

Rough Rider

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Chapter 1

“No! I won’t leave him here! I can’t do this—please don’t make me do this!” It was her own frantic voice that woke her, not her companion’s presence; but the moment Captain Joy Grant opened her eyes she was aware of not being alone, and she was grateful that she’d ignored protocol tonight and had allowed her chief medical officer to go sleep by her side instead of sending him back to his own quarters at evening’s end.

He wasn’t sleeping now, of course. No one could have slept through the racket she’d just been making, but John Woodlawn had waited patiently for Grant to rouse herself and now he was ready to gather her into his arms and hold her close while she trembled and fought down the last vestiges of her nightmare’s panic. Only when she finally relaxed against him did he ask her gently, “The same dream, Joy?”

“Exactly the same. I’ve had it every night since we changed course, and each time I get a little further into it before I wake up.” Grant shuddered, glad she’d been on intimate terms with this man for more than long enough so that she had no hesitation about being this honest (and this vulnerable) with him. He had come aboard the *St. Petersburg* with her when she had taken command of her most recent starship two years earlier, he newly widowed after a happy (although often absentee) twenty-year marriage; she in all ways but one the quintessential never-married-except-to-the-ship Star Guard captain, whose long-term relationship with an Arian civilian research scientist had just broken up and had left her feeling far more adrift than she’d expected (or than she’d cared to admit, even to herself).

They were old friends anyway, though, were Joy Grant and John Woodlawn. They'd been at the Academy at the same time, he serving as her senior mentor during her plebe year; they'd stayed in touch throughout their careers; and they'd served together on another starship that had also found its way to Zorti, nineteen years earlier when Woodlawn's marriage had been young and when Grant wouldn't have looked at him twice as anything but a friend because someone else had occupied the most special place in her heart and in her life.

Someone she'd just been dreaming about, again. Someone she'd left behind on Zorti, the first human to die there on the world where the second Earth colony on a true M-class planet had been established during the years since then.

"I'm your doctor, you know," Woodlawn reminded his captain now, but his tone was mild rather than insistent. He let her go without trying to hold her when she moved out of his arms and lay back against her pillow, the bedclothes clasped over her breasts by arms that were still faintly moist with the perspiration of dream-inspired panic. "I could insist that you tell me about it..."

"The hell you could," Grant answered him; and although her lips twisted into a wry grin, no warmth made it as far as her blue-gray eyes. "But do I really have to tell you, Woody? You were there nineteen years ago. You know what I'm reliving whenever I have that dream. What's the point of putting us both through my telling it to you like some kind of badly written horror novel?"

"The point might be to help you stop having the dream every night," Woodlawn observed dryly. "You didn't seem to be enjoying it much, so I thought you might like to unload it. Or unload the baggage that's causing it, is what I meant to say. Why not, Joy? You said it, I was there-so there can't be anything you need to hide from me."

"Don't be too sure about that, Woody." Again that twisted, completely unhumorous grin distorted Grant's mouth. She was no beauty, never had been; but in her mid-forties she usually had an air of calm certainty that gave her perfectly average face a comfortable attractiveness whenever she wasn't finding it necessary to stare down an enemy or scare hell out of a difficult crew member.

Woodlawn remembered her as an Academy cadet who was still filled with adolescent uncertainties, as a junior officer who hadn't yet learned that it wasn't necessary for her to take herself far too seriously in order to command respect; and as a youthful executive officer on a ship much smaller, much less technologically advanced than the *St. Pete*, which would have taken twice as long to make a direct passage from Earth to Zorti and which had been heading into the utterly unknown instead of visiting today's well-established colony there. That young exec had really been pretty whenever she'd smiled, but of

course in those days her smile had reached her eyes almost every time she'd worn it.

The mature woman might have been beautiful tonight, if she hadn't long ago forgotten how to smile like that. She laughed at jokes like other human beings, she apparently enjoyed all the normal pleasures-eating, drinking, working hard, making love-but Woodlawn hadn't seen those expressive blue-gray eyes of hers fully include themselves in her smile since they'd taken the old *Rough Rider* away from Zorti after being the first humans to land on that world, all those years ago now. As far as he knew she hadn't smiled like that even once since she'd left someone behind on Zorti who had been capable of making her light up like a Terran sunrise.

Hell, of course she wasn't going to talk to him about it. She'd allowed herself to be debriefed after her return to Earth nineteen years earlier, she'd talked to the press about all the conventional things that an explorer was expected to discuss and describe-and as soon as some other drama had diverted the media's attention from the discovery of Zorti, she'd plainly been thankful to be allowed to stop talking about it and hadn't willingly done so since. Except maybe to the child that had been born to her eight months after that discovery, the child she had just learned that she was carrying when she'd had no choice but to presume its father dead and to leave his body unrecovered somewhere on the alien world of which he had afterward been immortalized as discoverer.

