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Heaven's Only Daughter  
by Laura Resnick  
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Science Fiction

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It was a strange case right from the start. Mrs. Polona Heaven said that her daughter, one Kara Heaven, had been kidnapped by aliens. She hired us to get the girl back with the stipulation that there was to be no scandal or political embarrassment involved in the girl's retrieval. That was how she put it: retrieval. That should have tipped me off, but I was still relatively new to the business. The technical stuff, like tracing missing persons, verifying identities, tailing suspects -- you can learn all of that pretty quickly. But reading people? No, that takes years of experience.

You may wonder what a nice girl like me is doing in this sordid business. Actually, ever since the first Interstellar Arms Reduction Treaty was signed, a lot of perfectly respectable people (i.e., ex-military types who sincerely believed they were honor-bound to destroy two whole planets in the Incubus system before we learned that those poisonous molds were actually sentient beings) have gone into private investigations. What's more, business is booming in the private sector. Let's face it, with the galaxy opening up and bureaucracy spearheading humankind's expansion into the Milky Way, there's not much point in expecting the government, the police, or the civil service to get anything done on behalf of the ordinary citizen. Sure, when the Governor of the United African States awoke one day to find her ceremonial tiara had been stolen, it was a big deal, and three interplanetary law enforcement networks searched half the solar system for the culprit (in addition to priceless gems, the tiara apparently had certain religious significance, and witch doctors far and wide were gleefully warning that the African union would crumble if the tiara were not successfully retrieved and the thief suitably punished). But if an ordinary person's tiara -- or daughter -- disappears these days, your only hope is to hire a team of private investigators.

I actually used to be a reproductive counselor (or, more accurately, I used to advise people how to fornicate without reproducing). But after that memorable altercation our men and women in uniform had with the fierce and bloodthirsty inhabitants of Polonius IV (all of whom are now safely dead or in "cheerfully decorated rehabilitation camps"), a lot of government funding was diverted to the military to pay for those weapons that we now have to liquidate, under the terms of the most recent Interstellar Arms Reduction Treaty.

So I found myself out of work just about the time my best friend's partner disappeared -- after having embezzled three million credits from the business they owned jointly. I held her hand all through her dealings with the

firm of detectives she hired to find the bastard. By the time they'd been on retainer for four months, I decided that after five years of being overworked and underpaid, I'd sure like to make that much money for supplying so few results. So I went back to school for another year, then got an entry-level job with Harker and Fontina Investigations.

Like some others in this business, I've read a few private eye books by some of the classic authors, many of whom have been dead for centuries -- Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler among them. A lot of the references are pretty baffling, even after you read the footnotes, but there's an archaic romanticism there that appeals to me. That, of course, is part of my problem.

Even after two years at the agency, two years of catching adulterers in the act, dealing with perverts and sex offenders, tracing teenagers who probably had a damned good reason for running away in the first place, and retrieving stolen property that no sensible person would want back, I still had this crazy idea that I was in a moral profession. I believed that I was one of the good guys and that I was supposed to do what was right. How I managed to keep believing this, even as I photographed copulating couples without their knowledge (on adultery cases, I mean), is a question that could probably occupy a therapist for several years. Maybe some of that stuff I read, in which heroes and heroines were always doing the hard thing for the right reason, got to me.

Anyhow, I was pleasantly surprised (which shows how naive I was) when Harker and Fontina assigned me to the Heaven case. Though I had worked on over a dozen interplanetary cases, this was my first interstellar case. It was also my first case involving non-humans (which goes to follow, since the Interstellar Migration Act prohibits alien races who act like us from coming here, which means we have virtually no alien crime in this system). It was potentially the most politically sensitive case I'd ever been assigned to, and I was very excited about having a chance to prove my mettle (we're talking naive). I thought the fact that I was assigned alone to the case, with no supervision other than the usual progress reports, was a measure of the firm's confidence in me (yes, I know, you needn't say it).

