

Silent Service

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Chapter 1

It was so quiet now. Kate Landay lay still, and listened to the blessed silence after the relentless questions, and savored the absence of pain.

Was she conscious, or was this a dream? Or was she dead, and this her first moment of after-life? Right now she didn't care. Later, if there was to be a "later," the curiosity that had been landing her in difficult situations all her life would no doubt kick in; but for the moment she wanted nothing except to be left as she was.

That, of course, was too much to ask. She felt a touch that was human, or at least flesh against her flesh; she heard a voice speaking, that of another female. A voice that was familiar, that she'd never expected or even hoped she might hear again.

"Kate. Kate, don't try to answer me. I'm monitoring you, I'm watching how you react when you hear me. You can go back to sleep in a just a minute, but I need you conscious for a few scans. Unless you're in pain - and you shouldn't be - just relax, just rest. You're safe now, and they didn't do anything to you that I can't fix."

Amy's voice. Amy who had been at her side since Kate Landay was a plebe, a whole career and considerably more than half a lifetime ago.

It really was all right, then; the lack of tactile sensation below her neck must be due to her body's being immersed in regenerative gel. Somehow she had survived, although she couldn't imagine how or why.

"Dr. Salter?" Landay heard a second voice, this one masculine but also familiar. Familiar, yet so long absent from her life that for a moment she

couldn't place it - or perhaps just didn't want to place it. And since she couldn't turn her head toward the sound, performing the incredibly difficult task of opening her eyes seemed pointless. "How is she?"

"Conscious, which means you shouldn't be here," Salter answered, with acid in her tone. But it sounded like forced disapproval, as if she said what a physician was supposed to say from habit rather than from real inclination. "But by now she's recognized your voice; see there?"

Salter would of course be indicating the changes in her patient's brain activity, and the man who'd come into the room (or compartment? were they on a ship, or still on the Gateway planet, or somehow back on Earth?) would be looking at the monitor and understanding the readouts and nodding almost absently. His eyes would be on Landay's nude body as she lay suspended in the regen tank, and what he must be seeing would be disturbing even to a person who'd once served as a Ranger in the Sovereignty's defense forces.

Would he be revolted, not just distressed? Landay wondered that almost idly. It had been so long, and her damaged body still had such a dim and tiny spark of life within it, that although she'd clearly just reacted to his presence she couldn't claim to be feeling excited about it. She wasn't feeling much of anything, physically or emotionally, because right now she simply wasn't capable of doing so.

But she heard him when he spoke again, of course, and his voice held neither revulsion nor the pity that would have been worse. He said in a deceptively calm tone that she remembered well even after the passing of two decades in Terran time, "Looks like it was close, Doctor. I guess I almost wasted all those favors I called in."

"Close? Close doesn't count, Joe." Amy Salter uttered a gusty sigh. "She still looks like hell, but she's going to be fine. Kate, you can go back to sleep now. Everything checks out."

"Pleasant dreams," Joseph Costigan added softly, and Landay could have sworn that his fingertips brushed against her cheek as she drifted away into comfortable darkness.

* * *

"What happens now, Doctor Salter?" Costigan waited until he was certain that the woman in the regen tank could no longer hear him before he asked that question. Kate Landay was still now, with peace on her face, and that was an improvement over the way she'd looked yesterday when she'd been brought through the Gate. Then her face had been lined with agony she'd no longer been capable of feeling, but that had distorted her features for so long before it ended

that her muscles remembered and held their positions even after clinical death had given her release.

She still looked awful, there was no denying that, but already she was healing. The body he'd once known so intimately was twenty years older now, even if she hadn't been savaged inside and out by the Questioners' procedures she would still have been changed by time's passing alone - but he could see that she'd remained very much the athletic woman he remembered. Still slender from rigorous physical training, not from vain self-starvation, he thought now as he noted the contours of muscle that were redefining themselves as the regenerative gel caused her body to remember what its tissues had been like before the Questioners began with her. In this far-off place beyond the Gate he hadn't seen even her image, not once in the twenty years since he had come through that portal himself as refugee and exile; but every line of the form in that tank was familiar to him nonetheless, she had matured but she hadn't truly changed.

Not physically, anyway. Nor emotionally either, he suspected, or she wouldn't be here now in this condition. But would the ordeal from which she was now recovering alter her in anything like the ways that his own experience with Sovereignty justice had changed him?

He could only wonder, because her new life hadn't yet begun. Wouldn't begin until Salter took her out of that tank, until Landay stood again on her own legs (weak and uncertain as those of a Terran horse's foal, if all the post-regen tales he'd heard were true) and let the healing gel be washed from her re-grown skin. Coming out of the tank and showering away the last glistening coating was often compared to the rebirth of ancient legend, and while Costigan was thankful he'd never had that experience himself he suspected the comparison might be an apt one.

The life Kate had known was over, yes. The body in which she had lived her first forty-three years was to all intents and purposes gone, destroyed as punishment for the offense she'd been accused of committing against the Sovereignty and in hopes of gaining the Questioners information about her suspected cohorts. The body Costigan saw now was a new one, growing from the pattern of the other but sharing only the most basic of its structures.

Brain, spinal cord, skeleton, major internal organs. Even the latter group of items would of course have been damaged by the energies to which the Questioners had subjected her, but they never harmed a victim's brain. They had wanted her to know, because without knowing there could be no true punishment; and they had wanted her to be able to communicate, even to the last moment.

Amy Salter was straightening at last from the regen tank's control pad, and

she was working her shoulders and sighing with relief. She asked acerbically, "Since when am I 'Doctor Salter' to you, Joe? We never liked each other much, I realize; but we've known each other forever, for gods' sake!"

"I didn't dislike you, Amy." Costigan looked his old rival over, and he made no attempt to conceal the fact that he was doing so. "Kate hasn't changed much in twenty years, but you certainly have."

"If you mean that I've learned how to open my mouth and say what's on my mind, you're right. I had to learn that, I found out fairly early in my first shipboard assignment that if I didn't kick ass when it needed kicking I'd never be able to get Explorer ship crews or Rangers or anyone else I had to take care of to take me seriously. And you sure as hell can't treat a patient who doesn't accept that you're a real doctor, so I just bit the bullet as the old saying goes and started playing the role. And after awhile it started to come naturally." Salter had regen gel on her forehead, a glop that had landed there at some point when she'd found it necessary to touch her patient and had then inadvertently touched her own face. It was harmless, of course; it didn't act on any organism that didn't need its help, but it was messy and she fastidiously wiped it away.

"Kate always told me I didn't really know you," Costigan acknowledged. "And that was true, you were in medical school most of the time that she and I were together; but I've got to admit, I never thought you'd last a year on active duty. Not from what I did see of you then."

"And you still didn't like me very much. But that's old news, Joe." Salter gave him a tired smile. "Now we both get out of here and let her sleep, if that's what you meant when you asked me what happens next. She's perfectly safe, if there are any problems at all the tank will alarm and I'll be back in here inside of a minute. She's progressing beautifully - I expect to have her out of there in a week at the most, possibly in as little as four days. But you know as well as I do that regen's a completely individual process, my job's to monitor and make sure that nothing interferes. Her body and the gel interacting are doing all the real work, she only needed me to set up the protocol correctly and get it started."

"I mean after the regen's completed, Amy." Costigan's gray eyes met Salter's dark ones, and although his tone was matter of fact his gaze was a demand. "I know something else about people who come back from injuries severe enough to cause clinical death, I know that I may not have done her a favor by pulling her out of there and that you may not be doing her a favor by giving her back a healthy body. It's bad enough when the person who's regenned got hurt in an accident, or was injured in a battle...I never heard of bringing anyone back from a torture death before. Do you think she's going to make it?" He paused, and swallowed so hard that his throat moved visibly. "I don't mean is her body going to recover, I mean is *she* going to make it?"

