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It was a port dive like any other humanity had built since some lucky bastard brought the first log *back* to shore. And the topic today was no different from when the Phoenicians sailed the middle sea—pirates and slavers.

Only this dive stood in the shadow of the New Birmingham bean pole. The shops and heavy-fabrication barns that gave a thirst to this bar's customers sent their goods and gear up the elevator to starships in the orbital yards of High Birmingham.

Today was different for Captain Terrence Tordon. Trouble to his enemies, Trouble to his friends, and more often than not, just plain Trouble, he'd come to accept the label for all it meant. Born, raised, and commissioned in the Society of Humanity Marine Corps, he had passed many a happy hour in dives such as this.

Today, however, was the first time he STAT followed his wife into one.

Commander Uxbridge led them through the bar's door with its flashing beer ads. It was he who suggested the sun was below the yardarm and their business might better be completed in informal surroundings with a drink at hand. Uxbridge was finishing up his forty years with the Navy at the disappointing rank of commander, so no one would be surprised if he put in less than a full day.

Trouble and his wife Ruth followed because she had questions about the source of funds now flowing into Uxbridge's numbered Swiss accounts on Old Earth.

Officially, Uxbridge was the czar of Navy scrap on New Birmingham. He sold off surplus gear, battle-shattered hulks—and defeated Unity ships from the recent unpleasantness. They weren't supposed to be in working condition.

So why were said ships showing up in the hands of pirates and slavers. Trouble had had the unfortunate experience of accepting said slavers' hospitality not once but twice a few months ago.

It was a major source of embarrassment for a combat Marine.

Trouble glanced around the bar as he settled into a chair next to his wife. This early, the booths lining the walls and the tables scattered around the floor were empty except for two men in one booth. They seemed lost in haggling. Given the time and place, it likely had something to do with recreational pharmaceuticals.

The front entrance was balanced by a rear exit. The lights were up, throwing in harsh relief dilapidation that went unnoticed in the smoky shadows at night. Behind the bar, a mirror ran the length of the room. It exhibited dents and dings that proved it metal, not glass.

Trouble fingered the table. Painted to look like wood, it was heavy metal.

That's one way to avoid replacing the furniture every time the customers get rambunctious, he thought with a smile.

Then he went back to splitting his time between Ruth's conversation with Uxbridge and the rest of the bar. He was, after all, the guard dog here.

Ruth, a farmer born and bred, even looked the stereotype today. Her long black hair was braided into two pigtails, and she wore a calico dress with full skirt.

How much she looked the part of the contract farmer for a light cruiser, providing fresh fruit and vegetables from hydroponic gardens between the ship's ice armor and main hull, had been a hot topic between husband and wife that morning. However, since the Navy Department had only just started this crazy farm program, no one was too sure what the proper appearance of a ship-based farmer was.

Ruth had dressed as she wanted.

Trouble, who'd never lost a firefight, was getting used to losing to his bride.

Whatever her appearance, Ruth could talk farming. And she was talking Uxbridge's ears off about hydroponic agribusiness and her need for additional tubing, tubs, and pumps. She was laying it on thick.

So thick, no one would mistake her for an Alcohol, Drug, and Explosives Enforcement Agent.

Even a part-time one.

At least that was what Trouble and Ruth hoped.

A waitress showed up. Ruth interrupted her monologue long enough to order a beer; both men followed her lead.

Trouble noted that the conversation between the two men in the booth seemed to be getting more heated, but they kept their words too low for him to make them out over Ruth's voice. He rested a hand on her knee under the table, hoping she'd take it for a request for a pause.

She brushed his hand off.

Did she really think he'd make a pass at her right now? Still, this was her show. Captain Umboto had made that clear as they left the *Patton* this morning.

Ruth leads; Trouble follows.

But Ruth, love, do you have any idea where you're going?

The drinks arrived. As Trouble reached for his, he noted that the booth's conversation was on pause as one of them answered a phone. Was there a twitch of a nod in their direction?

Uxbridge was seated with his back to the booth. Was he looking at Ruth, or beyond her to something in the mirror? Trouble started to turn, to check the mirror out, but Uxbridge was lifting his glass in some kind of informal toast.

Trouble raised his mug, glancing at Ruth, who was smiling as if she had good sense. The commander was smiling, too, kind of smugly.

Movement at the corner of his eye drew Trouble's attention.

"Honey, I think we got a problem," he muttered.

His bride ignored him . . . a habit developed since saying "I do."

She missed the pistols coming out across the room.

"Down," Trouble growled—and upended the table.

Their drinks went flying, adding little to the heavy aroma of yesterday's brew, smoke, sweat, and more exotic odors.

"What are you doing?" Ruth screeched, and made to follow Commander Uxbridge as he headed for the back door.

Trouble kicked the chair out from under Ruth, unbalancing her enough that he could pull her down beside him—just as two rounds from across the room filled the air where her head had been.

"Huh?" Ruth came out of her fixation on Uxbridge to glance around. "What's going on?"

"A friendly exchange of joy dust for cash seems to have gone wrong," Trouble offered as he edged his head above the upended table, and ducked fast as the two people across the room squeezed off more incoming in his general direction.

"Assuming it was what it looked like, and not cover for your friend's withdrawal."

Ruth's automatic was out of hiding from its rather nice place that Trouble enjoyed roaming in quieter times. Set for sleepy darts, she squeezed off two rounds at Uxbridge as he disappeared out the back door.

"Darn," she muttered as she only added more chips to the bar's battered motif.

Trouble edged his own service automatic around the tabletop and sent a few of Colt-Phyzer's best toward the erstwhile entrepreneur and client. He glanced around for the bartender, but she had made herself scarce.

To call the local constabulary?

Not likely. Trouble had noted a distinct lack of New Birmingham's uniformed finest as he and Ruth approached the "friendly watering hole," the commander had suggested.

Trouble ducked as another couple of rounds shoved the table against his shoulder and showered plaster from the wall above him. He tapped his commlink.

"Gunny, I could use some help. Where are you?"

The pause that followed was decidedly longer than Trouble expected.

"Stuck in traffic, sir," finally came back.

Marine NCOs are people of few words—but they pack a lot of meaning into what syllables they do speak, just as the Corps packed a lot of power into its chosen few. What Trouble heard was straight information underlain with rock-solid determination, overlain with more embarrassment than he believed possible to a Gunnery Sergeant.

“You wouldn’t believe the traffic here, sir.”

Trouble would. Raised by the Corps at bases around the rim of human space, this was his first venture deep into the overpopulated heart of humanity. From orbit, New Birmingham was one glowing orb, whether in daylight or darkness.

“We’re fifteen blocks from you, sir. Should I get the crew moving on foot?”

The image of four combat-loaded Marines double-timing through this industrial area, even in the camouflage they’d dummied up for today, made Trouble cringe worse than the next burst from across the room.

He glanced around the lower corner of the table.

The two were running—one for the front door, the other for the back.

“They’re bugging out,” he shouted to Ruth. He snapped off a three-round burst at the back of the one headed for the front door. Ruth tried for the other.

Both got good hits.

The rounds just stuck there like darts on a dartboard.

“Body armor,” Trouble spat as he stood, dusting plaster from his one set of civilian clothes. But he was talking to himself.

Ruth was up and headed for the back door.

Trouble caught her elbow and swung her back around. “You’re not sticking your pretty head out that door until all concerned have had a few minutes to reflect upon their evil past.”

“But Uxbridge is getting away.”

“He’s gotten away, Ruth. Diamonds to donuts, there was a car waiting for him out there. And *his*

driver knows how to get around this damnable local traffic. All that's out there now is a buddy of our gun-toting trader from across the room."

Trouble waved at the now-vacant table.

"Oh! Yeah, I guess that's how I'd do it." Ruth looked around, probably taking in the pub's decor for the first time.

Imitation wood paneled the walls in dark swirls. Blinking signs for local brews and sports teams paled in the full light of day. *Now* the bartender wandered out from the bathroom.

She noted the situation with an unconcerned eye and asked if they wanted fresh drinks. Trouble declined, righted the table and chairs, settled their tab, and led Ruth cautiously out the front door.

A half dozen people in working overalls passed them going in. It was as if an OPEN FOR BUSINESS sign had been turned on. A dozen more in pairs and trios followed.

A moment later, a checkered cab drove up.

Gunny piled out to report as the other three Marines took point, covering 360 degrees around them.

The idea was for them to be inconspicuous today, since New Birmingham had its own police force . . . however invisible . . . and strong gun-control laws . . . that seemed less than perfect in their application.

The Marines' body armor was covered by their new, multicolored sweat suits, making them look for all the world like a child's crew-cut, hard-eyed teddy bear. Their guns were hidden in bags, making them only slightly less conspicuous.

"Sorry about the delay, sir. Next time I do this, we use one of our own drivers."

"I agree, Gunny. Let's get out of here."

The cabby had no trouble delivering them quickly to the space elevator. An hour later, they were up the bean pole and reporting to Captain Umboto in her day cabin.

"He got away, Izzy" Ruth blurted out.

Trouble gritted his teeth at his wife's familiarity. He'd spent much of his two months of married bliss trying to introduce Ruth to the Navy Way.

He hadn't been all that successful.

She had finally acquired the ability to identify rates and rank. The wardroom still chuckled at Ruth's initial effort.

Standing in line at the Navy exchange at High Woolamurra, Ruth had proudly told Trouble, "That one's a captain, 'cause he has four stripes. But what's five stripes?"

"Five stripes?" Trouble asked, puzzled as he followed Ruth's gaze . . . to two chiefs. One, with over sixteen years in the Navy, sported four gold hash marks. The other, with twenty-plus years, had five.

Trouble spent the rest of the wait in line trying to stop laughing as he explained the difference between officer rank stripes, that encircled the sleeve, and enlisted service hash marks that angled up to cover part of the sleeve. Undaunted, Ruth shared with the entire wardroom over supper that night how she'd made her latest discovery.

Half of the officers had almost laughed up their chow.

The skipper surprised him; she'd nodded understandingly at Ruth. "Learning all the secret handshakes of this bunch is a bitch," she muttered encouragingly.

The skipper surprised Trouble again today. She just nodded at the announcement that the bird had flown the nest and changed the subject. "Better get the farm ready for fluctuating gravity, Ruth. We're clearing the pier in two hours."

"Orders, Skipper?" Trouble asked.

"The yard at Wardhaven finally thinks they've figured out the spaghetti that passes for wiring in our main system. We've got a week's reduced availability there."

Trouble and Ruth both knew the truth behind those words. The *Patton* was one of many hasty war conversions from merchant vessel to light cruiser. The yards had rushed the ships into commission, paying attention only to what would make them fit to fight . . . and wasting little time on minor things like system standardization.

Thanks to that haste, the *Patton* had damn near ended up a permanent fixture at the end of a pier.

