

THE FAR SIDE OF THE STARS  
by David Drake

DEDICATION

For Tristan David Drake

The previous four generations of the family have read voraciously, so I hope he'll carry on the tradition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dan Breen continues as my first reader, making my prose better than it would be without him.

Dorothy Day and Evan Ladouceur have been addressing specialized continuity problems in this one, and my webmaster Karen Zimmerman not only helpfully read my drafts but also archived them. (After you've killed as many computers in the middle of projects as I have, you learn not to take chances.)

Speaking of which, my son Jonathan got me going again when I *did* kill a computer. I can't claim to have consciously raised my own techie, but it seems to work very well if you have the time. I'm reminded of the Neolithic hunters who set their axeheads in split living branches, so that when the wood regrew it gripped the stone perfectly.

Clyde Howard helped research bits of information that I *knew* I had but couldn't put my finger on till he'd provided them.

My friend Mark Van Name made an observation that allowed me to write this book (and I expect future books) in a greater state of contentment than ever before. I don't think it makes the prose better, but it's certainly an improvement for me.

Writers aren't easy to live with, and I may be more difficult than most. My wife Jo manages, and she feeds me very well besides.

My thanks to all of you.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

One of the problems when you're writing of either the past or the future is 'How much should I translate?' I don't mean simply language: there's a whole complex of things that people within any society take for granted but which vary between societies. (But language too: I had somebody complain that the Arthurian soldiers in *The Dragon Lord* talked like modern soldiers. My reaction to this was that I could write the soldiers' dialogue in Latin, but the complainant couldn't read it; and if I'm going to translate into English, why on Earth wouldn't I translate into the *type* of English the same sort of men speak today?)

Weights and measures are a particular problem. I don't assume that the world of the far future will use the weights and measures of today, but I'm quite certain that my inventing new systems will do nothing desirable for my story. (There are people who're really happier for a glossary of made-up or foreign words. I'm not, though I'll admit I still occasionally murmur to myself, "*Tarzan bundolo!*")

In the RCN series Cinnabar is on the English system and the Alliance uses Metric, simply to suggest the enormous complexity I expect will exist after Mankind spreads among the stars. (Well, I certainly hope we'll spread among the stars, but I won't pretend I'm sanguine about our chances at the moment.)

Communications protocols are very roughly based on those of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, 11<sup>th</sup> ACR, during the period it was—I was—under the command of LTC Grayle Brookshier. There were a lot of stories about squadron and regimental commanding officers. The stories about Battle Six were all positive.

I think I should comment on the background of this novel also. Today physical travel is easier than ever before, and television takes us literally anywhere. The world is generally accessible to most people, and as a result it's becoming homogenized. I don't insist that this is a bad thing, but it's a major change from the situation of a generation ago, let alone that of a hundred years in the past.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a party of Russian nobles bought a South Seas trading schooner from its owner/captain, hired as captain the former mate (a man named Robert Quinton), and for several years sailed the Pacific from Alaska to New Zealand, from Kamchatka to Diamond Head. They hunted, bought curios, visited ancient ruins, and viewed native rites in a score of localities.

This sort of experience was available only first-hand and only to the exceptionally wealthy (or their associates like Quinton, who wrote a memoir of the voyage). Today anybody who watches PBS and the Discovery Channel can see everything those aristocrats saw, or at any rate as many of those things as survive.

I've tried as one of the themes of *The Far Side of the Stars* to give the feel of that former time, when travel was a risky adventure possible only for the few. While I'm glad that many--myself included--can share the world's wonders today, I do regret the passing of the romance of former times and the fact that maps no longer have splotches marked *Terra Incognita*.

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## CHAPTER 1

Adele Mundy wore for the first time her white Republic of Cinnabar Navy dress uniform. The sleeves had the chevrons of a warrant officer, the lightning bolt of the Signals Branch, and a black ribbon of mourning. She paused to check herself in the mirror in the entryway of her townhouse.

Three generations of Mundys had lived in Chatsworth Minor, ever since the family became so politically prominent that Adele's grandfather replaced their previous townhouse in Xenos with these imposing four stories of brick, stone, and ornate carvings. Adele had grown up here, but she'd been off-planet continuing her education as an archivist the night sixteen years ago when the Three Circles Conspiracy unraveled and

gangs arrived to carry off the remainder of her family for execution.

She'd never expected to see Chatsworth Minor--or Cinnabar--again. When she learned that the heads of not only her parents but also her 10-year-old sister Agatha had been displayed on the Speaker's Rock, she hadn't wanted to *see* any relic of her previous life.

She smiled faintly into the mirror. Times change, but people change as well. The stern-looking naval officer with splashes of medal ribbons on the bosom of her tunic wasn't the reserved girl who'd left Cinnabar for the Academic Collections on Bryce just in time to save her life. They shared facial features and a trim build, that was all.

Or almost all; because both the officer and the girl lived with the bone-deep certainty that they were Mundys of Chatsworth. Adele's parents had been egalitarians and members of the People's Party, but there'd never been any doubt in their minds that the Mundys were first among equals... and no doubt in their daughter's mind that whether she was a scholar or a street-cleaner, she was a Mundy. There'd been times after her parents were killed and their property confiscated for treason that Adele believed a street-cleaner probably lived better; but that didn't change anything that *really* mattered.

Adele's servant Tovera--if servant was the right word--glanced at her mistress briefly in the mirror; her eyes flicked on, never resting anywhere very long. If Adele was prim, then Tovera was so colorless that casual observers generally paid her less attention than they did the wallpaper. For the funeral she wore a gray dress suit of good quality, also with a mourning ribbon. Her only other ornamentation was a blue-and-silver collar flash that proclaimed her a retainer--the sole retainer at the present time--of the Mundys of Chatsworth.

Tovera missed little but cared about even less; perhaps she cared about nothing except whatever task she'd been set or had set herself. Having Tovera around was much like carrying a pistol with a trigger as light as thistledown.

The pistol in the sidepocket of Adele's tunic was so flat it didn't bulge even a dress uniform. Its trigger was indeed light.

Smiling again Adele said, "I didn't have to check myself, did I, Tovera? You'd have told me if something was wrong."

Tovera shrugged. "If you wanted me to, mistress," she said. "I don't imagine we'll attract much attention at this affair."

Adele adjusted the set of her own black ribbon. "No," she said, "I don't suppose we will. But Daniel loved his Uncle Stacey, and I wouldn't care to fail Daniel."

*I'd rather die than fail Daniel...* But she didn't say that aloud, and Tovera wouldn't have cared anyway.

Adele glanced at the footmen, waiting patiently as she'd known they would be, and then to the doorman. The house servants wore Mundy livery, but unlike Tovera they were employed by the bank which on paper leased the townhouse. That was one of the perquisites which had fallen to Adele by virtue of her friendship with Lt. Daniel Leary, RCN; the son of Corder Leary, Speaker Leary to his associates even though he'd given up the speakership of the Assembly years before.

"I believe we're ready, then," she said. The doorman bowed and swung open the front door of softly gleaming beewood cut on what had been the Mundy country estate of Chatsworth Major. With the four footmen ahead of her and Tovera trailing a polite pace behind, Adele stepped into the court.

Times indeed change. Speaker Leary had been primarily responsible for crushing the Three Circles Conspiracy--and Adele's family--into a smear of blood... but it was his influence acting through the agency of Daniel's elder sister Deirdre which had returned the townhouse to Adele's ownership when she decided she wanted it after all. Ligier Rolfe, the distant cousin who'd taken possession of the truncated estate after the Proscriptions, probably didn't to this day know what had happened to ownership.

The tram stop was at the mouth of the court, now quiet, which had acted as an assembly room when Lucius Mundy addressed his supporters from the fourth floor balcony of Chatsworth Minor. Political power had never meant anything to Adele; indeed, so long as she had enough to feed her and the freedom of a large archive in which to indulge her passion for knowledge in the abstract, she didn't care about money. Even so it pleased her to think of how furious her cousin's wife, Marina Casaubon Rolfe, must have been when she was evicted from a house to which the mere wealth of her merchant family would never have entitled her.

Tovera must have noticed her expression. "Mistress?" she asked mildly.

"Do you remember Mistress Rolfe?" Adele said.

"Yes," Tovera said. "A fat worm."

"I was recalling," Adele explained, "that she saw fit to insult a Mundy of Chatsworth."

Tovera didn't comment. Perhaps she smiled.

Servants lounging at the entrances of other houses fronting on the court rose and doffed their caps, standing with their heads bowed as Adele passed by. In Lucius Mundy's day, all these houses had been owned by supporters of the People's Party. They'd suffered accordingly, but those who bought the properties in the aftermath of the Proscriptions were generally social climbers like Marina Rolfe. To them Adele's return gave the neighborhood the cachet of a real aristocrat's presence; they'd made very sure that their servants were properly obsequious.

Adele couldn't imagine what her neighbors made of the fact that Mundy of Chatsworth was a naval officer; and a warrant officer besides, a mere technician instead of a dashing commissioned officer like her tenant, Daniel Leary. Aristocrats were allowed to be eccentric, of course.

"Mistress?" Tovera said again.

"Am I eccentric, Tovera?" Adele asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"I wouldn't know, mistress," Tovera said. "You'd have to ask someone who understands what 'normal' means."

Adele grimaced. "I'm sorry, Tovera," she said. "It's not something I should joke about."

