

Homecoming

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

I'd been down maybe four hours, long enough to go through the newest version of decon -- a ray of light that poked every part of the body with gentle warmth -- , not long enough to get a sense of this American 89 years in my future.

Technology was different -- that seemed obvious; laws were different -- noticed that just a few minutes ago; but people seemed to be the same, preoccupied with their own agendas, too busy to hear let alone answer questions.

Not that there was anyone to ask. I was sitting in what passed for a police precinct interview room, a windowless square with blank white walls so clean I could almost see myself, a table (also white) with tiny fingerprint shaped indentations. No one sat across from me. I got a sense they all huddled outside the room, watching the 100+ year old man who looked like he was thirty-five -- or, depending on your point of view, the thirty-five year old man who was actually well over 100.

My stomach was tied in loops -- this certainly wasn't the homecoming I'd been expecting. Not that I'd been expecting a particularly good one. Hell, anything could have happened -- an asteroid could've wiped out all life on Earth for all we knew -- at least until we reached Earth Central (and managed to jury-rig our communications equipment so that we could unscramble their messages) somewhere around the Moon.

We'd been celebrating during our glide from the Moon to Earth, celebrating and trying to figure out how to land the damn ship, according to the parameters Earth Central had sent to us. Everything was different, which we had expected, but we hadn't expected our equipment to be so antique (by Earth's point of view) as to be nearly non-functional.

Someone slipped up and told us they thought we were dead. Seemed they never got our transmissions once we left the solar system. Or maybe they'd get them years from now, when it no longer mattered.

Comptin figured they'd upgraded their equipment, forgot all about us, and didn't set anything to receive. Worthy thought that we just didn't aim the communications equipment right after we'd left the solar system.

Me, I was beginning to figure the screw-up was just one of many that was plaguing us in our relationship with Earth. Or my relationship, anyway. The others seemed just fine. They were heading off toward their grand homecoming parade, and media interviews (in whatever passed for media in the America of 100 years in our future).

We'd even practiced those interviews in the long journey back. How would we describe the ALS drive to people who had either progressed beyond it or hadn't given space-flight a thought at all in during the time we were gone? I just hoped our trust funds still existed, that some EMP blast hadn't wiped out all banking records or something. We all got paid up front, and that money got stashed, untouchable until we returned.

To be honest, until I got arrested, the return had me the most nervous. I still wasn't sure I wanted to come back to the land of people. I liked the solitary nature of our journey. Sometimes I didn't interact with my fellow crew members for weeks on end. In fact, the thing that had me the most nervous about my return to Earth was dealing with large crowds of people. It simply wasn't something I liked.

We didn't know if anyone even cared we were coming back. No one had sounded enthusiastic, at least

not the people we spoke to at Earth Central. We didn't even know if our parent company, Dreamers, still existed. They'd developed the first space drive that could go -- as they termed it -- "almost light speed" (hence ALS drive), and sent us on our merry way.

We knew the risks. Hell, I knew the risks. I just hadn't expected to be arrested the moment I got back.

The minute I stepped out of decon and figured out how to work the new clothes someone had thoughtfully provided, I met up with two official types who slap the 22nd century's version of handcuffs on me.

The official types muttered something about paternity suits and monetary provisos and skipping out on obligations, all of it in a legal mumbo-jumbo that made no sense at all to me. Especially since I was twenty-five and single when I left, and only thirty-five and still single when I got back.

I just figured there was some kind of major screw up. Maybe officialdom didn't know their history. Maybe it got lost in the translation.

You see, our little team of six was chosen out of a field of more than 100 qualified candidates because we had no surviving family members, and because we were single. Sure, we had attachments -- friends, maybe a few ex-lovers -- but nothing that would make us go bonkers should we discover that everyone precious to us died in our absence.

We expected everyone precious to us to die. Or at least get older -- like a hundred years older -- and we had all the battery of psych tests to prove we could handle the changes.

Only I wasn't so sure, four hours into my return to American the Beautiful -- which still existed, thank you very much, as a free and independent state, a reluctant signer (or so they told me) of the Treaty for Global Unification, and so-far, the only major hold-out from the Global Economic Union -- that I could handle those changes.

I spent the first part of that conversation staring at the handcuffs which, in my day (feels strange to say "in my day" when you're only 35) had been made of metal and unlocked with a key, just like they had for God, who knows, maybe a hundred years before that. These things they had on my wrists were made of a plastic so thin that it seemed sheer and so light to the touch that it felt like nothing held me at all.

