

BIO RESCUE

S. L. VIEHL



A ROC BOOK

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ROC

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For my stepdad, Anthony J. Sabella,
with love and gratitude.

You'll always be
the father of my heart.

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CHAPTER ONE

Most Allied League pilots didn't like flying around Hsktskt displacer blockades. It was about as intelligent as 'Zangians swimming bloody near a starving mogshrike—they only did it if they weren't particularly attached to their tails.

But Jadaira hadn't become a pilot to preserve her ass.

"I've got a ship on screen," Burn said over her headgear. "Vector ninety-three degrees, one-fourth east, seven solar, midfield."

Dair didn't think anyone from her squadron had been foolish enough to blunder off course into an orbital minefield, but she switched to flight band and checked anyway. "Somebody going sand-belted on me?"

All of her pilots answered, by the numbers and in position.

"Acknowledged." Relief made her ease back in her harness. So far the pilots' pod kept their losses at zero, but with all the war junk floating around, that could change. Rapidly. "Burn's found himself a stray. Saree, drop down and have a look, if you would."

Through the viewer Jadaira watched as her wing lead pilot rolled out of patrol formation and flew short parallel to the field. Saree's strafers made a silver flash against the star-strewn blackness as she came about.

"Target acquired, Commander," her wing leader transmitted. "Freighter class. Could be a League transport."

The League had pulled out of the Pmoc Quadrant months ago, and the war had kept them so busy they hadn't come back to visit. Still, the ship could be carrying reinforcements to the front. "LTF or passenger?"

"Too small to be troop. Debris trail's half a kim wide."

No military pilot would have left that kind of scatter, no matter how smashed-up his ship was. It would be like begging for a rogue or a merc to attack.

"Refugees." Dair shifted her grip on the controls as she considered the situation.

Her patrol could provide safe escort through the system for anyone fleeing the war, if necessary, but this was different. She couldn't send more than one ship in to guide the blunderer out without risking triggering the whole minefield. Also, the patrol's primary mission was search and destroy, not search and rescue.

There were really only two options. She could try to get them out, or she could watch them blow up. "Feeling toothy today, Ensign?"

Her gunner's voice acquired a mocking edge. "You have to ask, Commander?"

Dair recalled Saree before she broke formation herself. "Maintain safe distance until we're clear. Keep an eye out for more strays; sometimes these lost pups travel in pairs." She hesitated. "Onkar,

we blow this, you've got the pod."

Her second-in-command didn't like her giving him orders, mainly for dominance reasons. When there was a threat to the pod in the water, males became aggressive, and very protective of females. Flight training had cured her male pilots of most of that, but Dair knew Onkar still resented her outranking him. Telling him he could take over only if she was dead was just another subtle volley in the silent war between them.

He tossed back one of his own, not so subtle: "I'll note the regs violation on my incident report."

Of course he would. Onkar noted *everything*.

He's probably rehearsing how he'll give orders already, she thought as she entered the field. *Dair, keep my tail in one piece.*

The Hsktskt were rather unimaginative when it came to setting up displacer mines, and the best way to enter a field of them was from an angle. Each of the proximity-sensitive mines had been programmed to randomly rotate positions, and carried enough charge to blast a nice-size hole through any slow-moving, unprotected hull. A snap to get around, if one was an experienced fighter pilot.

Unfortunately, the League transport pilot wasn't. Dair saw that as soon as she made visual contact and watched his inept maneuvering set off three more mines. "Oh, not good."

"Mouth-breather," Burn muttered.

"Have a little sympathy for the handicapped, cousin." She disengaged all auto controls and powered up the boosters. "Be slick now; here we go."

Flying fast and straight was the only way to keep from triggering more mines. Fast Dair could do, straight was the challenge. While she avoided colliding with the mines in their immediate flight path, Burn began targeting the rows ahead of them and shooting out a corridor in front of them. Impact shock waves from the explosions battered the hull, but the strafers were uniquely designed to acquire, absorb, and then shed displacer fire. Constellations rippled as the blasts rolled off them in steady, light-bending sheets.

"Transport on center screen, Dair. Vector fourteen degrees, thirty-eight east, point-two-five solar. Burn made a rude sound with his gill vents. "Lurching through on a single thruster, the finless pup."

