

# ALLIANCES

*by Kristine Kathryn Rusch*

In 1999, Kristine Kathryn Rusch won three Reader's Choice Awards for three different stories in three different magazines in two different genres: mystery and science fiction. That same year, her short fiction was nominated for the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus Awards. Since she had just returned to writing short fiction after quitting her short fiction editing job at *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, she was quite encouraged by this welcome back to writing. She never quit writing novels, and has sold more than forty-five of them, some under pseudonyms, in mystery, science fiction, fantasy, horror, and romance. Her most recent mystery novel is *Hitler's Angel*. Her most recent fantasy novel is *The Black King*.

"TT'orgive me, sir." Captain Roz Sheehan could barely hide *r* her disgust, even if she was speaking to a superior officer. "I don't believe we should trust the word of a Cra-tiv'n, two Dulacs, and a Hacrim."

Admiral Allen Galland reached across his wide oak desk and handed her an information pad. She did not look at it, instead studying the office around her.

Roz had been here a dozen times-and each time Gal-land had proposed some half-assed scheme. Most of them she'd been able to get out of, but lately that had gotten harder and harder.

She had a reputation for being the most creative captain in the fleet, and that had brought her to Galland's attention.

That, and the loss of her ship in the Cactus Corridor. She kept her command-after all, her crew got back alive and she had managed to defeat an entire squadron of Ba-am-as-but Galaxy Patrol rules were hard and fast. Any captain who lost her ship had to go through retraining and reassignment.

Galland had prevented that, but he hadn't let her forget that favor. And so far, it had cost her eleven unsavory missions. Eleven missions that had fattened Galland's private purse and had left her with the feeling that she should never have taken his deal, even though it helped her retain her command.

The office wasn't making things any better. Oak desk, real Earth plants-spiders (which were hardy) and violets (which were not)-paintings older than the Galactic Alliance, and leather furniture that had antique stamped all over it. Every time she came here, she saw some new treasure, and she wondered how much of her sweat had gone into paying for it.

Not to mention the fact that Galland kept his office too damn hot. Hot and humid, filled with "real" sunlight. Good for the plants, he said.

Bad for her. Especially when she was trying to look cool and calm, unruffled by his latest stupid plan.

If only the Alliance had stricter rules for its base commanders. But they were military governors who operated without much oversight-and were as good, or as bad, as they chose to be. And Galland certainly wasn't choosing to be good.

"I could download the information to your personal account," Galland said, capturing her attention just like he wanted.

She sighed and looked at the information pad he had given her. A highlighted route appeared, running through the Cactus Corridor and beyond, well into uncharted space.

A small blue planet pulsed, begging her to touch the screen and enlarge the image.

She didn't. Instead, she handed the pad back to Galland.

"A treasure map," she said. "How delightful. Am I acting as a member of the Patrol now or as part of a newly created piracy force? Should I wear an eye patch, get a peg leg, and start calling you matey?"

"You forget, Captain, that you are talking to your superior."

She let out a large sigh and let her shoulders relax. "No, I haven't, sir. But frankly, you're not acting like my superior here. You're acting like a little boy who just found out that there's gold at the end of the rainbow."

"And you, Captain, should take this assignment more seriously."

"I would," she said, "if you had a reliable source. And if you were pursuing something that was possible. They're sending you-me, actually-on some kind of wild goose chase."

"I've heard enough about this universal translator to believe it's something we have to investigate."

"Then have someone bring it here," she said. "What's to stop someone from bringing the technology to us?"

"The Hacrim say that these creatures don't want to sell it."

This mission was getting worse and worse. "Then why would you want me to go to this place?"

"To see if the rumors are true," Galland said.

"They aren't," Roz said.

"Then find out."

"Through the Cactus Corridor. Into uncharted space. Breaking God knows how many regulations to track down a rumor?"

“You’re an explorer, Captain.”

“I’m a military officer, Admiral. I’m supposed to be patrolling a sector, not going on fantasy vacations in your stead.”

“You’re being insubordinate, Captain.”

“And you’re not acting like my superior officer, Admiral.” Roz picked up the pad and looked at it one last time.

There was a lot of information missing from that route. The section of space after the Cactus Corridor was empty- completely black. Then there was the pulsating planet, and nothing else.

Space was never empty and it never had nothing there. Especially over distances that vast.

“Let me remind you, Captain, who saved your butt-”

“Yeah,” Roz said. “In an incident that happened in the Cactus Corridor. No offense, Admiral, but I really don’t want to take my ship back there.”

“You won’t be, Roz,” Galland said, lowering his voice. “You’ll be taking a prototype vessel. A small one. One that can handle the prickly nature of that nebula.”

“And the Ba-am-as?” she asked.

“You let me worry about the Ba-am-as.”

“No offense, sir, but I’m the one whose going to be taking a prototype ship through the Cactus Corridor, heavily mined and guarded by the Ba-am-as, into space that isn’t properly charted, in search of something that’s *scientifically impossible*. I respectfully and forcefully decline.”

Admiral Galland let out a small sigh. “Roz, I don’t think you’re in the position to argue-”

“Admiral,” she said, putting her hands on his desk and leaning close. “Let me ask you a few questions.”

He raised his dark eyes to hers. She thought she caught in them an expression of wary amusement. She didn’t like that at all.

“Fire, Captain.” Back to captain, then, were they? None of that too-familiar Roz crap any longer.

“Did the Dulacs speak English when they told you of this great find?”

“No,” Galland started, but she didn’t let him finish.

“Did the Hacrim? How about the Crativ’n?”

“No.”

“Did they use one of these devices to communicate with you?”

“No,” Galland said.

“So you had to speak to them through translators.”

“Yes, but-”

“Human translators, trained at some university and hired by the Patrol, right?”

“Yes, but-”

“Don’t you find that somewhat suspicious?”

“No,” Galland said.

She couldn’t believe he had just said that. “No?”

