

The Most Daring Dreams

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CHAPTER 1--LIFE IS A GARDEN

2097: On a course set for Jupiter

Silently catapulting toward Jupiter in the cold vastness of space at one-thousandth the speed of light, the small spacecraft was set on a purposeful course. It was headed for the planet's moon, Europa, where a space station had been established by Universal Mining Operations for the purpose of extracting technetium ore. On Earth, the element technetium existed only in dangerously radioactive forms. The discovery of its stable isotope on Europa had provided UMO with a highly prosperous mining opportunity.

The mine's crew of one thousand had contracted the deadly Attila disease, caused by a mutant strain of an airborne virus. Its only cure was found in the fluid of the live orchid plants of the species *Cattleya hyperlimbia* that were on board the spacecraft. The pharmacy at the mining facility was becoming depleted of its supply of the life-saving orchids, and UMO's orphilon and street scavenger employees were dying. Because of the need to ration the cattleya medicine, many were not receiving high enough dosages. Transporting them back to Earth was not an option as doing so would place the world's population at considerable risk. The

Europa employees were not indispensable but were too numerous to replace without UMO suffering a loss in mining profits. And James John Ganymede was not about to sacrifice the company's profits!

He had immediately dispatched an emergency rescue team comprised of his trusted corporation soldier and space pilot, Captain Thor DV556hZ, and Doctor Helena OM781eη, doctor of pharmacognosy. They were to deliver and dispense the life-saving cargo to the surviving workers in the mine's infirmary. Two days after their departure, they'd been followed by a larger craft carrying a crew of medical personnel who would administer further treatment to the patients.

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On the day Helena was to board the craft, a sense of wonder filled her. At thirty-two, not only would she be carrying out an assignment vital to UMO's workforce on Europa, but it would be her first venture away from the Earth-Moon system. Captain Thor would soon be directing her from the Nebraska ground, onto the spacecraft's first step, and her perception of the universe would be transformed forever.

The tall soldier-pilot as her guide, she absorbed every detail he brought to her attention during the required safety tour designed for civilian passengers who'd be traveling beyond the Earth's ionosphere aboard government transport. *Aboard the interplanetary ship that was to become their home for the next two months!* she marveled.

She'd only read about space science in the popular holojournals and was eager to experience some of their reported facts firsthand. While acquainting her with the external features of the craft, the captain spoke with the fluency of an expert in space flight, yet in terms a layman could understand.

Normally, Helena scorned Delegation government soldiers. She had witnessed their callous disregard for fellow orphans. But this one seemed different. He had the manners of a gentleman, ceding his physical strength and military ranking to her defenseless civilian status. She sensed from him the promise of a memorable adventure.

According to Thor, the spacecraft issued for his sole use while carrying out official duties for UMO was a smaller, more streamlined model compared to the bulky cargo and commuter transport ships he'd often been asked to fly. At thirty-five meters long, Helena thought it was enormous! Its exterior design, sleek with aerodynamic moldings, was painted dark gray, the UMO logo in red. The bow was tapered and held diamond-glass window panels impervious to micrometeoroids. At the stern Helena noted the four large exhaust exits, each flaring out to twice a man's height in diameter.

Embedded in the craft's flipped-open exterior door was the escalator that carried her up to the lower deck's transitional airlock chamber and, she thought,

into a most fascinating new dimension of space-time. As Thor guided her through the ship's interior, a flush of warmth filled her. It was prompted by her anticipation to embark--or was it because of the tall man's nearness? She acknowledged it was probably due to a mixture of both.

The lower deck contained access to the vertical take-off and landing gear, a cargo hold area, and the ship's power and support bays. While Thor detailed the ship's infrastructure, Helena detected a sense of pride in his voice. There was kindness beneath its authoritativeness. But she also sensed something else: a weariness--or a trace of sadness. It matched the subtle darkening in his turquoise-colored eyes. Eyes which seemed to have seen too much in this old solar system. They had a cast which most would not have noticed, and she had the feeling that Thor didn't mean for her or anyone else to become aware of it, for it would serve no worthwhile purpose to dwell on past woes while there were official obligations to fulfill.

Helena wondered what had hurt him so.

Accustomed to laying aside his personal problems, Thor continued his survey of the spacecraft, feeling appreciative of the beauty and efficiency of its form and function. His passenger was showing evidence of becoming more at ease when she began asking him to further explain certain technical aspects. Shown the access to the power plant which was fueled by a deuterium/helium fusion reactor, she inquired, "And how is the fusion process activated?"

