

The Fall of the Altairan Empire: Book One
Nexus Point
Jaleta Clegg
jaletac@earthlink.net
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Chapter 1

"Dace? We really need to talk."

I hunched my shoulders. I doubted Jerith wanted a discussion. He much preferred lecturing.

"Oh, Captain?" He leaned over my chair; the stench of old sweat filled the tiny cockpit.

"What?" I kept my back to him, choosing instead to watch the interplay of colored light across the viewscreen. I wrinkled my nose at the smell.

"The ship needs a week in drydock. Everything is falling apart. See? The coolant levels are spiking again." He reached over my shoulder to tap on the indicator.

I pushed his hand away. "The ship is fine. That's just an air bubble. It will work itself through the system soon enough." Less than three weeks out and I wished I'd never signed his contract.

"We need to put the ship in drydock, Dace." Jerith swung my chair to face him. "I'm telling you as your engineer that this vessel is unsafe. The whole hyperdrive system could fail at any moment. It needs repairs and adjustments. As the captain you should take responsibility. If you won't, I will."

I ignored his juvenile attempt at intimidation. I could play that game better. "You can check the coolant on the ground at Thurwood if it will make you feel better. The hyperdrive system is fine. I checked it myself. And as the ship's engineer, I'm paying you, not some drydock tech company."

"You haven't paid me anything. And coolant systems that old are not my job."

"You said they were when I hired you." I suspected he just didn't want to crawl through the access conduits. If I hadn't been female and young besides, he might have shown me at least a little respect.

He snorted, crossing his flabby arms.

"Scared of tight spaces? Or are you just incompetent?"

"How come there isn't any soup left?" Flago smelled worse than Jerith. Neither cared much about personal hygiene. "All we got are two week's worth of breakfast cereal."

"You ate the soup already," Jerith said.

I sighed and rubbed my forehead. Tempting as it was, beating them into submission would only make matters worse, though the strategy had worked on the bullies at the Academy. "So eat cereal. It was the only thing I could afford on Beccurot." Less than two months out of the Academy, the ink still wet on my pilot's license, and my crew hated me. It wasn't what I'd envisioned.

Flago sniffed. He stalked all four steps to the galley.

"Drydock, or I won't fly with you. This ship isn't safe." Jerith slapped my chair.

"Feel free to leave anytime." I turned back to the controls as he left the cockpit.

He muttered in the galley with Flago. I didn't care. Let them plot. When we made port, they were both getting off. Permanently. Close quarters with people I couldn't stand drove me crazy.

My board erupted in red lights. Sirens screamed. Alarms shrilled. The ship shuddered violently. I froze for a split second before the Academy training kicked in. The autopilot flashed. We weren't at destination. The engine whined as the temperature shot up the scale. I flipped the board to manual control and slammed the hyperdrive shutdown switches initiating an emergency downshift. Lost and drifting in normal space beat the alternative which involved exploding.

The bubble of normal space generated by the hyperdrive collapsed. My vision blurred as three dimensional space twisted into seven. If we weren't close enough to a gravity well big enough to lock onto, we were about to be smeared across the transect boundary of hyperspace.

The ship lurched and shook. We finally slid free. The universe flipped right side out. Lights flickered madly. Every indicator glowed red. I booted the sublight systems.

They barely responded. The power feeds flashed. Something exploded. The ship tumbled.

"We just lost half the coolant system," Jerith shouted. "The core's redlining."

"Where are we? Flago?" I barely heard myself over the screaming alarms.

The ship rocked as an escape pod shot away. Flago was gone. I swore under my breath as I wrestled with my ship. I wasn't going to let it explode if I could prevent it. I slammed switches like mad, trying to stabilize the ship.

"The core is redlining, Dace!"

"I know!"

"Cut it loose!"

I didn't want to. If I dumped the core, we would be stranded with only emergency power. It might be weeks before anyone found us. If ever. I hit the override buttons. It didn't help. The indicator crept closer to the red zone.

Jerith reached over my shoulder to punch the button that should have jettisoned the core. Nothing happened. He shoved me to the side, then slammed his fist into the eject button. The core didn't eject. The temperature gauges slid into red. The core overheated. When it reached critical, it would explode and take the ship with it. Jerith scrambled out of the cockpit to the second escape pod.

The ship shuddered as his pod shot away. I couldn't leave, not yet. Not until I'd tried everything. *Star's Grace* was my life, my soul, my dream. I hit the reset switches. I cut all power. I sat in the dark and counted to five while the alarms screamed. I hit the switches to turn everything on again. Nothing changed. A new alarm hooted over the chorus of sirens. Less than ten seconds before the core overloaded.

It was still a hard choice. I scrambled through the galley to the last escape pod. I pulled the hatch shut and sealed it, abandoning my ship.

The pod launched itself automatically. I buckled the restraints, blinking back tears. The last time I'd cried was when I'd lost my first and only toy at the orphanage. Beido had been a scrap of cloth with a clumsy face, but she'd been my doll. The director had thrown her out when I made the mistake of showing I cared.

The ship exploded. The shockwave spun my pod out of control. Everything vibrated. I clung to the webbing, tumbling wildly through space.

The pod finally stabilized. I freed a hand to wipe my face. I'd just lost everything, every credit invested in my ship and cargo. I reached for the hatch release. Dying in vacuum would be quick. I pulled my hand away. The will to keep going was too ingrained, too many years of fighting everything and everyone. I slumped against the webbing. I'd just have to start over.

The pod's simple controls should have come on automatically. I stared at the dark guidance screen and waited. The screen stayed blank.