Mrs. Heaven's personality made it immediately apparent to me why aliens had kidnapped her daughter instead of her. Though quite beautiful, she was as cold as ice, with a hard, ruthless edge and an imperious manner that made me long to do something undignified to her. If she had any motherly feelings toward her abducted daughter, she kept them well-hidden. I was given orders to bring the girl home with all due haste, primarily, it seemed, because Mrs. Heaven found the entire situation tediously inconvenient and socially embarrassing.

I had dealt with kidnapping on a couple of earlier cases. I have to admit that, despite my bewilderment at Mrs. Heaven's apparent immunity to the emotional trauma of her daughter's kidnapping, I was somewhat relieved. A great deal of time is lost in consoling the family, delicate questions are difficult to ask of sobbing parents, and honest answers and estimates are almost impossible to give in the face of a terrified mother's desperate hopes.

"Now, then, Mrs. Heaven, when did your daughter disappear?"

She checked her calendar, a luminous little holographic dial which hung from her neck on a chain made of crystallized quicksilver. "I noticed she was gone yesterday, around 1300 hours. I returned from my luncheon with Irina Halstead-Mao to find my daughter's chambers empty. I became worried when she didn't return toward evening, since she knew we were scheduled to attend the inaugural ball of the Interplanetary Governor."

Fearing she might mention more VIPs if given the opportunity, I tried to get Mrs. Heaven to pinpoint the exact hour her daughter was last seen. It proved to be a futile exercise. Although Mrs. Heaven had noticed Kara was missing yesterday, she hadn't actually seen her for over two weeks.

"What about Mr. Heaven?" I asked.

"I saw him this morning."

"No, I mean has he seen her?"

"Of course not. Why would he see her?"

Well, damned if I could think of a reason. We moved on. "Does Kara have any close friends who might have seen her during the past two weeks?"

"She has a fiance, \_obviously\_." The glacial look in Mrs. Heaven's eyes made it clear what she thought of private investigators who didn't keep abreast of society news. "The wedding is scheduled for the fifteenth of next month, and Kara must be back in time for the standard social functions."

"I see. What's the name of her prospective husband, ma'am?" She appeared reluctant to answer, as if finding it distasteful to involve him in this messy business, so I prodded, "It's important that I talk to him, Mrs. Heaven. He probably knows something about her activities and can perhaps help me pinpoint the actual date of her disappearance." She relented, and we proceeded to the next, and most important, question. "What makes you think she was kidnapped by aliens, ma'am?"

"Who else would do such a thing?" she said frostily.

I decided to return to that subject later.

"Does Kara have a job?" I asked, looking for some link to the real world. An incredulous stare was the only response. Silly question, I suppose. The Heavens were one of the five hundred richest families in the Western hemisphere. No, they weren't ordinary people, and they probably could have gotten powerful government agencies interested in locating their daughter. However, as I've mentioned, Mrs. Heaven wanted no breath of scandal, a requirement that clearly ruled out government involvement.

"Has there been a ransom demand?" I asked, continuing the interview with true grit.

"No, of course not. Aliens don't understand the value of money," she said contemptuously.

Actually, that's not quite true. The Interstellar Migration Act was passed almost a century ago because a small band of Shirulians waylaid a ship carrying the semi-annual payroll of three major interplanetary corporations. They boarded her somewhere between Saturn and Jupiter and made off with the greatest sum of money any group of thieves had ever even attempted to steal. So I figured that at least \_some\_ aliens knew the value of a credit, even if it was only those races no longer permitted to enter our solar space. However, Mrs. Heaven was clearly not in the mood for a history lesson.

"It's extremely important that you let us know if you receive a ransom demand," I explained to her. "That will make my job a lot easier. Otherwise, it will be difficult to trace -- "

"I am not interested in making your job a lot easier, Ms. Hoxley," Mrs. Heaven said archly.

She was a real piece of work. The rest of the interview wasn't any more productive than what I've already described. Just before she left my office, she turned and met my eyes with almost frightening intensity. "You must get her back," she said, her voice implying a wealth of unspoken threats if I should fail. "She's my only daughter."