An appropriate fate, perhaps, for Kirkland Gambol Rogers. How they'd joked about having an uppercrust dandy of a young captain for a ship called *Rough Rider*! It had seemed so poetically suitable before they'd realized their "discovered" world already had a name, by which its native inhabitants called it, that *Rough Rider*'s officers had humorously suggested it should be dubbed "New Cuba" and that its highest elevation should be named "San Juan Hill."

Those high spirits of theirs had come crashing down soon enough, though. Although Joy Grant had since then risen in rank from lieutenant to full captain, although she'd commanded a succession of increasingly larger and more powerful starships and although the son she'd borne eighteen years earlier had grown into an intelligent and good-looking man of whom she had every right to be proud, it was her old friend John Woodlawn's opinion that she had left much more than a lover down there among the telepathic natives of Zorti. She'd left something behind that had by its absence changed her forever, and although Woodlawn had come to love her more dearly than ever during the months since she'd first allowed him to share her bed he was always aware even when they were closest to each other both physically and emotionally that something essential was absent from their times together. There was some part of her that he was not touching because she wasn't in touch with it herself, or (a cold

thought that horrified him whenever he permitted himself to entertain it briefly) because that part of her was gone, not just concealed. Really gone, destroyed, literally and not just figuratively sacrificed on the altar of initial contact with an unknown and in its terribly innocent way absolutely deadly alien species.

“Woody, I’m sorry-this is going to sound awfully unfair-but I need you to go back to your quarters now,” Grant said, managing to use her command voice without looking or sounding ridiculous given their current circumstances. Two naked lovers in a bed, and she was giving an order like the Star Guard captain she was and she plainly was expecting to be obeyed. “I know I said you could stay, but now I really have to be alone for awhile.”

“All right.” Woodlawn wasn’t sure whether he was agreeing because he wanted to give her what she needed, or whether he was a chief medical officer obeying his captain; and it didn’t matter, because he’d long since given up worrying about it when the lines between official and private relationship became blurred. Such things were inevitable when men and women served together in confined spaces over months, sometimes years, out of contact with others of their own kind except their shipmates. The old “nonfraternization regulations” had been sent to the junk pile decades earlier, and as long as mature adults used discretion there was no need to be afraid of discovery because no one really gave a damn what anyone else did in privacy. Not even when “anyone else” was the ship’s captain, and when her relationship was with one of her own senior officers.

It hadn’t been against regs for something like this to happen, even as long ago as *Rough Rider’s* return from Zorti; but when Grant’s by then obvious pregnancy had caused the intimate relationship that had existed between captain and exec to become part of the exploratory starship’s story as covered by the media, the brass at Guard Command had been embarrassed and they’d frowned even though they could not openly censure. Woodlawn was well aware that between unofficial but decided disapproval from her superiors and hysterics from Kirk Rogers’s wealthy, widowed and possessive mother Joy Grant had had hell to pay for returning first to base and then to Earth pregnant with her dead captain’s son. That was one good reason why he never pressed her for more than she was willing to give him now, despite the passage of almost two decades and despite the fact that he was a staff officer and therefore about the safest possible partner she could have chosen from a protect-the-chain-of-command standpoint.

Nevertheless he was disappointed at being asked to leave her now, when he’d waited so long and so patiently for tonight’s invitation to come. To wake up beside a loved one again, after missing that every morning since Mae’s death!

Oh, well, he’d done without that pleasure more mornings than not even

while Mae had lived; he'd been serving on starships and she had been teaching school back home on Earth during most of their married life. As for waking up beside Joy Grant some morning, he still had confidence that it would happen sooner or later-provided that he was patient and cooperative now, provided that he didn't make her feel pushed for what she so plainly was not yet ready to give him.

So he got out of her bed now, dressed with the uncomfortable feeling that she wanted him gone so intensely that she'd have winked him out of existence if that had been within her power rather than tolerate the delay caused by his need to don his clothing, and bent to kiss her goodnight even though he wondered whether she really wanted him to do so. "Go back to sleep if you can, Joy," he said, and smoothed dark brown hair that was just showing its first silver threads back from her forehead. "You've still got the medicine I prescribed?"

"Yes, and I haven't taken it once and I don't intend to start tonight." She was feeling repentant, maybe even downright guilty; she put up a hand and caressed his cheek. He noticed that she was very careful to keep the bedclothes tucked securely and concealingly around her body, very careful indeed to avoid doing anything that might look like an invitation or just a reversal of her decision that he should leave. "I'll be fine, Woody. I need to think, that's all. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I never met a captain who didn't spend a lot of time alone, if that's what you mean," he answered her, and kissed her again. "It seems to go with the rank. Predisposition or consequence, I don't know-but I guess it means you're normal and I don't need to worry about you, as your physician or as your lover. Good night, darling. I'll see you tomorrow sometime, I hope."