Until I tried to move, of course. Then the damn things tightened, and caused shooting pains to course up my arms. The cuffs cut off circulation to my hands, making them swell, and finally one of the arresting officers (I guess that's what these folks are called) took pity on me and loosened the restraints.

"Better if you don't struggle," she said.

Thanks, I wanted to say to her. Would've been nice of you to tell me that before you slapped the damn things on my wrists.

But I was quiet. I figured justice in the 22nd wasn't too different from justice in late 2030s. After sitting alone in this all white interview room for the last hour, I wasn't so sure I was right. But then -- all of four hours ago -- I had this confidence that I could figure out what mistake had been made, and could fix it.

They hauled me in here, after driving me across town (and I'm not even sure what town I'm in -- we left from Cape Canaveral in Florida, but Earth Central told us to dock -- Dock! -- in a place called CCNXY5. Tucker thought maybe there was so much space flight that landing areas have designations now, like airports did in our time. But that was a question we didn't even have time to ask).

Anyway, they drove me across town or what seemed like across town in something that resembled a

cross between a car and a bullet train. It was sleek and sophisticated, and moved so fast that everything outside my grimy plastic window was a blur of light and sound and color.

We docked or landed or drove -- at that point, I wasn't sure how to label anything -- into some kind of parking structure, next to other car/bullet train hybrids, and I got hauled through a back elevator (yes, an elevator and I was glad to see it) to the interview room.

Alone. Despite my repeated requests for an attorney.

That was the other thing that differed, of course. It looked like they weren't going to let me have counsel even though I asked for it half a dozen times, until I finally got mad.

"Look," I said to the arresting officers, "I don't understand what you're charging me with. When I left Earth, I was a law-abiding citizen. Had to be or I wouldn't have gotten the mission. I never committed a crime. Hell, I don't think I even considered it, not once. I never married, had only a few girlfriends, and can guarantee that I don't have kids. Or didn't have kids. Or whatever. So throwing around the paternity which in my day -- " (and there it was, used in conversation for the first time, that awful phrase) -- "meant I had fathered a child. I haven't. Case closed. Let me go."

These two -- Frick, Frack, whatever the hell their names were (they never told me) -- stared at me like my head had exploded, then started talking about the charges all over again.

I kicked the table leg, causing everyone but me to jump (don't know if I activated something or alarmed something or if these folks just weren't used to sudden eruptions of anger), and Frickety-Frackety, the arresting officers shut up. Finally.

"Look," I said. "We can go over this and over this, me saying you two really have the wrong guy, or you trying to explain, yet again, a hundred years of changes that I'm probably not going to understand. Or you can get me a lawyer, who'll figure all this out, talk to you nicely and in language you understand and who should, God willing, be able to talk to me in some sort of language I'll understand."

I looked at them, clean cut, athletic in a beefy way and humor-impaired just like generations of officials before them, and got the sense that no one had ever spoken like that to them.

They leaned together like parents figuring out how to discipline a recalcitrant child, and finally they left me alone.

For at least an hour, maybe more. I honestly couldn't tell. Time -- the way it felt, the way it passed -- was somehow not something I had a sense of any longer.

Finally -- finally! -- the stupid little white door that disappeared into the wall when closed burst open and this woman strode in. I gotta figure she's a lawyer, not just because of the business-like don't-fuck-with-me attitude, but also because she wasn't wearing the green and gold clothes the other two had on, which, I'm finally beginning to realize, was some kind of uniform.

She was wearing a variation on the business suit. It had a longer coat than I was used to, but the lapels were double-breasted. Underneath the coat, she wore a vest and a white shirt that looked like it was made of some hard unmalleable material. Her pants were creased and long, covering a pair of shiny black shoes that -- in my day (dammit!) -- would have been called men's shoes.

She didn't have a briefcase or even a Palm. Instead, she sat across from me, touched a button on her wrist and a small slightly see-through image appeared between us. It seemed to be some sort of legal document.

"You're in a lot of trouble," she said without a how-do-you-do.

I was tired of people telling me I was in trouble. I was tired of them treating me like a criminal. And I really hated the way they all looked at me, like I was pond scum instead of one of five people who took (at the time [note I avoided the dreaded "in my day"]) one of the riskiest jobs ever offered.