I was not moved to tears.

Kara's fiance was a little more helpful, though not intentionally so. His name was Quayle Morrison, as in the Morrison Bank of Mars, the Morrison Complex on Ganymede, and the Morrison Mining Company operating on the moons of Saturn. He had yet to inherit all of this vast wealth, but he was flexing his fingers preparatory to seizing the reins of power.

"Kidnapped?" Quayle gasped at the beginning of the interview, clearly appalled. "Did Polona Heaven mention which race of aliens she suspects?"

"No, sir. She told me I had no business asking such an impertinent question." No wonder Harker and Fontina had given me the case, I thought irritably. They'd seen her coming. "I'm obliged to investigate this possibility fully, sir, but I must admit that Kara's being kidnapped by aliens seems unlikely to me."

"Why?" he demanded.

"Ever since the Interstellar Migration Act was passed, there's been no

record of any misdemeanors by aliens, let alone crimes like assault, kidnapping, or extortion." I shrugged. "There's no precedent for this. Don't you think it's possible Kara could have been kidnapped by humans?"

"Nonsense!" he bellowed. "Let's have none of this liberal rubbish, Ms. Hoxley. If Polona Heaven says aliens kidnapped Kara, her word is good enough for me."

I decided that the ultra-wealthy were very strange. "Well, then, sir, do you suspect a particular race?"

"I'll bet you half the uranium on Pluto that it was a Dramborian, Ms. Hoxley."

Since he probably owned half the uranium on Pluto, I asked with interest, "Why do you say that, sir?"

"She's been hanging around with them, hasn't she?"

"Has she, sir?"

"Of course! Mind you, charitable tendencies are to be applauded, but not when it gets out of hand."

"The Dramborians. They're the ones immolating themselves on their home planet to protest the, um, benevolent rule of the Second Aligned Interstellar Council, aren't they, sir?"

"Bloody nuisance," Quayle muttered. "They're making the cost of fuel skyrocket."

"So Kara was involved in lobbying for them here?" I guessed. Quayle wouldn't have been so annoyed if she was simply giving them old clothes and freeze-dried food that people like the Heavens didn't want anyhow.

"Damned right, she was. I told her that a little charity was all very well and good, but to engage in any political activity on behalf of these creatures was out of the question."

"But she didn't listen to you?"

"Women!"

Taking that for a confirmation, I said, "But if she was helping them, why would they have kidnapped her?"

"They're aliens, Ms. Hoxley. Who knows why they do what they do? You can't expect logic from creatures like that."

"But the Dramborians are a peaceful race. That's why they're allowed to enter this system. Their protests are largely verbal, and the only violence they've displayed has been self-inflicted. Why would they suddenly kidnap a human woman?" I wondered aloud.

"Have you forgotten that Kara Heaven comes from an extremely wealthy family? It seems to me, Ms. Hoxley, that the Dramborians will benefit more from bartering for her release than they ever benefited from her rather incompetent activism on their behalf."

And that, I supposed, was a possibility well worth investigating. The following day, I visited the Dramborian Cultural Exchange Center, the planet Drambor's primary office in this solar system.

I had only seen a few Dramborians until then, since there weren't many of them on Earth. Though oxygen-based, their atmosphere is somewhat different from ours, so they tended to get rather ill if they stayed for long. The few Dramborians who were here on a long-term basis appeared to spend most of their leisure time inside atmosphere-controlled chambers at the Cultural Exchange Center.

I'm ashamed to admit that, despite my admiration for their ancient culture and their commitment to pacifism, I had always found them quite repulsive. They're rather fish-like, even though they're two-legged, land-dwelling, male and female beings. Ironically, despite the fishy smell that clings to them, they can't swim at all, and some rotten kids caused a nasty interstellar incident a decade ago when they threw three Dramborians into the water off the Florida coast. Not only did all three Dramborians drown, but their bodies were almost unrecognizable when they were shipped back to Drambor; apparently some chemical in their scaly skin can't survive contact with Earth's salt water, and the bodies were hideously deformed as a result.