Trouble wouldn't have minded that, except he and Ruth about then were in slavers' hands, growing drugs on a stinking, hot planet named Riddle.

The work was bad; the supervision was worse.

Slave drivers stalked around with whips in their hands and rape on their minds.

Ruth and he had risked their necks to help an invasion fleet show up.

But those were yesterday's problems. Today, the *Patton* was in the best shape she'd ever been, and the skipper had a tiger grin on her face.

The call to Wardhaven came from the people who made planets shake.

When they talked, people died.

Hopefully, it wouldn't be anyone Trouble knew personally. With a salute and a shrug, the Marine officer went to prepare his detachment to get underway. STAT.

A week later, Ruth galloped up to the captain's gig. Trouble was waiting for her, his face the mask it became when he was busy being Marine. Catching her breath, Ruth glanced around. Good, Izzy wasn't there yet.

She flashed her husband a proud grin, which he ignored as he always did when he was in Marine mode. Still, she had a right to be proud.

She'd heard Trouble grouse, and other naval officers, too, that every civilian considered themselves a brevet admiral . . . and acted accordingly. Ruth was doing her darnedest to be their obedient servant . . . and act accordingly. Although it was none too easy to meet their expectations. Take this situation, for example.

All Ruth's life, she'd been taught to defer to her betters, to let her elders enter a room first and take their preferred seat before she and the other kids started squabbling over who got what was left.

Always, age before beauty.

But not now, not the Navy Way, as her husband had done his best to make clear. Here, the junior entered a vehicle like the captain's gig first and God help her if she didn't guess what seat the senior wanted and avoid taking it.

"It's madness," she insisted.

"No," her new husband would remind her, "it is neither the right way nor the wrong way. It is the Navy Way."

Movement caught Ruth's eye. Izzy and the new exec were entering the docking bay. She flashed Trouble a quick grin and entered the captain's gig first. Taking the measure of the eight seats available to

her, she picked a middle one on the right. That left seven free for the three officers to squabble over.

Her husband entered right behind her, took the seat across from her and began belting himself in. The XO entered, took a quick sidestep, and let Izzy pick her seat.

Smart man, he'd go far in any Navy Ruth ran. She shrugged internally, doubting any Navy operated that way.

Izzy settled down in the seat ahead of Ruth. "How's it going, Ruth?" the captain asked as her hands automatically belted herself in.

Ruth was still trying to figure out the five-point harness the Navy used and didn't look up until she heard her name. "Oh fine, Izzy," Ruth said and watched both Trouble and the exec blink at the familiarity.

Well, darn it, I'm a civilian. There have to be a few advantages to that disability Ruth did not say.

"How are the farmhands working out?" Izzy asked, settling back in her seat, all harnessed in.

Ruth was still struggling. Trouble popped his one-point release and reached over to help. Another time, his hands' feathery touch on her breasts and inner thighs would have been a turn-on. Today, it just added to her frustration as he inserted tab A into slot B with an ease that eluded her.

Then again, he was always good at getting his tab A into her slot B. Trying not to blush, Ruth concentrated on Izzy and let her husband strap her in.

"They're catching on fine," Ruth assured Izzy. "Chief Yellin and Petty Officer Dora grew up on farms. They're fast learners, and they pass it along to the rest very quickly."

Actually, *retired* chief and petty officer, but you don't tell captains what they already knew. At least that was what Trouble insisted.

"You've been eating our produce for the last week," Ruth pointed out.

"I know. I signed the pay chit before we docked. I mean the other hands."

Trouble flashed Ruth just a hair of a raised eyebrow. He'd warned her that nothing happened aboard ship without the captain's knowing.

"We were expanding the tanks," Ruth began as methodically as she could while the gig went zero

gee and pulled away from the *Patton*. “We were back at High Woolamurra station, and where I grew up, a farm wasn’t a farm without the farmer’s wife.”

“So you hired on Chief Yellin’s wife,” Izzy finished.

Ruth nodded.

“And kids?” the XO asked.

“No, sir,” Ruth shot back. “They’re all grown and on their own.”

“Although if this experiment of yours works out,” Izzy went on, quoting almost verbatim from what Ruth was thinking, “the youngsters on your farm will want to bring along their wives, and they will want to have kids.”

“I’m housing them in the farm area, between the ice armor and the main hull, and I’m paying for their rations, same as any other of my contract labor force.”

“And if we have to fight?” the XO led on.

“The ex-crewmembers will report to their battle stations. Chief Yellin has identified a very safe area near the ship’s core for me *and* the wives to report to.”

The exec turned to Izzy for The Word. If Ruth’s eyes weren’t deceiving her, the skipper was sporting a sliver of a grin.

“Someone with too much time and too little brains back at the Navy Department decided it was cheaper to lose a ship or two rather than keep full crews aboard in peacetime,” Izzy said. “Some other dunderhead decided the planet-bound farmers were charging too much to provide certified bug- and fungus-free fresh fruits and vegetables for the ships. I figured I could combine both directives and give the *Patton* a farmful of willing hands only too ready to down tools and race back to battle stations.”

Izzy stroked her chin as entry gees built up. “Should have realized I wasn’t the only one with an imagination. Whose idea was it, yours or Chief Yellin’s?”

“Mine,” Ruth said.

One thing she’d learned fast from Trouble . . . and his troubles . . . was that when higher-ups asked

who was responsible, the only answer was the senior officer present.

At the farm, that was Ruth.

Izzy's grin was pulled down at the ends. Ruth hoped it was by the extra gees they were under. "Hope you're just as creative for what we're getting into."

After that, the captain lapsed into thoughtful silence. The others followed suit.

Ruth raised an eyebrow to Trouble. *What are we getting into?*

His almost imperceptible nod added nothing to her growing sense of apprehension. *What kind of nut farm have I signed on with?*

Until a few months ago, Ruth had never been off Hurtford Corner, the planet of her birth. Since being drugged and dragged into the filthy hole of a slave ship, she was up to five planets now . . . four in the last month alone.

It was nice seeing new places with Trouble's arm comfortably around her. How pleasant Wardhaven could be would have to wait for a time when Trouble wasn't being so darn Marine.

A government limo waited for them. Ruth quickly entered and took a jump seat, Trouble right beside her. A civilian had attached himself to their group sometime during the walk from gig to limo. Izzy actually broke into a wide smile at the sight of him and made a point of entering ahead of him.

"Woman, I'm a civilian now."

"And a deputy minister, if I'm not mistaken." Izzy shot back. "This is your get about, isn't it?"

"Rita refuses to have anyone assigned a limo. Good woman. Trying to be as tight a skinflint on the nonessentials as her husband would want."

"How is she?"

"More pregnant every day. And the happiest woman on ten planets since her husband made it back."

The civilian reached a hand across to Ruth's husband. "Trouble, isn't it? I see you've got your captain's bars back."

"Yes, Captain Anderson Trouble answered quickly.

And Ruth did a quick reassessment. The old guy was retired Navy. That raised his stature in the strange game these folks played. If this was *the* Captain Andy, skipper of the 97th Defense Brigade in the recent war, he was darn near a god to Izzy and Trouble.

“And this must be your bride,” the old fellow beamed.

Ruth beamed back, unsure if she should nod her head, offer her hand, try to curtsy where she was seated, or salute. Flustered, she just sat there and blushed.

“I read the report on what you and your husband did on Riddle.” Captain Anderson continued. “A fine bit of action. Well done. Very well done.”

Ruth might be new to the Navy, but she knew that to be the highest praise available to these tight-lipped, unexpressive people. Now she was blushing red-hot, but, for a civilian, in the presence of a god of war, it seemed like the best response.

“What are we headed for this time out?” Izzy asked.

“I have no idea. The spy has been keeping busy and offering no tidbits for the rest of us to gnaw on. I, myself, have been fully occupied trying to restore one lost bridegroom to the side of his lady-in-waiting. Shall we just go along, my feline friend, and enjoy the ride?”

“This tiger says why bloody not,” Izzy said.

The rest of the drive was quiet enough to give Ruth plenty of time to wonder what a farm girl was doing among the likes of these hardheaded fighters. When she’d signed herself up to be Izzy’s part-time ADEE Agent, she’d figured it for a minor thing.

Apparently, there was a lot more to saying “Yes” to the likes of Trouble and Izzy than she’d ever dreamed of.

Their destination was an imposing building of gray stone pierced by row upon row of windows. The limo drove into a basement garage and dropped them off next to an elevator, which disgorged them onto a thickly carpeted, high-ceilinged hallway, lined at long intervals by dark, wooden doors.

This is definitely not the poor side of town.

The empty conference room that Captain Anderson led them to smelled of wax and wood. A thick slab off a huge tree dominated the center of the room. Trouble took Ruth's elbow and edged her toward one of the high-backed wooden chairs lining the wall. Izzy and Andy seated themselves at the table. Ruth tried not to look like she was gawking as she surveyed the room.

Two chandeliers provided a gentle light. The walls were a rouge-and-cream paper, marred by empty hangers. Ruth would have bet paintings once hung there. Why keep the empty hangers?

She doubted it was an accident.

Nothing in the room spoke of carelessness to detail. Except the hangers . . . and the two large screens at the front and back of the room. They must be recent additions; their cables were neat but showed in stark, modern contrast to the carefully contrived ancient elegance of the rest of the room.

Interesting, very interesting. Turning to Trouble, she opened her mouth . . . and was immediately shushed by a curt shake of his head.

She followed his gaze to an opening door. Quickly, the room filled with purposeful people, talking quietly among themselves, juggling armfuls of readers, looking for seats. Several seemed to know her husband.

One gorgeous blonde flashed him a brilliant smile. "How's it going?" she gushed.

"Great," Ruth answered Trudy Seyd.

They'd met on Riddle. Tru had not only been Ruth's bridesmaid, but had gotten the planet's records center back up so that it could issue Trouble and Ruth a marriage license.

"What are *we* up to?" she shot back.

Tru's grin got even bigger. "Can't spoil the boss's announcement, but I think Trouble here is gonna love it."

The Marine beside Ruth groaned. "They don't pay me enough for what you get me into."

"Hey, you never would have met Ruth except for the last mess I got you into." STAT Tru protested, which wasn't exactly correct but was close enough not to argue over.

“Oops, here comes the boss.” Tru turned to take a place near the head of the table.

The announcement was ambiguous since three entered the room.

A rotund man in a ruffled white suit easily could have deserved the title; clearly he was used to dominating any room he entered.

Then Ruth caught a hint of the steel in the other man’s eyes. Back ramrod straight, the taller man took the room in with a commanding glance, nodded at whatever the other was saying, then turned a loving smile to the woman that seemed surgically joined to him at the elbow.

The woman was clearly pregnant. The smile she shared with the man was warm enough to make comfortable any long winter night.

Ruth remembered such glances between Ma and Pa, and sighed in hope that she and Trouble might one day share the same.