I hit the power buttons. The screen fizzed gray and white. I flipped the switches and adjusted the settings. The screen flickered black before returning to static. I jiggled the frame. It cleared, briefly. I used my favorite swear words.

The profanity didn't help. I popped open the access hatch above it. I wiggled my hand through the tangle of wires inside. Everything seemed to be connected, although the wires were old and brittle. Insulation crumbled off, leaving bare metal. I accidentally crossed the wrong two. I yelped and jerked my hand free as the system shorted. Static filled the screen before fading completely. I swore as I sucked my burned fingers.

I'd have to hope the emergency beacon still worked. I reached for the small storage locker. It

supposedly held a water supply and emergency ration cubes. They would never go bad, or at least never get any worse. The door of the locker stuck. I squirmed around to bang on it, twisting myself in the webbing.

The controls beeped, a very insistent beeping. I glanced at the dead screen. It hadn't magically started working. The lights flashed on the guidance system, indicating a planet close by. The pod was landing, whether I wanted it to or not.

I tried to untangle the webbing. I panicked and only twisted it more. The beeping increased in pitch. Atmosphere screamed past. An access panel banged loose. The pod shuddered.

The pod's angle was too steep. I fumbled my arms free to hit the thrusters.

The pod spun. I hit the controls again. The pod tumbled. I panted in the growing heat. I had to think, not panic. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

"I am Dace, I am strong. I can do this."

It helped me focus. The pod still blasted through the atmosphere. I had to trust to luck that the planet was habitable. I might be breathing poison. If I managed to land in one piece.

I tried booting the screen one more time. Nothing happened. I'd have to judge it by ear. I'd done it at the Academy, once, in a simulator where the worst that could happen was a bad score. I'd die if I messed up this time.

"First thing," I said, "straighten it out. Left thruster, just a bit. Ease back, Dace. Nose up, but not that far."

I talked myself through the procedure. The pod quit spinning. I feathered the controls, lifting the nose, keeping the tail down. Now I just had to wait. The braking thrusters should come on automatically. I stared at the dead screen.

"No radar, no way to know how close . . ."

I was beyond swearing. I closed my eyes and sweated. I guessed blindly and hit the braking thrusters.

The pod lurched, slamming me against the webbing. The old fuel in the braking thrusters burned unevenly; the thrusters cut out sporadically. The pod fell like a rock. The thrusters kicked in, shoving me against the webbing. The thrusters sputtered a final time. Crash foam gushed from nozzles, partially filling the space.

The pod slammed into the ground, hitting hard and rolling. I ground my teeth, fighting nausea and glad I hadn't eaten lunch.

It finally crunched to a stop, tilted on one side, nose down. The controls died with a mournful beep. The lights died. I felt along the webbing for the release clasp. I shoved my fingernails under the release and pried. I broke one nail before the webbing popped loose. I landed on the controls. The storage locker opened, dumping its contents out.

I fumbled for the hatch release lever over my head. I twisted my hands around it and yanked. Wind scoured the inside of the pod, smelling of mud and animals and rain. I thumbed the heater on in my suit as I crawled free.

I'd crashed in the middle of a muddy field, dotted with tangles of bushes. Clouds scudded across a gray sky. Rain spit in intermittent bursts. Folded hills rose to one side. The field dropped into a shallow basin on the other. A line of trees broke the distance halfway between the basin and the hills.

I reached into the pod to gather supplies. I had no idea how long I might be stuck on this planet. No one would look for me. I had no family. Someone might look for Flago or Jerith, though after living with them for three weeks, I couldn't understand why unless they owed money.

I sorted through the jumble of things that had fallen from the storage locker, none of it what I expected. I found a bar of very old chocolate, two screwdrivers, a small wrench, and a nice set of lockpicks. Everything else in the pod was junk, not worth salvaging.

My pockets contained my ship ID chip and an assortment of wire connectors. I dropped the connectors into the pod. I couldn't think of any possible use for them. I put the chocolate and my ID

chip in my pocket along with the tools.

The lockpicks posed a problem. They were illegal anywhere in the Empire. Toiba, the junkyard dealer I'd bought my ship from, had taught me how to use a similar set, though I'd only practiced. I'd never used them on a real lock. I slipped the lockpicks into my left boot. I could always ditch them later.

I nibbled on chocolate as I picked my way across the mud towards the distant line of trees. I stepped around a clump of bushes. A huge creature munched grass on the other side. It brayed loudly. I dropped the chocolate. My heart thumped triple time.

The creature lowered its massive head and brayed again, showing me lots of very big, very square teeth. I retreated a step. The creature snorted, blowing strings of mucus from its nose. It stamped its enormous feet, churning up mud. I stared into its dark eyes certain I was about to be eaten.

The animal tossed its head. I screamed and ran for the dubious safety of the trees.

The beast chased me, braying loudly. Other animals like it joined in the chase, tails high and hooves squealing. Their huge bodies thundered across the field.

I swerved around a bush, barely keeping my feet as I slipped in the mud. I stumbled to a stop. The things surrounded me, all square teeth and stomping hooves. I darted to one side. They snorted. I ducked my head and ran for the trees. They brayed as they chased after.

I slammed into a fence under the trees, knocking myself flat and sliding under it into a dirt path. The creatures stopped on the other side, flapping their tails and blowing mucus.

Rain dripped in my eyes. I brushed it away. The creatures licked their noses with long tongues. I crawled across the mud, away from the fence.

Footsteps pounded on the dirt path. I crouched, ready to fight. People ran towards me, waving sticks and shouting. I heaved a sigh of relief. They must have seen my pod.

My relief died as they came closer. They waved the sticks, shouting angrily.

