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The Trophy

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THE TROPHY

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Bill Baldwin

CHAPTER 1

End of the Line

“**T**hragglng Universe, Peretti,” Brim yelled over his shoulder, “the gravs have tripped out. I can't keep her on course. Crank 'em up—now!”

“Power's *gone*, Mister Brim. Readouts say she's blown the feed tube.”

“Better send out an alert then, Sparks. Looks like we're going in. Pam, get everybody down in the cabin.”

While Hamlish frantically broadcast the timeworn litany of trouble in deep space, Wilf Anzor Brim struggled alone with the old starship's controls. Beside him, Jana Torgeson slumped over her co-Helmsman's console, reeking of cheap meem. “Morris,” he yelled into a flickering display, “see about jettisoning some of the cargo back there!”

“Ain't enough of us here ta' do much good this trip, Mister Brim,” Morris responded with a smug look on his face. “Warned ya' before we left, we did...”

Brim ground his teeth. At the beginning of the trip, there had been hardly enough hands to staff *Jamestown's* bridge, much less handle a cargo bay. “I understand,” he growled. “But you'd better do all you can. The more weight you get rid of, the more chance we *all* have of surviving the crash.”

“*That* puts things in a whole new light, Mister Brim,” Morris responded. His thin visage disappeared from the screen like a gray wraith.

Dressed in a tan civilian Captain's uniform—threadbare remnant from some long-defunct space line—the twenty-eight-year-old Brim shook his head. No wonder Morris had never been in the Fleet: He'd have spent his whole life in the brig. Through the ship's forward Hyperscreens—normally transparent crystalline windshields that simulated conventional vision when traveling faster than Lightspeed—he watched the first tongues of flame begin streaming aft from protrusions on the hull. Reentry time and no gravs! He shook his head in disgust. All he had to work with now was the steering engine. The little gravity kicker wasn't much, but it gave him a chance—one of the few he could presently think of. Like any good Helmsman, he always tried to have a trick or two up his sleeve, just in case Voot decided to strike, which, in this case, he surely had. Suddenly, the ship jolted.

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"There goes the pallet of hullmetal rolling machines," Morris reported from a display. He was now dressed in a bright orange space suit and helmet.

"Good work," Brim acknowledged through clenched teeth. Those big machines were worth a whole lot more than old *City of Jamestown* herself. Luckily, they'd been insured by their wary owners before takeoff. Little Star Fleet Enterprises could never have raised that kind of ante in a million Standard years. Without them, however, there would now be no hauling fee, and Universe knew the company needed every thragglng credit it could earn. He shook his head in frustration and peered down at the solid undercast, still c'lenyts below. At least the ship didn't seem to be falling so fast now...

"That's the last of the mobile crawlers," Morris reported momentarily. "Cargo deck's empty, all right?"

Brim nodded. "Very good, Morris," he said. But it wasn't very good at all. Even if he managed to bring the old starship in without killing anybody—which was still quite problematical—things looked bleak for StarFleet Enterprises. *Jamestown* was the only ship left in the fleet.

"Port Authority's dispatched a rescue tug," Hamlish reported presently. His beige-colored uniform was a lot newer than Brim's, even though it had started life in a different space line. "I've given 'em our predicted landing coordinates, just in case we get there."

Brim laughed grimly to himself. They'd get there, all right. No way to go anywhere else with only a steering engine. "I'll have the space radiators out, Jana," he ordered absently, preoccupied with his own readouts.

Moments later, he shook his head in disgust, then reached over the gray-haired woman's rumped form to activate her controls himself. Almost immediately, old *Jamestown* began to shudder and rumble while long, tapered panels deployed from either side of her torpedo-shaped hull. In the presence of any atmosphere at all, they had a startling effect.

Peretti chuckled contemptuously. "Not much left to cool with those old radiators, is there, Brim?" He was the only one in the crew with a new, made-to-order StarFleet Enterprises uniform. Clearly, he had access to funds above and beyond anything the faltering space line could disburse.

"Not radiators—wings," Brim snapped through his teeth as he concentrated on flying. One mistake now and they were all dead.

"Wings?"

"Yeah, wings," Brim answered. In the Fleet, it had once been his

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duty as Principal Helmsman to help train junior officers. "You haven't logged much time in these old kites, have you?"

"What's that got to do with the price of cawdor nails?" Peretti asked defensively, attempting to pull his coat over a sizable paunch.

"Not much anymore," Brim grunted while stratoturbulence rattled the old hullmetal plating, "but if you'd spent any time at all with these old ships, you'd know that their radiators are shaped like wings—as a safety feature. Probably for situations just like this."

