

Regs

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Chapter 1

“You can get out of here now, Rudy. No need to hang around, and have both of us in trouble if this goes bad.”

When I said that to Technical Specialist Tasker, I wasn't a bit sure whether he would take me up on the offer or not. But I owed it to him, to give him an out; bringing me, his team leader, down in one of the *Ishtar's* shuttles didn't guarantee he'd get charged with breaking regulations. He could claim I'd given him a direct order, after all.

I wouldn't be able to make such a claim. I knew what I was doing from the second I began planning this little expedition, and I couldn't even bother to pretend otherwise.

It didn't matter. Either I would come back with my missing team member, my stray lamb as it were; or I wouldn't come back at all, and in either case the consequences of my actions would be mine to suffer.

But Tasker deserved an out, and I was going to give it to him if he wanted it. He stood there staring at me, both of us with our boots crushing the clearing's grass and sending up sharp aromas in the pre-dawn mists, and I could just barely see his face as this world's sun tried to break through and reach us.

He looked so young. Just a kid, with dusky brown skin that hadn't a line on it yet - with big eyes, and full lips that trembled a bit even though he was trying to hide his feelings as young males always think they must.

Why hasn't that changed, in all the hundreds of years since humankind moved outward from Sol?

But maybe it's got nothing to do with gender, after all. Because now that I

think about it, I used to try to appear totally calm, too, when I was Tasker's age.

That was a long time ago.

"How were you going to get back to the ship, ma'am?" Tasker asked me, with just a hint of a much older man's wry humor glinting in his dark brown eyes. "If I was gonna leave you here, I mean."

He was staying, and although I'd felt duty-bound to offer him an honorable escape I was only going to do that once. Because the truth was, I was going to need him in order to complete my self-assigned mission.

Even with him, I probably didn't stand much of a chance; but I was doing what I had to do. A team leader doesn't abandon one of her own, not for any power in the whole universe.

* * *

"If I didn't know already that this planet has people of human descent on it, I'd realize a colony ship had landed cargo here." Tasker said that because he was nervous, and he needed to say something. But he was right. As the sun finally cut through the mists, the clearing where he'd set us down was revealed; and it was a meadow filled with Terran wildflowers.

Black-eyed Susans. Painted daisies, or pyrethrum as they're more properly called. Queen Anne's lace, a pest plant in so many people's minds; but I've always thought its white filigree quite beautiful, even though I realize it never yet found its way onto a colony world by design.

It always finds a way to hitchhike. Like blue chicory, like European yellow flag.

Come to think of it, I've always been partial to those flowers, too.

Down by the stream at the meadow's edge, I could see clumps of something scarlet. Cardinal flower, or bee balm? The forest in this temperate latitude was part conifer, part deciduous; and the rhododendrons setting buds for the next spring's far-off blooms made me slightly homesick for my native Rigel 5.

"The people are why Cranshaw's in trouble," I said to Tasker, as we started the short hike from this concealed landing site to a traveled road and - hopefully, soon after that - civilization as the locals knew it. "Damn all anthropologists for idiots, anyway! What did he think he was going to learn, that was worth risking getting caught on the wrong side of a shifting border?"

I was blandly ignoring, of course, the obvious reality that Tasker and I were taking the same risk. And that when Marcus Cranshaw obtained clearance for his ill-advised one-man recon, he at least got that approval properly (something he must have damned well known wouldn't have happened if I'd

been on board the *Ishtar*, but that's another story!).

I was on my own now, and Tasker with me. Of which reality my tech spec didn't know better than to remind me out loud. "Ms. Falconi, it's been twice that long since Dr. Cranshaw disappeared. And we'll be in Ast territory if we're still here in twelve more hours," the kid said, looking at me again with those innocent eyes of his. "The border shifts at 1700, Standard Shipboard Time."

I knew that, and he knew I knew it, and telling him so was only going to make it hard for me not to yell at him. Which he didn't deserve, not when he was risking a life he'd only just started to live by staying here with me - on top of risking the career he was also just beginning, even if we did get out of here alive. Even if we did succeed in finding our team mate; and if, when we'd found Marc Cranshaw, we were able to rescue him.

That was assuming a hell of a lot, and I couldn't afford to get excited during my first hour on the ground. Not when a single tech spec, one almost as green as the moss of the forest through which we were now padding, was all the backup I either had or could hope to have until this mission was over.