Galland nodded. “No.”

She stood up. Now she was confused. “Why not?” And then she mentally kicked herself for asking the question.

“Because,” he said, “they claim these creatures don’t want the translator in anyone else’s hands.”

“So,” she said, “on the off chance that this universal translator does exist, what am I supposed to do? Steal the technology?”

“That’s your suggestion, Captain.”

She let out a surprised laugh. “I was being sarcastic, Admiral.”

“Really?” he said, “Somehow, I hadn’t noticed.”

She stared at him, shocked. “You can’t be serious.”

He grinned. “It was your suggestion.”

She shook her head. How she hated the meetings with him. The thing was she knew she had little recourse. The

Alliance let a lot of things slide, particularly if the end result benefited Alliance members.

And to think she had been idealistic when she joined up, believing that “for the good of all races” crap that had been in the recruiting ads. To think that she once believed she and her crew would fly all over the galaxy doing good.

How naive was that?

Probably as naive as letting Admiral Galland help her avoid reassignment.

“Admiral,” she said, choosing her words carefully, “we couldn’t invent a universal translator for human languages. Human beings-the same species-don’t base our language on the same structure and concepts. How can there be a universal translator for humans and aliens? It’s not possible and you know it. You want me to risk my life and my crew’s for someone’s con.”

“It’s not a con,” he said. “Three different kinds of aliens-”

“Yeah. They couldn’t all have been bought off.” She put up her hands as if to ward off his next remark. “That was sarcasm too, in case you didn’t catch it.”

“Look, Captain. You and I have both seen a lot of strange things in our careers. That’s part of what space is about.” Galland was being serious now. Somehow that disconcerted her even more. “What if this translator works for some alien races? If it works forty percent of the time, then it’s better than anything we have.”

“And if, in the remaining sixty percent, it mistranslates and we don’t know it, aren’t we setting ourselves up for something completely terrible?” she asked.

“Let’s find out if it exists first, Roz. Then we’ll worry about it.”

“So I cross the Cactus Corridor, fight my way through an uncharted section of space, find out the damn thing exists, come back, tell you, and you’ll send me out again?”

“I’d rather take your first suggestion,” Galland said.

“It wasn’t a suggestion,” she said. “And I won’t steal for you or the Alliance. I’m not that dumb.”

All the humor left Galland’s face. “Really, Roz?” he asked. “Your record suggests otherwise.”

“It does not. I’ve been one of the best officers in this fleet, and you know it.”

“I know it,” he said. “But it doesn’t show in your record. In fact, the last eleven runs you did for me were off the books. Officially, Captain, you’re grounded.”

Her mouth went dry. “What?”

He shrugged. “We’re pretty much an isolated outpost here, Roz. No one knows what happens out here unless we choose to tell them. For the past several years all your communications, all your assignments, and all of your command decisions have been run through me.”

Of course it had. That was standard policy. She was feeling light-headed. He had manipulated standard policy to his own advantage? That was even lower than she had expected him to go.

“There aren’t that many starships,” she said. “Patrol Headquarters has to know that someone has been running the *Millennium*.”

“Someone has,” Galland said. “Just not you.”

She licked her lips. They were dry, too. “What have I been doing then?”

“Penance, just like you were supposed to. Working dock-side with me.”

“You son of a bitch!” She started across the desk at him, but he caught her by her shoulders.

“Don’t fly off, Roz,” he said. “You don’t dare. Or I’ll report your usage of the *Millennium*. All of it illegal.”

“That’s not true. We’ve done surveys for the Patrol. We’ve gone on assignment-”

“True,” he said. “All of it logged in under the new captain’s name. The only runs that bear your signature are the eleven I asked for.”

“All illegal,” she said.

He shrugged. “All insurance.”

She eased herself out of his grasp. “What about my crew?”

“Loyalty is a two-edged sword, Roz,” Galland said. “They’ll say anything for you.”

“You’d ruin their careers, too?” she asked.

He smiled. “It seems that you already have.”

She clenched her fists and had to walk around the office once to keep herself from flattening him. Asshole. She had been right. She should have trusted her instincts, should have believed in that feeling she had every time he gave her an assignment.

But she had wanted her ship back so badly, she had been willing to believe him. Willing to become his patsy.

Dammit, this was her fault. She willingly blinded herself so that she could have the command she felt she deserved.

Now she wished she could go back in time. She wouldn’t refight the battle in the Cactus Corridor. She’d done that right. No. She’d report the entire thing to Headquarters when she got back to the base, just like she had planned.

But Admiral Galland had talked her out of it. He had said that he had taken care of the report, and he had told her to keep her information to herself because he thought he could save her command and maybe even give her the *Millennium*.

She remembered seeing the *Millennium*, brand new and sparkling, docked on the

base's secure ring. She had wanted that ship. After the battles she fought, the risks she had taken, the way she had saved her crew and the mission, she felt she had deserved that ship.

And Galland had used those emotions. Used them all.

She made herself focus on the statue of a man on a horse on one of the bookshelves. It was a Remington, from Earth, twentieth century. She knew because Galland had told her. And she had looked it up one afternoon while lounging in her quarters. If the bronze statue was the original, it was priceless. It had once stood in the Oval Office of the White House, back when Ronald Reagan was president, centuries ago.

Had Galland stolen that, too? Or had he bought it?

She didn't know. Anyone could get rich out here, and still serve in the Patrol. Getting rich wasn't illegal. It seemed like very little was any more.

Damn him.

"So," she said, "you're even taking the *Millennium* away from me."

"Roz, you're the one who proved that full-sized vessels can't survive intact in the Cactus Corridor. That nebula would be dangerous without the Ba-am-as and their mines. But the fact that the Ba-am-as claim it and defend it, and the Corridor is filled with more debris than the average nebula, make it the most treacherous area of space out here."

"I've flown it," Roz said.