"Passengers are down:" a woman's voice interrupted from the alternate console—Brim's main-cabin display had been out for the last month.

"Very well," Brim answered, conjuring her face in his mind's eye: Pamela Hale, the Chief Flight Attendant. During the war years, she'd been executive officer of a battlecruiser. Pam was at least ten years older than himself and still a handsome woman. "Better get *yourself* down while you're at it," he added, "and strapped tight, somewhere against the aft side of a bulkhead. Local gravity won't hold long after we hit."

"I *thought* I heard the gravs go," she said from the intercom. "Can't Peretti get them going?"

"They're dead," Peretti interjected apathetically. "Like us, probably."

"No problem," Hale quipped easily. "A lot of people I run into these days died years ago."

Brim smiled. Pam Hale was a brave one, all right. He guessed she'd probably seen enough wartime action that nothing in the Universe could much faze her. "As long as those steering engines hold out," he said—hoping he sounded a lot more assured than he felt—"I'll bring us in." He glanced out the Hyperscreens again and shook his head. He couldn't even see where they were going to make landfall.

"Well, don't let me keep you, then," Hale said in the same bantering voice. "I wouldn't want anybody to think I was interfering with operations or anything."

"Oh, go strap yourself in," Brim teased. People like that could calm a thraggling thunderstorm if they wanted to. He wondered how she'd ever wound up in an end-of-the-line outfit like StarFleet. He guessed it would be quite a story.

Outside, reentry flames were now flooding along the decks, and *Jamestown's* great, tapered radiators looked like dazzling sails spun of light itself. In the blazing slipstream, their thunder raged through the old starship like a disruptor barrage.

"Going through about fifteen thousand irals," Hamlish reported, peering over Torgeson's still-inert form.

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"Thanks, Sparks," Brim acknowledged. "I can use that kind of help a lot more than communications now."

"I'll switch consoles then," Hamlish grunted, and dragged Torgeson to a nearby jump seat. The drunken Helmsman wore a nondescript green jumpsuit and Brim noticed she'd worn holes in the soles of her boots. The little COMM Operator slid behind the co-Helmsman's readouts and adjusted his glasses while he grinned awkwardly. "You'll have to tell me what you want to see."

"Start by calling out the altitude every couple thousand irals or so," Brim said grimly. "My altimeter conked out this morning."

"Twelve thousand irals," Hamlish announced presently. "I guess we've slowed some, haven't we?"

"Yeah," Brim agreed, "the rate indicator shows that." It was better, but still awfully fast. "Button up the cargo holds, Mister Morris," he warned, speaking into the display.

"Cargo holds are secure, Mister Brim," Morris replied calmly. Brim envied him his space suit; it would be a big help in a crash landfall. Since passengers didn't wear them, however, bridge crews couldn't either.

"Ten thousand irals, and the checkout panel's lit, Mister Brim," Hamlish reported.

"Got you—read the checklist to me as it displays."

"Aye, Mister Brim. Shoulder harnesses?"

"Check," Brim answered, struggling into a network of faded webbing. He wondered how strong it actually was after all these years.

"Buoyancy chambers?"

Brim checked an emergency area beside the altimeter readout. Three green lights—the old rustbucket *thought* she could float, anyway. "Ready," he said hopefully.

"Eight thousand irals."

"Check." The undercast seemed to be coming up at them faster as the distance narrowed. He shuddered.

"Steering engine on continuous power?"

"Continuous power—check."

"Autoflight panels?"

"Off," Brim said emphatically. Under these circumstances, he wasn't about to trust anybody's hundred-year-old autohelm. "Emergency beacon?"

"It'll be on soon as you hit the green panel under your forward Hyperscreen."

"It's on."

"Check."

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"Six thousand irals. That's the last item from the panel checklist, Mister Brim."

"Very well," Brim acknowledged. "Just stay where you are. I'll call out a few more items myself in a moment."

Suddenly, they plunged into the clouds. At once, torrents of rain began to thunder against the fiery Hyperscreens, transformed instantly to steam while the old starship bounced and groaned in the darkening gloom. They were soon in such dense vapor that their forward position light bathed the outside world in a ghostly white glow, while the rotating beacon blinked dazzling green across it like disruptor fire.

"Speed brakes?" Brim asked. "Five lights over there on panel two."

"Five lights...on."

"Good work, Hamlish," Brim said. Then, "Pam, are you strapped in down there?"

"With my back against a bulkhead, Wilf."

"What about the passengers?"

"Safe as I can make 'em."

"Wish me luck, then."

"You bet—*real* good luck, sweetie."

"Three thousand irals..."

