

The Verralto Incident
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by
Melody L. Higdon

A tiny skipship hung in space just outside the visible edge of the Verralton system's sun. Only two people were on board, a scientist intent on measuring odd solar fluctuations and her bored pilot.

"Vicki, when will you be done? I'm hungry." The man sighed when he got no answer and reached over to tap the oblivious woman on the shoulder. "Vicki."

"Um?" she said absently, her attention still locked on the screen in front of her.

Experience made him tap her again before he said anything else. She looked up and blinked, vaguely surprised to see him. "Lunch?" he said, brown eyes hopeful. His long, lean frame hid a huge appetite.

"Lunch! Why it's only—" She looked at the chronometer on the console. "Oh, no! I didn't realize it was so late! We were due back on board 20 minutes ago! Why didn't you *say* something?" She scrambled up and sat at the command board. "Captain Juarez will be—"

"— waiting," he finished for her. "I asked for an extra half hour. I figured it would take me that long to break that trance you go into every time you do research."

Her eyes softened. "You know me so well, Joss."

He leaned over to give her a lingering kiss. "Absolutely, my sexy genius; now let's go eat!"

Vicki touched her collar commbar. "Androcles, this is Skipship Two. Request permission to return to the ship."

Captain Juarez answered the call himself, irritation only lightly veiled by his unfailing courtesy. "And not before time, Dr. Barnett. Please; by all means, do return."

Vicki hunched her shoulders at the frost in his tone and glanced at Josiah. His dark hair gleaming, he mimicked Captain Juarez at his most disapproving. As always, the sight of this otherwise professional officer acting the fool for her made her smile. "Right away, Captain. Skipship Two out."

Josiah turned the little skip toward the ship and expertly piloted it past the bulk of the vessel to the skipbay. He swung around to enter the open bay just as the comm channel came alive.

"Skipship Two! Get away from the ship—" Captain Juarez' urgent command broke off as an explosion ripped the ship apart in a blaze of light. The tiny craft, spun by the concussion wave, hurtled out of control amid debris from the Androcles. Josiah fought the controls while Vicki stared out the porthole in disbelief.

"It's gone!" Stunned, she searched for anything she could recognize. "The whole ship is just gone."

Hampered by a damaged thruster, Josiah finally brought the skipship back into control. He joined Vicki at the porthole to stare at the debris field that marked where the Androcles had been. He saw no escape pods and his stomach lurched. He and Vicki were the only survivors.

The extent of the disaster hit Vicki. "Captain Juarez warned us away; he knew something was wrong. What happened?"

“There was no fire from the planet, no outward cause that I picked up on the scanners. It must have been a plus power node failure. Nothing else would wreak such total destruction.” Josiah slid into the pilot’s seat.

“Where are we going?” Numbly, Vicki watched him bring the skip around to a new heading.

“Only one place to go; Verralto. The hull is breached, and we’re losing air.” Josiah explained the problem. “It’s the only Earth Class planet for light years.”

“We’re not supposed to go there.” Vicki’s trembling refuted her calm voice.

“No choice, Hon.” Josiah looked grim. “We’re going in, and it’s going to be rough. Sit down and strap in tight.”

“Okay, Joss.” Very subdued, she obeyed his instructions.

“Don’t worry.” He reached across and gripped her hand comfortingly. “We’ll make it.”

“Of course,” she agreed with absolute faith.

Joss allowed himself a flash of pride; his Vicki believed he could do anything. “Hang on, now; we’re going in.” He wrestled with the damaged controls. “Let go the emergency beacon.”

Vicki pressed the button and watched the beacon spiral away from the skip. “Beacon away.” The ride roughened as the skip entered the atmosphere.

“Here we go!” Josiah went grim as he brought the little ship around for a landing.

Vicki clung tightly to the armrests of her seat and took a shuddery breath. “Here we go.”

Gravity seized the ship and heat came through the hull as friction scorched the alloys. The skip bucked under Josiah’s hands as he fought to bring it to a survivable landing. The wild ride seemed to last forever until it ended abruptly with a banging, rending slide. Boulders and trees flashed by as the skip skimmed across the rough ground. The two passengers hung on, tossed back and forth in their seats, as the skip broke up around them. The nose finally hit a hillside with a heavy crunch and silence fell. Smoke rose from the wreck in a thin plume and disappeared in the wind.

Three years later, aboard the Patrol Fleet Starclipper Starwitch.

“Captain’s Log, begin.” Ensnconed in his private office, Brett Thatcher steepled his fingers thoughtfully as he framed his entry. “We are in orbit around the planet Verralto in the Crinea Star System. By order of the Union Council, we are here to get permission to search for a skipship thought to have crashed on Verralto three years ago. The skip is from the Androcles, a research vessel lost in an explosion in this system.”

As usual, his uniform jacket hung in the corner; he worked in his shirtsleeves. Made of genuine, hand-loomed linen, the shirt lay soft and comfortable against his skin. Although not strictly a uniform item, they buffered him against the scratchy fabric of his uniform jacket, a benefit many of his officers envied. He had the collarless shirts specially made for him back on Earth, the cut and fit to his measurements and specifications. The stunningly expensive shirts, along with double-spiced Tasman Spice coffee, were his only self-indulgence.

He wore them strictly for comfort; he never saw how well the style suited him. The soft, white fabric, beautifully tailored, draped in graceful folds yet drew attention to his muscular shoulders and trim torso. Tucked into the navy blue pants of his uniform and open at the throat, the shirt had a piratical effect that matched his coal black hair, dramatic gray eyes, and classically chiseled features. Coupled with the burr of a soft Welsh accent, it all added up to a compellingly attractive man, all the more so because he did not know it.

He leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee. “A scan made of the explosion site last month turned up an emergency beacon. This beacon, though too heavily damaged to transmit a distress signal, proved there were people off ship when the Androcles exploded. Since Verralto is the only habitable planet in this system, the pilot would logically attempt to land there. If he made a controlled landing, there should be survivors on Verralto. This assumes the skip was not so crippled in the blast that it crashed. In light of the damage the beacon took, I don’t hold much hope for the skip itself being in good enough condition to make a survivable landing.”

Annoyance drew his brows lower, and he set his cup down with a distinct click. “The Verralton government agreed to meet a negotiator but accepted only retired Fleet Admiral Gunnar Bjornsen. Unfortunately, Admiral Bjornsen recently passed away at the ripe old age of 112. I have tried for days to get the Verraltons to accept a substitute. At the suggestion of the Union Council, I have offered myself as his replacement.”

A quiet chime interrupted his thoughts, and he stopped the log entry. “Yes?”

“The Verralton Coordinator wishes to speak to you, Captain.”

“I’ll take it here.” He sat up and keyed his commscreen.

“Aye, Sir.”

The screen lit and the Coordinator’s narrow, furred face turned to him, his close-set ears swiveled forward alertly. His appearance strongly reminded Thatcher of a big cat. “Captain Thatcher, you may represent your government. The restrictions we placed on Admiral Bjornsen also apply to you. Do you accept?” Implacable black eyes stared out at him with cold disinterest.

Thatcher had no choice. “I accept.”

The Verralton showed no emotions. “Gate down in one hour. We will provide coordinates.” He cut the connection abruptly.

Thatcher slumped in his seat to brood over the situation. “Continue log entry.” He finally spoke. “The Verraltons have agreed to let me replace Admiral Bjornsen. Acceptance of their terms means I must go without the escort officer customary when making landfall on a non-Union

planet. They cite the extreme sensitivity of the situation as the reason for the restriction, but it smacks of duplicity to me. I acceded only because there may be survivors, Dr. Victoria Barnett among them. The emergency beacon showed she was on the skip when the Androcles exploded. If she's alive, the Union Council wants her back as she is a top weapons research scientist."

Thatcher sat up again as he finished his log entry. "The Verraltons are notorious for killing emissaries in the midst of negotiations, so I am reluctant to trust them now, especially under such odd conditions. The Council doesn't agree with my reservations since the Verraltons came to us and hinted they would allow the search in the first place. I will need to be very careful if I am to return to the Starwitch, with or without survivors in tow. Captain's Log out."

Entry finished, Thatcher called his executive officer, Shoji Tomei, into his office and briefed him before passing command to him. A pureblooded oriental, Tomei could trace his lineage all the way back to samurai warriors of ancient Japan. "Your ship, Exec. Please have Dr. Bartow meet me in Transit Gate One. Tell him I want a personal homing transmitter." Thatcher shrugged into his jacket.

"Aye, Sir. Do you expect trouble?" Tomei followed him out of the room.

"With the Verraltons?" Thatcher stepped into the elevator. "Always."

"Good luck, Sir," Tomei called as the doors slid closed.

"I'll need it," Thatcher muttered under his breath.

Dr. Bartow waited for him when Thatcher strode into the gate station. "Your arm, Brett." He pushed up Thatcher's sleeve and expertly injected the transmitter under the skin of his right wrist. He did a function check to confirm the signal with the system operator, who stood at the console. "Now we can find you whether you have your commbar or not."

"Thanks, Rian; let's hope this is one precaution we won't need." Thatcher stepped onto the transit platform. "Activate, Crewman Marks."

"Aye, Sir." Crewman Marks keyed the mechanism. He saw the characteristic flash that indicated a twist in the fabric of space had formed and disappeared. Thatcher vanished.

Thatcher found himself in a barren, open plain. Large mountains loomed far off on the horizon, and no buildings were in sight. A lone Verralton waited beside a ground car. Thatcher walked over to him.

"Captain Thatcher?" the Verralton lisped. Tall and slender, he had flat, obsidian eyes that seemed too large for the narrow-boned face. His shadowed-silver fur marked him as a high-caste citizen. "Come with me. My superiors wait." He turned without waiting for Thatcher's response and slid into the groundcar.

Thatcher mentally shrugged, got in beside him, and buckled his safety harness. His escort immediately sent the car careening across the plain at high speed. More than an hour passed in silence before a heavily fortified building came into view. The car darted into a tunnel that went beneath it. Huge doors swung closed behind the car as it pulled to a stop. Thatcher felt a frisson of unease as his escort got out of the car to walk down a steep ramp. Thatcher caught up with him at another set of doors.

"I am Chact." His escort spoke into a monitor. The doors opened silently on a small, austere chamber. They stepped in, the doors shut, and Thatcher felt the elevator go down. He could not tell how far they went, but it seemed a long way. The doors opened, and Chact led the way along a narrow, chilly corridor. Silent soldiers lined the hall, and each stiffened to attention as Chact passed.

Chact stopped before a door, and the guard opened it for him. The door swung in on a room empty but for a table and chairs. Two high-caste Verraltons sat at the table. Chact left Thatcher and sat down beside the other high-castes. Stiffly at attention, four armed soldiers ranged against the walls.

“Captain Thatcher.” One high-caste spoke.

Thatcher mentally reviewed the sociologist’s briefing on local customs. “Don’t bow or offer your hand. If you do, they’ll take you for a low-caste, and you won’t get anywhere with them.” The advice came back to him so he stood impassively and waited.

His lack of reaction seemed to satisfy them. “You are here to negotiate for permission to search for survivors of a skipship crash, are you not?” The same one, apparently in charge, asked.

“I am,” Thatcher replied tersely, following the rules the sociologist laid out for him.

“That crash allegedly occurred three years ago. Why do you seek only now?” Only one Verralton spoke, but there was a charged tension in the room. Thatcher sensed they were all vitally interested in this despite their pretended indifference. He resolved to answer carefully.