"And lost a ship doing so."

"If regulations hadn't insisted on one: successful completion of a mission and two: crew's lives above all else, I'd've gotten the damn ship out." She took a deep breath. "I want the *Millennium* on this mission."

"No."

"And since this mission's off the books, I'm not following regulations."

"Roz-

"What are you going to do, Allen?" she said, being as disrespectful to him as he was to her. "Throw the book at me? You can do that already. If you want me to go, and it's clear you do, you do it my way."

"See the prototype first," he said.

"Has the prototype flown any farther than this base?"

"No."

“Have its weapon systems been tested in real battles, not simulations?”

“No.”

“Has it ever flown in anything other than optimum conditions?”

“No.”

“Then you give me the *Millennium*, or you find someone else to take this little joy ride of yours.”

“I’ll have your ass, Roz.”

She smiled at him. “It seems that you already do, Allen. There’s not a lot more that you can threaten me with. You do it my way, or it’s not going to get done. Or did some other captain wrap a noose around her neck like I did?”

He stared at her for a long time. Then he sighed. “All right,” he said. “You have the *Millennium*.”

“Somehow,” she said, “I’m not overjoyed.”

Roz was even less overjoyed when the *Millennium* hit the Cactus Corridor. The Corridor was the name the Patrol had given one of the larger nebulas in this part of the galaxy and it was, as Galland had said, dangerous even without the mines placed in it by the Ba-am-as.

The Ba-am-as were a possessive race who claimed not only the space around their planet, but the space around their solar system as their territory. That they shared that space with at least seventy-five other sentient species didn’t seem to bother them at all; that among the seventy-five were four-teen that were space-faring only bothered the Ba-am-a’s in that they had to defend themselves.

And they did, against everyone.

To make matters worse, the Ba-am-as were more technologically advanced than the Patrol. It meant that any space-faring ships that went into self-proclaimed Ba-am-as territory had to be warships, and had to have a lot of maneuverability.

The *Millennium* had both, and normally, Roz would have felt all right going into Ba-am-as turf with her ship, but things weren’t normal, The *Millennium* was designed to run with a crew composite of three hundred. It could run well with anything down to two hundred and, theoretically, could function with a skeleton crew of one hundred.

Galland had allowed her the fifty crew members of her choice, promising to reassign all the others and rebuild their careers. She was happy for them-but the problem that she had was that to run the *Millennium* with half her minimal crew composite required her to use her best people-and those were the people she most wanted out of Galland’s clutches.



Her only other choice was to take the prototype which she trusted as much as she trusted Galland. Better to run the Corridor with a tired overworked talented crew in the best ship in the fleet than run it with a new ship and an unfamiliar crew.

Or so she told herself.

If there had been a way to avoid the Corridor, she would have done it. But there wasn't, at least, not a quick way, according to the maps she had gotten from Galland. She would have interviewed his alien informants herself, but they had conveniently left the base just before she arrived.

She did watch the vids of the interviews and noted that all the pertinent information hadn't been filmed at all. Some-one had shut off the vids at all the appropriate moments. That meant she couldn't even reconstruct the blacked-out vids. All she had was Galland's word, the crazy map, and supposition.

The interviews told her less than Galland had.

The fifth day into the nebula, the computer reported the first minefield.

The Ba-am-as were clever. The mines were impossible to detect, at least with Patrol technology, but the Ba-am-as always issued warnings in the parameter around the field. The warnings always ended with some Ba-am-adian dignitary expressing its wish that no race get hurt in Ba-am-adian territory.

So considerate.

Roz had the computer do a sweep anyway. She had learned, the last time she went through this nebula, that the Ba-am-adian mines appeared on scans as bits of rock. Her plan was to avoid all rock as she went through.

If the Ba-am-as had changed the configuration of the mines, however, the *Millennium* would get through the nebula by luck alone.

As soon as the announcement came through, Roz went to the bridge. She wasn't the best pilot on board, not anymore, but she was the most canny. She took the copilot's chair and served as backup as the ship crawled its way through the minefield.

Fifteen agonizing hours passed. Roz suspected they were nearly out of the field when the first Ba-am-as ship appeared.

Ba-am-as ships were slender and white, looking so light that they seemed to float in space. The Ba-am-as never revealed themselves. Even their announcements came through as audio only, and all attempts to look at their planet were blocked.

Roz always imagined that they looked like their ships, white featherlike creatures without any substance to them at all.

"Message," said Ethan, her first on this mission.

“What language we got?”

“Bad English,” said Ethan.

It annoyed her that the Ba-am-as had learned the language of the Galactic Alliance, but the Alliance had never even heard the Ba-am-adian language.

Maybe language was just annoying her all around these days.

“All right,” she said. “Tell them to go ahead.”

Although she could probably recite the announcement chapter and verse already. She still heard it in her dreams.

“Galactic Patrol Vessel,” said the flat androgynous voice that was so obviously computer generated. “You are in Ba-am-adian space. We request that you leave it immediately.”

She had two ways of responding. She had tried the first the last time she had gone through and that had gone very badly. The Ba-am-a’s seemed to have no patience with people who claimed that this part of space could not be owned.

She operated the communications array herself. “Ba-am-adian vessel,” she said. “We had no idea we were in your space. We’ve been called to an outpost on the other side of the nebula. We request safe passage to tend to our people.”

There was a long silence before she got the response, “There are no Patrol outposts on the other side of the nebula.”

“There is one,” she said. She wondered how far she would have to take this bluff. “I can give you the coordinates if you like.”

She hoped that the Ba-am-as could not read her star charts. If she had to send the information, she’d use the least informative way possible.

“You are already halfway through the nebula,” the Ba-am-as said. “You have guarantee of safe passage to the other side. But you must agree not to return through our space.”

Great. All she was doing was putting off the inevitable. “That would require us to go several light-years out of our way.”