I leaned back in my chair, careful not to twist my handcuffed wrists. "How about an introduction before analyzing my life since I returned to Earth?"

She flushed, which I didn't expect, and then she gave me a sheepish smile. The flush highlighted her skin, which had some flaws beneath the surface, not readily noticeable.

"I'm Alison Yost," she said. "Sixth Star Media Incorporated hired me to be your attorney."

"Sixth Star Media?" I asked. "Who are they?"

She blinked twice, as if I'd asked who God was, then took a deep breath. "We have some catching up to do, Mr. Fortan."

"I have some catching up to do. A whole lot of it. That's why I had the cops send for you." I couldn't keep the irritation from my voice.

"The 'cops' as you so quaintly call them did not send for me." Yost touched her wrist again and the see-through slip of paper disappeared. "I came because of Sixth Star."

"Okay. Now we're back to my question. Who is Sixth Star?"

"They might be your salvation, Mr. Fortan. Or not. I suspect you'll see a whole battery of lawyers from a variety of different media outlets. You'll have to choose one."

I shook my head. "Don't people hire their own lawyers any more?"

"Rich people do. And the poor still get the dregs from the court appointments. But people in your situation, Mr. Fortan, often get a media company's lawyer, for a price."

"So I still have to pay you," I said.

She shook her head, touched her wrist, and a document appeared in her hand. The document had the same see-through quality as the one before, only this one lay flat on the table. She pushed the document toward me.

"This is a standard agreement," Yost said. "In return for all your court costs, attorney's fees, and incidentals before, during, and in the days after the trial -- "

"Trial?" My voice rose.

"-- you agree to give Sixth Star Media Incorporated, which includes net-tech, downloads, airweb, TV, books, DVD, and any technology that has or will be developed, an exclusive right to the story of your legal entanglements, starting from this moment, and terminating no less than one week after your trial is completed."

"How can there be a trial?" I asked, still stuck on that point, "when I haven't been charged with anything?"

"You're charged and booked, Mr. Fortan. Didn't the officers explain that to you?"

"They tried to explain something, but it wasn't registering. Maybe no one's gotten the memo, but I've been _off the planet_ for about 100 years. Incommunicado. In deep fucking space. Or can't you people figure that out?"

She smiled at me. "I had forgotten how colorful our language was when I was a kid."

A kid? I frowned at her. There was no way she was over forty.

"We're a lot more polite now," she said. "Pendulum swings, I think, although it might simply be that there are more of us than ever. The Moon colony failed, you know."

No, I didn't know. I had no idea there had been a Moon colony and I certainly didn't care about its failure. "Maybe I'll be polite when this Kafka-esque nightmare ends."

She raised her eyebrows.

"You have no idea who Kafka is, do you?" I snapped, shaking my head. What else do you do for ten years besides read every classic in the database? Davidon learned four languages so he could reread books in the original.

"I read Kafka in college," she said. "I was a lit major."

"And now I know a lot more about you than I want to know, and still nothing about the so-called charges that I've been asking about."

Yost nodded once. "Let me put this in non-legal terms, Mr. Fortan, something the police are no longer required to do. You've been charged with child abandonment, failure to provide for your family, and familial neglect. You have eighteen years of child support payments due, as well as one half of a college education -- fortunately for you, completed roughly eighty years ago, so the cost was low -- compounded by interest on all of that money -- and, well, we're talking a substantial sum here, Mr. Fortan."

"It'll be easy to fight," I said. "I never married. I never had children. I was always careful. I used birth control and I made sure that no woman I ever slept with conceived. So there's no way this kid could be mine."

"This kid," she said, "is dead."

I let out a small sigh and stared at her, feeling even more confused.

"But he left a family -- three children of his own, all of whom have children, and those children have children, and they have an attorney who is continuing the fight against your estate."

"My estate?" I said. "How can I have an estate? I'm not dead yet."

"Any living person with money has an estate, Mr. Fortan, or didn't they explain that to you in astronaut school?"

"There is -- was -- is -- was -- dammit -- no such thing as astronaut school."

"I remember, Mr. Fortan. I even remember when the _Long Day's Journey_ took off, and all the hopes for it. I was ten years old at the time."

"And what, they kept you in stasis?"

She smiled. "Very kind of you, Mr. Fortan. You've missed some developments while you were gone."