“It was only last month we recovered an emergency beacon that suggested there might have been survivors of an accident that destroyed one of our vessels.” Thatcher watched them closely and tried to measure their mood. “Verralto is the only planet in this area able to support human life. If anyone survived, they would have come here.” They still said nothing.

“Your government expressed willingness to allow a search,” he reminded them, sensing a simmering anger just beneath the impassive surface. The Verraltons exchanged looks devoid of any expression Thatcher could read. Fresh unease flared in his mind; instinct warned him the situation held great danger.

“It is true,” the leader suddenly admitted. “We have long suspected the creature we have tried to capture for the last three years is not of Verralton origin. It must be your survivor.”

“Capture? It?” Thatcher did not like the choice of words. “What do you mean?”

The leader signaled the soldiers with the lift of his clawed paw. “We have been trying to exterminate this creature, and we will succeed at last. You will help us.”

“Help you! There is no way I will cooperate in any such thing!” Thatcher refused angrily.

“You have no choice. Take it.” Chact gave the order, and the soldiers closed on Thatcher. Thatcher backed away and quickly keyed the commbar on his collar.

“Starwitch!” He got no further as the soldiers seized him and roughly dragged him, struggling, into the cell in the next room. They searched him, pulled open his jacket and shirt, and checked for concealed pockets.

“Nothing, Coordinator,” one soldier reported.

“Hold its arms,” Chact ordered. The soldiers forced Thatcher against the wall and pinned him there, his back against the stone and his arms outstretched to the sides. Chact scanned him with a hand-held sensing device and, with the scratch of a razor-sharp claw, marked the place on Thatcher’s right wrist where Dr. Bartow implanted the transmitter. “There.”

At Chact’s signal, a soldier drew his knife and slashed Thatcher’s skin above the device. Thatcher jerked in pain, but they held him tightly. The soldier dug out the transmitter with his knife, wiped off the blood, and, bowing, gave it to Chact.

“Excellent.” Chact dropped the transmitter to the floor and crushed it under foot. “Tie it up.”

Blood dripped from the gash to spatter red splotches on the floor. One soldier pulled the commbar off Thatcher’s jacket for Chact to pocket while the others tied Thatcher to the wall.

They forced his arms above his head, tightened coarse ropes over the bloody slash with deliberate cruelty, and backed away.

“Is this how you negotiate, Chact? Is this a sample of Verralton honor?” Thatcher tugged at his bonds, angry and frustrated. “I demand you release me immediately! I am a legal emissary of the Star Union Council sent to negotiate with you with your government’s approval!”

Chact dismissed the soldiers into the corridor. “As we never intended to negotiate with you at all, our honor is intact. You, Captain Thatcher, are bait.”

“Bait?” Thatcher went still, his attention caught.

“We plan to use you to lure out the demon that plagues us,” Chact said. “The Barnett destroys and kills at will. We send out patrols; they do not come back. We send many troops to hunt it, but it is a ghost that evaporates into the air. Sensors do not see it, our people fear it more every day, and we can not find it.” A soldier in the hall made a sign to ward off evil, and Chact stopped to glare at him. The soldier froze, then snapped to rigid attention.

“Always it attacks, then disappears like smoke in the wind,” Chact continued. “Work in outlying areas has all but stopped. We must send two or three low-castes to do work that takes only one because they will not venture out alone. We devote all our energies to eradicating the demon, and *still* we can not find it!”

He stopped his progressively more furious recitation to stroke down the silvered fur on his arm. “Now we try a new approach, with you as leverage,” he said more calmly. “We will broadcast word of your capture on all our communication frequencies. We know it listens; it will hear and come to free you. When it does, we will have it, and then we will rid ourselves of off-world vermin once and for all.” Chact’s eyes glittered with the fervor of a fanatic, and Thatcher realized just how deep race hatred ran in the Verralton people.

“And if she doesn’t come? What then? She’s too smart to just walk into a trap.” Thatcher challenged Chact. Dr. Barnett was smart, very smart. Her survival thus far testified to that intelligence.

Chact bared his fangs in a cold smile, the first emotion Thatcher had seen on a Verralton face. “We have planned for that. We will put you to torture in the morning and broadcast your screams. It will come to help you then. We have learned it is weak that way.”

A sinking feeling spread through Thatcher. Chact could be right. He saw a picture of Victoria Barnett before he left the Starwitch. The young woman had naive gentleness in her eyes. She would come for him, and he could do nothing about it.

“My ship expects to hear from me. When I don’t report in, they’ll look for me,” Thatcher shouted at Chact’s retreating back.

Chact waved at the walls around them. “This fortress was designed and built specifically to block sensors. Without your communicator or transmitter, your ship can see nothing. Let them look; they will not find you.”

The door slammed shut behind Chact, leaving Thatcher alone in the tiny cell. The only light came from a small panel high on the wall, and it cast a dim glow. When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Thatcher saw why.

Sensor arrays covered every inch of the walls and floor. Light, temperature, and pressure alarms would go off at the slightest trigger. He moved his foot experimentally in a wide sweep and found a smooth semicircle of unsensored floor and wall around him. Useful to know? Maybe, maybe not.

The ropes around his wrists were tight, and the rough fibers burned in the gash. With his arms spread apart over his head, he had no leverage to try to work loose. No amount of pulling did anything but grind rope fibers into his skin, so Thatcher resigned himself to waiting for an opportunity to escape.

As he stood in the dark cell, he swore over the long groundcar trip with Chact. It had taken him hundreds of miles from his landing point, where the Starwitch would begin the search. He had a long wait before he could hope for rescue.

Even as Thatcher brooded in the cell, Chact spoke to Tomei, who demanded to know where Captain Thatcher was at that moment.

“He is in session with our Emperor, and we are bound by Imperial law to leave them undisturbed. I’m sure he will contact you when he can.” Chact put off Tomei with the smooth, practiced air of a born politician.

Tomei glanced over at Schuller, who scanned the surface. “The transmitter?” Schuller shook his head.

Tomei turned back to the screen. “Captain Thatcher’s personal homing device has gone dead. Can you explain this?”

Chact shook his head. “A malfunction perhaps? We can not be responsible for your inferior equipment. I will ask Captain Thatcher to check the device when I can. I can do no more.”

Deke Salter, the ship’s chaplain, leaned to whisper in Tomei’s ear. “He’s lying.”

“Of course.” Tomei fumed, fully aware of the diplomatic snarl he faced. He could not act without solid proof Chact was lying and was unlikely to get it without Verralton cooperation.

“We can’t contact Captain Thatcher directly.” He tried a new approach. “He has equipment with him that should allow it.”

“He *had* it.” Chact signaled, and someone handed him the commbar. “Our Most Exalted Emperor forbids communications devices of any sort in his chambers for security reasons,” he said smugly. He handed back the bar. “We will return it to you.” The bar appeared on the deck in front of Tomei, and he picked it up to turn it in his fingers, staring at it with foreboding. Without his commbar, Thatcher was entirely on his own on Verralto, and the situation had clearly gone sour. Tomei searched his mind for a new tack but came up with nothing.

“We will contact you every hour in the hope of hearing from our captain.” He put on as much pressure as he dared in a subtle attempt to warn Chact not to harm Captain Thatcher.

Chact smirked, barely concealing his contempt. “That is certainly your privilege.” The screen blanked.

“Damn it!” Tomei angrily dropped into his seat. “Mr. Schuller, where did the commbar gate up from?”

Schuller checked the panel. “From the landing site, Sir, but there is no indication of any structure in that area above or below ground. They must have done a bounced gate from somewhere else.”

“What about the transmitter? Where did it stop sending?” Tomei thought it might give them a place to start.

“At the landing site, Sir. The captain landed in a suppression zone; we couldn’t track him once he entered it.” Schuller looked rueful. “Had we known in advance it was there, we could have adjusted for it. Once we lost the signal, though, it was too late.”

Tomei considered what the subterfuge implied about Verralton strategy. “They want to mislead us and slow our search. Lt. Schuller, I want you and Chief Engineer Parks to look for Captain Thatcher. Scan for human life signs; begin at the landing site and expand the search pattern from there.”

“I take it you disbelieve Chact, Sir?”

Tomei nodded grimly. “I do, Mr. Schuller. Captain Thatcher is in trouble. Find him.”

“Aye, Sir.” Schuller returned to his console.

Born on Devros, Schuller had the squat, heavily muscled build typical of the high gravity world natives. Deverians, descendants of Germanic Slavs who settled Devros, are famed for their mechanical skills. Despite his heavy-world strength, Schuller had an amazingly light touch with computers. He was an expert, and Tomei relied on that skill to find the captain.

“Ensign Albertson, ask Dr. Bartow to make an official log entry about the condition and reliability of Captain Thatcher’s personal homing device,” Tomei ordered his duty officer. “After that, set up and keep a complete record of everything that goes on from this point to build a case for intervention. If we need to go down there and get Captain Thatcher, I want documentation of what’s going on here to back me at my court martial.”

Albertson noted Tomei’s orders. “Aye, Sir.”

“Lt. Jansen, sound Alert Status Two.” Tomei gave the order to prepare the Starwitch against possible attack.

“Aye, Sir, Alert Status Two.” The alert notices went out, automatically powering up the ship’s weaponry and protective screens. Crewmen hurried to battle positions all over the ship from the bridge to Engineering to Sickbay. In less than five minutes, the Starwitch stood ready for anything. Had he called for Alert Status One, she would have been ready in two minutes.

“Alert Status Two, Sir,” Jansen reported to Tomei. “All stations show green.”

“Very good.” With no more to do, Tomei got comfortable in the command console seat reserved for the executive officer. He prepared for a long wait but hoped for a lucky break.

On the planet below, word about Thatcher’s capture already broadcast on all frequencies. As Chact predicted, human ears listened. Ensnared in her mountain hold, Vicki Barnett followed the chatter of excited Verralton voices.

“A Patrol Fleet officer; how very original,” she mused skeptically. “Third time this year they’ve tried this trick. They must think I’m pretty stupid.”

She listened to more of the broadcast, curious in spite of herself. “What makes them think I’ll fall for it now when I haven’t before?” Casually braided brown hair stayed out of ever-changing hazel eyes that glittered with intelligence. Of medium height and stocky build, she wore the remains of a shipboard work uniform. Worn but clean blue shirt and slacks topped native boots she had stolen to replace her own. Neatly sewn patches covered the knees and elbows of her uniform and many rips had been carefully darned.

She listened as she potted around the cave she called home. She spilled the water she poured when the Verraltons began to brag about the upcoming torture. They had introduced a deadly new twist to their game.

“Those devious *bastards!*” She shut off the transceiver with an angry stab of her finger. “They know I can’t take the chance it’s not a bluff this time. They might really have a Patrol Fleet officer. They know I won’t sit still for that! Not after what they did to Joss!” She went to the mouth of the cave and stared out into the sunlight while she plotted her next move.

After a time, she got out her maps. The Verraltons had been deliberately generous with details, and she knew the fort where they reportedly held the officer. She often scouted the area and had even cached emergency supplies in a small cave near the fort. All that would be helpful, but she held an ace.

She had blueprints of the fort. In a raid some months before, she had substituted fakes to make the Verraltons think they had gone up in flames with the building she had destroyed. They detailed everything: the sensor batteries, guard posts, alarm systems, and, importantly, the ventilation system.

