

Starship Castaways

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ISBN 0-595-20004-4

Published 2002 by IUniverse, Inc
<http://www.iuniverse.com>

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2002

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Chapter 1

“Dammit, Alike! This just isn’t right!” Chandler of the Clan Cranston hissed the words into his commanding officer’s ear so that no one else on the *Baikal*’s bridge could hear him (he hoped). “It’s wrong to leave them crippled like this. We have to finish them!”

“Chandler, I don’t have time for this.” Alike, also of the Clan Cranston, fixed her second-in-command with a stare that wasn’t even a degree or two warmer than the expanse of vacuum separating the *Baikal* from its victim. She didn’t give Chandler the courtesy he’d given her. She spoke at normal volume, and her voice (as always) reached every officer in the compartment. “They’re not going far, and that means they can’t survive for long. I want to get that freighter under tow before anyone else shows up—we’re on the border of Clan Yanger’s space here, and we could wind up having to stand off one of their ships if we’re discovered with a prize that’s unsecured.” She let her green eyes rest on Chandler for a moment longer before she gave him the mercy of looking away and snapping to a more junior officer, “Helm! Take us alongside! Nice and easy, now, so that anyone who’s not in the control room watching sensors won’t even know what’s happening.”

That was how any Clan raider did it after disabling a Commonwealth ship that had chanced the dangerous passage through Clan space. Open a breach in the hull-flood its interior with poison-and soon after that, the boarding party could do its work without opposition. The Clans had regarded this part of space as theirs for generations, and they claimed whatever of value crossed it as their own.

Nothing was supposed to be crossing it from Commonwealth to Empire, actually. That was why the *Baikal*'s current prey was escorted not by a state-of-the-art military vessel bristling with the latest armaments-but instead, by a ship picked up at auction and refitted for this kind of guard dog duty.

Chandler spared that hapless vessel, what twenty years ago when it was launched from a Commonwealth shipyard was classed as a light cruiser, a last glance as it passed out of range of the *Baikal*'s sensors. As he did so he shook his head in wonder at the valiant fight that ship's people had managed to offer his own. He didn't dare repeat, not even in a self-directed whisper, what he had already told his captain; but he thought it again unavoidably.

The people on board that enemy ship had fought with valor, and they were out of range now only because they were continuing in the direction they'd been moving when their vessel's sublight drive as well as its hyperdrive ceased functioning. Inertia would carry it along at the same rate, since in space there was no atmospheric friction to slow them, until long after the human beings inside it died from whatever got them first.

Would it be exposure, as the ship's interior temperature fell inexorably after eventual power failure? Oxygen starvation? Death from lack of water? Or-slowest of all-from starvation, after the rations ran out?

They wouldn't be able to call for help. Before she gave the order to abandon their crippled prey to its fate, Captain Alike Chandler of Clan Cranston first made sure that the enemy vessel's communications array was destroyed.

You fought gallantly to protect your charges. You deserve better than what you're facing now, Chandler Cranston thought at whoever was still alive inside that hulk. *You deserve mercy given by one honorable crew to another, and I'm ashamed-bitterly ashamed-that a Cranston clan ship is abandoning that duty.*

Damn you, Alike! Cousin or no cousin, you're still what happens when a raider captain's chosen according to pedigree instead of by combat record!

"Chandler!" Alike's voice penetrated his thoughts (and probably the *Baikal*'s bulkheads, too, Chandler thought sourly as he responded with lifted head and expectantly directed eyes). "There's no rush now. Don't send the boarding party across until every compartment of that ship's been flooded and then cleared. D'you understand me?"

"Aye, Alike. I do." Chandler inclined his head toward his superior with respect in his manner, and utter disgust in his eyes.

* * *

"Captain, I've got nothing left to give you except thrusters. I'm sorry, but that's it!" Marilla Lansing surveyed the wreckage that used to be the *Archangel*'s

engine room, and she shook her graying head in utter frustration. The tears that stung her dark eyes were partly from the wisps of acrid smoke that automatic scrubbers and fire extinguishers (still operating somehow) couldn't remove from the compartment's atmosphere quite fast enough to keep ahead of the situation, and partly from angry despair. Never in all her forty-plus years of living had Rilla felt quite this helpless.

"Damn," came the mutter of Captain Irina Pappaniku's voice over commlink from the bridge. She sounded ridiculously calm. "Well. That takes care of coming about and making a stand against the clan ship, now, doesn't it?"

She probably wasn't expecting an answer, but Lansing gave her one anyway because the engineer could see several pairs of eyes turned expectantly in her direction. She knew without having to guess, because these were her people, which ones were feeling relieved that for them this battle was over now and which were mortified at learning they couldn't possibly go back and continue doing the job they'd signed on to do.

She said, "You could bring her about, Captain. And there we'd be, dead in space."