Then the woman spared a quick, appraising glance for the room, and Ruth ditched her first impression. The steely eyes and the assessing look were a startling contrast to the loving wife.

“Everyone is here,” the woman announced, taking the chair at the head of the table. The men moved smoothly to fill the empty seats at either side of her.

“Hopefully, this is the last ministerial meeting I’ll be chairing, now that my long-lost husband has wandered back from *wherever* it was he strayed off to.”

That drew a chuckle from the room.

“Captain Umboto, I’m glad you could make it. I see you’ve brought your key staff.” Which came as another shock to Ruth, piled so quickly upon the last one.

Since when was I promoted to key staff?

Then the woman turned to the big man. “Well, Mr. Spy, what have you and yours been up to?”

Captain Izzy Umboto leaned forward in her seat, hungry for action, for anything to sink her teeth into. As far as she was concerned, most meetings were a waste of time. Not with this bunch.

While the minions around the walls would have readers overstuffed with the raw feed, the discussion at the head of the table would be lean, mean, and with a bit of luck, something worth fighting for.

Andy patted her hand gently. “Down, tiger. Overeager people in our trade get the wrong people killed.” Under the Buddha-like gaze of her old master, the captain of the cruiser *Patton* leaned back in her chair, took a deep breath, and waited.

Fortunately, the spy did not make her wait long. “My technicians have been sifting through the scraps you enthusiastic field folks left us on Riddle. Fortunately, it was enough. Although I suspect it does not take a genius for intelligence analysis to glean the essentials from the debris.” The spy fixed Izzy with wide, inviting eyes, tempting her into his realm.

“The station above Riddle was too small and its capacity too limited to maintain a fleet of pirate cruisers,” Izzy said quickly. “It lacked the yards to refurbish the pirated ships or to file the serial numbers off them so that they could appear again on regular shipping lanes.” Izzy continued with growing confidence and a touch of disappointment.

It had felt good to grab a space station, capture three pirate raiders and bring down a planetary government of drug lords and slavers. Still, in the back of her mind, even then she’d known the fish was too small for the damage it did.

She needed to look further for the bastards that gave her niece Franny the drugs that STAT killed her.

Okay, spy, point me at something I can blow up.

“A very accurate assessment,” the spy said, rewarding her with a smile, a most strange rearrangement of his face. “We winged the buggers, but we missed the heart.”

“So where is the bankroll for those bastards?” said the other man. Izzy liked the sound of the question. She studied the man for a moment, then blinked in surprise.

This was Colonel Ray Longknife, the man who killed Unity’s President Urm and ended the war. But in all the videos, he hobbled around with a cane, the results of a chunk of iron her brigade had put up his backside.

Izzy frowned her own question at Andy.

“A long story,” he whispered back. “Later.”

“A good question,” the spy answered. “And one that gets straight to the heart of matters like these. In military operations, you follow the flow of energy and munitions. In matters like these, you follow the money, and it leads you to the source.”

“And?” the woman cut in.

“We lost the trail,” the spy said bluntly. “Which says something in and of itself. Only old money can hide that well. Old money from Earth. Fortunately, while money can hide, what it does often leaves telltales behind. For example, Colonel Longknife, we have taken apart the little present left behind in the *Second Chance*’s main network. A delightful bit of code, created by a sterling programming boutique back on Old Earth.”

The colonel looked very interested in the spy’s work.

“They serve a very select clientele, very discreet. Only recently has their conscience been pricked about the use certain of their customers have put their code to in the recent war. But they have come forward and made a clean confession of it.”

Why did Izzy doubt that guilt and absolution had anything to do with this sudden turn of affairs? She grinned, for once enjoying the chase.

“There is also the recent bit of luck that Mrs. Tordon gave us, putting the fear of God in her

Commander Uxbridge and allowing him to take flight.”

Izzy swiveled in her chair to observe the spy’s high praise turn Ruth beet red. Still, she did a decent imitation of the Marine seated next to her, saying not a word to deflect the kudos or correct the spy’s misconception . . . if indeed he did not already know she had meant to bag the commander that day.

“Uxbridge’s sudden withdrawal of all funds in certain numbered Swiss bank accounts allowed us to trace not only where he went, but also where the funds came from.”

“Where does the trail lead?” The woman leading the meeting rushed the spy; a glance her husband’s way made it clear she had better uses for her time.

“Forward, to a certain planet misnamed Savannah. While we on Wardhaven were successful sending our Unity thugs and politicians packing, their President Milassi managed to hang on, pointing to an election he won before Unity took over five years back. He has to face elections in a few months. Interest in the outcome of those elections goes far beyond Savannah.”

“Savannah was settled before Wardhaven,” Colonel Ray Longknife mused. “Industrialized from the get-go. I never had to fight them. Glad of that. Anything else we need to know about Savannah?”

“The Humanity ambassador to Savannah has requested additional Marines to bolster his small guard. Milassi seems to be having trouble maintaining order. The Senate also has a fact-finding committee due there in ten days. They want a cruiser in orbit for their stay.”

The spy turned to Izzy. “You will shortly receive orders to the Savannah system.”

“Nice of you to tell me about them. Did that trail your sniffing after lead anywhere else?”

“Yes. Forward the trail led to Savannah. Backward, and not as a total surprise, it led to this gentleman.”

The screen behind the spy came alive as Tru Seyd tapped her reader right on cue. A face smiled out at them blandly, the kind of pictures that the business section of papers featured under the headers of “promoted” or “heading the megamerged stellar corporation.”

Izzy found such pictures lacking in conviction.

This one was no exception. If the years had lined that face, given it any wisdom or character, computer processing of the negative or surgery on the original had removed any evidence.

The face was bland, blank, uninformative.

Still, Izzy memorized it, as she might the electromagnetic fingerprint of a new enemy's flagship. This was the target. This empty face had retailed the drugs that killed Franny and too many others.

Deep within Izzy a question formed. *Why would anyone as outwardly clean and straight as this man mess with poison?*

Izzy waved off the question; the odds of her getting an answer were not worth betting on. Then again, the odds of her getting such a man in her gun sights were pretty slim, too.

If it came, Izzy didn't want to miss.

"Mr. Henry Smythe-Peterwald's money was mature when old money was just being minted. His family has been buying and selling politicians since before graft had a bad name." The spy examined his notes. "I believe one or two popes are in his direct lineage though that was before the pope gave up his army.

"The family's money went from obscene to merely plentiful until a few generations back. Henry's grandfather got in on the ground floor of the interstellar net. He got a lock on the hardware and managed to buy up all the software. He also invested quite heavily in several planets just opening up."

"Was Savannah one of them?" Izzy asked.

"Yes."

Izzy made a gun with her finger. "Bang," she said to the picture.

"Were it only that easy," the spy fairly moaned. "Money and power build walls that keep investigators out more thoroughly than prisons keep ordinary people in. The trap that captures Mr. Peterwald must be carefully baited and cautiously sprung."

"He wouldn't be going to Savannah anytime soon?" Izzy asked.

"He has never set foot off Earth in his life. No one in his family has."

Izzy had never even seen Old Earth.

She sighed. Sailors didn't get to pick their battles. They fought where and when they were told. She did have orders to take the *Patton* to Savannah and offer all assistance. She might just have a chance to bring some well-deserved pain and discomfort into Mr. Peterwald's life.

Others, way above her pay grade, would have to be the ones to bring down such a gold-encrusted scumbag as little Henry there.

Henry Smythe-Peterwald X paced his father's room. Twenty paces took him to the windows that looked out over a thousand pristine acres of woodlands.

The old man had nurtured the waste just to impress lesser beings. Henry never knew his father to actually walk among those trees. In his youth, Henry had tried to hide there, to find some special place that was his alone.

Father's guards always found him.

Today, Henry ignored the view and whirled to cover the twenty paces back to the white wall, bare except for the myriad of medical gear that kept the old man alive.

His father had bragged, "I will live forever. I'm buying the rejuvenation treatments other people are dying for."

The old man would laugh at his joke, enjoying it immensely.

"You stupid, old bastard," Henry snarled. "You warned me never to trust a beta version. 'Wait until the second or third upgrade to risk your own system to the new damn code.' But you had to have the first rejuv the labs came up with. Now your brain has turned to snot?"

Remembering what his father could not, Henry laughed. He laughed in the old man's face.

It was safe to laugh now.

The old man couldn't call his guards.

The eyes that had made Henry cringe now stared blankly at the ceiling, blinking rarely. Breath flowed in and out as the ventilator pushed and pulled. The body could easily pass for a healthy thirty-year-old's, a good twenty years younger than Henry.

“Now live with what it’s got you, old fool,” the son snarled at the blank face.

The beeps and weaving patterns on the monitors quickened. Henry stepped away from the bed, put several paces between him and his father before the nurse passed through the self-opening door.

“Mr. Peterwald, your father seems to be having a distress episode,” the woman said as she hurried to the bed.

“I’ll leave him to you,” Henry said, avoiding even a glance at the nurse. Ms. Upton was probably the ugliest woman to pass the Nursing Boards in the last fifty years. Several others on his father’s support team rivaled her for that accolade, but Upton brought a second factor to her credit.

Her voice made stripping gears sound melodic.

His father had always kept the beautiful and graceful at his beck and call. Now, if the old man actually could hear, could understand what was going on around him, he’d be hating every moment of his immortality.

Served the bastard right.

Henry smiled as he left the room.

An elevator took him down to his office area. The wide space it disgorged him into presented a view of plants, trees, and a waterfall.

Hidden behind the façade, dozens of people in this room labored to fulfill his slightest whim.

More waited patiently, hopefully, for him to permit them a moment of his time.

He was distracted by none of them as he walked to his office. A word from him, and the waterfall would have disappeared, giving him a view to his primary secretary.

Henry walked, breathing the aroma of the woods, listening to the chirp of birds. Almost, he was in his hiding place, his special place.

Only now, no guards would dare disturb him. Today, no father could yank him in to put on a senseless display for lesser petitioners.

Someday, he might go back to the woods, the real woods, to see what his secret place had become.

Not today.

Not now. There were things to do. Grandfather had remade the family fortune. Father had added to it, reaching new heights until presidents and prime ministers sweated as waiting petitioners in this very room.

Now that Henry had finished paying off the courts and been formally appointed the old man's guardian and master of the family fortune, Henry would show him who was the better.

But he'd have to do it quickly, before the old man's brain was totally mush.

The drug money had offered him a quick way to the heart of Unity. Grandma Smythe may have razored out the bootleggers from the family tree but that didn't mean Henry was ignorant of the many ways the family made its fortune.

The Unity propagandists were right. Henry and other powerful men *were* jacking up the price for finished goods, and offering cutthroat prices for the raw materials the outer rim could offer for payment.

Why shouldn't the rim send Earth the drugs its teeming masses demanded for their distraction.

It had been an easy alliance for Henry. He had the ships; he knew which of his captains weren't obsessive about following every little law. The profits hadn't been all that great. Unity middlemen and the skippers had robbed Henry blind.