Salter turned away from him then, and looked at her patient. She studied Kate Landay carefully, as if this woman were simply an intriguing case and not the closest friend of her entire adult life. At last she sighed, looked up at Costigan again, and grinned a small and rather crooked grin. She said softly, "That's up to her, Joe. And in a way it's just as much up to both of us, don't you think? We're all she has now, there's nothing left of her old life here."

"Or of yours," Costigan said, realizing that fact for the first time even though it should have been plain to him from the moment when he'd asked Amy Salter if she would be willing to do this. "You could have stayed on the other side, Amy. You weren't convicted of any crime, you came through that Gate voluntarily - but you left everything familiar behind, too, and now you can no more go back than Kate can."

"Or than you can." Their eyes met again, and this time they locked in a moment of complete understanding. "We're stuck with each other, Joe. You, and me, and Kate. But then that's nothing new, is it?"

* * *

If the Gate had been predictable, Amy Salter reflected as she scanned Kate Landay's body for the hundredth or more time since she'd come through that portal with her friend's stasis tube five days earlier, this haven would not have been available to them or to any of the thousands of other humans who lived here. Some scientists believed it was the far past or distant future of the barren Class M planet from which it periodically opened to a topographically similar, but far more hospitable, world; some theorized it was the same planet in a parallel universe, in another dimension; while others said it was simply very far away, perhaps in another galaxy within the same universe and the same time period inhabited by present-day Earth and its allies and its enemies. In any case the Gate opened without regularity, usually several times during each Terran-reckoned year but not in any predictable pattern; and it had been known to go dormant for months at a time, in fact its longest dormant period since its discovery had lasted a worrisome fifteen months. That was why instead of using the Gate for commercial travel between - dimensions? time epochs? galaxies? - whatever, after an initial period of exploration the Diet had decided that no one would be sent through whom society might actually want to get back.

There was precedent for this sort of thing, plenty of it. Salter had studied human history as had any educated citizen, she knew about Australia - about the first colonies on the moons of Saturn - about the mines of New Siberia. And putting a prison colony, or sociological garbage dump to be more accurate in this case, beyond some kind of energy barrier or time portal wasn't a new idea

either; she had read the fiction of Heinlein and other early speculative writers, she knew that such a “coventry” wasn’t a brand new concept. It had been especially useful five years after the Gate’s discovery, though, when the Diet had been obliged to figure out what to do with the remnants of a defeated rebel fighting force and that force’s associated civilians. Dumping them through the Gate and figuring that they had a reasonable chance of staying alive in the world beyond it had been a way to treat such survivors of the Alba Five civil war as Joseph Costigan with some semblance of compassion; and of course before and since then many other undesirables had been similarly dumped. Once on the other side they weren’t coming back, the high security installation on the Gateway world made sure of that; and it was beneficial to society to have a means of getting rid of people who couldn’t or wouldn’t be rehabilitated after having committed crimes, since now it was no longer legal to execute miscreants of any kind.

It was no longer legal, but at times it was done by *de facto* means. Amy Salter knew that for certain now, she had seen the evidence when Kate Landay’s body had been released from the Questioners’ section at the New Brixton Security Facility on Gateway. “Committed suicide during questioning by authorities,” the death record had said; that was what Landay’s family had been told, and even Salter would have been expected to believe it if she hadn’t been summoned into the office of New Brixton’s commander and if once there she hadn’t been greeted by the sight of a stasis tube floating on antigrav pads in front of that officer’s ornate desk.

Kate had been inside that tube, or what remained of Kate at least. In spite of her years of practice as a military physician, Amy Salter had looked through the transparent lid and had been obliged to swallow vigorously several times in order to keep herself from vomiting.

And yet at the same time she had wanted to shout with gladness, because there was still the potential for life in that tube. Clinical death, yes; but by definition that could be reversed, her friend hadn’t yet gone to a place from which she could not be reclaimed. And then the commander of New Brixton had been speaking to Salter, had been telling her that if she wanted to accompany her patient and commanding officer’s body into exile beyond the Gate she would be allowed to do so.

Someone over there wanted this woman badly. If Amy refused to go along, the prison commander continued, before she could leave here she would have to part with her memory of this conversation. The person who wanted Captain Landay was making it worthwhile for the Diet’s appointees to accommodate his request; never mind how, never mind why. And that person said that Dr. Salter would recognize him if they were allowed to communicate with each other.

Amy had agreed, numbly because this was overwhelming news coming on top of her friend's arrest and torture and now temporary, but potentially permanent death. The New Brixton commander had ordered a commlink to be set up between his office and that of someone he called "my counterpart on the other side." And within seconds she'd found herself staring into the familiar face of Joseph Costigan, twenty years older than she remembered him but unmistakably Joe.

"Will you come with her?" was the only question he'd asked.

For Amy Salter to answer in the affirmative would mean the end of her career, the end of her life as she'd always known it. A story of some sort would be concocted, given out to the press, told to her few remaining distant relatives back on Terra and to her friends and Explorer colleagues...a story that would have to tie in somehow with Kate Landay's supposed suicide.

Whether or not those who knew her would believe that tale wasn't Salter's problem. She did feel sorry for Kate Landay's family; Kate had such a thing, and while it was no storybook ideal her people cared about her and they would grieve for her. So, of course, would Kate's lover of the past ten and more years. But the only person who would really have grieved at losing Amy Salter lay dead in a stasis tube beside her, so giving Costigan an answer to his question hadn't been difficult at all.

She'd only asked, "Can you provide me with the facilities I'll need to restore her, Joe? If you can't then there's no point to this, I won't bring her through the Gate and then lose her anyway."

He had promised her the necessary medical technology, and he had delivered. And now Kate Landay, no longer Captain Landay of the Explorers although she might or might not realize that fact yet, was whole again in body and was carefully easing her weight onto her feet for the first time.

The structures that had supported her when she'd walked into New Brixton's interrogation unit almost a Terran month earlier were gone, destroyed. The flesh and bone she wore now was almost entirely new, yet it had the tactile memories of that which it had replaced. Landay was as weak as any human who'd been inactive for medical reasons over a lengthy period of time, but she wasn't going to have to learn to control her body all over again; she leaned on Salter's arm for support and for balance, but she did so with the air of a cadet gaining artificial gravity "sea legs" rather than with that of a toddler attempting to walk for the first time.

Joseph Costigan watched them on a security monitor from his office elsewhere in Government House, and although he felt a few twinges of guilt at invading their privacy by doing so he didn't seriously consider delegating the task or dispensing with it altogether. Covertly observing new arrivals was a

necessary protocol, it simply had to be done; and if anyone was going to watch Kate when she was this vulnerable, then at least he was going to do it himself.

He saw two human females of similar age, both in their early forties now. Amy Salter was an African woman of medium height; her black hair not yet graying, her face strong-featured with dark eyes that watched her friend with a familiar combination of affection and relief and professional concern. Kate Landay (how she had hated it when some self-appointed genius back at the Defense Academy had corrected her name on a class list once, making her into “Katherine Landry”! Costigan recalled with a smile) was of mixed European and Native American ancestry; a petite woman who didn’t look as if she could possibly pick up a blaster rifle - let alone use it with appalling accuracy. Larger humans paired with her for the Academy’s hand-to-hand combat courses had quickly learned just what a disadvantage overconfidence really could be, and Costigan himself had discovered when he’d been her training partner that she could compensate very well for her lack of reach. That small frame of hers carried steely muscles, she was a damned sneaky fighter, and her reflexes were swift.