"You know damned well you will, *St. Pete's* not that big a ship!" Grant laughed ruefully and took her hand away from her lover's face. "Good night, then."

When had she ever used an endearment to address him, even in their most private and intimate moments? Never, Woodlawn thought with astonishment as he let himself out of the captain's quarters and walked to the nearest lift. The ship's passageways were quiet at this hour; there were on-duty crews at work, of course, in every department that required 24-hour coverage, but generally there was little corridor traffic at 0200. Even though he would not have needed to be embarrassed, would not have dreamed of trying to explain himself if he'd encountered anyone, he was still somehow relieved to make it all the way down to sickbay and his own adjacent cabin without having to politely greet anyone on his way.

He wasn't feeling polite. He'd just got through telling his captain he wasn't worried about her, and now he was making himself a liar-and he had no more

hope of going back to sleep than she'd had, so he made himself a hot brandy and he sat in a chair and stared out a viewport instead of undressing and lying down again.

He sat there and remembered Zorti as they'd discovered it nineteen years earlier; and he knew perfectly well that six decks above him in her own quarters, Captain Grant was doing exactly the same thing. The only problem was that although he'd "been there," just as she'd said, he had not physically or telepathically witnessed the most critical moments as she had done; had not been a command officer, had not been able to share fully in her pain and her responsibility. So he had no illusions that his recollections could bring him any clue as to what in hers could be causing that disquiet, could be making her dreams so disturbed and her waking hours so tense-ever more so, he thought as he mused, with each day that brought the *St. Petersburg* closer to Zorti and its newest mystery.

I just hope you can solve it this time, Joy, Woodlawn thought as he nursed his drink and his memories simultaneously and waited for the infuriatingly cheerful voice of his chrono-alarm to tell him that the night was over and he was free to start his day. *I hope so for your sake, and for mine.*

* * *

Chapter 2

They'd found a whole new world, that rarity which the scientists called an "M-class" planet. What that actually meant, Lieutenant Joy Grant knew, was that this world was like Earth and like her native Siloam: it had the proper combination of atmosphere, gravity, solar warmth, water and vegetation so that it could support human life without the need for artificial habitats or for any sort of so-called "terraforming." It also lacked any factor such as excessive radiation from its sun that would make it an unacceptably dangerous place for humans to settle. What it had that Siloam had lacked at the time of its first settlement some sixty-three Terran standard years earlier, though, was a very large complication: it had an indigenous population, and for that reason the proper course of action for Captain Kirk Rogers must be to discreetly collect data from a distance and then to return his ship to its base-or at least to a comm relay station from which he would be able to contact Guard Command and ask for further instructions.

Well, the captain was collecting data, all right; and so far *Rough Rider* was holding a distance near enough so that its powerful long-range sensors could function, but far enough out in the new world's star system so that anyone watching from the planet's surface would have seen nothing more than one more piece of celestial junk floating by. The satellites that orbited the planet were dead as could be, declared both *Rough Rider's* comm officer and the ops officer who ran the sensors with the greatest skill (indeed, with an almost eerie sensitivity at times). So the question was:

"Kirk, do you think the native population actually put those satellites into

orbit?" Executive Officer Grant used both her privilege of addressing the young captain by his given name, and her privilege of asking him the questions no one else dared to ask but that everyone else was surely thinking, if she could tell anything at all by the puzzled and eager faces that were gathered on the exploratory starship's bridge even though it was late evening by ship's time and only Beta Shift should have been present because Alpha's day was over and Gamma wasn't yet quite due to come on duty. Instead every bridge officer who'd been able to manufacture an excuse, no matter how flimsy, was present and the off-duty shift people were annoying their on-duty counterparts by leaning over shoulders and panels and muttering distractedly (and distractingly) as the drama of discovery unfolded before them.

Grant had considered exercising her perfect right to evict anyone and everyone who wasn't part of Beta Shift, but certainly neither she nor Captain Rogers would normally have been on the bridge at this hour; and although this was a time when she could perfectly well justify her own presence while refusing to let other off-shift personnel remain, she hated to think of requiring even one of those eager youngsters to retreat from the heart of the excitement that was what had called most of them into this dangerous profession to begin with. As long as the ship's functions and its data gathering were both proceeding without undue difficulty, she was inclined to let the off-duty people stay for the party; and when she'd locked silent glances with her captain on the subject, she had received a clear assent from him.

Hell, even the ship's young physician was on the bridge by now. John Woodlawn, M.D.; Lieutenant, the only other full lieutenant aboard besides Joy Grant. The ship's other officers were j.g.'s and ensigns, and while not one of them was a first-timer to deep space (this type of exploration was too risky to allow truly green officers aboard) they were all very young-average age, 23 standard years-and filled with the boundless energy and equally boundless capacity for excitement that went with their youthfulness.