She still had to make sure she was trying to kill herself for a friendly. "Initiate structure scan."

"Acknowledged." The gunner performed the sensor sweep and patched the data directly to her screen. "It's League standard. Debris trail's fouling the readings, but weapons and stardrive appear inactive."

The civilian pilot must have shut them down to reduce his energy emissions; so he apparently had *some* brains. "Signal and advise him to cut his engines and hold position."

Burn relayed her orders as he cleared the last of the mines between them and the transport. As it came fully into her visual field, Dair swore. The ship was a passenger freighter, designed to haul loads of beings through space but do little else. And it was a flying wreck, riddled with impact craters, hull panels scorched, and engine cowlings close to collapse. What she could see of the fuselage appeared intact, but in some places, probably not for long.

"I've received a response," her gunner said. "Ship's the *Hemat*, private passenger transport out of Sol Quadrant." A sharp klik of disbelief came over Dair's headset. "Cousin, you're not going to believe this."

"Try me."

"He's warning us off."

She changed her mind—the pilot was an idiot—and switched on her transcom. "Transport vessel *Hemat*, this is the *Wavelight*, PQPM Commander Jadaira mu T'resa. We're here to provide assistance."

Power down your engines and stand by.” *And quit acting like a jerk.*

The voice that replied sounded clipped and unpleasant. “~~We do not require assistance, *Wavelight.*”~~

Of course they require assistance; any half-wit can see that. But quadrant regulations as well as her own colonial charter required her to respect the wishes of any species that refused aid. If they said no, she would have to leave them alone. Her ’Zangian instincts had no problem with that. In the water, the unhealthy or crippled were abandoned, driven off, or went on their own to an isolated, sacred place to die.

Only Dair wasn’t completely ’Zangian.

Perhaps she’d heard him wrong or had inadvertently offended him. “Say again, *Hemat*, and please provide your status.”

“We do not require assistance, *Wavelight.*” The pilot’s voice came through the transcom, harsher than before, almost like a growl. “Most of the systems on board, including our navcomm, have been destroyed.”

He can’t find his way out of the field, that’s all? “Copy, *Hemat*, we’ll guide you out. What’s your destination?”

“We were in route to Kevarzangia Two, but—”

“Not a problem,” she cut in on his relay before he could hand her more nonsense. “That’s our home base. We’ll escort you.”

The voice grew nastier as the pilot snapped out his response. “*Wavelight*, I repeat, the Skartesh are *not* in need of your assistance. This is not your concern.”

“Skartesh.” Burn produced a weary sigh. “As if we needed more of them.”

“*Hemat.*” She fiddled with her panel, creating artificial interference. “*Hemat*, do you copy? Your signal is breaking up again.”

“Dair,” her gunner cut in over her ruse. “The bloody mines are grouping.”

That meant the disturbance they’d created within the blockade field had been large enough to trigger a mass detonation sequence. AKA the worst thing that could possibly happen.

Enough chitchat. “*Hemat* pilot. Hold your position until we pull ahead fifteen kim, and then follow our track. Push your throttle through the gate as soon as we’re clear.”

“Unacceptable.” He was actually snarling at her now. “I repeat—”

Dair never found it difficult to be genial toward other starjocs, but even her good nature had limits. “Look, pilot, all these floating blasters have just gone communal. Whether we stay or not, they’re going to converge on our present positions and blow. You and I have about a minute and thirty seconds to clear the field, or make our peace with our respective deities.”

There was a moment of static, then, “Negative. Abandon the field; I repeat, abandon the field.”

Dair could have fiddled more with the relay, but whatever coy game the Skartesh pilot was playing aggravated her. “Okay, friend, here’s the situation: If you stay, we stay. Should you change your mind, maintain visual contact and prep to get the hell out of here. *Wavelight* out.” She terminated the signal.

“Do we really have to die for a bunch of Skittish?” Burn wanted to know.

Part of Dair didn’t want to. The Skartesh—commonly referred to as the Skittish—had been forcibly evacuated from their homeworld by the Allied League. Skart’s solar system had been one of the first engulfed by the war between the colonizing League worlds and the reptilian raider-slavers of the Hsktskt faction. As a result, the displaced lupine aliens were rapidly becoming the most numerous species on K-2. Because of the strange and often disruptive nature of their behavior, few of the land-dwellers on K-2 wanted any more of them to transfer in. The native ’Zangians weren’t as judgmental, but the tensions the cult created among the other colonists had everyone worried.