But he'd gotten the connections he needed with President Urm.

And Urm had happily promised Henry a war, with all its chances for war profiteering. And when it was done, he'd be in the perfect position to buy up losers for pennies on the dollar.

Yes, the war could have doubled or even tripled the family's fortune. If there was a brain cell left in the old man, he'd have had to admit that his son had beat both him and granddad.

But the war ended too soon.

"Is Whitebred waiting?"

"Yes, Mr. Peterwald." his secretary immediately answered.

"How long has he been waiting?"

“Two days, Mr. Peterwald.”

“Good. Send him in. And, Milly, change my office to one most intimidating for his personality profile.”

“Yes, Mr. Peterwald.” There was a brief pause. “Done, Mr. Peterwald.”

Around Henry, the room wavered, then solidified. Patterned after the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, this was one routine you couldn't download from every site on the Web. Just keeping the mirrors synchronized took more computing power than a large city required.

Henry loved it. He relished what happened to others when he surrounded himself with these ancient trappings of power.

Yes, it would be fun working Whitebred over in the Hall of Mirrors.

A short, dark-haired man entered.

He wore the buttonless gray suit that was *de rigueur* this month for high-powered business executives. Molded into the shoulders and arms were probably enough computing power to work a small starship.

Beside Whitebred, in Henry's view, numbers appeared showing his respiration, heartbeat, and blood pressure, probably stripped right off his own coat's confidential medical monitors. When Whitebred opened his mouth, Henry would get an immediate stress analysis, matched against Whitebred's nominal stress in his last couple of corporate meetings.

Henry kept such data on file for all his people. Good information on your subject made meetings like this easy.

He checked the make and model of Whitebred's own office software and suppressed a snort. Henry would know everything about Whitebred. He, in turn, would know nothing about Henry, or be in worse shape still if the poor man actually trusted the readouts that his own system fed him about Henry.

Yes, Henry would enjoy this meeting.

“Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Peterwald,” the supplicant said.

“Hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long,” Henry lied.

“No, no sir. No wait at all,” the man lied in return.

“Are you enjoying your work with us?”

“Yes, very much,” he lied again. “I think I have a lot to offer the corporation.” That was not a lie, at least as Whitebred saw it.

“Well, we have to look out for our returning war heroes.”

The man winced visibly.

“I liked your idea. The way you were running that fleet, you could have ended the war in a day.”

The man preened.

Henry abstained from pointing out that his bottom line was predicated on the war’s going for another six months. Whitebred did not have permission to end the war so suddenly. Then again, his actions hadn’t mattered one whit.

“I really could have if those mutineers hadn’t ruined everything.”

“Apparently, yours weren’t the only mutinous hands around. It was one of his own men that killed Urm.” *And ruined all my profitable plans.*

“Yes,” Whitebred hissed.

“I understand that you were able to leave a bit of a present behind for your mutineers.”

“Yes, Mr. Peterwald.”

“Well, I have a surprise for you. That Colonel Longknife who killed Urm also bought your cruiser off the scrap heap. Even hired what was left of its crew, most of your mutineers, I understand.”

“Have they attempted a jump?” The man was hardly breathing.

“As I understand it, Longknife, Abeebe, and the Marine captain went tooling off to a meeting several jumps from Wardhaven. Never got there,” Henry announced dolefully.

Whitebred beamed from ear to ear.

“Yes, I think you have taken care of all our problem people.” Henry chuckled.

The other man laughed out loud.

This was going rather pleasantly. The man was Henry's kind of fellow.

"How would you like to be an admiral again?"

"I don't think the Navy would have me, Mr. Peterwald. But, if you can arrange it, sir, and that's where you want me, I'm your man," he quickly corrected what another man might mistake for a rejection.

Henry smiled his understanding.

"No. There's nothing in the Humanity Navy that interests me. However, Savannah is in need of a new fleet commander. The station there is doing double duty for me. The Navy shores up a government I find very convenient, and its yards will work on ships other places are squeamish about handling, if you know what I mean," Henry said with a raised eyebrow.

"Definitely, sir," Whitebred said, no question even hinted at.

"Good. I want a man there in charge of all that. President Milassi of Savannah owes me several favors already. What with an election coming up, Milassi will want to owe me many more."

Henry snickered at the malleability of politicians.

Whitebred joined him in the laugh.

"Having my own man on the scene is just what I need. You'll command not only the ships and yards but several battalions of Marines. Think you can handle that?"

Whitebred had the good sense to say nothing at this reference to his recent inability to command his own fleet.

"I might add, that unlike the fools you had to put up with in the war, most of these officers know where their money comes from. The real money, not that pittance they draw from Savannah."

With it clear that all the important officers were in Henry's pocket, Whitebred leaned back in his chair. "When do you want me to start?"

"Right now would be good. I want to update you on the history of Savannah. Not the crap the media would feed you."

Henry stood, walked around his desk, and put an arm around Whitebred's shoulders as the man scrambled to his feet. "My grandfather started that colony. I think of it like a plantation that's been in the family for generations. Can't let it be tossed around like a ball among strangers, can we?"

"No, Mr. Peterwald, we can't let that happen."

"Good, how would you like to do dinner?"

Henry beamed happily as the man nodded.

"We can talk more over food. Milly, have security scrounge up my son from wherever he's hiding. It will be an education for him to hear how the family runs things."

Where Ruth grew up, they had words for how she felt; useless as tits on a boar hog. Worthless as a fifth wheel.

None of those were as useless as an officer's wife while he was busy moving his detachment. Trouble was prowling around his green-clad men, talking with his Gunny, busy as a man could be . . . and impervious to Ruth's presence.

Older Marine officer wives had warned Ruth about this. She understood it . . . in her head. But living through it . . . that was another thing entirely.

Maybe she should have stayed on the *Patton*, or come down on another shuttle.

But she had work of her own to do.

And it would help if she was introduced to the embassy staff by Trouble so that they would connect her with him.

After all, if she got in trouble and had to run for the safety of the legation, it would help if the Marine at the embassy gate knew to let the captain's woman in.

And Ruth was busy getting herself in trouble.

Or at least not doing what a simple space-based farmer or officer's wife should do.

Izzy and Trouble covered this during the week the *Patton* was in transit.

Those idiots back on Riddle had hardly known how to grow the drug plants. Surely, they hadn't done the bioengineering that turned common Earth-based plants into forget-the-world dust. No, someone else had created the stuff.

Ruth's job was to find that someone and do something about them.

Right! Easy! Just land on a strange planet and wander around asking any stranger, “You know where the illegal-drug research station is?”

I wouldn't survive a day.

Izzy and Trouble had looked at her dumbly, and said “That sounds like a plan.” and left her to stew over a real one.

As Trouble got his Marines and their duffel bags loaded aboard a bus sent by the embassy for his company, Ruth rented a car from a counter in the spaceport.

Now she understood why Izzy had been so insistent that Ruth get a credit card with her corporate name on it.

Pa never borrowed anything. If he and Ma couldn't pay for it, they went without.

Here, Ruth needed borrowed wheels, and no one rented without a credit card for collateral. The Navy wasn't the only place that took some getting used to.

Ruth completed her rental agreement and pulled her tiny car up behind the bus to wait. The fellow who rented her the car had assured her that its map screen would show her how to get anywhere in town.

Yeah, right. Ruth would follow the bus.

While she waited for Trouble to get moving, she asked the computer to show her the best way to the Society of Humanity Embassy.

The computer told her there was no embassy, “Glorious Unity forces being at war with Earth's running dogs.”

Someone hadn't updated their database.

Trouble seemed in no hurry, so Ruth expanded her research. “Where's the illegal-drug research center?”

“I know of no such business,” came back at her.

“Chemical research center?” she tried.

“I know of no . . .”

“Farm or plant research center?”

“I know of . . .”

“What do you know?” Ruth snapped in exasperation.

That was a mistake. The computer began an unstoppable exposition on all the bars and bordellos in town, some with quite graphic descriptions of the services offered.

And it wouldn't shut off. Ruth tried. How she tried! The voice ran on.

“Hey, woman, want your windows washed?” a young voice piped.

“What?” Ruth asked, glancing around for the voice's source.

“Want your windows washed? They're dirty.”

“What? Where are you? I can't hear you very well. This thing won't cut off.”

In answer to her first question, a squeegee started waving outside the passenger side of the car.

Ruth rolled the window down.

The squeegee reached in and rapped the dashboard, “Shut up, you machine mouth,” the young voice snapped.

The computer did.

“That's better. Woman, you want your windows washed? I do a good job. Only one dinar, Savannah.”

Ruth checked her purse. “I don't have any Savannah money yet.”

A face, very dirty and horribly thin rose on tiptoes to smile at her from the passenger window. “That's fine. I can do your windows for one Earth dollar.”

Ruth wasn't sure what the exchange rate was, but she was pretty positive it wasn't one for one. She glanced at her windows. They were clean.

She studied the kid; his hopeful smile was hard to deny. Ruth held up an Earth quarter.

“You drive a hard bargain, woman, but you win,” and the kid quickly went to work smearing her front windows.

“Where you want to go?” the kid asked as he came around to her side of the car, giving Ruth her first

good look at him.

The rest of the boy was as thin as the face had promised. He looked maybe six or eight, but allowing for a tough street life, he might be twelve. His clothes were dirty, torn and way too big for him. What passed for shoes were held together by string with used newspaper for soles.

Following behind him was a girl, maybe a year or two younger.

“Are you his sister?”

“No, he’s my brother,” the girl piped back.

“Tiny gets confused easy,” the boy explained, not slowing down his work. “Where you going?” he asked again.

“To the Society of Humanity Embassy,” Ruth answered this time.

“The old one or the new one?”

“The one with the ambassador, I hope.”

“Oh. The traffic’s bad through town. You could get lost real easy, ma’am. I’ll show you a shortcut. Get you there real fast. Only cost a dollar.”

“I’m planning on following that bus.”

The boy studied the big vehicle ahead of them. “You could lose it at a stoplight. I can make sure you get there. Only a dollar.”

Ruth looked down into the pleading eyes of the girl . . . and weighed the chances that these two kids could hit her over the head and leave her body in a ditch somewhere.

Concluding that neither or both could hurt her, Ruth nodded. “You make sure I get to the embassy, and I’ll pay you two quarters.”

“You drive a hard bargain, lady,” the boy answered.

But his sister was nodding yes.

“Okay, we do it. Just for you.”

Sis let out a squeak of joy and clapped her hands. A moment later, big brother opened the passenger

door and helped sis into the backseat. She ignored the seat belt and stood, leaning on the front seat. Brother then settled himself down beside Ruth.

“I can take you there now. Why you want to follow stinky bus?”

“Because my husband’s on it.”

“He one of the jarheads?”