Captain Rogers answered his exec's question while squinting at the small readout panel on the console that rose up to separate their chairs. He said, "I'd guess that they didn't, Joy. I'd guess that the people we're reading down on the planet's surface have a rather primitive lifestyle; there are no large buildings, although the population appears to be settled rather than nomadic it's scattered over the temperate and tropical zones and it's in clusters more like tribes or villages instead of being concentrated into cities; and none of that points to the technological capability for building and launching satellites."

"So did they once have that kind of technology and then lose it, to a war or a plague or some other planetwide disaster? Or were the satellites placed in orbit by some other race-visitors, or other now-extinct natives of this world?" Grant

wondered aloud, as she stared just as raptly at the same information that Rogers was scanning and absorbing.

She could keep up with him, and that took doing. For all the differences in their backgrounds—he the child of Terran privilege, who'd entered the Academy after graduating from the finest prep school on the mother planet; she the colonial brat who'd had to arrive on Earth a year early in order to catch up academically before trying to pass the Academy entrance exams—they were intellectual equals, and Kirk Rogers hadn't a snobbish atom in his brain. He'd done as her fellow officers always did on first acquaintance, of course, and had more or less discreetly tested Grant's abilities after the first time he'd heard her speak with her last remaining (and absolutely indestructible, dammit!) trace of Siloam accent; but he'd been fair in his assessment, and once he was certain she was as qualified as her record indicated he'd given her both the personal respect and the professional backing that she needed in order to establish herself as his first officer.

On one level she had to admit that the testing just because of that faint accent had annoyed her, but on another level she knew that it was inevitable and that she should be thankful for his fairness once she'd passed his scrutiny. There were plenty of Guard officers who didn't give colonists acceptance under any circumstances. They might be obliged by regulations to work with those born on Siloam, or at least reared there from such an early age that the colonists' distinctiveness of speech had become ingrained; but they did not have to like or accept the colonists, and there was nothing worse than having to work for and with a commanding officer who just plain didn't like you. Didn't like you not because of anything you'd said or done, or even because of anything you were; but just because of where you'd lived while you were learning to use language. So Joy Grant had been more than ready to give Kirk Rogers her loyalty, and that had been over a year ago when *Rough Rider* was still a-building in spacedock and her newly assigned pair of commanding officers had first met and had supervised her final outfitting and shakedown cruise together.

So much had happened, in just thirteen months of standard time. Joy looked at the man beside her—at the carefully barbered head of coal-black hair, at the deep blue thoughtful eyes and at the patrician strength of his face (and in her mind's eye, at the devilish dimpled grin she knew she could so easily call forth when the situation allowed it!)—at the slim strong body that looked like that of the confirmed polo player that he was, when she'd scarcely heard of the sport and had never seen a live horse before coming to Earth for the first time at age 17—and she hid her own quiet smile. She was happy to be here beside him for more reasons than the professional ones, and those by themselves would have been more than enough on this most exciting evening of her life so far.

The most exciting for any pleasant reason, anyway. She would not think about the other kinds of excitement she'd known, because there was no need to mar this hour with unpleasant recollections of things that were past and done with and unchangeable. She'd left all that behind her on Siloam, along with the farm that she might have inherited if she'd been willing to work it for the rest of her days in partnership with the cousin she'd been expected to marry and who curiously enough really had been her first love. The dream of following her father's footsteps into the Guard had been much stronger than her love for her cousin, stronger even than her ties to her mother's land; and she'd never been sorry for the choice she had made.

Rogers was speaking again, with a small frown between his dark eyebrows but with a certain mischievous-small-boy light in his eyes that his exec knew very well from less official times and settings. He said, "I think we owe it to ourselves to find that out. Don't you, Ms. Grant? Don't you, people?"-now clearly addressing every person on the bridge, both those who belonged there at this time and those who were so unabashedly intruding.

A rumble of assent that turned into a cheer answered him. Grant found herself smiling, not with her captain's subtle mirth but with her own wide and delighted grin. She said firmly, "That's not what the book says, Kirk."

"The book assumes that we find an empty world, like Siloam was before humans settled there-animals but no intelligent beings in residence; or that we find an indigenous population that hasn't yet developed space travel, so we leave it alone to develop however it will-or that we find a population that's able to come out into space and greet us, in which case we hope to hell it's a friendly culture," Rogers countered, and now he let his amusement and eagerness move from his eyes to his mouth in a slight curve of full lips. "We haven't got any one of those three situations. So that tells me that 'the book' can't be applied here verbatim, and that means I have both the right and the responsibility to make decisions based on the situation that we do have. Do you see a problem with that, Lieutenant?"

When he called her by her rank, he was putting her on notice that he expected either public agreement or a request for a private conference so that disagreement could be aired out of their people's hearing. Grant met her captain's eyes, they measured each other for a moment, and then she nodded. "No problem at all, Captain," she said with equal formality, addressing Rogers by his title rather than by his rank (which was the rather lowly Lieutenant Commander that suited a ship as small as *Rough Rider*-full commanders and four-stripe captains seldom got the real voyages of exploration, because that was a job for the young and any claim the senior officers made of feeling deprived was usually more sentimental than truthful). "It's your judgment call, you've

made it, and now the rest of us get to have our curiosity satisfied without having to turn around and get some bureaucrat's go-ahead first."