Certainly no one would have called the Skartesh a species to die for.

But Dair felt sure she could get them out intact. “Lock a range and bearing scanner on him. Tell me the minute he twitches.”

“Are we staying if he doesn’t?”

She routed power to the stabilizers. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re stubborn, demented, and you bluff like a Trytinorn dances.” Burn made the strumming sound of ’Zangian mirth. “But then those have always been your best qualities.”

“That and I picked you as my gunner.” She checked the position of the nearest clustering probes.

Dair flew over the *Hemat* and took up position in front. She eased her hold on the control grips and watched the screen as Burn targeted the rows ahead and started blowing out a new conduit. Once he opened a linear avenue wide enough to accommodate the freighter, she throttled forward and shot into the open conduit. Five kim. Ten kim.

Come on, come on, she thought as she watched the scanner. *Quit being such a nail-head and shake your tail.*

Fifteen kim. Slowly the freighter began to follow their track.

“Appears he’s not quite as sand-belly as we are,” Burn said.

“So much for my dream male.” The knot in her chest eased, but only momentarily. Turbulence rocked the strafer as she navigated the channel of clear space Burn had made. Rolling the ship helped them endure the buffeting, but the sluggish freighter couldn’t do the same.

“Commander, he won’t withstand much more.” Her voice of reason patched another sweep of the *Hemat* to her console. “They’re barely maintaining environment as it is.”

They’d have breathers on board. They had to. “Patience and persistence, cousin.”

“What about the mines?”

She ran the sharp edges of her top teeth over her bottom lip. She had to divert the clustering mines away from the *Hemat*, which they’d locked on as the bigger target. *Only one way to do that in a blockade field.*

Dair knew there were plenty of ways to die in space. It was a vast, unfriendly void that supported life only if it brought along with it its own heat and atmosphere. She took small comfort in the fact that being blown up by displacer mines was one of the more merciful ends.

At least they’d die fast.

Dair made her decision. “Burn, punch me another hole, wide spread, forty-four degrees port. Make it sloppy.” She changed the rate of their emissions, making it appear as if the strafer were a very large, very damaged troop freighter.

The gunner clicked his teeth once and then released a long breath through his vents. “*Duo*, that’s pissing blood.”

“Exactly.” She signaled the freighter. “*Hemat* pilot. Stay on course and don’t follow us. As soon as you’re clear, signal my squadron. They’ll guide you home.”

“Commander—”

“Don’t debate this with me, pilot.” She hated being curt with a stranger, but they had no time for diplomatic niceties. “Follow orders or bid us, your passengers, and your posterior farewell.”

Her gunner opened a second, larger swath through the port side of the field, and she abruptly veered off. The concentration of fire and destruction, along with their engine output, acted like a magnet on the blockade units, and drew them away from the transport to crowd in around the strafer.

Like any killing machine, the mines went for the biggest chunk of bait.

“Deep with you, Jadaira mu T’resa,” Burn said.

Hearing the 'Zangian united-upon-death farewell made her shoulders shake, but Dair didn't laugh out loud. ~~Gunners were so fatalistic—and sensitive—and her cousin was no exception.~~ "At your side, Byorn mu Znora."

As the grouping mines began exploding in chains, the shock waves turned into direct contact displacer hits—something the hull couldn't shrug off. Although the cabin environment remained secure for the moment, Dair automatically pulled on her breather and locked her arms into the control grips, to prevent her hands from being jarred from the console.

What was it her academy instructor had said? *Learn to fly through hell and you'll always find honor on the other side.*

The explosions were so close and dense that her viewer became occluded, and Dair had to rely on console readings to follow the narrowing channel. A few kilometers more and they'd be clear, but the communing blasters were already closing off the end and forming a wide, deadly wall. Sealers around the overhead canopy began to whine. She knew her ship better than anyone; the straffer would never hold together long enough to punch through this mess.

Sorry, Dad, Teresa. I had a good run.

Sonic fire registered on her screen, making her jerk. She leaned forward; almost convinced it was a ripple. But it wasn't. "Someone wants a court-martial."