Oh, yes, she could fight. Well enough to lead a Ranger unit, although he now knew that she’d switched service branches after....

No, he wasn’t going to think about that right now. He was going to sit here instead and be glad that Amy Salter was the kind of physician who remembered that stimulating regrowth of a patient’s lost hair was a very useful way to boost that patient’s morale during recovery from devastating injuries such as those Kate Landay had endured. Kate’s hair color was a warm brown, highlighted with hints of red or gold depending on the spectrum of light that happened to be playing on it at any given moment. Just now nothing like that was evident, of course, because the lights under which she moved were cold and unforgiving; but she looked much better with that crop of short hair than she’d looked with just frazzled wisps decorating her scarred scalp, a few days earlier when he’d seen her in the regen tank.

Kate’s eyes were hazel, and her face was fair-skinned and heart-shaped and - what? Not beautiful, that was a conventional word and Kate’s looks weren’t conventionally pretty. Yet she had always attracted her full share of attention from those human males who came within her orbit (and from some females, too). She certainly had caught and kept Joe Costigan’s interest, when he’d met her during the long-ago time while they were both midshipmen.

She had always looked so completely and confidently alive, that was it. But now she was tentative in a way he’d never seen her look before, except for one time only.

A time he didn’t particularly want to remember, but he could do nothing

now to squelch that memory. He watched while the woman he'd once regarded as the love of his life made her unsteady way from the regen tank to a hand-held shower nearby, studied her nude body almost dispassionately because not even Kate could be erotically interesting to him while that nauseating gel was still coating her skin...and he thought of her as he'd first known her, and wondered whether she could remember him as he'd been then with anywhere near the same clarity.

* * *

Landay's thoughts at the moment were not at all similar to Costigan's. She was biting her lip as her new/old, strange/familiar body protested at being asked to move for what was essentially the first time. It wasn't exactly painful, but it was decidedly not comfortable.

"Here, you're supposed to use the shower seat!" Amy scolded, her tone as acerbic as her supporting touch was gentle. "Sit, now. And let me handle the spray, your job's to just hold still."

"That's about all I can do," Kate answered in disgust. "I can't remember the last time someone had to give me a shower, this is ridiculous."

She wasn't, of course, equating showers shared with Yoshi with this mild humiliation.

Yoshi. Dear god, what had they told Yoshi?

The water was warm on her skin. Until now the gel had kept her from feeling any real sensation wherever it had touched her; and it had enclosed her to her chin, covering even her scalp so that only her face was exposed. She was aware now that this chamber was cool, that she would be comfortable without clothes here only for as long as the water was flowing over her body. The warmth was relaxing, though, and being able to feel anything at all was a pleasure.

Or she should have said, to be able to feel anything except pain. Those memories were still very close. She'd been roused a number of times while in the regen tank, and on each occasion the absence of torment had been less of a surprise than on the last; but she recalled little else about those awakenings. They had been necessary for Amy to configure her treatment correctly, and they'd lasted only as long as was required by that purpose.

Yet she was certain that the first time she had awakened in that tank, someone besides Amy had been with her. Someone dear to her...a masculine presence.

"Was Yoshi here, earlier?" She knew, somehow, that wasn't the case; but who else could it have been? A male physician or other caregiver, some

colleague of Amy's, wouldn't have left this resonance of emotional connection behind him in Landay's mind; and none of the other men with whom she'd felt such closeness could possibly be nearby.

Her adored grandfather was on Terra, and wherever this was it wasn't Earth. Her father had gone out of her life long ago. Her brother (half-brother actually, but all the sibling - and in a sense, all the child - she'd ever had, and therefore more precious to her than were most women's younger brothers) couldn't have been mistaken for anyone else, because if the El'kah'th/human hybrid Clifton Bradley had touched her there would have been nothing vague about the memory. And while it was possible that she, the criminal - the traitor, the cashiered Explorer captain - might have been sent into exile after somehow surviving her ordeal in the Questioners' hands, there was no way Amy Salter had done anything that would have caused the authorities to send her through the Gate too; so she couldn't have heard Joseph Costigan's voice or felt his fingertips brushing against her cheek. Assuming that Costigan was still alive beyond that Gate, of course, and this many years after he'd been sent through it to exile that was a very large and probably unwarranted assumption.

Oh, she was confused! And she hated confusion so much; she'd spent her whole adult life (and her adolescence, and most of her childhood) unraveling mysteries and solving puzzles because to *know* was her passion.

"There, that's the last of the glop," Amy was saying inelegantly. "There's no warm-air dryer here, I'm afraid; Joe's given us all the essentials but not many of the amenities. So we'll get you dried off the old-fashioned way, and then into some clothes."

"Joe?" Landay asked. Suddenly she was alert. She still couldn't remember much of what she so desperately needed to recall, but at least her perceptions of the present were clear now. She sat up straight, grasped the towel that Salter was about to wrap around her, and began to rub her wet body with as much vigor as she could muster. "Tell me what happened, Amy. I remember a hearing, not a legal court-martial but a closed debriefing. At the end of that I was told I had to be taken to the Questioners, and I expected it to be easy because they were going to use truth dope on me; and I knew as soon as they had the truth I'd be out of there and on my way home to Yoshi. But I woke up from the dope with someone telling me they couldn't get past the barrier in my mind, and that they were going to have to break down that barrier...and after that..." Landay shuddered, and for a moment she clutched the towel and closed her eyes.

"Shhh." Salter knelt at her friend's side, wrapped a second towel around her shoulders and put both arms around her. "Of course there wasn't any barrier for them to break down. You told them the truth with and without the serum, but they just didn't want to believe it. So they kept up the Questioning until you

died. Clinically, anyway. And then they put your body into stasis, and thank all that's holy they did it soon enough."

"Why did they put me in stasis?" The shudders stilled after a moment, but Landay didn't try to disengage herself from the other woman's arms. She leaned against her friend instead, and her eyes remained closed. "Were they going to regen me so they could start all over?"

Now, that was a thought so horrible it hadn't entered Amy Salter's mind. She said honestly, "No, Kate. That wasn't the idea, not at all."

"What, then? I know how far a full Questioning can go before the subject dies, there can't have been enough left for me to live again without the regen no matter what you or anyone else did for me." She put her head down onto Salter's shoulder. She must be getting her friend wet, but right now she didn't care; and Amy didn't seem to care, either. She put up a hand and smoothed Kate's hair instead of trying to move fastidiously away.

"The idea was to send you through the Gate to Joe Costigan," Salter said, and waited a moment when she felt the smaller woman's body stiffen in her embrace. "He's not only survived over here, Kate; he's acquired some kind of power, a lot of influence. Enough so that when he contacted people he knew on the other side - and I know that's supposed to be impossible, but it isn't because I saw him do it! - he was able to get your body released intact into exile instead of having your ashes sent home to your next-of-kin, and he asked me to come with you and do the regen. So of course I did, and now here we are. That was five days ago, you've always been a fast healer."

"What did they tell my family? What did they tell Yoshi?" There was a measurable interval before Landay asked those questions, and when she did so her voice was hushed and reluctant. Whatever the answers were they couldn't be good ones, she already knew that; but still she must ask, and still Salter must tell her.

"They said that you committed suicide to avoid giving the Questioners the information they were seeking." Salter tightened her arms, almost fiercely tucked her friend's head closer into the sheltering curve of her shoulder. "That's what Yoshi's been told, what your family's been told. I'm not sure how they explained not having your body or your ashes to send home, but after Joe contacted me I stopped caring about that because I was busy taking care of you. But I'm sure the bastards thought of something, they always do."