“Marines,” Ruth automatically corrected the epitaph she now knew to smile when she said, and better yet, not say. “And since he may have to loan me an extra quarter for your tip, it’s Mr. Marine to you.”

“Yes, ma’am, boss lady. Whatever you say.”

The bus rumbled into life, and Ruth discovered why the kid called it stinky. The engine let off a blue cloud of poorly burned hydrocarbons that made Ruth want to cough.

Sis held her nose and made a “Pee Euw” sound.

Brother gave Ruth his “Whatever you say, woman, you’re paying for this,” shrug. Thankfully, the bus quickly got in gear.

Ruth followed it out of the port.

“It’s gonna turn left at this light,” brother told her. It was a good thing Ruth had been warned; the bus did a quick left at the light without even slowing and nary a signal.

Ruth hit her turn light and followed.

“I told you so,” the boy grinned.

“That’s worth an extra quarter,” Ruth assured him, keeping her eyes on the road, the traffic, and the bus.

“It’ll take this on-ramp to the expressway,” the boy offered.

“Expressway?” Ruth cringed inside. On Hurtford Corner, she’d never driven over forty, fifty kilometers an hour.

She’d since learned that speeds on expressways . . . unless clogged with rush-hour traffic . . . could be a hundred or more. Swallowing her fear, Ruth followed the bus up the ramp. Again, no turn signal.

She listened for her own turn signal; it made happy clicks. Yes, turn signals weren't outlawed on this planet.

But they did seem distressingly optional.

At least for large buses.

And trucks and anyone else that wanted in her lane.

Everyone behind the wheel on this planet seemed possessed by some urgent death wish. Cars and trucks rocketed along at speeds that must have exceeded the *Patton*'s best, changing lanes with only inches to spare.

The bus, not to be outdone, aimed itself for the far left lane as soon as it entered the highway and dared anything smaller to get in its way.

Ruth started to follow.

"I know the way to the embassy," the kid assured her, "if you want to go slower."

The boy huddled on the seat beside her. Sis was no longer hanging over the front seat; a quick glance behind Ruth didn't show sis on the backseat.

She must be cowering on the floor.

Ruth started to ask if the two of them had ever been on an expressway before. Then swallowed the question, unwilling to strip the boy of his man-of-the-world airs.

Ruth stayed in the slower right lane and let the bus disappear in traffic ahead.

"Where is the embassy?" she asked her guide.

"Near the river, a couple of blocks from Government Center," he said through clinched teeth.

"Computer, show me the way to Government Center," Ruth ordered. A map appeared on the dash in front of her, showing the expressway in red. The fifth or sixth exit ahead showed as yellow and a trail led off it to the right.

"Thank you, young man." Ruth said as cheerfully as she could manage with a huge truck riding her bumper, eager to push her along.

“Ah, you are welcome,” the boy said, the words seemingly strangers to his mouth.

How often was the poor kid thanked for what he did?

As Ruth motored along at a stately speed . . . and cars whizzed by her on the left . . . the children regained their confidence. Apparently, they’d never experienced the view the expressway offered. As they came over a rise and began the descent into the river valley, their excitement returned.

“Oh, there’s the river,” the girl squealed.”

“Those tall buildings near the river are Government Center,” the boy offered.

Ruth risked a glance. Several skyscrapers shot up in the center of town. Whether all of them were Government Center or just a few, Ruth didn’t know or ask.

Not doubt, she would find out soon enough.

6

Fifteen adrenaline-filled minutes later, the kid pointed out the Society of Humanity's new embassy, and Ruth pulled up behind the now-parked bus.

Marines had formed loose ranks, with their kits in front of them, rifles slung. Trouble wanted the rifles in full view though only he and Gunny's sidearms were loaded. That was one of several hints that Ruth had picked up that this was not going to be just a case of the Marines showing up in fancy dress blues and saluting smartly.

The kids seemed reluctant to leave the car, so Ruth pocketed the keys and headed for Trouble.

He stood beside a young lieutenant in undress greens, observing as Gunnies did the work, a strange way of doing things, but apparently much required by the Navy Way.

Ruth came to a halt several paces from her husband and waited to be recognized. It took only a moment for Trouble to turn a smile her way, reminding her why she loved the big galoot.

"Lieutenant Tubby Vu," Trouble said by way of introduction to the rail-thin officer, "I'd like you to meet my wife, Ruth."

"The infamous Trouble has a ball and chain?" The young man laughed as he offered Ruth his hand.

She replied with a firm handshake, solid enough to show that she worked for a living, but not so tight as to challenge the man to a test of grips.

He responded with a broadening grin.

"My *wife*," Trouble corrected Ruth's official status, "is the ship farmer for the *Patton*. She'll be nosing about town for equipment and supplies, so she may occasionally need some semiofficial help."

There, that provided Ruth with enough cover to hide a multitude of sins.

“I’ll be glad to be of any service that I can. I’ll advise my Gunny to make sure the troops get The Word.”

Was there a wink and a nod involved in the lieutenant’s communication with his newly arrived captain?

As Izzy said, learning all the unofficial handshakes was a challenge.

“Hon, do you have a couple of dollars? I need to pay off my native guides.”

“Doesn’t your car have a map?” Trouble asked, with just the hint that if she didn’t know how to make it work, he’d explain it all to her later.

“Oh, yes it does,” she answered sweetly. “Do you know that Savannah has no Society of Humanity Embassy on account of Unity being at war with Earth’s running dogs?”

“Someone hasn’t updated their database?” Trouble said.

“I think I said the same thing myself a few miles back,” Ruth said, smiling sunnily.

“I have some Savannah dinars if you haven’t had a chance to get any local currency,” the lieutenant offered helpfully.

“I promised them Earth dollars,” Ruth pointed out.

“The official exchange rate is over eight to one.” The lieutenant frowned. “I’ve seen local cops break a street kid’s arm for overcharging a tourist.”

“They wouldn’t . . .” Ruth started, then realized that was only one example of the kind of world she’d landed in. With a swallow, she changed her answer. “I promised them Earth dollars, and I always pay my debts. Captain?”

Trouble reached in his pocket and came up with two one-dollar coins. “This ought to do it.”

The kids had stayed in the car, their heads below window level. *Gosh, they were short.* In the few steps to the car, a plan came together in Ruth’s mind. She opened the passenger-side door and went down on one knee, level with the boy’s eyes.

“I’m going to be doing a lot of traveling around town in the next couple of days. You seem to know

your way around, and when you don't, you have the right words to get the computer to answer my questions. Would you like to hire on with me?"

Sis's face lit up like a Lander's Day fireworks display. Brother tried to look thoughtful, but failed when he saw the two coins in Ruth's hand. "Two dollars a day, Earth?" he yelped.

"Two dollars, each day, every day. You meet me across the street tomorrow morning, under that tree beside the bridge at eight."

It hit Ruth that the kids might very well sleep under the bridge that night to make sure they didn't miss their date with her. No watch was in evidence.

The boy seemed to read her mind. He scowled. "I know how to tell time. Eight it will be." With that, he grabbed the coins, and he and his sister scooted off.

"What was that all about?" Trouble asked, as Ruth rejoined him and the lieutenant.

"I think I just hired some native guides for our port stay." She laughed.

The lieutenant seemed dubious. "You could do better than kids. For Earth dollars, half the cabbies in this town would sell you their cars."

"And other things," Trouble added with a raised eyebrow.

"Well sir, yes, but she's your wife."

"She's the *Patton's* contract farm manager," Trouble corrected. "Get used to it, Tubby, the worlds are changing."

"So I've noticed. And here comes one of those changes. Your new boss, oh captain mine, and no longer my problem."

Ruth turned to see a tall woman striding toward them. Her beige suit highlighted her green eyes and blond hair. She offered Trouble her hand; as he shook it, she introduced herself.

"I'm Becky Graven, the embassy's first political officer. Think of me as the senior person inside that works for a living," she said with just the hint of a smile.

"I'm Captain Tordon. Most of my friends call me Trouble."

“So I’m told. For good reason?”

“Maybe. Sometimes.”

“All the time,” Ruth drawled, one woman to another.

“And you are?” Ms. Graven said, turning to Ruth.

“Ruth Tordon, contract farmer on the *Patton*. It’s a new business, and I’m still trying to get the right mix of gear, seed, and chemicals.”

“Tordon,” Graven said, looking at Ruth, then at Trouble, “Tordon. No family resemblance.”

“We’ve only been married two months, so it may not show that much,” Ruth quipped.

Graven snorted. “A Marine officer’s wife. You poor sucker.”

“A ship’s farmer,” Ruth repeated.

“If you say so, deary. A year from now, I’ll love to hear how it’s working out.”

She turned to Vu. “Lieutenant, we’ve rented the building behind the embassy to quarter this new detachment as well as your own. Several of the Foreign Service Officers are moving off the economy and into the embassy. They’ll be taking your old quarters.

“Wasn’t that building a prison?” Vu asked.

“It’s presently office space. Before that, it was a prison, and before that, it was an apartment building. One thing you’ll learn about Savannah, things change fast around here. Occasionally for the good. Captain, will you walk with me for a few moments. Ruth, you might as well get the standard briefing from me as secondhand from your husband.”

Dismissing the lieutenant to his housekeeping chores, Graven turned and began to walk toward the river. Ruth hurried after her.

Trouble delayed to order the young officer to “Carry on” and return a salute before he marched briskly to catch up.

Marine officers did not run.

Ruth had seen Trouble run. She squelched that memory of fire and explosions.

At the river, Graven paused to glance up and down the empty promenade, “This ought to be secure if we keep walking and talk softly.”

“It’s that bad?” Trouble observed.

“Yes and no,” Graven answered quickly. “Unlike the ambassador, I don’t think we have to worry about anything so crass as peasants storming the legation. Unity made its play, fell flat, and most of its thugs and hoodlums are busy running for cover.” She paused to frown.

“That may not be the case on Savannah. My intelligence officer swears that a load of fingerprint files were dumped in the river during the last days of the war. Now, some of the worst thugs and hard cases are employed by Milassi’s police force and secret police.”

“Secret police aren’t allowed under the Society of Humanity’s constitution,” Ruth observed.

“Right, but if you name it after the Central Bureau of Investigations back on Earth and use their table of organizations, it takes the civil rights watchdogs a while to spot how differently it works. I’ve signed off on the initial report. In a few years, they’ll get a task force out here to investigate.”

“But not before the coming election.” Trouble concluded.

“Smart for a Marine.”

“Some of us are. What is this Senate committee looking into?”

Graven gave them a sideways look. “Don’t be too smart, soldier. But if I’ve been informed correctly, the two of you are some kind of a team and you, Marine, are here to see to more than keeping the ambassador’s flower garden from being trampled.”

Ruth and Trouble answered that with a slight nod.

“You notice the industrial park on the drive in from the port?”

“That bus driver was pulling more gees than I’ve had on some combat drops. I was busy just hanging on,” Trouble drawled.