"No kidding," I muttered.

"We've managed to slow the aging process and now most people have a life expectancy of 150 years. By today's standards, I'm still in my late middle age."

"Oh," I said, because how else could you respond to something like that? We'd all known it was coming -- all the breakthroughs before I left showed that. But I just hadn't expected it to be so soon.

Which, if I really thought about it, it wasn't.

Soon, that is.

"Okay," I said, shaking off the mind-numbing thoughts of all the changes that had occurred while I was gone. "If we've managed to retard aging and add years to normal life expectancy, then I figure it would be simple to prove that I'm not the dead kid's dad. Hell, DNA tests were so sophisticated when I left that you should be able to prove beyond a reasonable doubt -- that is still the standard, right? -- "

"In criminal cases," she said. "In civil -- "

" -- beyond a reasonable doubt that I am childless and that I am who I say I am. Besides, I've only been in the company of two women in the past ten years -- one hundred years -- whatever -- and I know neither of them got pregnant. We'd have noticed if a kid were born on The Long Day's Journey."

Yost threaded her fingers together and peered at me over them. Now that I was concentrating on her face, I did see a web of tiny lines near her eyes.

When she seemed certain that I was done, she said, "Do you remember a Janet Delancy, Mr. Fortan?"

Of course I remembered Jannie. We'd hooked up about a week before my quarantine in SpaceTech, a bar that catered to scientists and tech geeks. She'd been long-legged and pretty, with thick black hair that fell around her shoulders, and matching black eyes that snapped with intelligence. I bought her a drink, and she propositioned me, wanting -- or so she said -- to give me something to remember Earth by.

Which she did too, nearly a dozen times over the next six days, and I relieved each of those times during my ten celibate years aboard The Long Day's Journey.

But I didn't tell Yost that. I didn't trust her. I didn't trust anyone I'd met since I'd come home.

"Why should I remember a Janet Delancy?" I asked.

"Because," Yost said, "she's the mother of your son."

I didn't have a son. I knew that without a doubt. But I wasn't going to sit here and argue semantics with her. Not until I got a few things straight.

"You're my lawyer, right?" I asked.

"Hired by -- "

"Yeah, I know. Some media company."

"My loyalties will be to them if you agree to their terms."

"Not to me?" I asked

"Not entirely." She nodded toward the document before me, which I still hadn't read.

"So confidentiality -- that's a thing of the past too?"

"For the duration of the trial, no. But if you agree to my representation, then I may, when all charges are discharged, dropped, served or commuted, release my notes -- audio, video, and written -- to Sixth Star Media for use as they see fit."

"What if I hire you?"

"That would be irregular, Mr. Fortan."

"I don't care."

"I doubt you can afford me," she said. "Especially if we lose."

"Why especially if we lose?" I asked.

"Your funds will be dispersed to your family -- "

"You people act like I have a family."

"You do, Mr. Fortan. That's proven."

"Not to me," I said. "And not by any definition I know."

She stood, sighed, and said, "Look. I used to give free introductory consults. I'll do that now. You clearly need someone to explain what's going on here."

"You're taking pity on me?"

She tilted her head. "Yes." Then she paused. "I'm waiting for the lawyer joke."

"I figured they were out of fashion."

She shook her head. "Some things never change."

We smiled at each other then. I kinda liked her. She had a human side, which I hadn't expected and which I appreciated.

"After this first hour, though," she said, "we go back to the original arrangement. I'm going to be working for Sixth Star first, and you second. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I said. "I'd shake on it, but I'm a little tied up at the moment."

Yost didn't smile at that joke.

"So now we have confidentiality?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"For how long?"

"Until you waive it," she said.

"Okay," I said. I was ready to proceed. "I knew Janet Delancey. I even slept with her. Even though I wasn't allowed to have a birth control shot for more than six months before the mission, I used condoms, and I used them right. They didn't break. I never reused one, and we put them on long before they were necessary."

Yost sat down, her eyebrows raised. "You remember all that after 100 years? That must have been some sex."

"I remember all that after ten years, and it wasn't some sex," I said. "It was the last sex I've had -- at least with a partner -- since I left Earth. Little things like that add some significance to a memory."