As Adele and her entourage approached the stop, an east-bound tram pulled onto the siding. Another monorail car clattered past on the main line, heading west toward the great roundabout in the center of Xenos. By law only the Militia, the national police, could own aircars within the municipal limits of the capital; the likelihood that a touchy rival aristocrat would shoot down a private aircar passing overhead made the law more effective than merely legal sanctions could have done.

Many of the great houses had their own tramcars which teams of servants set on the rail when their master or mistress chose to go out. Adele had a respectable nest egg in the form of prize money gathered while under the command of Lt. Leary, but she couldn't

have afforded such an establishment even if she'd seen any use for it.

She'd gotten used to taking care of herself; she preferred it that way now. She had Tovera, of course, but it was easy to forget that Tovera was human.

A footman ran ahead to engage the tram that'd just stopped, saving Adele the delay before another car arrived in answer to the call button in the kiosk. At this time of day that might be as much as half an hour. The funeral was being held at a chapel near Harbor Three, the great naval base on the northern outskirts of Xenos. Adele had allowed enough time--of course--but she preferred to be a trifle early than to miss the start of the rites because of a run of bad luck.

Adele Mundy had seen a great deal of luck in her 32 years. Quite a lot of it had been bad.

The man who got off the tram wore a hard-used, one might almost say ragged, RCN 2<sup>nd</sup> class uniform, gray with black piping. It was the minimum standard of dress required for off-duty officers in public, though given its condition--there were oil stains on the left cuff and a mended tear on the right pants leg--the powers that be in the Navy Office might have been better served had the fellow donned clean fatigues instead.

The recent armistice between Cinnabar and the Alliance of Free Stars had led to the decommissioning of many ships and the consequent relegation of officers to half-pay status. For those who didn't have private means, half-pay was a sentence of destitution. This was obviously an unfortunate who couldn't afford to maintain his wardrobe--

"That's Lt. Mon," Tovera murmured in her ear.

"*Good God, it is,*" Adele blurted under her breath. She'd unconsciously averted her eyes in embarrassment; poor herself for most of her adult life, she had no desire to wallow in the poverty of others.

Such concerns didn't touch Tovera any more than love or hate did. The man coming toward them was a potential enemy--everyone was a potential enemy to Tovera--so she'd looked carefully and thus recognized Daniel's first lieutenant.

"Good afternoon, Mon!" Adele called, stepping through the line of footmen who'd deliberately placed themselves between her and the disreputable-looking stranger. "What are you doing here? Have you completed the *Princess Cecile's* repairs already?"

"Mundy?" said Lt. Mon. "Thank God I found you. Is Captain Leary here as well? I need to see him soonest. I *must* see him!"

Mon was a dark, close-coupled, morose officer in his early thirties. His technical skills were above the high average of RCN officers, and his doggedness made up for his lack of brilliance. Mon had neither family wealth nor the interest of senior officers to aid him, so his advancement in the service had been embitteringly slow.

Adele respected Mon but she didn't particularly like him. She doubted that many people regarded him as a friend.

Mon's saving grace was the way he'd reacted when Daniel Leary gave him his first taste of honor and prize money. There were officers--many officers--who'd have been envious of the lucky younger superior who swept from success to success while they plodded in his wake. Mon by contrast had shown only gratitude and utter loyalty.

"Daniel's at the Stanislas Chapel," Adele said. "Commander Bergen died, and Daniel's in charge of the arrangements. We're headed there now, but, ah...."

The tramcar began to chime in mindless irritation at being held at the stop. Adele glanced at the vehicle but held her tongue; her frustration was with the situation, not one

more noise in a city that was full of them.

Mon glanced down at his uniform. "Oh, this?" he said, flicking the stained cuff. "Oh, that's all right. I've got my Whites in storage at Fastinelli's. I'll pick them up and go straight to the chapel--it's only a stop or two away from Stanislas."

He started back into the tram; the footman holding it in place stepped across the doorway to block him. "No, no, that's all right Morris!" Adele said. "My colleague Lt. Mon and I will travel together to the chapel. He'll change when he gets there."

They all boarded, the footmen first to clear space for their mistress--though the only others in the car were a disconsolate couple wearing shapeless blue robes. They cowered at the far end. Xenos was the capital not only of Cinnabar but of the empire which Cinnabar ruled. The city drew tourists, workers, and beggars from more worlds than even an information specialist like Adele Mundy could determine without checking the handheld data unit in a discrete thigh pocket on all of her uniforms, even these Dress Whites.

Adele smiled wryly. She'd be less uncomfortable stark naked but holding her data unit than fully clothed without the unit. Yes, she supposed she was eccentric....

The monorail whined away from the stop, then jolted onto the main line. They'd switch to a northbound line three stops on instead of going west to the main transfer point at the Pentacrest.

She wondered if the foreign couple had a real destination or if they were simply riding the cars for want of other occupation. They didn't look the sort to bury themselves in study as Adele Mundy had done when she was a lonely orphan in a foreign land.

"Ah, Mon?" she said, voicing another awkward topic that thought of poverty had brought to mind. Fastinelli's was the large-volume naval clothier's located near Harbor Three. Strictly speaking the firm didn't have a storage facility, but it did loan money against items of uniform which were surplus to the requirements of temporarily embarrassed officers. "Since you've just landed and won't have collected your pay yet, can I offer you a small loan for your storage fees?"

"What?" said Mon, obviously surprised. Whatever he was furrowing his brows over, it didn't seem to involve settling with the pawnbroker at the end of the tram ride. "Oh. Oh. Thank you, Mundy, quite decent of you, but I'm all right. Count Klimov gave me a drawing account to arrange stores."

Adele's eyes narrowed minusculely. "You did just land, didn't you, then?" she said, knowing that her tone was thin with a justified hint of displeasure. The lieutenant was obviously concerned about something, but that didn't justify what by now amounted to rudeness in ignoring her initial polite question. "You brought the *Princess Cecile* back to Cinnabar, that is?"

Mon stiffened, then scrunched his face with embarrassment. "Yes, mistress," he said. "Your pardon, please, for being distracted. Yes, we completed repairs to the *Princess Cecile* four weeks back. I brought her directly from Strymon in accordance to the orders that reached me while she was still in dry-dock. We landed at Harbor One a few hours ago, and I came to see Lt. Leary as soon as I'd rendered my accounts to the harbormaster."

"Harbor One?" said Adele, puzzled at mention of the lake northwest of Xenos where the first human colony ship landed. Early in Cinnabar's history Harbor One had sufficed for both her commercial and naval traffic, but those days were long past.

Commercial transport had shifted to Harbor Two on the coast a hundred and twenty miles from the capital, while the RCN had built the vast artificial basin of Harbor Three for its operations at the close of the First Alliance War seventy-five years before.

"Why yes, mistress," Mon said. "The *Princess Cecile* is being sold out of service. I assumed that you--that Lt. Leary, at least--had been informed of that?"

"No," Adele said. "Daniel doesn't know that. I'm quite sure he'd have said something."

She sat back on the tram's bench, staring in the direction of the scratched windows while her mind grappled with what Mon had said. She felt the same disbelieving emptiness as she had when she learned that her family had died during the Proscriptions.

The words were simple, the concept quite understandable. The *Princess Cecile* was a foreign-built corvette, badly damaged in battle off Tanais in the Strymon system. You could never trust a ship after structural repairs, and there were many conservative RCN officers who didn't believe you could really trust a hull built on Kostroma in the first place. Now that Cinnabar and the Alliance were at peace, it made better sense to dispose of the *Princess Cecile* rather than bear the expense of maintaining her in ordinary.

Oh, yes, Adele could understand the reasoning. The analytical portion of her mind also understood why the heads of the Mundy family and their associates were displayed on Speaker's Rock when their conspiracy came unravelled.

But in both cases, Adele's stomach dropped into a frozen limbo while her mind spun pointlessly around the words and their implications.

The *Princess Cecile* was simply a small warship. Adele had first seen her less than a year ago, when she was a Kostroman corvette overflying a banal national parade. The *Sissie* was cramped and uncomfortable even at the best of occasions, and much of the time Adele had spent aboard her had involved danger and discomfort well beyond anything she'd previously experienced in a life with more than its share of squalid poverty.

And yet....

A year ago Adele Mundy had been a lonely orphan eking out an exile's existence in a third-rate court whose ruler affected to be an intellectual. Her title was Court Librarian, but her duties were those of a performing seal. Now she had her nation and even her childhood home back. She had the whole RCN for a family, and in Daniel Leary she had a friend who would stand with her to death.

None of these things were the *Princess Cecile*; but they had all come about through the *Princess Cecile*.

"Mundy?" Lt. Mon said in a worried tone. "Are you all right?"

Adele opened her eyes--she didn't recall having closed them--and gave Mon a crisp smile. "Yes indeed, Mon," she said. "A little sad, perhaps, but I'm on my way to a funeral, after all."

Mon nodded solemnly, looking out at the six- to eight-story buildings along the tram route. The top floors were luxury suites with roof gardens; the ground level was given over to shops, often with the owners' apartments on the floor above. In between lived ordinary people, bureaucrats and lieutenants with families larger than their incomes; librarians and mechanics and off-planet beggars jammed a dozen to a room. Lived and in their times died, because everything died.