The lead man stabbed his stick my way. I rolled to the side, scrambling to my feet. The others circled, watching. I raised my fists, ready to attack. I'd lose the fight, but at least I'd get a few blows in.

The rain picked up, drenching all of us. I wiped water out of my face. Movement flashed behind me. I twisted around. One of them whacked me over the head. Blinded by pain, I landed in the mud face-first and passed out.

Chapter 2

The smell woke me. I sniffed and gagged. It reeked worse than an overgrown algae tank. I lay on a pile of dried grass that had since mildewed. I sat to get away from the stench. My head spun. I cradled it in my hands, feeling for damage. I had a big lump over one ear that ached horribly, but everything else seemed to be intact.

I frowned, trying to figure out where I might possibly have landed. Flago might know, he'd set the course, but he wasn't here to ask. The planet was probably part of the Empire, but other than that, I knew nothing.

The only light came from a pale seepage around the door. I gingerly crawled to the light. Rough stone chilled my hands and knees. I puzzled over it, sweeping my hands to either side to be sure. It was definitely real stone, but that couldn't be right. No one built with real stone. Plascete was much cheaper and easier to shape.

I groped my way around the room, six steps one way, four the other, finding nothing except the pile of dead grass. I felt my way around the door, a huge slab of wood, real wood. I got slivers trying to pry it open. It wouldn't budge when I shoved it. I hammered on it and shouted. No one came.

I slumped with my back against the wall next to the door. I rubbed burning eyes, blaming the tears leaking past my fingers on the smell.

The door swung open with a massive creak. I tried to shield my eyes from the sudden

brightness, squinting at the dancing, wavering light.

"Fire?" Who used torches for light? Maybe I only dreamed it. And maybe someday I'd meet the Emperor himself.

A man in a garish robe studied me, hands on his hips. A fierce bird embellished with polished stones and metallic embroidery screamed on his chest. I'd studied enough textiles to recognize the fabric as poor quality, but the quality of the embroidery belied that. It didn't make sense. He curled his lip in distaste.

I pushed myself to my feet, leaning on the wall as the room spun dizzily. I barely came to his nose.

The man holding the torch, a bald man wearing only leather pants and big boots, loomed over us both. His face showed nothing but vague boredom.

Everything reminded me of a Dariana Grace vid. I'd watched every one I could find at the Academy. I'd named my ship after her. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to recreate one of her vids, like a very elaborate joke. But why me? I had no money, no family, no connections. It couldn't be for me.

The bird man asked a question. I'd never heard the language before.

"Do you speak Basic?"

He said something else, waving his hand impatiently.

I shook my head. The room swirled around me. I grabbed for the wall and missed. They let me fall on my face in the doorway. I lay still, waiting for the dizziness to pass.

Bird man asked me another question. He kicked my ribs when I didn't answer. I curled around the pain.

The bald one picked me up, tossing me over his shoulder. Bird man led the way down a hall.

They carried me into another room lined with more burning torches. The smoky air burned my throat. A huge brazier sat in the middle of the room, coals glowing red like evil eyes. The bald man dropped me onto a wooden table. I hit the lump on my head. I swallowed bile.

He grabbed my arms, yanking them out to the sides of the table where he clipped my wrists into metal cuffs. He grabbed my feet and did the same with my ankles. I couldn't have fought him if I wanted to.

The bird man leaned over the table. The bald man stayed by my feet. Bird man asked me a question.

"I don't understand anything you're saying."

He gabbled more questions.

"Try Basic."

He slapped me.

"I don't understand."

He slapped the other cheek. I screamed at him. He hit me repeatedly until I shut up. My nose dripped blood across my cheek. Bird man turned away.

I looked at bald man. He may have been bigger, but he felt less threatening. "Who are you? Where am I?"

Bald man folded his arms over his massive, naked chest.

"Why are you doing this? My name is Dace, captain of the *Star's Grace*." I stopped. He obviously didn't care who I was.

Bird man smiled serenely as he lifted a metal rod in his hand. The tip glowed red, the light reflected in his eyes. He stroked my cheek with his free hand. I cringed at his touch. Not even at the orphanage had things been this bad. I'd been beaten, but not with hot iron.

"What do you want from me?" My voice cracked.

He reached for my face, cradling my chin in his palm. He aimed the rod at my eye. I tried to bite him. He squeezed my bruised jaw and lowered the rod. Heat sizzled across my face.

The door behind him slammed open, booming off the wall like the crack of a blast rifle. The metal rod slammed into the table next to my head, frying off a strip of hair.

Bird man uncurled his fingers from the rod, his face set in an angry scowl. I shifted my head away from the smoking metal embedded in the table.

Bird man shouted at the newcomer. Baldie pulled out a huge knife. A new voice, a very authoritative and commanding voice, said something in their weird language. Baldie put the knife away. The newcomer shoved bird man aside.

His expression was cold enough to freeze methane. His icy green eyes were harder than emeralds. He touched the patch on my left shoulder, the red triangle of the Guild of Independent Traders. One eyebrow lifted. He flicked the gold bars and crossed comets on my collar. "Captain and pilot. Interesting."

"Who . . ." His frozen glare silenced me more effectively than bird man's slaps. I snapped my mouth shut.

He gabbled in the strange language. Bird man answered with a lot of arm waving and pointing. Baldie ignored me, intently watching the argument between the other two. Cold man won. Bird man backed off, muttering darkly to himself. Cold man snapped his fingers and turned, his white robe swirling around him.

Baldie unfastened the cuffs. He slung me over his shoulder, like before. Bird man fixed me with a glare of such hate that I shuddered as Baldie carried me from the room.