A sitting duck, useful to the ship they were supposed to be protecting only if the enemy captain allowed the old cruiser's continued (and probably unexpected) activity to pull the clan ship's attention away from its true quarry. That could only be temporary even if it did happen, because the *Archangel* and the freighter *Keltic* were all alone out here. Help wasn't on the way, and slowing the clan ship's boarding of the freighter and slaughter of its crew wouldn't make one bit of difference in this incident's outcome.

An "incident" was just how this day's carnage would be written up by InfoServ, of course, if it made the public broadcasts at all. Incidents in Clan territory got press attention only when they featured particularly lurid details or when prominent Commonwealth citizens died or disappeared. There wasn't anything newsworthy about a freighter that vanished while attempting an illegal (technically, anyway) passage from Commonwealth to Empire, since InfoServ wouldn't know it had taken this first ever "hired gun" escort ship along with it into oblivion.

How had she, Commander Marilla Lansing of the Commonwealth Defense Service, wound up spending her life's last hour here? Retired Commander Lansing, formerly of the Commonwealth Defense Service, that was...why hadn't she been content to stay on Claris 5 with Abraham and their son, instead of following her old friend and long-time commanding officer Irina Pappaniku into the no man's land of Clan space?

It was far too late to be wondering about that now, though. Pappaniku's familiar voice was saying evenly over the commlink, "I won't throw our

people's lives away making a gesture, Rilla. We've got life support. Unless we fire those thrusters and counter it, we've got forward motion. The clan ship's ignoring us, and if its captain was going to bother finishing us off that would be happening right this minute-so I'm betting they're going to leave us right where we are. Abandoning us to die, is what they think they're doing! But we aren't going to cooperate."

When had Pappaniku switched from a direct bridge-to-engine room call to a shipwide broadcast? Lansing hadn't noticed, but she realized now it had happened because her surviving crew members weren't staring toward her and straining to eavesdrop. They had their heads lifted, and their faces wore the slightly vacant expressions of humans listening to a voice that was (from their viewpoint) disembodied.

"We aren't going to lie down on our decks and die," Captain Pappaniku was saying with absolute determination. "That's probably what 'Clan honor' expects, since we're out of the battle and the ship we're supposed to be guarding with our lives is lost no matter what we do or don't do now. But committing suicide by giving up isn't part of my code of honor, and I don't believe it's part of anyone else's here, either!" The tempo of her speech picked up as she said that last sentence, as her tone went from defiant to galvanizing. "Department heads and deck bosses. Get your areas secured; put together a list of repairs you can make, and start your people on them immediately. Put together another list of repairs you can't make, and bring it with you to my ready room 30 minutes from now. I want casualty lists then, too. We're going to figure out how we can stay alive, and after that we're going to figure out how we can get this ship to safe harbor somewhere until help can reach us. Get busy, now! Pappaniku out."

From all over the engine room, Rilla Lansing heard sighs. The people under her command, those who were still alive and conscious and able to react to their captain's speech, threw despair aside and went back to work with a grim enthusiasm that five minutes earlier Lansing wouldn't have believed possible.

* * *

On her bridge, Captain Irina Pappaniku slumped as she closed the commlink. Making that announcement had taken the last of her strength...or almost the last of it, anyway.

She had one more thing to do. Her first mate, her executive officer in the parlance of the Defense Service to which she'd belonged for so many years out of the life she would lose today, was bending over her with poorly concealed horror in his eyes.

Pappaniku didn't want to know how she looked, and Mitchell Dufraïn's

eyes came far too close to serving her as a mirror. Yet she couldn't afford, not just yet, to close her own lids; because once she did that, she doubted she would have enough strength (physical strength, at least) to pry them open again.

Strength of will she still had, but that could only carry her ruined flesh so far. Beyond that, lay death-and for the first time, death looked inviting and peaceful to Irina Pappaniku.

They'd promised her it would be this way when her time finally came, had her teachers during the early years of her career. She'd tried her best to believe them, but she hadn't quite managed it until now.

Now what she felt most keenly was gratitude at discovering that they were right after all.

"Captain, we don't have a sickbay anymore. But can't I at least get you onto the couch in your ready room? You've got to let someone dress those burns, and give you enough painkiller to knock you out. What you just did, talking to the crew like that-you've made the difference. For God's sake, let the rest of us take it from here!"

Mitch Dufrein was a huge man, tall and solid and broad of torso without carrying a gram of flabbiness in the process. Lifting Irina up and carrying her off her bridge would be the easiest thing in the universe for him, and he would do it gently, too.

Nevertheless the idea of being moved was about the only thing left in the universe that could horrify her now. Pappaniku locked gazes with him, and she grimaced because shaking her head was an almost equally bad idea. "No!" she grated, as the powerful analgesics already in her bloodstream began giving way to pain again. Mitch was right; if she took enough to push the agony back one more time, it would also be enough to send her over the edge into unconsciousness.