A heartbeat later, they broke out into driving snow over a seascape of white capped swells. Brim glanced at the leaden gray combers below while ice suddenly frosted the fast-cooling Hyperscreens. He switched on the heat and melted it, but he didn't need ice to tell him that it was *cold* down there.

An altitude warning horn sounded. "One thousand irals," Hamlish reported.

"Thanks," Brim acknowledged, almost wholly consumed in setting up his landing. "What's our airspeed?" Now, he was clumsily turning upwind across the troughs of the swells. They suddenly looked bigger than battleships.

"Airspeed one sixty-three." Hamlish's voice was getting tight and squeaky.

Brim chuckled to himself. He wasn't the only one terrified by the view through the forward Hyperscreens. Only a few hundred irals separated them from the rolling violence of those swells. "Brace yourself," he warned. "Here we go."

"Pull up! *Pull up!*" cautioned the ship's altitude alert.

He punched the alarm into silence as he rolled the port radiator into a rogue gust, then dropped the nose slightly. Speed meant lift, and he'd soon need all of the latter he could get. Somehow, he had to set her down on the relative calm of an upward slope while traveling

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in the opposite direction. Long patterns of lacy spume marked the troughs parallel to his flight path. A sudden gust threw *Jamestown's* nose to starboard again; this time, she began to crab sideways. Grinding his teeth, Brim rolled the port radiator lower. After what seemed like an eon, she began to line up again—but now, no more than thirty irals separated her belly from the crests of the oncoming swells. Time to get her down. Brim carefully raised her nose till she slowed, barely maintaining lift. Timing was everything now; a false move and they were all dead. The old starship trembled violently as the radiators began to stall, but Brim deftly willed her airborne with the steering engine at full forward until—moments before the next crest passed beneath the hull—he brought the nose up sharply, then plunged behind the mountainous wave top as it surged astern, dousing the Hyperscreens with foam and spume.

A split click later, old *Jamestown* smashed onto the back of the wave, launching two massive cascades of green water high overhead and shuddering back in the air while Brim struggled to raise her nose from the next impact. Suddenly he stiffened. In the corner of his eye he caught a large inspection hatch hanging from the leading edge of the port radiator. It had clearly torn open at the first violent impingement, and was now scuffing the surface in short bursts of mist. Before he could react, it caught the roiled surface, then separated in an explosive cloud of spray, dropping the wingtip precipitously. In desperation, he put the helm hard to starboard, but it was too late. The radiator's tip dug into the water and the starship cartwheeled. With the steering engine at full detent, he struggled to whipsaw back on course and *almost* made it—but not quite. When the ship slammed into the next wave, her nose was still down. The concussion knocked out the local gravity and pushed the *City of Jamestown* violently back to starboard. Loose equipment cascaded wildly along the bridge floor while the air filled with screams from the lower decks and Brim's face smashed into the readout panel. The starboard Hyperscreens gave way to a tempest of dazzling high-voltage sparks. Before Brim could move, green water erupted onto the flight bridge like an explosion.

Spluttering and coughing, Brim fought against the shoulder straps in a desperate effort to keep his head above the flood. Whining emergency pumps began to labor in the background as waves surged in all directions through the flight bridge. Then the water stopped pouring in as the old starship reared her nose skyward, hung for awful clicks, and plunged back in a great welter of spray. Moments later, she careened to a stop, rolling wildly, parallel to the endless ranks of swells. Somehow, she was down.

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With Hamlish back at his station anxiously contacting various manned compartments to see who might have survived, Brim secured the few controls that yet needed attention, then leaned out the side window and looked sadly back along *Jamestown's* listing hull. Here and there, her plates were wrinkled like cheap tissue paper. The spaceframe had clearly given way in a number of locations. He'd done his best for the old girl. It simply hadn't been good enough.

He shook his head as he watched a tug materialize out of the driving snow overhead and begin setting up a landfall. Clearly, this was the end of the line for old City of *Jamestown*—and probably StarFleet Enterprises as well. Then he took a deep breath and pursed his lips grimly. For all practical purposes, he supposed, it was also the end of the line for Wilf Anzor Brim, at least economically.

Later, Brim balanced himself precariously atop *Jamestown's* shattered bridge as the tug pulled them slowly into harbor. Two bright-green hawser beams crackled from optical bollards on the stubby, hunchbacked rescue ship to the nose of the ED-4, but for the last hundred c'lenyts or so, those beams had disappeared ahead into heavy fog that set in as the storm subsided. There was no sky and no horizon, only the mist, cold and wet on his face. The sea's leaden swell was long and slow, littered with ice fragments. Listing heavily to port, *Jamestown* sloughed unwillingly through the sluggish water, shouldering aside half-frozen mush that streamed past her ruined flanks and tumbled in her wake with a distant, whisper-like chuckle. Aft, he could see the misshapen curve of the hull, the dull, corrugated segment outside the failed generator chamber, a number of open hatches, the stubby KA'PPA tower, and farther on, white arcs of foamy water jetting from the pump outlets.