Burn's response was lost to the blasts as the squadron moved in on the blockade wall, and vaporized enough mine chains to punch out an exit for them.

As the last impact wave hit them, Dair's console screen shattered, and glass shards floated lazily over to bounce off her faceplate. She lost all data display. "Ensign, where is our lost pup?"

"Sixty-one degrees starboard, Commander. Now clear of the blockade."

Dair needed to make sure their interior atmosphere was intact, and she wasn't going to take the pilot's word for anything. "*Hemat* pilot, hold your position; we're coming around to dock with you."

She turned in a tight circle to fly a pass beside the transport when something glittered in the corner of her right eye. A half second later, something slammed into the side of the ship and sent them into a whirl.

"What the *suns* was *that*?" she yelled, turning to gain control over the spin and the ship.

"The *Hemat* just took a shot at us. Single-chamber repulse fire." Burn's articulated fin end hammered his console. "Can I return the favor? Please?"

She'd just saved his ship, and he was *attacking* them? "Hold your fire." She leveled out and heard something under the ship tear and groan. "Can't he just say thank-you?"

She tried to signal the transport, but the pilot was either jamming the frequency or didn't care to respond. Another blast hit them. This time she knew what the ripping and rumbling was; he'd disabled both her primary engines.

One shot might have been an accident, but two . . . "All right, that does it. Take away his toys, Ensign."

"With pleasure." Burn directed a short volley of pulse fire at the underside of the transport, and there was a small but gratifying flare of light. "Transport weaponry power cells destroyed."

"Good job." Dair switched to flight band. "Onkar, form up behind the freighter and herd him back to base." If the Skartesh had lost their environment, they could damn well suffocate now.

Her second instantly transmitted back: "Why was that fool mouth-breather shooting at you?"

Burn cut in before she could respond. "They're Skittish, Lieutenant."

Onkar muttered something short and vile.

"Burn, shut up. Onkar, let it go and make sure he lands safely. I'll have a word with the pilot later."

Actually, Dair wanted to bite him. Someplace soft and full of nerve endings. Skartesh had lots of them. “My thanks for saving our tails.”

“That was prime flying, Jadaira.” Onkar made it sound like she’d done it merely to aggravate him. “What’s your status?”

“Everything but the main thrusters are shot, but we’ll limp along after you. Get these civilians off the planet.”

“More transfers?” Saree said, momentarily forgetting protocol. “*Duo*, don’t we have enough already?”

“Who knows, perhaps the Ninrana will take some of them off our hands. See you back at base.” Shan switched off wideband and tried to reboot her screen. “Burn, I’m blind here.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got a nice personality,” her cousin joked. “Twenty degrees, eleven north, solar four hundred plus.”

They both laughed as they headed for home.

Rushan Amariah left one of his relief pilots at the helm of the *Hemat* with orders to fly back to Kevarzangia Two as slowly as possible. Since the pilot, like the entire crew, was also a follower of the faith, he did not question Shan’s orders.

Which was just as well, because any opposition might have resulted in the backup pilot having his throat torn out.

A few of the faithful were still crouched on the floors of the corridor that led back to his quarters and as Shan passed them they timidly reached out to brush their fingers against the hem of his robes. Their deference was automatic; he was the Salvager, the Great Messiah, the Ennobled One who would return the Skartesh to Paradise. To touch his garment was to affirm their convictions in the Promise and the Delivery.

All of that, and yet Shan had still been unable to carry out his mission, and had nearly destroyed them all in that blockade field.

If only that idiot pilot and her patrol hadn’t interfered.

He’d had little experience with female soldiers. His people never permitted their women to work outside the home environment; maintaining the faith, bearing children, and caring for their mates were their primary duties. Certainly no female had ever served in a command position; that was unthinkable. Now he would be forced to dwell among other species who allowed their women all sorts of unimaginable liberties.

And the way she had spoken to him—as if they were equals, then refusing to obey his orders—still made his blood run hot. *If she belonged to me, I would bite her tongue until she learned how to curb it.*

Shan punched the code to access his quarters, then stepped inside and secured the door panel. The transponder he had concealed in his storage unit was small but he hadn’t been able to risk bringing anything more sophisticated on board the *Hemat*. Communicating with anyone outside the cult unless under life-threatening circumstances was forbidden by Skartesh laws; laws Shan was obligated to enforce. He could not insist on one thing and do another. His followers were devoted, not blind, deaf, and mentally incompetent.