She traced a finger over the paper. "Here," she said at last. "If they've really got someone, he's got to be here." Her finger rested on the cell where Thatcher stood. "I'll go in tonight, in the small hours when attention begins to lag."

She planned her approach as she gathered up gear. She left the cave with two hours of daylight left to get there and take up a surveillance position. All traces of the gentle girl Thatcher had seen in the picture were gone. In her place, a grim soldier marched on a deadly enemy.

The sun dipped below the horizon as she lay on a bluff that overlooked the fort. She watched the activity below through powerful binoculars, confirmed weak points in sensor arrays, checked guard placements, and monitored patrol timing. Darkness fell swiftly, and she clipped night filters onto the binoculars to continue her scan.

The Starwitch also scanned. Schuller saw no human traces, but he did notice a few tiny blank spots that could not be from the forts he registered. Any other time, he might have found them interesting, but not today; he had another goal. Schuller concentrated on finding Captain Thatcher, so he ignored the blanks. He could not know Dr. Barnett had long since made personal screens that concealed her from any probe. She had one in each of her scouting points near all the forts in her area. Those little niches were the blanks Schuller saw. Meanwhile, he and Henry focused on penetrating the fort detection barriers.

Chact had informed Tomei some time ago that Thatcher had retired for the night. As an imperial guest, he was not to be disturbed unless he specifically requested it, and he had not. Tomei could only wait for Schuller and Parks to find a chink in the armor below. More concerned by the hour, he hoped Captain Thatcher could afford to do the same.

Thatcher had been hanging for hours. No one had come near him since they slammed shut the cell door. He tried to sleep but could not take the strain relaxing put on his shoulders and wrists for more than a few minutes at a time. Thirst bothered him more than hunger, and his cut wrist throbbed and burned. He rested as well as he could, knowing what daylight would bring. He suspected Verraltons enjoyed inflicting torture and were entirely too good at it to suit him.

Barnett moved when the stars burned brightly above her. She rappelled down the cliff face, soundlessly took out the first guard to pace by, then waited for his partner. She caught him by surprise, and he went down with little fuss. Two lights went out, then started to blink on a console in the fort. The technician manning it pressed a button on the intercom.

"Coordinator Chact, the bluff guards have been neutralized," he reported.

"Excellent. The demon is on the way. Signal the alert, but do it quietly," Chact instructed the technician. "We don't want to chase it away. Shift troops to that side of the fort. Blanket the area."

"As you command."

Barnett knew they traced the guards. It was precisely why she killed them; she hoped to draw the fort contingent away from her real entry point. Nimble and strong, she re climbed the cliff to speed around to the far side of the fort. With satisfaction, she noted only skeleton crews had been left in this area while the main body of soldiers searched the other side of the fort compound. An experienced guerrilla fighter, she easily slipped by the guards and sensors that barred her way.

She made it to a side entrance unobserved, where she crouched in the shadows to check her screening device. If it failed while she was inside, they would have her. Quietly, she edged into a deserted corridor and stealthily went to the vent panel she marked on the blueprints. She popped the grille and boosted herself up into the ventilator shaft before reseating the cover. She crept along, counted branches as she passed them, and worked ever downward as she made turns and descents with an image of the blueprint in her mind. Finally, she peeked through a grille and saw a guard in front of a cell.

“Softly, softly, catchee monkey,” she whispered, quoting a Rudyard Kipling story she read as a child. She had to immobilize the guard without killing him or his body sensor would give away her position.

In another part of the fort, the technician at the monitors nervously searched for her outside. His superiors waited in a semicircle around his seat, and he was aware of the consequences of failing them. Death would be a blessing too long in coming.

“Where is it? Why does it take so long to come?” a high-caste demanded angrily. His fur stood up at his neck, indicating his growing agitation.

Chact waited more calmly. “It is sly, Ronst; not given to blundering in unwarily. That’s why we’ve never caught it before. Be patient; we will have it before the sun rises again.”

Another, more powerfully built male looked at him coldly. “For your sake, Chact, you had better be correct. Should it escape us again, the Lord Imperial will be very displeased, and I will certainly remind him this plan was yours.”

Fear made Chact’s fur ripple down his back ridge. Personal minister to the Lord Imperial, Berdon was second only to him in power. He nodded curtly in a display of confidence he did not feel. “Certainly, Lord Berdon.” He turned to the technician. “Pull power from inside the fort and boost the outside scanners to maximum. Find the demon!”

At that moment, the demon crouched in a vent shaft above the guard in front of the cell. She took a small object from her pocket and laid it out on her palms. She dropped the glittery toy through the grille into the corridor, where it flew in loopy circles around and around the guard. It caught his eye, and he followed its crazy flight path first with his eyes and then with open paws. When he moved under the vent, Barnett dropped a loop of rope over his head and jerked it tight, choking off his voice. Hauling him up to balance on his toes, she tied off the line, then swung down to take his weapons and tie his hands behind him.

“You won’t die by my hand,” she whispered to him in his own language. “I need your sensor to keep telling them you are here.” She pulled herself up into the shaft with easy agility and looked down on him. “Of course, I can’t answer for what your superiors might do.”

His eyes widened as her meaning went home, but she vanished. Just a few feet from where the hapless guard hung, she popped the screen off another vent. Cautiously, she leaned to peer into the dark cell. “Pst! Anyone here?” she called softly.

Thatcher’s head snapped up when the vent cover came loose. “Shh! Who’s there?”

“A friend.” The reply came back in a feminine whisper.

It had to be Barnett. "Get out of here!" He whispered the fierce command. "It's a trap!"
"I know," she informed him. "I came anyway. Can you move?"

"No; I'm tied against the wall." He realized she had no intention of leaving. "Get out of here right now!"

"Not without you." She refused calmly.

"I'm ordering you to go at once." Thatcher tried again to get her to leave. "They'll kill you!"

"They have to catch me first." She brushed off his command. "What sensors can you see? My blueprints didn't show them."

Thatcher accepted that he could not make her obey and told her what she needed to know. "Don't touch the floor or the walls. They're pressure and temperature sensitive. Don't show a light either, that'll set off alarms too."

"Right. Are there any safe spots?"

"There's a clear half circle right around me to keep me from setting anything off." He made out a dim form sliding down a rope. "What are you doing?" he hissed urgently, alarmed to see her inside the cell.

"Watch."

She swung back and forth on the rope, arcing in widening sweeps, until she lightly dropped down practically on top of him, her feet between his and her shoulder thudding into his chest. She held her rope with one hand and grabbed his shirt with the other to steady herself. Leaning against Thatcher to keep her balance and hold the rope at the same time, she drew a knife and reached up to cut his bonds. "I'll have you free in a moment."

"Hurry," Thatcher ordered her. "The quicker we get out of here the better. There may be ambient energy sensors in here. The radiant patterns you emit may set them off."

"That's not a problem; they don't have that technology yet. I'm Victoria Barnett, formerly of the research vessel Androcles; who are you?" She sawed at the tough fibers. The rope parted and his left arm dropped.

"Captain Brett Thatcher of the Starclipper Starwitch. Are you the only survivor?" The ropes fell away from his right wrist, and he was free. His arms felt leaden, but blood surging into them made them tingle. He rubbed his wrists then wrapped an arm around her waist to balance her against him.

"I am now," she replied. "I landed with Lt. Commander Josiah Powell, but he's dead." She tied her rope to an anchor ring where Thatcher's bonds still dangled. "Can you climb?"

"As soon as I get feeling back in my hands." He wiped fresh blood from his wrist on his pants.

"How did they get you?" she asked as she tested the knot.

"I came to negotiate search rights. We came to look for you," he told her dryly. "You've made quite a name for yourself with them, haven't you?"

"Have I?" she queried with unmistakable satisfaction.

"I'd say so!" Her reaction surprised Thatcher. "They want you dead badly enough to kidnap me and risk a major diplomatic incident to get to you."

"Good." Her voice hardened, startling Thatcher with her angry intensity. "We have to get moving," she warned as he rubbed life back into his hands. "I left a guard trussed up outside the door. Any time now, he's going to decide it's better to suicide than let his superiors deal with his

failure. Once he's dead, his body sensors will go off, and they'll know exactly where we are. I'll go first."

She adeptly scampered up the rope. "Come on." Thatcher swung onto the rope and pulled himself up to the vent. Between them, they managed to squeeze his shoulders through the narrow opening.

"Stay close so my pocket screen will cover you," Barnett instructed Thatcher as she started away. The two crept past the vent where the guard hung. His eyes widened when he saw Thatcher, and he struggled to free himself. Barnett looked at him without emotion and turned away. "He's secure," she said quietly. "Soon he'll be dead."

She crept off and Thatcher followed. He lost count of the turns they made and the branches they passed, but Barnett moved steadily, sure of herself. She came to where she had started and removed the vent cover. They had a bad moment when Thatcher's shoulders stuck in the opening, but he came free when she jumped up and added her weight to his. She replaced the cover and led the way down the corridor to the door to the outside.

They hugged the fort wall while they caught their breath and scouted the area. Inside the fort, sirens started to wail. "The guard's dead." Barnett explained the alarm. She took a keypad from a pocket and punched in a series of numbers. "See that line of trees below the cliff over there?" She pointed. Thatcher nodded. "When I say go, you head for them at flank speed and don't stop for anything."

"What about you?" Thatcher closed his jacket. The navy blue material reflected light much less than the white shirt beneath it. "It's you they really want."

"I'll be right behind you, raising a little havoc. Ready?" He nodded and she pressed a button on the keypad. Instantly, a brilliant explosion lit the sky from the other side of the fort. Pounding feet and flitting figures told them the Verraltions converged on the explosion.

"GO!" Barnett spoke into his ear, and he took off for the trees. She ran a few steps behind him, keying more explosions. They had nearly cleared the fort plain when a lone sentry leapt from cover. He caught Thatcher all but on him and attacked.

He buried his knife in Thatcher's left shoulder and let momentum carry them both to the ground. Before he could get up, Barnett knocked him off Thatcher with a flying tackle. She scrambled to her knees beside Thatcher and gripped his arm.

"Don't touch that knife!" She warned him vehemently.

She had no time to explain; the Verralton rose. She leapt up and charged him without hesitation. Thatcher watched in amazement; this was not the timid woman he expected to find. Barnett fought aggressively, karate punching and kicking in a raging storm that drove the guard back. She did battle with a ferocious concentration that boded ill for her opponent.

Busy with him, she did not see his partner come to join the fray. With a supreme effort, Thatcher rose to knock the surprised guard to the ground with one powerful blow of his fist. Fortunately, the Verralton stayed down, because Thatcher collapsed to his knees immediately, gasping with pain. Barnett spared only him a brief glance before she slipped inside the soldier's defenses to land one last murderous blow to his neck. The Verralton went down for good. It took less than a minute.

She wasted no time on the dead sentry. She wheeled and bent to Thatcher. "Let me see." She explored the haft of the knife with her hands, afraid to risk a light. "Damn it! The hilt is very ornate, it may be a Chee."

Thatcher fought to focus his attention, but the knife made his shoulder blaze with pain. "Pull it out," he ordered her.

"I'm sorry, I don't dare take the chance," she apologized. "We can't deal with this in the dark. I'll explain later."

Shouts from the fort made her head swivel in that direction. The guard she killed had appeared on the panel and the meaning correctly interpreted. "They're on to us. We've got to get out of here now!"