Baldie lugged me outside, dumping me into a rickety wooden cart like a bag of cargo. Early sunlight stabbed down, mercilessly exposing the mud and blood on my shipsuit. The breeze, though fresh, still reeked of animals and even less pleasant odors.

"Why didn't you report earlier?" the cold man demanded of the bald one.

I kept my mouth shut, wondering if they'd say anything important in front of me.

"I let you know as soon as I could. Baron Molier wasn't going to wait."

"Demons again. It's taken years to convince him demons don't exist. She just convinced him otherwise, falling from the skies in a ball of fire, bringing punishment on him for his sins. Killing his precious cows. Idiot." He shot a glare my way. "He won't let you work for him now, he knows you answer to me."

"We could have left her. The Baron would have killed her soon enough."

"And left an even bigger mess to clean up. You," the cold man addressed me. "You have a name?"

"Dace, of the *Star's Grace*."

"Trouble, Leran." Baldie gestured behind us.

Leran, the cold one, glanced behind. "Get her to the mansion, Ky. Tell Ameli to have her ready to ride tomorrow morning. I'll convince Baron Molier the demon won't bother him." He leaned over the edge of the cart. "Give me any trouble at all, Captain Dace, and the Patrol will get nothing more than your body."

Relief washed through me. The Patrol meant rules. The Patrol wouldn't let people torture me with hot iron. I ducked my head.

Leran nodded, apparently satisfied. He strode into the mansion, his white robe swirling dramatically.

Ky climbed into the front of the wagon. He whistled. The cart lurched into motion. I clutched the side to keep from bouncing out. Hoofbeats squelched in mud. I craned my head to look.

An actual, real, not-hologram horse pulled the cart. I gaped. Horses were very rare, very expensive, and very delicate. This horse didn't look delicate. It resembled hologram horses the way an ore freighter resembled a yacht.

More horses worked in fields along both sides of the track. I sat, curious about the planet. Primitive conditions prevailed, dirty people and animals in fields that looked tilled by hand. The people

stopped grubbing in the dirt to stare as we drove past.

"You're like a blasted freak show." Ky grabbed a blanket from under his seat. He threw it at me. "Get under that and don't show yourself."

The coarse blanket stank. I held it out, away from me.

"Do it now, or I'll tie you and then do it."

He didn't look like he would be gentle. I gave in. I lay down in the creaking cart, pulling the smelly blanket over me. I waited until Ky turned around before I lifted the edge to peer out.

Even on the frontier worlds of the Empire people used machines, built buildings with plascrete. People didn't live in mud hovels. They didn't use horses to plow fields. I knew very little about agriculture, but this planet didn't resemble anything in the documentary vids. This was a Dariana Grace fantasy come to real, stinking life.

I saw fewer fields the longer we traveled. The cart bumped over a series of small hills. The day grew hot. Air lay like thick syrup over the landscape. Insects buzzed as they crawled next to me. The hay in the cart crept into my suit.

The cart jerked to a stop; the blanket yanked away.

"What is this? A joke?" A head of elaborately braided yellow hair appeared over the edge of the cart.

"Leran says you are to make her ready to ride by morning," Ky said.

"Look at the mud on her!" She flipped at my shoulder.

I slapped away the woman's hand.

"Ky, you can't leave me with her," the woman complained, her voice shrill.

"Your problem, Ameli." He unhitched the horse.

I climbed out of the cart. The world slipped sideways. I leaned against the back panel.

Ky led the horse around the far side of a stone mansion.

Ameli planted fists on hips, her blue skirt flaring around her. She would have been pretty if her face wasn't twisted in a scowl.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"No."

"You've disrupted fifteen years of field research. You ignorant, stupid spacer! You have no concept of the damage you've caused."

"I'm sure you'll tell me. Where am I?"

She smiled smugly. "You are at the residence of Leran, the Lord High Enchanter, he who commands even the demons of the sky to obey him."

Cold man's house. "That was really helpful."

"You're on Dadilan," she said, as if that would explain everything.

"And where is Dadilan?"

"You can't have landed here without knowing. It's not even on the official nav charts."

"I had to make an emergency shift out of hyperspace. We were supposed to be on Thurwood."

"We?"

"I had two others on the crew. I don't know if they made it down or not."

"Your ship? A toy your rich daddy bought you to play with. You are way out where you don't belong."

"*Star's Grace* is a fully registered and licensed cargo ship. Or it was."

"You're too young to own a ship. Unless someone bought it for you." She folded her arms and cocked her head to one side, a calculating look in her blue eyes. "Dadilan is restricted to protect its culture. Leran will take you to the Patrol base. The charges he'll press against you will get you a thousand years prison time. You'll have the entire Antiquities Research Division after you. If there's anything left, the Xenoarcheologists will have their turn. They think the people on this planet are from a lost colony ship from before the Empire. They might even be from the mythical homeworld of

humans."

I groaned. I'd be lucky to ever live free again. Criminal charges for interfering with a protected culture, even by accident, carried stiff penalties. I belonged to the Independent Traders Guild, but I wasn't authorized for contact on a world like this. I would have a hard time justifying my presence. Stupidity wasn't usually accepted.

"We can't have you inflicting any more damage." Ameli fingered the embroidered edge of her blouse. "Bath first. I believe we can find suitable clothing for you in the storage chests. Then, I think the language and culture tapes. You're going to have to pass as native, at least until the Patrol arrests you."

"Hypnoteacher?" I shifted warily away from her.

"But of course." She smiled brightly, malice lurking behind her words. I wondered exactly which tapes she'd use.