*Rest in peace, Princess Cecile. You too were a friend.*

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"Retired Rear Admiral Aussarenes and wife," said the buzzy whisper in Daniel Leary's left ear. A member of the staff of Williams and Son, Undertakers, sat in the back of a discrete van parked across from the Stanislas Chapel. She checked everyone in the receiving line against a database and passing along the information over a radio link. "*He commanded the Bourgiba when your uncle was its third lieutenant.*"

*Not its third lieutenant*, Daniel corrected mentally. Her *third lieutenant*. A ship was female, even when she was a cranky heavy cruiser with a penchant for blowing her High Drive motors--as Daniel remembered well from the stories Uncle Stacey and his cronies told in the office of the repair yard while his sister's young son listened agog. Williams and Son specialized in society funerals, but the RCN was a very specialized society.

"Good morning, Admiral Aussarenes," he said aloud. "Uncle Stacey would've been honored to know that you and your good lady have come to pay your respects. May I present you with a ring in remembrance of the occasion?"

He offered the velvet-covered tray. The bezel of each silver ring was a grinning skull surrounded by a banner reading COMMANDER STACEY HARMSWORTH BERGEN, RCN.

Aussarenes took a ring and tried it for size on the little finger of his left hand. He walked stiffly, apparently as the result of back trouble. "I don't need a ring to remember Lt. Bergen," he said in a rasping, belligerent voice. "A damned troublesome officer, I don't mind telling you. Apt as not to be up on a mast truck when he was supposed to be on the bridge!"

"Darling," his wife muttered in the tone of exasperated familiarity. "*Not here.*"

"Well, he was!" the admiral snapped. He looked up and met Daniel's eyes. "But he was the best astrogator I ever knew. When Bergen conned us, even the *Bitchgiba* could show her legs to a well-manned battleship if the course was long enough."

"Thank you, Admiral," Daniel said with a broad smile. "My uncle knew his limitations, but he appreciated praise when he was due it."

"Aye," said Aussarenes as Lady Aussarenes surreptitiously tugged his arm. "I hear you learned astrogation from him, boy. That's well and good, but mind that you stand your watches too!"

They passed into the chapel. Daniel continued to smile as he offered thanks and a remembrance ring to the next person in the receiving line, a man whose firm supplied antennas and yards to Bergen and Company. Perhaps a smile wasn't the proper expression for a funeral, but it was more natural to Daniel's ruddy face than a solemn frown.

Besides, the turn-out for the event was remarkable both for the number and the rank of the attendees. Commander Stacey Bergen was the greatest pathfinder and explorer in Cinnabar history. He hadn't gotten the recognition he deserved during his life, but the splendor of his funeral made up for that--at least for his nephew.

"Senator Pakenham and her husband, Lord William Pakenham," Daniel's earpiece whispered. Daniel wouldn't have recognized the hatchet-faced woman with a rotund, very subdued man in tow, but he recognized her name as that of the chair of the Senate's committee on external relations. Pakenham wouldn't have known Uncle Stacey

from Noah's bosun, but she was here paying her respects in company with quite a number of the Republic's other top political figures--because they wanted to please Corder Leary.

Speaker Leary hadn't attended the funeral of a man he'd always treated as a poor relation--which Uncle Stacey was, truthfully enough, for all that their partnership Bergen and Associates ran at a profit. Perhaps he was avoiding the awkwardness of meeting the son who hadn't spoken to him in the seven years since their violent argument ended with Daniel enlisting as a midshipman in the RCN. Nevertheless he'd used his influence to add luster to the funeral of the brother-in-law he'd despised in life; and for that Daniel would thank him if they chanced ever to meet again.

"*Captain-of-Space Oliver Semmes*," said the undertaker's man over the radio link. "*Naval aide to Legislator Jarre's delegation*."

For a moment Daniel's mind failed to grasp the implications of the unfamiliar rank and the green-and-gold uniform of the trim little man bowing to him. His first thought was: *Some wealthy landowner wearing the comic-opera uniform of the company of fencibles he commanded by virtue of his rank in his borough.*

No, not comic at all: this was the dress uniform of the Fleet of the Alliance of Free Stars. Daniel didn't know his enemies' honors well enough to identify most of the medals on Semmes' tunic, but he recognized the lavalier dangling from a white and silver ribbon as the Cross of Freedom, which was neither a trivial award nor a political one.

"Captain Semmes, it's a pleasure to see a distinguished member of your service," Daniel said. "Commander Bergen would have been deeply cognizant of the honor."

He cleared his throat while his mind groped for the correct words. It wasn't a situation he'd envisaged dealing with. Uncle Stacey had indeed viewed all Mankind as a single family striving together to rediscover and populate the universe... but that wasn't the official position of the RCN, nor the personal opinion of Lt. Daniel Leary; and it *certainly* wasn't the viewpoint of Guarantor Porra, who ruled the so-called Alliance of Free Stars with an iron fist and a security apparatus of legendary brutality.

"Ah... may I offer you a ring in remembrance of Commander Bergen?"

Semmes picked up a ring between thumb and forefinger, moving with the precise delicacy of an automaton. "I was privileged to meet your uncle once, Lieutenant," he said, cocking his head sideways to see how Daniel took the revelation. "On Alicia that was. My brother and I were aides to Frigate-Captain Lorenz, and Commander Bergen was surveying routes from Cinnabar to the Commonwealth."

"Ah!" said Daniel. Lorenz was a man whose reputation had spread well beyond the Alliance, a swashbuckling officer as renowned for feats of exploration as he was notorious for greed and utter amorality whenever he wasn't under the direct eye of his superiors. "Yes, that would have been almost thirty standard years ago, would it not?"

"Twenty-seven," Semmes agreed with a nod, fitting the ring he'd chosen onto his finger and holding it out to examine it critically. "We were most impressed by Commander Bergen's skill--as an astrogator."

He met Daniel's eyes squarely. "He was not a fighting officer, though, was he?" Semmes went on. Daniel might have been imagining the sneer beneath the bland assessment. "Your uncle?"

Daniel nodded crisply. "No sir, my uncle was *not* much of a fighter," he said. "Fortunately, the RCN has never lacked for officers to supply that particular deficiency."

He gestured the Alliance officer on into the chapel; not quite a dismissal, but an unmistakable hint. "Perhaps we'll meet again, Captain Semmes," he added.

"He's the sort who'd try to swim off with fifty feet of log chain back in Bantry," Hogg muttered into Daniel's ear from behind. "Thinking about it, something along those lines might happen right here in Xenos, young master. Eh?"

The voice from Williams and Son was identifying the next man in line as the recording secretary to the Senate committee on finance--quite an important fellow as Daniel well knew. Daniel had other business that was more important yet.

"Hogg," he said, turning to fix his servant with a baleful eye, "there'll be none of that, even in jest! An officer of the RCN cannot--and I will not--have a servant who acts like a street thug!"

"Begging your pardon, master," said Hogg. He sounded at least vaguely contrite, for all that he met Daniel's glare with level eyes. "It shan't happen again, I'm sure. I was a might put out by the fellow's disrespect for Master Stacey, is all."

Daniel nodded, forced up the corner of his lips in a smile, and returned to the receiving line. "A pleasure to see you, Major Hattersly," he said. The recording secretary had a commission in the Trained Bands. "May I offer you a ring in remembrance of Commander Bergen?"

The trouble in dealing with Hogg was that he wasn't so much of a servant as the tough older brother who'd raised Daniel in the country while Corder Leary busied himself with money and politics in Xenos. Daniel had a countryman's instinctive love for Bantry, the family estate. Money was useful only to spend, generally on friends, and as for politics--well, young Daniel had spent days watching the colony of rock covies on the banks of Tule Creek. So far as he was concerned, they were not only far more interesting than his father's associates, they were on average a good deal smarter.

Corder Leary didn't think often about his son. Deirdre, the elder of his two children, was stamped from the mold of her father and absorbed his tutelage with a flair of her own. Daniel's mother was a saint--everybody agreed that, even her husband, which was perhaps the reason he only saw her on the few times a year when he was in Bantry for other business. But a saint doesn't have the temperament or the skills to handle a very active, very *male*, child... and Hogg had both in abundance.

Mistress Leary would've been horrified to learn not only what Hogg had taught the boy but even more by the way Hogg disciplined him. She never did learn, however, because one of the things Daniel learned from Hogg was how to be a man and not go blubbering to his mommy when he got clouted for doing something stupid.

Daniel didn't want to face the task of covering for a retainer who'd misguidedly scragged a high representative of a power with whom Cinnabar was for the moment at peace. He'd deal with the situation if it arose, though, because he was a Leary and understood his duties to his retainers... another thing he'd learned from Hogg.

Besides, Daniel hadn't been any happier than Hogg was to hear the implied sneer at Uncle Daniel's lack of credentials as a warrior. Particularly since the gibe was justified.

"*Admiral and Lady Anston*," said Daniel's earpiece. "*He's head of the Navy Board, but he has no connection with Commander Bergen that I can find.*"

*Great God almighty!* Daniel thought. He had a momentary fear that he'd blurted that aloud in the face of the head of the RCN--though Anston had heard worse and said worse in his time, there was no doubt about that.

He'd been a fighting admiral and a lucky admiral; the two in combination had made him extremely wealthy. Instead of retiring to spend the rest of his life indulging whatever whim struck his fancy--porcelain, politics, or pubescent girls--Anston had for the past eighteen years turned his very considerable talents to the organization and preservation of the Republic of Cinnabar Navy.