"Help me up." Thatcher put up his hand.

"Just a second." She knelt beside him. "I'm going to move your arm for you. Just let it go limp; don't help me."

"We don't have time! We've got to move!" Thatcher insisted.

She ignored his order. "We have to make time! Trust me; I know what I'm doing." He let her ease his arm up to tuck his hand into his belt. He did not make a sound though the movement hurt fiercely. "Whatever you do, keep the muscles around that knife as still as you can," she instructed him. "It could mean your life. Can you walk?"

"I can walk." He staggered to his feet and immediately clung to a tree for support.

"Sure you can," she snapped tartly. She looped her arm around his waist to steady him. "We are deep in enemy territory here, Captain, and dawn is less than two hours off. Verralton soldiers are everywhere. If we don't get to shelter before sunrise, we are in deep trouble."

"Then move out," Thatcher commanded. They traveled as quickly as darkness would allow. Sure of the terrain, Barnett guided him around most of the tripping hazards. More than once, Thatcher would have fallen without her arm at his waist. He fought shock as the blood loss from the knife wound took its toll.

They hid from approaching patrols several times, and once Barnett left Thatcher in the shadows while she slipped up behind a soldier who got too close. She did not kill him; his body sensors would alert the enemy to her location so she knocked him out and tied him up. Coming back for Thatcher, she practically lifted him to his feet bodily. Despite the haze settling over his mind, he felt a surge of admiration. He doubted he could have risen without her, and he would have been caught well before now without her expertise.

They splashed into a river and waded many yards upstream to hide their tracks and the blood that dripped from Thatcher's shoulder, down his sleeve, and to the ground to mark their trail. Before they left the water, Barnett stopped to tuck a bandanna into his shirt so spattered blood would not betray them. Once back on dry ground, she left Thatcher often to cover their tracks and scout ahead for patrols before going on into the night.

Dawn stained the horizon a pale red when she led him to a concealed cave in the rock face of steep cliffs. She got Thatcher inside, then rolled an ingeniously balanced boulder across the opening and activated a concealed screening device at the entrance.

"We made it. We're safe here." She breathed a sigh of relief. The harrowing night at an end, she could relax.

"Good." Thatcher stood propped unsteadily against the back wall of the tiny cave, his eyes closed. His fingers around the knife hilt, he tried to stanch the blood that seeped past them.

"Let me help you sit." Barnett put her shoulder under his good arm and wrapped her arms around his waist so she could ease him to the ground. She fumbled in her pouch for her flashlight and clipped it to her shirt to free her hands. "I'll see what I can do."

"Fine." Thatcher dropped his hand and tipped his head back to rest against the wall.

She focused the light directly on the hilt protruding from his shoulder and swore pungently. She rummaged in her pouch, dumped it out to search the contents, and threw it aside. "We have a big problem," she said flatly.

"What?" He responded wearily. "Just pull the damned thing out. I'll do it if you can't." He gripped the hilt, prepared to tug the knife free.

"NO!" Barnett seized his arm to stop him. "It's not that easy. This is a Chee. The blade goes in like a regular knife, but when it's pulled out, it fans out dozens of spines that tear through flesh and bone like nothing you've ever seen before," she explained. "The spines have extremely sensitive triggers. They could spring open at any moment."

"Wonderful," Thatcher retorted sardonically. "Now what?"

She shrugged. "We need ka-Chee, but I don't have any here."

Thatcher opened his eyes. "What are ka-Chee?"

"Tools to lock down the spines so the knife can be removed safely." Barnett gave a brief description. "I have some back at my home base, but none here."

"I see." Thatcher sat up with effort. "We'll go there."

"We can't. We're hours from there, and you can't make it that far in this condition. We barely made it here. There's no point in my going alone, either." Barnett forestalled his next idea. "By the time I got there and back, you'd be dead. This thing has to come out soon."

"Then leave me," Thatcher ordered her. "Save yourself."

"No." She did not elaborate on her blunt refusal. She stripped off her gear, rubbed her face and arms with dirt to hide their paleness, and rolled aside the boulder.

"What are you doing?" Thatcher asked when sunlight spilled inside the cave to fall across his face.

"I'm going back to get the Chee pouch off that dead sentry before they pick up his body."

"That's out of the question. One, it's full daylight now and Verraltons are everywhere." Thatcher refused to let her go. "Two, the fort sensors will pick you up the second you leave here. They would have us both in minutes."

"What else can we do? We can't get any help." She spoke impatiently. "Do you have a commbar? No. Well, neither do I. Do you have a personal transmitter?" She pushed up his blood-encrusted sleeve to expose the angry gash on his wrist. "At a guess, I'd say no to that too."

That she noticed his arm surprised him. She had not seen him in anything but darkness or near darkness except for the few minutes she used her flashlight to look at the knife. "I can't let you take the chance." Thatcher asserted firmly. "I insist you wait until things cool down a bit."

"Look, Captain, I've got to go now." She leveled with him. "We must remove the Chee soon. It's a miracle the thing hasn't deployed its spines already. Sooner or later, it will trigger, and when it does, it will tear you to shreds. I absolutely will not let anyone else die because of me if I can prevent it, and that's the end of this discussion."

Thatcher's gray eyes flashed with anger, but he held his temper. He suspected she had good reason for her attitude. "Just how do you expect to get by all those soldiers?"

"Remember those explosions? I blew out the fort sensors on our way out of there earlier." She justified the risk. "All they'll have for the next few hours are hand units with very limited range. The shelter screen will conceal you, and I'll take the pocket screen we used earlier. It should protect me as long as they don't get too close. The high-castes don't trust soldiers with pulse guns; all they have are knives and hand weapons. Besides, I've been evading Verraltons for three years. I can do it, I will do it, and I'm going now."

Thatcher recognized he could not stop her. Three years of surviving on her own had honed an independence that over-rode her Fleet conditioning of obedience to a superior. She would chart her own course, in this case, not necessarily a bad thing. Here on Verralto, she had key expertise he lacked; she knew her enemy.

“You be damned careful.” He accepted the inevitable.

“I’m always careful. If I weren’t, I’d be dead.” She put her jacket over him and set a canteen beside him. “Stay warm and rest; I’ll be as quick as I can.” She went to the entrance.

“Wait! Put more mud on your face. You’re too pale.”

She rubbed in more dirt. “How’s that?” To his eyes, she looked like a child with her muddied face and ragged clothes.

“Better.” He swallowed the temptation to once again order her to stay. It would be pointless; her closed expression warned him he could say nothing to make her obey him.

“I’ll be back,” she promised.

“Dr. Barnett?” Thatcher caught her just as she started to move the boulder back into place to block the entrance. “Who died for you?”

She hesitated, haunted memories in her eyes. “Josiah Powell.” The boulder shut out the light and she vanished, leaving Thatcher to ponder her answer. What happened to Powell? Why did she blame herself for his death? The knife wound screamed with pain, and everything had a nasty tendency to spin whenever he moved even slightly. Time slowed to a crawl as he waited for Barnett to return.

Meanwhile, Schuller watched a fort that suffered a series of explosions in the middle of the night. Summoned by his night relief, he had taken one look and called Tomei to the bridge. When Tomei called the surface to ask about the explosions, they put him off with a weak story about a minor incident well north of the Emperor’s fort.

A couple of hours later, Tomei made a casual stroll around the bridge stations and stopped to look over Schuller’s shoulder. He saw markers on the screen. With his usual precision, Schuller had noted the anomalies he spotted.

“What are those blue dots, Mr. Schuller?”

“Those are blank spots noted in the scanning passes, Sir,” Schuller told him. “I tagged them in chronological order of discovery. This one is the latest.” He pointed. “It showed up in an area we scanned earlier. They appear to be screens of some type; they’re very small and difficult to scan.”

Tomei examined the display more closely when his eyes picked out a pattern. “There’s a blank spot near every fort within this circle?” He wanted clarification. “They aren’t part of the fort screens?”

“No, Sir. They operate on a different frequency and are extremely difficult to pick up. The design’s radically different from that of the Verralton devices; far more effective,” Schuller told him.

“Can the Verraltons pick up these blanks?” Tomei felt excitement stirring. He thought about Dr. Barnett, a premier weapons design engineer. Could she have made these? She had the ability. Could it be her work they saw?

Schuller shook his head. “I don’t believe so. Our technology in this area is much better, and even we have trouble finding them; they’re extremely subtle. If it weren’t for the anomalous blank spots they create, I wouldn’t get them at all. They’re slippery little devils.”

“How big are these spots? Could they conceal a human?” Tomei asked the crucial question.

“They’d screen two people if they stayed close,” Schuller replied, intrigued with Tomei’s observations. “Do you think they mean something, Sir?”

“I find it interesting a new blank spot appeared so soon after the ‘minor’ explosions, and so close as well,” Tomei told him. “It suggests someone who doesn’t wish to be found by Verraltons is down there. Maybe it’s someone human.” He clapped a hand on Schuller’s shoulder. “Keep an eye on those dots and keep working to punch through the screens. Good job! You may have gotten our first break.”

“Aye, Sir!”

Far below the circling ship, Barnett once again hid in the trees at the edge of the fort plain. She arrived minutes too late; they retrieved the dead sentry even as she watched. Two soldiers wrapped the body in a blanket and put it on a wheeled stretcher. One took the stretcher away while the other stayed to patrol.

She watched him intently. He had a Chee pouch, but he paced well out in the open. She calculated the risk of going for him as he started toward the grove of trees where she hid. He got within feet of her and looked around anxiously. To her surprise, he pulled a Chee pouch from under his shirt and dropped it.

“Oh, Great Barnett!” he called out, looking up into the sky. “I saw blood on the ground, and the sentry’s Chee is gone. I think he used it on you or the human you took. That means you have need of ka-Chee now.” He peered around again, obviously on edge. “Last winter, you saved my father and brother from an avalanche when they surely would have died. The duty of settling this family debt falls to me. Take the ka-Chee and be welcome.”

He turned, walked a few feet, and stopped. “I will pass this way again in five minutes.” He resumed his slow-paced walk and went out of sight.

Barnett scouted around for a trap very carefully, but saw nothing. Stealthily, she crept to the edge of cover, darted out for the pouch, and darted back. Nothing happened. “Well! How about that,” she marveled. She retreated into deeper cover and headed back to the cave.

A soft noise startled Thatcher awake, and he opened his eyes to see someone roll aside the boulder. Sure it could not yet be Barnett returning, he quickly struggled to his feet and hid against the wall. He braced himself, knowing he only had one chance. A shadowy figure came past him, and he locked his arm around the throat.

“Captain!” Barnett choked. “It’s me!”

He let her go instantly. “Sorry; I thought you were a Verralton.” He slid down the wall to sit before his knees gave way. “You made it.”

“Safe and sound until I got here.” She rubbed her throat ruefully and chose not to mention the hair-raising daylight trip through Verralton patrol lines. “I should have called to you before I came into the cave. Lord, you’re strong!”

“Did you get it?” Thatcher ignored her comment.

“Right here.” She showed him the ornately beaded pouch. “Now for the hard part.”

“What’s that?” Thatcher watched her empty the pouch.

“I’ve got to use these to get that knife out of you.” She handed him two knives. “These are ka-Chee.”

Thatcher looked at the knives. Both had long, sharp blades with opposing edges curved over. “What exactly do you have to do with these?” He felt sure he would not like her answer.