The Dramborians at the Cultural Exchange Center were distant, due to their planetary protest against our influence, but unfailingly courteous. In fact, they were the first polite people I'd encountered on this case. However, explaining the concept of kidnapping to Dramborians -- i.e. taking someone away from one place and confining them in another place, all of this against their will -- was one of the most exhausting, frustrating things I've ever done. After all, they had only been permitted to enter our solar system because they were so totally devoid of criminal tendencies, so how could they understand such a thing?

I finally gave up and simply requested a list of all Dramborians who'd had contact with Kara Heaven. Four of the aliens on the list had already gone back to Drambor. It took me two days to interview all the others, after which I requested a permit to travel to Drambor. There was no record of Kara on any scheduled transport to Drambor, and aliens are not permitted to charter private vessels. However, Mrs. Heaven was pressuring my bosses, and they were pressuring me, so it didn't seem politic to remain on Earth any longer.

If a Dramborian did indeed have Kara, he had not only learned about kidnapping on Earth, but also such useful skills as forging travel documents, counterfeiting interstellar visas, and evading random computer scans. It seemed so unlikely, I began to fear I was diving into a black hole.

Interstellar travel is not something a person should undertake lightly. The hyperspace jump made my ears bleed, and I never did get the stains out of my favorite tunic. And if you think flying halfway around the world upsets your body clock, try traveling five light years from home.

The air on Drambor, should you ever have the opportunity to visit there, is not one of its primary attractions for humans. It's filled with a sort of sticky soot which stinks of putrescent primeval things. The Dramborians were polite, but not very friendly. After all, the average Dramborian was accustomed to seeing at least one self-immolation a day in protest against human efforts to control Drambor, so they weren't especially thrilled to find another off-worlder in their midst. The only liquid available on Drambor is a murky, oily drink served with things floating in it that are rather like small slugs, and the food ... Well, I really pitied Kara Heaven if she were stuck on this planet, and I had every intention of helping her get back to fresh air, decent food, and cold cocktails.

I enlisted the aid of the Dramborian religious order -- the closest thing they have to a government of their own -- thanks to the support of the Supervisor of the Dramborian Cultural Exchange Center back on Earth. Things operate a little differently there, so it took more time than I would have liked to track down the four Dramborians I sought. In other words, I was starving to death and desperate for a decent drink by the time I finally found the fourth and final Dramborian who, according to official records, had had contact with Mrs. Heaven's only daughter. I wanted to interview him quickly and then get off that damned planet. So imagine my surprise when I told him I was looking for Kara Heaven and he said he'd be happy to take me to her.

"You know where she is?" I asked.

"Of course. She is in my home." Since Dramborians don't lie, I believed him.

"What's she doing there?"

"She exists there."

It was one of those situations that called for more experience than I possessed. Was he going to kidnap me, too? Kill me? Had Kara been brainwashed? If only I hadn't been forced to turn over my weapon to the transit authorities upon leaving for Drambor. I felt naked, helpless, uncertain.

On the other hand, nothing terrified me as much as the prospect of going home and telling Mrs. Heaven that I'd found out where Kara was but hadn't gone to see her.

"All right," I said after a brief internal struggle. "Take me to her."

It was not a long trip from the Dramborian's ritual bath house to his home, which wasn't half bad compared to the Alien Guesthouse in which I'd been

staying. Dramborians are not materialistic in the same way that we are. The abode was barren of possessions but just chock full of leaves, plants, vines, twigs, and bulbous things that looked like vibrating, mossy rocks.

Kara was there, meditating on the floor, looking quite pretty, though not entirely healthy. Well, after just a few days on that miserable planet, I figured that I probably wasn't looking too healthy either. There are no mirrors on Drambor, though, so I wasn't sure. When the Dramborian spoke her name, Kara opened her eyes and looked toward us. Upon seeing me, her expression darkened and she rose to her feet, backing away slowly as she spoke.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Hoxley. I'm a private investigator hired by your mother to find you."