As head of the Navy Board he kept the RCN out of politics and kept politicians of every stripe out of the RCN. Everybody knew that naval contracts were awarded to the suppliers who best benefited the RCN and that ships and commands were allocated according to the needs and resources of the Republic--as determined by the head of Navy Board.

Anston was a florid man in his mid sixties. He ate and drank with the same enthusiasm he had fifty years earlier when he was a midshipman running up and down the rigging of his training battleship. Some day he'd die. That would be a worse blow to the RCN and the Republic than anything the Alliance had managed in the past century of off-and-on warfare.

But Anston was alive now, the most important man in the RCN and one of the most important in all Cinnabar; and he'd come to Commander Bergen's funeral.

"Good morning, Admiral Anston," Daniel said. An analytical part of his mind watched the proceedings dispassionately. It noted that Daniel's voice was pleasant and well modulated, and it marvelled at the fact. "Uncle Stacey is greatly honored to see you here."

"Is he?" said Anston, grinning grimly at Daniel--one spacer talking to another. "Well, I wouldn't know about that, boy; I leave those questions to the priests. I do know that I used the route Lt. Bergen charted through the Straw Pile to reach the fullerene convoy from the Webster Stars before it met its Alliance escort. The profits paid the RCN's budget for a year and didn't do me personally so badly either, eh, Maggie?"

He beamed at his wife, as near a double to him as their different sexes would allow. Her pants suit was covered with lace and ruffles--but all of them black, so from any distance she was merely a pudgy older woman instead of the clown she'd have looked in contrasting colors. "Josh, don't call me Maggie in public!" she said in a furious whisper.

Anston clapped her on the buttock. Lady Anston affected not to notice, but the admiral's aide--a lieutenant commander of aristocratic bearing--wincd in social agony.

"What was Semmes saying to you?" the admiral demanded in a lowered voice. "He came calling at my office--for courtesy, he said. I was out and I'll damned well be out any other time he comes by!"

"Nothing that matters, your lordship," Daniel said. Behind him, Hogg grunted agreement with the admiral's comments. "He met Uncle Stacey on Alicia, when the Alliance expedition under Lorenz arrived just after the government had signed a treaty of friendship with the Republic."

"I guess he wouldn't forget that," Anston said with an approving guffaw. "They had no idea we were operating within ten days Transit of there--and we wouldn't have been except for your uncle's nose for a route where nobody else could see one."

"Josh, we're holding up the line," Lady Anston said, glaring at Daniel as though he and her husband were co-conspirators in a plot to embarrass her.

"Well, Commander Bergen isn't complaining, is he?" the admiral said in a testy

voice. Then to Daniel he continued, "Listen, Lieutenant. The Senate doesn't want a war with the Alliance so it pretends there won't be one. I don't want a war either, but I know sure as the sun rises that war's coming. Coming whenever Guarantor Porra decides it's in his interest, and that won't be long. You needn't worry about being put on half pay--you're the sort of young officer the RCN needs even in peacetime. And when it's war, you'll have a command that'll raise you up or use you up, depending on the sort of grit you show. On my oath!"

The admiral passed on into the church, guided to the front by one of the corps of ushers provided by Willams and Son. The rhythms of his wife's harangue were intelligible even though the words themselves were not.

"*A navy warrant officer*," said the undertaker's prompter. Then, testily, "*She should have been directed to the gallery via the back stairs!*"

"Hello, Adele," Daniel said, gripping Mundy's right hand with his and clasping his left over it. "By God, I'm glad you could see this! They've turned out for Uncle Stacey, by *God* they have! He'd be so proud to see this!"

Adele nodded with her usual neutral expression. Tovera, as pale as something poisonous from under a rock, stood just behind and to the side of her mistress. Daniel had a fleeting vision of the scene when an undertaker's functionary tried to shunt Adele to the gallery as a person of no account; he grinned broadly.

"Daniel," Adele said, "Lt. Mon's back with the *Princess Cecile* and seems in a desperate rush to see you. He'll be here for the service as soon as he changes into his dress uniform."

"Ah?" Daniel said, letting his left hand drop to his side. He met Adele's gaze calmly. She didn't show emotion as a general rule, but they were good enough friends that he could see when the emotion was present regardless. "I'll be glad to see him, of course--but what's wrong?"

Adele cleared her throat. "He says the *Sissie* is to be sold as excess to RCN requirements," she said. "I gather it will happen very soon. In a matter of days."

"Ah," Daniel said, nodding his understanding. "They must have a buyer, then. I regret the matter, though of course I understand the advantages to the Republic."

"Of course," Adele agreed. "I'll see you after the service, then. Back at the house, I suppose?"

Daniel nodded, though he wasn't really listening. All he could think of for the moment was the light of the firmament blazing about him as he stood on the deck of his first command--the RCS *Princess Cecile*.

"Come along, mistress," Hogg said. "I'll sit you down in front."

"I *hardly* think--" said the chief usher, a severe figure imbued with a mincing, sexless aura of disapproval.

"That's right, boyo," Hogg snapped, "you hardly do. Put a sock in it while I take the master's friend down t' the best seat in the house!"

Hogg and Mundy disappeared into the nave of the chapel; the chief usher fulminated at an underling.

"Good morning, Captain Churchill," Daniel said to the next in line, an old man wobbling in the grip of a worried younger relative. Churchill had been a midshipman with Uncle Stacey.

*The fabric of the universe distorting around the gleaming prow of the Princess*

Cecile, *under the command of Lt. Daniel Leary....*

## CHAPTER 2

Between wheezes for breath, the undertaker snarled at the troupe of actors wearing death masks of Stacey Bergen's famous ancestors in the rear yard of the chapel. Adele considered taking out her data unit to determine whether the large, elderly man--tall but definitely overweight besides--was Master Williams proper or the Son. The urge was wholly irrational so she suppressed it, but it would've taken her mind off the past and the future; and off death, at least for the moment, which is what it seemed to Adele that the past and future always came down to.

She smiled. She knew other people viewed life differently, though she'd always suspected that they hadn't analyzed the subject as rigorously as she had.

The undertaker had finally sorted the actors to his satisfaction. The clowns in the initial group started off down the boulevard singing, "*Stacey came from the land where they understand...*"

The females wore caricatures of RCN uniforms and the males were in grotesque drag. Mind, some of the prostitutes Adele had seen plying their trade successfully outside Harbor Three were scarcely less unattractive. The RCN had high standards in many respects, but she'd come to the conclusion it was any port in a storm when it came to sexual relief after a long voyage.

"... *what it means to fornicate!*" sang the clowns to the music of the flutes some of their members played.

The actor playing Commander Bergen was next in the procession, walking ahead of the discretely motorized bier which a member of the undertaker's staff guided. Torchbearers, statuesque women in flowing garments, flanked him.

Adele had listened without comment to the discussions Daniel and the widow held as to what age the actor was to portray his uncle. They'd finally decided on the man in his prime forty years ago when he'd just returned from the first of his long exploring voyages in the *Beacon*. The actor wore mottled gray fatigues with senior lieutenant's pips on his collar; and he walked with a slight limp, miming the result of a fall on a heavy-gravity planet and the spinal injuries which eventually left Stacey confined to a wheelchair.

"*Where even the dead sleep two in a bed...*," sang the clowns. The masked 'ancestors' followed them out of the courtyard in pairs, moving at a stately walk while the clowns capered and mugged for the spectators lining both sides of the street to the crematorium. A funeral of this size was not only entertainment for the poor, it was news for all Xenos.

The Bergens were an old but not particularly distinguished house; Stacey, who had retired from the RCN as a commander, was typical of his family. Today his lineage had been improved by leading military and political figures of the past. The families involved would never have lent the death masks without pressure that could only have come from Corder Leary.

Adele'd never met Daniel's father and hoped never to meet him; that would save her the decision as to whether or not to shoot the man responsible for her parents' death. But no one had ever accused Speaker Leary of doing things halfway.

"... *and the babies masturbate!*" sang the clowns.

"Mistress Mundy?" murmured a voice in her ear; one of the undertaker's functionaries. "Come, please. The living family is next."

Adele followed the little man through the crowd gathered inside the courtyard gate. He was polite as befit anyone dealing with people of the rank of those waiting, but he squeezed a passage for her with the authority of a much bigger fellow indeed.

"You and Mistress Leary will follow Lt. Leary with the widow," the fellow said, depositing Adele, frowning in doubt, beside Deirdre Leary. Daniel's elder sister wore a tailored black suit of natural fabrics. The rosette on her beret was cream-and-rose, the Bergen colors.

"Ah, Deirdre," Adele said. "Yes, of course you'd be here."

Deirdre Leary had requested when she met Adele that they deal with one another by first names. Referring to their relationship as informal would've been stretching the word beyond its proper meaning, though. Adele respected the other woman, but she felt the two of them had as little in common as they did with the chlorine-breathing race of Charax IV. She presumed that Deirdre reciprocated her feelings.

Adele was irritated with herself for not having expected Daniel's sister to be at the funeral. Speaker Leary's two children were, after all, the deceased's closest relatives by blood. And for that matter, Adele had almost nothing in common with Daniel either--on paper.

The last of the actors passed through the gate. The undertaker spoke to Daniel, making shooing motions with rather less ceremony than Adele thought was due the man who was paying for this affair. Supporting the widow, a countrywoman who'd cooked and kept house for the retired commander and who had never said a word in Adele's hearing, Daniel stepped into the street.