“The idea is to slide one of these down each side of the Chee blade and lock them into place to neutralize the spines so the Chee can be safely removed.” She described the procedure.

Thatcher turned the ka-Chee in his hands and examined them more closely. He shook his head and returned the wicked-looking blades. “The solution seems as bad as the problem.”

“I can’t pretend otherwise. Using them will be hard on you, but if those Chee spines should trigger open...” She stopped short. “Well, it would be very bad,” she finished in an understatement. “This has to be done.”

“The question is, can you do it?” Thatcher let his eyes drift over Barnett. Her hands shook with nerves.

“Do we have another choice?” She took a deep breath.

“No.” Thatcher went icily calm as he resigned himself to the ordeal to come.

“Well, then, I’m elected.” She offered a canteen. “Water?”

Thatcher drank deeply, eagerly slaking his burning thirst. “Thank you.” He returned the empty canteen. “I was parched.”

“You’re welcome.” The polite exchange seemed to settle Barnett’s nerves. “Let’s get your jacket and shirt off you.”

She helped him work his right arm out of the sleeves of his jacket and shirt. Pulling the garments around, she cut through both from the front openings to the knife blade. That allowed her to get them off him and gave her clear access to the Chee. The blood-soaked linen shirt stuck to his skin, and it peeled away wetly.

“You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” Thatcher asked as she set aside his clothes. “It looks like it could be tricky.”

“It takes a delicate touch,” she admitted. “I practiced on Metau gourds for a whole month before I got the hang of it. I’m afraid you’ll be my first live patient.”

“How very reassuring,” Thatcher commented dryly.

“Let’s put it this way,” she responded quietly. “I ate a lot of Metau while training for this kind of emergency. I wanted to be ready in case *I* needed ka-Chee.”

Thatcher stared at her; her words let him glimpse how alone she had really been, marooned on this hostile planet. With no one to depend on, she learned self-reliance. He admired the courage it took to even contemplate using the ka-Chee on herself, much less to train for the possibility. The picture he saw on the Starwitch had not done her justice. Great strength of character hid behind that soft-eyed, innocent expression.

She scrubbed her hands in water, rubbed handfuls of sand to get her skin as clean as she could, and then cleaned the ka-Chee with equal care. “I’m all set. Are you ready?”

Thatcher braced his back against the wall and turned his head away. “Do it.”

“Try not to move.” Barnett picked up a ka-Chee. She began to ease the tool into the wound, pressing the blade against the Chee. She had to rock it back and forth as she pushed it in, yet be very careful not to trigger the spines as she did. It forced her to work slowly.

Thatcher clenched his teeth and held rigidly still as the ka-Chee sliced into the raw wound. His right hand closed on a fistful of sand as he fought to keep his left arm relaxed. Sweat beaded on his brow, ran down his face, and slicked his neck and chest. Barnett’s lips moved, but his ears rang so much he could not hear her. His jaw locked shut, he willed himself to remain silent; he did not want to put any more stress on her than she already faced. Still, it was all he could do to keep

each breath from turning into a scream. An eternity passed before he felt a click as the ka-Chee locked into place, the pressure stopped, and Barnett sat back on her heels. Her whole body visibly shook, and her face had gone chalky. The ringing faded and Thatcher could hear her words.

“Damn, damn, damn, damn—” She chanted the word, her face wet with distressed tears. They were both drenched with sweat.

Ignoring the tremor in his own hand, Thatcher reached to take hers. “You’re doing fine,” he told her calmly. “Take a minute.”

“I’m so sorry! I can’t help hurting you.” She wiped her face with the back of a bloodied hand and smeared red across her cheek. “The Chee is in practically to the hilt!”

“You’re doing what you must. Finish the job, Dr. Barnett.” Thatcher hoped hearing her professional title would steady her. His shoulder blazed with pain and the cave spun around him. He did not know whether he could hang on to consciousness much longer, and she needed his support to get through this.

“Right now, I’d trade all my doctoral degrees for just one: medical!” She spoke with heartfelt, fervent sincerity as she rewashed her hands and the second ka-Chee. The water ran red as it disappeared into the sand. She drew from an inner strength to force her hands to steadiness. “Wishing won’t do either of us any good. Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’m ever going to be,” he replied honestly.

“Then let’s get it done.” She grimly bent to her task.

It was impossibly worse the second time. The second ka-Chee had to be forced into torn, abused tissue already taut with the Chee and the other ka-Chee. It made her work the blade around as she pushed to get it into the wound. She drove it deeper and deeper as Thatcher struggled against crying out.

The soldiers searched close now; they could hear them shout back and forth. Any noise might alert them. Her face a mask, Barnett shut out everything but the task at hand. Somehow, Thatcher made no sound though the pain escalated to sweep over him like a burning wave. There was a long moment when he could not even breathe. She swore again, softly, but he could spare no energy to listen. Just as he was sure he could endure no more in silence, he felt a click.

“Got it,” Barnett whispered in relief. “I’ll have it out in a minute.” She braced her knee against his chest and tugged at the Chee with all her strength. It resisted at first, then popped free with a sickening, wet sound. They gasped in unison. Trembling in reaction, Barnett slumped back on her heels. They both needed time to gather their composure.

“Does it hurt much?” she asked when she trusted her voice.

“The damned thing hurts like hell, but that’s not the worst of it,” Thatcher told her shakily.

“What else?” She searched for more injuries.

“My shirt’s absolutely ruined.” He tried for a light tone. She rewarded him with a watery smile.

“It was a very nice shirt,” she allowed, gamely trying to match him. “If I were you, I’d bill the Emperor for a replacement.”

Thatcher saw the Chee blade for the first time when she dropped it in his lap. The ka-Chee enclosed the deadly spines on the short blade. His blood soaked everything. His shirt was black with it, her hands red with it, and the Chee gory with it.

“You have a light hand,” he complimented her. “Well done!”

“Thank you.” Barnett cleaned his wound as thoroughly as she could and washed the blood off him. She stripped off her own shirt and tore it up. “It’s not made of as high quality a material as your shirt, but it will serve the purpose.”

She pressed a soft bandage to his shoulder and wrapped it into place. She fashioned a sling for his arm and checked the knot to be sure it would not chafe. In just a light tee shirt and ragged slacks, she looked very young to Thatcher.

“Let me see your right arm,” she requested. He held it out without a word, and she examined the cut. “Infection’s started,” she told him. “I should open the gash and clean it.”

“Why not,” Thatcher agreed wearily. “We’ve gone this far.”

He caught in a breath when she broke the sealed wound, but otherwise waited in stoic silence as she cleaned it and covered it with a neat bandage. Finished, she offered him another drink. He drank in greedy gulps, emptying half the canteen.

“Do we need to conserve water?” He saw she did not take a drink when he handed back the canteen.

“Water’s no problem; a natural spring runs down the wall over there. You just can’t see it from this angle. Medicine; now *that’s* a problem.” Barnett helped him lie on a ground cloth she spread and covered him with her jacket.

“Why?”

“Because I have none. Infection sets in unbelievably fast here. You need antibiotics soon. Your arm is already festering, and your shoulder won’t be far behind it.”

“It can wait.” Thatcher already planned ahead. “It must, at least until dark. We’ll rest now and head for your roost tonight. Once there, we can turn off your screen and let the Starwitch find us. We’re the only humans on this planet; the scanners should pick us out pretty quickly.”

“All right.” Barnett accepted his directive. “I just hope you can afford to wait for attention. The microbes on this planet are especially virulent to humans. They almost killed me before I developed immunity to them, and I never had a wound like yours, just cuts and scrapes.”

She rinsed the blood from his clothes as best she could and draped them over an outcropping to dry. Despite the streamlet that flowed through, most of the cave floor remained dry.

Thatcher noticed the sand under him felt warm. “Is there geothermal activity in this region?”

“No,” she told him. “This is an emergency camp I set up about a year ago. I mixed chemicals into the sand, and they react to pressure by giving off heat. The crystals blend in with the sand and warm things enough to take the edge off even a cold day. I don’t have to risk a fire or leave traces of my presence. Even if a native came across this cave, they’d think as you did, the warmth is geothermal.”

“Ingenious!” He admired her creative solution. “Where’d you get the chemicals?”

She shrugged. “Our hosts supplied them.”

“You stole them.” He amended her answer without censure.

“Whatever.” She did not deny it. “Get comfortable, if you can; night is hours away.” They arranged themselves as best they could in the cramped cave and shared her food. As they ate, they listened to the patrols move away from their hiding place until only the sound of the wind remained. They were safe for the moment, but the soldiers would be back.

“What kind of accent do you have?” she asked curiously. “It’s quite unusual, and I can’t place it.”

“Welsh.” He shifted to find a more comfortable position.

“Oh, you’re from Earth? I’m from Orion Prime.” Distracted, she obviously thought of something else. “You’re not what I thought you’d be.”

“Why not?”

“You’re odd for a starclipper captain. All the ones I’ve ever met are really sure of themselves, arrogant. I thought you’d insist on getting your own way no matter what.” She spoke very candidly. “I expected you to put up much more of an argument when I left earlier.”

“That would have been stupid under the circumstances.” Thatcher buried a yawn. “I could hardly stop you with a knife planted in my shoulder. Besides, you’ve been on Verralto three years; I’ve been here a few hours. You’re the expert, and it’s a fool who doesn’t make proper use of experts.”

“Still, you’re different,” she insisted. “In a good way,” she added hastily.

“Thank you, I think.” Thatcher acknowledged the dubious compliment. “All the same, when we return to the Starwitch, you’ll have to get used to obeying orders again. Don’t expect me to give way when we get back to my domain.”

“Of course not.” Barnett replied dryly. “It’s funny the Starwitch came for me,” she said idly. “Indirectly, she’s why I got stranded here.”

“Why?” Thatcher resettled to find a position both his arm and shoulder would accept.

“Because I signed on board the Androcles when Admiral Borden forced me out of the Weapons Research unit over her weapons.”

Her curious statement brought Thatcher alert. “Explain.”

She looked at him over her shoulder. “What do you think of your weapons systems?”

“Well—” Thatcher felt a moment of discomfort, then recalled she helped design the weaponry. He could not reveal any secrets she did not already know. Still, he answered cautiously. “They’re weak in several areas.”

Barnett raised a finger. “One, they’re too interdependent. A lucky hit could knock out half your weapons battery.” Another finger went up. “Two, the phased fluctuator program is very unstable, and as a result, the pulse arrays respond poorly to repulsor shield variations. They sometimes fail to respond at all.” She rattled off the very problems he had in mind as she raised a third digit. “And three, they could be more focused and deliver twice the firepower at substantially longer range.”

“You know!” It surprised Thatcher that she hit on the very things he disliked most. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I did, often and loudly. That’s how I ended up on the Androcles.” She was matter-of-fact. “The admiral considered the politics of getting the Starwitch out of the construction lists on schedule more important than correcting what he considered minor deficiencies. When I wouldn’t shut up, he forced me out.”

Those minor deficiencies damned near cost me my ship, Thatcher thought angrily, remembering a Gargan ambush that had almost destroyed the Starwitch. “Can you correct the flaws?”

“I don’t see why not; I worked up a complete revamp for the system design, and I left behind a shipload of notes on the reconfigurations. I suppose they weren’t implemented.”

“I never saw them.” Thatcher confirmed her suspicions.

“Admiral Borden is a busy man,” she commented cynically. Thatcher had a lot to think about, and he let the subject lapse.

“Dr. Barnett?” he asked after a long time.

