

Walk in Silence

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If ancient animosities  
are finally laid to rest,  
will new ones take  
their place?

I

Silver Tide

Lieutenant Colonel Jess Fernández was sick. She sat in her chair at the end of a giant robot arm that could swing anywhere within the large hemisphere around her. Although she could act as captain from many locations within the ship, she spent most shifts here on the bridge.

She rubbed her eyes, exhausted after having worked late the previous evening, ship's time. Her queasy stomach didn't help. She also had a cold, of all the absurd anachronisms, and she felt like hell.

Holoscreens covered the surface of the kilometer-wide dome that formed the bridge. Right now they showed the planet Athena, a gas giant banded by blue and red clouds, glowing against the spangled backdrop of space. The view to starboard lifted her spirits. It came from a satellite orbiting Athena and showed her ship, Silver Tide, a scientific research facility. The vessel glistened, a rotating cylinder several kilometers long. Lights sparkled along its body, on antennae, pods, struts, and towers.

Jess always got a kick out of watching Silver Tide from within the ship. She had never lost the awe she felt that first time she boarded, coming to assume her command. In the five years since, Silver Tide had become part of her.

Her stomach interrupted her enjoyment with an unwelcome lurch. Trying to divert her thoughts, she magnified the screen images. Now they revealed a small spacecraft on approach, a Bolt transport. On Silver Tide, the pod on a docking tube was opening like a giant flower. The Bolt sailed inside and the pod closed, swallowing the craft. Jess recognized the Bolt; it carried Jack O'Brien and his Allied Services team, which tracked the interstellar black market. They were hitching a ride on Silver Tide, headed out across space to bust smugglers.

Jess sniffled, distracted by her stuffy nose. Pah. This was absurd. She had all her inoculations. Granted, none were 100 percent effective, but humans had cured most strains of the common cold. It irked her no end to have caught one anyway.

She still had to do her job. To the computer, she said, "Spin her up."

"Done," it answered. The bridge began to turn, its screens adjusting to keep the view stationary. She rotated the bridge during part of each shift so her crew at the consoles on the hull weren't always in micro-gravity. Against the immensity of space, their stations were tiny wedges moving past the stars. Usually Jess reveled in that glorious vista. Unfortunately, seeing those consoles zip by today did nothing glorious for her stomach. Bloody hell. Captains weren't supposed to get sick.

Jess sent her chair humming toward a hatch on the hull. To match speed and position with the moving hatch, the chair turned upside down, making her dismayed stomach flip-flop. She gulped bile as she shoved out of her seat. Then she rendezvoused with the Bridge Renewal and Refresher Chamber, otherwise known as the loo.

As she squeezed into the cubicle, a med-holo of her face formed in front of the opposite panel showing a woman with black hair tousled around her shoulders. Dark smudges showed below her eyes.

She barely had time to lean over the sink before she lost her lunch.

"You work too hard." Dr. George Mai stood by the bed in the exam room, scanning his holopad. A heavy-set man of average height, he had a kind face and brown eyes. He frowned at Jess, who was sitting on the end of the bed, her booted legs almost touching the floor. "You should come in more often for a check-up," he admonished.

Jess barely held back her grimace. She had never liked hospitals. "I'm not working any harder than usual. I've no reason to be sick."

"I'm still checking a few tests, but I can already give you the diagnosis." He turned off his holopad. "You have a cold, Captain. You need rest. Relaxation."

Jess glowered at him. "I'm perfectly relaxed."

He started to answer, then seemed to think better of it. Instead he said, "I'll let you know if anything else turns up."

"Thank you." She slid off the bed, standing half a head taller than him.

"You really could use a rest," he said. "Doctor Bolton would say the same."

Gads. He was pulling out the big guns. She could just hear Sandra Bolton, the senior physician at Claymore Hospital: I insist you relax, Jess. Take a vacation, find a hobby, meet some people. You're an intelligent, accomplished, attractive woman. All right, so you're also stubborn as all hell. But you still need a social life.

Stubborn, pah. Sandra didn't seem to understand the words, I'm fine, go away. Jess had great respect for the doctor's abilities, but she had no wish to hear Sandra's unsolicited advice on her personal life, or lack thereof.

Especially not now.

Jess hurried through the secluded woods around the medical park. She had changed back into her uniform, the blue trousers and shirt of a lieutenant colonel in the Space Corps of the Allied Worlds of Earth. At six-foot-two, with long legs, she devoured distance as she strode along a gravel path. The trees and flowering bushes on both sides tended to make her forget she lived on a star ship. Then she reached an open area and saw the forest sloping up the distant curve of the cylinder. The "sky" consisted of light panels in the overhead deck.

Silver Tide was a self-sufficient habitat, with its own towns and countryside. It carried thousands of people, primarily civilians, though Jess and her officers served in the Space Corps. The scientists onboard did research related to space, studying everything from genetically altered colonists on other planets to star formation. Researchers throughout the Allied Worlds of Earth regularly applied for grants to work on Silver Tide.

Jess sighed. Cold or no cold, she had work to do. She headed for the administrative park where her staff had their offices. The gleaming buildings were scattered among lawns and parks, with abstract sculptures that had never made a whit of sense to Jess. The modern art looked ugly to her, but perhaps she was too pragmatic to appreciate its nuances.

For the rest of the day, she met with the heads of science divisions, working on the ship's itinerary. They had just picked up several astrophysicists who would study interstellar dust clouds for the next few months. Several weeks ago Silver Tide had dropped off a team of anthropologists on the world Icelos, and Jess wanted to check on them. Other groups had other itinerary requests.

Normally Jess enjoyed this part of her job, but today she felt too queasy to do more than function. During a meeting with the Microbiology division, she started to sneeze. She wished the med-patch George had given her would take effect. This was embarrassing.

After a full day, she headed home for a few hours of sleep. As she walked, she brooded on the discord among her staff. Several argued against returning to Icelos to check on the anthropologists. They claimed it would take valuable time other research teams needed. Jess found that hard to credit, given how often Silver Tide made such checks. Far more likely, their reluctance came about because Icelos was a Cephean world.

Cepheans had once been human. Six thousand years ago, an unknown race had moved humans from Earth to another planet, then vanished with no explanation. The stranded humans learned genetic engineering in desperation; without it, their population would have been too small to maintain a viable gene pool. Driven by memories of their lost home, they also developed space travel and went in search

of Earth. So it was that five millennia ago, Earth's displaced children built an interstellar empire.

But the empire soon collapsed, stranding its colonies. Although its descendants took thousands of years to regain space travel, they eventually succeeded, this time building a formidable civilization, the Skolian Imperiate. When Earth's people finally reached the stars, they found their lost siblings already there, busily building empires. The Skolians had recovered many of their ancient colonies—including Cepheus.

The name was actually an Earth word. Unable to reproduce Cephean speech, Earth's humans called the world Cepheus after a mythological king descended from Zeus, because the parent star appeared in the direction of the constellation Cepheus when seen from Earth.

However, Cepheus was a Skolian world. Its colonists had altered themselves, though now, millennia later, no one knew why. If they had intended to expand their gene pool, they failed miserably; Cepheans could neither reproduce with humans nor had any interest in doing so. Perhaps the changes adapted their harsh new world. They had two extra arms, modifications to accommodate the limbs, and luxuriant pelts. Entrepreneurs on Earth had spent millions trying to synthesize the fur, but that was all most humans liked about their altered neighbors. Cepheans evoked ancient terrors: Yeti, golems, stalkers in the night, a child's nightmare.

Initially Cepheans had liked humans, responding on an instinctual level. Earth's children looked like pretty pets to them. They turned wary as they discovered their long-lost siblings were anything but simple or malleable. When they realized how much humans reviled them, their unease became hostility.

A few decades ago, the Cepheans had settled Icelos, a planet in a system near their home. The colony's scientific nature made it amenable to interaction with humans, and scientists on Earth and Icelos soon set up an exchange program. Silver Tide had carried Earth's research team to Icelos, and Jess felt responsible for them. The exchange offered a symbol, proof that humans and Cepheans could work together. But the tenuous accord could unravel all too easily.

Dusk spread over the landscape as the panels dimmed overhead. Weary, Jess sat on a large boulder by the path and folded her arms across her torso. She leaned forward, swallowing the bile in her throat; either George's medicine wasn't working or else she needed new thoughts. She felt like hell.

Better not to think of Icelos.

With her arms crossed on her polished desk, Jess nodded pleasantly to the man sprawled in a leather armchair of her office. "I hope your accommodations are acceptable, Mr. O'Brien."

Jack O'Brien gave her a rakish grin, more like a pirate than a security officer in the Allied Services. "Top shape, Cap'n." A black curl fell over his forehead as he took a swig of his coffee. "After our military transport didn't show up, we figured we were stranded at Epsilani Station. Your ship was a godsend.

"I'm glad we could help." Although the Space Corps had no formal connection to the Allied Services,

Jess had no objection to their agents hitching a ride on her ship.

The comm in her desk buzzed. Touching a panel, she said, "Fernández here."

Sandra Bolton's voice crackled. "Captain, I need to see you as soon as possible."

Jess held back her groan. She had no wish to see Sandra now or ever, but she knew the doctor; the more Jess balked, the more Sandra would persist. The last thing she needed right now was to have a verbal duel with the head of Claymore Hospital in front of a visitor.

Jack O'Brien stood up, setting his mug on her desk, and mouthed, Thanks for the coffee. Relieved by his tact, Jess raised her hand to him as he left. When she was alone, she spoke into the comm. "I'll stop by the hospital later if I have time." She had a lot of work to finish today. In fact, she had just remembered more she had to do. Incredible amounts.

Sandra wasn't buying it. "This can't wait."

Jess frowned. "Why not?"

"You should come here."

That gave Jess pause. Sandra wasn't usually this oblique. It might bear checking out. Grudgingly, she said, "All right."

Sandra stood at a bench surrounded by monitors. The doctor was five-foot-six and had gained weight over the years, nothing drastic, but enough to make her round. Her short, stylish hair gleamed silver in the harsh light.

As Jess entered the exam room, Sandra turned and regarded her with a neutral expression. Bland. Sandra never looked bland. Something was up.

Jess stopped just inside the room, even more wary now. "Yes?"

Sandra studied her face. "We need to talk."

"How about some other time?" Like in a century.

"Jess, listen." The doctor cleared her throat. "It's about the suggestions I gave you."

"Which ones? You give a lot." Sandra's inventory of lectures was formidable.

"About socializing."

Jess would have laughed if she hadn't been so astounded. "Is that why you called me here so urgently? To find out if I've gone to any parties?"

"No. I just hadn't expected you to actually take my advice." Sandra laid her hand on the exam table, as if for support. Then she took a deep breath. "Jess—you're pregnant."

Jess stared at her, at a loss for a reply. It was simply too ludicrous. Finally she found her voice. "Is this some sort of tasteless joke?"