Mission? Well, I couldn't think of anything better to call it, even though certainly no one had assigned it to me.

Instead of shouting at Tasker I said in my mildest tone, "Rudy, I told you when you first got assigned to me that I don't mind 'Falconi' and I don't mind 'Nora.' But anyone who calls me 'ma'am' or 'Ms.' or 'team leader' on the ground like this, is apt to get my ass shot off for me. Don't do it again. Okay?"

I guess he hadn't thought I was serious, back when I told him that originally; and on board ship, I don't mind a bit of formality. He looked at me just before we had to step out of the sheltering trees, onto the shoulder of the macadam road that was our immediate destination, and he nodded as if he'd only just grasped that I meant what I'd been saying to him. "Okay," he responded, in a light baritone that no longer seemed like too much voice for someone his age. "Nora."

We soon left the forest behind us, and before we'd been squinting against the day's now brilliant early sunlight for more than a few seconds' time one of Class M Planet 8055's internal combustion powered vehicles (stinking appallingly of the fossil fuel that it burned) pulled to a stop just after passing us. An elderly man leaned out of an open window and shouted, in words that thanks to proper preparation of my brain's language center actually made good sense to me, "Where are you two tryin' to go? Ya want a lift?"

We did. We crawled into the cramped cockpit (no, it was properly called a cab!) of his vehicle with him, and the old man opened the throttle again and we were on our way.

* * *

“Nothin’ much open yet, but I suppose you know that,” our driver said as we bounced along. “What’s your name, son?”

This was one reason for me to be glad Tasker had decided to come along. What I knew of this world (gleaned from a very fast read-through of Marc Cranshaw’s database) told me that a woman traveling alone was going to spend much of her time explaining herself, or perhaps even defending her right to retain her freedom of movement.

Tasker’s presence solved that problem for me. He’d done his own read-through of Marc’s data on this culture, and I’d given him a role to play; a cover identity to use. He said easily now, “Rudolf Tasker, sir. This is my sister, Nora Cranshaw. We’re looking for her husband.”

We could use our own names here, which was going to simplify things immeasurably. Once, centuries ago, our ancestors and these people’s forebears had spoken the same tongue. There had been enough drift so that without preparation we would have had great difficulty communicating, but proper names were still similar enough so that ours just needed to be given the correct local pronunciation.

And if I wanted to have guaranteed access to Marc when we located him (when, not if!), I needed to use his surname. That would let me identify myself as his spouse...which I wasn’t, of course. Just his boss, his team leader. But on this world, I would have to play a role in order to function effectively.

In order to survive, actually.

“Banks,” the old man said, and it was his name. “Pleased to know you, Tasker.”

Me, he ignored. Tasker wasn’t violating any rules of courtesy by giving my name as well as his own, but he hadn’t been required to acknowledge that I had one. In which case our driver would have assumed that I was Tasker’s wife.

Good thinking, Rudy. It wouldn’t hurt to mention our mission up front, because this friendly local might be able to help. To point us in the right direction, anyway. To get us started.

And besides, Rudy wasn’t all that experienced at field work. If Cranshaw had to in order to keep our covers unbroken, he would do anything short of killing me to conform to local customs. Up to and including knock me flat, in perfect portrayal of a husband disciplining his wife in a misogynistic society. But Rudy Tasker, poor kid, was finding it hard even to treat me discourteously. I hoped he wasn’t going to wind up getting me killed, before this was over.

Chapter 2

A small town police station looks and feels like a small town police station, no matter what its developmental era and no matter where in the galaxy it's located. This one was in a neat building of reddish bricks (that I suspected really had been made by firing clay), a building that had three stories and was therefore the tallest one in sight.

Most of this community was built from wood, and its houses were sprawling one-story affairs. Banks let us off at the “public safety,” as he called it, before he drove on to an open-air market whose stalls were being set up on a gravel-surfaced lot further down the town's main street.

The back of his truck was filled with produce, piles of round vegetables (or were they fruits?) that looked a lot like Terran eggplants. In which case, I was glad I wasn't going to have to eat any of them.

I hate anything that's got seeds in the middle of it, if they're seeds that the diner is expected to eat. Yech!