"The ship's been upgraded with the latest in plasma lasers, ma'am." Thor remarked to himself that beside him was a woman with extraordinary concerns and that, unlike some orphilon employees who felt the need to gratingly recite Delegation tenets at every opportunity, conversations with her on the ensuing journey might actually hold his interest. He further explained, "The stream of hot ionized gas expelled from the reactor is capable of producing thousands of kilonewtons of impulse force--"

"Which is more than enough to escape a planet's gravity field and acquire the speeds needed for practical interplanetary travel," Helena volunteered with a hint of a smile, as though proud of herself for her addition to his technical explanation.

The lilt in her voice--Midwestern, yes, but he detected a hint of something exotic. And he noticed a playful glimmer in her eyes, blue as a summer lake. He was surprised at himself when he continued looking directly into them.

"Er, why yes, exactly, Doctor."

Already, she was infinitely more interesting than some of the government drones whom he'd had to transport in the past. He needed to remind himself of the task at hand and further elaborated that the nuclear plant also provided energy for the ship's internal functions as solar panels would provide decreasing power as

they traveled further and further from the sun.

He caught Helena's uneasy glance at the OFF LIMITS and DANGER signs on the walls surrounding the reactor. Her somber expression indicated that their stern warning, along with his description of the gruesome death caused by intense radiation exposure--suffered by a flight mechanic he had known--was becoming firmly impressed upon her mind.

Her eyes darkened with concern and then brightened again as her curiosity moved on to another topic. She asked about the ship's method of producing a physiologically sound gravity field. He pointed out the graviton emitter which lined the fuselage. It was usually set to one Earth gravitational force.

Soft, layered waves of brunette hair, just reaching chin length, tumbled attractively around her face. She moved some of it behind her ear, a mannerism of hers, he'd already noticed, when she was thinking hard about something. Or this time, was it possible that her subconscious was making a flirtatious gesture? She then asked, "Captain, and how are the gravitons are produced?"

His eyes sparkled at her profound question, and he explained the particle physics involved in the process. Something from deep within his consciousness, catching him completely off guard, became magnetically attracted to her vitality, her intellect. They had a common interest in scientific matters. His visceral self was already attracted to her sable-like hair and expressive blue eyes. He couldn't deny the excitement her presence was kindling within him.

Extinguish it. Now. He warned himself to neutralize his endocrine rush and subdue his quickening heartbeat. This wasn't the time or the place. The nature of this assignment demanded his full attention. To be preoccupied by a woman now would not be advisable. The UMO employees on Europa were depending on them--for their lives. Fortunately, he was able to control his more basic urges and even ignore them if he had to, attributing this talent to his soldier training.

And he was not about to jeopardize the mission of the Subterra Rebel Force, an underground, anti-Delegation organization of which he was secretly a member. He needed to guard his words around Helena. Treason was not looked upon lightly by orphelions who were uninformed--or unwilling to believe the reports--about their government's corrupt activities.

Helena was contemplating his subatomic explanation of the gravity simulator as they moved toward the bow of the vessel. She decided that his voice, mellifluous and articulate, with a soft southern accent, was pleasing to her auditory sense. She couldn't escape the fact that his rugged handsomeness and long, copper-colored hair was most pleasing to her visual sense as well.

But an uneasiness from the back of her mind came forward with stern advice: *He represents tyranny. Don't be fooled by his charm.*

Helena regarded her government as oppressive as a searing, desert heat.

During times when her mind would soar to the stars with ideas of freedom, her body had always been left on the ground to be subjected to Delegation control. The rescue mission to Europa had given her a symbolic leave from the usual constraints of her life at UMO--symbolic only, because the spacecraft they were traveling in belonged to UMO and was managed under the jurisdiction of the Delegation Assembly.

She decided to rein in the natural will of her emotions. To them, Thor was luring her toward an unknown fulfillment almost too tempting to leave unexplored. On the other hand, she felt disdain for what his position exemplified. Conflicting emotions aside, her undivided energies were needed for the success of the rescue mission.

A spiral stairway brought them to the upper deck. Thor motioned his arm in a broad sweep across the bridge in introducing her to the nucleus of the astroship's activities. Helena noticed the forward-facing seating and control panels around the room's perimeter for three additional crew members. It pleased her to see the stacks of crates under her charge had been delivered safely into the environmentally-controlled bridge chamber.

While seated at the command station, Thor demonstrated some of its functions should his mission partner need to maneuver the craft in an emergency situation. "I will further instruct you in emergency piloting once we are on our way," he said. Helena felt the task would be a bit daunting but she didn't mention it.

Thor brought her through a doorway which led to a hallway behind the bridge. Helena saw that he had to bend slightly to avoid bumping his head. To the starboard side she was shown the galley, two sleeping quarters, the shower and lavatory. She thought the rooms small but serviceable and observed that her luggage had been already set in the room that was to be hers. Further down the narrow hallway was the utility room which held dry-cleaning and other appliances that would be necessary for the extended trip. On the port side and separated from the preceding chambers by the corridor were the workout room, two more sleeping quarters, and a storage room.