She touched her wrist, accessed another document, shoved the first one aside, and set the second one before me. "I don't expect you to read this," she said, "but you can if you want. It's a summary of all the DNA testing done in your case over all the years. There is no doubt that Charles Fortan Delancy was your son. So there is no doubt that all of his children are your grandchildren, and his grandchildren are your great-grandchildren"

Great-grandchildren, at thirty-five. That made my stomach hurt. "No doubt at all?"

"Stop the games, Mr. Fortan. DNA testing was accurate in 2039. Imagine how accurate it is now."

"Using what samples?" I asked. "From me, I mean."

"_Dreamers_ released some of your records when it disbanded."

"It what?" I had wanted the company to remain. Not because I loved _Dreamers_ -- I didn't. It was a corporation -- but because I hoped its institutional memory might give us a safe haven should there be trouble.

Like now.

"Long story." She smiled at me. "You've lost a lot of time."

I leaned back, beginning to feel all the losses. "What about Janet? What did she say?"

"That the child is yours." Yost studied me for a moment. "You know she's dead now too."

I had expected that. Jannie and I knew we'd never see each other again, and I hadn't minded. I hadn't been in love with her. She'd been a good time, and, it seemed then, that was all she'd been offering.

"I don't understand," I said. "If everyone's dead -- "

"Everyone but your grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

" -- why am I here? In handcuffs, no less."

"Let me see if I can untangle a hundred years of legal mess for you. First, Janet Delancy sued your estate in the name of her son Charles for child support payments. Then -- "

"What a minute," I said. "I have a trust, not an estate. Everything I own was being managed for me inside of a trust until I returned. Nothing could be touched. All my bills were current, and all the trust was supposed to do was earn income so I had something to live on when I returned. My fee for this trip went into that trust."

"I know," Yost said.

"So it's not an estate. Even if they wanted to, the trust couldn't have paid out."

"We know that too," Yost said.

"Then how could she sue?"

"You can sue for anything," Yost said, and the answer sounded reflexive. "However, you signed an agreement with _Dreamers_ guaranteeing that you did not have family or spouse left behind who would have access to that trust. She tried to show that you signed the agreement in bad faith."

"Well, I didn't," I said.

"Apparently, the attorney for your trust figured that out, simply by using your son's birthdate. You would have had no way of knowing that Janet was pregnant because you were incommunicado when she took her first pregnancy test."

"Off the planet," I said.

"Actually, you were still in quarantine, but the records show she didn't try to contact you."

I frowned. "Why not?"

"I suspect, she feared you would have asked her -- on the record, one hopes -- to get rid of the child. If you had done that, there would have been no case."

"So you can establish that I didn't know about the kid. Why should I be charged with all these things if I didn't even have a chance to do what the law demanded?"

Yost gave me a look filled with pity. "The fact that you didn't know is not an excuse, according to most of the case law I've seen. Apparently men are supposed to think about the consequences of their actions, and make sure -- "

"I did think!" I stood up, jerking my wrists and the damn cuffs tightened again. "I used precautions. We were clear on the fact that this was fun only. And there was no way I could have made sure. I was gone for ten years. She knew I'd be gone. She knew that when she met me."

"One hundred years," Yost corrected me.

"Well, from her perspective, yeah."

"Which made you a perfect victim."

"What?" I sank back into my chair again. Then I raised my arms. "Can you get them to take these things off? Or at least loosen them?"

"They think you're a flight risk."

"Oh, really? Where am I going to go? Mars? I have no friends here. I don't even know what city I'm in."

"All fathers who've been charged with abandonment are assumed to be flight risks -- "

"Well, I'm not all fathers and this is a weird case. Make them take the cuffs off."

To my surprise, her eyes twinkled. She touched one of the depressions on the table, and a little teeny person popped out of it. At least that's what it looked like to me. Actually, it was some kind of hologram.

"What?" the little teeny person -- male from the depth of his voice -- asked.

Yost made my request about the cuffs, got some disagreement from Tiny, then reiterated my argument, at which point Tiny disappeared and a different teeny tiny person, dressed in robes -- whom, I soon realized was a teeny tiny judge -- appeared, looking very annoyed. She was facing me, and Yost had to press a few more buttons to get that image turned around.

Yost spoke legalese for a good five minutes, the judge issued some kind of ruling -- which appeared above another depression on the table -- and my cuffs fell off. That simple.

I rubbed my hands together, wondering if the feeling would ever return to them. The little teeny judge disappeared, and Yost grinned at me, as if she'd performed some sort of magic trick.