"Very well, then." Rogers straightened in his chair, set his jaw, and stared at the main viewscreen. "Helm! Take us in, and establish an equatorial orbit. Speed one-half full sublight; ops, continue scanning those satellites all the way in. Even though we're certain they've been dead for years, let's assume they're live and may blast us at any second. Call it 'insurance,' if you like-because anything that was built by a species we don't know, is something we don't understand and can't afford to be making assumptions about."

"Amen," Dr. Woodlawn was heard to mutter, with that borderline insubordinate humor that Star Guard physicians seemed to have inherited from their forebears in all of old Earth's former military services. He came to stand at Joy Grant's side, with the air of someone joining an old friend to share a noteworthy experience; and it was obvious that he was within his rights to do so, because Grant looked up at him briefly and gave him a warm smile.

"We talked about this at that seminar on expectations for initial contact with potentially friendly sentient alien species; remember that, Woody?" Grant asked, although she'd almost immediately turned her eyes back to her console once she had acknowledged his presence. "Did you ever think it would actually happen to us, though?"

"It had to happen sooner or later, to some starship's crew," Woodlawn replied, and leaned unselfconsciously on one hand that gripped the back of the exec's chair. "The only lifeforms as intelligent as humans that we've found out here so far have wanted to kill us, not talk with us. So let's hope this time's going to be a refreshing change!"

Damn all doctors, Grant thought; and she grimaced. *They're just too ready to tell you the bald-faced truth when you don't need to hear it, and to soft-pedal it to the point of lying to you when you do need bluntness. I don't want to think about the attack on Siloam. I was eight years old, I lived through it, my colony's long since rebuilt and the attackers haven't come back even after almost 20 years-so I am not going to think about it now!*

Yet some part of her was grateful for the caution the physician's remark had given her, whether or not he'd intended it that way. She increased power to her sensor array, and also increased her own attentiveness to what it was telling her as *Rough Rider* moved in toward the blue-gray globe that was this star system's fourth planet.

"Yellow alert," Kirk Rogers said in the deceptively quiet tone that he always used at the most tense moments. The ship's main computer responded to the captain's voice by making the appropriate changes in all systems, the public address system carried his words to every compartment, and the off-duty people

on the bridge promptly disappeared to their proper stations.

Grant and Rogers glanced at each other and grinned. "At least no one got hauled out of bed this time," the young captain remarked dryly, then deliberately wiped the smile from his face and stared intently at the viewscreen.

"Establishing orbit, Captain," came the helmsman's voice.

"Sir, the satellites are continuing to be inactive," came the unnecessary but routine confirmation from ops, in the person of a young West African woman. "In fact, I'm not even detecting any residual power sources. They're not just dead, they've been that way for one hell of a long time."

Rogers raised a thoughtful eyebrow, then said to the main computer: "Secure from yellow alert." Apparently they weren't going to be shot at, at least not by anything that was out here in space with them. "What do you think, Ensign? Can we tractor one of those dead satellites aboard for closer study?"

"Certainly we can, sir. Shall I match orbits with the nearest one?" Ops was all eagerness. She was a would-be scientist gaining deep space experience before entering her doctoral program back on Earth, and she was at this moment actually flexing her fingers with eagerness to get her hands on the closest of the dead ancient satellites.

"Proceed," Rogers said, and began scanning from the command console again. This time he was minutely examining the surface of the world below them, and he was frowning-with puzzlement, Grant wondered as she watched him? Or simply with concentration? Or with apprehension that couldn't be allowed to find any other expression than that small frown, because the captain had to appear confident before his crew no matter what he might be feeling at a moment like this one?

No matter how cavalierly he'd justified bringing them into orbit over this world, the fact was that it was inhabited by a non-spacefaring race-if the people whose life-signs he was now studying so intently had had anything to do with launching the dead satellites, they'd lost that knowledge years ago, perhaps centuries ago-and he had to realize that he was going to be bending the rules to the breaking point if he continued on course and made *Rough Rider's* presence known to those beings on the planet's surface. Was he having second thoughts about taking such a momentous step on his own authority?

Who, Kirk Rogers having second thoughts? Joy found herself hiding a smile when she saw her young captain's eyes lighting up with triumph after he'd spent a few minutes more frowning so intently. She should have known better. She might sometimes suffer the misery of self-doubt, but that was definitely not one of her captain and lover's failings.