“It is a small requirement to save your lives,” said the metallic Ba-am-adian voice.

Actually that was true. And it put a germ of an idea in her head, an idea she did not have to examine until she got back from Galland’s mystery planet.

“We agree,” she said.

Ethan swore behind her, and she waved him silent. The rest of the bridge crew was staring at her as if she had grown three heads.

“We accept your safe passage through the nebula and for it, we agree not to return this way.”

There was a long silence on the other end. Then the computerized voice said, “We shall hold you and your people to this agreement. Now, follow us and we shall lead you out of the nebula.”

“Thank you,” Roz said and ended the communication.

Her bridge crew was still staring at her.

“That Ba-am-as said ‘your’ people,” Ethan said. “You don’t have the right to negotiate something this big for the Alliance.”

“I know,” she said.

“Don’t you know what kind of problems this will create?” Ivy, her pilot, asked.

“I know,” Roz said.

“And you did it anyway?” Ivy asked. “Don’t you know what’s going to happen to you?”

“Nothing that hasn’t happened already,” Roz said. “I need a quick meeting of the senior staff. It’s time you all know what’s going on.”

They frowned and returned to their posts.

She sat back and let Ivy do the hard piloting. But Roz made sure the computer was charting their course, and taking readings of the rocks and debris near the strange twists and turns. Maybe, just maybe, she’d be lucky enough to find a common material in all of that junk.

Maybe she’d discover how to locate a Ba-am-adian mine.

“He’s been tampering with all of our records?” Ethan asked, pacing around the conference desk.

The conference room in the *Millennium* was probably the prettiest room on the ship. On one wall, it had floor-to-ceiling windows open to space, on the others it had hand-painted maps of the known universe—maps which could be covered by screens if someone needed to make a large presentation.

Ethan was a burly man who’d made his way through the ranks on sheer brute force. It had taken her—and her crew—to show him that he had the intelligence to match that strength.

Now, however, she wished he was small and puny. He was using that strength to knock empty chairs and eventually, he’d knock them clear of their anchors in the floor.

Ivy was huddled beside Roz, looking as if she didn't want to be there. Three other staff members, petite Gina Fishel who headed security, no-nonsense Belle Curry who ran the medical team, and sturdy Tom O'Neal who led the engineering team, watched Ethan warily. He was expressing the anger all of them felt-Roz was smart enough to know that-but they still weren't comfortable with the edge of violence that was in all of his movements.

She was. She remembered having the same feeling in Galland's office.

"Yes," Roz said patiently. "He tampered with everything."

"And you trusted him?"

"He was my superior officer," she said. "We were following regulations."

Ethan growled and smacked another empty chair. "You should have double-checked on him."

"Why didn't you?" she asked, unable to control the impulse.

"Because that was your job."

"So, under your logic, you should have made sure that I did it properly." She folded her hands. "We'd all been on base since the loss of the *St. Petersburg*. We all had the opportunity to make sure that Galland was telling us the truth. We all chose to believe the system was working."

Ethan whirled, slapping his large hands on the table. "You can't blame this on us."

"I'm not," Roz said. "But I am pointing out that the mistake I made was somewhat logical. I've had a week to think about this. I screwed up, yes, and I allowed my desire to maintain a ship and a command compromise all of us. But we're here now--"

"We wouldn't be here if you'd told us that on base," Gina said softly.

Roz nodded. "I know that."

Gina's narrow face flushed. "You got us here under false pretenses."

"I need you to run this ship," Roz said.

"We could strike." That came from Belle. She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back in her chair.

Roz looked at her with surprise. Belle, who had served on more ships than the rest of them combined, never acted in an insubordinate manner. She accepted her work as easily as she accepted her silver hair and advancing years.

"You could," Roz said. "Then we drift. I can't run this ship alone."

“So your plan is to be Galland’s lackey?” Tom asked.

Roz shrugged. “I figure we’ll investigate this.”

“Why?” Belle said. “You know it’s not possible.”

“I have a hunch Galland has sent us there for another reason,” Roz said.

“And then how do you expect to get home?” Ivy asked, her voice soft. “You told the Ba-am-as that we won’t go through the Corridor. If we don’t, we’ll go so far out of our way that it’ll take us two years to get back.”

Roz nodded. Then she stood up and walked to the window. Through its protective coating and quadruple panes, all regulation thick, she saw dust particles floating like schools of fish. The *Millennium* could handle small particles of debris like that-it was built to withstand all sorts of space junk-but she knew that too many trips through a nebula would make microscopic fractures too small to measure, and eventually, something on the ship would buckle.

“It doesn’t bother you that it’ll take us forever to get back?” Ethan asked the question a bit too loudly.

“It bothers me,” she said, “but I’m not going to worry about it right now.”

“What are you worrying about?” Tom asked.

She rubbed her arms. “Getting to that planet. Finding the universal translator.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to go through with the mission!” Ethan said.

She turned. The staff were all staring at her, waiting for her answer. “What do you want me to do?”

“We could contact the Ba-am-as, and ask for passage out of the Corridor on the Alliance side,” Ivy said.

“After the lie I told them?” Roz asked. “You think they’ll buy that?”

No one answered her.

“And if we do return, then what? Do I put Galland on report?”

“Sarcasm doesn’t help, Roz,” Belle said softly.

“No, I suppose it doesn’t,” Roz said. “But you’re not coming up with any solutions.”

“Maybe we should turn ourselves in,” Ivy said softly.

Ethan cursed and kicked the nearest chair. It shuddered on its post, and nearly toppled off.

“Don’t go breaking the ship,” Tom said to him. “We might have to live here for the next two years.”

Ethan cursed again.

“Let’s see what Galland wants so badly,” Gina said. “I’m with the captain. We might have blackmail material here.”

Roz looked at her sideways and smiled. “That’s the kind of response I need from my staff. Blame me all you want, but let’s come up with some creative solutions to get us out of this mess.”