The relay he had left open was still displayed; the recipient of his signal still patiently waited for his report.

“I located the device,” he said over the encrypted channel. “It was planted in the stardrive.”

“By whom?”

“Unknown.” Someone had been following the *Hemat*, however, and Shan had flown into the minefield hoping to lure the pursuing ship in after them. The patrol’s commander and her heroics had ruined that.

“Could it have been one of the faithful?”

“No. They were not permitted access to the vessel until we launched, and I scanned each of them myself prior to boarding. It must have been someone at the quadrant processing station, perhaps on the docks.” Shan wanted to return there and take the place apart, platform by platform, until he found the culprit. “How did you know it had been planted on the ship?”

“Our information came from the Ylydii ambassador’s envoy. He was found deceased several hours after his last transmission to us.” The elderly male’s ancient eyes narrowed. “The physicians here said it was natural causes.”

Too many friends of the Skartesh had done the same over the last cycle. “I doubt that.”

“Indeed. We will need to examine the device.” He scratched idly for a moment at his silver cheek fur. “Send it to us through the usual channels.”

“I cannot comply.” Shan barely kept the frustration out of his voice. “We were discovered by League planetary patrol. Their rescue efforts made it necessary to eject the drive, along with the device.”

The elder considered that for a moment. “Can you recover it?”

“Negative. My ship is too damaged, and we have a military patrol escorting us to the planet.” Also thanks to that foolhardy ’Zangian commander and her dogooder impulses. At least the two shots Shan had taken at her ship had kept her from docking with his. “Colonial security will likely retrieve the drive before I can requisition another ship.”

“Indeed.” Some of the dark-streaked fur across the older male’s low brow bristled, and then smoothed out. “We will attempt to recover it through other channels.” A faint smile wrinkled the grizzled muzzle. “We must allow for the occasional error, Rushan. Even a savior such as yourself has been known to make them.”

It was not his habit to make any mistakes, but he refrained from snapping that out and dug his claws into his thighs. “As you say.”

“You will proceed to K-2 as planned, and reunite with the faithful. Report back to me as soon as you have arrived. And Rushan.” The smile disappeared. “There can be no more mistakes.”

CHAPTER TWO

Normally it would have taken only a few minutes to return to K-2, but without her primary engine Dair had to fly the way a seastar oozed. She also wouldn't trust the stardrive until she had the flight crew check out the damage from the field and their ungrateful friend, the suicidal Skartesh.

When Dair finally landed, the emergency response vehicles were waiting with chemfoam pumps, ramp tube, and two mobile immersion tanks.

"Go on ahead," she told Burn as she set the envirocontrols to drain the cockpit. "I'll talk to the guy."

"So will I," Onkar said over the flight band.

The words sounded subdued, but the tone behind them said *furiously 'Zangian male, ready to use some teeth*. "You can't thrash him, Lieutenant."

"Why not?"

"You'd win, and they'd make me clean up the mess." She hoped that would placate him, and switched her interior controls to evacuate the cockpit. "Transport, we don't require tank transfer thanks."

"Copy, Commander."

Because they were amphibious aquatics, 'Zangians were able to breathe above and below the surface, but preferred to breathe liquid. Even Dair and her pilots, who could tolerate gravity and longer periods above the surface, operated more efficiently breathing fluid. As a result the League had modified their strafers to maintain a liquid interior environment chemically identical to K-2 seawater. 'Zangians injured out of water also swiftly went into systemic shock, and were always transferred directly to mobile tanks via sealed ramp tubes before being transported to the FreeClinic for treatment.

Making the transition from breathing liquid to oxygen wasn't difficult, but the sensations weren't pleasant. It took Dair and Burn a few minutes to expel the last of the almost-seawater from their gills, and inflate their seldom-used lungs.

"I hate breathing air," Burn said, between coughs.

"*Duo, who likes it?*" Dair cleared the last drops from her gills and took her first deep breath. Another smothered a groan. Unlike her cousin, she had many major surgical alterations to deal with, including an artificial diaphragm. Which felt like it was bruised; she'd been wearing her harness a little loose and had probably hit her chest into her panel when the *Hemat* had fired on them.