"Yes. They always do." Landay swallowed what sounded like a sob, and one more powerful shudder rocked her body. Then she deliberately lifted her head, pulled back against Salter's arms and waited to be released.

After which she put up her hands and began toweling her hair, nonchalant in her physical nakedness now that she'd successfully covered her painfully

exposed emotions. She said, “I remember thinking I heard Joe’s voice once, I think it was the first time I woke up in the regen tank. I even thought he touched me, on my cheek because that was about the only place I had available to touch right then. When I woke up later I was sure it must have been a dream...but he really was there, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. I think he had to see you and touch you to make sure he’d really got you away, and that you really were going to live and get well. He hasn’t been back since then, but he’s called me often.” Amy smiled her relief. This was the Kate Landay that she knew, and the one everyone else knew too. She was glad her friend could trust her enough to let her see that other Kate, the vulnerable one who’d rested quivering against her body just a few moments earlier; but getting this woman back had been the whole point of the past five days’ efforts.

* * *

“She’s small,” a voice said quietly at Joseph Costigan’s shoulder. “You realize you haven’t told me a damned thing about her, really? But I did expect someone physically larger. I don’t see how that little thing ever got through Ranger Basic.”

Costigan didn’t start, because he had been aware of it when his life partner had entered the room that he fondly referred to as his office. This world beyond the Gate had been occupied by humans for a full generation, so although it was still very much a frontier it now had some fair-sized settlements; and the woman who stood behind his chair was his partner in the leadership of this particular settlement, the oldest and largest one on this planet.

He wouldn’t tell Hanna Leone that actually she reminded him of Kate Landay, that their similarities as he perceived the two women were why he’d been attracted to Hanna two decades ago when he had been thrust through the Gate along with 796 other people. That sounded like a huge group, of course; it was enough to populate a village, enough to crew the largest of starships. But it was a pitiful remnant, to be all that remained of the human element of a once-thriving colony.

He’d become that remnant’s leader by default, because though the Sovereignty had characterized them as a “rebel force” most were civilians; and although he was only in his early twenties then, he was an experienced military officer. A Ranger, which meant that he was used to small units and dangerous but short-term assignments - he hadn’t had the training of a starship command officer or Explorer, and he really didn’t know much about organizing a group like that one and getting its members settled into life on a new world. But what else could he do, when they were looking to him and to the several former

enlisted men and women among their number for guidance and protection?

And how in bloody hell was he or anyone else supposed to protect them, anyway, when the world to which they'd been so unwillingly sent was already occupied?

The Gate had been open on that day at its widest possible expansion, which was serendipitous because its functions were in no way controllable by the New Brixton staff - and the opening's unusual breadth had at least allowed Costigan's people the doubtful protection of being able to keep together, instead of being forced to form a column whose individuals could be picked off. He'd thought they might be attacked like that immediately, because they had been allowed to bring along food supplies and his notion of what lay beyond was one of deprivation and anarchy. And they had been met at the Gate; met by an armed band, one that had held them there while he and the other former military people had battled their own urges to resist and had firmly controlled those among their civilian charges who had seemed close to panic.

Then Hanna had appeared. She'd been little more than a girl, in those days her much older (and by then reclusive and dying) lover had been the leader of a settlement that had coalesced out of those who had been dumped during the five years since the Gate's discovery.

There hadn't been as many previous arrivals as he had expected there would be, and that was probably why they were far better organized than he'd anticipated. There was a main group, a settled village where families who'd been exiled together had set up rude homes and where couples who'd joined themselves after being exiled had done likewise. There were other, smaller groups - some settled, some nomadic - of people who couldn't or wouldn't fit into the main village. From time to time the more violent of these raided the more peaceful, and that was why (as Hanna Leone had explained to the newly-arrived Joseph Costigan) it had been not only possible but absolutely necessary for those in the main settlement to establish leadership and to create defenses and especially to monitor who or what came through the Gate whenever the damnable thing self-activated. Usually it brought them just a few new citizens-to-be, people who'd done something the societies on the other side of that portal couldn't tolerate and that they themselves couldn't repent of...but sometimes it brought psychopaths, and while weapons were never officially allowed through they did make it occasionally in spite of all supposed safeguards.

The refugees from the disbanded colony on Alba Five created a major problem for the Gateway world's existing population, because they numbered more than half as many as its main settlement's residents and because they were a cohesive group. Assimilating them quickly was vital, that Hanna Leone had been able to see immediately and that she had recommended to the community's

leader. And of course the best way to assimilate them promptly was to combine authorities, for her to bring Joseph Costigan and his comrades together with their local counterparts. The alternative would have been to help them establish their own separate community, and to do that as quickly as possible so that competition for resources couldn't spark conflict between the two groups.

They had chosen to meld their people into one settlement. It hadn't been easy, there had been countless conflicts and arguments for the leaders to mediate or arbitrate. But it had worked, and when the original community's leader had died part way through the process Hanna Leone had settled the succession issue by assuming her dead partner's role and then taking Joseph Costigan as her new mate.

If she hadn't been attractive to him then, Costigan thought now as he turned in his chair and looked up at her after almost two decades of life at her side, he would have been in deep trouble. But although she wasn't like Kate physically - she was taller and more generously built, fuller of breast and broader of hip - she had the same air of being in control of her surroundings, and the same vitality shining in her eyes.

Brown eyes, much darker than Kate's eyes. Black hair, as black as Joe's own. No, she didn't look a blessed thing like Kate Landay except that both were adult human females; but she had the right spark, he had been able to want her and take her and make a life with her all those years ago. And he still cared for her now, if only with the affection of a long-time friend...and she'd never attached much importance to the physical part of their relationship anyway. When they were younger she had expected him to want her from time to time and probably would have been insulted if he hadn't, but now he no longer touched her in that way and she had never thought it necessary to initiate such contact.

That was one way in which life with Hanna Leone was completely unlike life with Kate Landay. Kate, Joe Costigan recalled with an inward smile, had been the initiator just as often as he had during the long-ago time when they'd been mated. And she had been a tender and enthusiastic lover, although too often distracted even during intimate moments by the demands (both real and perceived) of duty.

Old married couple, or just friends and allies who'd at one time also been lovers? Costigan wondered that briefly about himself and his current partner, as he left his chair and gave her an embrace that was warm and tender but not the least bit sensual. He said, "Kate's little, but don't put your money on that if you ever have to fight her. A lot of people have made that mistake, and not all of them are still around to talk about it."

"I'll bet!" Hanna said, and she kissed his cheek and she laughed. "Be

careful, Joe. I don't mind that she's here, I'm glad you got her out. From what you told me, no one's ever had a worse exit from the other side than she did! But now that she is here, she and that friend of hers have got to fit in and make themselves part of what we've built. Either that or they'll have to do what the misfits always have to do, and find a place in one of the villages or among the nomads. If she's a threat to our people here, I'll handle her the same way I've handled all the others. I'll expect you to do the same, and what she was to you twenty years ago had better not make a difference."

Leone drew back with that statement, and looked into Costigan's face without having to look up at him as Kate Landay had always been obliged to do when they stood like this. They measured each other, brown eyes meeting gray eyes in what wasn't quite challenge but had never been full harmony either; and after a time both heads nodded in agreement.

* * *

Chapter 2

It had been twenty years since she'd seen this man; because that moment of semi-consciousness in the regen tank didn't count, not now. Kate Landay was determined to take that attitude, anyway, because she still felt a bit embarrassed about knowing he had seen her like that. Not that she'd been naked, that was hardly a problem; not that she'd been injured and anything else but attractive, they had been first cadets and then Rangers together and he'd seen her in about every unlovely state the human female body could achieve unless one insisted on counting childbirth. She hadn't done that with him, they'd come close in a way but it hadn't happened.