“Blackmail is creative?” Belle asked.

“It’s the best thing I’ve heard so far,” Roz said.

“Yeah. After we go to some stupid planet no one has ever seen before, and then take a route two years out of our way to get home.” Ethan sat in the chair he had just kicked. The chair groaned under his weight. “By then, all this might not matter.”

“It’ll matter,” Roz said softly.

“To whom?” Ethan asked. “For all we know, by then Galland could have retired.”

“It’ll matter to me.” Roz shoved her hands in the pockets of her uniform. “It’ll always matter to me.”

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They emerged from the nebula into a portion of space that Roz had only been to briefly, during her last encounter with the Ba-am-as. This time, like last, she didn’t have any time to explore. She had to fulfill her mission.

She couldn’t articulate to her staff anymore why she felt she had to fulfill this bizarre quest. She had a hope, one she hardly expressed even to herself, that she would find something that would allow her to get some kind of revenge on Galland-or, at least, that would restore her good name.

Since the aliens who had informed Galland of the planet hadn’t bothered to name it, and since it was uncharted-at least by the Alliance-Roz’s crew had taken to calling it “Xanadu.” They all giggled when they said it, and then looked at her sideways, as if afraid she would get the joke. She didn’t, and she really didn’t care.

The route they had been given took them into a new solar system. Most of the planets were not marked on the map. The exploration urge hit her again, but she ignored it.

She headed for Xanadu, hoping against hope she would find something she could use.

Xanadu turned out to be an Earth-type planet with oceans and six continents-three habitable to humans. The atmosphere had enough oxygen to sustain human life, which was not a surprise, given the makeup of the planet itself.

Roz had studied her chart enough to know that the creatures she was seeking lived on the small third continent. It reminded her of Australia, where she had been on her one trip to Earth at the age of fifteen. From space, it had looked like an island, but she knew that the land mass itself was vast.

She had her senior staff review the alien interviews- with all the blackouts-hoping for a clue to what she was seeking. She also had the computer scan the surface, looking for signs of a space-faring civilization.

It found nothing on the surface so, in a moment of frustration, Ethan asked it to scan below the surface.

There the computer found catacombs that went on forever-all of them carved out of rock and supported by metal beams: not anything that would have occurred naturally.

It took three days to locate an entrance to the catacombs. Then Roz plotted the away missions, breaking protocol again and deciding to go herself. She wasn't going to orbit the damn planet waiting for news. If there was something below that she could use-or even if there wasn't-she wanted to see for herself.

The fact that her crew was even on this mission was her fault; the least she could do was shoulder all of the responsibility herself.

She went down in the first shuttle, along with ten crew members. Ethan stayed on board, protesting the entire time. Roz took Ivy, Gina, two other security officers, Tom and two of his most scientifically minded engineers, and a medical officer handpicked by Belle.

Despite the atmosphere readings, Roz insisted they all wear environmental suits. She hated the helmets and the clear faceplates as much as anyone else, but she wasn't going to lose a person on this mission. She wasn't going to take any unreasonable chances.

A second shuttle was supposed to disembark five hours later if hers didn't return. She never said it would be a rescue mission, but both she and Ethan knew it was.

Ivy piloted the shuttle down and balked when Roz ordered her to remain on board. But Roz didn't listen to Ivy's arguments; instead she hustled the rest of the team out of the shuttle and into the bright light on the planet's surface.

They had landed on a flat rocky area near the spot the computer had located as the entrance to the catacombs. The rocks were rust-colored, but the soil beneath, peaking out in various areas, was a dark brown. There were no plants here, but she hadn't expected any. The plants were two kilometers below them, in a valley that she

could barely see from where she stood.

The environmental suit's cooling unit clicked on after informing her that the surface temperature was barely tolerable for human beings. The shuttle had read the ambient temperature of the air and had said it was cool enough to go without suits. But apparently the shuttle's equipment didn't measure how hot the surface got with the large sun overhead baking the strange red rocks.

Roz led her team to the coordinates for the opening to the catacombs. She had expected something elaborate carved into the rocks jutting up like cliffs. Instead, a metal box stood on the rock like a sign pointing toward the hiding place below the surface.

The box had a door on one side, and the door was open. Roz glanced at Gina, who shrugged.

"Might always be like that," Gina said. "No way of knowing."

Still, she motioned to the members of the security team, and they all went in first. Roz and the rest of the landing party waited until Gina gave an all clear.

Then Roz led the way inside.

Immediately, her suit's cooling unit shut off. The air was cooler in here and, her suit informed her, more oxygen rich. The ceiling glowed, creating a cool, unnatural light that illuminated the path before them. The floor sloped down-ward, a gradual slant so that even the most clumsy could keep their footing.

"This is weird," Tom said.

Roz nodded, but said nothing. She walked just behind the security team, noting the metal beams and the way the support structures disappeared into the rock.

The deeper the team went into the catacombs the wider the caverns got. Instead of getting darker, the path got lighter. The same material that had been on the ceiling above illuminated the floor below.

"Cautious creatures, aren't they?" Roz asked.

"If they were cautious," Gina said, "they'd've greeted us already."

"Says who?" asked Marek, one of Tom's scientists. "We have no idea how they operate."

"Or even if they exist at all," said Brock, the other scientist.

"Someone exists," Roz said. "Or existed. This didn't just appear by itself."

The catacombs opened even farther and up ahead, Gina whistled. It took Roz a moment to catch up to her. The path created a T where Gina had stopped. At the



top of the T, someone had built a wall that came up to Roz's shoulders.

When Roz looked over the wall, she whistled, too. Above her, a carved ceiling glowed as bright as daylight-only this light was cool like the light that had illuminated their path- not red and furious like the planet's sun.

Beneath that domed ceiling was a cavern that seemed to extend for kilometers. And on every centimeter of that cavern floor were buildings and streets.