She looked over her shoulder, and was surprised to find the spot where Dr. Woodlawn had stood empty. She should not have been surprised, of course; the

ship's physician had of course been required to go back to sickbay the moment the yellow alert had been declared, but she hadn't been aware of his leaving and she missed his presence now. There was something comforting about Woody. Just what she couldn't have said, he was no beauty to look at and he often said things that annoyed her; but she liked having him stand there just behind and beside her chair and she always missed him after he left.

She said, "What's next, Kirk? Are we going to take it slow and study the satellite first, and then send a landing party down to the surface? Because we aren't detecting any short-range comm devices in operation down there, anymore than we detected any long-range ones from farther out."

"Which means that most likely these people don't even have radio, let alone microwave or subspace communications technology," Rogers acknowledged, his smile back on his face now. "But at some point they had space flight, Joy, and that's where I'm hanging my proverbial hat. We'll wait until Alpha Shift comes on duty, and then we'll put together the first landing party. Right now-much as I hate to say so-the safest thing we can do is see to it that Alpha and Beta get some sleep while Gamma Shift does its job. That means I'd better set the example, and you'd better back me up." He rose from his chair as he spoke that last sentence, stretched his tall body, and yawned rather more dramatically than would have been his usual habit. "Good night, people. Mr. Boyce, you have the bridge; Ms. Grant is retiring, too, I believe."

Joy resisted the urge to raise an interrogative eyebrow in her captain's direction. Retiring to where, that was the question? She stepped into the lift with Rogers, and when its door closed and they were alone together she said as much. "Let's see now, Kirk. The idea is to get some sleep, so I'd better head to my own quarters. Right?"

"Right, much as I hate to tell you that," he answered her, and gave her a rueful grin. "I do mean get some sleep, Joy. I want both of us at the top of our game tomorrow."

"Aye, Captain." She answered his grin by reaching out a hand to halt the lift. "But before I obey that order...."

He put out his arms, she moved into them, and for much too brief a moment they held each other. Then they moved apart, having used that moment to share a passionate and thoroughly satisfying kiss, and she reached out to restart the lift.

"Good night, Kirk," Grant said demurely as she walked away from the lift in one direction, while he walked away from it in the other.

Neighboring quarters for captain and first officer were an old custom that had been done away with after a blast from a never-yet-identified alien vessel off Siloam had taken out both of a Terran starship's off-duty commanding

officers within a single moment; in fact, if *Rough Rider* had been large enough to have several decks devoted primarily to quarters then the captain and the first officer would actually have been exiting the lift at different levels. On this little ship the separation-for-safety's-sake policy only put the captain and the exec at opposite ends of the same deck, which fact seemed to Joy almost a safeguard in and of itself because if the lifts went down at least she could get to her captain without having to crawl through maintenance spaces. There was something to be said for that, surely-and she often wished that the older custom still prevailed, and that she might be next door to Kirk Rogers with a communicating door between their quarters. Maybe someday after the scare of the Siloam incident had had more time to fade, or after some poor captain and exec had paid the price of mutiny or some other, equally disastrous event because they couldn't communicate in absolute privacy, the older custom would be restored. She didn't wish the necessary disaster onto any command team, of course, but she still hoped she might see the old way restored at some point during her own career.

Now that she was off the bridge and her adrenaline was no longer pumping, she was suddenly aware of being very tired indeed. How many hours had she been on duty, anyway? A full double shift, plus a bit more than that; Gamma had officially come on duty during the yellow alert from which they'd just secured, and she'd begun her "day" with Alpha. She was yawning as she palmed the door to her cabin, and she barely persuaded herself to bother taking off her uniform before lying down to sleep.

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Chapter 3

*Captain Joy Grant woke from the night's final sleep with the disoriented feeling of a human who has dreamed so deeply and realistically that waking feels not like return to reality, but like being torn away from it. That feeling was made worse, she realized as she lay in her berth and deliberately moved her eyes around the familiar scene of her cabin in order to reassure herself that *this* was the reality-and *that* had been the dream-by the fact that she'd been lying down to sleep in her quarters aboard *Rough Rider*, nineteen years earlier, just before she'd awakened to the here and the now.*

This cabin was easily twice as large as her quarters aboard *Rough Rider*, her berth was also considerably wider than the one she'd lain down on in her dream, and her walls were decorated with artwork that she hadn't owned back then-some of it hadn't even been painted back then, since she had collected it from many sources and the official standing of the artist had never had much to do with her interest in adding the work to her collection. Now Arian, for instance, hadn't even been discovered at the time she had served aboard *Rough Rider*; and the natives of Arian hadn't had any tradition of painting in oils, they'd already learned that from their human associates during the surprisingly few years since that initial contact between species had been made. So her portrait by the Arian artist Ch'tg would by itself have been enough to prove to her disoriented mind that she'd dreamed those scenes on *Rough Rider's* bridge, that holding Kirk in the lift and kissing him goodnight was only a memory brought back more poignantly than usual by the *St. Petersburg's* ever-increasing nearness to Zorti where all that had taken place.