She was going there soon enough anyway, and for that relief she wouldn't need pharmaceuticals. Nor would she return from it...so wasting these final moments of awareness was unthinkable. They were difficult, but they were also incalculably precious.

"Mitch, in 30 minutes I'll be gone. You know that as well as I know it," she said, gathering herself physically while her mind grew preternaturally clear. "I don't want everyone walking into the ready room to find me, or what's left of me, lying on that couch. I want them to find you waiting for them, in command and ready to take their reports and put together a plan. I'm dead already-I knew I was about two minutes after I got hit. I'm counting on you to pull the people together now and keep them together, and get them to someplace where they can survive. Understood?"

He opened his mouth to argue. She stared at him without flinching, now

truly using the last of her strength and thinking it well invested when he closed his lips again, set his jaw, and nodded.

He did understand. He was accepting the charge she'd given him.

It was enough. She could rest now.

Irina Pappaniku closed her eyes for the last time, and let the darkness take her.

* * *

"Where's the captain?" It was Rilla Lansing who wanted to know that first, of course. Rilla had been one of Irina Pappaniku's closest friends.

Mitchell Dufraïn looked at each of the half-dozen other people who were occupying the casual seating (several comfortable chairs and a sofa) in the *Archangel's* ready room. He knew he ought to be sitting behind the captain's desk, but he couldn't manage that yet. So he was in the guest chair in front of that desk instead, with the chair swiveled on its base so that he could face his department heads and deck bosses.

They'd lost sickbay and they'd lost the hangar deck, both completely, so there were two fewer people here than there ought to be. One of those attending this meeting was a substitute, because the ship's chief tactical officer had arrived wounded in sickbay just before a shot that Dufraïn devoutly hoped even a clan ship hadn't aimed for the medical facility struck there anyway.

Still, he had a better representation of the ship's leaders than he'd any right to hope for considering their desperate situation. The ones who were still alive were even whole (so far) in the physical sense, relatively speaking. Their bodies showed bruises, abrasions, and cuts that were clotting now under light coatings of soot; but no one here was badly hurt.

The badly hurt among them had for the most part, Dufraïn thought sourly, died when sickbay was blasted open to vacuum.

"Captain Pappaniku was wounded, and she wouldn't let me relieve her," the first mate informed Engineer Lansing, and everyone else along with her. "She made it through the battle. She died in her command chair, within five minutes of when she made that shipwide announcement."

"Oh, *God*." Rilla Lansing was a professional, one so seasoned that she'd managed to complete her Service career and retire. Yet this news rattled even her, coming as it did just when they were realizing they truly had survived the clan ship's assault and were about to regroup, in hope of also surviving the ordeal that began when the enemy turned its attention aside and that part of the fight was over.

Yes, Lansing really was a professional. She uttered that one despairing

groan, and she blinked fiercely to get rid of the moisture that flooded her eyes; but then she straightened her shoulders. The next thing she said was, “So that makes you acting captain, doesn’t it, Mitch? And it makes Ms. Eriknova first mate, and me second.” She nodded toward a fellow female who appeared to be as human as she was, but who possessed singularly odd dermal pigmentation.

No one ever addressed Thalia Eriknova of Themyscira by her given name. As far as Mitch knew, no one had ever been invited to do that.

“Correct,” Dufrein said, acknowledging Lansing with a nod and then giving Eriknova a hard look.

The woman looked back at him, impassively. She nodded after a moment, letting him know she understood.

Rilla Lansing had a husband, a high-ranking civil servant (or was Abraham Hightower actually a politician of some kind or other?) back on her world of residence. She was also the mother of a young adolescent son. Although Dufrein doubted that most of the people in this compartment knew it, Irina Pappaniku was a long-time widow whose only child (a daughter named Lena) was a cadet in her fourth year at the Academy. Pappaniku hadn’t made any effort to let her officers on this ship get to know her, but as her first mate Mitch Dufrein had learned a few things about his captain anyway; and Rilla Lansing, of course, knew Pappaniku from as long ago as the two women’s shared plebe year.

Did Eriknova have a family (as he understood the word, anyway) on the mysterious planet that she called home? Dufrein wondered that now, along with why it hadn’t entered his mind to wonder about it before. Then, of course, he put the thought aside along with all else that was personal.

Lena Pappaniku would go on living without Irina, and so (if the *Archangel’s* people never made it home) would young Abram Hightower. Abram’s father, Abraham, would mourn awhile for Marilla Lansing; but then he would surely find another woman to share his life and help him finish rearing his son.

The same thing would happen to the families of all the other people on board this ship now, and to the loved ones of those who’d died already. Their lives would go on, as the lives of lost sailors’ families always had.

They were the lucky ones even though they undoubtedly would never be able to see it that way, Mitch Dufrein thought as he moved from the swiveled guest chair to take a seat perching on the edge of the captain’s desk instead. From there he could see the others better and hear them better, could give them his full attention as he began listening to the reports Irina Pappaniku had ordered them to start preparing during the last minutes of her life.