Then it started to snow again. Small white flakes whirled past his face like moths near a Karlsson lamp. He shivered. His old tan uniform didn't heat well anymore, and a tear below the collar let a lot of frigid dampness in. But it felt better trembling out here in the cold than sitting uselessly below. With the Hyperscreen frames empty and open to the weather, *Jamestown's* bridge was, for all practical purposes, just as cold and wet as the outdoors. Besides, the wrecked, waterlogged consoles tended to remind him of his own fortunes during the last two years. Somehow, none of it seemed credible—not even now.

Less than two months after he (then Lieutenant Wilf Brim, Imperial Star Fleet) reported to a new assignment aboard I.F.S.

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Thunderbolt, Emperor Nergol Triannic and his League of Dark Stars had unexpectedly sued for an armistice. The war had ended precisely three standard weeks later, with Triannic sent into exile on remote little Portoferria, orbiting the huge gas giant Cordic-19 in the sparsely populated ninety-first region of the galaxy. During the peace euphoria that followed, *Thunderbolt* was expeditiously paid off, declared surplus, then towed to the breakers—early victim of the Congress for Intragalactic Accord, or CIGA. This burgeoning new organization had quickly infected the Imperial Government as well as the Admiralty as soon as war's patriotic fervor began to wane.

Brim's own career had followed the same path a short time later. After six weeks of inactivity at the great Fleet base on frozen Gimmas-Haefdon, he had been summoned to a large auditorium at one of the headquarters buildings, packed in with other recently orphaned Fleet officers, and indifferently discharged with a month's credits in his pocket, a one-way ticket to anywhere in the Empire, a flimsy war veteran's card, and a printed citation ("suitable for framing") from Greyffin IV, Grand Galactic Emperor, Prince of the Reggio Star Cluster, and Rightful Protector of the Heavens. "We wish to personally thank you," the citation began, "for your tireless devotion to the cause of..." Heartsick, Brim had thrown it away—the signature was clearly a fake. He'd seen the real thing the day he'd been awarded the Emperor's Cross, and *that* citation was actually signed. He'd even met the Emperor in person. During another life, it seemed now...

Afterward, with throngs of other displaced Blue Capes, he'd made his way back to Avalon, the Imperial capital. Even if he had wished to return to his native Carescra—which he did not—nothing remained of his earlier life there. After the Helmsmen's Academy and the life of an Imperial officer, there was no returning to that poverty-blighted desert, not even with the specter of approaching destitution. And his meager savings had dwindled predictably in the fast-paced, explosive life of Avalon City—capital of nearly half the galaxy.

Brim shook his head as the fog thickened again, making him blink. There would certainly be no income from *this* trip—not with a jettisoned cargo and a wrecked starship. He shrugged as the mist isolated him completely for a moment. It was some satisfaction to have spared everyone on board, especially the passengers, unfortunate wretches that they were. Most of them were clearly on the bottom rungs of the Empire's economic ladder. They were the only kind of fares little StarFleet Enterprises could attract: people who could pay so little they'd take passage on a clapped-out antique

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like *Jamestown*.

Just to get to Avalon...

He laughed with half-cynical compassion. All too soon, they'd find out—as he had—that they'd only gone from some distant frying pan into a brand-new fire...

The fog cleared again for a moment, revealing a bleak forest of gantry cranes, most of them inactive. When the huge port reverted to a peacetime economy, many of the great commercial terminals had been forced to close their piers from lack of traffic. Brim shook his head; it certainly wasn't the kind of postwar paradise he'd once imagined. But then, he'd been a bit more idealistic in those days, expecting people to feel some appreciation—perhaps even a little obligation—for returning veterans and the wartime sacrifices they'd made. He snorted. The CIGAs took care of that with their ceaseless attacks on everything even remotely connected with the military. Instead of making him feel as if he had finally earned some worth in the Empire, he'd gotten the idea early on that he was actually part of a national embarrassment. The war was over, and the sooner people could forget about every part of it, the better.

He shrugged, then started momentarily as Pam Hale materialized out of the fog, expertly negotiating the wet hullmetal on spike-heeled boots as she took her place beside him. A full-length cloak and hood covered everything but her face with woolly tan. She had soft, mist-covered features: a dimpled chin with generous lips and high cheeks, a pug nose, and enormous blue eyes whose corners were developing a network of tiny wrinkles. "Not a pretty sight," she observed, nodding toward the empty docks and boarded-up cranes. "A lot of folks are out of work now that peace has come to the Empire."