They put in the tympanic inserts that allowed them to communicate with land dwellers, then climbed over the side of the straffer and jumped to the ground. Burn swayed and then staggered a little. So did Dair, despite her greater experience with gravity. The adrenaline rush of the rescue was recoiling on her, and combined with her bruises and need for the water, it was quickly sapping her

energy.

Unlike her, Burn also had to coil up his flukes and separate his SEAL-modified lower appendages in order to walk. 'Zangian bodies weren't designed to do any of that for long periods of time.

Dair often envied Burn his flukes. Of course, being small and extremely agile she could swim faster than anyone in her home pod, and her specially designed legs and webbed feet made it easier for her to walk on land. Yet she'd always secretly wished she could look more like the other pilots: more 'Zangian, less Terran.

She couldn't tell Teresa that. Her stepmother's favorite admonition was, *That's pod mentality, Jadaira.*

Burn limped along the side of the *Wavelight*, eyeing the damage to their ship. "Verrig isn't going to like this."

The exterior of the strafers had taken a beating; some of the hull panels had craters in them large enough for Dair to put her fist through. Heat stress had caused seams in the alloy to shrink, and wiring spilled from them like nests of barb-eels. Hydraulic fluid mixed with cabin water rained in steady streams from the strafers to the landing pad. Dair saw her reflection in one of the oily, dark puddles and made a face at the less-than-'Zangian image.

Her ship was battered, torn, and bleeding, but Dair knew they'd patch it back together. Just like the pod had her.

"Security wants to see you two." Flight Crew Chief Verrig paced the length of the *Wavelight*. His species were quad-legged but armless, so he wore a prosthetic rig with a number of interesting attachments. Between his huge eyes and tiny mouth was a long, vertical flap he used for speech. His colorless derma generated a continuous layer of gelatinous slime that kept his body temperature regulated. Most land dwellers thought Verrig was a little repulsive, but Dair and her people considered him quite handsome. "A miracle you didn't lose cabin environment."

Burn rolled his recessed eyes. "Going flat-lung was the least of our problems, crew chief."

"Jadaira." Onkar appeared, looking none the worse for transitioning from liquid to atmosphere.

Unlike Dair and Verrig, the two 'Zangian males both had dark hides, the color of sky before moonrise. Burn was too young to have many battle scars, but Onkar had old clash markings slashed all over him. One deep scar bisected the left side of his face, and three gillnets under his right ear were missing—none of which he had gotten in the breeding caverns, as most of the pod's other males had while chasing a female in season. Onkar had been adopted by Dair's pod as an adult. Before that he had lived in the outer currents as a rogue.

Onkar's reticence wasn't from lack of opportunity. Among 'Zangian females, Dair's second was revered more for his scars than his SEAL modifications. His tough appearance could have snared him any mate he desired, too. Except that he didn't chase anyone.

Dair knew he was waiting for her to go into season. In the water he watched her constantly, and every time they were topside he made sure to be somewhere nearby.

She met his gaze, and felt the tension that always hovered between them, unspoken, unmovable. "Lieutenant."

He looked past her at the *Hemat*. "I will deal with this refugee pilot."

"No, you won't." She tapped her chest insignia.

"This is not about rank." He glanced at Verrig and lowered his voice. "He *attacked* you."

She understood his feelings of aggression, but she couldn't allow him to act on them. "*Duo*, Onkar, he made a mistake." She thought of how she had taunted him during the mission, and her voice gentled. "We all do."

“Yours was saving him.” He stalked off.

Verrig used a grav-hoist to pull back the huge primary engine cowling, peered inside, and hooted at his disgust. “What the blessed *Knti* happened up there?”

Pilots kept their quarrels private, so Dair shook her head at Burn before replying with, “Just caught some friendly fire. Why haven’t they released the passengers on the *Hemat*?”

Her gunner nodded toward a FreeClinic transport parked near the passenger vessel. “Looks like Medical’s still on board.”

She recalled what the pilot had transmitted. He’d said nothing about injured passengers. “Were there wounded?”

“None, far as I know,” the flight crew chief told her. “They’re checking for bugs.”

That was definitely strange. Transport subjected every landing vessel to intense scans to assure they were not carrying any potentially harmful life-forms or diseases. “Biodecon not working?”