Adele's eyes narrowed. How much *was* this costing, anyway? She had a scholar's disregard for money, but Daniel's attitude was more that of a drunken spacer... which of course he was, often enough. Lt. Leary'd been a lucky commander, but even the captain's share of prize money didn't overwhelm the needs of a 23-year-old officer who demonstrated the same enthusiasm for living as he did for taking his command into the heart of the enemy's fire.

The undertaker turned to Adele and her companion. His mouth, open to snap a brusque order, closed abruptly. He bowed low to Deirdre.

Adele started forward, matching her pace to Daniel and the widow. It struck her for the first time that the bill--or at least the whole bill, knowing both that Daniel was stiff-necked and that he had very little conception of what things really cost--might not be going to the nephew after all. She looked at Deirdre but said nothing; there was really nothing to say, after all.

The crowd in the street had a carnival atmosphere quite beyond the traditional life-affirming bawdy of the clowns in the lead. Adele heard spectators identifying members of the procession, herself included, to their children and companions. She couldn't imagine how they were able to do that until she heard a hawker in the near distance call, "Get your programs! Every famous personage, living or departed, listed here with their biographies!"

Deirdre glanced over with a dry smile. "Surprised?" she asked.

"Gratified, rather," Adele said. "I don't think there's anything that could have

made Daniel happier. Since he got his first command, at any rate. You arranged it, I presume?"

"I was acting on instructions," said Deirdre. "My principal will be pleased that you think matters are going well."

Deirdre's principal would be her father--and Daniel's.

The three-block avenue from the Stanislas Chapel to the crematorium was through public land which had been a floodplain before the Market River was first channelized, then covered. On a normal day there'd have been people doing outdoor gymnastics and running on the tracks around both halves of the property. A maze of kiosks on the north side catered to shoppers of all varieties. The booths were dismantled every dusk, leaving commercial activities to prostitutes of both sexes. Since Harbor Three lay just the other side of the perimeter fence, trade in the hours of darkness was also brisk.

This morning everybody in sight had come to watch the funeral procession. She smiled wryly. Turning to Deirdre she said, talking over the crowd noise, "Commander Bergen actually deserves this pomp for having opened so many trade routes for the Republic... but his actions aren't the reason this is happening, are they?"

Deirdre shrugged. She was dark-haired and reasonably attractive in business clothing. If she'd put the effort into her looks that most women seemed to, she could look stunning. Adele doubted that Daniel's sister felt any need to bother. Money and power would bring her any men she wanted, and the likelihood was that Deirdre shared with her brother a complete disinterest in what the partner of a night chose to do the next morning.

Adele couldn't object. She herself wasn't interested in a partner at all.

"It depends what you mean by 'his actions'," Deirdre said, meeting Adele's eyes with a level gaze. "The fact that he was a good friend and teacher to Corder Leary's son certainly has something to do with it."

"Yes, I see," Adele said, nodding crisply.

"But since we're on the subject of business...", Deirdre said. "Do you know what my brother intends to do as heir to Commander Bergen's share of the shipyard? The Republic's present state of peace with her neighbors will limit the opportunities open to a young naval officer, I should think?"

Adele faced front, her expression cold. Her first reaction was shocked amazement; then the humor of it struck her and she chuckled aloud. They *had* been talking business, as Deirdre viewed the world, after all.

Everything could be refined down to business if you looked at it the right way. The cost of the most elaborate funeral in a decade was on one side of the ledger; Adele didn't know, couldn't *guess*, what Deirdre put in the other pan of the balance, but she knew there had to be something.

"I haven't discussed the future with Daniel," she said, wondering if the other woman would find her smile insulting. It wasn't meant to be; not entirely, at least. "He's been quite busy with funeral preparations, of course. Based on what he's said to me in the past, I don't imagine that he's interested in becoming a Cinnabar businessman, however."

In all truth, Adele couldn't imagine her friend as anything except an RCN officer. Perhaps she was unduly influenced by the fact she'd only known Daniel for a year in which naval duties had absorbed him... but the uniform fit him perfectly. If anyone could be said to belong to the Republic of Cinnabar Navy in war or peace, it was Lt. Daniel

Leary.

Her smile quirked wryly. Perhaps the same was true of Adele Mundy, who'd found a family which respected her talents and which was willing to use her just as hard as it used her friend Daniel.

"A shipyard can't simply be left to the workmen to run," Deirdre said. Her voice was thinner than it had been a moment before. Nobody likes to have her nose rubbed in the fact that someone else sees no value in what she holds dear; for all that Deirdre must have known before she raised the subject that Adele had no more interest in business than Daniel did. "Unless there's a suitable manager in place very shortly, the silent partner will demand that Bergen and Associates be sold up. I can understand my brother having other priorities--"

She probably couldn't understand, any more than Daniel could have understood Deirdre's preoccupation with wealth and political power; but it was the polite thing to say.

"--but he's trustee for Uncle Stacey's widow during her life. That will surely affect his decision?"

The crematorium was a low, cast-concrete building, modeled on a pre-Hiatus temple; there were Corinthian pilasters across the front. The actor dressed as the deceased took his place to one side of the square bronze door flanked by the torch bearers, while the attendant locked the bier against the opening.

The coffin was closed; the last six months had ravaged Stacey beyond what his nephew was willing to display to the world. A touch of a button would roll it through the door into the gas flames.

The clowns had split to either side of the crematorium and waited behind it, still wearing their costumes but talking among themselves in low voices. Their parts were played, but their dressing rooms were trailers behind the chapel, inaccessible until the crowd dispersed.

The troupe of ancestors seated themselves on the triple semicircle of folding chairs, each with a pole holding a card with the name of the character the actor represented. An usher guided Daniel and the widowed Mistress Bergen to their place on the left behind the actors; another usher gestured Adele to Deirdre to the right.

Adele looked across the lines of age-blackened death masks to Daniel Leary, who beamed with pride and the joy of life. Beside and behind her, ushers were arraying the other mourners--admirals and cabinet ministers and merchant princes.

She looked at her companion. "Deirdre," she said, "your brother will fulfill his duties to the widow in the fashion that seems best to him. I can't guess what that will be; I'm not Daniel. But--"

She felt herself stiffen to even greater rigidity than usual, and her voice honed itself to a sharp edge.

"--I would be very surprised if it crossed his mind that he should take up the partnership that his father used to degrade Uncle Stacey. And if Daniel did consider that, I would be merely one of his many friends to tell him that the notion was absurd. Am I sufficiently clear?"

Music, an instrumental version of a martial hymn, boomed from speakers beneath the front corners of the crematorium. The coffin began to rumble forward.

"Perfectly clear," Deirdre said. "I'll report your thoughts to my principal."

The bronze door sprang upward and shut behind the coffin; an instant later, Adele felt the throb of the concealed gas flames. Deirdre leaned closer to continue in Adele's ear, "For what it's worth... Speaker Leary doesn't respect very many people. I believe that he'll be more pleased than not that his son is one of those few."

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Attendants had opened side gates so that spectators could disperse through the park as well as going up the avenue to the chapel the way they'd come. Daniel took off his saucer hat and mopped his face and brow with a handkerchief. He could barely see for sweat and the emotions that'd been surging through him during the morning.

"It went well, Uncle Stacey," he muttered under his breath. By God it had! All Cinnabar had turned out to cheer the Republic's greatest explorer off on his final voyage.

Maryam Bergen had left on the arm of Bergen and Associates' shop foreman, an old shipmate of her husband's and, not coincidentally, her brother. A mere workman couldn't be part of the official mourning, of course, but the foreman and most of the other yard employees had been given places just outside the fence where they had an unrivaled view.

"Here you go, master," Hogg muttered, offering Daniel a silver half-pint flask. He'd already unscrewed the jigger measure that covered the stopper. He eyed the dispersing crowd, wearing an expression of the same satisfaction that Daniel felt.

"What is it?" Daniel said as he plucked out the cork.

"It's wet and you need it," Hogg said. "Just drink."

Not precisely what a gentleman's gentleman would have said, but Daniel was a *country* gentleman which was a very different thing from the citified version. He took a swig of what might have been cherry brandy and certainly was strong enough to fuel an engine.

The actors playing Stacey's ancestors had joined the clowns behind the crematorium. They'd handed the deathmasks to footmen from the families which'd provided them and were removing their costumes; attendants folded the chairs on which they'd been sitting.

The man who'd impersonated Stacey was talking to the undertaker. He was the contractor as well as the principal performer, for the undertaker handed him a purse. He weighed it in his hand and bowed.

Adele stood alone just beyond the ranks of chairs. When she caught Daniel's eye she nodded, turned, and walked away. Tovera, who must've been watching from the other side of the fence during the ceremony, trailed her mistress closely.

Daniel smiled in appreciation. Adele wouldn't intrude, but she hadn't wanted to leave without saying goodbye.

"Lt. Leary?" said a voice at his elbow. Daniel turned abruptly and found the principal actor beside him. "My name is Shackleford, Enzo Shackleford. I trust our performance was to your taste?"

It was disconcerting to see the fellow still in uniform but without the mask and wig, for his wild white hair was utterly unlike anything a spacer would wear. In a cramped, weightless vessel, such strands would've drifted in all directions.

Daniel swallowed the swig of brandy that'd been in his mouth when the man startled him. Part of it went down the wrong pipe; he sprayed it onto the sleeve of his Dress Whites that he got over his mouth and nose in time.