Sandra showed no sign of laughing. "George and I did three independent checks. They all give the same result."

Jess scowled. "Then your procedures have some problem."

"When George saw the result during your exam earlier, he thought it was a mistake too. But we checked. It's true."

"Sandra, for crying out loud. I can't be pregnant."

The doctor spoke dryly. "You aren't the first woman to say those words. Nor the first to be wrong."

"I'm not saying it's unlikely. It's impossible."

"No birth control method is one hundred percent effective."

Jess wished she were somewhere else. Anywhere. Discussing her sex life, or lack thereof, was about as high on her list of preferred activities as having a tooth pulled without benefit of modern dentistry. She crossed her arms. "It requires a merger to effect the result you attribute to the sole capacity of my reproductive organs."

The doctor smiled. "Does that have a translation into something I can understand?"

So much for subtlety. Jess felt herself redden. "It means I haven't, uh—been with a man."

Her tormentor shrugged. "Maybe you forgot."

"Forgot?" Jess couldn't believe she was having this conversation. "That's ridiculous. And no, I didn't go to a sperm bank."

"So how did you get pregnant?"

"I didn't."

Sandra continued as if Jess hadn't spoken. "You caught a cold because your resistance is down. You need more rest now and you're not getting it. And it's why you've felt nauseated. You have morning sickness."

"I have it all day," Jess grumbled.

"You must have missed two cycles by now. Didn't you notice?"

"I'm always irregular when I'm off-planet."

Sandra scrutinized her. "Could you have had sex without knowing it?"

This felt more surreal by the moment. "I think I would have noticed."

Sandra motioned at the bed. "Lie down."

Jess scowled at her.

The doctor smiled. "I don't bite, you know."

"You do worse," Jess muttered. "You give advice." But she went to the bed and lay on her back. Her feet hung over the bottom edge.

Sandra clicked up an extension to support Jess's feet. Then she moved to a monitor and said, "Scan one, Jazmín Fernández." It was one of Sandra's few redeeming qualities: she knew how to say her captain's name. It wasn't that Jess didn't like her nickname; she had answered to Jess since her childhood in London. But she still appreciated it when someone pronounced Jazmín right.

"Type R scan," Sandra said. She unhooked a cable from the monitor, rolled up Jess's shirt, and proceeded to slide the disk across her abdomen.

"Hey." Jess stiffened. "What are you doing?"

"Relax. It's just an image processor." Sandra motioned at the monitor. "Look."

Jess peered at the screen. A color image was forming, set against a dark background. It showed a sac holding a tiny figure with a huge head and a flutter inside its body. "What is that?"

"Your baby," Sandra said. "The motion is its heartbeat."

Jess blinked. Could she truly have conceived a child? How?

Sandra studied a panel below the monitor. "This verifies the tests. You're nine weeks pregnant."

"Nine weeks?" Jess sat up suddenly. "That's when we took those anthropologists to Icelos."

Dryly Sandra said, "Your memory coming back?"

Jess flushed. "I still can't be pregnant."

The doctor gentled her voice. "In a situation like this, denial isn't unusual. But you need to accept it, Jess. You need to decide what you intend to do."

Jess stared at the monitor, watching her baby's heart beat. A new life. Incredible. Protective instincts surged in her, similar to what she felt for Silver Tide.

She glanced at Sandra. "If you're asking do I want to give up the child or end the pregnancy, the answer is no."

Sandra didn't look surprised. "Shall I contact the anthropologists?"

Jess's voice came out sharper than she intended. "My child's father is not on Icelos." She slid off the bed and paced away from the doctor. "I don't know how this happened."

Sandra made a frustrated noise. "Fine. I give up. You had no lover. You conceived out of nothing."

Jess turned around. "I didn't say I had no lover."

"Ah." Sandra came over to her. "Now we're getting somewhere."



"He can't be the father."

"You have other candidates?"

"No." Jess fixed Sandra with what she hoped was a quelling stare. "But he can't be the father."

Sandra didn't look the least bit quelled. "You know mistakes can happen."

"Not in this case."

"What kind of birth control did you use?"

"I didn't."

Sandra snorted. "And you're surprised you're pregnant?"

"I didn't need any."

"Why? Is he sterile?"

"No. I just didn't need it."

"I don't believe you could be that naïve."

Jess glared at her. "Damn it, Sandra, let it go."

"Let what go?"

"All right!" Jess crossed her arms again. "My companion was Ghar Ko. Satisfied?"

Sandra stared at her. "You mean the Cephean Ambassador?"

Jess wished she could disappear. "Yes."

Sandra finally closed her mouth. "Lord Almighty."

"What I just told you is confidential."

"Yes, yes, of course." Sandra looked as if she couldn't decide whether to be fascinated or appalled. "And yes, you're right. Human beings cannot have babies with Cepheans."

"Are you sure the child is human?" Maybe the scientists were wrong. Maybe hybrid offspring could exist.

"Completely human." Sandra rubbed her chin. "A Cephean male couldn't impregnate you. Too many differences exist in the DNA."

"I don't know what to say." Jess had yet to sort out how she felt about what had happened. She certainly didn't want to discuss it with Sandra. But she had to file a report, even if she declined to name the nonexistent father. Although maternity no longer meant an end to active duty on a ship like Silver Tide, a pregnant captain was hardly routine, especially an unmarried one. If she didn't handle this right, she could lose her command.

Sandra seemed curious now, instead of flabbergasted. "How does Ambassador Ko feel about it?"

"I don't know," Jess admitted. "It just—happened. Then we fell asleep. I woke up, wrote him a note, and left." Silver Tide had been scheduled to depart and she couldn't hold up the ship for her personal life. Or so she told herself. But she and Ghar could have sent messages later, via starship. That neither of them had done so suggested she wasn't the only one at a loss for words.

Sandra frowned. "I've never known you to be a coward."

"I'm not. I needed time to think." Ghar probably had too. She had no idea if their liaison appalled, embarrassed, or shamed him. "If his people learn about this, it will cause him problems. Cepheans don't much care for humans." To put it mildly.

"Apparently one of them does," Sandra said dryly. "This could blow up on you big time. Humans are just as xenophobic towards Cepheans."

"That's why I haven't said anything."

"What are you going to do?"

Good question. Too bad she had no answer. "What should I do for the baby?"

Although Sandra obviously wanted to continue the topic of Ghar, she held back, at least for now. Instead, she switched into her most professional tone. "No alcohol or caffeine. Sleep more. Avoid zero-g; otherwise the cells in the fetus might not orient correctly. On the bridge, minimize how long you

spend weightless. No EVAs. Even inside the ship, make sure you always have radiation protection. If the nausea gets so bad you can't eat, let me know."

"All right." That all sounded manageable.

Sandra spoke more softly. "And Jess."

"Yes?"

"What happened would be difficult for anyone to handle. Especially if you had no choice. . . ."

It took Jess a moment to decipher her meaning. Startled, she said, "It was consensual." She couldn't imagine Ghar forcing her. With relations between Earth and Cepheus already so strained, it would have been madness. It would shatter the brittle concord between their peoples.

"Could it have happened while you slept?" Sandra asked. "By someone else?"

Jess blinked. "Of course not."

"Are you sure?"

Jess glanced at the monitor. It gave the time of conception as the night she had spent with Ghar. But she couldn't believe Ghar would be involved in such a strange deception. She turned back to Sandra. "I'm sure."

"It is hard to imagine," Sandra admitted. "If you remember anything, let me know." In a gentler voice she added, "And if you need to talk, I'm here."

"Thank you." Jess heard the stiffness in her voice. "But I'm fine. Really."

She wished she believed that.

Jess walked through the woods in a deepening twilight. She kept thinking about Sandra's question: could this have happened while she slept that night? But how? Someone would have had to enter Ghar's home and impregnate her while he was there. Regardless of whether they used artificial means or sexual, they would have had to drug her or find some other way to ensure she didn't wake up. She didn't see how they could have silenced Ghar, and she couldn't believe he would allow such violations. To what purpose? It was just too bizarre.

If Ghar had left for a while after she went to sleep, someone might have broken in during his absence. But

that didn't make much sense either. If someone in the village had wanted sex, easier ways existed to find it than sneaking up to the Cephean ambassador's home and ravishing his guest in her sleep. Even if the person had sought the thrill of danger, Jess didn't see how he could have infiltrated the well-guarded Cephean colony or Ghar's home. And she knew Ghar too well to believe he would have left her alone long enough for such an outlandish event to occur.

She had last seen Ghar on Icelos, during a reception to welcome the anthropologists from Earth. Jess had never been comfortable at such gatherings. It had been a relief to leave with Ghar, the two of them deep in conversation. She wasn't sure how they had ended up at his home. They had settled on a soft rug and proceeded to get drunk on that sharp brandy the Icelos colony produced for export.

Eventually Jess had slumped against his huge frame, no longer able to sit straight, and he had pulled her against his chest with his lower arms. He had been using all four hands to talk by then. Cepheans couldn't replicate human speech, and humans couldn't mimic their language, so the two of them had conversed by signing. For some reason, they had decided to "talk" by pressing signs against each other's torso. Or maybe that had just been an excuse for their curiosity. It had soon grown more intimate.

Jess touched the comm on her gauntlet. Then she leaned against a tree, feeling the roughness of the bark through her shirt, and gazed into the dusk. The stillness of the night in the secluded forest helped calm her turmoil.

Her comm chimed. Touching the receive panel, she said, "Fernández."

"Captain, this is Sandra Bolton. I received your page."

Jess rested her head against the tree. "I was wondering how extensive a database you have for DNA records."

"It's a big one." Sandra didn't sound surprised by the inquiry. "Every time we link into a major medical system, we update ours. We probably have over eighty percent of the database for citizens of the Allied Worlds of Earth."

Jess spoke softly. "So if an Allied citizen has ever had a medical record made of his DNA, you've a good chance of having it."

"That's right." Sandra paused. "We only have a few records from Skolian databases. Our Icelos files are pretty skimpy."

"Check what you can." Jess swallowed. "See if you can match my child's DNA."

"I'll go through everything we have."

"Thank you." Jess paused, unsure what to add. "Good night."

"Good night." In a kindly voice, Sandra added, "Jess, go home and rest. Don't brood."

"Thank you. But I'm fine. Really."

After they signed off, Jess stood watching the night. She couldn't handle this compassionate side of Sandra; it was easier to be annoyed when the doctor was giving a lecture. Confronted by a gentle Sandra, Jess feared she might drop her emotional guards. It would be tantamount to admitting she wasn't self-sufficient. She had spent a lifetime proving herself; she couldn't bear to ask for help now.

No matter how ill at ease she felt, she had to see Ghar. He might know what had happened. It wasn't something she could tackle long-distance; she needed to see him in person. And going to Icelos would make it easier to check their medical databases. But it would take a fortnight to reach the colony, using most of the leeway in Silver Tide's schedule.

If she wanted to see Ghar, she couldn't hesitate.