“They’re Skittish. The council has ordered special inspections for their transfer vessels; you know what sorry shape they usually arrive in.” Verrig, who thought any abuse of a starship was grounds for immediate execution, snorted. “Knowing how they love to generate filth, it will take us a solid month or more to sterilize the ship. *Knti* only knows what they’ve done to the propulsion and navigation systems.”

“How many on board?” she asked.

“Couple hundred, plus the one I heard that they’ve been waiting for. A salvage man or something.” The crew chief extended one of his artificial limbs and handed her a datapad. “Sign off on the strap for me, Commander. I’ll req you a temp replacement; you won’t be getting her back for a few weeks.”

She noted her consent and nudged Burn. “Come on. Let’s see what’s going on.”

“What about Norash?” Verrig asked.

The thought of going on the carpet in front of the chief of Colonial Security didn’t thrill Dair. “I’ll report in later.”

The gunner spotted a couple of pilots walking off the landing pad, and waved a fin. “I want a minute alone with the Skartesh who fired on us, Jadaira.”

Like Onkar, Burn was feeling aggressive, but high stress had that effect on ’Zangian males. Dair felt pretty punchy herself. “He’s Skartesh, so watch his teeth and paws. Remember they’re pretty free with their body fluids, too. Don’t bite him, don’t swipe at him, and don’t try to mark him.”

“They don’t like acquiring scars?” Burn, who intended to collect as many as he could to impress the pod’s females, was utterly mystified by that.

“No. They think it’s . . . unattractive,” she said, for want of a better word.

“Land’s end, have they ever looked at themselves?”

As they walked to the Skartesh transport, Dair took a few moments to enjoy what there was to appreciate while being topside. Kevarzangia Two was a beautiful world, above and below the water. The land dwellers had to cope with far more varieties of chokeweed, which grew all around the dwellings, but it came in pretty colors and smelled, for the most part, nice.

Dair never understood the colonists’ need to remain boxed up in the structures they called buildings, but even they were interesting. The cramped conditions sometimes gave her a touch of unease, which her stepmother called claustrophobia, but when that happened all she had to do was look up.

K-2’s sky was almost endless, like a huge, clear inlet of good water. A few clouds drifted about, but there was nothing hanging above her but green sky. Another of the reasons she’d chosen to join the military and learn to fly; being a pilot was just as thrilling as being in the water, but she could move

faster and go farther than she'd ever imagined.

Space and speed were wonderful addictions.

"Look at this," Burn said.

Dair turned her attention to the *Hemat*, which was in far worse shape than the *strafer*. Fuel and environment were leaking from a couple of panels, and huge carbon sweeps mottled the outer hull. Part of the fuselage had crumpled in, and the stardrive array was nothing more than a big, empty hole. Technicians were already crawling all over the outside of the vessel, but the docking ramp was guarded by a pair of armed militia.

She walked up and held out her tags. "Commander mu T'resa, Ensign mu Znora. Permission to board the ship."

The guard scanned and verified her ID, then Burn's. "You'll have to go through decon again when you're through."

"Acknowledged, thanks."

Dair and Burn walked up the ramp and signaled for entry, but had to wait a few minutes before the hull doors parted. More militia stood inside, and she had to repeat her request and show ID again before gaining access.

"All this for some Skittish?" Burn looked around as he scratched his hide. He was already starting to flake. "Seems a bit overmuch."

"The council has been strident about enforcing their charter lately. Must be why they've insisted on extra inspections." She spotted a gaunt-looking female in a long white robe standing silently in front of a door panel, and walked up to her.

To an aquatic eye, the Skartesh were not a particularly attractive species, and this female was no exception. A little taller than Dair, she had long, slanted dark eyes rimmed with black lids. A black nose jutted out with a narrow jaw to form a distinct muzzle. Blunt-tipped triangular ear flaps stood straight up from her skull, exposing the pink inner works. Like all her kind, she was covered with fur, but hers was spotty in color and density, and the dullness and odor rising from it indicated that cleanliness was not a priority. A longer, matted brown mane sprouted from between her ears and ran down under the collar of her robe. Her paws had four wide, thick digits tipped with short black claws, and a fifth crooked, longer digit that served as a thumb.