And never would happen for her now, she supposed. She and Yoshi had been just about to take that step at last; after her final field assignment Captain Landay had been expecting promotion to flag rank, and she had reluctantly agreed to accept shore duty. She called it that like the daughter of generations of Navy officers that she was, like the Maine coastal girl she also was.

The only reason she'd made up her mind to that sacrifice was so that she and Yoshi could have their family together before it was too late for that, before her body reached the age at which conceiving would require medical intervention. At forty-three she was still fertile during monthly cycles when she didn't deliberately suppress that fertility, and the physician she'd discreetly questioned during her last off-ship physical two years ago had told her that she probably would continue to ovulate regularly for up to ten more years. She could have children naturally now, or she could have them with what that physician had euphemistically called "a little help" later; she was healthy, so as long as her

intended partner was able to cause conception there shouldn't be any problem at all in achieving pregnancy.

"Achieving" pregnancy. How Landay had laughed at that choice of words, once she was away from the examining table and able to think through all the implications of what that doctor had told her.

Amy she hadn't consulted about this matter, even though Amy was her ship's surgeon and had taken care of her for what seemed like forever. Those physicals conducted during base visits were always done by a physician the Explorer or Regular ship captain didn't see regularly, just to make sure nothing slipped by; so she hadn't had to hurt her friend's feelings by seeking out other care, she'd been required to do that anyway. She knew that the entries in her medical file which resulted from that checkup wouldn't include any references to her conversation with the doctor about her prospects for motherhood, that sort of thing didn't get recorded unless there was something unusual about it. And there was nothing the least bit unusual about a female Explorer in her middle years thinking about settling down at last, personally as well as professionally, and as part of that process considering her options for belatedly starting a family.

That was one thing Yoshi simply wouldn't do for her, patient though he'd always been with his Explorer captain's long absences and unpredictable assignments. As long as she held a field post he would not knowingly have a child with her, because he wasn't interested in becoming a father whose wife might on almost any day leave him a widower.

Kate had understood why he felt that way. She'd been a service brat herself, she remembered the terrible upheavals of being moved from base to base and being cared for in her earliest years first by one parent and then by the other; almost never by both of them at once. When at last the marriage had ended and her father had gone out of her life, and her mother had decided that the only way she could provide a stable home for ten-year-old Kate and newborn Clifton was to leave the youngsters in her own parents' care on Earth, Kate had been sad only until she'd discovered what a joy it was to know from month to month what bed she was going to sleep in and what school she was going to attend and whose faces would greet her at breakfast each morning. She, and Grandpa Bradley and Gram Landay (who like most Terran married couples used their own names, with Kate and her mother calling themselves "Landay" because they belonged to the female line and with Clifton using Grandpa Bradley's surname because Kate's father hadn't been willing to give his name to his wife's second child) had become a family, the most secure family Kate had ever known.

She'd looked forward to making her own family with Yoshi, and now that

was never going to happen. And once, long ago, she'd sacrificed her chance to do so with the man who was coming into her room now...she wondered whether he'd forgiven her for that yet, or if the wound she'd given him was still unhealed.

It didn't matter. She turned toward the door when she heard his voice, and she held onto the back of a chair because she was still unsteady on her feet and because she'd always needed something to do with her hands when she was nervous.

Damn him, why should seeing him make her nervous? This was ridiculous. They hadn't parted as enemies, and she was here now because for some reason he'd found it useful to save her life. Amy had explained that to her; and while there had to be much she didn't know about it yet, the facts she did know were enough to be reassuring.

"Hello, Kate." Costigan was holding out his hands to her. Both hands, the greeting clearly that of an old friend and not the formal welcome of local official to - immigrant? Refugee? Just what was her status in this place, anyway?

She let go of the chair and reached out in response. His hands had always engulfed hers, he was a big man and she a small woman. They'd laughed about that fact many times, it had always amazed them that their bodies fit together so perfectly when at first glance they appeared to be so mismatched...

Wrong thought, Kate; now you're blushing. She used speech to push the unwanted images away, said firmly, "Hello, Joe. Thanks, Amy told me what you did."

"Not as much as what you did for me once." Gray eyes met hazel ones, and now Kate Landay's face flushed in earnest.

"I didn't think you knew!" she said, and drew an audible breath. "I didn't think anyone knew, the deposition I gave for your trial was recorded under seal."

"I was allowed to view it, though." Costigan smiled thinly. "You took one hell of a risk, Kate."

"Yes. But I couldn't do anything different. If I'd identified you as a deserter you'd have been court-martialed and sent to the Questioners instead of being tried as a civilian, and I couldn't be responsible for that. I was glad I made that choice at the time, and now that I know what I would have been sending you to - now I'm gladder than ever. You were exiled along with the rest of your people - but you lived, and you never had to face Questioning." Her hot face was cooling now, and as the flood of emotion subsided she felt her knees beginning to tremble. She wasn't well just yet, no matter how much she wanted to pretend otherwise.

"You're not on a goddam bridge!" Costigan said almost angrily when he

saw her swaying. “You don’t have to put up a command front, for god’s sake sit in that chair before you fall on your face.” And he took her shoulders in his hands and saw to it that she did so, handling her as easily as he might have handled a child.

Right now that was fine with her. As he’d said, she wasn’t on the *Sparrowhawk*’s bridge any longer; in fact she wasn’t Captain Landay any longer, either. She never would be again, not unless the people of this outcast colony could someday create the technology that would be necessary for them to start exploring their own part of space.

Costigan sat on the edge of the bed that was the room’s only other piece of furniture, except for a stand that held a light-source and a few medical supplies. To be in a private space at all was a privilege here, of course, but more than likely Landay didn’t realize that yet. He waited until some color came back into her face (she’d gone from being red with embarrassment to white as a Terran cloud from weakness with barely a moment’s transition), and then he spoke to her much more gently than before.

“Kate, I owed you. I would have tried to get you out of there for that reason alone, but it wasn’t the only reason. I also care about you. I’ve been with someone else for a lot of years now, but you were the first real partner I ever had; and even before that, you were my friend. I want to get you and Amy started on a new life here now, and I need you to help me figure out the best way I can do that.”

“Maybe you should start by explaining what this place is like.” Landay sat up a bit straighter in the chair, which was comfortably contoured and padded but didn’t automatically accommodate itself to her shape. That was part of what she’d left behind, and as an Explorer she understood that much already. That was how she must think about this place to which she and her friend had come, she must treat it as she had treated all those other new worlds...as another intriguing new assignment, a place she must get to know and learn to understand. Only this time she wouldn’t be doing that on behalf of the Sovereignty, for the benefit of settlers who would soon follow her onto an empty M-Class world; or to ensure the safety of business people who would want to establish trade relationships with the citizens of an inhabited alien system. This time she and Amy would themselves be the settlers, and from now on this world would be their world.

Joe Costigan had faced this same prospect two decades earlier, but he’d come through the Gate with more than half a thousand of his own people accompanying him. In a sense he had brought his society along, and in a way that must have been terribly difficult - it was the kind of responsibility for other lives that Captain Landay knew only too intimately! - but in a way it must also

have been reassuring. She and Amy were alone here; they had each other, and to some extent (apparently) they had Joe Costigan. But that was it, everything and everyone else that was familiar to them had been left behind forever now.