I wondered what happened if a woman had to be arrested, on this world? Because when we went inside the station, my “brother” Rudy and I, we saw not one single female face.

I'd glimpsed several women on the lot where the market stalls were being erected. But each of them, I now realized, had been in company with a man. There'd been no lone woman, nor any groups of women.

I already knew that about this society, and certainly it wasn't the first one I'd encountered where a larger and stronger (physically speaking) class dominated another whose members were smaller and weaker. And often, in

societies with human ancestors, I'd found that this translated into "the men dominate the women."

So why was it bothering me here? Really bothering me, as if this time I'd decided to take it personally?

Well, I couldn't let myself do that. I was a professional, and this was my job. The same one I'd had since I was Tasker's age: doing on-the-ground evaluations of unfamiliar worlds with sentient populations, so that Survey Central could determine whether or not each new planet's people should be contacted directly. Those we found to be sufficiently advanced (in both cultural and technological terms) were offered diplomatic relations, and opportunities for trade. Those that weren't ready for such contacts, our bosses scheduled for further clandestine study; but essentially we left them alone, to develop however they would for additional years, or decades, or even centuries.

It was always a challenging job, one that was filled with constant surprises - some of them dangerous ones! It also yielded to us "survey ops" a whole range of intangible, yet positively addictive intellectual rewards.

Tasker was speaking. The man behind the counter at the public safety was listening, and then he was answering.

He was a thin fellow, taller than Rudy but not nearly as wide through the shoulders. He was probably my age or even older, which in a culture with rather primitive medical knowledge meant he was getting on. He gave me a kind look, and that surprised me. Old Banks had somehow managed to look right past me, whenever he glanced in Tasker's direction.

"Hmmm. The only man that's been around here that no one knew, for the past few weeks anyhow, would have to be the one that was in a wreck up on the ridge. You hang on a minute, I'll call the hospital."

He reached for a device that had a mouthpiece and an earpiece, each connected by insulated wires to something that functioned as a stand for both. Oh, yes. This world's communications still depended almost entirely on wires. Analog technology.

Tin cans with a string in between, as one of my old professors used to characterize this stage of development. But they went right along with furnishings like the ones in this reception room, furnishings upholstered with cured animal hides. With vehicles whose parts were just barely mass-produced (no wonder there weren't very many available for private use, which of course was the only reason this planet didn't have a huge air pollution problem due to those nasty fossil fuel powered engines!). With glass, glass that could be broken, in this building's windows. With automated devices for creating documents and for performing mathematical calculations, but without anything in sight that could be called a computer - no matter how primitive.

“Have you got a picture?”

Tasker thrust a two-dee of Cranshaw (which I already had from a previous mission, or I'd never have been able to get one made up in time for this caper) at the policeman, who nodded absently and pushed it away.

“Hospital's down the road,” he said as he put the comm device's two ends back onto their rack. “Take the picture there.”

Clearly this interview was over. The people of this culture weren't unhelpful, in fact in their own way they were kind to strangers; but they didn't waste time, and they didn't waste words.

That was okay with me. Time was what Tasker and I didn't have, thanks to that Ast treaty and the cretins who had negotiated it.

* * *

A hospital, with no women in evidence? This even I couldn't believe, but I was seeing it - so I had to believe it.

All of the clerical workers in the hospital's business office, where we were asked to wait, were men. There weren't many of them, though, because in this culture recorded documentation wasn't worshipped the way it always has been in ours. This was a world where oral traditions were given precedence - where if the equivalent of one of our judicial officers had to choose between a so-called “paper trail” (even an ironclad one) and the testimony of a person, the spoken testimony would be accepted every time.

I wondered how they handled billing for medical care, and then remembered that this was a hard currency and barter economy. Their medium of exchange was known to us from remote, preliminary monitoring, and I thought it likely that insurance was an unknown concept. So if you couldn't pay for your care...hey, just what did happen to you, anyway?

Marc had been in a vehicular accident. That meant he might have been badly hurt. And while he had certainly been carrying a supply of local currency (he was an old hand, who always did his homework), would he have had enough on him to compensate a hospital for medical care following a serious injury? And even if he was carrying enough money, would the people who picked him up and brought him here have let him keep it? In some cultures, taking all valuables from a casualty of a transportation mishap wasn't even considered dishonest. It was only what you were supposed to do.