It almost felt like she had.

"Okay," I said after a moment, "I was the perfect victim. What did you mean?"

Yost's grin faded. "You were being scammed, sweetie. Taken out and set up."

I shook my head. "All we did was have a fun week -- "

"Maybe all you did was have a fun week. She had clearly done her research. You guys were the first to go to deep space, right?"

"Right," I said, thinking suddenly about my dreams of the triumphant return, the hopes I had for some kind of life when I got back.

"And she knew that."

"Everyone did, if you can truly recall the year I left. We were news."

"Testing a special drive for _Dreamers,_ a private company, who helped you all set up your trusts, paid your fees, and wished you well."

"Yes," I said.

"No government involvement -- "

"The government saw no percentage in deep space flight. It was the private industry that stood to make a profit -- "

"I know. I know. My grandkids are studying it in school." She smiled. "The questions they ask. You'd think I'm the relic."

The _instead of you_ was implied.

"I'm guessing," Yost continued, "that your girlfriend -- "

"She wasn't my girlfriend."

"-- was gambling on the fact that the law said anyone who had not been heard from in seven years could be presumed dead. There was no guarantee you guys would ever come back. In fact, most people assumed you wouldn't. Your trust would then become an estate, and someone would get to inherit it."

"You're saying my trust is gone?" I actually felt a chill. This world was foreign to me and I hadn't even left

the police station. I had no idea how I'd find work, what I'd do, what I'd live on -- I hadn't planned on coming back just so that I could be destitute (although, I must confess, we all worried that we might come back some kind of crisis).

"No," Yost said. "Your trust is intact. Dreamers lawyers were good, and they drew up a solid document. You couldn't be expected to return until about last year. There was a window in there of years in which it would be likely that you returned. There's some sort of equation in the papers, but I just got them and I haven't had a chance to study them -- "

"We figured our return would happen somewhere between ninety and a hundred years if all went well, one hundred and twenty or thirty so if things didn't go as planned."

"Well," she said, "the upshot is that the courts decided you couldn't be declared dead until seven years after the last possible day you could possibly return. The trust was unbreakable, and so the family was waiting for your money until whatever that date was."

"And then they got confirmation that we were alive." Something sank in his stomach. He rubbed his wrists harder. The skin had turned red.

"They marshaled their lawyers, charged you with neglect, abandonment, and everything else they could think of, and are prepared to go after the sums I listed to you earlier -- 18 years of child support, plus interest and penalties accumulated over the time you were gone."

"I still don't get it," he said. "Why does this make me the perfect victim?"

"Because," she said, "your friend Janet didn't believe you'd survive the trip. She'd get the money to raise her son, and everything would be fine. Even if you had survived, by her reckoning, then you would return long after she got your funds. The money would be spent, she would be dead -- as indeed she is -- and going after her would be difficult to say the least."

"I don't see how I can be charged for things that weren't illegal when I left."

"Oh, but they were," Yost said. "You probably didn't notice, being a man who was determined not to have a family. A lot of the child protection laws went into effect in the late 20th century, and so did many of the child support requirements. The modifications in the law occurred in the early parts of the 21st century, when women started using technology to conceive children years after their husband or partner died. First the laws said that if the woman could prove her spouse wanted a child but didn't have one before his death, then the child was entitled to part of the estate. Over the years that rather sensible ruling got eroded until any child conceived with the father's permission -- permission being in consensual sexual intercourse at the time of sperm collection -- then that child was eligible for part of the dead father's estate."

"I'm not dead," I said, feeling odd each time I said it.

"And then came the modifications so that a man who participated in consensual sexual intercourse, and left sperm behind -- either in a condom or a diaphragm or some other collection device -- would be liable for child support."

I ran my fingers through my hair. "I'd remember that. Believe me I would. I'd've made certain that no one got me with that one."

"It looks like someone did," Yost said.

"Check the law," I said. "If it came into being after I left, how can I be charged under it?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'll have to check. Some laws concerning children have been applied retroactively, starting with the child's conception."

"Oh, for Chrissake." I paced around the small room. White on white, the only color being Yost. And me, of course. It was worse than the ship, worse than anything I'd experienced. "I'm trapped here. I'm an unwilling victim in a scheme that -- "

"Yes, we'll have to prove all of that. Now you see why Sixth Star wants this case? Not only are you a minor celebrity -- probably about to be major -- but the case is salacious. It has human interest, sex, money and could possible change the law down the road, if you win."