"You've found me. Now go away."

I glanced nervously at the Dramborian. "That was only half my assignment, Kara. I'm also supposed to bring you home," I said, puzzled by her behavior. I guess I'd expected to be greeted as a long-awaited heroine. I mean, I was rescuing her.

"I am home," Kara said, which wasn't what I had expected her to say.

"Kara, have you been injured? Coerced? Drugged?" When there was no response, I continued, "Are you afraid of something?"

"Go away, Hoxley," she said again.

"Kara, I'm here to help you."

"I don't want your help. I'm sorry you've come all this way, but you're wasting your time."

I stared at her, not sure what to do next. As I considered the situation, her gaze slid away from my face. Her eyes locked with the Dramborian's yellow, lizard-like ones, and that was when I knew.

As liberal as I had always considered myself, I realized I was sickened, absolutely disgusted by what I saw pass between them in that brief moment. The Dramborian wasn't human. He was a different species. He wasn't even from the same planet as she was. How could she bear ... I shuddered. How could she?

I took a few deep breaths, gagging on the thick, foul air, nauseated by the Dramborian's fishy, decaying odor.

"You weren't kidnapped. You ran away. With him," I whispered, trying to conceal my horror.

"Yes," she answered serenely.

"That's why there was no trace of you in any transport record. You faked the documents, bribed the frontier guards, and forged the signatures, not him."

She shrugged. "Of course. He couldn't have done that."

"I will prepare some liquid for you and our guest," the Dramborian said, bowing sinuously and leaving the chamber to get just what I wanted at that moment -- more thick, slimy, lukewarm liquid.

After he left us, Kara looked contemptuously at me. "You're shocked, aren't you?"

There seemed no point in denying it. "It's a new concept, Kara. Give me time to get used to the idea."

"It's not an idea or a concept," she said, clearly not caring whether or not she converted me. "I'm here. I live here, with him, and I'm happy here. I am old enough to make these choices for myself."

"Why didn't you at least tell that to your mother and leave home openly, under your real name?"

"My mother would never forgive me for the disgrace it would cause if the whole world knew I'd left my family and the marriage they'd arranged for me in order to go live with a Dramborian on his home planet. I thought this way would be better. Quieter. Polona wouldn't have to save quite so much face if no one knew what had really happened to me."

"Kara, you must have known she would hire a p.i. if you simply

disappeared," I said wearily, feeling well and truly sick of the rich and powerful.

"And how far do you think I would have gotten if my mother knew what I intended?" She looked away. "You see how hard it is to escape her? Even running away under a false name hasn't protected me from her tentacles. You're proof of that."

"So come back with me, talk it over with her like a sensible adult, and you can be back on Drambor in time for the next immolation."

"No! You don't know her. Once she got me back, she'd never let me get away again. There would be guards around the house, coded locks on every door, sensory alarms watching my every movement. I'm expected to marry Quayle, have splendid children and ensure that the Heaven fortune will have heirs." Her voice was ironic as she added, "I'm her only daughter, you know."

"I know, I know," I said morosely. "But surely if -- "

"I'm not going back with you, Hoxley."

"Kara," I said carefully, "I have a contract to fulfill."

She stared at me. "You mean you'd force me to come back with you?" She must have read my expression as I assessed my chances. "Oh, he wouldn't stop you. How could he? He doesn't understand force."

I started to say more, but she was seized by a fit of coughing. By the time she was through, some awful, yellow stuff was running from the corners of her eyes. I wiped it away and helped her sit on the floor.

"Kara, you can't stay here. The atmosphere's no good for us, and forget about the food and drink. Even diplomatic missions get rotated up to a space station every two weeks."

"I'm not going back, Hoxley."

"You should at least get an air tank to help you get through particularly bad days."

She didn't answer me, and I saw she was struggling, gasping for air at the same time her body rejected what it was inhaling. I'd listened to some of the recommended travelers' advisories while preparing for my trip to Drambor, so I knew what was in the air and food, as well as what was missing from it. I figured Kara Heaven would be lucky to live five more years if she stayed here, and I suspected she knew it.