“We call it Arcadia,” Costigan said simply, and then paused to see whether she would recognize the allusion. “Just one of many names for ancient mythical Terran paradises...I suppose whoever gave it to this place originally was joking, but those of us who live here now don’t see any reason why it has to be a joke. It’s a good world, Kate. The worst thing wrong with it is that the Gate doesn’t operate on a predictable schedule, and there’s no other way to get back to where we came from. If this planet were located where people could reach it by starship, there’s no way in hell people like us would be allowed to live on it at all - let alone have it to ourselves, to develop as we see fit.”

“Then you’re happy here? Amy said you were one of this place’s leaders, that was how you had enough power to do what you did for me.” Landay regarded her former lover, and was glad when he looked at her frankly instead of hooding his gaze as she recalled that he was altogether too capable of doing. She wanted the truth from him now, and if the truth wasn’t pretty she wanted it just as much as if it were pleasant.

But he knew that, they’d been comrades before they’d been lovers; and although he’d been a Ranger rather than an Explorer, he also understood the overriding importance of knowing the facts about a new world where a human being was going to be expected to function successfully. He nodded and let her see another kind of smile, the kind she remembered all too well, for just a moment before he said, “‘Happy’ may be too much to ask for, Kate. But I’m contented here. This place has challenged me, but it’s also given me a chance to build a life I never could have had if I’d been able to stay in the Sovereignty but had to leave the service.”

“And your wife? You said you’ve been with someone for years now, and if I know you that someone’s got to be female.” Landay smiled. This time she didn’t blush, because there was nothing embarrassing about reminding Joe Costigan that she knew his sexual preference and that hers complemented it.

They’d been good together, they really had. But that was long ago, she’d had years of intimate life with Yoshi since then, and she was genuinely thankful to realize that Joe had experienced the equivalent of that with some other woman. He deserved to be happy, he deserved fulfillment...and she hadn’t been able to give him those things, not in the way he had needed.

“She’s my mate, but we never had a commitment ceremony because people don’t do that here. It’s never become our custom. If you ask one of the old-timers why, they’ll give you a dozen different reasons but none of them will really make much sense. ‘We just don’t do that here’ is probably the best way to

explain it, and I guess you've heard that before if you've been an Explorer for the past twenty years." Costigan grinned again, this time not quite as briefly. "Anyhow, her name is Hanna. Hanna Leone; she came here as an eighteen-year-old girl, and when I arrived three years later she was already second in command to the leader of the largest group of settlers. 'Settlers' is what we call ourselves, by the way! Never exiles, never prisoners, certainly never criminals. Hanna took over as leader when her first partner died; and she took me as her partner after that. That's become another custom here, there are always two leaders in any group and they're always partnered to each other. It's not always male/female, but it's always a personal pairing and not just a formal captain/first officer kind of relationship. The only exceptions are a few very remote bands that have almost no contact with the rest of us, except to trade or to fight from time to time."

"So you've been with her since then." Landay nodded. She'd heard of much stranger leadership arrangements and succession customs. It was amazing what developed when a group of humans became cut off from regular contact with their larger society and that isolation persisted over years. Particularly if the isolated group didn't expect to be reunited eventually with the larger civilization, if its members knew they might be on their own for a very long time - or even, perhaps, forever. "Are there children, Joe?"

"No. And don't ask me why, it just never happened. Here we don't have enough surplus medical supplies or equipment, or even enough trained doctors, to waste those resources trying to have children when nature doesn't just send them along." Costigan kept his tone easy deliberately, schooled his face into nonchalance; or at least into something that wasn't pain or regret. "What about you, Kate? Before you got here I knew from communicating with New Brixton what crimes you were supposed to have committed, and Amy's given me the background on why the charges against you were upgraded from insubordination to treason; but other than that I don't know a thing about how you've spent the past twenty years. Except, of course, that you stayed in the service and switched from Ranger to Explorer and made four-stripe captain."

"I was planning to go back to Terra after one last assignment, if I hadn't been arrested and sent to New Brixton and the Questioners," Landay said, and she made no effort to be casual. "I was on the promo list to make rear admiral, and I was going to let them stick me into an office at HQ. Then I'd have quit using birth control, and Yoshi and I would have started living together officially for the first time."

"Yoshi?" How just one word, just a man's name, could carry so many questions within it was beyond either of them; but it did. It carried a whole lifetime's worth of inquiries, in fact.

“Yoshi Sakagawa. Professor of Naval Architecture at Dalhousie University College of Engineering in Halifax.” Kate smiled gently then, because somehow talking about Yoshi always made her smile. “We hadn’t figured out how we were going to handle that part of it, of course. Someone was going to have to commute, that admiral’s office I just mentioned was going to be on Luna and I can’t imagine Yoshi leaving his house on the South Shore for anyone or anything! But we’d have worked that out, we always worked things out.”

“Unlike you and me,” Joe Costigan said, and he didn’t smile.

“Are you still mad at me because I didn’t have that baby, Joe?” Landay lifted her head, and when her eyes met his the challenge in them was familiar.

“No. I wasn’t mad at you then, not for not wanting to have a baby when the timing was all wrong. I was just mad at what happened to it, and removing the embryo into stasis until we both were ready to be parents should have been such a simple procedure. Dammit, that kid shouldn’t have died!” Costigan started off calmly enough, but his face flushed darkly while he spoke. Now he was clearly agitated. “She’d be a grown woman by now, Kate, if we’d left her where she was and if you’d had her eight months later.”

“Yes. And for what it’s worth, I’ve wished a thousand times I could go back and change that decision. I probably would have regretted it if I had, I probably would have wound up hating you and hating her too...but I still wish things had been different, I didn’t want it to be the way it was.” Landay closed her eyes for a moment. She was using up her strength now, strong emotions were draining her even more rapidly than physical activity. “Joe, we’re supposed to be talking about how Amy and I fit into this ‘Arcadia’ of yours.”

“Yes. We are, and that means I need to introduce both you and Amy to Hanna. I wanted to see you alone first, Kate, because we needed to talk about all the things we’ve been talking about; but Hanna’s the boss, one leader has to be senior and that’s her. And of course whatever we come up with when we start making decisions is going to affect Amy just as much as it’s going to affect you.” The change of topic was taking effect now. Costigan was breathing easily again, and his dark face was almost back to its normal hue. “One thing’s for damned sure, we can use another doctor. And an Explorer ship’s captain should fit in easily, too; I know you’ve got skills we need here, and I know you’ll be able to transfer them to a new set of tasks.”

He got up from the edge of the bed then, and moved the scant two steps that brought him to Landay’s chair. He reached down and lifted her out of it, not picking her up in his arms but nevertheless supporting most of her weight as he guided her to the bed and firmly placed her on it. “But right now you’re about to collapse in a heap, and that’s not going to do either of us any good if Amy finds you like that and blames me. Rest for awhile now, Kate. I’m not going

anywhere, Hanna's not going anywhere, and neither are you and Amy. One thing we always have here on Arcadia is plenty of time."

* * *

Chapter 3

“We use mostly solar power. The generators that the earliest settlers were able to bring through the Gate are still functioning, and from time to time we manage to bring through additional components,” Hanna Leone explained to Kate Landay and Amy Salter. She’d sent Joe Costigan off on other business after introductions had been made; she wanted to form her own opinions about these two newcomers to her small realm, and that had required discreetly removing Joe from the picture. “Whenever we get that kind of opportunity we concentrate on solar tech equipment, with medical running a close second. We’ve come a long way in the past quarter-century, we can fabricate some substitutes for manufactured goods now and once we get a piece of equipment we can nearly always find ways to keep it running; but we can’t refine ores into metals yet, and that’s so basic that learning to live without it has been one of the hardest things for us.”