"If I win." I stopped pacing next to her. She smelled faintly of lilies, a scent I hadn't smelled for ten years.

"You know," she said, "you could just accept your family, pay them their fee, and then move on. In the end, it would probably be the cheaper course."

"It's not about money." And as I said that, I knew it was true. I had no idea how much money was in my trust. The people who represented my so-called family probably knew, and Yost probably knew, but I didn't. "It's the principle of the thing."

"Principles have changed since you left," she said. "Most people believe the child's welfare is paramount and that a child is entitled to care from both parents. The state's been mandating responsible parenting for decades now. This is just one of those cases. You can't ask the culture to go backwards."

"So a woman can, at any time, assault a man, use him for procreation purposes without his permission, and then slap him with the responsibilities?"

Yost raised her eyebrows. "Sounds familiar."

"What?" I asked.

"What do you think men have been doing to women for centuries?" She stood. "And now, your consultation hour is up. I'm heading out of here, unless you decide to hire me."

"Answer something first," I said.

"All right." She tilted her head, waiting.

"Can you leave the information on my trust and exactly the amount that these people want to take from me?"

"Sure," she said. "I'll have to add fees and expenses for law firms who've been handling your cases up until now -- "

"Who couldn't manage to show up once I'm home," I said, feeling slightly annoyed.

"They've shown up," she said.

I frowned at her. "I thought you worked for Sixth Star media."

"I do," she said, "and several other conglomerates. The law firm who employs me handles hundreds of clients, and in this case, they just happen to intersect. When it became clear that you were alive, Sixth Star paid all your bills. They want to cover this case."

"If there is a case," I said.

It was her turn to frown. "What do you mean?"

"Well," I said slowly, "I can't help wondering why I'm liable for eighteen years of child support plus penalties and interest spread out over a eighty-two years when I've only been gone ten years."

Her eyes lit up. It was as if I'd given her fifteen Christmas presents at once.

"I don't know," she said, "but it certainly would be fun to find out."

Fun. As if it weren't my future on the line. As if some woman -- admittedly one very agile and interesting woman -- hadn't targeted me and my money for her little schemes. As if I wanted, yet again, to be the risk-taker, the point man, the first one into a bold new venture.

"Let's see what we can figure out," Yost said and started to sit down, but I caught her arm.

"Give me some time," I said. "I've got some thinking to do."

"But Sixth Star will cover this. It's hot, it's interesting, and it shouldn't be as embarrassing to you as the case initially was -- "

"I know," I said, leading her to the door as if this interview room were mine, and not in the middle of some police precinct. "But why don't you research something or something? I want a few moments to myself."

"Mr. Fortan, we have to get you out of here. I think, with this new argument, we can get all the criminal charges dropped, and let civil court handle the rest. It'll -- "

"Fine," I said. "Get the criminal charges dropped. I'll wait here for you."

"I can call up the judge on the -- "

"Somewhere else," I said, and the little white door opened as if I had made it do so (but apparently someone on the other side had been watching us -- not listening too I hope, but then what did I care? Everything was so different I couldn't keep track), and she left, still talking about how the time differential changed everything.

I guess it did, but not in the way she was thinking about. I sat down in my goofy white chair, in that pristine white room, with the depressed white table, and listened to the silence, like I'd been doing for years. Every room -- even ones on a ship -- had ambient noise, and this one was no different. The slight hum of some heating unit, the faint rustle of movement outside. Or maybe it was the rustle of my clothing as I breathed.

I didn't know and didn't care. I let the ambient noise disappear into my subconscious like it was supposed to, and let my thoughts take me.

The psych tests conducted on me 10 -- or 100 -- years ago showed that I had a high tolerance for solitude. I had the ability to remain still and quiet for long stretches of time, yet I also enjoyed adventure.

One of the reasons I'd taken Jannie back to the apartment that final week before quarantine was that I didn't like the bar scene, and I had nowhere else to go, nothing else to do. I wanted to be doing something that I wouldn't be able to do in space, but I didn't want to surround myself with crowds of people.

I didn't like the choices. Hire a lawyer who represents a media company and let her steal my privacy as

my reward. Hire my own attorney and I'd still lose my privacy. Of course, there was no guarantee of privacy. If human nature remained the way it had been in the 200 years before my departure, I would become a celebrity no matter what and the privacy would be gone.