“Yes?”

“What happened to Josiah Powell?”

She stayed quiet for so long he thought she would not answer. “He piloted the skip the day of the accident,” she began. “We were out gathering data on a solar fluctuation pattern. We ran late and were just coming back to the Androcles when Captain Juarez suddenly ordered us away from the ship. Before we could obey, it went up like a super nova. Debris from the explosion damaged the skip, but Joss managed to make a controlled crash. We never knew what happened to the Androcles.”

“A plus power node gave way. They barely had time to know what hit them.” Thatcher supplied the information.

Barnett sighed. “Joss guessed it, but we couldn’t be sure.”

“And after the crash?” Thatcher prompted.

She shifted. “We came down high in the mountains, so Joss said he’d walk out. We knew Verralto was populated with a non-Union race, but he figured they would help. I broke my ankle, so he made me stay behind.” Her voice lowered to a near whisper. “He was gone four days before I went to look for him. It took me two more to find him.” Her voice sounded choked.

“The Verraltos hate all races but their own, you see. To them, humans on their planet were an abomination they would not abide. They strung him up and tortured him to make him say where I was. He wouldn’t tell them where he crashed or admit there was anyone with him on the skip.”

She shivered, locked in the memory. “I sneaked in close and hid in the brush of a high bluff right above Josiah. He was nothing but a mass of blood. They used their Chee to tear tufts of flesh out of him. He had dozens of gaping wounds all over him. Verraltos perfected the art of torture over hundreds of years, and their techniques are very effective on humans.”

The images she conjured up appalled Thatcher, but he said nothing so she would continue to tell her story. Her tone hardened with anger. “He somehow sensed I was nearby and lifted his head. For a moment our eyes locked, then he screamed out one word. GO! His defiance infuriated them, and they killed him right before my eyes, but they never knew I was there. I got away unseen because he bought my life with his.”

She abruptly sat up to put her back to Thatcher, her shoulders hunched. “I’ve spent the last three years destroying power plants, raiding encampments, flattening government facilities, and generally making mayhem. I made good use of that high-quality, high-tech education my parents imposed on me, if not for the purpose they intended.”

Her voice went ice-cold as she described her activities. “I hit them wherever and whenever they were vulnerable. I hit them in surprise attacks, and I hit them in the teeth of strong opposition when they know I’m coming. I ambush soldiers and government officials, slow or disrupt work whenever I can, in remote areas and cities alike, and reach right into their very homes. I destroy power grids, buildings, and dams, and blow up equipment right in the fields so crops rot where they stand. If they hunt me, they don’t go home. If they try to trap me, they pay in blood. I lay waste to everything I touch and leave my mark everywhere I hit so they know who did it to them. I have taught them to fear me. I’ve given them nightmares and a new word for their language. To them, Barnett means demon and to meet me means death.”

Her vengeful ferocity stunned Thatcher. He could hardly reconcile the deadly terrorist she described with the woman who cried when she hurt him. It amazed him the same hands that

bandaged him so gently took revenge with such lethal skill. Still, he could imagine how it must have been for her, alone on a world where every hand was turned against her, alone against those who killed her companion so brutally. What would he have done in her place? He honestly did not know.

“What now? What will you do?” he wondered.

“Now?” She turned to meet his eyes. “I don’t know. I’m sick of death and destruction.” She wearily pushed her hair out of her face. “I’m tired of hiding, of running; I’m tired of the killing. I can’t sustain the hatred any longer. I just can’t do it any more. I need to find peace.” She lay down and turned away her face. “Mostly, I want to go home. I just don’t know if there’s any such place for me.” They fell silent as they brooded over private thoughts.

“How old are you?” Thatcher asked abruptly.

“Twenty-eight.” The turn of his thoughts caught her by surprise.

“You’re quite young to have so many doctorate degrees,” he observed. “Six isn’t it?”

“Seven,” she corrected. “As Joss used to tease me, I’m a bloomin’ genius.” Her words were bitter. “I’m incredibly cerebral, but absolutely useless in the real world. I haven’t got the sense God gave a cucumber; ask anyone.”

“You think you could have saved Josiah if you had used common sense?” Thatcher interpreted her meaning. “Is that why you blame yourself for his death?”

“I should have realized something was wrong much earlier and gone after him sooner,” she answered with self-loathing. “I could have saved him.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. If it had happened today, you might have done it. Back then, you didn’t know what to do; you had no experience. You would have only died with him,” Thatcher told her. “When you ran, you did the only thing you could.” She said nothing, clearly unconvinced.

“Tell me about him,” Thatcher requested. “He meant a lot to you, didn’t he?”

“I would have gladly died in his place,” she replied sadly.

She did not face him; she spoke into the darkness. “You have to understand what my life was like before Joss came along. They identified me as a prodigy very early, and my parents decided they would raise their little genius right. They were, still are, I presume, scientists, and they approached raising me the same way they approached research, scientifically, rationally, and antiseptically.” Barnett sighed.

“I’m one of the odd ones, Captain. I don’t have a special talent. DaVinci, Gallileo, Ramdes, Hectar, and a few others through human history have had a wide-ranging gift like mine, if that’s what you’d call it. Because of it, I got a comprehensive education under rigid supervision. I spent my entire childhood with specialists bent on refining my mental capabilities.

Thatcher thought he saw what it must have been like. “You were lonely.”

“Physically, no.” She laughed without humor. “There was always someone around. Emotionally, oh yes, I was alone. My parents were aloof and didn’t allow me contact with other children. Even friendships with my teachers were discouraged lest they should waste my time with frivolities,” she explained bitterly. “I finished my third doctorate at 15 and left home right away to work in weapons research for Patrol Fleet.”

“They let you join Fleet?” That puzzled Thatcher; even to enter the Academy, the minimum age was seventeen.

“No.” She shook her head. “I worked as a civilian employee until I turned 21, then they offered me a commission. They put me through an orientation course and made it official.”

“Is that when you met Powell?” Thatcher rubbed his hand over his bandaged wound. The pain had steadied to a heavy ache.

He could almost hear her smile. “No; I didn’t meet him until I was almost 24. Borden ordered me to take a long vacation or else, and I chose to spend it on a research vessel to see a little of the galaxy while I had the chance. The only slot I could get was on the Androcles.”

She shifted, relaxing as she remembered. “I thought it was a great chance to make a fresh start, maybe even make friends. I didn’t count on my egghead reputation preceding me, and my social skills were too poor to compensate for it. Everyone sheared off but Joss. He jumped in with both feet.”

Her smile was clear now even though Thatcher could not see her face. “The first time we met, he stopped me from walking into a wall. I was reading and not watching where I was going. He grabbed my arm and said ‘Whoa there, little lady!’ like someone from an old-time western. He said I needed someone to keep me from breaking my nose, and he was just the man to do it. We clicked right away. He brought out a new side of me. He taught me to dance, play practical jokes, to relax and to have fun; he taught me to laugh. He understood me. With first his friendship, and later his love, he bought my acceptance on the Androcles. For a whole year I belonged somewhere and with someone. I was so happy. It was the most wonderful thing ever to happen to me. We were going to be married, Joss and I. He said we’d make our own little geniuses together and raise ‘em hands-on.”

She sounded muffled, and Thatcher knew she fought back tears. “He was everything to me, and he’s gone because I didn’t have sense enough to know something was wrong and go to him. He suffered horribly and died because I let him down.”

“You did no such thing!” Thatcher tried to comfort her. “Powell gave you a precious gift, Dr. Barnett, your life. Be grateful for his sacrifice and cherish his memory all the more for the courage it took for him to make it for you.”

He leaned over carefully, flinching as his shoulder blazed in protest, and put his hand on her shoulder. “It wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have saved him. Accept his last gift to you as he gave it, freely and with love.”

She began to cry, softly at first, then in wrenching sobs. He patted her shoulder comfortingly and let her weep. He suspected it was the first time she really let herself grieve for Powell, the first person ever to care for her. Dislike for the cold scientists who were her parents swept over him. She eventually slept, but he lay awake for a time to think about how it must have been for her both on Verralto and before the crash.

Just outside, Verralton patrols passed occasionally, sometimes within feet of the entrance, as they searched for the humans. The soldiers tracked blood spatters as far as the riverbank, where they disappeared. They never picked up another trace of the trail again. As the day wore on, the patrols expanded the search in widening circles that moved farther and farther from their quarry. Thatcher slept in short, disturbed cycles as pain and increasing fever broke his rest.

On board the great ship in orbit around Verralto, Shoji Tomei paced in frustration. He had been working for hours to get the Verraltons to lower the fort screens and allow them to verify Captain Thatcher’s well being. He got nowhere.

Interestingly, Chact had been replaced without explanation by another high-caste, Berdon. He hid his attitude about other races far less than Chact, and slips in how he spoke began to form a picture of rabid bigotry. If he represented typical Verraltons, any survivors would have spent all

their time hiding from murderous natives intent on extermination. Tomei wondered whether Dr. Barnett could have lived long under such conditions.

Schuller and Albertson thought not. "She was a scientist, Commander, not a well trained Patrol Fleet officer." Ensign Albertson, his red hair cropped short, his blue eyes sparkling with energy, still read her file. The youngest officer in the meeting, he tended toward pessimism. "She lacks the background to survive in a hostile environment."

"She already had an 'absent-minded professor' reputation before the accident," Schuller added. "Although she had an IQ above 200, she was well known for her lack of worldliness."

"In other words, she was a typical genius," Henry said dryly, his eyes thoughtful. He absently twisted the end of his blond braid between his strong, callused fingers. "That only means she would have had trouble adjusting, not that she failed."

"I agree with Henry." Salter put in his opinion. "Except that she wasn't at all typical; she was actually very well rounded. Look at her education; she's got everything from language and history to heavy science. I think, if she survived the crash, she would have adapted far better than you might expect of such a sheltered person."

The discussion became more general as they weighed the chances of a woman they knew only from her file. Tomei raised his hands. "Enough. We'll never know how she fared or even whether it was her at all until we break down those screens and recover Captain Thatcher."

"We're close, Sir," Henry reported. "We should have something for you in a few hours."

"The sooner the better, Henry. The captain might not have much time left. That's it, people, let's get back to work." Tomei rose to dismiss the meeting.

Salter walked beside him as he headed for the bridge. He turned to him when they were alone on the lift. "Do you think Captain Thatcher is all right, Shoji?" He frowned worriedly.

"I don't know, Salty." Tomei shook his head wearily. "I think so. He's a tough man to kill; he's damned sharp, and he's remarkably resourceful."

"But he's alone down there, and the Verraltons hate us so fiercely." Salter expressed what bothered him most.

"Don't count him out yet. We'll find him." They walked onto the bridge, and Tomei sat in his regular seat, leaving the command chair open for its rightful owner. Salter read his action as hope. Somehow, it comforted him.

Barnett's internal clock woke her as night began to settle. Thatcher stirred when she moved but slept on. "Captain?" she summoned quietly.

Thatcher did not respond, so she touched his shoulder to rouse him. He felt very warm and his torpor alarmed her; he did not waken. She dipped a cloth in the cold spring.

"Come on, Captain, please wake up," she murmured as she patted the wet cloth over his face and neck. "Please; you're scaring me." It took time, but his eyes slowly opened. Dull at first, they sharpened as he gained awareness.

"You had me worried," she said, relieved. "I thought I was going to have to carry you out of here."