Yes, civilians who could go on with their lives as usual—except for sorrow that they endured for a time, and then forgot—were the lucky ones where

bereavement by space combat was concerned. Mitch Dufrain knew what it was like for a starship officer when violence touched his home-world, and took away his family but left him to go on serving when he had no one left to protect.

He recalled lifting his captain's seared and lifeless body out of her command chair just minutes earlier, and then he fought to put that memory aside along with all those others so he could focus completely on what Rilla Lansing was trying to tell him as she offered the first of the post-battle status reports. Before he succeeded, though, he also remembered envying the dead woman heartily.

She'd gone out knowing her only child was safe. It was the kind of mercy fate hadn't given Dufrain-either that knowledge itself, or the resulting peace that he saw as he looked at his captain's ravaged face for the final time.

Her worries were over forever, just as Mitchell Dufrain's were starting all over again.

* * *

Chapter 2

Poetic justice. Chandler remembered that ancient expression from the language his people still shared with their fellow humans in the Commonwealth, and he grimaced more than smiled at the bitter humor of that thought.

The *Baikal's* bridge lay shattered and smoldering around him. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious after he heard Alike giving a frantic order to, "Seal access ports and release grapples! *Now!*".

Civilian vessels weren't supposed to be outfitted with self-destruct capabilities, and setting any ship's self-destruct sequence on time delay like this was a damned dirty (although admittedly clever!) trick. The boarding party was almost ready to return when Chandler bent over the console where a junior officer was puzzling over peculiar readings from within their victim's hull-and he was still damning himself, as he lay on the deck now and coughed and gasped and wished his body would stop struggling so desperately to go on breathing, for not giving that emergency cast-off order himself the second he realized what was about to happen.

Alike would probably have relieved him of duty, of course, for usurping her command. But Alike would still be alive, and so would most if not all the other members of her crew. There would have been time, if he'd given the order himself, to add another equally vital command: "Helm! Get us out of here, maximum speed!"

They could have put distance between their hull and that of the doomed freighter. It would have taken so little of it to make a difference....

Instead they'd been right on top of the other ship as it came apart.

Was anyone else left alive, or was he, Chandler, all alone now in what remained of the *Baikal*? All alone with half a hundred corpses, that was. The freighter *Keltic* was gone, but at least this much of the clan ship was (for now, anyway) intact.

Although not exactly habitable. Between the smoldering fires and lack of active atmospheric scrubbing and oxygen replenishment, Chandler knew he wouldn't be spending much longer thinking about what had happened already-and he didn't have to wonder one bit about what was going to happen next.

If this intact compartment didn't lose its integrity first, or if one of those fires didn't blaze up and reach something explosive, Chandler was going to run out of oxygen to breathe. Then he was going to die.

Which would save him the trouble of ending his life purposefully, of course, so it was just as well. Even if rescue was on the way (which it wasn't!), even if it could arrive in time (which it couldn't), he could not possibly go on living with any kind of honor now.

"Damn," Chandler muttered unoriginally, and thought as he felt consciousness slipping away again that he was glad he didn't have to face that last and most terrible test of his honor and of his will. He wasn't sure he could have done it, to end his life deliberately.

* * *

Aristotle Merchant bent over the sensor panel and scowled as if that would make its signals stronger and its readouts plainer. Then he activated his commlink. "Mr. Dufrein-I mean, Captain. Something's happening back where we left the *Keltic*. You want to take a look?"

"I've got it, sir." Thalia Eriknova moved in quickly, knowing perfectly well Merchant would resent her for doing so and not caring a bit. Merchant was the kind of senior ordinary who never missed a chance to demand his CO's attention-and besides that, he hated being assigned to any shift that Eriknova commanded.

Which was just too damned bad, because if he didn't like womyn that was his problem. A lot of people didn't. From the day she'd left Themyscira to enter the Academy as the first of its daughters to pursue a Commonwealth defense officer's career, Eriknova's survival had depended on the ever-increasing thickness of her skin. Now, going on two decades later, she had her act down pat.

These days only the likes of Ari Merchant still bothered to challenge her, and she sometimes wondered if even his chronic defiance (which always

managed to stop just on the safe side of insubordination) was really all that personal. She suspected that Merchant might well have pulled the same stunt of taking it upon himself to open a link to the captain while the bridge was under another officer's supervision, whether or not that watch officer happened to be Eriknova, just because he liked to buck the chain of command and thought he saw an excuse.

Well, this wasn't it. Mitch (as she thought of Dufrein privately, although she didn't address the acting captain by his given name even in the most casual of off-duty settings) had plenty to do elsewhere now that Captain Pappaniku was dead. He might even be trying to get a little much-needed rest, since he'd been in charge of the shift that was just ending when the clan ship came swooping in...how long ago?