They look like malnourished werewolves, Teresa had said once when she and Dair had passed the large compound the Skartesh had set up for their cult at the edge of the colony.

Is there a great diversity of wolves on your homeworld? Dair had asked. At her stepmother's blank look, she added, *You said once that 'Zangians look like Terran seawolves.*

Oh, that's human slang for orca, honey. Teresa had given the Skartesh inside the compound the same dubious look that the other land dwellers did. *Trust me, if you're going to be described as a wolf, go with sea, not were.*

"We'd like to speak with your pilot, please." Dair didn't expect an answer—the Skittish rarely chose to communicate with anyone, verbally or otherwise—and wasn't surprised when the lupine female turned, punched something in on the wall console, and abruptly walked away.

Burn stared after her. "Does that mean we follow?"

"I guess." She looked down at the small tufts of hair on the deck where the female had been standing, and wrinkled her nose. "Let's go and see what happens."

Burn didn't appear happy at the prospect. "You're sure I can't scar them?"

The silent Skartesh female led them down the corridor to the end, and signaled at a wide door panel. When it slid open, she turned and stood waiting. Since the panel didn't close, and the female didn't t

to stop them as they approached, Dair and Burn walked in.

~~Inside were thirty more Skartesh wearing white woven robes and sitting on the deck around central helm console. The male manning the console was also wearing a robe, but his was the color of deep water. He had his back toward them, but the black-rimmed eyes of those gathered around his face moved to stare at the two 'Zangians. No one rose, or spoke, or blinked an eyelash.~~

If this is the reception segment of the crew, they needed to brush up on their protocol. Dair politely cleared her throat. "Pardon the intrusion, but we're looking for your pilot."

The Skartesh male in the turquoise robe turned around. "You have found him."

The pilot wore a thin metallic band around his brow, but unlike the female and most of the Skartesh gathered around him, he had a beautiful silken pelt of dark brown body fur and a long, thick black mane. Pretty as it was, Dair never could get used to seeing another being covered with hair—especially hair the color of dead chokeweed, like his.

Maybe his will fall out in patches after he's been here awhile, like the other Skittish, Dair thought. Would make him seem a lot less . . . menacing.

His slanted eyes were dark with no whites, like the other Skartesh, and didn't look friendly. "What do you want?"

For a moment, Dair stared. So did Burn. The Skartesh rarely spoke where they could be overheard, but everyone had caught their high-pitched yips in their native tongue. The pilot's wristcom was a model that projected translations while mimicking his natural voice, which was much different—deeper, harsher, and so resonant that Dair imagined she could feel it in her bones.

He looks like a big canine but he sounds like an aquatic. Finally she put her own vocal cords to use. "I'm Commander mu T'resa, commander of the planetary patrol squadron." She gestured to her cousin. "This is Ensign mu Znora."

"Rushan Amariah." The Skartesh bared his teeth.

Burn's folded dorsal fin stiffened, straining under the back of his flight suit, until Dair reminded him in klik why humanoids usually showed teeth. *Greeting-not-threat.*

Shows-too-many, her cousin klikked back.

Be-calm-quiet. Since Skartesh seemed to prefer face-to-face conversing, she pulled off her helmet and shook out her gilletts. "Pilot, would you mind telling me why you fired on us after we led you from the blockade field?"

Dair had been told her alterformed voice was rather striking. Underwater she sounded like everyone else, but on the surface oxygen enabled her replacement larynx to work. The blend of Terran organics and SEAL technology had given her a clear, faintly melodic tone that Teresa claimed became quite piercing whenever Dair lost her temper. Certainly it was the exact opposite of Rushan's.

The Skartesh took his turn staring, but mostly at her face. "You have Terran blood?"

He isn't much of a genius. "No. I'm a SEAL."

The fine short fur beneath his eyes bunched.

She interpreted that to mean that he didn't understand her. "A SEAL is a surgically enhanced/alterred life-form."

"You were made to look like a human female?" He made an up-and-down gesture. "Deliberately?"

"Yes. My stepmother is a Terran biologist. She invented SEAL technology." The silent, blank face watching them made her uneasy to elaborate further. "I'd still like an explanation for what you did up there."

"Would you."

"There was no reason to fire at us; we were only providing assistance." She waited a little longer

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