"I'm awake." Thatcher sat up awkwardly. "Is it time?"

"Almost. You're burning up." She pressed the cool cloth to his face. "How do you feel?"

"Hot." Thatcher irritably pushed the cloth aside. "Enough." He peered out into the gathering gloom as he drank from the canteen she gave him. She could see his badly swollen right arm even in the dim light of evening.

“You’re sick.” Barnett stated the obvious. She took his arm to loosen the too-tight bandage. “Your wounds are infected.”

He did not respond to that. “Is it safe to go yet?”

She shrugged. “It’s still too light. We need deeper shadows. Your things are dry; I’ll help you with them.”

“We’ll wait a bit longer then head out.” Thatcher let her help him dress.

His right arm was so swollen, Barnett had to slit the shirt and the jacket sleeves up to the elbow before she could get his arm through. He ignored that discomfort but hissed when she moved his left arm and pulled at the raw shoulder wound.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I know it hurts.”

“Is your hideout in the mountains?” he asked as she buttoned his shirt for him. His own fingers would not close enough to let him do up the small studs. He continued at her nod. “How long should it take us to get there?”

Barnett reviewed the route in her mind, figured in the Verralton patrols, and adjusted for Thatcher’s injuries. “Four hours, more or less.” She helped him resettle his arm in the sling. “Once we get to the cave, we can turn off the screen. The Verralton scanners will spot us, but we can defend the entrance for a while.”

“Good.” Thatcher pressed the heel of his hand to his head, to ease the ache behind his eyes, and staggered with dizziness when he turned. “I’m all right.” He stopped her with a lifted hand. “Let’s get going.”

She evaluated the darkness outside expertly. “Right. Remember to stay close so my screen will cover us both.” She slipped out, Thatcher at her heels, and turned for the mountains.

Neither spoke as she led the way up an invisible track. She kept to a slow pace for Thatcher’s sake. He stubbornly resisted assistance, so she gave him a hand in ‘rough’ spots to disguise her aid, in a bid to conserve his failing strength.

As the night wore on, blood loss and infection stripped him of stamina, and as the path grew steeper, she abandoned pretense and took much of his weight across her shoulders. Still, he kept putting one foot in front of the other, and she admired his grit. She had always heard starclipper captains were the most mentally tough people in the Star Union, and he proved it with every step he took.

Human ears are keener than those of Verraltons, and they alerted Barnett to approaching patrols early enough to take cover. Several times they hid in deep shadows, behind boulders, or in crevasses as Verraltons passed. One group came so close they heard the soldiers talking among themselves as they marched past their hiding place. Barnett smiled with grim satisfaction at what she heard.

“I can’t believe we’re out here looking for the Barnett and that human it took,” one soldier spoke from his place in the jittery troop. “I hope we don’t find them! It’s crazy enough to cross the Barnett in daylight much less at night!” There were growls of agreement until the one in charge ordered silence.

“Make enough noise and it will find *us!*” he growled. That brought quiet immediately. The troop marched out of sight, and the two humans slipped from the shadows. Thatcher focused on the single arduous task of continuing; he trusted himself to her lead. They pressed on. Some time later, Barnett stopped by a pile of rocks and helped Thatcher sit.

“Rest a moment. I’ll be right back,” she promised. She disappeared around the mound of stones and quickly returned with a skin bag.

“Here, try some of this.” She filled a cup she dug out of her pouch. “You probably shouldn’t have it, but it may help in the short term. Go easy.”

Thatcher took the cup and drank without checking the contents. It turned out to be strong, raw liquor that burned going down his throat. After the first choking swallow, it did much to revive him. He took another drink, prepared for the potent stuff this time. “This is good! Where did you get it?” Her hands had been empty a moment ago.

“The locals are primitive in some of their beliefs. This is a sacrificial altar.” She refilled his held-out cup. “The low-castes believe a demon prowls this area, and they appease it with offerings of strong drink. They occasionally leave food too.”

“Demon?” Thatcher recalled that, in the cell, Chact had called the creature that plagued Verralto The Barnett. “You!”

“Me,” she agreed. “I don’t bother low-castes. It’s only high-castes and their soldiers who need to fear me, but...” She hefted the bag. “There’s no reason I can’t use what’s intended for me, is there?”

Thatcher took another big swallow, appreciating the burn, and welcoming the numbing effect the liquor spread through him. “You never bother the low-castes? Why not?”

“Because they’re slaves to the high-castes. They have enough problems without me adding to them.”

Thatcher’s intuition told him there was more to it. “You help them against the high-castes, don’t you?”

“I’m no Robin Hood, Captain,” she said defensively. “I intervene only when it serves my own interests.”

Thatcher did not believe her. He felt sure she helped them quite often, but he let her claim go unchallenged. Discussing it clearly made her uncomfortable. He wondered, though, if she realized what an impact she had made on Verralto. Judging from the attitudes of the high-castes toward her, she might have unintentionally planted the seeds of a low-caste revolution. Her continued terrorist success against the high-castes, and their escalating fear of her, proved to the low-castes it was possible to resist the high-castes and live.

Considering how much Chact and the others hated her, he suspected those seeds thrived and now bore fruit in low-caste rebellion. He chose not to dwell on the probability she had violated Union law, which dictated strict non-intervention with the physical, technological or cultural evolution of any race not in the Union. The law did not allow for unintended outcomes. At first look, she could be in serious trouble. Deep in thought, he drained the cup and gave it back to her.

The stop had gone as long as Barnett dared let it. She stowed away the cup, slipped the skin bag into her pouch, and offered her hand to help him to his feet. “We’d better get going.”

She stopped as often as she dared, each time to let Thatcher gather strength for the next stretch. Each stop got longer, each bit of progress smaller, as he steadily weakened. Were it not for her shoulder under Thatcher’s arm, the steep track would have finished him. In time, she practically carried him as they climbed ever higher into the mountains. Fortunately, his will kept him on his feet. She could not have lifted all his weight.

Incredibly, despite his condition, he managed to save her life. While edging along a steeply sloped path, she lost her footing on loose gravel. She would have plunged to her death, but Thatcher made a lightning-quick grab for her and held her weight until she climbed back to safety. She could not imagine where he found the strength, and her admiration for him soared.

He ordered her to leave him behind twice, but though she taxed her own stamina in the effort, she ignored him. She just adjusted her grip and kept on without comment. The third time, he insisted she go on alone.

“I’m holding you back too much,” he told her, exhaustion in his voice. He slid down to rest against a rock. “You can move much more quickly alone. Get to your cave and bring back help. I’ll be fine right here.”

“Verralton patrols are everywhere.” She pointed out lines of moving lights below them. “They’d have you in no time.”

“I can defend myself,” he lied. Right then, he did not know if he could stand without help, much less put up a fight. “I’m giving you a direct order to go.”

She wore an obdurate, mulish scowl and put her fists on her hips. “No,” she said flatly. “Not now, not ever. We make it together or not at all.”

“Dr. Barnett, you’ve refused to obey my orders for the last time. When we get back to the ship, I’m court martialing you for rank insubordination,” Thatcher growled, frustrated, as he accepted her help to rise. And pinning a medal on you for your courage, he added in the privacy of his thoughts.

“Fine! When we get there, you do what you want,” she shot back tartly. “Right now, cooperate with me and come on. The night wears towards dawn.” They struggled onward as the night air chilled and thinned with altitude. They lost all sense of time, so neither knew how long it took before they turned a bend in the narrow pass to see a cave set deep under a rock overhang.

“We’re here!” Barnett lit her flashlight only when they were well inside, put it in Thatcher’s hand, and went to activate the screen that protected the cave.

Exhausted and desperately ill, Thatcher numbly looked around her home. Neatly stowed supplies, tools, and equipment salvaged from the skip lined the walls. Baskets on rough shelves held food and water bags hung in a corner. He saw the pallet she made up as a bed and took a step toward it. He thought he should sit down before he fell on his face.

“We’ll be safe here for a while.” She called to him as she watched the approaching sunrise. “I think we should rest before we turn off the screen. The Verraltons will react quickly once they pick us up on their monitors. The pass won’t let more than one through at a time, but they’ll come. They won’t be able to bring up the heavy artillery to drive us out, at least not for a few hours,” she allowed. “If it takes the Starwitch too long to find us when the screen is off, though, we’ll be in trouble.”

When Thatcher failed to respond, she turned to see him sway on his feet. The flashlight fell from his hand and his knees began to buckle. She darted over and grabbed him barely in time to keep him from slamming to the floor.

“Hang on just another second,” she begged him as she hauled him to her bed. He collapsed onto the pallet, flat on his face, unconscious, and burning with fever.

Straining to move the limp man, Vicki tugged him onto his back. “Smoke signal,” she heard him mutter. What could he mean?

She covered him, thankful he made it to the cave before he passed out. “You’re one tough man, Captain. Just be tough a little longer, and I’ll get you out of here, I swear.”

She tried to give him water, but it just trickled down his neck. His fever burned so high it frightened her. Her fingers at his throat, she took his pulse, counting the beats silently, then took her own to make a comparison.

“Time’s up, I think,” she said worriedly. “Starwitch, I hope you’re paying attention. He needs you right now.” An idea popped into her head. “Smoke signal! *That’s* what he meant! They’re already searching for us; we only have to catch their eye! I’ll *make* them see us!” Instead of simply turning off the screen and hoping for the best, she switched it off and on in an ancient code that stuck in her mind like a nursery rhyme.

SOS— SOS— SOS— SOS—

“Commander Tomei! A screening device is blinking on and off in a definite pattern.” Lt. Schuller spoke abruptly. “It looks like a signal.”

Tomei leapt up and hurried to stand beside him. “Where?”

“Here.” Schuller showed him. “It’s the same type as the ones used in the blank spots around the forts.”

“Great!” The news excited Tomei. “You’re right, Schuller, that pattern does look regular. Is it some sort of code?”

“Accessing...” Schuller checked the computer memory banks. “Yes, Sir! It’s an old Earth radio code, from the 19th century.”

“Decode it.” Tomei gave the order crisply.

It only needed a moment for the computer to interpret it. “It’s repeating three letters in sequence: SOS. According to the history files, that was the code for distress.”

Tomei closed a fist in triumph. “It’s got to be humans!” He hit his commbar. “Transit Gate One! Scan the signal Lt. Schuller will transfer to your console. Confirm and fix on any humans in its vicinity.”

“Aye, Sir!”

“On the double, Lt. Schuller.” Tomei snapped the command.

“Done, Sir!”

“Very good.” Tomei sat in his command chair. With nothing left to do, everyone on the bridge waited with held breath.

Barnett crouched at the mouth of her cave. “Here goes nothing.” She shut the screen down completely, aware the ship would have to get a good fix on them to get a lock on them for the gate. The Verraltions homed in on the blinking screen like moths to a beacon, and she could see them coming fast.

“Find us, Starwitch!” she whispered as she prepared to do battle. “Find us!”

The first soldier inched around the curve, and she threw a rock at him. It caught him on the head and sent him screaming to his death. A second soldier immediately came into sight.

“Come on, Starwitch!” she pleaded as she threw her knife. A new attacker moved up, and she began a desperate holding action.

On the Starwitch bridge, where they waited tensely, the comm panel came to life.

“Confirmed! I’ve got two humans on our sensors, Sir! Somebody shut off the screen!”

“Bring them up,” Tomei snapped. “On the double!”