Hogg muttered and snatched the kerchief from Daniel's cuff to mop at the liquor. It would've made better sense to sneeze on the actor's utility uniform....

Shackleford pretended his attention was fastened on matters of supernal interest on the horizon. "A most gratifying house, if I may say so, Lieutenant. A turn-out that would've done honor to the most respected admiral or statesman. I was pleased to be in charge of the performance."

"Your pardon, Master Shackleford," Daniel managed through spasms; the strong brandy burned like spattering thermite on the soft inner tissues of his nose. "Yes, yes, you did splendidly."

"I like to think that the Enzio Shackleford Company gives value far above our small additional increment of cost compared to just *any* self-styled thespians," Shackleford said with an airy gesture of his hand to indicate they both were true aristocrats. "Allow me to provide you with my card, sir."

He did so with a flourish that suggested he performed card tricks when nothing more lucrative offered itself.

"You may have occasion at any moment to require similar services," Shackleford continued. "How well it has been said, 'We know not the day and hour of our passing.' In your moment of grief, sir, do not fail to call on the first name in posthumous impersonations--the Enzio Shackleford Company!"

Daniel frowned, trying to imagine who else might die for whom he'd be responsible. Adele, perhaps? Though she was at no obvious risk unless catastrophe struck the *Princess Cecile*, in which case the vessel's commander was unlikely to be in a position to arrange the funeral.

Thought of the *Princess Cecile* lowered a gray curtain over Daniel's mind; he took a long, deliberate drink from the flask, drawing its contents far down. He'd been tense throughout the day, afraid that some mistake would turn the proceedings into a farce. He'd felt no sadness, though; this had been a celebration of Stacey's life and--as it turned out--a triumph. The flesh, frail even in life, was now ash; but the name of Commander Stacey Bergen was on the lips of everyone in Xenos.

Uncle Stacey's glorious send-off was past, and now present reality was intruding on the euphoria of the afternoon. Daniel had Admiral Anston's word that the Admiralty would find him a command; that counted for more than a signed and sealed commission from anybody else. The thought of the *Sissie* being gutted and turned into an intra-system tramp, though--that was troubling.

Gutted--or simply bought by a breaker's yard for her masts, electronics and drives. Though the boom in trade that came with peace should give all spaceworthy hulls enough value to spare the *Sissie* that final indignity for a few years further.

Daniel took another drink. When he lowered the flask empty, he saw Lt. Mon coming toward him against the grain of the departing crowd.

In general terms he was glad to see Mon, who'd been as satisfactory a first lieutenant as Daniel could imagine serving under him: competent, careful, and brave--though that went almost without saying in an RCN officer. No few of those who wore the uniform were pig stupid, but cowards were as rare as saints. Besides those professional virtues, Mon was loyal to Daniel beyond what could be expected of a human being.

On the other hand, if Mon was coming to moan about having to feed his large family on half-pay when the *Sissie* went out of commission, well--Daniel would

sympathize, but at another time. For now his grief was for the corvette herself.

"Sir!" Mon said, clasping Daniel's hand. "Thank God you're on Cinnabar. I had nightmares of you being off on an embassy to Kostroma or the Devil only knew where!"

Mon's dress uniform fit poorly--he'd lost weight since he last wore it, which might have five or more years in the past--and he hadn't taken time to update his medal ribbons. Daniel let a smile of satisfaction touch his lips: the citations Mon had won in the brief time he'd served under Lt. Leary would have made the cabbage patch on his tunic much more impressive.

Quite apart from the fit of his uniform, Mon looked dreadful. At the end of the brutal run to Sexburga, 17 days in the Matrix without a break, everybody aboard the *Princess Cecile* looked like they'd been dragged through a drainpipe... and even then, Mon had been in better shape than Daniel saw him now.

"I'm here, right enough," Daniel said with a note of deliberate caution, "but as you can imagine, Mon, I have a good deal on my plate right at the moment. Perhaps later...?"

"Sir," Mon said. His face screwed up in despair and frustration. "*Daniel*, for God's sake. I need help and I don't know where else to turn!"

"Ah," said Daniel, nodding in understanding. "Well, I hope I always have a few florins for an old shipmate."

He reached for the wallet that'd be attached to the equipment belt of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Class uniform he usually wore on the ground. His Whites used a cummerbund rather than a belt and had no provision for carrying money or anything else of practical value.

"Hogg?" he said, trying to hide his irritation in forgetting the situation. "Do you have ten--that is, twenty florins you can let me have until I'm back in my rooms?"

"Sir, it's not *money*...," Mon said. He straightened and looked around, suddenly a man again and an RCN officer. "Look, can we go somewhere and talk? This is...."

He shrugged; Daniel nodded agreement. Standing in the open among attendants sweeping up the debris of a funeral simply wasn't the way to discuss anything except the weather.

"Right," Daniel said. "The last time I looked there were bars just down the street. We'll find a booth and see how I can help you."

He gave Mon his arm and they started up the avenue, by now almost empty of mourners. Though there was no lack of bars this close to Harbor Three, they weren't the sort of places that an officer usually entered wearing his dress uniform.

Still, if Daniel kept his intake to only a few drinks--or anyway, a moderate amount--then he shouldn't have to replace his Whites because they were dirty; or they were bloody; or they'd been torn completely off his back in a brawl that'd started the Lord knew how. And if he did have to replace his uniform, well, an officer of the RCN was always ready to make sacrifices for his fellows.

### CHAPTER 3

Buelow's, only three doors down from the Stanislas Chapel, catered to warrant officers looking for a place to have a drink rather than common spacers intending to get falling-down drunk as quickly and cheaply as possible. Daniel eased himself into a booth, realizing as he did so that it was the first time since dawn that he'd taken the weight off his feet.

The three-dimensional photographs on the walls were of landscapes rather than sexual acrobatics. Daniel couldn't identify any of the scenes, but the three-legged creature clinging to the face of a basalt cliff certainly wasn't native to Cinnabar. The dark, pitted wood of the bar came from off-planet also; Daniel noted with interest that its vascular tissue seemed to curl in helices around the bole, rising and sinking through the slab's planed surface like sections of a dolphin's track.

Hogg seated himself beside the cash register where he would unobtrusively take care of the charges; a woman in uniform, an engineer by her collar flashes, was drinking a boilermaker at the end of the bar. Other than them and the tapster who walked over to the booth, Daniel and Mon had the tavern to themselves.

Daniel glanced at the tapster and said, "So, Mon? I believe yours is whiskey and water?"

"No, no, Leary," Mon said, shaking his head violently. "Thanks, I mean, but I've sworn off for, for the time. I'll have--"

He looked at the solid, balding bartender and grimaced. "A shandy, I suppose," he said. "Yes, a shandy."

"And for me as well, sir," Daniel said brightly, wondering if Mon had gone out of his mind. Aloud he continued, "Well, Mon. What d'ye need to see me about?"

Mon set his hands firmly on the table with his palms down and the fingers spread, stared at them as he organized his thoughts, and then lifted his weary eyes to Daniel. "Look sir, it's like this," he said. "While the *Sissie* was rebuilding on Tanais, we got a message through the High Commissioner to the Strymon system that we were to bring her home to Harbor One for disposal. I guess you'd heard that?"

"Yes," Daniel said, "I had."

He didn't add that he'd heard it from Adele less than two hours ago. Strictly speaking nobody'd been required to tell him, since he'd turned over command of the *Princess Cecile* to his first lieutenant while she was in dock.

The fact that he hadn't heard a whisper about the sale out of service of the corvette he'd captured and commanded in actions that thrilled all Cinnabar, let alone the RCN, had to have been conscious concealment rather than mere oversight. Anston, or more likely the captain heading the Board of Materiel, must have thought that the famous Lt. Leary could raise enough of a public outcry to reverse the Board's reasoned decision.

And so he could've done; but he wouldn't have. The needs of the service came first with Daniel Leary, as they should do with every officer of the RCN.

"Well, you can imagine I wasn't happy about that," Mon said, stating the facts baldly as though the situation had no emotional weight for Daniel. "But then a couple nobles from Novy Sverdlovsk arrived with a letter of introduction from the High Commissioner. Count Klimov and wife Valentina, their names were, and they wanted passage to Cinnabar."

He shrugged. "No problem there, of course," he went on. "We weren't on a fighting cruise, and you'd drafted forty crewmen to the Strymon dispatch vessel you sailed home on. It was just a matter of the passengers providing a share of rations to the officer's mess--and I don't mind telling you, captain, that I've never had better rations anywhere in my life, on shipboard or land. They've got more money than God, the Klimovs do."

The tapster returned with the shandies, thumping them down on the table. "Thank

you, sir!" Daniel said, but the fellow turned with only a grunt and walked back behind the bar.

Daniel eyed the muddy brown fluid in his glass, a mixture of draft beer and ginger ale or whatever else the bar kept for a mixer. The tapster looked as though he were disgusted to've served something so debased. Daniel didn't blame him.

"Well, it turned out that the Count and his wife were coming to Cinnabar to hire a ship so they could tour the Galactic North," Mon said, raising his glass. "Rather than use a Novy Sverdlovsk crew and vessel, they wanted the best. Besides, they knew Cinnabar'd opened the shortest routes to the North. Your Uncle Stacey had."

He drank, made a sour face, and set the shandy down again. He started to speak but paused to wipe his lips with the back of his left hand.