A city, made of white stone. The splotches of color came from paintings on the sides of buildings, from fabric spread on rooftops, and from the river that flowed through the city's center. She could smell the water up here, fresh and spicy and cool, and she could hear it as well as it churned its way past all the buildings.

Branches of the river flowed through the center part of the city like streets and it took Roz a moment to realize what she had taken as roads before weren't. They were calm branches of the river, their surface so flat that they shone.

"My God," Tom said. "I've never seen anything like this."

None of them had. It was stunning and unsettling at the same time.

Roz checked her system's clock. They'd been underground for two hours. She couldn't check in from this far below the surface. Which meant that she and the team had only an hour to interact with whatever lived below.

"Gina," she said, "send one of your team back to the surface. Tell Ethan to delay the second shuttle by five more hours."

"Yes, sir," Gina said. She relayed Roz's order, and one of the security members branched off, heading back the way they'd come.

Roz felt a slight pang, wondering if she should have sent a pair above, but so far she had seen nothing hostile.

"Does anyone see how to get to that city?" she asked.

"Either side will take us down," Tom said, pointing to the other side of the cavern. The paths followed the walls, slanting downward until they met directly across from where the team stood now, in what looked like a giant slide that led into the city.

Roz nodded. It would take them another half hour or more just to traverse the width of the cavern. But she saw no other choice.

This time, she led the team. The downward slope was much steeper here, and she had to hold onto the wall to keep her balance. So did the rest of the team. All the way down she watched for some form of alien life, and saw nothing. When they finally reached the far side of the cavern, Gina swore. Roz looked ahead.

What had looked like a giant slide from the other side looked more like a waterfall

encased in stone on this side. The only way down it was to rappel or to slide down.

The stone waterfall ended in one of the pools that had branched off the river.

“Great,” Tom said.

*Strangers*, a voice boomed.

Roz looked at the rest of her team. They looked as startled as she did.

*State your business here.*

Roz felt a shiver run through her. That was English- and, so far as she knew, the creatures in this place had never encountered any humans before, let alone those from the Patrol, those that spoke English almost exclusively.

“Urn.” She stepped forward. “We’re from the Galactic Alliance, a loosely-based association of worlds on the other side of the nebula near here.”

Tom was frowning at her. Did she sound as uncomfortable as she felt.

“We had heard that you had a universal translator. We were sent to check out the rumor.”

The voice was silent.

Roz looked at her team. Gina shrugged. The other security members hung back as if the strangeness surprised them. The scientists were looking for the source of the voice, and the medical officer was frowning.

*We do not allow strangers into the city*, the voice said after a moment. *One of our representatives will meet you.*

Roz felt her shoulders relax, She really didn’t want to face that frozen waterfall.

Then she heard a loud splash and a strange whirring. A

creature whirled out of the pool below them, and rose to their level. It landed, shaking water off as it did so.

It was small, mammalian in appearance, with forearms and webbed feet like a duck. It also had a beak. Its eyes were dark and had no whites. It seemed to be breathing the air, but it also had gills along the sides of its neck.

*We have never heard of a Galactic Alliance.* The little creature’s mouth-or what Roz took to be a mouth-did not move.

“We’ve been around for nearly a hundred years,” she said. “If you want, I could brief you on it.”

*Perhaps later.* It folded its small forearms over its belly. It had what looked like

six-fingered hands at the end of those forearms and it threaded the fingers together.  
*First we would like to hear of your universal translator.*

“Actually,” Roz said, “we heard you had invented one.”

*We have no use for such a thing,* the creature said.

“Yet you’re speaking to us in our language.”

The creature made a chittering sound. */ am not speaking.*

Telepathy. She had heard that there were creatures all over the galaxy that had it in one form or another. “How do you understand our language, then?”

*/ do not know. Only that we overheard your speech, then used what pieces of it we could find to create our own responses.*

Roz glanced at Gina. Gina had pressed a small button on the side of her environmental suit. She was recording this. Although Roz figured it would do no good. If the creature was telepathic, the conversation would be distinctly one-sided.

*How did you learn of us?*

Roz told him of the Hicrum, the Crativ’n, and the Du-lacs, and then she spoke of her assignment.

*What good would a universal translator be to your peo-cle?* the creature asked.

“We travel all over the galaxy,” she said. “Our mission is to map the sectors we haven’t seen before, and make diplomatic contact with peoples we haven’t encountered before. We usually contact only space-faring races.”

*We were space-faring once.*

“What happened?”

*We chose not to be any longer.* The creature shook some more water off its fur, then leaned over and groomed its shoulder with its tongue. It made a spitting sound, and shook again. *However, it is beginning to seem as if we will not be left in peace.*

“Because the Hacrim and the others are telling everyone about you?”

*And you are all coming to investigate.*

“We’ve been raised to believe that a universal translator is an impossibility,” Tom said.

*When you speak of this translator, you speak of a device, do you not?* the creature asked.

“Yes,” Roz said.

*Then you have been raised correctly. So far as we know, anyway.*

“But we’re understanding each other.”

The creature raised its dark eyes to hers then made that cluttering sound again. She wondered if it was a sound of derision or disgust.

*My people have the skill to understand most sentient beings. It is not a pleasant nor desirable trait, and it is the reason we have retreated here.*

“The underground city?” Gina asked.

*The river, the creature said. It protects us. We have trouble absorbing through water.*

“What do your people call themselves?” Roz asked.

The creature made a sound that was something between a burp and a sneeze.

The creature studied them for a moment, then said, *If we had had the device you were looking for, what would you have done with it?*

“I would have reported to my superiors.” Roz said, not sure that was what she would have done at all. “And they probably would have figured out a way to buy the technology from you.”

*Would they be willing to barter or trade?*

“Of course,” Roz said. “I’m sure a lot of races would.”