Not much more than two hours. Incredible; but what hours they had been.

Eriknova might have to call Dufrein anyway after she saw what Merchant thought the sensors were showing, but it was her decision to make. Not Merchant's. She bent over the panel beside him, and what its readouts told her made her whistle softly.

"Ms. Eriknova? What's going on?" Dufrein's voice was sharp. Clearly Merchant, damn him, hadn't closed the link after all.

"An explosion, Captain. One big enough to be a ship the size of the *Keltic* going up-and she's off scanners now, either destroyed or completely powered down." Eriknova frowned, not in displeasure (horror was what she actually felt) but in concentration. "The clan ship's still there, but it's dead in space."

"Well, then. That much worked." Dufrein spoke wearily, in the voice of a man who'd just heard news he expected to give him satisfaction-which hadn't had that effect at all.

"Yes. It did." Eriknova nodded, staring at the console as if it were her superior officer's face. Aristotle Merchant was looking at her, for once with an inquiry that wasn't supercilious or hostile on his face; and the others, the rest of her current bridge crew, were giving her similar looks.

They didn't know, because that briefing had been for the ship's senior officers only. Did she dare to tell them about it now?

"The *Keltic*'s activated self-destruct. Now the bastards on that clan ship won't be plundering her after murdering her crew-and it was all over for them anyway, as soon as we got taken out of the action. It looks as if they even took the clan ship with them, to all intents and purposes. Good for them!" Eriknova straightened up, since there was nothing more she wanted to see on the sensor console's readouts, and she glanced around the bridge so that she could gauge her people's reactions.

Had she expected guilt, that the freighter's civilian crew was dead now

because the *Archangel* had failed to protect them? She felt that way about what had just happened, and she knew Mitch Dufrain did, too. Certainly Marilla Lansing would share that distress-and perhaps there would be others. But for the most part, she was reminded all over again as she glanced from one face to another, these people were just as much civilians as were those who'd been manning the *Keltic*.

What she did see on their faces was relief. Whether or not these people felt responsible for failing in their efforts to defend the freighter, not one of them wanted to hear that the *Keltic* and its crew were now in the hands of Clan Cranston.

* * *

“Wonderful. Instead of giving ’em enough protection to beat off a clan ship, the bosses give ’em self-destruct instead! Ain’t that just too damn nice?” Ari Merchant was past caring if the damnable “womyn” (was that word singular, anyway, or was it plural?) heard what he muttered as he sat at the sensor console. He’d been a crew member on a dozen different freighters during the years of his exile from Tanis. He knew how it felt to be not exactly defenseless, but so close to it that you were almost worse off than if your ship carried no weapons at all...and he still couldn’t believe that stupid bovine Pappaniku hadn’t had brains enough to dash clear the minute the *Archangel*’s sensors detected the on-coming clan ship.

Who says that being from a “technologically backward” world like Tanis means a man doesn’t have the talent to make one damned fine starship officer? Merchant didn’t voice that familiar sour thought. Nor did he speak his next thought out loud, either: *That womyn-freak got into the Academy, went through Command School, made it all the way to lieutenant commander-and then she resigned, probably because someone hurt her poor little sensitive feelings one time too many! Damn, I’d have given almost anything to have what she threw away. I know I’d have needed some help getting up to speed on the technical stuff, but the Academy Admissions Board wouldn’t even listen to my application. Yet they took that thing from Themyscira and made her a command-level officer.*

So now she’s giving me orders, and I can’t even look forward to knowing that when we get back to the Commonwealth I can tell the owners I want a different berth or I’ll try my luck elsewhere. I’m stuck with her, for who knows how long, until someone finds us or we figure out a way to get our long-range comm back on line and start yelling for help.

Assuming we live that long, of course!

Ms. Eriknova’s firm voice interrupted his thoughts. “Merchant. What did

you say just now?" she demanded, not giving him an honorific because an ordinary (no matter how senior) didn't merit one.

She couldn't let disrespect to the owners pass. That was worse than disrespect toward her as his superior, and Merchant knew it when he spoke.

He didn't fear the owners, though. Or at least not enough, because he'd said it anyway; and doing so had made him feel better. Yes, even about this utterly horrific situation.

Nevertheless he had his mouth under better control now, so he answered her civilly and felt rather proud that he could make himself do it. "Nothing, ma'am. Just wishing we'd been able to do our job and take out that clan ship, instead of having the *Keltic* take it out for us when they blew themselves to hell."

There, he'd said the same thing exactly-yet he'd rephrased it in a way that made it a perfectly proper sentiment to express. Aristotle Merchant was pleased with himself now, indeed.

Behind him, Thalia Eriknova lifted her black eyebrows and considered his words for a moment. Then she nodded calmly and said, "I wish that, too, Merchant. I'm sure everyone does," before she turned away and went back to her command chair.