No, that wasn't true here. This culture valued hospitality toward strangers, and my own experiences thusfar confirmed what my rapid digesting of Marc's database had told me.

I felt better, remembering that. I wondered whether Tasker had had the

same doubts occur to him, decided that he hadn't, and envied him for being so young and so innocent of everything that could go wrong within the next few minutes.

I wished I didn't have to hide behind the façade of his masculinity, and then decided I was glad I could do so because it left me free to observe this place and these people while Tasker did the talking.

He had just finished explaining our plight to a graying man behind a finely finished desk in the private office to which we at last were ushered (on anyone's world, an office and desk like these signified authority sufficient to command a few genuine privileges!), and the doctor was getting ready to reply. "Well. Yes," he said, after looking carefully at the two-dee of Marc. "We treated him. He couldn't talk straight. Seemed confused, as if he knew what he wanted to say but couldn't remember the right words. We can't keep mental cases here, not after we've patched up everything that's wrong physically, and he was a charity case besides."

He uttered the word "charity" with a delicate hint of disdain. Clearly hospitality was important here, but so was being able to pay one's own way. Cranshaw hadn't been able to do that.

No matter. I didn't give a damn about making these people proud to know me. I just cared about finding Marc and getting him on board the shuttle, while we could still hope to make it out of here.

"So where'd you send him?" Tasker was doing well, very well, with the local speech.

A good kid. If he lived, he'd make one hell of a full-fledged survey op someday.

"Pine Valley. That's farther up into the mountains, almost a whole day's road trip. The office will have to charge for it if you want to call ahead."

Oh, yes. With analog communications, it was simple and cheap to call people nearby - and progressively more difficult and expensive to contact those who were more distant. Even a day's journey, which could take as long as twelve hours in standard terms, was far enough so that special communications charges must be levied.

Not only did we lack sufficient currency to start by wasting it; we weren't going to travel to this "Pine Valley" place by road. Our best bet would be to thank this fellow sweetly, get the hell out of his hospital, and head back to our shuttle.

As soon as Tasker acquired enough information about Pine Valley's location so that we could plot the right landing coordinates, of course. A day's journey by internal combustion vehicle, over macadam road snaking uphill, would be nothing for us.

And we wouldn't have the problem of transporting Cranshaw back from Pine Valley, either, once we got hold of him.

* * *

Chapter 3

“Nora,” Tasker said to me softly, as we walked down the village’s main street toward the open-air market. Hopefully we could bum a ride back up the road to a place near our shuttle, since most of the vendors at the market had arrived there in private vehicles.

The shoppers were hiking in. Later in the day it might be easier to hitch a lift, when the vendors were through and were ready to break down their stalls; but we couldn’t wait around for that to happen. We’d have to try it now, and hope not to find ourselves hiring a driver (which would be blatantly unusual, not just mildly so, in this place where we already stood out as strangers). We couldn’t hoof it all the way back whence we’d come, not unless we wanted to retrieve Cranshaw sometime tomorrow instead of later today. This world’s vehicles were primitive and smelly, but they were a hell of a lot faster than walking.

“Uh,” I said, or rather grunted, in response. I had an idea that even if she was his older sister, a man in this culture didn’t talk much to a woman in public. No one else was listening, of course, but I wanted to stay in character.

“What’ll the Ast do with this planet, when they move in?”

A nice question. I didn’t know, and I was willing to bet that none of the diplomats who’d decided to sacrifice it knew the answer, either. What they did know was that the Ast had agreed to cede us three captured systems that were industrially advanced and strategically important, in exchange for abandoning all our rights in this sector...even though this sector also contained a planet that had humans living on it. Humans who had separated themselves from the rest of

us centuries ago, and who therefore had no more claim to our protection than did any other sentient beings with whom we had no previously established ties.

It was appalling, was my thought on the subject. I firmly believed that no world, human or alien, deserved to be abandoned to the Ast. But the diplomats hadn't asked me, of course! We'd just got this oft-disputed sector secured, had only moved ships like the *Ishtar* (which wasn't designed for assault missions, but for a wider range of tactical and exploratory ventures) into it during the past year or so. I had been anticipating getting orders for a mission on this very planet, whose preliminary work-up had been completed by the remote monitoring specialists, when I'd left to attend that wretched conference. And while I was gone, the peace treaty's terms were announced...the cultural and technological survey of Class M Planet 8055 got erased from the *Ishtar*'s roster of upcoming missions...and Marc Cranshaw, blast and damn the man, took off on his own.