"I don't tolerate them well." The drugs necessary for the knowledge transfer made me ill for days afterwards. I used hypnoteachers only when I couldn't avoid them.

"Too bad," she said. "It's that or the Baron's dungeon."

"I'd almost rather take the dungeon."

"You don't have a choice." Her voice grew hard. "Strip everything off. Now. I won't have you leaving mud all over Leran's mansion." She smiled sweetly as I stared at her. "Should I have Ky help?"

I stripped my shipsuit off, hating her perky smile and smug attitude. I didn't see I had any choice, at least not until I had more information. I'd find my own way to the Patrol once I knew enough.

Chapter 3

Ameli jabbed needles into my arm before hooking me to the hypnoteacher. The drugs worked their way through my system. I slid into sleep, the hypnoteacher whispering in my head like a chorus of ghosts.

Ameli woke me the next morning. She didn't give me any choice about that, either.

"Another glorious day," she said cheerfully. "The sun is about to rise."

"Go away," I said as forcefully as I could. My brain was like an overstuffed cushion pressing on my skull.

"Rise and shine." Ameli jerked the blanket off.

I shivered in the sudden chill.

"You've got five minutes to use the facilities." She nudged a pot on the floor with her foot. She left, taking the blanket with her.

I stared at the pot. The lump of knowledge in my head unfolded slightly. This was the epitome of bathroom facilities. It smelled like it had already been used.

I stood by the hard, narrow bed and shivered until Ameli returned. She dropped a pile of clothing on the bed. I shook it out to reveal an underdress of stained yellow with an overskirt in faded gray. Native dress for a servant, the lump of knowledge in my head informed me. It would unfold on its own, sooner or later, and I'd pay a price then, but for now I knew a little about Dadilan and could speak the language if I concentrated. I put the outfit on.

Ameli tapped her foot as she looked me over. She frowned at my hair. "It should be much longer."

I kept my hair shorn to less than an inch. It didn't stick up as noticeably and didn't remind of the orphanage on Tivor every time I looked in a mirror. Ameli solved the problem by tying a scarf over my head. It itched.

"My boots?" I asked. They were specially fitted and they were expensive.

She handed me a dainty pair of slippers.

I refused to take them. "I want my boots."

"And the lockpicks in them? So sorry, Dace. I think you just added another fifty years to your prison sentence."

"They aren't mine." I bit my lip when I realized how stupid that sounded.

"They're part of the evidence against you and your meddling. Leran has them." She smiled brightly. "Enjoy your life, Dace, what's left of it. Don't come back into mine." She swept out the door, hips swinging.

I jammed my feet into the slippers as I hurried after her.

"Ameli, wait, please." Maybe if I told a good lie, I could convince her to help. And maybe I'd be invited to tea with the Emperor's mother. I was a terrible liar.

I tripped over the slippers and fell down a short flight of stairs. I landed on my butt at the bottom. I winced as I hit bruises.

Leran, Ky, and several other men stood by the front door. They watched impassively as I collected what remained of my dignity and got to my feet.

"If you are quite finished?" Leran asked politely.

"Yes, quite."

Leran gave me a look I couldn't interpret.

Ky opened the front door. Sunlight poured into the room. The men walked outside. I followed.

At least a dozen horses dozed in the area right outside the door. I stopped in the doorway.

"Oh, no." I backed away. "I am not riding one of those things." I liked my animals in a zoo behind bars, not up close.

"Yes, you are," Ky said.

"No." I dug my fingers into the door frame.

He leaned over me, drowning me in his shadow. "I could give you to the Baron. He'd be more than happy to see you again."

I swallowed hard. Riding a horse or certain death involving hot iron. I unpried my fingers from the door frame. Ky nodded and stepped out of my way. I walked over to the tamest looking horse. It tried to bite me.

I retreated a step. "This isn't a good idea."

"Get on the horse," Ky said. "Show her how, Vin."

One of the men took a horse by its harness and swung onto its back. He made it look easy.

I glanced over my shoulder at Leran, weighing my chances of escape. The odds weren't high enough yet. I grabbed the hair growing on the horse's neck and pulled myself onto its back, lying on my belly. The animal promptly jogged away. I slid off, landing in the dirt. One of the other men caught the horse.

"You have to hang on," Ky said.

I stood, brushing dirt off my backside. "Hang on to what?"

"It also helps if you sit."

"We could always tie her on," the man holding the horse suggested.

"Not a bad idea." Ky flexed his fists.

"Move," Leran ordered.

Ky picked me up and dumped me on the horse. He shoved my foot into a loop of leather hanging to one side. My other knee went around a knob just behind the horse's neck. I grabbed big handfuls of neck hair as the animal started walking.

One of the men led the horse on a long lead rope. We rode away from the house to the wild hills beyond. I hung on, gritting my teeth against a growing ache in my backside.

We rode through widely spaced trees alternating with grassy meadows. Lacy leaves tossed in a light breeze. The land appeared wild, completely uninhabited. Leran called a halt in the shade of an extra big tree.

I slid off the horse. The sound of water running woke thirst. I hobbled to the stream, crouching to scoop up a handful of icy water, drinking despite the things floating in it.

The men watered the horses, then staked them out where the grass grew high. Ky walked over to me. He dropped a chunk of coarse bread and greasy cheese into my lap.

"Thank you," I said. If I could convince them I was harmless and friendly, maybe I could get more information out of them. Maybe they wouldn't mention the illegal lockpicks when they turned me over to the Patrol.

Ky glared before turning away.