"Touring the North?" Daniel said, pursing his lips in concentration as he stared at his glass. "You mean, visiting the Commonwealth of God? I suppose people from Novy Sverdlovsk might find it interesting, though I recall one of Stacey's old shipmates saying he'd seen pig sties he thought were prettier than Radiance, and the rest of the Commonwealth wasn't up to that standard."

"I don't think they care much about the capital," Mon said, rolling his palms upward. "The Count says he wants to do some hunting, and his wife studies people that never got back into space after the Hiatus. The relict societies, she calls them. You know, wogs with bones through their noses who'll cut out your heart and eat it because the Great God Goo tells them to. It's her life, I guess."

"Scholars, then," Daniel said. "I don't think the Commonwealth controls a tenth of the worlds that'd been settled in the North before the Hiatus, and 'control' is stretching it to describe the government anyway. The planets pretty much run their own business, and the Commonwealth fleet supports itself by extortion when it isn't straight piracy."

By a combination of treaty and threat the ships of Cinnabar and her allies were exempt from the abuses, at least in cases where there might be survivors to bring back word of what had happened. But all vessels trading into the Galactic North went armed, even though guns and missiles reduced their cargo capacity.

"Yeah, well, it's still a damned fool way to waste time and money," Mon said. "But they've got money, the Lord knows they have. And that's the rub, Leary. When they learned the *Sissie*'d be going on the block, they decided to buy her themselves for their tour. And they want me to captain her, at a lieutenant commander's salary!"

"Why Mon, that's wonderful news!" Daniel said, rising in his seat to reach over the table and grasp Mon's shoulder. "And they couldn't have a better man and ship for the job! Why, good God, man, you had me thinking there was something wrong!"

If the Klimovs could afford to crew the corvette, she was an ideal choice for a long voyage into a region which was unexplored where it wasn't actively hostile. The *Princess Cecile* was a fast, handy vessel. Though light for a warship in a major fleet, she was far more powerful than the pirates and Commonwealth naval units (where there was a difference) she'd meet in the North.

Mon would have to resign his commission, but under the circumstances the Admiralty would grant him a waiver so that he could rejoin at some future date at the same rank. All he'd lose was seniority on a day-for-day basis--and his half-pay, just under a quarter of what the Klimovs were offering for his services.

As for the *Sissie*--well, she wouldn't be a warship any longer, but she wouldn't be

a scow running bulk supplies to asteroid miners either. Good news for the ship, good news for her acting captain--and good news for Daniel Leary, two recent weights off his back!

"There *is* something wrong!" Mon said miserably. "Sir, what am I going to do for a crew? With the peace treaty signed, all the trading houses will be hiring spacers. I'll have nothing but drunks and gutter-sweepings--for a voyage to the North, and not to the major ports either."

While Daniel thought over what Mon had just said, he sipped his shandy. Good grief! it was dreadful. He supposed he'd drunk worse... well, realistically, he *knew* he'd drunk worse; but he certainly hadn't been sober while he was doing it.

"Well Mon...", he said, resisting the urge to swab his mouth and tongue with something clean or at any rate different. "I should think based on what the Klimovs offered you, they'd pay something better than going wages for seasoned spacers. In fact, I'd expect most of the *Sissie's* current crew would sign on with you. She was always a happy ship--and lucky in her officers, if I may say so."

A middle-aged man came in with a younger woman, moderately attractive but respectably dressed--a second wife, perhaps, but not a whore. "Hey Bert," the man said to the barman as they headed for the end booth. "The usual for me and Mamie."

"Coming up, Lon," the tapster said as he set a pair of glasses on the bar.

"Luck!" Mon said bitterly into his empty glass. "That's the problem. On the voyage home we had a dozen breakdowns. Mostly the damned High Drive--Pasternak finally figured out that the gauges they'd replaced in Tanais were off, so we were feeding 8% more antimatter to the motors than he thought. We had half the motors go out, eaten through by the excess. Plus two of the masts carried away in the Matrix. We didn't lose a rigger, but we would've if Woetjans hadn't grabbed him without a safety line and then caught a shroud with her free hand."

Woetjans, the bosun, and Pasternak, the engineer--Chief of Rig and Chief of Ship respectively--were both officers who did credit to the RCN. Woetjans in particular, a big raw-boned woman, was worth a squad of almost anybody else when she entered a brawl with a length of high-pressure tubing.

"Well, that's the sort of thing that happens with a major rebuild," Daniel said reasonably. "That's what shakedown cruises are for, after all. Are the Klimovs upset?"

"Them?" Mon said scornfully. "Good God, Leary, they're used to Sverdlovsk ships. They'd be happy enough if the hull didn't split open and *all* the antennas fall off!"

He shook his head, miserable again. "No, no, it's the crew," he said. "They think I'm a hard-luck officer. I heard Barnes say that opening his suit in a vacuum'd be quicker than going to the back of beyond with the *Sissie* now, and the other riggers on his watch agreed. And word'll get around the docks, of course. Hell and damnation, it already has!"

"Ah," said Daniel, understanding completely but unable to think of a useful remark to make. "Ah."

It was quite unfair, of course, but spacers were a superstitious lot. There were ships--well-found according to any assayer--which had reputations as killers; and there were captains who, whatever their technical qualifications, were known as Jonahs. No spacer shipped with either, not if there was a choice; and now, with the merchant fleets hiring, all spacers who could stand more or less upright had a choice.

"God damn all spacers to Hell!" Mon said. "God damn *life* to Hell!"

He turned on his bench and said, "I'll take a whiskey and water. A double, dammit, and keep the bottle out!"

He looked at Daniel and said in a despairing voice, "I know, I don't need my wife to tell me that I put down maybe more than's good for me. But liquor never affected me on duty, you know that sir?"

"I never had a complaint about you, Mon," Daniel said still-faced. He could use a drink himself, but it didn't seem that ordering one was going to make the situation better.

"I thought with everything going wrong, you know...," Mon said, squeezing his face with his spread hands. "That, you know, if I went on the wagon, that the trouble would let up. That God'd take his thumb off me, you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I know," said Daniel. Spacers are superstitious by nature; they're too close to random death on every working day to be otherwise. That was no less true of acting captains than it was of the riggers under their command.

"And the next watch the Port One antenna carried away and took the spars and sails from Two and Three besides," Mon concluded bitterly.

The tapster came with his drink, setting it down on the table and watching Mon sidelong as he walked back behind the bar. Hogg was watching also. Daniel wasn't concerned, but Mon was obviously closer to the edge than Daniel would've wanted on the bridge during action.

"Daniel," Mon said, holding the drink in both hands but not raising it. "Sir. The men will listen to you, you know they will. Will you come to the mustering-out parade tomorrow and talk to them? Sir, I've got *five* brats now, my wife delivered while I was on Tanais. I can't make it on half-pay, I *can't*, and if I have to take a crew of fag-ends to the Galactic North, well--"

He smiled with a wry sort of humor. "Well, then, I'd say Barnes'd be right. I'd do better to open my suit in a vacuum."

"I... will consider our options tonight, Mon," Daniel said, rising deliberately so that it wouldn't look as though he were fleeing his old shipmate; which is what he was doing, near enough. "And I'll be at the mustering-out parade, I promise you. That's ten hundred hours?"

"Aye, ten hundred," Mon said, rising also with a radiant smile and gripping Daniel's hand. "Thank God. Thank *you*, sir. If I can just keep a stiffening of trained men we'll be all right, I swear we will!"

Daniel nodded without amplifying his earlier statement. He needed to be at the pay parade to thank the crew which had followed him to Hell, not once but several times; and who'd brought the *Princess Cecile* and her commander back as well. But as for what he was going to say to them--

He owed Mon the respect due a loyal and competent officer; but he owed a great deal to every soul who'd served on the *Sissie* with him. He wasn't going to tell them to throw their lives away; and despite what he'd said to soothe Mon, the corvette's troubles on the voyage home would convince *anybody* that he was a hard-luck officer. He wasn't a man Daniel would willingly follow to the North, nor one to whom Daniel would pledge his honor to encourage others to follow.

There was a buzzing. Hogg, preparing to leave, reached into his breast pocket for the phone he carried while in Xenos. He listened for a moment, then said to Daniel, "We need to get back to the house, master. *Now*."

They headed for the door together, the servant leading his master by virtue of starting a double step ahead. As they burst back into the sunlight, Hogg added in a low voice, "That was the major domo, sir. Mistress Mundy had some trouble. Bad trouble."

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The tramcar on which Adele and her entourage returned also carried fourteen home-bound office workers, filling it to the legal limit. Adele's footmen--well, the footmen accompanying her and Tovera; the Merchants and Shippers Treasury paid their salaries, though they wore Mundy livery--would've barred the strangers if it had been left to them, but Adele's parents had prided themselves on their concern for the lower orders. Adele, who'd spent most of her life in those lower orders and knew a great deal more about them than her parents had, nonetheless restrained her servants in their memory.

On the other hand, she hadn't felt she needed to allow the car to be loaded *above* the legal limit. At this time of day there'd normally have been forty people per tram; as passenger number twenty boarded at the Pentacrest Circle, Adele's footmen blocked the door and used their ivory batons on the knuckles of anybody trying to pry it open before the car started. Adele preferred to think of that as self-help in enforcing the law rather than a noble trampling on the rights of the people.

She smiled. Though she could live with the other characterization. She'd been trampled on often enough herself.

