent partner. No longer as best friend (although he remained that still), and the most valued and trusted of her subordinates.

*Yes. They didn't want us talking to Mortha, or any other Outworld. "Divide and conquer" is still a valid strategy, after all.* Something distracted Linc's attention then. Something innocuous, though; a child being placed in his arms. One of Dan and Rachel's triplets.

"Talking to Linc?" Katy's father asked, as she refocused her attention outward. When she turned her eyes toward the old man's face, she found it creased into a reassuring smile.

That was one thing for which she had to give her parents nothing but credit. They'd drawn back from her in disapproval after she broke off her betrothal to Johnnie Romanov, and hadn't relented until she and her first husband came to Narsai with three little boys-Ewan a toddler, the twins still infants-and bribed them with their grandchildren. Later, accepting her off-world marriage at last, they'd applied Narsatian family values to her divorcing George Fralick and leaving newborn Maddy with him to grow up in the Fralick home on Kesra. So their daughter was already "outside the pale" as far as Trabe Kourdakov and Cabanne Romanova were concerned, long before Katy took her immorality one step further and remarried. Joining herself to the Morthan hybrid who'd served as her first officer, through all the years she'd been a Star Service captain-and, in her parents' eyes, committing formalized adultery.

Which was no longer the case, with George dead for the past six months. Something she hadn't desired, but when it happened-and not by her hand, thankfully!-she accepted it with vast relief. Now her parents could welcome Linc into their family without reservation, without having to fight their way past their still sincerely held beliefs; and now she had to give them the credit they were due for never holding his heritage against him. They'd liked him and made him welcome, in the days when he was "only" her friend and colleague, and an occasional visitor on Narsai. They showed no disgust now, or fear, or even simple distaste, whenever they detected the couple's telepathic and empathic bond operating in their presence.

Her parents were members of Narsai's elite, with the superb off-world educations and (except where Narsatian mores dictated otherwise) egalitarian values their status implied. More than ever, on this afternoon when her home-world's destiny must soon change forever, Catherine Romanova knew that she was proud to be their daughter.

"Yes," she said, answering Trabe's question. "I'm having the Mistworld ship break orbit and stand by in open space, Dad. Close enough so they can

monitor what's going on down here, but in the clear. I don't want them to be sitting ducks for Commonwealth fire, if that's what Admiral Benedon's got in mind."

"You know that flagship's commander?" Kourdakov asked his daughter. And then added, without letting her reply, "Will they still be within, well, telepath range? Able to lend us a hand if we need it?"

"They'll try to stay that close. But Dad, they're only one ship. I've ordered them to keep themselves alive, if they have to choose. And I'm not sure why they're taking my orders-no one ever put me in command of Mistworld's star fleet!-but they've accepted that one. They'll pull out and run, if necessary." Romanova stared into her father's eyes now. Hating what she'd just told him, and hoping he could see that in her gaze.

"With your boys on board, I hope?" Narsai's senior chair councilor stared back at his only child, accepting brutal truth and complimented that she was offering it to him. "This isn't their fight, Katy. And it especially isn't their hosts' fight. Even though it's been easy for me to forget that those bodies they're walking around in belong to three entirely different young men, each of whom has his own right to go on living."

"They're already on board, Dad." Katy reached briefly for Linc again, and verified that it was so. "They wanted to take us on board with them-our whole family. But I said no. This is our world, and we have to stay with it and do whatever we can to keep it free. Free and sovereign. *If we can.*"

The terminal before them showed a face again. Two faces, actually; those of Narsai's Commissioners of Aquaculture and Public Safety. The "Harbormaster" demanded in his abrupt, bluff way, "Trabe! There you are! Why the hell haven't you called my militia to alert yet? I mean, our militia." He glanced at his companion as he spoke that last sentence; but Mara Ling (who happened to be his wife, anyway) looked far too distressed to notice his choice of possessive pronoun, or to take offense at it if she had.

*Because my daughter didn't tell me I should!* was probably the honest answer, Katy realized as she glanced at her father's chagrined face. He knew so little about providing the kind of leadership Narsai was going to need, during the hours and days soon to come...she waited for his slight nod, not willing to undercut his authority with the pair of commissioners, before she stepped in. "If that battle group's coming to knock us back into line as good members of the Commonwealth," she said, in a firm yet hopefully soothing tone that she'd often used to calm trigger-happy junior officers, "calling out the militia isn't going to stop them, Harbie. It won't even slow them down! But it will give them a chance to eliminate it as a threat, because they'll be able to identify every person you and Mara have started to train. So Dad's not going to be calling them out.

He's going to hold them in reserve, in case we find ourselves under Commonwealth occupation. To form the core of a resistance movement, which is how they can be most useful. If and when we find we need to use them that way."

"Oh." On Mara Ling's face all along, and behind Harbie's bluster of pretended belligerence, there'd been stark terror of doing what was so foreign to most Narsatians-of standing against an enemy, prepared to do battle. Both commissioners' shoulders slumped, now, in relief. "So you'll let us know when we're needed, Trabe? Katy?"

"Absolutely," Romanova said, and smiled at them. The taut, grim smile of a trained and seasoned star-warrior, who if she hadn't been worried sick about noncombatants in harm's way (noncombatants who happened to be her parents, children, and grandchildren!) might well have been enjoying this moment's familiar adrenaline rush. This moment when the images of Harbie and Mara disappeared from the terminal, and that of the Commonwealth battle group replaced them. A battle group that was now dropping out of hyperdrive, and proceeding in-system at maximum sub-light speed.

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