And maybe not. I ate the bread and cheese. Shadows of fish darted past my rock. Once I got my bearings I would slip away. They couldn't watch me all the time. So far, they hadn't done more than threaten to turn me in on criminal charges. It was lightyears away from torture with hot iron. Maybe I should stay with Leran.

"What are you really doing here?"

I glanced over my shoulder at Leran's white robe. "It was an accident."

"No one lands here by accident." He stepped around me, pausing just at the edge of the water. Sunlight and shade dappled his robe.

"We had to make an emergency downshift. We were supposed to be at Thurwood."

"And what is an honest, law abiding captain doing with these?" He held out the lockpicks.

The truth sounded stupid even to me. Leran would never believe it.

"Ameli said you were going to press charges against me," I said instead.

"Me personally? No. I'll let the Patrol decide what to do with you." He tapped the lockpicks against his palm. "Unless you tell me who you really are and why you're here. I'm sure we can come to some sort of understanding."

I stared at him, confused. "My name is Dace. I'm captain of the *Star's Grace*."

"And owner? Your lies need work, Captain." He tucked the lockpicks into his robe. "Convince me, Dace, or I'll give you to the Patrol without a second thought."

He walked away, signaling the men to round up the horses. I sighed and got off my rock. My legs locked. I limped to my horse. It rolled its eyes, sidling away from me. I grabbed the leather straps buckled around its head.

"I don't like you, either." The horse bared its teeth. I yanked on the strap.

Ky slapped my hand away from the horse. "Get on."

I didn't want to, but it was Leran and the horse or the unknown. I scrambled onto the horse. It snorted and tried to walk out from under me. I found the loop for my foot, settling into the seat.

Leran watched, his face inscrutable. Once I was on, he wheeled his horse, kicking it into motion. The others followed. We left the stream, striking out across a series of hills. I bounced on my horse, trying to ease the cramps in both legs.

My head ached; whether from the crash, the subsequent beating, or the hypnoteacher, I couldn't tell. I poked at the knowledge in my head as a diversion. It didn't help.

Dadilan made Tivor, the planet I'd grown up on, look like a paradise. Women on Dadilan had no rights; they were the property of men. My escort made more sense after I digested that. As far as anyone was concerned, I belonged to Leran. I hated the thought.

I eyed the beefy men surrounding me. They were scarred and tough looking. My chances of a successful escape were slim to nonexistent. If I did leave Leran, I might land somewhere even worse.

Time crawled past in a sticky haze of sweat and aching muscles. We climbed steadily as the day wore on. Mountains rose above the hills, tall monoliths of gray stone dotted with dark green. The smell of growing things filled the air. Small birds flitted between the wide branches of scattered trees.

Leran finally called a halt late in the afternoon when we reached a wide flat bordered by thick trees and a high cliff of gray stone. Water dripped down the wall of stone, forming a pool at the base. A thin stream cut through the meadow.

I stayed on my horse. My legs tingled from lack of circulation. I wriggled my toes in an attempt to wake muscles. Leran spoke to Ky. They gathered two of the men and the horses carrying packs. The group rode away at an angle to the path we'd been following most of the day. The three men still in camp ignored me. One of them started a fire while the other two cared for the horses.

I pried my knee off the knob, losing my precarious balance to slide down the side of the horse. I grabbed for its neck hair. The horse shifted away, heading towards the pool of water. I fell onto my face.

I muttered swear words as I stood. I winced as I picked my way across rocks, cursing Ameli for taking my boots and leaving me with useless slippers. I found a spot to sit and watch the man cook.

He glanced across the dancing flames. "Who do you work for?" He stirred a handful of leaves into the pot.

"Myself." I sniffed appreciatively.

He grinned, showing a missing tooth. "Leran might deal, if you offered good enough. He's not bad to work for, not like the others."

"What are you talking about?"

He laughed. "Play innocent, Captain Dace, and you won't live three days here. They play for keeps."

I waited for him to explain. He didn't. He whistled while he stirred the soup.

My eyes grew heavy. I wanted a hot bath and a pain patch. I slumped against my rock, shifting a bag to use as a pillow. The sky faded into deep blue. A handful of tiny moons glowed over the far horizon.

I fell asleep listening to the crackling fire and the whistling cook.

I woke to shouting and screaming and confusion. Men wrestled over the fire, stepping into it and scattering burning branches. I scrambled away from a shower of sparks.

A man swung a long knife at me, the edge glinting orange in the light of the fire now burning the surrounding grass. I blocked the blow, kneeling him in the belly. He dropped the knife.

I rolled under his feet as another man jumped to attack. The knife glinted. I dove for it, but another tangle of fighting men kicked it away. I scrambled on all fours, heading for the darkness under the trees. A large man loomed out of the shadows, swinging his fist. I grabbed a branch from the ground, wielding it like a club. I connected with his ribs. He lurched away.

The horses broke from their makeshift pen, crashing through the men to run down the hills. The men shouted louder. I paused near the trees, the branch clutched in my hands. At least a dozen men still wrestled near the fire, too many for me to fight. I ran downhill, after the horses.

I meant to circle around, to head back to camp and hide until the fight ended. I got lost instead.

The tiny moons overhead gave little light; the stars gave less. I stopped in a clear space to catch my breath. The hills looked the same in every direction, trees and grass and nothing to indicate where the camp lay. I picked a direction at random, hoping it was the right one.

I stumbled into a stream. The cold water soothed my bare feet.

Eyes glinted in the shadows. Something growled. I splashed out of the stream. The creature growled again, sounding big and hungry. I ran, my heart pounding in my throat. Animals belonged in zoos, not out in the open.