"I don't know," I said bluntly, when Tasker made a small throat-clearing noise and I realized my uninterested little grunt wasn't going to stop him from pressing until he got a reply to his question. "No one's ever seen an Ast, Rudy. They like the same kind of real estate we do, is all I know about them. All anyone knows."

"How can that be true? Weren't there bodies found after any of our battles with them? Or captured ships, or prisoners?"

There hadn't been; but Tasker was a recent arrival from a far-off sector where there had never been an Ast threat. I said patiently, since although we were getting near the market we were still far enough away so we couldn't be overheard, "They blew themselves to space dust, Rudy. Every time. You'd have thought that even if they were that xenophobic, they'd have failed once in awhile - that at least one captain would have died before he, or she, or whatever, could get self-destruct set - but it didn't happen like that. So no, our people have never seen an Ast. And if the Ast have anything to say about it, I guess none of us ever will."

That, of course, was driving Tasker nuts. And me along with him, and everyone else whose job description included exploring new worlds and meeting new kinds of people.

Xenophobes always drove the likes of us crazy, but these so-called "Ast" were just ridiculous.

And their secretiveness, of course, also made them scary as hell.

* * *

"Father says I can take you and your brother to where you need to go."

The woman was actually a girl, by the standards of my culture. Seventeen or eighteen standard years old, perhaps? She wasn't bad looking to my eyes (or, I suspected, to Tasker's eyes either), but the almost zero attention she was getting from other people in the marketplace made me suspect that she was either plain or downright homely by her own people's reckoning. Or, perhaps, socially outcast?

She was pregnant. Not too far along, but enough to show in a way that I couldn't mistake for chubbiness.

She was pregnant, and she was in a public place in company with her father. By this world's customs, it didn't add up. It didn't add up at all.

And she could drive? There probably weren't any rules against it (this world didn't go in for the licensing regulations that are common among most human societies), but women here generally didn't perform such tasks. Didn't even know how, because of their "protected" status.

"Get back here as fast as you can, though!" the middle-aged man who was her father growled. Although his voice and his facial expression were both appropriately sour, his eyes were kind and soft.

This was a man who loved his daughter, whether or not anyone else did. And it was a love that he thought he was taking great care to conceal.

"Come!" The girl was still addressing me, and that made her the first native to do so since I'd arrived on this world. Which probably meant that she was being polite, by not presuming to speak to Tasker.

Who was staring at her. I would have to find an excuse to kick him, or poke him, and hope he'd get the message when I did so.

* * *

She not only knew how to drive; she did it with a great deal more facility than old Banks had possessed. And that was fortunate, since traveling uphill and back out of the valley afforded far more opportunities for mishap (or just plain jerky handling of one's passengers) than had the downhill ride.

She asked me my name; I told her the one I was using, the combo of my own given name and Cranshaw's surname. She asked where my husband was, since she knew at a glance that Tasker was too young, and I told her. "In Pine Valley, we think, whatever that is - a place for insane people? Marcus was in an accident, and the man at your hospital told us he came out of it unable to speak sensibly. So they transferred him, and we're going to get him and take him home."

"Yes, Pine Valley's a place for insane *people*," the girl said, with disgust in her voice that seemed related to the word she'd emphasized. Which wasn't

“insane,” as I would have expected if I’d been seeing this conversation in transcript form instead of hearing it as it unfolded. “Men who are crazy, of course. Women are given rest if they start going that way. You really are a stranger here, aren’t you, Nora Cranshaw?”

“Given rest? What does that mean?” Tasker spoke up from the other side of the cab. Once again, I’d been sandwiched into the middle.

He was right. What our guide had said wasn’t that phrase exactly the way our quickie language absorption had taught it to us. There was a difference in nuance, one that might be important. Had to be important, actually, because that phrase had been used repeatedly in the broadcast recordings that our experts had collected and had used to decipher 8055’s language and build the beginnings of a cultural database. A cultural database that we, the first survey team to ground here, would augment with everything we learned (even though we hadn’t arrived under at all the usual circumstances).