The car pulled into the siding at the head of her court, rocking slightly on the single overhead rail. No one waited to board on the eastbound platform; the office workers poised expectantly to spread out farther when Adele's party disembarked. They knew how lucky they'd been to have so much room as they rode to their high-rise apartments in the eastern suburbs of Xenos.

As Adele followed her footmen onto the platform, a tram pulled into the westbound siding behind her. She sensed Tovera turning her head, holding her flat attaché case with both hands. A young naval officer in his 2<sup>nd</sup> Class uniform got off, a stranger to her. Probably someone coming to see Daniel, a friend or perhaps a messenger from the Navy Office.

The seven houses on the court were as quiet as usual on a summer evening. Half a dozen men wearing varied livery squatted on the doorstep of the end house on the left side, next to Chatsworth Minor. They rose, pocketing the dice and the money, when they saw Adele arriving home.

One of the group was her doorman; he walked quickly back to his post without looking sideways to acknowledge her presence. Unexpectedly two other men followed him.

"Mistress Mundy?" called the RCN officer behind her. She turned, then halted to let him join them. The footmen were unconcerned, but Tovera's right hand was inside the attaché case she held in the crook of the other arm.

"Yes?" Adele said; not hostile but certainly not welcoming either. She didn't like being accosted by strangers, especially strangers who knew her name. This lieutenant--she could see the rank tabs on his soft gray collar now--was clean-cut and obviously a gentleman before the Republic granted him a commission, but he was still a stranger.

"Your friend Captain Carnolets hopes you'll be able to dine with him tonight at his house in Portsmouth," the lieutenant said, stopping a polite six feet back. That put him just beyond arm's length of Tovera, toward whom he glanced appraisingly. "He

apologizes for the short notice, but he says he's really quite anxious to renew your acquaintance."

*I don't know any Captain Carnolets*, Adele thought. And of course she didn't; but she knew Mistress Sand, who controlled the Republic's foreign intelligence operations with the same unobtrusive efficiency as Admiral Anston displayed within the RCN.

If Adele had needed confirmation, the way the messenger reacted to Tovera provided it. He wasn't afraid of her, exactly; but he was as careful as he'd have been to keep outside the reach of a chained watchdog--and he'd recognized instantly that the colorless 'secretary' *was* a watchdog.

"Yes, all right," Adele said. "But I'll change clothes first."

She turned and motioned the footmen on. Having servants was a constant irritation, complicating even a business as simple as walking down the street. On the other hand, the fact that she'd made the journey home in reasonable comfort instead of being squeezed into less space than steerage on an immigrant ship was an undeniable benefit....

"My name's Wilsing, by the way," said the lieutenant as he fell into step with her. "There's no need to change for the captain, mistress. He was most particular about his wish to see you as soon as possible."

"Which will be as soon as I've changed into civilian clothes, Lt. Wilsing," Adele said, letting her tone suggest the irritation that she felt. The only association her dress uniform had for her was the funeral of a man she'd respected and whom her friend Daniel had loved.

It wasn't Mistress Sand's fault that this funeral had reminded Adele that her own parents and sister had been buried without ceremony in a mass grave--all but their heads, of course, which had probably been thrown in the river after birds pecked them clean on the Speaker's Rock. It was true nonetheless. Adele felt the meeting would go better if she got out of her Whites.

When Adele was within twenty feet of Chatsworth Minor's recessed entrance, the doorman turned and said something to the men who'd followed him. They were burly fellows; though they were dressed as footmen, their livery didn't fit well.

One pulled a blackjack from inside his jacket and clubbed the doorman over the head; the doorman staggered into the pilaster, then fell forward on his face. The thug's companion drew a pistol and pointed it in the air.

Adele glanced behind her. Eight men, mostly holding lengths of pipe and similar bludgeons, had entered the court and were walking toward her purposefully. One of them had a pistol. *They must've been in concealment in the pavement-level light wells of one of the houses across the boulevard....*

Lt. Wilsing pulled a flat phone out of his breast pocket. "Don't!" Adele said under her breath.

The gunman at the front of Chatsworth Minor aimed his pistol at Wilsing. "Drop it, buddy!" he snarled. "I won't warn you again!"

"Drop it!" Adele repeated. She edged behind one of the footmen so that her left hand could reach into the side-pocket of her tunic without the gunman seeing her.

Wilsing let his little phone clack to the ground. His face had no expression.

"Now the rest of you step away and you won't be hurt!" the gunman said. "We're just going to teach your mistress not to steal houses from her betters!"

"I have the ones behind," Tovera murmured.

"You men!" Adele said to the terrified footmen. They were trying to look back at her and to watch the gunman also. "Get out of the way at once. This isn't your affair."

"But mistress--" said the senior man, a fellow who could--and probably did--pass as a gentleman when he was off-duty and looking for recreation among the female servants from other districts.

"Get out of the way or I'll take a switch to you, my man!" Adele shouted. She sounded on the verge of panic; the part of her mind that dealt with ordinary things like servants had been disconnected from her higher faculties. Her intellect was focused on the developing situation.

The footmen scrambled off to the left. One started to go right, then sprinted to follow the others when he realized he was about to be left alone.

The eight thugs from the head of the court must be very close now. The gunman in front laughed and sauntered forward, accompanied by the man with the blackjack.

Adele shot the gunman in the left cheekbone with her pocket pistol. *The light was from the west; she hadn't allowed enough for the low sun.* She shot him a second time through the temple as he spun away with a cry, then put a third pellet into the back of his skull while he was still falling. She heard Tovera's sub-machine gun firing quick, short bursts like the crackling of an extended lightning bolt.

The Mundys were a pugnacious house, quite apart from their political endeavors. Her parents had believed that the best protection they and their offspring had was to be deadly marksmen--not to win duels, but to make it clear to any outraged enemy that challenging a Mundy was tantamount to suicide.

The thug who'd knocked out the Chatsworth doorman dropped his blackjack and fell to his knees screaming. The servants who'd been dicing at the next house had frozen when the first man pulled his gun; now they collided with one another in their haste to open the door and run inside.

*Mother would be proud of me,* Adele thought as she turned. *Those hours in the basement target range hadn't been wasted. It's good to learn skills at leisure so that they're available when circumstances force a career change....*

The eight men who'd been behind Adele's entourage were all on the pavement now. Several were thrashing violently, but those were their death throes. At least one had started to run.

The barrel shroud of Tovera's weapon was white hot. Like Adele's pistol, the sub-machine gun accelerated projectiles down its bore with electromagnetic pulses. The pellets' aluminum driving bands vaporized in the flux, so sustained shooting created a good deal of waste heat. The muzzle of Adele's own pistol shimmered and would char the cloth if she dropped it back into her pocket.

Tovera turned and shot the thug who was praying on his knees. He sprang backward, a tetanic convulsion rather than the impact of the light pellets directly. Three holes at the base of his throat spouted blood.

Adele grimaced. "Sorry, mistress," Tovera said as she slid a fresh magazine into her weapon's loading tube. "But we didn't need a prisoner. We already know who was behind it."

Adele had a sudden vision of Marina Rolfe herself kicking on the pavement, spraying blood. Of course knowing Tovera, it might not be anything that quick for the

lady who believed the Casaubon family money insulated her from retribution when her thugs crippled the rival who'd ousted her from the status she thought she'd purchased.

"Don't kill her!" Adele shouted. "Don't kill her, Tovera, or I'll hunt you down myself. On my honor as a Mundy!"

Tovera dipped her head in acquiescence. "I understand, mistress," she said.

A stain was spreading across the trousers of the gunman Adele had killed; his bowels had spasmed when he died. She went down on one knee, still holding the pistol in her left hand. It'd cooled enough that she could put it back in her pocket now, but she was too dizzy to do anything so complex at the moment.

Tovera fitted her sub-machine gun back into the attaché case she'd dropped when she began shooting. Wilsing had picked up his phone and was speaking into it in urgent tones. He didn't seem affected by what he'd just watched, until you noticed that as he spoke his eyes flicked across building fronts. They always stayed on the second story or above. He wasn't taking any chance of seeing the carnage surrounding him.

Wilsing hadn't done anything but stand where he was; none of these deaths were on his conscience. But only a sociopath like Tovera could watch such slaughter and not be affected by it.

The senior footman said, "Mistress, what should we do?" Adele tried to speak but the words caught in her throat. He grabbed her shoulder and shook her. "Mistress, what do we do?"

Adele rose to her feet, putting the pistol away. She hadn't reloaded, but it had a 20-round magazine. *I don't think I'll need to kill more than seventeen additional people tonight*, she thought. *Of course it took me three shots to put the first one down....*

Aloud she said, "Get into the house and call the Militia. I'm sure somebody else has done so already, but make sure there's been a call from Chatsworth."

"Mistress Mundy?" Wilsing said as he lowered the phone. "We need to get to, to Captain Carnolets as soon as possible. Quickly, now!"

"We can't leave--" Adele began.

The young lieutenant waved his hand at the sprawled bodies. "This has all been taken care of!" he said angrily. "Come! It's really most important!"

"We'd best do as he says, mistress," Tovera said with a smile as cold as a cobra's. "Mistress Sand isn't a person who likes to be kept waiting."

Adele nodded curtly. "All right," she said. "I don't suppose I need to change after all."

Wilsing pulled out an oddly-shaped key as he led the way back to the tram stop. Adele avoided all the outstretched limbs, but despite her care her right half-boot came down on a trickle of blood. The sole was tacky, at least in her mind, with every step she took thereafter.