*I will speak to my people, the creature said. You will return here after the next sunrise. You will then explain to us your hesitation at returning to your command and why you are both elated and disappointed to learn of our talents.*

Roz was startled. She had realized it was telepathic, but she hadn’t realized its ability extended beyond the language skills. “All right,” she said.

The creature tilted its head, which seemed like some sort of ritual movement (like a wave), then it raised its arms and laid itself on the stone waterfall. It slid down the fall and landed, with a splash, in the pool below.

Roz peered after it, but couldn’t see anything in the murky depths. “Okay,” she said after a moment, “that was weird.”

“But promising,” Gina said.

The pool below still rippled. Roz thought she saw movement. But she pulled herself away. “Let’s head back to the shuttle before Ethan sends the next team down.”

So they made the long trek back, radioed Ethan, and settled in for their first night on Xanadu.

Sunrise, it turned out, was two standard days later. The wait was interminable. For the first time, Roz re-gretted leaving Ethan on board the ship. She wanted to hear his analysis. The others were reliable, but they weren't as blunt as Ethan.

She needed blunt right now.

The breaks in the recordings of the interviews bothered her more than ever. She had a hunch that Galland knew his universal translator wasn't a device, but a people. And she had an idea that he wanted her to bring just one member of that race back with her.

That was what she would have done if he hadn't threatened her. if he hadn't tried to manipulate her, and if he hadn't ruined-her career.

She did speak to her team, and they all agreed that there was no way she would be able to convince the Xanadians- which was what they called the creatures, not being able to imitate that sneeze/burp sound-to continue to hide or even to move on. If three different alien races knew about them, it was only a matter of time before someone else did as well.

And their skills would be useful, whether on a voluntary or a coerced basis.

While she waited, she sent all the information she had back to the ship. Belle and her team examined it. Telepathy on a low level, Belle informed Roz, had been found in other races scattered among the galaxy, but nothing this sophisticated. Mostly telepaths were able to sense strong emotion among their own people. Belle had no records of any race that had telepathy with other races-and certainly not anything that included picking up a language in less than an hour.

"But," Belle had said, "as much as I don't want to admit that it's possible, I have to remind myself there's more to this universe than we can perceive. All I have to do is blow a dog whistle to know that."

It was her standard line when she encountered something she didn't understand, and it bothered Roz. "Can't you at least make a guess at what they're doing?" she had asked.

"I can guess," Belle had said. "Not on the telepathy but on the language."

That got Roz's attention. She thought that was the impossible part, and she said so.

"Babies of all species which have language have a great ability to absorb and learn that language without formal training," Belle had said. "It's an ability most of us lose as humans by the time we're four. A handful retain it, like a talent. I'm guessing that this entire species had to learn language and telepathy as survival skills. I don't know enough about the ecosystem of the planet, but if we delve into it, maybe into the planet's history, we'll learn why these skills are so necessary."

Then Belle had grinned. "Or maybe they're just conning us like everyone else has

managed to lately.”

It was possible, Roz supposed, but she didn't know why there would be such an elaborate con. There were easier ways of trapping Galland, and the Galactic Patrol didn't even work this sector. So she was inclined to believe the Xanadians were real.

Her staff agreed. They thought the Xanadians were the real thing.

Now she just had to find out what the little gold mines wanted.

Instead of meeting her down by the city, the creature met her inside the door to the catacombs. Near the surface, it looked more molelike than she had expected, its dark eyes squinting at the light filtering in the open door.

Her own team waited just outside as the creature had asked them to do. It had pulled Roz far enough away that her voice couldn't be heard by her own people-and she wondered how it knew that or if it was just comfortable a distance away from the others-and then it said,

*We are tiny race. We live in the-and again it made a sneezy burpy sound, which somehow she understood to mean the continent she was on-and nowhere else. The other races on this planet leave us alone. They're frightened of our abilities. But now, creatures from space have come-several in the past year-and by that she knew it meant its year, not her year-and all of them seemed intrigued by our abilities to understand them. We get a sense of threat and we do not know why. You are the first to speak of trade, barter, buying, and we begin to understand. Our ability to communicate does not frighten you. You desire it, see it as a commodity, see it as something that will improve your lives.*

She nodded, then said, “Yes,” just in case it didn't understand.

*We sent the others away, telling them that we want to be left alone. And it seems, they all told your people. Why is that?*

“Knowledge.” she said. “It's a commodity, too, among my people.”

The creature rubbed its handlike paws together, as if she had confirmed its thinking. *We had heard of your union. We were going to apply to it for its protection until you arrived. You have hesitations. It is as if you do not believe in the organization you represent.*

If she needed confirmation of the creatures' telepathic ability, then this was it. The creature had put into words the very thing that had been bothering her.

If she were to report back to Galland, he would come out here. Or he would send a force out here. He'd been far enough away to tamper with her records, hide the loss of a ship, and make himself rich enough to have expensive goods all over his office. If he made some kind of deal with these creatures outside Alliance guidelines-and any deal he made with them for his own gain would be-there would be no one to

stop him.

At least not until it was too late.

She could, she supposed, let Headquarters know what was happening, but that would be difficult, especially considering how Galland had discredited her and her crew.

And, really, when she looked at it, what was the Alliance, anyway? A federation of planets with nothing more in common than their military unity. They claimed they were diplomats exploring the galaxy, but the races they found either joined the Alliance or became the Alliance's enemies.

She had no idea why the Ba-am-as hated the Patrol, but she had a hunch the reasons she had been told weren't the ones the Ba-am-as had.

She sighed. "I'm not the best representative for my people. I've been discredited and I allowed myself to be conned."

The creature turned toward her. Its dark eyes seemed to have grown even darker. *We know this.*

"Then you know that I no longer believe in the Alliance I represent."

*It is why we talk with you.* One of the creature's forearms fluttered like the wing of a grounded bird. *We believe you are the first alien we have encountered that might be able to help us.*

"Help you?" she asked. "How?"