I slid the monetary information sheet that Yost left in front of me and studied the figures. If I gave the so-called family the money they were requesting, and paid off the attorneys who had fought on my behalf while I was gone, I would have maybe one percent of my assets left. I had no idea what modern prices were like, and I didn't know if that one percent would buy me groceries or an island off the coast of Florida.

Apparently there were a few other questions I should have asked.

And there were a few other options that Yost should have mentioned. I could, theoretically, meet this so-called family of mine. If they reacted like people in the vids we took with us into space, they'd fall into my arms and we'd live happily ever after.

But faced with hard cold reality, I doubted that was possible. First of all, I didn't believe that we would like each other just because we shared some DNA. Secondly, I wasn't real fond of people who spend their entire lives grubbing for money they didn't earn. And thirdly, I wasn't the most social guy on the planet -- or off, for that matter. I really didn't want to get involved.

And that, I realized, was the bottom line. If Yost had her way, the cases would drag on for years, she'd set a precedent for anyone who traveled in deep space, and every aspect of my life from the moment I returned to Earth until the moment I died, would be recorded, perused, sifted, and analyzed by people I didn't even know.

The risk in this case wasn't the obvious one. It was that I might get lost fighting someone else's battle for principles I didn't understand, let alone believe in.

It might have been different if Jannie were still alive -- or maybe even my kid. Maybe I'd've been able to reason with him. But grandkids, great-grandkids -- hell, I'd been around long enough to know that family myth often became family destiny. So far as they knew, from time immemorial Grandma or Great-Grandma had been screwed over by this famous astronaut and they were only going after her share.

After all, she'd spent her life fighting for it.

I shook my head.

What I wanted was to get out of this little room. I wanted to go somewhere and look at the night sky, maybe talk to a few real scientists, see -- perhaps -- if someone would let me fly away again.

Some guys were made for home and hearth. Others for spending their lives fighting over principles in musty courtrooms. Me, I was made for solitary contemplation in tiny rooms with a view of the universe.

The stupid white door opened and Yost came back in. "Criminal charges dropped," she said. "And I've got the first leg of my argument for the civil trial."

"There won't be one," I said, standing, knowing I was now free.

"What?"

"We're giving them what they want."

"But you can't," she said.

"I can."

She took a deep breath. I could see her lawyer brain preparing the arguments for me now, and I didn't want to hear them.

"I hired you to get me out of here," I said. "You did that. And now I'm going to pay off these people, and then I'm going back to my life. You can help me, or not, up to you. But I'm not signing your little agreement and I'm not giving up my privacy."

She studied me for a moment, then smiled. "I don't remember guys like you from 100 years ago."

I smiled back. "It was only ten years."

Yost laughed and held the door open for me. "How about you let me fight this one anyway. You won't have to sign the agreement for Sixth Star, and I promise I won't spend more than the money you have in the trust defending your honor."

"Nope," I said. "My honor doesn't need defending. I slept with her. I'll pay the consequences."

"It shouldn't have to work this way," Yost said.

"That's right," I said, "but you've told me that's what the law says."

"I told you that so you'd fight it."

The hallway was a muted blue and gold with lights that seemed to flicker inside the walls. The floor, which looked like some kind of tile, was actually soft to my feet. And the place smelled like good, fresh mountain air.

We were inside a building with no windows. Hallways shouldn't smell like this.

"Look." I pointed at the lights flickering in and out. "I have no idea what this stuff is, and it's just part of an everyday wall inside some police precinct."

Yost turned toward me, obviously fascinated in spite of herself.

"I have a whole world to discover," I said. "The last thing I need to do is tilt at windmills."

"You wouldn't be tilting -- "

"Case closed, counselor. Now," I said, putting a hand collegially on her shoulder. "How about you help me figure out how to leave this building and get some lunch?"

She looked at my hand as if she were going to ask me to remove it. "You're crazy, you know."

"No," I said as she led me through a silver-lined gap in the wall. "I'm just someone who knows a bad risk when he sees one."

After a moment, she smiled and shook her head. "I think I might grow to like you, Mr. Fortan."

I doubted she'd have enough time. I was going to be out of her life as quickly as I entered it. But I didn't tell her that.

I wanted to stay on her good side, at least until she paid for lunch.

-- END --