II

## Stalactite City

Icelos. Jess felt welcomed by the small world. After she left the starport, she headed into town. She could have taken a magrail or hitched a ride on a cargo lorry, but she preferred to go on foot. Warm within her climate-controlled jacket, she enjoyed walking in the three-quarters gravity.

The Cepheans were biosculpting the planet, adapting it for settlement. Although Icelos now supported humanoid life, the environment wasn't yet comfortable. Even here at the equator, the warmest zone of the planet, the temperature usually hovered around freezing. The village resembled a ski town, with alpine bungalows capped by peaked roofs. Putting her hands in her pockets, she crunched through the snow, avoiding icy patches on the cobbled lanes.

The village had a crystalline, glittering beauty. Jess took a deep breath, savoring the crisp air. Although she had chafed when Sandra prescribed shore leave, she was secretly glad the doctor insisted. During the last fortnight, as Silver Tide had traveled here, Jess had debated whether or not to send Ghar a message. Her doubts had stopped her. If he had somehow caused her strange condition, she didn't want to warn him that she was coming, lest he find a reason to cut short his visit to Icelos and return to Earth, where he served as ambassador. So she had held off.

She had spent the afternoon taking care of her duties; now she had two days to herself. Of course two days didn't amount to much on Icelos, which rotated in only eleven hours. Regardless, she would make her best effort to see Ghar. Her emotions tumbled over one another, conflicted and awkward, but she

still looked forward to the visit. As difficult as it was to admit, she missed Ghar.

When Jess came around a house, her stride faltered and she stared along the street to the land beyond the town. Cliffs sheered into a cobalt blue sky, and above them, jagged mountains rose in cold, primeval splendor. The sunset edged their crowns like tubes of hot-pink neon. Here in the village, the snow drifted against the bungalows had turned a luminous pink. Ice hung in frozen lace from the houses, glittering like rubies.

With an appreciative sigh, she set off again. Exhaling, she watched her breath condense in the air. As she passed a bungalow, a spray of ice fell from its roof. Icelos had slumbered for eons; now the Cepheans were awakening the world. It seemed fitting; in Greek mythology, Icelos had been the son of Somnus, the god of sleep. But she suspected Earth's name for this world came from deeper in the human subconscious. The mythical Icelos had been a shape-changer who could turn into different animals; she often wondered if the name was an oblique, even unconscious acknowledgement by humans that their Cephean cousins had once been human and now were Other.

After a while, her gait slowed. She began to wish she had taken a hovercar. How had the human race survived so long, when incubating little humans took so much energy? She trudged on, trying not to think how far it was to home. A few years ago, the Allied embassy had arranged an apartment here for her, after the Cepheans requested her diplomatic services. The Cephean science commission and its Earth counterpart needed a liaison, someone who regularly traveled between Earth and Icelos, and the Cepheans already knew Jess from the visits Silver Tide had made.

She smiled wryly, remembering the dubious response from the Earth commission. As much as her taciturn bluntness appealed to the Cepheans, it annoyed humans. However, Allied Space Command liked that she got things done with efficiency and no fuss, so in the end she had become the liaison.

As sunset faded into a silvered dusk, Jess plodded to the intersection at Starfarer's Lane. The sign at the crossroads looked the same as always, a stone rectangle hanging from a pole. She had never paid it much attention before, but today its carved words jumped out at her.

Childcare. The arrow pointed right.

She knew she should continue on home, rest, eat, sleep. But instead she found herself turning right.

A simple bungalow housed the childcare center. When Jess opened the door, young voices burred over her. She found a cheerful room inside, with white walls adorned by cartoons in bright red, blue, and yellow. Toys were strewn across the carpeted floor. Three toddlers played there, watched by a blond woman with a kind face. The woman glanced at Jess, then did a double-take, her gaze widening.

Jess hesitated. Self-conscious, acutely aware of her uniform jacket and trousers, she closed the door.

The woman recovered her composure and approached with a friendly smile. "Hello, Captain. What can I

do for you?"

Good question. To cover her uncertainty, Jess said, "We're expanding a childcare facility on my ship. I'm interested in how other sites organize their centers." It was true, actually. A community on Silver Tide had requested a new center, and Jess had been meaning to have someone attend the matter. It occurred to her that she ought to do the attending herself; she might soon be using that center.

"I would be happy to give you a tour." The woman glanced at the insignia on Jess's jacket. With diffidence, she added, "On a ship as big as yours, though, I'm sure you have much more extensive facilities."

Jess felt more out of her depth here than she ever had on Silver Tide. She managed a smile. "Size and quality aren't the same. I've heard yours is a well-run operation."

The woman beamed. "That it is, ma'am." She motioned with her hand, inviting Jess forward.

So Jess went on a tour of the center. In one room, a girl and boy were stacking holographic blocks. Seeing them, she felt an odd constriction in her chest. Would her baby have dark curls like the boy? Or perhaps she would be like the girl, her eyes huge and dark, her sweet face shaped like a heart. But how could she imagine her child's appearance when the only paternal candidate was impossible? So far Sandra had found no genetic match for the baby, but the DNA was undeniably human.

Jess thought of her parents, their youth and energy drained from raising five children when they had resources for no more than one. The unrelenting demands of borderline urban poverty had ground the joy out of their lives. It had always made Jess uneasy about starting a family. Now an undefined longing tugged at her, feelings she had no name for, except that they came with a flavor of loneliness.

"Captain?" the woman asked.

Startled, Jess realized she had been standing there, gazing at the children. She spoke softly. "They seem so happy."

The woman's voice gentled. "We do our best."

When the tour finished, Jess and the woman returned to the main room. About that time, a young couple came into the center, stamping snow from their boots, laughing together as they hung their jackets on a peg by the door. One of the toddlers ran to them, a strapping boy in a blue jumpsuit. The woman swung him into her arms, grinning when the boy laughed. As she sat in a rocking chair, the man settled in an armchair next to her, and they chatted companionably while the woman nursed the child.

After Jess left the center, images of the family stayed in her mind. She wanted to share this pregnancy with someone. Ghar. But she feared to tell him. She hated to think he might have betrayed her trust. If he

hadn't caused this to happen, he would make the only logical assumption, that she had taken a human lover that same night. Although she had no way to know how much he would care, if at all, she didn't want him to believe she would betray his trust either.

Hell, what could she say when she had no idea herself what had happened?

The penthouse took up the top floor of The Conners, one of the tallest structures in the village, an elegant tower seven stories high. As Jess entered her darkened apartment, the curtains across the room parted, probably responding to a command from Matrix, the Evolving Intelligence that ran the place. He often altered the ambience, which meant she came home to unexpected changes. She tended to enjoy it; over the years, he had developed a sense of her preferences.

The curtains opened on a window that took up most of the wall. Night had fallen outside, and light from the star-encrusted sky poured through the window, making the white carpet glow. Standing in the center of her sunken living room, Jess gazed out at the night's beauty. Usually she savored the spacious dimensions of the place, which fit her height, but tonight it just made her more aware of its emptiness.

"Matrix," she murmured. "It's too dark."

The lights came up slowly, letting her eyes adjust. The room had simple furniture, elegant and sleek, with silver accents and plants in blue-glass pots. Relieved to be home, Jess dropped onto the sofa and pulled off her boots. She stretched her legs across the blue-glass coffee table, her feet reaching the other side. Legs that go on forever. A man she had known ten years ago had told her that.

Her husband.

He had come to London from Norway. They had spent five years together, with a renewable marriage contract. Then she became captain of Silver Tide. He didn't want to leave Earth and she didn't want to give up her command, so they had let their contract lapse. Although they had parted amicably, the loss had affected Jess deeply, far more than she wanted to admit. Since then, she had guarded her emotions even more.

Until Ghar.

Perhaps it had been the brandy, or the unreality of that night. Or maybe she just liked him better than anyone else she had met, despite his being Cephean. She shook her head at her folly. You never do things the easy way, do you? Exhausted, she slumped back and closed her eyes. She knew she should have dinner, but the thought made her stomach rebel.

Jess sighed. For the baby, she should eat. Opening her eyes, she noticed a light on a fingertip panel in the sofa arm. "Yes?" she asked.



"Welcome back, Captain Fernández," Matrix said pleasantly. "Can I get you anything?"

"A new stomach," Jess grumbled.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do organ transplants."

She smiled. "How about food? Something bland. Skim milk to drink."

"I can have the kitchen prepare a superb bland meal," Matrix assured her. "Would you like your mail while you wait? You have a message from Doctor Bolton."

Jess almost groaned, but she knew she shouldn't avoid her doctor. "Go ahead."

Sandra's voice crackled. "Captain, please contact me immediately."

Jess waited. "That's it?"

"That is it," Matrix said.

She rubbed her chin. "All right. Contact Doctor Bolton. She's on the Silver Tide, in orbit."

"Message sent. Would you like anything else?"

Jess still felt unprepared for this, even after thinking about it for days. But she made herself answer. "Yes. Get me the Allied embassy."

"One moment, please." After several minutes, during which Jess sat like a lump, Matrix said, "I have Paige Lowell from the embassy."

"Thanks. Put her on audio." Although Jess had always liked Paige, right now she didn't feel up to facing the young woman's flawless perfection. Somehow the incomparably beautiful Paige managed simultaneously to appear as elegant as an old-money heiress and as wholesome as the girl next door. Add to that her formidable education and rapid advancement in the diplomatic corps, and she could give even the most confident person an inferiority complex.

A lovely voice floated into the air, cultured and gracious. "Hello, Captain Fernández. Welcome back to Icelos."

"Hi, Paige," Jess said. Then she winced. She had never quite figured out when she and Paige were on a

first name basis and when they were being formal. So she added, "Please call me Jess."

"It would be my pleasure. What can we do for you?"

Jess steeled herself. "I'd like to see Ambassador Ko. If he's still here." Cephean protocol required the Allied embassy on Icelos contact the Cephean embassy here if Jess wanted to talk to Ghar, even though she already knew the code for his private comm.

"I will be happy to inquire if his Excellency can meet with you," Paige said.

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Jess paused, too tired to think of small talk. "Good-night."

"Good-night, Jess. Have a pleasant evening."

After they cut the connection, Jess raked her hand through her hair. Would Ghar respond? More likely, he wanted to forget their night together.

Matrix suddenly spoke. "I have Doctor Bolton waiting."

Jess winced. "Just put her on audio. No visual." If Sandra saw her fatigue, she would launch into a lecture.

"Incoming," Matrix said.

Sandra's voice cut the air. "Jess, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Jess shifted on the couch. "Why?"

"You've been sick so much it triggered an alert in your quarters on the ship. Why didn't you tell me how bad it was?"

Jess shrugged, then remembered Sandra couldn't see. "It's not bad. I've kept some food down."

The doctor clucked at her. "You're too stoic. I gave Matrix an anti-nausea prescription. Take it."

Jess was too tired to argue. "All right."