*It would require you to break several of your laws.* The creature studied her as if it could see through her.

"It seems I've done that already."

*And you would have to find new allegiances.*

"I'm listening," she said.

So, with a wave of its little pawlike hands, the creature outlined its proposition.

She had to take the proposition back to her crew. The creatures were willing to wait while she returned to her ship. She held the meeting shortly after she arrived.

"We know nothing about these creatures," Ivy said. "If they want us to train them so that they can go back into space, how do we know they won't go out and conquer the galaxy?"

"All five hundred of them?" Belle asked.

The entire staff looked at her.

“I checked. We can scan below the surface, even if our communicators don’t work there.”

“Any way they could have fudged that?” Gina asked Tom.

“I suppose,” he said. “If they have a great understanding of our technology and lots of time to prepare.”

“I take that as a no,” Roz said.

“Unless you’re really paranoid,” Tom said.

“Besides,” Belle said, “they reproduce slowly. Even if all five hundred decide to conquer the galaxy, it’ll be a while before they have the ability to do so.”

“They say they reproduce slowly,” Tom said.

“No,” Belle said. “This one I could check. Gestation period of one of our years, two years in a pouch-they’re more marsupials than mammals in some ways-and then nearly two decades to grow up.”

“Okay,” Ivy said. “So they can’t conquer the known universe.”

“Not in our lifetime,” Belle said. “Besides, Roz said they’re going to let us interview the other races on this planet about them.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Ethan asked.

“We don’t speak any of the languages. And I don’t exactly trust the only available translators.”

“It boils down to trust,” Roz said. “And I don’t have any left, for anyone at least, except this crew.”

No one spoke.

“Which brings up another problem,” Roz said into the silence. “I mean, we’re not going to limp back to Alliance space, not if we do this.”

Everyone looked at her.

“You’re proposing stealing the *Millennium*?” Ethan asked.

“On the books,” Roz said, “we already have.”

“And doing what with her?”

Roz sighed. She’d been thinking about this since she went through the Cactus Corridor. “She’s our home, isn’t she? None of us has family anywhere else.”

The staff was silent.



“And we’ve been doing things we don’t like for reasons that we all hated because we thought we were working for the Alliance. It turns out we weren’t.”

“So shouldn’t we go back and get a court-martial for Galland?” Ivy asked.

“Maybe,” Roz said. “If we can. If we believe it’ll happen. Like I said, I don’t believe in much anymore.”

“What are you suggesting?” Ethan asked.

“They can’t come after us,” Roz said. “We’ve screwed up their passage through the Corridor. It’ll take them a few tries before they realize that the Ba-am-as believe there’s an agreement, a few more tries before they anger the Ba-am-as into believing the agreement’s over, and then at least two years of flying before they make it here, our last known stop.”

“We’d be fugitives for the rest of our lives,” Gina said.

“Only in Alliance space.”

The entire staff looked at her as if she had three heads. Roz was beginning to get used to that response.

She shrugged. “It’s just an idea. I’m beginning to realize that I’m not the most subtle person in the world. Or the greatest brain. But I do have an ethical center. I’m not suggesting we go out and pillage this part of the galaxy.”

“Then what are you suggesting?” Ethan asked.

“Doing what we were hired to do. Exploring. Helping when we feel it’s right.”

Belle rubbed her chin with her left hand. “You think helping the Xanadians is right.”

“Not so that they relearn space travel,” Roz said, “but so that they can defend themselves against anyone who wants to use their special abilities for the wrong reason.”

“And what would you take in payment?”

“Nothing,” Roz said.

“Nothing?” the crew asked in unison.

“Well, supplies,” Roz said. “We’re going to have to learn how to barter for those, if you follow my suggestion. And one other thing.”

“What’s that?” Ethan asked in a tone that suggested he hated the idea without hearing it.

“Adding a Xanadian to our crew. Provided we learn to like the creatures and feel we can trust them.”

“Why?”

“A universal translator is a valuable thing,” Roz said. “And the Xanadians want to learn what space flight is like. So we work together.”

“Create a new alliance,” Ethan said, sitting down hard, making the chair groan.

“Not a formal alliance,” Roz said. “More like an association. A friendly interaction.”

“It makes me uncomfortable. Any Xanadian on this ship will know everything about everyone.”

“Unless it lives in some kind of water environment,” Belle said. “Think you could jury-rig something like that over the next year, Tom?”

He nodded. “I even know the place to do it.”

“It’s not a sure thing,” Roz said. “We wouldn’t do it if we decide we don’t like them or we can’t trust them.”

“Then what do we do?” Ethan asked.

Roz leaned forward. “We leave.”

“Just like that?” Ethan asked.

She nodded. “What’s holding us here? What’s holding us anywhere?”

“Imagine what we’ll see,” Tom said. “Imagine what we’ll do.”

“It won’t all be easy,” Belle said.

“But it will be interesting,” Gina said.

Ethan looked at Roz. “Is this what freedom feels like?”

She grinned. “I don’t know,” she said, “but I have a hunch it is.”

The Xanadians agreed to the loose alliance. Roz made plans to interview some of the other species on the planet, and the *Millennium* orbited like a glorified guard ship while all of this was going on.

There was still a lot to work out. The entire crew had been notified, and she expected dissension in the ranks. Tom told her that one of the shuttles could be modified so that dissenters could try to fly back to Alliance space if they wanted.

So far, no one had volunteered.

Roz had a hunch no one would. The adventure out there was just too promising, the universe too vast.

Everyone on the crew had joined the Patrol for the same idealistic reasons she had,

and the last eleven missions had whittled away that idealism. Since she made her decision to break off from the Alliance, though, she heard a lot more laughter on her ship.

The pressure was gone. It was as if they had worked for an evil master and were now free.

The key, of course, was to maintain their own idealism in the face of being alone on this side of the Corridor. She felt they could do it.

She felt like her life's adventure had just begun.