"Damn it, Kara, I've accepted a fee to find and retrieve you."

She choked on a rueful laugh. "Polona's words, no doubt."

"Polona's words," I agreed. I suddenly felt like an utterly gullible idiot, and with good reason. "She knew you had run away, didn't she? That's why she seemed angry instead of bereaved when she came to the agency. You're too old for a p.i. to go after you as a runaway, so she made up the kidnapping story. It saved face and ensured results." I sighed. "The damn fool woman could have caused a major interstellar incident with a story like that."

A chill ran through me as I realized she still could. And I was irrevocably part of the problem now. So what was I going to do about it?

It wouldn't be hard to get Kara back to Earth. She was already too physically weak to give me much trouble, and all I had to do was tell the Dramborians who saw me dragging her to the transport terminal was that she was an escaped human criminal. The whole galaxy dreaded human criminals, after all. Mrs. Heaven would get her daughter back, I would get a bonus and perhaps even a promotion for successfully completing my first interstellar case, and Kara would get a wealthy human husband and a decent meal.

Or, I could leave her here, to die of slow toxemia on an alien world. She would live out her remaining days in this dreary, barren, leafy hole with a fish-smelling alien whom she could never truly understand, in the midst of beings that would never really accept her, so intent were they upon immolating themselves one by one in rebellion against her own race.

"Why, Kara?" I asked a little desperately.

She had ceased her coughing and straightened her spine. Her face was pale and beaded with sweat. "He's good. Truly and fearlessly good," she said hoarsely. "Have you ever known anyone like that?"

"In my line of work?"

The Dramborian came back with our liquid slime at that moment, serene, solicitous, and gentle. I found the communion between them was as enviable as it was grotesque. It's funny how deep a taboo can lurk inside you. Even funnier that it should lurk inside of me and not Kara Heaven.

I thought of a dozen stories on my way back to Earth, none of them particularly convincing. Above all, I couldn't indicate that Kara may have died on Drambor or been killed by a Dramborian; the last thing we needed was another interstellar war of extermination.

I finally decided that it was essential to make Mrs. Heaven believe that Kara had never gone to Drambor. After all, I figured that part of my unwritten pact with Kara was to make sure that no one else fulfilled my written contract with her mother.

I wound up simply reporting that the whole Dramborian lead was a dead end, and I started investigating other possibilities. Mrs. Heaven grew increasingly impatient, since she knew damn well that I was either lying or hopelessly incompetent. She eventually took her business elsewhere. I, of course, was fired in the full glare of publicity, with noisy recriminations about how Kara Heaven might still be alive and well if I'd done my job right. The girl would never be found now that the trail was so cold (the Dramborians had left Earth, cut off all communication, and closed Drambor to off-worlders by then), and Harker and Fontina exonerated themselves by condemning me.

And I finally realized that that had been the plan all along. My bosses had indeed seen Mrs. Heaven coming. Far more experienced than I at reading people, they had known from the first that she was lying, that this case could lead to their ruination in a dozen different ways, and that they needed a sacrificial lamb. They put someone expendable on the case, and then jettisoned me at precisely the right moment, a small loss in the greater scheme of their extensive assets.

As the old saying goes, I'll never work in this business again. I feared criminal charges for a while, after Harker and Fontina had abandoned me and before Mrs. Heaven's wrath died down, but I was finally allowed to return to comfortable obscurity.

I've gone back to school for more training -- this time to become a field operative in the Cultural Exchange Liaison Service. Well, why not? I am, after all, one of the few humans who has ever been to Drambor.

Maybe I got a rough deal, being tossed overboard by my own kind so that a shark like Polona Heaven could gnaw on me. But I suppose my fate was sealed long ago by guys like Hammett and Chandler. Here's a tip I learned from them. If you're going to do the hard thing for the right reason, you've got to be prepared to take the fall.

-- The End --

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