More gently, Sandra said, "Are you really okay?"

Jess felt her emotional defenses going up. "I'm fine."

"You keep telling me that. Why don't I believe it?"

Because you know me too well. Jess saw a tray rising up inside a glass column that supported the table. A panel in the table slid open and the tray came to the top. Dinner sat before her, pasta and vegetables on china. Milk filled a crystal goblet, and a vase held an orchid.

Jess shook her head, incredulous. She had grown up with so little, the fifth child of a Spanish father and Portuguese mother who lived in London. Her parents had been wanderers, only two in the millions of displaced tech workers, all scratching for jobs while unemployment in the information sector spiraled. With more and more intelligent machines able to replace humans, the need for infotech workers had plunged. Like many others, her parents ended up in an arbitrary urban center, scraping by with low-level jobs.

But in this modern age, a wealth of new jobs existed, including those on the frontier among the stars. Hard work and scholarships had made it possible for Jess to overcome her circumstances, yet even after buying her parents and siblings a new house in an upscale London neighborhood, she found it hard to believe this new life she had earned for her family.

"Jess?" Sandra asked.

She rubbed her eyes. "My dinner is here. I have to go."

The doctor spoke kindly. "Don't push yourself so hard. You deserve a rest. Give yourself some slack."

"All right." The words didn't feel like enough, so she added, "Thanks for the concern."

"You're welcome." Sandra's voice had an odd note, as if she were surprised to hear Jess thank her.

Am I that difficult a patient? Jess wondered if Sandra found their interactions painful too. But if so, why did the doctor persist in giving unasked-for advice? Their lives would be far easier if Sandra would let up on Jess's personal life. Jess doubted that would happen, though. She didn't understand why it mattered to Sandra. Maybe the doctor considered it important to Jess's job performance; ensuring Silver Tide's captain could carry out her duties was one of Sandra's primary responsibilities.

Enough brooding. Jess lifted the tray into her lap, settled back, and made herself eat. True to his word, Matrix had arranged an excellent dinner. The pasta almost melted in her mouth. She wished she could enjoy it more.

Matrix had put a patch with the anti-nausea medicine on the tray. When Jess applied it to her inner elbow, it blended into her skin, turning golden-brown. She rubbed her fingers over the patch, remembering how her skin had evoked taunts in her youth. As the world grew more cosmopolitan, acceptance among races and cultures had improved, but it still wasn't perfect. Jess had learned that lesson the hard way. Circumstances had forced her to become a fighter at a young age, aided by her height, strength, and stubborn refusal to back down from bullies. Friendship had been hard for her in those years, and it had never become easier.

It was strange how life could change. She had always perceived herself as rough-edged, but years later a top modeling agency had offered her a contract, lauding her purportedly "long-limbed grace and exotic style." Her height, unusual even for a high-fashion model, had intrigued them, as had her military rank. That had been the rage back then: sleek, svelte fashion with an undertone of soldierly power. Flustered, she had thanked them but turned down the job, far more at home with starship engines than runways.

"I have Ambassador Ko on your private line," Matrix announced.

Jess swallowed so fast she choked. Sitting up, she cleared her throat. "Put him on."

"Audio, visual, or both?"

She wasn't ready to face him on visual. But they couldn't talk, and to use sign language they had to see each other. "Did the ambassador request visual?"

"His human translator contacted me by audio," Matrix said.

Thank you, Ghar. "Just put on the audio then."

"Incoming," Matrix said.

Ghar's translator spoke, his resonant voice filling the air. "My greetings, Captain Fernández."

"Good evening, Your Excellency."

"How long does Icelos have the fortune of your company?"

That sounded like he was glad to hear from her. Then again, Ghar was a diplomat. He had to sound pleasant.

"I'm here two days." Jess hesitated. "I thought if you were free, we might, uh . . . meet for dinner." She winced at the clumsy invitation. As the Ambassador from Cepheus to the Allied Worlds, Ghar spent most of his time on Earth. When he traveled, he booked his commitments far in advance, and his visits to

Icelos were packed with obligations. She waited, her shoulders hunched in anticipation of his refusal.

"Dinner would be acceptable," he answered. "Shall we meet at the Junction in half an hour?"

Jess released the breath she had been holding. He didn't exactly sound overjoyed, but at least he hadn't refused. "Yes. Half an hour."

The Junction reminded Jess of a ski lodge, with its big fireplace and old-fashioned bar. Located at the base of the cliffs outside town, it served the human visitors on Icelos, a sort of last stop before striking out into Cephean territory. Jess doubted Ghar wanted to eat here; he couldn't sit in the chairs and he disliked the food. More likely, he wanted to take her to the Cephean settlement where he lived when visiting Icelos.

Jess waited by the bar, watching musicians play on the stage across the room. She was too restless to stand still for long. The med patch was working; she hadn't felt this good in weeks. Finally she decided to head into the cliffs. She knew the route Ghar took, so she could meet him on the way. Despite the strange situation, she looked forward to seeing him.

Cold air hit her face as she left the lodge. She had worn a sweater over her uniform, a long coat, and heavy boots, but she still shivered with the chill. It never ceased to amaze her how Cepheans thrived in this climate. Of course, she didn't have a four-inch pelt covering her body.

The road wound steeply up into the mountains. Gold posts stood at intervals, made from fluted metal, with smoked-glass lamps hanging from their tops, casting ghostly light. On her left, a cliff rose into the darkness; on the right, a wall at chest height bordered the road. Beyond it, a canyon plunged down for over a kilometer, fading into a heavy mist. Snow crunched under her boots, deeper here where no machines cleared the lane. Cepheans liked it this way.

Eons ago this land had been flat. Underground rivers had hollowed it into a maze of buried limestone caverns. Water rich with bicarbonate and calcium ions dripped from cavern ceilings, hardening into stalactites like huge icicles of rock, or falling to the ground and building up conical stalagmites. Eventually the land sheered upward, buckling into mountains honeycombed by caves. It made an eerily beautiful landscape, haunting and unforgettable.

Jess had seen how it unsettled human visitors here to know the Cepheans chose this forbidding landscape for their home when they could easily have settled the plains instead. Cepheans lived vertically instead of horizontally, a difference hard to fathom for a species with only two arms. The Cepheans' blunt refusal to acknowledge that their way of life might not suit everyone exacerbated the unease they created in their human neighbors.

A distant voice startled Jess out of her reverie. She paused, listening. The voice hadn't sounded Cephean, but few humans came up here even in the day, and at night they avoided the desolate road like a plague.

Up ahead, a path branched off this main one. She went over and peered down the trail, but the dim light made it hard to see. Was someone in trouble? Concerned, she headed down the path. The cliffs on either side leaned inward and met about a meter above her head. Stretching out her arms, she could touch the walls of rock on either side. Limestone caves glistened on either side, with stalactites and stalagmites glazed by frost like stone icicles, a wonderland of sparkling stone lace. She doubted any human explorer had yet mapped the full warren of passages up here. The serenity and deep silence appealed to her, reminding her of the silent expanses of interstellar space.

She neither saw nor heard anyone, though, and she couldn't spend too long here, lest she miss Ghar on the main path. Finally she headed back. As she passed a cave on her right, a glint behind a stalagmite caught her eye. It came from . . . what? A small cage? It was so well hidden, she had missed it before. Pausing, she stepped into the cave and knelt by the cage.

Mewling greeted her. A furry white animal butted its head against the bars, its pointed ears quirked forward. It resembled a comalkos, a popular pet among Cepheans, possibly descended from an early form of Earth feline. Looking more closely, she realized it actually was a kitten.

"What are you doing out here?" She scratched its head, pushing her fingers through the bars. It purred at her.

Scraping sounds caught her attention. Peering around, she realized the cave held many cages, all with cats. She doubted they belonged here. And she had heard a voice before—

Responding with instincts tempered by decades of experience, Jess jumped up and took off, striding back to the main road. She could come back with security officers from town. If the animals were legal, no problem. But hiding cats in these mountains was too strange to ignore.

Her footsteps crunched on rock. The natural chambers on either side of the path magnified sound—and so Jess distinctly heard the words, even from some distance behind her:

"Shit. She saw the cages."

Jess didn't pause to question—she just burst into a run.

She never heard the knife sing through the air, but she couldn't miss the crackle as it sliced her overcoat and sweater. The blade cut deep into her side. Another knife hit her leg, ripping through her uniform. Lord only knew how those blades were made, if they could so easily rip through layers of reinforced cloth. Part of her mind instinctively recoiled from the attack, but the rest of her concentration narrowed into a tight focus as her training took over. It happened too fast for her to feel pain. Yet.

As she ran, the tatters of her overcoat flapped around her legs, making her stumble. Jess yanked off the coat and threw it down, never slowing. Her injured leg felt like putty, and dizziness threatened. At the

back of her mind, she thought of the life she had to protect, the child inside of her, and she managed another spurt of speed.

By the time Jess reached the main path, her sprint had turned into a stagger. Her heart was pounding so hard, her entire body shook with it. She lurched across the road and hit the wall that separated it from the chasm. Before she could catch her balance, hands grabbed her from behind and swung her around, slamming her against the wall. Jess found herself staring at a tall man who looked like his name ought to be Buzz, as in an electrified chain-saw,

"Now you've done it," he said through clenched teeth. Two more people came out of the side path and sprinted toward them, a stocky man with red hair and a gaunt woman.

Jess strained to breathe. "What do you want?"

Instead of answering, Buzz heaved her upward. In that instant, the woman reached them. Without hesitation, she aided Buzz, yanking up Jess's legs, sending pain blazing through the wound. Jess's icy calm snapped into the cold fury that came over her in combat. She smacked her hands against Buzz's elbows and shoved inward, breaking his hold. At the same time, she brought up her knee hard. He choked, dropping his arms and doubling up, his face contorted. As the woman shoved Jess up the wall, Jess kicked out at her. A loud crack rent the air and the woman shouted, falling backward, her left hand clenched on her right arm, which was bent now at an odd angle.

Jess had no time to wonder why the bloody hell they wanted to kill her. The second man was already lunging at her, bringing down the knife-edge of his hand. He mistimed the blow, as fighters often did in unfamiliar gravity. With her more extensive training, Jess easily blocked it, but she still reeled under the impact when the blow hit her arm.

Buzz was coming back at her now, his face set in hard lines, and the woman wasn't far behind him. As Jess fought off the second man, her muscles straining, Buzz caught her again. With the woman's help, he pushed Jess up the wall. Jess tried to stop them, tried to wrench free, but she couldn't take on three at once, not with her injuries. Her leg responded only sluggishly and a deep burning seared her side. They pushed her up the wall—

And her hips cleared the top.

Jess went rigid, with nothing but air and a canyon at her back. In that moment, as she faced her death, she thought with cold clarity, You have no right. It enraged her that they could so cavalierly murder the mystery child she had come to treasure. She twisted hard, to the side, toward the road. Her efforts wrenched her out of their grip, but—ah, no!—she fell, fell, fell—

And hit the road with a crash that slammed out the air in her lungs. A man's scream reverberated in the air, splitting the night. Jess jerked up her head—

And froze.