“I noticed that almost everything was made from wood or stone or brick, or some other natural building material, even in the room where you had the regen tank set up,” Dr. Salter said, and her brow knit in puzzlement. “Just how did you manage that, anyway? From what I’ve heard talking with your physicians, that’s the first regen tank that was ever set up on this side of the Gate. I had to show it to the doctors who were trained here, they didn’t believe me when I described how it works and what it can do.”

Kate shot a look at her friend, because although she realized she’d been at first incapacitated and then convalescent since arriving here it hadn’t really occurred to her that Amy had had time to do anything except attend to her care.

Yet of course there would have been such time, and if there was one thing she knew about doctors it was that they always managed to find each other and that they always talked incessantly after they did so.

Hanna Leone nodded, not the least bit disturbed. She said, “You probably thought that communication wasn’t possible except when the Gate happens to be open; and until recent years that was true, but scientists on your side finally solved that puzzle. There’s a resonance that continues between the times of opening, Joe explains it as being like a carrier wave between the two locations. And since Joe had been working on the same idea from this side, he was the one who received the first message that ever came through with the Gate closed - and his having been in your military when he was young came in handy, because the people who established communication with him recognized his name and decided to keep him as their regular contact. Since then it’s been common knowledge on this side that we can talk to the screws, although I doubt that the screws have let anyone on their side know about it who doesn’t have to. It’s in everyone’s best interest if we’re prepared to deal with whoever or whatever they send through when the Gate opens, and the screws often accept payment from transportees and their families to make special arrangements that we carry out once they get here. In return we get certain - ah - compensations from them.”

“So sending me through in stasis, with the regen tank and Amy to operate it, was one of those compensations? A *quid pro quo*, you could say?” Kate Landay tilted her head thoughtfully.

“You could call it that, Captain Landay. I was a young woman when I came through the Gate, I’d finished my basic education on the other side and I remember that Latin phrase; but I’d advise you not to say anything like that to anyone who’s Arcadian-reared. They might think you were ridiculing them, and that wouldn’t be good at all.” Leone smiled thinly. “They might also think that it was a huge waste of *quid pro quo* for Joe to arrange to bring you here, so I wouldn’t mention that to anyone either.”

“I’m not ‘captain’ anymore.” Kate spoke matter-of-factly, and her eyes were steady as they met Hanna Leone’s. “And Amy just said that she’s already talked to other physicians here, so isn’t what happened to me common knowledge?”

“Not exactly. That you were Questioned to your death is known; that will give you a lot of respect in the eyes of other settlers, by the way, because those of us who remember the other side usually don’t remember it very fondly and it’s a sort of legendary hell as far as our native-borns are concerned. That you were sent through with the regen tank is also known, and I’m not going to try to keep that knowledge within our medical community because that would never

work. It's reusable, after all, so no one will think it's odd that we wanted to get our hands on it. What isn't known is that Joe called in favors and pulled strings until he made your rescue happen, that it was you he was after and not the tank - and if we're all wise we'll make sure that knowledge remains private to the four of us. It wouldn't be a good thing for our settlement if people realized just how connected Joe's become to the universe on the other side of that Gate. To our native-borns that's an unimaginable place, and to most of the rest of us it's somewhere we want to forget all about."

They'd been sitting in Leone's work space; unlike her mate she did not dignify it by referring to it as her "office." It was a simple room with a few chairs, a table that served as her desk, and a compact and rather antiquated computer. That computer had once been a Ranger's mobile unit, probably about a decade ago if Landay was judging its vintage correctly...how it could still be operating was a mystery, its designers would no doubt have been astounded. Now the Arcadian leader rose and walked to a window, and she pushed back its covering and drew in a breath of outside air. "Ah! It's crisp today. Autumn's almost here, and our winters at this latitude are the equivalent of nine Terran months long. Rather like those of Canada or Russia back on Earth, I think, from what I've read. But my first home was Canovan Four, and of course that world had no temperate zone. It was just too close to its sun, and we all had to live in its polar regions."

"Why did you settle here, then, instead of where the climate's better?" Amy Salter wanted to know. That was the sort of utterly practical question she always asked. She left discussions about customs and protocols to Kate, while she zeroed in on those things that were necessary for life and comfort.

"Two reasons. The obvious one is that we originally settled near the Gate because we hadn't the means to travel very far away from it; since then we've explored many areas of our world, though, and we could have moved our main settlement elsewhere if we'd thought it would give us a better place to live. But the tropics aren't habitable here for reasons other than the climate. The insect life in the frost-free parts of this world is deadly to humans, so in order to live here safely we have to stay where there's a good hard freeze every year. Far enough into those latitudes, in fact, so that the tropical insects don't wander up here during the months when the weather is warm. We lost a whole band of nomads years ago when they camped too far south during the summer. Hopefully we all learned our lesson then and that won't ever happen again."

"That's the kind of thing Explorers usually are able to find out before a new world is settled," Landay said, and once again she forbade herself to sigh. That life was over now, and she wouldn't devalue the second chance she'd been given by wasting time being sorry she couldn't go back to her old existence.

She would allow herself to regret being separated from Yoshi, but he believed she was dead. He was grieving for her, no doubt, but in time he would heal; and he would find someone else to love him and share his life. She felt the same way about her family, her grandparents and her mother and her little brother. Losing her was hurting them, of course, but it was something they'd always known might one day happen. They would survive, and would remember her in all the ways she wanted to be remembered. But did she regret not being part of the service any longer?

No, she couldn't feel the smallest spark of sadness about that. Her own had put her into the Questioners' hands, and then they had left her there until she was dead.

Hanna Leone was nodding, looking away from the window again and back at Landay. She said, "Yes, and we could have used a whole shipload of Explorers when Arcadia was new and I was still just a kid! We could have avoided a lot of missteps, saved a lot of lives that learning the hard way cost us. But we didn't have that luxury, we had to explore our world the best way we could and take our losses along with our gains; and that's how we did it. Now, Captain Landay - Kate, that's what I really will have to call you - we don't have starships and shuttles here, but we have plenty of uses for your other skills. We have uses for every new settler's skills, it's just a question of figuring out where the best 'fit' between the individual and the task set is going to be."

* * *

Amy Salter defected early in the tour of Gateway City, as its inhabitants had named the settlement that was nearest the portal and that was Arcadia's largest population center. As soon as they reached the city's hospital she was gone. She'd taken care of Kate Landay in a chamber of Government House that for security reasons had been fitted out for that purpose, so this was her initial chance to see for herself the state of Arcadian medical science. As she had said earlier, she'd been allowed to have contact with local physicians during her patient's recovery; but they had always come to her - always carefully screened by Joe Costigan - and much as she'd wanted to share her knowledge freely and find out what they had to teach her in return, she'd had to keep the conversations and the tank demonstrations brief.

She wouldn't have to restrain herself like that now. The hospital's chief of staff swept her up the minute she walked through his office door, and soon Kate Landay and Hanna Leone were looking at each other with mingled amusement and resignation. *Doctors!* that glance said with plain exasperation. Until a month ago Landay had been an Explorer captain and Leone was chieftain of what

amounted to a small city-state; but both women had been exercising military or quasi-military authority all their adult lives, and both of them understood that physicians could be as frustrating as they were necessary.

So they proceeded without Amy, and in a way that was good. As they walked together from building to building they could speak now without being constrained by anyone else's presence, and although having Amy there hadn't limited Kate in the least she suspected that it had limited Leone. The Arcadian woman asked as soon as she was sure they weren't being overheard, "Just what did you do, anyway, Kate? Joe told me you were suspected of treason, but that word can mean a lot of things. When I asked him just what it meant in your case, he clammed up; and when Joe clams up, I only make him tell me what I want to know if I really have to know it. Getting that man to do something he really doesn't want to do has a high price, I learned that a long time ago!"