“What do you think it means?” She wasn’t supposed to speak to Tasker except in response to a direct question, yet our driver (who still hadn’t told us her own name, although we’d learned that her father was called Alcorn) didn’t hesitate to communicate her annoyance.

“We’re strangers, as you say, so I’m guessing. I understand that around here, a woman who’s too old to bear more children retires. If I’m not being too blunt, she moves out of her husband’s bed.” Tasker was thinking fast, yet choosing his words carefully. “Did I misunderstand? Does it work differently from how I thought it did?”

“It sure is different than you thought. ‘Given rest’ means killed. A woman who’s borne her last child is useless, so why would any man in his right mind go on feeding her?” Our driver followed that question with a small and contemptuous snort. Or was it one of sarcasm?

I couldn’t tell for sure, but I had a feeling I’d just heard her reciting a well-learned lesson in tones of thinly disguised parody.

She pulled the truck to the roadside, at the landmark I’d described as our destination. She turned to me, and she said bluntly, “You’re from beyond the sky. So is your lost friend, and once you find him you’re going to take him and go back to the place where you came from. A place where women your age have all their teeth, Nora Cranshaw, and I don’t know of anywhere on my world that’s like that! If I help you get your friend out of Pine Valley alive, will you take me with you? My father wants you to. That’s why he let me bring you here.”

* * *

“Maybe you ought to start by telling me your name.” At her words I had frozen, absolutely frozen with surprise, for what was only the sixth or seventh time in my whole career. But I was coming out of it now, and since I couldn’t imagine a way this slip of a pregnant girl could threaten us - either one of us! - I was elbowing Tasker now, in a silent order for him to get his ass out of the truck.

Of course we couldn’t take her with us. Of course we weren’t going to admit to being what we were, no matter how accurately she had just guessed our origin.

It wasn’t unexpected that some people on this world might retain a belief in other planets, other humans who lived in a “beyond the sky” realm that was real rather than spiritual. But we weren’t here to convince the natives of anything, and we certainly weren’t supposed to be interacting with them except within the false identities we’d created.

We sure as hell couldn’t take this kid, this pregnant kid, anywhere.

But I wanted to tell her that gently, because I did feel sorry for her. I felt sorry for everyone who had to live in this society, and especially for this fellow female who was so clearly not a bit reconciled to the short and brutal character of the life that lay before her.

“Mira,” she said, in answer. “And you’ll take me with you, because I don’t belong here any more than you do.”

The next thing I heard was something I wasn’t supposed to hear on this planet. The sounds made by a vehicle that flew.

But what in the name of all holy things *was* it? It had two sets of wings, rigid wings, and it made the same hideous racket that the truck’s engine had made - so it was an internal combustion, fossil-fuel powered device. I knew that I’d seen pictures of similar vehicles, in history texts...but seeing an actual biplane in the sky over my head was quite another thing, from seeing one buzzing politely along in a tridee tank or across a twodee screen.

“What the hell’s that doing here?” I made a decision, a fast one, because the girl Mira clearly wasn’t shocked. She was waving, in fact! Standing clear of the truck and the roadside trees, semaphoring her thin arms and grinning wildly.

I still didn’t know what she’d meant, a moment ago, by declaring that she belonged to this place (to this world?) no more than we did - but now I was sure there was substance behind her words.

* * *

“A biplane?” Tasker liked old hardware, so he’d recognized the bloody thing instantly. But he knew just as well as I did that it had no business to be here. This culture used electricity, generated locally (no massive regional power grids

existed); it had motorized transportation; and it had mass production of some goods. Its communications system depended primarily on hard-wired connections, with only limited broadcast capabilities. It had no air travel except what was possible by hot-air balloon, not even the most experimental kind. People here actually didn't believe that heavier-than-air flight could be achieved.

Well, they hadn't believed it was possible, anyway. Until when?

"We can go now! My father just made sure I was still with you, and I told him I'm safe! He'll send someone for the truck later." Mira turned toward me, with her below-the-knee skirt swirling around her legs and with an excited flush on her young face. "So where is your flying machine? As soon as you rescue your friend from Pine Valley, are we going to take it up beyond the sky? Into space?"

* * *

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