Caught in the light from a lamp, a giant towered above them. Fiery red-gold fur covered his body and a mane of curls swept back from his face to his shoulders. Huge muscles rippled in his legs and arms, visible through his trousers and tunic. His shoulders had immense breadth and width, with massive blades that extended down his body to accommodate his second pair of arms. His lips were drawn back, baring fangs more than two inches long. His tail whipped through the air, six feet long and as thick as a man's body where it met his back. His lower arms were reaching for what his upper pair already held high over his head: the man Buzz.

As Jess stared, the ambassador from Cepheus to Earth threw his human captive into the canyon.

### III

#### Cavern of Ladders

Jess drifted awake, warm but unaccountably stiff. Why did her quarters have a musky scent? Silver Tide usually smelled sanitized. She stretched—and pain shot through her body.

"Ah!" She snapped awake. Oh, hell. She wasn't on Silver Tide. She was about to be hefted into a canyon.

Opening her eyes, she stared across a dimly lit room; no cliff, just a polished stone chamber. The tables and desks were double-tiered, designed for two pairs of arms, and a few feet taller than what humans would build. She was lying on a stone floor, on a rug, with her back against a padded wall. Another rug covered her, soft on her skin. Jess recognized the furs. Cepheans made them from a silken material they sheared off an animal called the abryr, one of the few Cephean words humans could pronounce, said with a growl in the throat.

Despite the cushion of blankets, the ground was rough beneath her. A ridge ran under her waist and another under her torso. She wore nothing except a shift and two bandages, one around her waist and the other around her thigh.

Memory returned: cats, the attack, Ghar. She had lost so much blood; then she had lost consciousness.

The wall behind her shifted.

For an instant Jess was too startled to move. Then she rolled onto her back, carefully, favoring her injuries. The "wall" behind her was alive.

Oh, Lord. She was staring at the chest of a Cephean sleeping on his side. A large Cephean. The "ridges"



she had felt under her body were his arms; he was holding her around her waist and torso. She lay in a cage of limbs, four to be exact. It was so strange, and so unexpected, that she couldn't even react at first.

Finally she said, "Ghar?" Her voice rasped.

He continued to sleep.

She tried again. "Ghar? Can you hear me?"

His lashes lifted, revealing two brown eyes, dark and liquid. He blinked as if trying to fathom her presence. Then his hands shifted, his claws retracted so he didn't jab her. He moved them against her back, signing in the language used by the deaf. It was the method of conversing they had tried before, a playful experiment that had ended up communicating far more than they had intended, or at least more than they had been willing to admit.

Do you hurt? he asked.

Jess was too self-conscious to think how she felt about his touching her, beyond her confusion at the situation and his presence. She signed against his chest, her fingers buried in his fur. I'm all right. Where is this?

You came here the last time you visited. His fingers stilled. Then, carefully, he added, Maybe you forgot.

Oh. Now she recognized the place. His rooms. They had spent the night here, on this pile of blankets in fact. He had just offered her a chance to pretend it never happened. She wondered how he would explain, if she chose to develop amnesia, why she was in bed with him now.

I remember, she signed.

The rigid muscles in his arms relaxed. I too.

I have another memory, she signed. But it must be a mistake.

What memory?

You threw a man into the chasm.

His hand made a claw on her back. Your memory is not a mistake.

She stared at him. Ghar, why?

You were covered with blood, one breath from dying.

Grateful as she was at his intervention, her unease grew as she absorbed the implications of his actions. The few times a Cephean had injured a human, it had provoked outrage on Earth; reports of the incidents glittered with invective, their censure stretching like a metallic tissue that looked strong but ripped easily, exposing the underlying panic humans felt when confronted by neighbors who were just human enough to make their immense differences terrifying. What would happen when it became known that the Cephean ambassador, the one they were supposed to trust, had murdered a man?

Jess signed slowly. If you hadn't come, I would be dead. I am grateful, more than I can say. But we have trouble.

He answered tiredly. Your authorities demand my extradition.

How long have I've been here?

About two Icelos days.

Good Lord. Twenty-two hours. Her ship would be behind schedule now. Why didn't my crew take me?

They wanted to.

What stopped them?

He paused. That answer connects to my second crime.

What second crime?

Holding a Space Corps officer hostage.

Bloody hell. I'm not a hostage.

They think you are.

You won't let them see me?

His intransigence came through his signing. No.

Ghar, this is nuts.

They might harm you.

Jess didn't know what to think. She had believed he would want to forget what happened; never had she expected him to react with the same possessive intensity a Cephean would direct toward his Cephean mate.

He signed on her back. Why were those people trying to kill you?

I don't know. I only saw a bunch of cats.

Cats?

In cages, hidden in a cave. She tensed. What happened after I saw you on the road?

Your other attackers ran. I pursued.

And then? Her hand clenched in his fur.

Ghar caught her fingers. I killed no one else.

Jess let out the breath she had been holding. That is good to know.

His growl rumbled. I might have killed them, if you hadn't needed my attention more.

Well, no one had ever claimed Cepheans were peaceful. But she would have never predicted this from Ghar.

Your authorities want proof you still live, he added.

I'm not surprised. She hoped Sandra hadn't told them about the pregnancy, but she knew if the doctor feared for Jess's life, Sandra would speak up regardless of how confidential Jess wanted the matter. The security people on Silver Tide would make the obvious assumption: if they knew, Ghar probably did as well. No one could fully predict his response, but he obviously was no more likely than anyone else to believe he was the only candidate for proud papa. Given his recent behavior, Security had good reason to think Jess's life might be at risk.

Although Jess didn't think Ghar would kill her, she couldn't be sure. About one thing she had no doubt: if Ghar murdered a lieutenant colonel in the Space Corps, a starship commander who served as an Earth-Cepheus liaison, all hell would break loose.

Jess signed against his chest. I must return to Silver Tide. She tried to sit up, and pain shot through her torso, followed by a rush of nausea. With a groan, she lay down again.

He set his lower arm across her waist, pinning her. You must go nowhere.

Jess recognized her nausea. Apparently Sandra's med patch wasn't 100 percent effective. Either that, or this was more serious than morning sickness. What if she had lost the baby? No. She couldn't have miscarried. Surely Ghar would have known. But would he understand? Jess didn't know how to ask. She was vulnerable now, undefended if he thought she had betrayed him.

Who patched me up after the attack? she asked.

Me.

So he hadn't let a Cephean doctor see her. It made sense; it would have provoked questions he probably wanted to avoid. Did I have other injuries? she asked. Bleeding anywhere else?

No. Only the two wounds.

Relief poured over her. Still, she needed to be sure. I should be checked by a human doctor.

A growl rumbled in his throat. You should stay here.

She tried to decipher his expression. Although fur covered his face, it wasn't long except where a human man would have a beard. Most humans found Cephean faces difficult to read, but she had learned to judge Ghar's moods. Right now he looked uncertain.

She signed, Your government can't like my being here any more than mine does.

His gaze didn't waver. Bor supports my decisions.

Bor? As in Bor Chi? You mean the Cephean First Councilor?

Yes.

Good Lord. If Ghar called one of the most influential leaders on his home world by a personal name, he was placed even higher in his government than she had realized. Bor Chi gives you his protection?

In public. His fingers slowed on her back. In private, he asks if I am insane.

But he stands by your decisions?

Yes.

Why?

He trusts my judgment. After a pause, Ghar added, He is also the older brother of my aunt's husband.

So. Kin ties. They were strong among Cepheans, apparently even in a hostage situation. Except she wasn't a hostage. At least she hoped she wasn't.

Why won't you let a human doctor see me? she asked.

He stiffened. Humans tried to kill you.

Three people tried to kill me. Not all humans.

Maybe.

Why do you suddenly distrust humans?

His claws scraped her back. I have always distrusted humans.

That gave her pause. It never showed.

My job was to overcome distrust.

What has changed?

Overcoming distrust is a euphemism for taking risks. He regarded her steadily. I have no intention to risk your life.

Jess felt as if a crystal sculpture of great value were shattering before her eyes, falling as she grabbed for it, her lunge too late to stop its destruction. You can't let the trust between our peoples—a trust you've worked for ten years to build—be destroyed this way.

I have no choice.

Yes, you do. Ghar, you do your job well. We need you. Both my people and yours.

It's too late, Jess.

It isn't! I can go back. Tell the truth.

A rumble thrummed within his chest. It isn't safe.

Jess scowled at him, holding it long enough so he had plenty of time to decipher the expression. It is my decision. Not yours.

He answered with only another rumble, but she recognized that growl. He always made it in protest, when he was about to give in on an argument but didn't want to tell her.

I will talk to the authorities, she added. Tell them you saved my life.

I don't want you to go back.

As much as she wanted to deny his suspicions, Jess had to consider them. Few humans visited this colony, and the Port Authority kept tabs on all visitors, which probably meant they knew the identities of the people who tried to kill her. If the PA had a more covert link to her attackers, such as turning a blind eye to their activities in return for bribes, she could end up dead if she contacted them, an unfortunate "incident" that would be blamed on Ghar.

She frowned. If she discussed the situation with anyone on her ship, over a distance comm, the PA might have a way to eavesdrop. Considering, she signed, We can bring someone here from Silver Tide.

It isn't possible to contact them.

Jess wasn't buying it. Although Ghar had no obvious comm in his home, she knew perfectly well that his apartment had modern technology; it was just hidden to make his home fit with the spare ambiance of the colony. She thumped her fist on his chest. We need to do this, Ghar.

After a silence, he signed, No military personnel.

All right. She knew him well enough to recognize that his lack of an overt refusal was the closest he would come to expressing his acceptance. She thought about her crew. Who among the civilians could best deal with what looked like some bizarre illegal import operation? Jack O'Brien, possibly.

How about the Allied Services? she asked. They work with smugglers.

No more than three of them. Concern showed in his gaze. Do you hurt? They can bring medicine to blunt the pain.

I'm fine. She didn't want to risk any drugs during her pregnancy unless they were absolutely necessary, but this wasn't the time to explain why.

Just when was a good time, she had no idea.

Even in the staid uniform of the Allied Services, with his unruly hair combed, Jack O'Brien still looked like a pirate to Jess. He came with two assistants, a man and woman, both in AS uniforms. All three settled on a rug in the main room of Ghar's home.

Jess sat with them, wearing a shift made from one of Ghar's tunics. Although on him it reached only to his hips, on her it came below the knees. She had put her arms through the upper sleeves, rolling them up to free her hands. To pull in the billows of cloth, she tied the lower sleeves behind her back—loosely. Even if her uniform hadn't been ripped and bloodied, its tight fit would have bothered her. She was almost three months pregnant; soon she could no longer keep her situation private.