Not to mention that Ch'tg had painted not the little-more-than-girl she'd been back then, but a mature woman who had the beginnings of soft crinkles at the corners of her blue-gray eyes and who wore a full captain's four stripes instead of a lieutenant's two.

Grant turned her head and looked at the two-dimensional image of the best and most certain proof of how much time had gone by since that relived in her dream, and at last she felt herself relaxing. Her body had been incredibly tense, and she was sweaty and she was feeling anything else but rested-whether from having spent the first part of the night decidedly not resting in Woody's arms, or whether from having spent the rest of the night dreaming so realistically that she'd been pumping adrenaline even while she wasn't conscious, she couldn't have said; but she was tired, she was feeling annoyed with herself and with her universe in general, and she needed to see the one sight that always lifted her spirits no matter what cause she might have to feel unhappy or distressed.

The person in the framed two-dee was also named Kirkland Gambol Rogers, but he wasn't the brash young captain of *Rough Rider*. He had the first Kirk Rogers's black hair and slim body, but his eyes were Joy Grant's own gray-blue ones; his face was heart-shaped like hers, not square-jawed like his father's; and when he smiled it was with her smile, with Kirk's dimples somehow managing to superimpose themselves. The effect was a perfect blending of both parents, and he was smiling in this image.

His eighteenth birthday, just two months ago back on Earth. That smiling likeness had been taken, Joy had managed to be polite to the only mother her son had ever really known-which was Sarah Gambol, Kirk's mother and young Kirk's grandmother-and then all hell had broken loose, when the young man had announced he had turned down his acceptance at Yale and was about to enter the Academy.

I thought the old girl was going to have a seizure, Joy recalled now with a small and very grim smile, remembering seeing Sarah Gambol in utter hysterics for the second time in their long and unwilling association. *It's just as I told you when I finally had a chance to talk with you alone, Kirk. The last time she threw a fit like that was when I turned up pregnant with you, after a chaplain had come to her house and told her that her son had died in the line of duty.*

How she felt about her son's career choice, which had probably startled her even more than it had startled the grandmother who'd been with him throughout his childhood and adolescence while she had spent only hours with him at any given time, Joy still hadn't decided. She was proud that he'd been accepted into the Academy, of course; that had always been, and still was, a challenge in and of itself. "The best and the brightest" was no phrase, it was a cold hard reality when it came to getting oneself admitted to the Guard's one-and-only officer

training institution, and if someone had asked her before young Kirk's announcement she would have had to say honestly that she had no idea whether or not her boy was capable of making that particular grade. He was intelligent enough, of course, and his grandmother had seen to it that he had the best of secondary-school educations; but that he also had the grit, the self-discipline, the ability to face up to physical and mental challenges that was required just to pass the Academy's rugged and decidedly nontraditional entrance exams-let alone get through plebe year!-was something Joy wouldn't have counted upon, knowing how carefully Sarah Gambol had tried to shelter him.

Just how had he managed to take those entrance exams without his grandmother's knowledge, anyway? Granted there were no fees involved, granted that he hadn't needed her legal permission because his eighteenth birthday was going to occur before his actual date of admission; but that had taken planning, and that had taken guts. Although Sarah had wailed that it was dishonest, downright sneaky, of him to do this behind her back-that it had been childish for him to do this without openly informing her!-Joy was of the firm opinion that it had been damned smart of young Kirk to decide what he wanted and to go after it without involving a grandmother who would have done nothing except her best to shoot him down. Her own grandmother, who'd raised Joy from the 8-year-old she'd been when her parents had died in that alien attack on Siloam, hadn't liked it one bit when Joy had chosen to follow her father's footsteps into the Guard instead of marrying her cousin and with him taking charge of her mother's homestead farm; but Elizabeth Grant hadn't been a Sarah Gambol. She had said what she thought of her granddaughter's choice, but after having done so she'd accepted it and had even supported it as best she was able.

Of course Joy had said what she thought of young Kirk's choice, both to Sarah (who couldn't dislike her more anyway, so nothing could be lost there!) and to her son. Now all she could do was hope he was making it through that critical time known as plebe year, because that was when every faculty member and every upperclassman at the Academy united in the effort to see to it that every freshman who lacked the qualities required to make a competent Guard officer got washed out sooner rather than later. The years of training were too expensive an investment for society to be making in any youngster who wasn't at the end going to be able to repay that investment with a full career of service, and besides no active-duty officer wanted or deserved to be let down by a newly assigned Academy graduate who couldn't do the job once the years of training were past and real life began.

Even though he's my son, Joy thought now as she looked at that image with narrowing eyes, if he can't make the grade then I don't want him retained. No way do I want my boy to be responsible for someone else's death, and that's

the price of being less than competent in this business. Even those who are the most competent sometimes fail, sometimes let their comrades down; so if you can't make it through plebe year, youngster, then while I'll be disappointed for you as your mother I won't shed a tear for you as a senior Guard officer. And in both roles I'll be relieved that you got washed out when you should have been washed out, instead of managing to bluff your way through and then being the cause of someone else's tragedy later on.