"You noticed that about him, did you?" Landay lifted a sardonic eyebrow. "I wondered how he might have changed, it's been a long time since he and I were mated. But I guess he hasn't changed that much, after all!"

"Probably not." Leone grinned, and there was real humor in her eyes. "Are you going to tell me, or is avoiding a question you don't want to answer your version of Joe's going to silent running?"

That was a starship term, borrowed from Earth's long-ago submarine service and used now in much the same way it had been used then. There were times when hiding a ship's location from the enemy meant shutting down every system that generated sound waves within or a plasma trail without, or anything else that might register its presence on that enemy's sensors. The ancient submariners had, in fact, been nicknamed the "Silent Service" because in the earliest years before sonar was invented their vessels had glided along under the surfaces of Earth's oceans without being seen or heard by those above; and their spiritual descendants of many years later, the Kate Landays who served aboard another kind of ship but who like those submariners depended for life itself on the integrity of a fragile metal shell and the dependability of the technology within it, were often called by that same nickname. If anything it suited them far more accurately, because the oceans of Earth were a positively noisy place when compared to the silence of space.

That was a silence that Kate Landay knew she would never experience again. She sighed inwardly, braced her shoulders, and prepared herself to give Hanna Leone an answer since she honestly felt that she owed one to this woman.

And a crude but very effective alarm, some kind of klaxon, sounded through the city's streets. Leone's face went pale, and her features tightened; and Landay recognized immediately the look of a military commander faced with the prospect of an unanticipated battle. The Arcadian woman's hand went

to her hip and brought a handheld comm up to her face. She said into it tensely, "Report!"

Landay couldn't hear the response, partly because that comm was an antique and partly because the klaxon hadn't shut up. People were running - she'd had an idea this place was well populated, but she hadn't realized just how well until she saw so many of them dashing from one place to another in what was clearly a response to the planet-bound equivalent of a starship's "all hands to battle stations" order. But Leone didn't run, she stood still and listened to whatever the person on the other end of her comm was telling her.

And then she put it back onto her belt and she said, "Damn! This isn't how I wanted to welcome you, Kate, but I hope you're up for a fight. It's a raiding party from the north, they're hitting one of our outlying farms and we can't afford to lose part of our crops to them this season. It's been a poor one, or we'd be trading instead of getting raided - but I don't have to tell you about what scarcity of resources does to a peace that's fragile at its best. Hopefully they're not after more than that, but we'll be ready if they do try to move in closer."

With that she began walking swiftly and purposefully, but she still didn't run. She didn't need to, because something that Landay hadn't seen before on this world - an aircar, antiquated but miraculously functional like just about all of Arcadia's other technology - swooped down and landed so near them that Landay flinched even though she'd piloted as recklessly as that herself when the need had presented itself. Leone scrambled aboard, and Landay followed.

* * *

Joseph Costigan was piloting the aircar. It was just that, a civilian conveyance that probably dated from the settlers' earliest days on this world. Like that internal monitoring system at Government House (so grand a name for so rude a building!) that Kate had detected during her first minutes outside the regen tank, it was so old that it seemed crude to someone newly arrived from the other side; but also like the monitoring system, and like Hanna Leone's comm unit, the aircar functioned with all the efficiency of equipment lovingly cared for and skillfully maintained. "When it's all you've got you make it do" was a maxim familiar to Rangers and Explorers alike, and clearly that was a way of life where technology was concerned on this side of the Gate.

Nevertheless consternation must have showed on Landay's face, at least to the eyes of someone who'd once known her well, because Costigan shot her a bemused look and said understandingly, "It's a heap, isn't it, Kate? But it's armed, it didn't come from the factory that way but it got retrofitted for fighting PDQ once it was brought through the Gate! And although it hasn't got the range

we'd like and it's slow compared to the in-atmosphere combat shuttles we used to fly, it's damned swift compared to a human's own feet or even to a horse's four feet."

"Not that we have many of those," Leone said, with the air of someone correcting a misconception before it could take hold. "Up in the mountains there's one group that has a whole herd of them; but all the progenitors of those horses came through the Gate when it was new, before it started being used to dump people the screws didn't want on their side. There were a few settlers who actually were sent through as settlers, and they had decent equipment and supplies. And animals, too. But," and she glanced at Costigan as if she'd abruptly realized she might be telling their new arrival far too much while Landay's loyalties were as yet neither formed nor tested, "this is the only aircar on Arcadia! That we know for certain. And it's how we get leadership to the scene whenever we have an incident like this one. The arms we're carrying don't matter half as much as Joe and me just letting ourselves be seen."

Landay nodded. This she understood; she'd learned early that while there were times when command meant keeping one's own person safe, there were also times when a captain or other leader simply had to appear quite literally at the battle's front. And she also knew that although such theatrics weren't often necessary in a technologically advanced conflict, when you were fighting under primitive conditions and with primitive weapons a distant authority figure could quickly be dismissed as no authority at all by those in the field.

"Hell, it'll be over by the time we get there," Costigan said, but he was pushing the aircar for all it was worth even while he was rendering that opinion. "Either the Rusties got one of the containers and made off with it, or they didn't. The one thing neither side's willing to do, you see, is destroy food! So they try to attack just when there's a full container powered up on antigravs and ready to be guided into the city. I've been working on a way to remotely deactivate the antigrav units, but so far I haven't got that puzzle solved; and until I do get it figured out, the Rusties are probably going to go on getting at least one full load of grain from our harvests during any autumn when things are lean."

"'Rusties'?" Landay asked. Her forehead puckered as she did so. She didn't like the way Costigan had said the term, although of course the word itself was innocent enough.

"Short for 'rustics,' country people, backwoodsmen." It was Leone who answered, her tone even. "Or for 'rusticators,' a very old Standard English term for tourists. By which the person using the word usually means that the Rusties are lazy, letting our people grow the crops and then stealing them from us."

"The ones who live furthest north don't have a growing season long enough for any Terran grain crop that can survive in Arcadia's soil." Costigan's

tone was also even, but in a way that hinted at reproof. “If they can trade with us for what they need to get through the winter, they’re always willing to do that. And we need the things they bring us from the mountains and the tundra, we’ll miss those goods this winter.”

“But we can’t trade away grain during a poor harvest!” This was an old disagreement between this long-mated couple, clearly. And Leone was the boss here, even if Costigan hadn’t already said so that would have been plain from the way she spoke and from the look she gave him. “The people wouldn’t stand for it, we’d have a revolt on our hands. I know, I know, we always lose at least one container and we get nothing in return for it - which we would if we traded, and just cut back on the volume - and we sometimes lose good people during the Rusties’ raids. But still, we just can’t change our people’s minds about this.”

She’s a good politician, Landay thought as she watched the taller woman. She knows what her supporters expect and she gives it to them, and to hell with every other consideration. But I’m not a politician, and I’ll bet from the look on your face that you’ve never learned how to be one either; have you, Joe my love? You hate this. You’ve learned how to live with it, but you’ve never learned to accept it - and you never will.

“Look, Kate,” Leone said, and gestured to direct her companion’s attention. “This is the most remote of our farmlands, and of course it’s the area that has to be harvested first because it’s located farthest north. And that’s why we can count on its getting raided at least once in any year that we have no surplus grain for trade—”

Whatever else she’d intended to say didn’t leave her lips. The aircar’s engines died, and it dropped like a stunned bird to the plain over which it had been flying.

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