Ghar sat to her right on a blocky stool, looming over them, silent and formidable. No one missed the hostility in his position or posture.

"Ambassador Ko saved my life," Jess continued, speaking to Jack O'Brien. His female assistant served as translator, signing for Ghar, while his male assistant recorded their words on a palmtop.

Jack regarded her intently, as if trying to decipher what lay behind her words. "Then you and his Excellency were already planning to meet that night?"

"That's right." She suspected Jack had been trained to read body language; in his line of work, the skill would be invaluable. He might be able to tell if she were lying or withholding information. So she just said, "Ambassador Ko and I often work together."

Jack nodded, his gestures restrained. He didn't give the impression he disbelieved her; his wariness seemed more due to Ghar's presence. As he spoke, his assistant signed. "We'll give your full statement to the authorities."

"Good." Jess exhaled. "This situation is already too volatile. We need to cool it down."

Jack nodded. "Your talking to us ought to alleviate matters." He spoke with an assurance probably meant more to ease Ghar's enmity than to reassure her.

"I hope so." Jess shook her head. "All over some cats. I don't get it."

"They aren't cats." He leaned forward. "You stumbled into a delivery by a cartel the AS has been after for years. My department has never worked on that case, so our data is limited, but we do know the cartel has moved business through here before. The port is small and no one pays it much attention." Dryly he added, "The smugglers probably never expected the captain of a major Allied starship to show up."

It still made no sense to Jess. "Why not just get a permit to import comalki? It can't be all that expensive."

"Those aren't comalki."

"They looked like cats."

Jack pushed his hand through his hair, making them revert to their more usual disheveled state. "The animals carry a virus. It's what the cartel actually sells. If the altered comalkos bites you, you're sick." Glancing at Ghar, he shifted his weight. "The virus is deadly to Cepheans."

Ghar signed. "How deadly?"

Jack blew out a gust of air. "Let those animals loose here and you'd have a killer plague, fast and vicious."

Jess stared at him. Was the cartel insane? Icelos was a world of the Skolian Imperialate, which had a formidable military that protected its own with legendary ferocity. Most Skolians were human, and Jess had no idea how they felt about Cepheans—but if they learned an Earth cartel had killed an entire colony of their citizens, any citizens, their retribution would be fast and harsh. The Allied Worlds of Earth would have little chance against them.

She clenched her hand in the cloth of her shift. "The cartel is out of their minds."

"Not crazy. Greedy." Jack's face had paled. "They'd have received a monstrous payment for that shipment from a fanatic group that wants to kill all the Cepheans. And hell, if it had started a war, it would've benefited the cartel's black market." Turning, he spoke more quietly to Ghar. "Your



Excellency, be assured that these extremists in no way represent the Allied Worlds of Earth. We greatly value our relations with your people and wish to continue in good will."

Ghar answered with sharp signs. Such fanatics also exist among my people. They feel similarly about humans.

Jess tried to gauge his mood, but she couldn't read him. He made no sound as Jack's assistant translated his signs.

Jack spoke grimly. "We'll punish the cartel. Count on it."

Ghar didn't answer, he just watched the AS agents. Now Jess recognized his stare; he was only thinking, but on the face of a Cephean, the expression looked murderous. When Jack shifted uneasily, she spoke quickly, to defuse the tension. "Are those altered comalki immune to this virus?"

Jack glanced at her, relief in his gaze. "They aren't really comalki either. They're chimeras."

The word sounded vaguely familiar. "I take it you don't mean that in the literary sense," Jess said.

"In a biological sense," Jack said. "To engineer a chimera, you mix DNA from two species."

She finally remembered where she had heard the word, in a long-ago college course. "Isn't a chimera some kind of mythological beast—head of a lion, tail of a dragon or something? Breathed fire at people it didn't like."

He smiled slightly. "That's where it originated. In biology it refers to a hybrid animal. Chimeras are easiest to make using similar species, like lions and tigers, or comalki and cats."

She could see where he was going. "So this virus would kill either a comalkos or a cat, but the chimera survives."

"That's right." He glanced uneasily at Ghar. "Cepheans like comalki, so the cartel found a variant of the animal that could carry the virus."

"Gods," Jess muttered.

Ghar growled deep in his throat, his lower hands fisted on his knees. He signed with his upper. "Why don't you stop these smugglers?"

Jack sat up straighter, his posture stiffened as if he were preparing to protect himself. "They've managed

to stay a step ahead of us. But if Captain Fernández testifies against them, it could give us the chink we need to bring down their operation."

Jess thought about three complete strangers trying to throw her into the canyon, killing not only her, but also her child. She regarded Jack steadily. "I will testify."

Ghar snarled, and she needed no translator to know he said, 'No!' in Cephean. His lips drew back and his teeth glinted like daggers. Then he bared his claws, which were longer than his fangs.

Jack blanched, but he didn't back down. "We need her testimony."

Jess signed to Ghar. I will be in no danger.

He answered in his own language, a series of growls. She had trouble with the words, but it sounded like the equivalent of "They will kill you."

"They won't hurt me." She spoke slowly so he could decipher what, to him, was a high-pitched, sing-song lilt. "I will have protection."

Jack O'Brien was staring at her. "You understand him?"

Jess glanced at him, distracted. "Some."

He whistled. "That's supposed to be impossible."

Thinking of her child, she answered dryly. "Many things are impossible. That doesn't stop them from happening." She had to change the subject before Ghar decided Jack was endangering her life and hefted him out a window. "How did the cartel get started?"

"A wealthy collector set it up about thirty-five years ago," Jack said. "He wanted Cephean rugs in his collection."

"Why didn't he just buy them?" she asked, incredulous. Granted the rugs were expensive, but their prices weren't exorbitant, especially for the wealthy.

"He didn't want abryr rugs." Jack glanced at Ghar as if weighing whether to continue. "He wanted Cephean pelts."

Jess stiffened as if she had been kicked. She had heard stories of people who skinned Cepheans for their fur, but she had never credited them before.

Ghar signed hard, using all four hands to emphasize his message. Humans are sick.

Please don't judge us all by the aberrations of a few, Jess signed. I'm human too.

He answered in his own language. "You are unique."

Jack was watching with them open curiosity—until Ghar fixed him with a hostile glare. Flushing, Jack immediately recomposed his face to show a lack of interest.

Ghar spoke through the translator. "Did this collector get his pelts?"

Jack shook his head. "No. None. Our authorities caught the hunters he sent to Cepheus. But none of the hunters would talk. We couldn't gather the evidence to convict him."

"He went free?" Ghar's angry incredulity showed in his the motion of his hands. "To murder again?"

Jack hesitated. "He didn't send any more hunters."

"You evade my question," Ghar said.

"You won't like the answer."

"Tell it anyway."

Jack exhaled. "He wanted specialty pelts."

A foreboding was building within Jess, and this time her nausea didn't come from pregnancy. "What kind of specialty?"

Jack turned to her. "From Cephean-human chimeras. It would give fur with the richness of Cephean pelts, the silkiness of human hair, and colors you couldn't get from a pure Cephean."

Jess was gripping the sleeves of her shift so tightly, her fingernails gouged her palms. "Are you telling me this madman created Cephean-human chimeras and skinned them?"

Jack answered quietly. "No. His people never succeeded in making a viable chimera."

Ghar signed sharply. "Why didn't you stop him?"

"We had no proof." Frustration showed on Jack's face. "To create a smooth pelt, the chimera would have to express Cephean genes, yet still have the desired human traits. That kind of selectivity requires methods more sophisticated than we have now, decades later. Back then it couldn't be done at all." He shook his head. "What could we arrest him on? Researching chimeras isn't illegal."

The light glinted on Ghar's fangs. "Only a human would let such a monster go free."

"He was arrested." Jack gave him a wintry smile. "For evading interstellar import taxes. He did time."

"Not enough." Ghar regarded him coldly. "It couldn't have been enough."

No, Jess thought. It could never be enough.

Windows in the main room of Ghar's home overlooked a cavern. The Cephean colonists lived in apartments cut from the walls of the great cave, their homes stacked up for ten stories, Cephean stories, double the height humans built. No lifts served the cavern; instead, vertical staircases ran up the walls like ladders, forming throughways much as humans built roads. Among the crowds of Cepheans climbing in the city of ladders, Jess saw many pelt colors, from common browns to rarer grays. None resembled the dramatic fiery color of Ghar's fur.

A rustle came from behind Jess. In her side vision, she saw Ghar join her at the window. They stood together, gazing at the cavern. It felt odd having him tower over her; Jess was used to being taller than most people.

After a moment Jess turned to him. He signed to her. Do your injuries hurt?

I'm all right. Although she ached all over, she could handle it. You've been very quiet about what Jack O'Brien told us.

He unsheathed his claws, and they curved like miniature scythes. What is there to say? That I want to kill humans?

Jess stiffened.

Not you. His signing slowed, and he touched her cheek with his claw. I wish to do to humans what I hate them wanting to do to Cepheans.

Jess froze, acutely aware of the honed point against her skin.

Watching her, Ghar sheathed his claws. Then he lowered himself onto a tall stool by the window. Even seated, he was slightly taller than Jess. He drew her forward until she was standing between his legs, then locked his lower arms around her waist and signed with his upper. Bor Chi has ruled that I have no guilt in the death of the smuggler, but your people don't agree. It means I can never return to the territory of the Allied Worlds. When you leave here, I can see you no more. He paused. So you will not leave.

Jess knew he spoke in anger. If he forced her to stay, it would be a disaster, one she doubted he wanted any more than she did. I have to go. But I will find ways to visit you.

No.

You may not feel that way when you hear what I have to say.

Why?

Will you first answer a question?

His gaze searched her face. Ask.

Do you know your parents?

Of course.

That stopped her. If he knew his parents, her suspicions had no basis. Do you see them often?

They died.

Jess signed regret. I am sorry.

His tail twitched through the air. I never really knew them. It happened right after my birth. Our transport crashed in the snow. Hikers found me two days later.

Jess stared at him. How could a newborn survive alone, in the snow, for two days?

I don't know. But I did.

She braced herself. I don't believe the child in that transport lived. Someone took his body and put you in his place.

His lips drew back in an expression that, if Jess hadn't known meant amusement, she would have believed was a snarl. Your imagination is fertile, he signed.

So is my body.

What?

Jess took a deep breath. During my last visit to the colony you were the only—She stopped. My only companion.

His tail curled over his shoulder and its tip stroked her hair. I know you don't expect me to share you. I wouldn't have been with you otherwise.

I'm glad you know that, Ghar. Because I'm pregnant.

He regarded her blankly. What?

I'm pregnant.

I have a trouble with your signing. I don't understand your word.

Pregnant. I'm going to have a baby. Yours.

His growl rumbled. It isn't amusing, Jess.

She laid his hand on her abdomen. I carry a child.

Ghar pulled back his hand, his claws unsheathing, points glittering. If you have a child, it is not mine.