* * *

Chandler woke up slowly, expecting to find himself in the afterlife. Not that he'd believed those legends during his lifetime, of course...but he had to be dead now. That was a simple fact.

Yet this afterlife didn't conform to any set of spiritual beliefs he'd ever heard espoused, so he scowled in puzzlement as he lay on something soft-firm (something like a bed?) and tried to open his eyes and found that he wasn't ready to do that yet. He could lift his lids, even though they felt heavier than he'd ever imagined eyelids could be-but the merest slit of light hurt his eyes.

"He's coming around," a voice said in Standard English, the universal tongue of space-traveling humanity. To Chandler's ears this person (a fellow male) was speaking it with a thick and unfamiliar accent; but he hadn't heard many Commonwealth people talk. Where might he have done that, after all? Clan folk didn't trade at Commonwealth spaceports, and when they preyed on Commonwealth shipping they did it just as the doomed *Baikal* had been about to do with that now-vanished freighter. They executed everyone on board as quickly as they could, preferably before sending any of their own crew inside the prize's hull.

Yet he thought this must be a Commonwealth citizen at his bedside now,

because who else could it be? Certainly not a member of another Clan. There might be a slight difference in inflection, or in cadence, but clan folk never had accents like this man's.

Besides, Clan Yanger wouldn't have removed a barely alive survivor from a rival group's crippled ship; and Chandler couldn't imagine who else might have vessels passing through this region of space. Yanger, Cranston, and the occasional Commonwealth idiot (or idiots)-that was it.

Certainly no fellow clansman would speak to him in such an outlandish manner, either. Chandler got his eyes open a slit and managed to keep them that way while his pupils adjusted painfully to the compartment's brightness.

"Lights, dim to 60 percent!" the strange voice said in a tone of quiet command. "Well. Hello, Mr. Clan Cranston. Is that easier on your eyes?"

Chandler froze. These people already knew who he was? Not as an individual, perhaps; but that didn't matter...well, of course they knew he was Clan and he was Cranston if they'd taken him out of what remained of the *Baikal*.

"Better, thanks," he gasped, forcing the two words out and wondering how he should answer the question that must inevitably come next.

"Good. Glad to hear it. Now, just what is your name? Your given name; I realize your surname's got to be 'Cranston.'" The speaker, a dark-skinned man who was probably early in his life's fourth decade, bent toward him and smiled encouragingly. Whoever this man had been addressing a few moments earlier must have stepped away from the bed, or left the compartment entirely.

Actually Clan Cranston's members bore several different surnames, but there was no reason to tell this man that-and plenty of reasons to avoid it. Besides, his own name *did* happen to coincide with that of his Clan. So the injured man said, "I'm Chandler Cranston. Excuse me for asking you this, but why am I alive?"

The medic (because that was what he had to be; no one else would have taken up that specialized scanner with such practiced ease) laughed softly as he began a head-to-toes check of his patient's body. "You're alive because my captain doesn't leave fellow human beings to asphyxiate on board dying starships," he answered easily. "Chandler-or however I'm supposed to address you?-I think you probably already know that the rest of your crew didn't make it. I'm sorry."

"Do you want me to say 'thank you'?" Chandler stared up at the well-meaning fellow, and wished he dared to shake his head. It wasn't exactly aching, but he had the uneasy feeling it wasn't only because the medic had him pumped full of analgesics-and who could guess what other drugs. "For saving my life, instead of leaving me to die with my comrades?"

“Is that what your people expected you to do?” The medic didn’t sound angry, but he did look disappointed. “I suppose we ought to have guessed that, since you clan folk never let yourselves be taken prisoner...but I’m finding it really hard to believe you wish we’d left you on what was left of that ship. You were dying, Chandler. By now you’d be gone, and that’s a fact.”

“How long?” Suddenly that seemed terribly important. In spite of himself Chandler was thinking now of that other crippled vessel, the old cruiser that was escorting the *Baikal*’s prey. Had this ship’s sensors picked it up? And if they had, were any of the people on board it still alive?

The answers to those questions had to be negative ones. Surely if this ship’s captain would pull a lone survivor off a ruined Clan vessel, she wouldn’t have hesitated a second about pursuing that cruiser if she’d detected it and there was any possibility it had life on board.

“Since we picked you up? Five days, and I’m not certain how long you were unconscious aboard what was left of your own ship before we found you and took you off it. My captain wants to see you, because she’s been wondering what the hell she’s supposed to do with you. Will your people let you come home, or are you-er- expected to be dead because your shipmates are?” Clearly the medic was grasping Chandler’s awkward situation, even though he just as plainly was finding it incredible.

Yes, the Commonwealth’s concept of honor must be completely unlike that of the Clans. Among these people it must be acceptable to stay alive by surrendering to an enemy. Chandler had heard about this, but until now he’d had trouble believing any warrior could behave that way.