I heard it crash through bushes behind me. I ran faster, blindly, through the dark woods. I slammed into a tree and skidded to a stop. I hung on to the trunk, shaking hard. I looked behind me, searching for eyes in the dark. I saw hundreds of them. I panicked, running again.

I clawed my way through thickets and brambles. I dodged past barely seen trees. I splashed through streams and tore my feet on rocks. I was lost in the woods with animals that wanted to eat me. I ran until my side ached and I couldn't breathe.

I stumbled to a stop. Grasses waved in a light breeze. Mist rose from a stream, thin streamers of white that faded only a few feet above the ground. I dropped to my knees, trembling from fear. My

stomach heaved. I retched up nothing.

The grass in front of me slowly parted. I stared into a wide face of evil green eyes and huge fangs. The animal snarled, showing more teeth. I didn't have the breath to run any longer. I scrambled through the grass until I found a big rock. I staggered to my feet, hefting the rock in shaky arms.

"Go away," I said, my voice squeaking with fear. "You aren't going to eat me."

The creature licked its fangs and came closer, moving on stealthy paws.

"I mean it. Don't mess with me." I lifted the rock to my shoulder. My muscles protested.

The creature shot a look over its shoulder, then bounded away into the night.

I let out a slow breath. Something had just scared the creature. That something would be bigger and meaner. Fear shivered along my spine. I held the rock higher, ready to throw it at the new threat.

He came out of the mist like a primeval god in a really bad romance vid—dark hair, darker eyes, and a face stolen from my most secret fantasies. He wore a leather vest with no shirt, tight pants, and tall boots. He stopped on the other side of the stream, muscles flexing as he folded his bare arms across his chest.

I swallowed hard, wondering if he was just a dream. I shifted my feet on the stream bank.

"What do you want?"

He looked me over, not answering.

I lifted the rock, trying to appear as threatening as possible. I lost my hold on it. It fell into the stream with a loud splash.

His lip twitched as he smothered a chuckle.

Having a complete stranger laugh at me was the final straw. I thumped down on the stream bank, dropping my head into my hands.

The man splashed across the stream, his touch gentle on my shoulder. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head. I'd felt worse and lived.

He watched me a moment longer, then put his arm around my shoulders.

I stiffened at the unexpected touch. No one had ever tried to comfort me. I surprised myself by bursting into tears. I'd lost control. I hated the feeling. I struggled until I finally fought the tears back. Only the occasional hiccuping snuffle escaped.

"Feel better?" he asked, just a trace of sarcasm coloring his voice. He shifted away, leaving me cold.

I couldn't look at him, embarrassed by my outburst. I stared down at his vest, at his muscles, at his hands, anywhere but at his face.

"You want to explain why you're out here?" He waited, still as a statue.

I finally looked up, at his face. It was a mask, giving nothing away. "I got lost?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Lost from where?"

I dug through the information Ameli had dumped into my head. I found little of any help. "My father's house."

He shifted position slightly, enough to change from sympathy to threat. "You're no native of this planet. You want to try again?"

I edged away. "No. How do you know I'm not native?" My curiosity got the better of me.

"You're speaking Basic."

I hadn't realized it. I repeated one of the more colorful expressions I'd learned from Toiba.

The man raised his eyebrow higher.

"You aren't native, either." I sniffled, wiping my nose on the back of my hand.

He stood. I glimpsed a tattoo on the inside of his wrist, an intricate black diamond that only one group in the Empire had.

I froze, not knowing if it was good or bad. "You're a Patrol Enforcer."

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't shoot you."

"You aren't carrying a blaster."

He moved fast. He knotted his fist into the neck of my dress, his face barely an inch from mine. "I don't need one. Who are you and why are you here? Don't even try lying."

"Leran . . ."

He shoved me to the ground, on my stomach. His hand pinned me to the bank. I struggled to keep my face above the rippling surface of the stream. I planted my hands in the icy water and shoved. His hold didn't budge.

"You work for him?"

"Leran? No. He was taking me to the Patrol." I shut my eyes and waited for the man to drown me.

"Why would he do that?"

I was a lousy liar. This man would see through anything I tried. I gave him the truth. "Because I ruined his research. I crashed in Baron Molier's cow pasture. He said I was a demon. He was going to kill me. Leran decided to take me to the Patrol base and turn me in instead."

The man's hold relaxed. I shifted back an inch from the water.

"Keep talking," he said.

"We stopped somewhere in the hills. The camp was attacked."

"And?"

"There were too many to fight so I left. I got lost."

"You still haven't told me who you are."

"Dace. My name is Dace."

He rocked onto his heels, letting me go. I scrambled away from the water.

"I don't think you heard me." He flexed his hands. "What's your name, your full name?"

"Dace." I wasn't about to use a name I'd discarded six years previously.

"I'll let that pass for now. How did you come here?"

"My ship exploded. The core redlined. The escape pod landed me here."

"In Baron Molier's cow pasture, you already said that. What ship?"

"*Star's Grace*, Independent trader registered out of Eruus."

"What was your position, ship's idiot?"

I'd already embarrassed myself, I wasn't about to let him insult me. I sat, sticking out my chin. "I'm the pilot. And I'm telling you the truth."

He gave me a look that said he didn't believe it.

"I'm also the captain and owner."

He laughed, a short bark of sound.

"Believe it or not, it's the truth." The anger drained away, replaced by fatigue. I wrapped my arms around myself, wishing I was at the Academy where I could ignore the humiliation the other cadets dished out.

"You aren't going to cry again, are you?" He looked afraid of the possibility.

I shook my head and sniffled. I'd wait until later, when he wasn't looking. He watched me fight with myself. He finally sighed.