Jess hoped she hadn't just signed her death warrant. There was no one else. It must be yours.

It cannot be. I am not human.

Yes. You are.

His tail snapped through the air like a whip. Stop mocking me.

I'm not. Jess pushed back the tendrils of hair that had curled around her face. Ever since I learned about the baby, I've been trying to understand. After we talked to Jack, I knew.

You think this sick collector made me for his collection.

Yes. But his people must have decided they couldn't go through with it, raising you to be murdered for your fur.

This is how you explain your infidelity? His claws glinted as he signed. I would have expected better from you.

I can prove it. The doctor on my ship can compare our DNA with the fetus. She'll know, Ghar.

She will say what you command her to say.

You know me better than that.

I thought I did. I was wrong.

You weren't wrong.

So you claim. Ghar considered her. Very well. I will do these tests. His gaze turned implacable. Pray they don't prove you a liar.

Jess watched from Ghar's apartment high in the cavern, while far below Sandra walked with her Cephean escort. Next to their towering forms, the doctor looked like a silver-haired child. Stairs led up to Ghar's apartment, turning into ladders as the walls became vertical. It took a long time for Sandra and her escort to climb, but finally they disappeared from Jess's view behind a ridge in the cavern. She waited, trying in vain to keep her muscles from knotting any tighter with her tension.

The front door of the apartment opened. A few moments later Sandra appeared in the wide entrance of the room where Jess waited. The doctor was alone; as instructed, the escort had left after delivering her. It was the second time in the past day Jess had seen her.

A heavy tread came from across the room. Turning, Jess saw Ghar in the entrance to an inner chamber. He stood with his lower arms braced against the sides of the doorway and his upper arms against the top. His tail whipped around his body, then settled down.

Sandra's gaze flicked from Ghar to Jess. "I've finished the analysis." She paused as Jess signed for Ghar. Then Sandra spoke directly to him. "I am deeply sorry, your Excellency."

Ghar watched Jess sign, then turned to Sandra. "Why sorry?"

The doctor spoke quietly. "Someone played with your genetics on a scale like none I've ever seen. You have human DNA throughout your body. The mingling is so extensive I doubt it can be fully mapped." She took a breath. "You're a chimera, Ambassador Ko. You combine the heredity of two people. And one of those is human."

"No!" Ghar signed.

"I'm sorry," Sandra repeated softly.

He signed fast and sharp. "If my DNA had anomalies, it would have shown up in my ID scans."

"ID scans don't go into enough detail. Cephean DNA is barely different from human, less than 2 percent." Sandra stopped while Jess caught up with her signing. When the doctor spoke again, excitement leaked into her voice. "Your DNA map is incredible. The subtlety is like nothing I've ever seen. To reveal the differences between yours and that of a normal Cephean, I had to do a much more extensive set of tests than any you've probably had before."

Ghar said nothing, just stood like a statue.

"And the baby?" Jess was so wound up she forgot to sign her question. Then, remembering, she repeated it for Ghar.

"Most of Ambassador Ko's tissues express Cephean genes," Sandra said. "But his germ cells are human. Chimeras are usually sterile, but they don't have to be. He produces some functional human sperm." She glanced at Ghar. "Your Excellency, you are the father of Captain Fernández's child."

Ghar answered in his own language. "It is impossible." His growls rolled through the room.

As Sandra's forehead furrowed, Jess said, "He doesn't believe you."

Sandra regarded them both with her painful compassion. "I can only give you the results. I can't make them what you want to hear."

Jess started to sign the words to Ghar, but he abruptly turned and left the room.

Sandra exhaled, looking at Jess. "I'm sorry. I know I keep saying that, but it's true."



Jess just nodded. What could she say? That she wanted to ram Silver Tide down the throat of whoever had done this to Ghar? True as that might be, it solved nothing.

"The results probably explain a lot to him," Sandra said.

"What do you mean?"

"They showed up a slew of anomalies." Sandra shook her head. "For one thing, whoever played with his cells didn't get the lower arms right. Apparently he's had them broken and reset in an attempt to fix them. He has metal rods in both to extend their length to what's normal for a Cephean."

Jess could imagine what Ghar's people would do if they discovered the true reason for his problems. "Sandra, you must keep this confidential."

"Unless you and Ambassador Ko choose otherwise, no one but the three of us will ever know."

Jess hesitated to ask her next question; nothing Sandra could say would make this easier. But her curiosity persisted. "Do you know what Ghar would have been like as a human?"

"Irish, I think. His hair and eyes would be the same color they are now." The doctor looked apologetic. "That's about all I can tell."

As hard as it was to imagine him as human, it wasn't impossible. In her mind, Jess could see a burly Irishman striding across green hills on Earth, his red curls whipping back from his face, his beard thick and full. It hurt to envision what could never be.

And Ghar? She couldn't imagine how he would deal with this, knowing he carried within himself the identity of a people he distrusted, even hated now. How would he reconcile his knowledge of the hostile parts that constituted his whole?

"I have to talk to him," Jess said. "Alone."

"And then?"

"I'll come back to Silver Tide."

Relief washed across Sandra's face. "I'll send up an air stretcher."

"I can walk."

Sandra gave a familiar scowl. "I have eyes. I can see you hurt."

The last thing Jess wanted was people fussing over her. More than ever, she and Ghar needed privacy now. "I'll be all right." She thought of the many staircases she had to navigate to reach the cavern floor. "I will rest here first, though."

Sandra didn't look thrilled, but she accepted the compromise. "One day. That's all."

After Sandra left, Jess limped through the apartment. She found Ghar in his bedroom, sitting on a stool and staring at nothing. She almost stopped out of reach of his claws; then she decided to trust her judgment and went to stand before him.

Do you want to be alone? she asked.

No. He sheathed his claws and touched her face with his upper left hand. I thought you lied to explain the baby. I misjudged you. I am sorry.

She felt how much that admission cost him. I understand.

Will you go back to Silver Tide with your friend?

My friend?

The doctor.

She blinked. Where did you get the idea Sandra Bolton is my friend?

He moved his lower hands in a horizontal motion, palms down, the closest equivalent Cepheans had to a shrug. You interact with each other as do humans I have seen who call each other friend.

All we do is argue.

In my experience, this is not an unusual way for humans to express friendship.

Jess didn't know what to make of that, at least in the context of Sandra. She drives me nuts.

She cares what happens to you.

Jess would never have used the word friendship for her strained relationship with the doctor. And yet . . . she wasn't sure how to define friendship. She had guarded her emotions for so long, maybe she could no longer see what lay in front of her.

Or sat.

She regarded Ghar silently, aware of him watching her back. To grapple with this business of love, she could have chosen a far less difficult path than involvement with a Cephean. But this was the path she had to walk, and so she would, if she could only figure out how.

Ghar brushed his fingers down her arm. Incredibly, you and I have made a child. At least for this I am pleased.

I too. It was the truth. But she couldn't relax with him. Not yet. When he drew her forward, she put her palms against his shoulders, keeping him at bay. He had his lower arms around her, his muscles ridged against her back. She touched the two-inch fang that came down over his lip, white against the curls of his beard. A slightly harder push on the tip of that incisor would draw blood from her finger.

Pulling away her hand, she signed to him. Does this response of yours mean I need not fear for my life?

His lips drew back in a snarl, though she knew he was showing dismay rather than rage. Using his upper hands, he signed with determination. I would never kill you. Never.

Even if you thought I lied about the child's father?

Even if that. A low rumble came from his chest, not anger, but another emotion, sorrow perhaps. I would have sent you away and advised Bor to cut ties with Earth.

I would never betray your trust. Jess spoke evenly. But if I had, it wouldn't be worth destroying relations between our peoples.

It was a moment before Ghar responded. A few days ago I would have agreed. Right now it is hard to remember why I ever wanted to establish trust with your people. It would have been the final blow to discover you had treated what passed between us with such disregard as to end up with another man's child on that same night. His signing slowed, as if his hands were weary. In time, my common sense would have prevailed. But by then, the damage may have been beyond repair.

She gentled her motions. I understand, Ghar. But I must return to Silver Tide.

After a long pause, he signed, You are free to leave.

Only then did her posture ease. Putting her arms around his neck, she laid her cheek against his shoulder.

He held her with all four arms and signed against her spine, his large hands covering most of her back. You should have the doctor send someone up with an air-stretcher.

I don't need one. I'm okay.

You are not 'okay.'

I'm fine.

He growled. You are as stubborn as a stalagmite.

Jess tried to laugh, but it caught in her throat. She saw no end to this mess. It had one glimmer of light, the baby. A miracle. But it would be insane to reveal the child's paternity. She had seen the hatred bred by xenophobia. Had Ghar killed one of his own kind, Earth would never have cared and Bor Chi would never have absolved him. She didn't want to imagine what their peoples would say to a child born of a human woman and Cephean male.

Ghar pulled back so he could see her face. He held her shoulders with his upper arms and signed with his lower pair. Your ship is a metal hull. It can never hold you in the night when loneliness stalks your dreams.

It is my home.

This could become your home.

Come live with me on Silver Tide.

His growl rumbled. I would die in your silver cage.

Jess signed sorrow to him. If we live together, your people and mine will make our lives hell.

He watched her with his large eyes. Brown eyes. Human eyes. Then stay with me this one last night.

Jess touched his face. Tonight, I will stay.

IV

## Bridge

Jess maneuvered her bulk through the hatchway to the bridge and floated forward. She had followed Sandra's advice rigorously and rarely spent time in free fall, so she savored these few moments the doctor allowed her. Being weightless offered a much-appreciated relief; at more than eight months pregnant, she was as unwieldy as a cargo barge.

She hauled herself to the command chair and settled in with a grunt. Panels shifted around her, adjusting to her size. In response to her commands, the robot arm that supported the chair carried it through the kilometer-wide bridge hemisphere. She passed a smaller robot arm ridden by one of her officers. When the lieutenant lifted her hand in salute, Jess grinned and saluted back. Then she moved on, until she stopped in the center of the hemisphere.

Jess spoke into her wrist comm. "Commander Carson, have we finished loading the cargo for the Flanders team?"

The voice of Al Carson, her Exec, came out of the comm. "In about five minutes, Captain."

"Excellent." She shifted position, trying to get comfortable. The chair molded to her body, accommodating her efforts.

Suddenly she stiffened, while muscular ripples moved down her abdomen. As if eager to join in, her baby chose that moment to give a hearty kick. Jess couldn't help but laugh. "You're a strong one."

"Ma'am?" Al asked over her comm. "I didn't catch that."

She wondered what Al would think if she told him she was having Braxton-Hicks contractions, the "practice" a woman's body underwent toward the end of pregnancy as it prepared for labor. Knowing Al, he would take it in stride. It wasn't genuine labor; she wouldn't give birth for at least another three weeks.

"The Flanders personnel are aboard," she told Al. "As soon as we finish loading their equipment, we can leave orbit."

"Aye, Captain."