“Lots of factories,” Ruth observed. “Savannah’s supposed to be highly industrialized. Why did it go with Unity? I would think it would be selling its finished goods at as high a price as anything from the

hub of humanity. It doesn't match the usual profile for a Unity rebel planet."

"For a farm girl, you know an awful lot about high finance," Graven frowned.

"Just because we didn't want all the expensive doodads doesn't mean we're ignorant. And I've had good reason to study Savannah for the last week. Some things just don't add up."

"They do when you have all the pieces," Graven told them. "What they built on Savannah did sell for top dollar, just like Earth stuff. But that didn't mean a lot of the money stayed here. Take a big fusion generator, for example. Certain high-value parts, like gears and turbines aren't made here. They have to be imported from one of Earth's big orbital plants. And strangely enough, most of the profits in the generator's construction get sucked right back to Earth to pay for those parts."

"Wouldn't that close them down when the war started?" Ruth asked.

"Should have. Absent a large inventory of critical parts, Savannah's factories should have become ghost towns in a few days, weeks at the most."

"How many Daring class STATcruisers did Savannah contribute to the Unity effort?" Trouble asked, then answered his own question. "Thirty, forty?"

"Thirty-seven," Graven corrected. "Each with three generators. General Fusion only has local warehousing capacity for a dozen of the Earth supplied critical parts."

"So somebody was shipping them turbines from Earth during the war?"

"It seems that way."

"Is that what the committee is here to find out?" Ruth asked.

Graven chuckled wickedly. "Hay is showing in your hair, darling. I've seen the list. I know their backgrounds. Three or four of them might be here to dig. Trust me, the others are here to bury it as fast as those four uncover it."

"Where does that leave us?" Trouble asked.

"Doing the job we came here to do. That's all any of us can do. The job we hired on for. Sometimes, we get to do a thing or two before anyone up there knows what's happening. As I understand it, that's

what you two did on Riddle. Must have been fun.”

Ruth and Trouble looked at each other and shook their heads at the same moment.

“No, trust *me* on this one,” Ruth said, “it wasn’t fun at all.”

Colonel Ray Longknife watched his wife ready herself for bed. For two long months, he'd held himself together with memories like these. He took a deep breath of her scent, content to just refresh the recollection . . . for the moment.

As she brushed out her long hair, it fell over her bare shoulders. In the mirror, Ray watched as her diaphanous gown flowed over and around the gentle swell of her belly. Thin straps struggled to hold her now-enlarged breasts and frequently failed, as darkening areolas played peekaboo with him.

Ray thoroughly enjoyed the view.

Quickly, he finished undressing so Rita could see how much he enjoyed the view. She smiled wickedly at him, settled the last hair in place, and turned to gasp in mock surprise. "Soldier, you must have been gone a long time, to find an old married hag like me so . . ."

"Not long enough for you to become an old married hag, young woman, now get over here, and I'll show you how long I've been gone."

"But you've been back ten whole days." She sighed as she came to stand above him.

"It's not the days, woman, but the nights."

"And such nights." She laid herself down beside him in one languid motion. "Baby's enjoying the visits. He'd been about to put out a sign on the front lawn, baby available for rent, apply within."

"The only thing getting within is me, woman." Ray growled, but his fingers were gentle as he explored the silken flesh of her breasts and made widening circles toward her thighs.

"Oh yes," she murmured.

Ray was home from the wars. Home from the stars. And now he had legs, real legs. He didn't have

to just lie there, waiting for her to do something.

Damn it was good to have his legs back underneath him. Or in this case, above her.

President Steffo Milassi signed the commission with a tired flourish. Horatio Whitebred was now a full admiral in the Savannah Navy.

Which ought to keep that idiot Peterwald happy for a whole five minutes. Didn't the man know that navies did not win elections!

Then again, if the stories he'd heard about Riddle were right, navies certainly could lose elections.

Milassi sighed. It had been a long day, full of meetings with lamebrained henchmen who had plenty of muscle. Unfortunately, they were clueless as the pavement they stumbled over when it came to using the power Milassi gave them in order to keep it.

Fortunately, he wasn't the only one who couldn't get good help.

Take that whimpering Society of Humanity ambassador. He now had fifty more Marines to guard his door. Did the fool really think he was in any danger?

Hell, nothing happened in Petersburg, nothing happened on Savannah without Milassi's writ.

And Steffo wasn't about to get Earth any more involved on Savannah than it already was. He made a marginal notation, adding an extra block to the no-violence zone around the damn embassy.

Best not to risk the ambassador's even seeing a head being bashed in.

Steffo was about to go on to the next report when his eyes fell on the last paragraph.

A woman had landed with the Marines . . . a ship's farmer. What in the name of hell was a "ship's farmer?"

That forced him to turn another page. Even Earth couldn't be dumb enough to put farms on warships! He made a notation to his flatfoots to follow that woman.

There had to be more to this story.

Then, again, maybe it *was* just part of Earth's effort to prevent local farmers from getting their hands

on hard Earth currency.

Steffo started to scratch through his order, then chose to leave it in place for a few days. It wouldn't hurt his hounds to follow her around a bit.

Intelligence hounds couldn't be used for the more blunt bits of election campaigning. If the ones asking questions also broke heads, people began to avoid them.

Milassi had learned the benefit of keeping the two apart.

Milassi rubbed his eyes, letting them wander for a few moments over the trappings of money and power that surrounded him. He snorted; they were nothing but a prison.

He laughed as he turned to the next report, a list of troublemakers who needed to be rounded up before the senators arrived. This prison was much to be preferred to the ones he sent these problems off to.

He scribbled his initials on that report and went to the next.

Ray lay spooned around his wife, his chest to Rita's back. His hand measuring the slowing race of her heart. He had brought exquisite pleasure to the woman he loved, and now it had given way to tranquil sleep.

He felt like he could leap any mountain in the worlds.

His hand moved lower, coming to rest on the bulge of her belly. Rita said she could feel the baby moving. Ray held his hand lightly there, but that miracle of budding life eluded him.

"I'm here, little one. I'm back."

And I'll be leaving again soon, came to him, unbidden.

Ray sighed. Yes, he would be going out again. But not for long.

I'll be back real soon, little one. Real soon.

Ray rolled over on his back, slowed his own breathing, and prepared for sleep. A fast run to Savannah couldn't cause all that much trouble, could it?

In his head, a quick course for Savannah played out. Just three jumps using the ones only he knew about now, after Santa Maria.

Unbidden, a second route superimposed itself on the first. This one was six jumps. And deep in the system of the fourth one . . .

Sleep came to Ray . . . and dreams.

Morning light played on the ceiling as Ray slowly came awake to the gentle touch of fingers playing in the hair on his chest.

He smiled.

“Make us late for work,” Rita breathed throatily.

He reached for her, kissed her. For a long time, nothing else mattered.

As he lay beside her, catching his breath, her grip on his hand tightened. “You’re dreaming more now.”

“Yes.” He nodded, not taking his eyes from the ceiling, from the unseen stars that still haunted his vision. “I kind of had to learn to trust my dreams.”

Rita rolled over on her side, rested a hand against his cheek. “You have all those star charts locked in your skull. You have to let us get them out. I’m converting the three pirate ships we captured at Riddle into scout cruisers like the *Second Chance*. The Wild Goose class, we’re calling them. They can spread out, using your charts. Think of what they’ll find for our baby!”

Her other hand went to rest on the bulge below her heart.

Ray smiled. His wife was a dreamer, a tiger, all those and more. She had been enthusiastic about exploration before the baby.

Now she was a fanatic.

“I’m meeting with a group of astronomers who have some ideas about how to match what I know with what they have in their databases,” Ray said. “In a day or two, they should have enough to keep our

ships busy for the next year.”

“In a day or two?” she echoed, both hands now on her tummy.

Ray rolled into a sitting position, pulled Rita into his arms. “A day or two will be enough.”

“I want you to stay here until the baby comes.”

“I’ll be here when the baby comes.”

Rita pulled away from him. In a flash of flying pillows, blankets, sheets, she was on her feet. “You want to go out again? Last time almost killed you! For God sakes, man, haven’t you done enough for any ten men?”

Ray took a deep breath. It was going to be a long morning. The ministry would have to manage on its own while the two of them had it out.

Ruth headed out the front door of the embassy, flashing a sunny smile at the young Marines on guard duty in reply to their salutes. She was at the curb before she noticed that there was no one waiting for her under the tree across the way by the river. As she came to a halt to consider what might have happened to the kids, a cab rolled up.

“Need a ride, lady?” the bewhiskered man behind the wheel called through the open window.

“Not at the moment,” Ruth answered automatically, still scanning the rolling green of the riverbank for any sign of two kids.

“I know Petersburg. I can find you anything you want. Anything. Nothing goes on around here I don’t know about.” He smiled with absolute confidence.

“Thanks.” Ruth innocently smiled back. “I’m just starting my day off with a walk. My husband’s a Marine, and he’s already done a three-mile run,” she added by way of explanation.

Trouble had had the gall to wake her up at “oh dark early” with a grin and a suggestion she join him.

She’d hit him with the only thing handy—a pillow. Tonight, she’d arrange to have something heavier at hand. Like the combat rations they’d had for breakfast.

Even split four ways, that thing was still heavy in her stomach.

“Have it your way,” the cabby said and gunned away, leaving Ruth in a shower of rubble from the worn road and fumes from his tailpipe.

Can’t anyone around here tune a motor?

Ruth headed for a wooden bench looking out over the wide, cobbled promenade facing the river. As she suspected, the kids were hiding in it, huddled behind its high back.

“What are you two doing?”

“Don’t talk to us. Just sit on the bench. Is the Bear gone?” the boy whispered quickly.

Ruth sat down beside the boy and looked out on the river rather than at the kids. “The Bear?”

“The fuzzy-faced cab driver,” he said. “He works for the crushers.”

“Crushers?”

“Blues. Black boots,” the boy hurried on, frustrated at the failure to communicate.

“You mean the police,” Ruth offered.

“Police,” the boy echoed, frowning in puzzlement at his sister.

Both the kids looked much better today than they had the day before. They had washed off a couple of pounds of dirt. Both sported new, if badly worn, shoes.

Ruth decided to try another approach. “What do the crushers, ah, black boots do?”

“They keep us out of this part of town,” sister offered. “Rat’s still seeing double from the kick the Bear gave him in the head.”

“They twist the bigger girls, make them pay rent for their corners. Break our arms if they find us sleeping around parks. Crushers,” he said as if the word said it all.

Ruth decided it did. She’d had no idea the risks she was asking the kids to take when she told them to meet her here. “You two stay put. I’ll bring the car around and honk for you. You come running then.”

The kids nodded with understanding.

Ruth stood, stretching lazily as she took in the river-park area. No one was walking along the promenade. Some traffic roared across the bridge into the government center, but none of them looked interested in two kids huddled on a park bench. She checked traffic along the road in front of the embassy.