"My camp is just across the stream. You look like you could use something to drink." He stood and offered me his hand.

I stared stupidly at it. He confused me. He wasn't threatening me, not now. I took his hand. He lifted me without effort. I couldn't hide my wince when my feet hit the rocks.

"This way," he said, pulling me after him.

I limped across the stream, soaking the bottom of my skirt. He pushed me down onto a rock before stirring up a small fire. My stomach growled. I rubbed my arms, shivering in the night air.

I studied the man surreptitiously. His hair was longer than mine, very dark with reddish highlights. It curled just slightly where it brushed the back of his neck. He stirred the pot steaming on the fire. The tattoo on his wrist caught the light and my imagination. What was a Patrol Enforcer doing

here? Why try to drown me when I mentioned Leran's name? Something was rotten on Dadilan.

Not my problem; I was leaving. I would face whatever criminal charges were levied against me. I would give them the truth. The Patrol would have to believe me. But this man was Patrol and he didn't believe me.

The man handed me a steaming cup dipped out of the pot. I wrapped my hands around it and sipped the hot drink. It wasn't enough to counterbalance the cold night air and my wet skirt. My teeth chattered. The man fetched a blanket out of a neat pack on the ground. He dropped it over my shoulders. I clutched it tight. He loomed over me. I felt even shorter than I usually did.

"Try again." He sat on a rock nearby. "Start at the beginning."

"I was born . . ."

"Not that far back." He shot me an impatient look.

"I told you. My ship was en route to Thurwood with a load of machine parts. Something went wrong. I had to do an emergency downshift out of hyperspace. The core redlined and the ship exploded."

"Not very professional of you." He poked at the fire with a stick. "You say your name is Dace and you own your own ship."

"It's the truth." My ship was a cloud of radioactive debris. I sighed again.

"No crying." He pointed the stick at me. "That isn't fair."

I wiped my nose on his blanket.

"What were you doing with Leran?" he asked casually, studying the end of his pointy stick. I sensed the answer I gave would determine how he used it.

"He pulled me out of Baron Molier's dungeon and offered to have me arrested. It was better than being skewered by hot iron pokers."

"Why are you speaking like a native now?" The man touched the pointy end of his stick.

"They used a hypnoteacher. It doesn't work right on me." I sipped at the drink, watching him carefully. The stick was still very evident. "It usually takes me a week or two to get all the information straight again. It's easier just to learn it the old way. What's your name and why are you out here?"

He studied me, the stick waving in the air between us. After a moment, it went into the fire, pointy end first.

"Malcolm Tayvis," he said. "I'm looking for my partner. He was supposed to meet me here two days ago. I don't think he's going to make it. So tell me what to do with you."

"Leran was going to let the Patrol at the base deal with me. His assistant explained at length about Dadilan's protected status."

"And you were dumb enough to believe them?" He scraped a section of dirt flat, then stabbed his finger into it. "That's Baron Molier's keep. That's Leran's mansion." He stabbed the dirt again right next to the first stab, then drew a curved line. "These are the mountains. We are somewhere about here." Another stab to the left of the first two. He moved to the right of the first marks, away from the end of the curved line, and made another mark. "That's the Patrol base. Leran was taking you in the opposite direction."

I was lousy at maps, but even I could tell Leran had lied to me about our destination.

"Gragensberg is here." Malcolm Tayvis made another mark above the others. "Big city and home to a second group of researchers led by Shomies Pardui. I doubt he was headed there. They hate each other. I would guess Leran was taking you here." Another mark, far to the left. "To the slave market."

He couldn't possibly have said slave market. Slavery was illegal. "But Leran said the Patrol tracked us in. Is that why you're here, to investigate the pods?"

"Pods?" Tayvis brushed past my question. "How many of you are there?"

"I had two on my crew. I don't know where they ended up. They jumped ship as soon as they could." I frowned at his map. Why had Flago abandoned ship as soon as we were through the jump

point? Before the core redlined, before we knew our position. Jerith showed no surprise over the engine problems, but he had been surprised the core wouldn't eject.

"What?"

I shook my head. I didn't have more than a tickle of suspicion.

Tayvis backtracked to my previous question. "If that fireball two nights ago was your pod, then the answer is no, the Patrol wouldn't send someone out looking for you. I'm surprised you survived the crash."

"The radar system died. I had to guess."

"You're in remarkably good shape." Tayvis didn't need a pointy stick to look dangerous. I swallowed a new knot in my throat. "Who are you really working for? Who's paying you to smuggle shara?"

"What?" Fear lost out to confusion.

He stirred the fire with another stick. "You are where you don't belong. Which means you're up to something illegal."

"Flying my ship from Beccurot to Thurwood is perfectly legal."

"How old are you?"

"None of your business."

He grinned. He looked younger and a lot less dangerous. I reminded myself he was a Patrol Enforcer, undercover on this planet for a reason. He could kill me and no one would question him.

"Did you run away from the Academy on Eruus or did they kick you out?"

"I graduated two months ago."

"Ah."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

His grin faded. He dug through his pack, pulling a length of rope free. "You don't give me a lot of options. I'll sleep better if I know you're not going to try to kill me."

"You're going to tie me."

"You have a better suggestion?"

"What if I promise?"

"I don't know if I can trust you."

I gave in, too tired to fight. I held out my wrists. He tied them together, then fastened them to my ankles. I didn't tell him I could have untied myself in less than two minutes. I rolled into his blanket.

He leaned over me, a shadow in the fading firelight. "If you aren't here in the morning, you'd better run as far as you can. Because if you've lied to me, no one is going to ever find you." He moved away, across the dying fire.

Sleep was a long time coming.

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