Jess settled back and activated the holoscreens. The bridge went from a vast metal cavern to—nothing. The crew consoles on the hull seemed suspended in space. Dominating the view, a luminous blue world rotated, girdled by silvery rings. Far more distant, a white star pierced space, the parent sun for this iceball world, its light filtered by the screens. Silver Tide had stopped here to pick up a team of scientists headed back to Earth.

A familiar longing came over Jess, the wanderlust that had stirred her heart for as long as she could remember. She would have loved to go down to the science station floating in the atmosphere of the planet, don an environment suit, power up a fly-craft, and explore the world firsthand. But she hadn't left Silver Tide for months now. Sandra didn't want her to risk acceleration, and Jess's presence on-planet hadn't been necessary during their stops.

"Such a beautiful sight," Al Carson murmured. "Like a sphere of turquoise and sapphire light."

"You sound poetic today," Jess said.

He chuckled. "It happens every now and then."

A twinge of sorrow came to her, one that had caught her often these pasts months, sometimes when she encountered a sight she would have liked to have shared with Ghar, like this one, other times when she saw a family together. She and Ghar spoke on occasion, but it was difficult to arrange the interstellar communication. She wished he could be here, or if not here, then someplace where they could see each other when they had the chance.

They didn't have that option. Although the authorities on Earth had dropped the kidnapping charge against Ghar, the murder accusation remained. At least Jess's testimony had helped bring down the cartel's operation in the colony and ease the outpouring of public anger against Ghar. For all that Cepheans made them uneasy, the people of Earth were horrified by the attempted genocide on Icelos.

Allied Services had acted fast to wipe out the plague chimeras. It had kept the Skolians from declaring open hostilities against Earth, but relations between Cepheus and Earth had still deteriorated. Angered by the murder charge against Ghar, one of their most prominent citizens—one who had prevented the brutal death of an Allied Space Corps officer—the Cephean authorities steadfastly refused to extradite him. Cephean portrayals of Jess were scathing, which incensed the Space Corps. So Ghar remained on Cepheus and the Cephean embassy on Earth remained empty.

The situation disheartened Jess. In the past, hatreds on Earth had burned over race, religion, sexual orientation, and customs. Those differences seemed to fade now, compared to the variations between humans and their altered kin on other worlds. Although Jess and Ghar had never revealed that their relationship went beyond friendship, their acquaintance caused outrage anyway, a response Jess had never experienced in her interracial marriage with the man from Norway.

Nor did her pregnancy sit well with her superiors; she had broken an unwritten code of the Space Corps by remaining pregnant without a spouse. Although no regulations prohibited an officer in her position from giving birth out of wedlock, the brass didn't like it. But where Ghar was concerned, she had few options. Even if her government hadn't considered him a criminal, she and Ghar might not have been able to marry. No one knew; no legal precedents existed. And Jess had no intention of taking vows with someone she didn't love just for the sake of being married.

At her request, the Space Corps kept the identity of her child's father confidential. Although she

managed to retain her command, she had been passed over for promotion. She could only work hard and hope the situation improved. She had agreed to the tests requested by the medical team studying her child. It was unheard of for a chimera as complex as Ghar to exist, let alone be fertile, but without him, their studies were limited. Unless Cepheus and Earth reached a truce that allowed their scientists to collaborate again, the secret of how Ghar existed would remain a mystery to Earth.

Al's voice came out of her comm. "Captain, we have the Flanders cargo on board."

"Great. As soon—" Jess stopped, startled as another contraction began, spreading from her lower back up into her abdomen. It was too long and too intense.

"Bloody hell," Jess muttered when it finally eased.

"Captain?" Al asked.

"Commander Carson." Jess paused for a calming breath. "Switch to the contingency plan we discussed."

"Good God!" Al said. "Do you need help, ma'am?"

Jess felt herself redden. "No, no. I'm fine." She was acutely aware of her bridge officers listening. Everyone knew what "contingency plan" meant. She tapped her gauntlet, starting up a procedure she had already programmed into her wrist comp. Then, after another deep breath, she said, "Commander Carson, you're in charge." More softly, to the entire bridge crew, she added, "Take her out gently, ladies and gentlemen. Gently."

A murmur of good wishes came from her crew. Al said, "Good luck, Captain." As tense as he sounded, anticipation also sparked in his words. Jess felt it too—until another pain wrenched through her, this one sharper than the last.

"Ahhh . . ." She struggled to hold back her gasp.

Sandra's voice suddenly snapped out of Jess's comm. "Captain, I'm receiving a page on your emergency channel."

Jess gritted her teeth against the contraction. "I know. I sent it."

"Well, I'll be cheddar in a chugger," Sandra said.

As the pain eased, Jess wondered what the blazes was a "chugger." She directed her chair toward the hatch at the back of the bridge. "I'm coming in."

"Are you sure it's time?" Sandra asked. "You aren't due for weeks."

Jess started to answer, then groaned as another contraction hit.

"Uh . . . I take that as a 'yes,'" Sandra said.

Somehow Jess managed, "You take it right."

"I'm sending an air stretcher for you," Sandra said crisply. "I've dispatched the orderlies."

"I don't need a stretcher." Remembering Ghar's comments about friendship, Jess resisted the urge to grumble at the doctor. "I'm fine. Really." As the contraction finished, she maneuvered out of her chair, which had reached the hatchway. "Just get ready for me, Doc."

"Now!" Sandra said again. "Push!"

Jess pushed, clenching the handgrips on the bed. The waves of pain went on and on, and even after they finally ebbed, the merciless pressure remained.

Sandra swore. "That's it. This baby doesn't want to come out. I'm going to operate."

Jess struggled to sit up. "No."

Lines furrowed Sandra's forehead. "You've been in labor for over a day. Jess, it's enough. You don't have to do this the way women did before modern medicine."

"Yes, I do." At the moment, Jess had a hard time remembering why she had been determined to carry through with natural childbirth. But damned if she was going to let them cut her open. She moaned as another contraction began. Steeling herself, she dredged up her strength. PUSH.

"It's coming!" Sandra suddenly called. "Jess! Come on! You can do it!"

Jess put in a gargantuan effort—and screamed as pain ripped through her body. Gasping at the sudden release that followed, she heaved herself up to look, breathing hard, her hair tousled wildly around her face—

"I don't believe it," Jess whispered. Sandra was holding a tiny girl with a wrinkled face and a pointy head covered by red-gold curls. As Sandra checked the baby's nostrils, the infant gave a loud wail.



"She's beautiful," Jess rasped. Then she collapsed back onto the bed.

The next moments blurred, as nurses cleaned her up and shifted her to a fresh bed. Then Sandra handed her a tiny, incredible bundle. Jess cradled the baby, murmuring. The infant looked up with large blue eyes, as if she recognized her mother's voice. When Jess put her to her breast, the child nursed with gusto. Jess was vaguely aware of Sandra and the others, but her attention was only for this miracle. She closed her eyes, astonished at the uncharacteristic tenderness she felt when she held this small bundle in her combat-trained arms.

Jess didn't realize she had dozed off until someone tapped her shoulder. She opened her eyes to see George Mai standing by her bed. The baby slept, nestled against her side.

George beamed. "The crew sends their congratulations, ma'am."

Jess smiled drowsily. "Give them my thanks."

Sandra appeared next to George. "Captain, you have a message from Cepheus."

Jess came fully awake, her emotions a sudden jumble, apprehensive and eager all at once. "I'll take it on my private line."

Sandra nodded. "I'll set it up."

Jess waited while Sandra made the arrangements. If George thought it strange that the outlawed Cephean ambassador wished to speak with her at a time like this, he kept his questions to himself.

After the doctors left, Jess sat up, holding the baby. She spoke to the air. "Put my call on audio."

The EI that monitored the hospital answered. "Would you like visual?"

Her inclination was to say no, especially after just giving birth. But this wasn't something she and Ghar could do through a translator.

"Yes," she said. "Visual too."

The wall across the room glowed blue, then cleared to show a large image of Ghar. He was seated at a desk in a gleaming office far more modern than his home on Icelos. His upper arms rested on the top of the desk, which was a grid rather than a solid surface, and his lower arms were crossed on a lower shelf visible through the grid. His human translator was just leaving the room.

Ghar waited until he was alone. Then he signed, Hello, Jess.

Hello. She showed him the baby. I thought of naming her Alejandra Ko Fernández. What do you think?

A beautiful name. Ghar hesitated. I would say she is a beautiful baby, but I have no idea how human babies should look.

Jess's face softened into a smile. She's beautiful.

After your Doctor Bolton contacted me, I thought to come there, to be with you. He signed with stiff motions. But as soon as I enter human space, I will be taken into custody.

Then I will bring Alejandra to Cepheus.

Jess, no. Bring her to Earth. His motions became subdued. I have decided. I will go to your authorities. Better to resolve this issue of my guilt than have it dividing our peoples.

Jess bit her lip, worried. As much as she wanted to see Ghar's name cleared, she knew a human court might convict him despite his having acted to save her life. I will testify for you, she signed.

If you do, the truth about our child will probably become public. It will be hard to hide once the lawyers start digging.

Jess bit her lip. I know. She doubted the news would be a complete surprise to either of their peoples. When the friendship between she and Ghar had become known, during the trial for the cartel, speculation had occurred.

Can you handle it? Ghar asked.

I think so. And you?

For myself I have no concern. But what of the child?

Jess finally spoke the conclusions she had come to after agonizing over that question for eight months. Alejandra needs to know you as her father from as young an age as possible. If we wait too long, fear could turn her from you. Better she knows from the start than to have the truth shock her later.

He lifted his hand in a Cephean gesture of assent. I have thought this also. But the decision must be yours. She is a human child. You better than I know what she will deal with in human culture.

I think it is best to tell her.

Then you will come to Earth?

Yes. We will come. It could only be for visits, if she meant to retain command of Silver Tide, but she and Alejandra would always find a way to see Ghar, somehow, whether or not he was in prison.

Ghar's large hands made word pictures as he signed. I do not know if marriage between us is possible. But if not, I will legally acknowledge our daughter.

Jess swallowed, unable to define the emotion within her. Ghar's life would be infinitely easier if he never tried to acknowledge his child. That he meant to anyway told her a great deal about him.

You honor us, she signed.

He moved his hands awkwardly. I am unsure of the proper way to say this. Were you Cephean, I would know. But in human terms I am lost.

I'm not sure what you mean.

His hands slowed. Wherever you go, whatever you do, my heart walks in silence until you touch my hand.

A hotness came to Jess's eyes. She recognized the verse; Cepheans used it as a declaration of love. Finally she recognized the unfamiliar emotion within her. She and Ghar had walked in silence, for years, afraid to voice what they felt to each other.

She signed the traditional Cephean words back to him. I offer my heart to break your silence.

They could never have what they wanted, a normal life. But perhaps they could bridge the fear that separated their peoples. It wasn't everything.

But it was a start.