“I should have died where you found me, yes,” the clansman said quietly, looking up into the medic’s face. “We don’t take prisoners-and we aren’t supposed to let ourselves to be taken. So I don’t know what your captain’s going to do with me. I guess that’s up to her.”

* * *

Chapter 3

Rilla Lansing hated standing bridge watches because they were time away from her engine room. Yet finding herself serving as second mate made her feel obliged to do this, to take a rotation up here and remind the people (and remind herself, which was more to the point) that she could no longer afford to stay comfortably buried in the ship's bowels.

To her the engine room was more like a womb, actually. Even when things went utterly wrong, even when the bridge was screaming at her for power she might not be able to deliver, Rilla still felt safe and at ease and absolutely in control.

She didn't feel that way up here. She'd served her rotations in all the necessary areas during her junior officer days, but she'd done it only because the Service required it of her; and that was years ago. Decades ago, even.

"Sorry you didn't stay retired, Rilla?" She heard Mitchell Dufrain's voice before she realized the ready room's door had opened, and she started. The command chair was a jumpy place for anyone to be sitting right now.

"Yes," she answered bluntly, no longer shocked that the acting captain would ask her such a pointed personal question in front of the people. Dufrain had been military once, she knew; he was just as much an Academy graduate as she was, or Pappaniku, or Eriknova. Yet he'd served on civilian ships for so many years now that he'd either forgotten the importance of military discipline, particularly that part of it which maintained necessary distance between officers and crew members...or he was taking delight in flouting that part of his long-ago training.

Nevertheless he was the one in command here, not Lansing; and that was fine with her. She added, diverting him from any further attempts to venture into personal matters (where she didn't want to go anyway, not even in private and not even if this oaf had been among her friends), "We have a marginally habitable planet on sensors, Mitch. It'll take us weeks to get there, but we can correct course for it without losing our momentum-that much we can do using thrusters only. Here, take a look." As she spoke she thankfully lifted her body out of the hated command chair.

Dufrain sauntered across the bridge and took her place. One thing she had to say for him, Lansing thought as the big man lowered himself and then settled, was that he looked natural there.

"Hmm." The small, considering sound was typically Dufrain. It got everyone's attention in a way that the personal exchange between senior officers had not, because it was a noise the acting captain made whenever he'd discovered something important.

"The charts show it, but from a fly-by survey only," the acting CO continued after a moment of further perusal. "Back when this sector wasn't Clan space yet. There's something interesting about that planet that you didn't mention, Rilla."

Damn. She'd been relying on the ship's computer to pull in everything that was relevant and offer it to her, and clearly she ought to have expanded her own parameters. She should have done what Mitch was doing right now, and read her way through after setting the "search level" to "exhaustive"...but she'd been so eager to give him good news, and changing course for any planet that might be able to sustain their lives after the ship failed them had seemed like such a complete no-brainer.

"What's that?" she asked in a deliberately casual tone, as she bent over the command console's readouts so she could see what Dufrain was seeing.

"An abandoned space station, or at least the fly-by crew recorded it that way based on lack of detectable life signs. They didn't go in and verify. It could be a stop-over, a station that's not manned full time but that's still used by its builders whenever they're in the area." Dufrain frowned slightly. "Damn, I wish they'd at least determined whether or not the people who built it needed environmental conditions similar to what humans need!"

Lansing knew where his thoughts were going now. She steadied herself with a hand on his shoulder as she smiled tautly and asked, "Well, we'll find that out soon enough, won't we? If we're going to make that course change anyway, I mean."

"Might as well. It makes better sense than to stay on a heading that'll take us back to Commonwealth space-years after we're dead, at the rate we're

traveling now.” Dufrein looked up at her, and he smiled in return.

The people were watching and listening as always. From the bridge’s several duty stations, Lansing heard soft sighs of relief. The woman at helm straightened her back and lifted her chin, clearly anticipating the order that was about to come her way from the command chair.

Hope. Being able to make a few repairs, cleaning the place up as best they were able, jettisoning their dead by way of burial and realizing that their own bodies’ relatively minor wounds had already started to heal, had given the *Archangel’s* survivors a measure of that precious commodity; but having a destination they were actually capable of reaching would give them a great deal more. For the first time since she realized the battle was over and she was still alive, Marilla Lansing actually thought she might one day be able to leave the *Archangel’s* confines again.

Getting home, though? Embracing her husband, stroking her son’s dark hair and exclaiming as she always did over how much he’d grown during her absence?

That she still regarded as impossible, as something to be put out of her mind like the distraction it was while she focussed all her energies on keeping herself and those depending on her alive a little while longer.

* * *

Mitch Dufrein realized he’d smiled at Rilla Lansing only after he saw that momentarily cheerful expression fade from her face. She wasn’t a pretty woman, probably hadn’t been even in the days of her youth; but when she smiled she looked-well-warm. Pleasant, reassuring, and comfortable.