Returning to the bridge, the pilot's voice took on a more serious tone. "This spacecraft is equipped with a defense system that includes warning detection devices, protective force shields, and gamma ray weaponry. There is a self-destruct feature and an escape pod should we need to suddenly terminate the mission."

Helena tried not to furrow her brow at the thought of why they might need to use the defense system. Both were well-informed of the potential dangers inherent in this assignment.

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On course for Jupiter, the daily routine of life inside the spacecraft was

soon established. On the bridge of the ship, at the control panel, Thor's time was spent updating course settings, maintaining computer systems, and communicating with UMO headquarters on Earth.

Their distance from Earth rapidly increasing, he began to feel more removed from the restrictions of his soldier life. From his post, he felt more at liberty to furtively, so as not to seem disrespectful, behold his shipmate's slender figure within her gold and black regulation clothing. Her medium frame seemed taller as she moved with straight-shouldered elegance. His eyes followed the shimmery fabric along her seductive curves. *This could become a very satisfying habit--watching her.*

At least for the moment, her presence was able to soothe his troubled conscience. Memories of the incident on Mars were still haunting him. Always would. Even though it had occurred while he'd been carrying out orders, he felt responsible. And *because* it had occurred while he'd been carrying out orders, it had been the deciding factor which had spurred him into becoming a Subterra rebel.

Helena softly hummed an unfamiliar and not unpleasing melody. He watched as her graceful hands sponged with water some of the thick leaves of the myriad of plants growing from deep trays on the lighted shelves. A few of the palm-sized orchids had already bloomed. They were lavender in color with dark pink centers. A delicately sweet fragrance wafted from them. They had converted the bridge deck into a makeshift greenhouse. Thor found the woman's touch around the place oddly comforting. As Helena made random chemical tests of the petals' fluids, he noticed how striking she appeared under the ultraviolet light, among the tropical flora.

He also noticed how content she seemed to be with her position at Universal Mining and, for some enigmatic reason, felt more let down than he would have had she been anyone else. How could she be happy to exist where one's life is predetermined to obey rules which allow no opportunity for democratic input and no possibility for leniency when errors are made? Even now they were being spied on by government recording devices hidden in the walls of the UMO astroship.

Thor's job as a rebel infiltrator was to seek out recruits from within the ranks of the workforce. But it was often difficult to distinguish between those who would be supportive of the SRF cause and those who would sound the alarms if they knew a revolutionist was in their midst. Could he trust Helena with underground information? He thought, realistically, probably not.

He knew others like her who believed their life was good and would readily turn in a traitor. After all, order must be maintained for the Delegation, for the good of the Solar System. Radical ideas signified disorder and needed to be dealt with accordingly. If she were to back Thor into a threatening situation, he would

do whatever necessary to protect himself and the cause of the Subterra Rebel Force, which he knew in his heart to be true and right.

Better to just enjoy her soft feminine presence and trust her with nothing.

Appearing to concentrate, yet not one hundred percent into her task, Helena couldn't resist the urge to spy on Thor through the foliage while she made the viability measurements. He was wearing the black version of the UMO pilot's uniform, made of a supple, synthetic material called leatherine. His thick hair was tied back; his mustache and beard were neatly trimmed.

Knowing her thoughts went well beyond what was appropriate and in spite of her ill feelings toward most authority figures, she couldn't help but muse over how appealing this one was while at the control panel, in expert command of their course. His mind into his work, it dawned on her how completely unaware he was of his own sexiness while totally absorbed in his element.

The sight caused her to inhale deeply. She closed her eyes and concentrated on settling her pounding heart.

To be so distracted by a man's presence was a novel experience for Helena. She knew if she was to act on her desire to become familiar with him on a more personal level, the attempt would most likely result in an awkward embarrassment since Thor was obviously of a more official mind set. Furthermore, the very idea went against the terms of her employment, and more significantly, against the premise of Delegation law.

And she had other ideas that were even more dangerous. She was certain Thor would phase her out without so much as a blink of an eye if he knew of her mutinous schemes.

Focus on the mission at hand, she reminded herself. Then she looked at Thor and sighed. Nothing could be done about the arresting color of his hair. But at least the company could issue less form-enhancing uniforms for their pilots so she could better concentrate on her duties.

Thor decided that, as the ship's captain, it would be more befitting if he resisted looking in Helena's direction for no apparent reason. He tried to concentrate on their trajectory against the stellar navigational on-screen charts, but it was proving to be an exercise in futility. He was more drawn toward this beguiling and beautiful woman, the manner in which she cared for the delicate tropical flora, and trustworthy or not, he discovered that he simply enjoyed her company.

But, she was a faithful servant to a government which he, only recently, had recognized for what it was and had grown to detest.