Barnett fought savagely to fend off the Verraltions. Despite their fear of her and their reluctance to attack her head-on, she lost ground, forced back as more of them got past the treacherous curve. She took a spear from one attacker and stood in front of Thatcher, holding the

soldiers at bay, when she heard the welcome ping of a transit gate locking contact. She laughed aloud at angry voices that cut off as she and Thatcher vanished.

They appeared on the Starwitch. She stood over Thatcher, spear in hand, and stared numbly at Crewman Marks for a full minute. He stared back, aghast, at the dirty, bloody pair in front of him. To him, the woman seemed the image of a fierce Valkyrie facing down the enemy.

She relaxed abruptly and sat beside Thatcher. "We made it!"

"Is he dead?" Marks stared at Thatcher's still form on the rough pallet.

"He wasn't the last time I checked," she said practically.

"Crewman Marks! Did you get them?" Tomei's impatient voice made the man jump; he had stared too long.

"We got them, Sir; Captain Thatcher and a woman. The captain needs medical attention right away!"

Cheers spread across the bridge. "Fine work, Marks! Stand by for instructions." Tomei cut the connection and made another call. "Dr. Bartow, medical emergency in Transit Gate One."

Marks came around the console. Barnett offered her hand. "I'm Dr. Victoria Barnett, most recently of the Androcles."

Marks shook her hand. Her strong grip and callused palm surprised him; they were not what he expected from a scientist. "Crewman Jack Marks of the Starwitch. Welcome aboard." He looked at Thatcher. "He's a sorry sight! Will he make it?"

She nodded. "I think so, but he needs care immediately. He'll get it, thanks to you. I appreciate the rescue."

Marks nodded. "Glad to be of service. Welcome home, Dr. Barnett."

Tears welled in her eyes, but she gave a wide smile. "You don't know how good it is to hear those words!"

"Crewman Marks, gate Captain Thatcher and Dr. Barnett directly to Sickbay," Dr. Bartow's voice instructed over his commbar. "We're ready for them here."

"Aye, Aye, Sir, right away." Marks returned to the console. "See you later, Doc."

"Sure thing." She and Thatcher disappeared.

Bartow's team engulfed them the instant they appeared and hustled Captain Thatcher off with practiced skill. Rian took the spear from Barnett and passed it to a nurse. "You must be Victoria Barnett. I'm Rian Bartow, Starwitch Chief Medical Officer. My team will tend Captain Thatcher. You come with me; I want you to see one of my doctors." He took her arm firmly. "You look as if you need tending as well. Dr. Fraterri!" Bartow signaled for attention. "I have a patient for you!"

"I'm fine, really!" Vicki protested. "None of this blood is mine... well, hardly any of it, anyway. I just need a bath, some clean clothes, and maybe a decent meal!"

"I'll decide what you need." Bartow dragged his patient to the waiting Dr. Fraterri over her objections. The duty nurse laughed at her clear dismay.

"Welcome home, Dr. Barnett!" he called after her.

"Everything's so hazy," Thatcher told Barnett. "I don't recall much after we started for the mountains, just bits and pieces. I remember climbing endlessly, sitting by some kind of altar and drinking something that burned going down. A long time after that, I remember walking into the cave. I draw a blank beyond that." He sat up in bed in Sickbay two days after their narrow escape. She visited under strict orders not to tire him.

“You passed out right then,” Vicki explained. “I turned around and saw you were headed for the floor. Even I could tell you were in serious trouble. You needed help right away, and I was frantic to figure out how to alert the ship. You pointed me in the right direction.”

Thatcher frowned. “I did? How?”

She nodded. “You said ‘smoke signal’ just before you passed out completely. It stumped me at first, but your meaning finally registered. We had to do something to draw their attention. I used the only thing I had, my screen.”

“What happened after that?” Thatcher asked, amazed she got such a brilliant idea from words he mumbled in delirium.

“Things got real busy. Once I signaled, the Verraltions were on us like a swarm of angry bees. If the Starwitch waited one more minute to bring us up, they’d have only gotten dead bodies.”

She sat beside the bed fresh, rested, and dressed in a new uniform. Her hair trimmed and her face clean for the first time since Thatcher met her, she looked completely different, older and more self-confident. She had spent one entire day in Sickbay enduring a tediously complete examination.

She turned out to be in good condition both physically and mentally. She came through her long isolation with remarkable stability, surprising everyone but Chaplain Salter who, alone among the officers, had bet on her adaptability. Bartow released her after the first day, and she had already conferred with Henry Parks and his engineers to share her techniques for penetrating the Verraltion screens and defenses. Salty would take her through therapy to help her deal with her anger and guilt over Josiah Powell’s death, but she got an otherwise clean bill of mental health from him.

Thatcher rested, all but healed and in bed only because Rian Bartow insisted on it. His gray eyes, no longer dulled by fever, sparkled with lively intelligence. He still wore a bandage on his right arm, but the swelling had subsided. The edge of another bandage showed at his open collar, a reminder of the shoulder wound. In another few hours, even they would be gone.

Thatcher put out his hand and gripped Barnett’s. “I went to Verralto to rescue you, and it turned out the other way around. I owe you my life. Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re very welcome, Captain,” she accepted gracefully. “You wouldn’t have been in danger at all if you hadn’t come for me, and I wouldn’t be here now. I owe *you* thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome. What will you do now?” Thatcher changed the subject.

“It depends on how much trouble I’m in.” She shrugged uneasily. “Chaplain Salter told me I may have violated Union law. Do you really think I started a revolution?”

“Ah, yes, as to that.” Thatcher sat up a bit straighter. “Our sociologists researched that issue, and I’m confident Patrol Fleet will accept their finding that the revolution was already brewing before you got involved. You may still be reprimanded, but there will be no criminal charges.” He did not tell her he put his weight behind her when an inquiry board threatened just that. His influence as the captain of the Fleet flagship decided them in her favor.

“Well, that’s something, anyway,” she said. “No jail time.”

“None,” he agreed. “If I have my way, no reprimand either.”

“Thank-you, Captain.” She looked relieved.

“So, what will you do?” he asked again.

“I’m not sure.” She looked at her hands uncertainly. “I’m not going back to the weapons lab; I know that much. I want to mainstream, get into the regular fleet. After all, there’s no one

waiting for me anywhere. Perhaps I'll try for a science officer's berth on another research vessel. There's a lot of new territory out there still to be explored; I'd like to go see it."

"Will you visit your parents first?" He wanted to know. "It's been over three years since you've seen them, and they thought you were dead. You have plenty of shore leave coming."

"I have no interest in returning home." She met his eyes with frank coolness. "Patrol Fleet notified my parents I'm alive. As far as I'm concerned, that will do perfectly well."

"All right." Thatcher respected her feelings. "I can get you a spot on a research vessel, if it's what you want, but have you considered signing on to a starclipper? Your experience and education would be assets to any ship."

Barnett cocked her head as her bright eyes assessed his expression. "What are you saying?"

"I'm inviting you to join my crew." Thatcher made the offer. "Chief Engineer Parks tells me you've already been of great use to him in Engineering, and I think we can challenge you in our science department." He grinned suddenly. "Besides, I want my weapons systems fixed!"

"I've never been the most military person there is," she warned him, "and I've had three years to forget what little I learned. Most of the time, I forget who ranks whom."

"You'll be fine as long as you remember I'm the boss on this ship," Thatcher reassured her. "You have a highly disciplined mind, and you've already demonstrated tremendous flexibility. I'm willing to give you time to adjust."

He sat up higher against his pillows. "The bottom line is that I want you on my staff. How about it? Are you in?" He held out his hand.

Barnett's eyes lit with enthusiasm as she took his hand in a firm grip. "I'm in! Thank you, Captain!"

"Excellent. I'll settle it with Patrol Fleet." Abruptly, he went briskly efficient. "You were due for promotion when you disappeared; I'm giving it to you now. Effective today, you are advanced to the rank of Lieutenant with all rank-appropriate rights and privileges. Pin it on before you report to Commander Tomei, my exec, later today. He expects to see you this afternoon. He'll give you an in-processing schedule and introduce you to your immediate supervisor in Science. Before you do anything else, report to Chief Brennan, our Deckmaster. He'll issue you a full complement of uniforms to replace what you lost aboard the *Androcles* and assign you permanent quarters. After that, sign in, settle in, and get oriented. Report back to me first thing tomorrow morning for further direction."

"Okay." She accepted his instructions, taken aback at the crisp decisiveness of his rapid-fire commands. "Gee!" Her first experience of him in his element dazed her and left her feeling breathless.

Thatcher frowned. "The proper way to address a superior officer is 'Yes, Sir', Lieutenant." He corrected her firmly. "Get used to it."

"Yes, Sir!" she repeated, abashed. "Sorry, Sir."

Thatcher saw Dr. Bartow coming. He wore an impatient look Brett read easily. "I think you're about to be chased out."

"You're right, Brett, she is. You are supposed to rest." Bartow scowled at Barnett, who put up her hands in surrender.

"I'm going, I'm going!" She recalled Thatcher's reprimand, and her eyes widened. "I mean I'm going, *Sir!*" Thatcher smothered a laugh at her horrified expression. She all but ran for the door.

“Lieutenant! One thing before you go...” he called after her. She returned, her eyebrows raised questioningly. “How did you know Morse code? It’s been out of use for 500 years!”

“Easy, Captain.” She grinned. “One of my doctorates is in Earth History. I once read about the sinking of the passenger liner Titanic. The dramatic tragedy of it and the courageous behavior of the signaler stuck in my memory. He kept to his post until he lost power and couldn’t signal any longer, well aware he sacrificed any chance at a seat in a lifeboat in doing so. The story burned that signal into my mind: SOS, SOS. I figured someone would dredge it out of the data banks and realize the source of the signal had to be human!”

Thatcher shook his head in disbelief. “Well done! VERY well done!” He looked intrigued, as though he wanted to discuss it further, but Dr. Bartow shooed Barnett out of the room.

“Talk about it when he’s out of Sickbay,” Bartow insisted. “Come to think of it, I distinctly remember putting you on a limited rest schedule. Get going, or I’ll put you in a bed too!”

“Yes, Sir!” She meekly allowed him to shoo her away.

“Tomorrow morning, Lieutenant,” Thatcher reminded her by way of farewell. She turned to wink at him from the door.

“Yes, Sir, Captain, Sir.” She rewarded his amused bark of laughter with a smile that lit her whole face. She left Sickbay with an exuberant bounce in her step, her spirits high.

Bartow stayed a moment to talk. “She’s a remarkable young woman, isn’t she? I assume you asked her to stay on with us?”

“She’ll be a fine addition to our science department,” Thatcher said gruffly.

“And where else could she go?” Rian said, aware of Barnett’s background. “You’re a soft touch, Brett Thatcher, but a great judge of character. I’ve read her file and it’s extraordinary. She’s very gifted, isn’t she?”

“Gifted?” Thatcher echoed the word as he settled back on his pillow. “Hell, she’s a bloomin’ genius!” He quoted Josiah Powell in tribute to the courageous man who sacrificed his life for the woman he loved.

Bartow looked puzzled and started to ask a question, but Brett waved him away. “Go away, Rian; I’m supposed to rest, remember?”

Rian accepted his dismissal and left, but Thatcher lay awake for some time. “A bloomin’ genius,” he repeated to himself with satisfaction. “And a damned useful, common sense, gutsy person to have on your side! Where else should she be but on the Starwitch?”

THE END