Bear and his cab were gone.

Casually, Ruth sauntered back to the embassy. The Marines saluted; she smiled.

On her way to the car, she did a quick detour to their quarters for her sidearm.

Izzy had warned Ruth that Savannah had strict laws against civilian weapons. Since Ruth was a

civilian, her military automatic was anathema and could easily land her so deep in the local jail that they'd never dig her out.

Ruth checked the weapon, made sure she had plenty of both nonlethal and lethal rounds, checked again to make sure her bra had the locator beacon Trouble had insisted she sew into its lining.

Only then did she trot out to the car.

Why, oh why, did I ever leave Hurtford Corner? Trouble, you better come home early tonight. And horny, too.

Ray drove them to the ministry building. As Rita had asked, they were late.

The ride, however, was silent. Rita sat like a stone Madonna on her side of the car. As the elevator carried them up, she said to the door in front of her, "You meet with your stargazers and shrinks. I'll keep the paperwork moving. Can't let the ministry collapse around our heads."

"Thank you, dear," he said.

"Don't thank me," she snapped. "I'm doing it for me and my baby. Not for you."

"I still appreciate it."

"You might show some of that appreciation around here a bit more often."

"I won't be gone long."

"That's what you said last time."

"Damn it, woman, they've fixed the ship."

"And what will go wrong next?" she fired back at him, as the elevator door opened onto four people waiting for a ride.

They took one look at Ray and Rita and took several steps back.

After a moment, the doors closed on Rita's silent anger, returning them to the appearance of intimacy.

"Rita, I could get killed crossing the street. This damn elevator could fall. Hell, wife, you knew I was a soldier when you married me."

Rita slapped the STOP button. “Yes. I knew you were a soldier. Damn it, I carried you out there to die. I brought you back and put the pieces together, then took you off to kill Urm and yourself. I did all the things a good soldier’s wife should do. And you got discharged, remember? Check that ID card you carry. R-E-T-I-R-E-D. The war’s over. Baby and I have paid our dues. So when are you going to quit chasing after a new place to die?”

The tears were streaming down her face now.

He took two steps to her, folded his arms around her. She was stiff as a board. He caressed her hair.

“Honey, I’m not going out to war. I’m just going to a business meeting. Your dad has gone to a million of them. I’ll spend my days with people in gray and brown business suits. No uniforms this time. These are politicians from Earth I need to talk to. Just a few days. Then I’ll be headed right back here. I promise. This time is different. I’m not a soldier anymore.”

She seemed to relax. “You’re not a soldier anymore.”

“Yes, honey, no uniform. Just look at me.” Ray stepped away.

Her eyes flitted up and down the conservative gray suit he’d put on today. “You’re back’s too damn straight for a businessman.”

Ray hunched his shoulders and stooped over. She laughed through her tears. “Why do you have to go now?”

“The senators are visiting Savannah.”

“Savannah. Why does it have to be Savannah?”

Ray straightened himself back up, then shrugged his shoulders. “Why is it any place? It just is.”

“Mr. Raymond Longknife, civilian, once this baby is born, we will fit out a lead-lined room on the *Second Chance* for you, me, and a nursery. Next time you go gallivanting, we all gallivant.”

“Most certainly, Senior Pilot Nuu.” he said as he bent to kiss his wife.

“Discharged,” she mumbled around his kiss.

“Definitely,” he agreed.

Ruth drove where the kids directed. They were showing her the sights, and in not a few cases, probably seeing them for the first time themselves.

Her “native guides” had a lot of holes in their knowledge. The computer helped. It presented Ruth with an official sightseeing list.

For this morning, Ruth followed it as she struggled to get her bearings in a town a hundred times larger than any on Hurtford Corner. At least, it seemed that way.

Initially, somebody had put some thought into planning this city. Wide boulevards quartered the city, north, south, east, west, with trolleys providing easy public transport.

The Anna River flowed in from the northwest and out to the southeast. A wide expressway drew a circle around the city center three mile out from Government Center.

There should have been additional circles six, nine and twelve miles out, but urban sprawl had gotten ahead of planning.

Beyond the planned zone was a hodgepodge of roads, at different angles, with different widths and at different levels of upkeep ranging from poor to nonexistent. That was where the industry and its workers lived. That was where the kids guided Ruth after she took them through a drive-through and fed them lunch.

Twice.

“Don’t eat so much you make yourself sick,” Ruth said in her mother’s voice, startling herself and the kids . . . for different reasons.

“You can eat too much?” the boy said, raw disbelief competing for room on his face with dripping

ketchup, which he'd been delighted to learn came at no extra charge.

"Yes," Ruth said, checking the tone of her voice and wondering why she was being the mommy to these kids.

The two kids exchanged looks, silent communication that Ruth suspected was nine-tenths disbelief and one-tenth dismay.

Before they could say anything further, Ruth asked the computer to show them where the General Fusion Inc. plant was located. The boy helped her follow the directions. In fifteen minutes, after only three wrong turns, Ruth was slowly driving by the front gate.

There were a dozen lunch trucks parked on the dusty field in front of the factory. A profusion of smells wafted from them, mixed into an eclectic potpourri that reminded Ruth of a Saturday afternoon at the annual farmer's fair as the women competed with each other for the ribbons.

Ruth smiled at the pleasant memories.

Then a fight broke out on the hard-packed dirt field.

There were shouts in languages that Ruth didn't understand. A circle formed as two men threw spirited, if wild punches at each other.

Guards in blue uniforms started sauntering from the factory gate toward the fight with no urgency until several people along the periphery started swinging at each other.

Then, whistles blowing, the blues trotted forward, clubs up to wail on any and all, irrespective of their belligerence.

Brother eagerly watched. "Fights don't usually break out until quitting time. Us kids will hang around the factories, seeing if anyone needs help home. You can make a nickel if your guy is really beat-up."

The kid swallowed his excitement, aware he'd given away the local going rate of help.

Ruth continued her slow drive by the plant, turning left to follow its northern side. The fight broke up, and men headed back to work in ragged clumps. There were shouts between groups, and hand gestures that Ruth expected were obscene, but she was unfamiliar with.

When one of the Blues took an interest in Ruth's slow-moving car, she accelerated, took the first right away from the plant, and asked for directions from the computer to Consolidated Electric LLC's plant.

It had the same dusty foreyard. Peeling paint and broken windows were the only break in the large, dreary factory walls.

"People come to work there day after day," Ruth breathed, appalled.

"Only if your old man has a job there. You got to have family ties to get a good job," brother informed her with bleak innocence.

"Can you get fired for fighting?"

"You can," brother said.

"But the one you kept helping home, last year," sister piped in. "He's a foreman now, isn't he?"

"Yeah," brother agreed. "Omar did get the foreman's job. He doesn't fight anymore," the kid said, probably mourning his lost nickels.

"Why were they fighting?" Ruth muttered, half to herself.

"Maybe one of the right-handers said something about a left-hander's wife or daughter. Maybe one of the scrapers crossed the line that morning. Who knows? They fight, the blues watch, then they break it up," brother said with a shrug.

Ruth had more questions but doubted that her diminutive informants had the knowledge or the wherewithal to answer them. Drives by several more dilapidated factories showed her nothing new.

The kids knew of no place with green stuff growing around it. Ruth could easily believe that. She'd never seen a place so gray, dreary, and drab. Admittedly, Savannah was only her sixth planet, but she had to wonder what it was like when the rainy season came, and the dirt turned to mud.

When she asked, the kids just shivered.

About midafternoon, Ruth noticed definite signs of the fidgets in the kids. "Is there a problem?" she asked.

“If we don’t get in line early, we won’t get a bed at the mission,” brother explained, then rushed on. “It’s okay if we don’t. It’s nice, and we can sleep outside. It’s just, if we’re sleeping someplace and the big kids find us, they’ll twist us for most of what you pay us. That’s all,” he finished with resignation.

Ruth tried to flash brother an understanding smile even as her heart felt ripped in half.

“I’ve seen about all I need for today. Where’s the mission? I can drop you off there and pick you up tomorrow. No need for you two to dodge the Bear again.”

Brother stared at her in wide-eyed amazement.

Sister hopped up and down on the backseat. “Would you? Could you?”

“Shush, Tiny,” brother said, trying to draw himself up to man height. “I’d really like that a lot,” he said studiously. “You don’t have to. We can walk there from here.”

“Not before dark,” Sis corrected, but in a whisper.

Brother threw her a quick scowl, and she fell silent.

“Consider it part of your pay,” Ruth said, then realized the kids might think they were losing today’s two dollars, she added. “Along with the eight quarters I’ve got for you.”

The children’s faces lit up like a morning sunrise. Tiny even managed a smile.

Brother, of course, was too much the man to let himself go that far.

No surprise, the mission was not in the computer’s memory.

The kids told her the nearest factory, then guided her along a twisting maze of streets and alleys that left Ruth praying her car’s GPS unit was in good shape.

She’d hate to have to activate her emergency beacon.

The thought of sitting here in an alley while people squeezed around her car, of her talking into her bra, asking Trouble to locate her and give her a heading for the embassy, was too embarrassing to contemplate.

Brother finally pointed her up a middling narrow street bordered by a mix of multistoried stone, stucco, and wooden buildings that would have been the dismay of even Hurtford Corner’s libertarian

zoning codes. Only one building among them showed any attention to its paint in the recent eon, a brown-painted three-story whose green metal roof seemed to have been appended as an afterthought. It angled off to the right as if it might slide in that direction at any moment.

Then again, none of the buildings on the street looked any too secure on their foundations.

However, while the rest huddled alone where they had been shoehorned into the block, unnoticed by passing humans, the brown one had a line of about a dozen people crouching in front of its door.

“Good,” Sis cried. “We’re early.”

“I’m sorry,” brother apologized, “you never know when the line will start. If you want, Sis can hold our place, and I can show you around some more.”

“I’ve seen enough for today,” Ruth assured him, slipping eight Earth quarters across to him, keeping them out of sight of anyone passing by. It would be a shame to have the poor kid murdered for a dollar or two. “Who runs this place?”

“Major Barbara,” brother answered, getting out and helping sis from the backseat.

“I’d like to meet her,” Ruth said, getting out herself.

The heat, dust, and stink assaulted her immediately.

Ruth had slopped pigs on hot summer days. Those were honest smells. This was . . . the stink of poverty and squalor and hopelessness. It bowled Ruth over with a power that sapped her, leaving her in its malaise by the second breath.

“I think Major wants to see you,” Brother said. “Here she comes.”

Ruth turned toward the brown building. A woman in a blue blouse and skirt, red piping along its edges, advanced toward Ruth. In the last month, she’d been marched on by Marines, Navy, and the best of Wardhaven’s Guard. There was none of the military pacing in “Major” Barbara’s walk . . . just the power.