She felt that way, too, in the moments while she bent over the command console with him-especially while she rested her hand on his shoulder. She was only steadying herself, of course, and one thing about engineers was that (more than any other specialty within starship crew structures) they had to be easy about working in close physical proximity to their comrades. If they didn’t start off that way, they got that way pretty quickly or switched to jobs that didn’t require crawling through the ship’s innards-often while sharing such space as there was with one or more co-workers.

Mitch had served his rotation in engineering, of course. He hadn’t left the Service until he was already thirty years old and a lieutenant commander by rank, serving as captain of a light cruiser that (in one of his life’s more poetic ironies) wasn’t a whole lot unlike the *Archangel*. The two ships were even of comparable yard vintage...damn, he’d been working for “owners” for much longer now than he’d spent as a Commonwealth Defense officer even if he

counted his Academy training as part of his military career.

He'd held mate's jobs at varying levels of authority on board half a dozen different freighters during the long years since resigning his commission, but his *Archangel* post took him perilously close to being a Service officer again. He'd accepted it reluctantly, not at all certain there was any wisdom in the owners' new strategy of buying up military surplus ships to serve as escorts instead of just giving the freighters better armaments of their own; but the owners made it clear. This was what they wanted him to do. Since he wasn't yet ready to retire, to settle down on a planet's surface somewhere and make some other kind of life, Dufrein acceded to their wishes.

Settle down? Home, Barents 3, was a wasteland now. The lush and prosperous planet where Mitch kissed his pregnant wife and his old parents good-bye for the last time might recover someday, if the government ever made up its mind to fund the necessary terra-forming, but that wouldn't bring his family back. Nor would it help him to forgive himself for being literally as far away as the Commonwealth could send him, on the day when terrorist forces picked Barents 3 as the perfect place to demonstrate what they could do to a typical, fully civilized Class M planet if they gained access to its weather control system.

That particular rebellion was long vanquished now. Dufrein had stayed in the Service until it was, of course. But afterward, it somehow seemed laughable to call himself a "Commonwealth Defender" when there wasn't a damn thing left in the Commonwealth that he was willing to die in order to protect—especially not when the Commonwealth had sent him away from his loved ones at just the hour when they needed his protection most.

Intellectually he knew he couldn't have helped Rodrigua, their unborn baby girl, or his mother and father one bit by being on his home-world when the protective upper layer of its atmosphere stopped blocking its sun's deadly radiation. All he could have done was die with them, since as a civilian he would not have been able to gather them into one of the handful of ships that carried high-ranking refugees away from the doomed planet...but knowing that was true didn't assuage his guilt one bit.

Often enough he'd wished he had died with them. It would have been easier than living through the years afterward, alone and without purpose, working at the only job he knew of that would allow him to stay in space (since he no longer had a home, or wanted one to replace Barents 3) without requiring him to remain in direct service to the Commonwealth.

He couldn't continue with that, of course. He stayed in until the rebels who'd killed his loved ones were dead, but after that he was through with the institution that sent him far away from his family at just the time when they

needed him most.

He signed on as third mate on a freighter, because right then he didn't even want the responsibility that must accompany a higher position. He did the job the owners paid him to do, and after awhile he started enjoying at least some things about living again.

Mostly, though, he worked his ass off; and whenever he wasn't working he was either exercising or studying something. What he never was, was idle. Not until he dropped into his berth after his duty shift and fell sound asleep, exhausted.

He'd lived that way, more or less (mostly more), for the past twenty years. This wasn't his first venture into Clan space, and that was no doubt why he'd been tapped (hell, a better word for it would be "drafted"!) to serve as one of the *Archangel's* officers-but he hadn't been willing to command anything. At that point he still drew the line, and the owners knew they had to respect it if they wanted him to go on working for them.

He'd promised himself he would never let anyone call him "captain" again, and to Mitch Dufrain it was the bitterest irony imaginable that Irina Pappaniku's death left him cast in that role whether he liked it or not. Here he was, after all these years, sitting once more in a light cruiser's command chair and knowing that chair was his.

For his own sake it hardly mattered that he was probably going to die out here, regardless of what he did or didn't do while he held this unsought and unwanted authority. Yet for those who were with him, he had to remember that survival mattered very much indeed-because the woman who was stepping back from his side now, and smiling at him again in relief that they were bound for an actual destination, had people waiting for her back home. So did many others on board, Dufrain realized; but for some reason he found it extraordinarily easy to imagine Rilla Lansing in her other role.

She was the age Rodrigua would be now, and though her child was a son-and a great deal younger than Mitch's and Rodrigua' baby would be, too, of course!-still, thinking that he might be able to keep Rilla Lansing alive and someday get her back to her family gave Mitchell Dufrain a sense of purpose he hadn't felt since....

Since the last time he sat in a light cruiser's command chair, and called the ship his own.

* * *

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