She looked at her son's smiling young face for a moment longer; then she got out of bed, glanced down at a body that was as firm as it had been when she herself was an eighteen-year-old plebe, and grinned ruefully. She couldn't believe she was that grown man's mother. Even if she'd had the good fortune to be able to raise him herself, she suspected, she still wouldn't have believed it; and since her role had been more like that of a visiting aunt or elder sister than of a mother, the sense of unreality was even more pronounced.

She was in the shower when she heard her comm unit whistling for attention. She knew there was no real emergency, of course; if there had been it wouldn't have whistled and politely waited for her to respond, it would have come to life with the officer-of-the-watch's voice telling her loudly and plainly what was wrong. Or the red-alert klaxon would have sounded through all of the *St. Pete's* twenty decks, and she would have grabbed a bathrobe and belted it hastily around her and have headed for the bridge exactly as she was. But that whistle gave her leave to get out of the shower, dry herself, and wrap up in a robe without too great haste before she padded barefoot to the bedside and touched the comm unit in response. "Grant here," she said. "Good morning, Tessa. Are we within comm range of Zorti, by any chance?"

She'd guessed right on both counts; the caller was her executive officer, and the occasion was just the one she'd cited. Commander Tessa Shepard's voice was amused as she answered, "Good morning, Joy. Sorry to bother you before breakfast, but you did want to be notified at this point-you left those instructions."

"I certainly did, and I'll be on the bridge shortly. Out." Grant chuckled as she cut the connection and shed the robe so she could get into a fresh uniform. Shepard was the proverbial early bird who nearly always was on the bridge prior to her scheduled shift, while one of the few command prerogatives that Grant really cared about was that as captain she no longer stood a scheduled watch-so hurrying in the morning, which she'd hated passionately since she was a plebe, was no longer a required part of her life. She spent more time "on duty" than did anyone under her command, of course, because she made a point of being accessible to her people practically 24 hours a day; but she made no pretense of breaking her neck to get onto the bridge for the start of Alpha shift, or Beta, or

Gamma. Not unless her senior officers were operating shorthanded due to some illness or injury affecting one or more of their number, in which case of course she moved a junior officer up to formally cover the breach but made sure she was there whenever that junior officer was on duty.

That hadn't happened often on *St. Pete*, and she hoped it wasn't going to happen on this run to Zorti.

They were within comm range, but Zorti had been silent for the past month. Ominously, terribly, utterly silent. That was what the *St. Pete* was doing out here today, a sleek and powerful warship diverted from other business and now heading toward a peaceful Earth colony; the freighter that should have been making the next stop at Zorti had been instructed not to call there until the nearest military vessel could investigate the sudden silence, since while the Terran authorities responsible for the colony might hope it was just technical failure of the comm relay there was no way they were going to chance that it wasn't due to something worse and not take the proper precautionary action.

"Something worse" had caused a similar comm silence at Siloam, almost 40 years earlier. Joy Grant remembered, she shuddered, and then she put the old memories firmly away.

She would grab an eat-it-on-the-run breakfast, maybe coffee and a hot roll-she'd never been fond of a heavy morning meal anyway-and she would exercise another of her privileges and finish it on the bridge, while she had ops start hailing Zorti. She knew that she wasn't going to get an answer, if Central Comm hadn't been able to raise the colony over all the times they'd tried before taking the expensive and time-consuming step of canceling the next scheduled freighter's run and diverting the *St. Pete* to investigate; but she must try, of course, and she must be present on the bridge while that was being done.

She did wish that old memory would stay where she'd tried to push it, far down somewhere in the back of her mind. Normally she was very good at banishing thoughts she didn't care to entertain, that was almost a requirement in a Star Guard captain; but today she wasn't succeeding as fully as she would have liked. All the way to the galley, and all the way from the galley to the bridge, the old images and the old sounds kept intruding on her thoughts. It was with gratitude that she finally emerged from the lift to Tessa Shepard's welcoming smile, to Chief Engineer Paul Grey Eyes's never-changing cocky look, to ops officer Arun Kruger's young and eager grin.

Kruger could be excited about this if he wanted to; this was only his second trip into deep space, for him it was still one great big ride in a celestial amusement park. Well, it wasn't that way for Joy Grant.

For her it never had been, and she had that day on long-ago Siloam to thank for stripping her forever of any illusions that an undefended Earth colony

was a romantic place for humans to be. She still didn't want to remember-but looking at the South African ensign's delighted young face made remembering inevitable, even while the surface of her mind was claimed by Paul Grey Eyes and Tessa Shepard who both wanted to talk to the captain at once.

Just as they always did. Grant did wish those two would quit trying to compete with each other.

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