Unconsciously, Ruth stiffened her back as she would to face Trouble in full kit or Izzy at full sail.

“I want to talk to you,” the woman said. “Will you walk with me?”

“Yes,” came immediately to Ruth’s lips.

“Someone will have to watch her car,” Brother piped up.

“Mouse, get Alice Blue Bonnet,” the woman snapped without looking back. Brother . . . no, Mouse . . . ran off.

The woman strode right by Ruth without slowing.

Ruth whirled on her heel and followed her quickly down the street until it rounded a block. Only then did the woman turn to face Ruth.

“I am known around here as Major Barbara. You’re flashing a lot of money at Mouse and Tiny. What are you setting them up for?”

“Two dollars is not a lot of money,” Ruth defended her charity.

“It is for those poor kids. If virgins are what you’re after, it’s too late. Neither of those kids are. Tiny’s rapist didn’t leave much of her behind, but if you intend to use her, I will resist you with all the power at my disposal.”

Ruth had watched one evening when Pa and the boys found a rat’s nest in the barn. The mother had fought for her young with a blind courage that left Pa shaking his head and brother almost willing to let them run loose. This was what Ruth saw in Major Barbara’s eyes—defiance in the face of sure defeat.

Ruth took a deep breath. She swallowed, trying to rid herself of the sick taste Major Barbara’s accusations left in her mouth. She rolled her shoulder, as if to slough off hopelessness bad as any that had sapped her during her marriage to her first husband, Mordy.

“Major, I am what I told the kids. I manage a farm aboard a Humanity cruiser in orbit. I’m looking for better tanks, piping, seed, and software. I’m married to a Marine at the embassy, and he’s all I ever dreamed of coming home to. Mouse and Tiny are as safe with me as I hope my own kids will be when I have them.”

Ruth studied the woman’s reaction. Barbara’s face was lined with care, her brown hair just starting to show gray. She wore no makeup. The face was honest, plain, and, as determination marched off it, a

kind of open optimism seemed to come to the fore.

“Now, if you’ve got a second, that café across the way seems to have just brewed up a new pot of coffee. Can I buy you a cup?”

“You work on a Navy cruiser, growing food?”

“The best fruits and vegetables.” Ruth said, pointing the way to the café. Barbara took up the offer and started across the street.

“Why put a farm on a warship?”

“Some Navy reg about assuring the fruits and vegetables are disease-free. Or so I’m told.”

“Or to keep hard Earth currency away from the poor local farmers,” Barbara breathed. “They have it tough enough as it is, getting hard money to pay their debts. Now it will be tougher.”

Ruth had no answer to that. She took a table well into the shadows of the café’s open room. Here, she had a good view of other customers and anyone walking by; she ordered two cups of coffee. The waiter recognized Barbara and seemed happy to serve her.

“Was your ship one of the first to get a farm?”

“Yes,” Ruth agreed. “The captain figured if I was fool enough to fall in love with a Marine, I was fool enough to run a farm on her ship.”

“Yes,” Barbara nodded, “you said you were married to a Marine. And now you are on Savannah, a few weeks before the coming elections and asking street kids to show you around. Madame farmer, Marine’s wife, what are you up to?”

That knocked Ruth back. Was her cover that thin? Or did this woman, dedicated to the poor, have eyes that saw more than most and a brain that did a better analysis than most of the intel types Ruth had met?

Ruth weighed all the possibilities and tossed the dice.

“I’m like lots of people, just trying to figure out how things work. Like today, passing by the General Fusion plant at lunch, I saw two men start slugging it out. Mouse told me it might be because a right-

hander said something a left-hander didn't like, or maybe a scrapper. What was Mouse telling me?"

Barbara glanced down the street at her mission. "The line's getting long early, I'll need to get back to oversee supper. That's what we offer them: a meal, a half hour of chapel, and a bed for the night. If I'm there, some of the more distressed folks stay calmer."

Ruth held her coffee cup with both hands, took a small sip, and spoke from behind it. "I imagine they find you a mothering influence. Soothing."

"Many of the worst cases hate their mothers, and for good cause."

"And you are dodging my question," Ruth pointed out.

"You've got the entire embassy staff to answer your questions. Why me?"

"I've asked them. What they can, they answer. Like the senior political officer has signed off on a request to have the civil rights people investigate how the Central Bureau of Investigations works on Savannah." There, Ruth provided some trading stock. She waited to see what the other would offer in return.

Major Barbara snorted. "This election, probably the next one, too, will be long gone before anything comes of that."

"Probably. Meanwhile, I'm trying to figure out what I can, and I doubt the embassy staff speaks the same language as the kids. To the staff, they're police out here. To the kids, they're black boots or blues or crushers."

Ruth shrugged. "I doubt anyone in the embassy knows what a left-hander is."

"They know what they are. They just don't know them the way the kids do. The view from the sewer is quite different. Left-handers are usually Croats, though they could be French Catholics as well. Those that make the sign of the cross going to the left shoulder first. Not like the Orthodox, who go to the right shoulder first. Like a Serb. Scrapers are those of the Islamic faith among us who bow toward Mecca when they pray." Barbara shook her head.

"Not an easy thing when you consider that as our planet rotates, the direction to Mecca changes.

Praise the Lord that someone came up with a single direction for those poor people.” Barbara shook herself. “But you aren’t interested in the fine points of religion.”

Ruth frowned. “On Hurtford Corner, we had Moslem Jews and several flavors of Christian. Even Wiccan. They weren’t killing each other. There wasn’t much Earth history in my education, but I seem to recall that even back in the Balkans, they’ve quit killing each other. Bad for the tourist business or something.”

“But it’s good for business, here,” Barbara snapped, then went on more slowly.

“In a plant, you have different shops doing different things. You have different line gangs doing their work, but not actually having to talk to each other . . . to get the job done. Back on Earth, when these different shops and line crews started talking, they discovered they had a lot in common. That’s what workers need if they’re going to organize and face managers with a united front. You’ve never been around unions, have you?”

“My pa was a farmer. I never heard of unions until one of my ex-Navy farmhands asked if he could organize the farm two weeks ago. ‘Nothing against you and what you’re doing, ma’am’ he told me , but his dad was a union man and he feels safer with a union rep talking to management. Me, a manager,” Ruth squeaked.

“My father was the last union organizer anyone dared send to Savannah,” Barbara said. “When he disappeared, I asked the Salvation Army to send me here. Savannah is not a sought-after assignment even in the Army of the Lord. I found my dad’s notes in a locker at the spaceport. He’d sent me the key.

“A hundred years ago, when they set up this planet, they hired on folks who couldn’t speak the same languages. Who hated each other’s guts and had been killing each other for five hundred years. Back on Earth, they put an end to the killing. Here, it’s company policy to keep it going. If the chain gang hate the line crew, they’re not going to listen to anyone from there tell them they need to unite against management thugs. If the craftsmen look down on the shop-floor crews, they’re going to go home to their tiny houses and not worry about what’s going on in the slums across town. Back in the early twentieth century, they

played that game on Earth.”

Ruth sat back, trying to absorb what she'd been told. “I don't see how . . .” she started slowly. But Major Barbara was coming out of her chair.

“I'm sorry, but I can't agree with you. The kids at my mission would not make good space farmers. They'd be upchucking their toenails, and I wouldn't put it past you to just toss them out an air lock if they caused you too much trouble.”

Ruth followed the major's glance; a wizened man made his way slowly into the café. His twisted wooden cane made tapping noises on the tiles. The man wore sandals, but Ruth would bet the kids would call him a black boot.

“I'm sorry you feel that way,” Ruth shot back as if continuing an argument. “Where I come from, a farm isn't a farm without kids to do the small stuff. Why should I pay a man a full wage to do what a kid can do just 'cause my farm is on a starship?”

Barbara stomped out of the café. Ruth tossed down a few coins and ran after her. “We aren't finished! Your kids need jobs! They aren't going to get any here. Scut work on my farm is the best they can hope for. You ought to be promising me the best you have.”

“Enough,” Barbara said, raising her voice, and her hand. Together they walked around the corner and out of view from the café.

“You're a quick learner,” the church worker whispered.

“That's what kept me alive raising drugs on a Riddle slave plantation.” Ruth said, all cover story aside.

Which caused Barbara to miss a step. “I heard about Riddle. I was asked to take lead in a new mission starting up there. I chose to stay here. What do you want?”

“The idiots growing drugs on Riddle didn't know which end of the seed to put in the ground. They didn't develop it. Some friends of mine say it was developed here. Do you know anyplace that might be a research center for something like that?”

“You definitely aren’t what you appear to be, are you, ship farmer?”

“And if I’m found out, my body will be floating down the river tomorrow.”

“Like so many each morning.” Barbara gazed ahead. “The line is long at the mission. I better get back. Alice Blue Bonnet is watching your car. Sometimes, she sells drugs. She used to sell her body, whatever it took to get by. She taught herself to read. I’m giving her time on my terminal for schooling. She’ll be with Mouse and Tiny tomorrow. I think she’ll have something interesting to show you.”

“Can I trust her?”

“Probably,” was all the answer Ruth got, as Major Barbara made a straight line for her mission front door.

Sitting on the hood of Ruth’s car was a girl of maybe fifteen. Her shirt and pants were worn black Unity fatigues. On her head perched a small blue pillbox hat. Hardly the bonnet Ruth had worn to work in the fields. Then again, where she grew up, police were safety volunteers, not crushers.

Different human worlds took a lot of getting used to.

“I kept your car safe, lady,” Alice drawled, sliding off the hood.

“Looks that way. Thanks,” Ruth said, fishing in her pocket for more quarters.

“You don’t owe me nothin’,” the youth said. “Major said do it. I done it.”

Ruth recognized the sound of pride, when pride was all you had, and almost she pulled her hand from her pocket, empty. Almost.

This poor kid had done a lot worse to keep body and soul together. And when her money ran out, she’d do it again. A few quarters might delay that time. Ruth caught one of the young woman’s hands with one of her own, then forced four quarters in it.

“You don’t owe me,” Alice insisted.

“I pay the people who work for me,” Ruth insisted back. “Ask Mouse and Tiny.”

“They’re just free ridin’. Havin’ more fun than workin’ for you.”

“They’ve shown me a few things I needed to see, and gotten me out of a few places I didn’t want to

be. Major says you can help me, too. Tomorrow.”

“She did?” Eyes that had been distant, almost dull, lit up. A smile almost creased the disinterested, undemanding face. Almost.

“What she want me to do?”

“She’ll tell you. I’m not sure, yet.”

“Some boss. You don’t know what you want?” The challenge lacked force. Still, the young woman had found enough of herself to make it.

“Sometimes, not knowing what you want is where you discover what you need.” Ruth smiled back. “I’m going to enjoy working with you.”

“I got to hurry, or all the food will be gone,” Alice said. “See you,” she tossed over her shoulder as she rushed for the mission.