"Yeah," Brim muttered. "Unless someone's actually aiming a disruptor at them, most people these days don't seem to attach much importance to Fleets *or* Blue Capes."

She met his eyes. "You're right," she agreed, "they don't." She shrugged wistfully. "Though the Admiralty does seem to maintain adequate ships in commission for people with the proper pedigree—'political interest', I think is the term they use."

Brim nodded. So far he could see, that was the normal way of the Universe. In the end, all privilege was skewed toward wealth. Every Carescrian knew it, fatalistically expected it, even. That didn't mean he particularly liked being treated the way he'd been treated. At one time, he'd hoped that things would change. But those hopes had been short-lived indeed. And, he supposed, it was easier for him to return to being nothing than to experience it for the first time, as were

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many of his presently out-of-work, former colleagues in the Fleet. Only Margot made things *really* difficult for him. He felt for the ring she had given him, hanging from a chain around his neck. He hated being nobody, because of her.

"What'll you do now?" Hale asked, interrupting his musing. "I doubt if Iverson can keep StarFleet running with no starships to fly."

Brim snorted grimly and nodded. "I doubt it, too," he said. There was no use pretending otherwise. The little company had been in a precarious financial position for a long time. It was the only reason they'd hired him in the first place—he was willing to fly for almost no pay at all. He shrugged. "Maybe I'll go into another line of work," he said lamely.

"Oh?" Hale looked at him with an expression of concern. "What *else* do you know how to do?"

"Well," Brim said, struggling to maintain his facade of confidence, "this isn't the only flying job in the Universe. Who knows, I might just get myself a job jockeying one of those hot starships they're getting ready for the Mitchell Trophy Race."

"*Really?*" Hale asked with an exaggerated look of awe. "I thought the Imperial Starflight Society was only for the rich and famous. Or is there something I should know about you, Wilf?"

Brim grinned in spite of himself. "No," he answered, "I've got no secrets—nor fame, nor money. So I guess I won't show up in A'zurn for the races next year." He shrugged. "I suppose I don't know precisely what I'll do next, but I'm bound to find *something*." Deep down, the thought cut him like a knife. How could he carry on a romance with a Royal Princess like Margot Effer'wyck if he had to live in a slum and work as a common laborer, with callused hands? He ground his teeth. That part of his rapid economic descent frightened him more than anything else. But then, maybe it didn't matter much anyway. After all, her duties left her little time to spend with him these days. He forced the dismal thought from his mind. "How about you, Pam?" he asked. "What kind of plans do you have?"

"Like everybody else, Wilf," she said, "I'll find *something*. I always have before." She looked away into the fog. "Something..."

Brim knew she wasn't any more sure of herself than he was.

At length, the tug dragged *City of Jamestown* into a filthy basin adjacent to a salvage yard. While Brim sat disconsolately at the Helmsman's console, blowing on his hands to keep them warm, she

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was floated over submerged gravity pontoons that eventually restored her to the standard twenty-five irals altitude that standardized starships maintain while at rest. After this, heavy cranes nudged her broken hull over a dilapidated stone gravity pool where she connected with a rusty brow indifferently smeared with bright patches of orange, anticorrosion compounds.

"Not exactly the royal landing pier on Lake Mersin," Peretti observed gloomily.

"It's a lot better than the bottom of Prendergast Bight," Hamlish countered.

"I guess," Brim allowed, but his sentiments were closer to Peretti's. In the Fleet he'd always landed on the lake, close in to the city instead of the drab, sprawling commercial port hundreds of c'lenyts to the austral pole. He looked down at the brow, just concluding its efforts to attach itself with *Jamestown's* sprung main hatch. The first person across was J. Throckmorton P. Iverson, owner and Chief Executive of StarFleet Enterprises, pushing upstream against a stampeding throng of passengers who wanted to be rid of starships forever. When finally he stepped onto the bridge, wearing a food-spotted gray business suit, scuffed shoes, and threadbare cuffs, he had the dazed look of someone who had been recently smashed between the eyes by a meteor. With his fat pink cheeks and narrow, near-sighted eyes, he looked more like a bookkeeper than an entrepreneur. "I, ah, hear nobody got killed," he said, glancing around hesitantly.

"*Nobody*," Brim assured him quietly. "Three or four were a little shaken when their seats tore loose, but nobody was seriously hurt, except old *Jamestown* herself." He peered down at his boots. "I guess she's gone for good."

"Yeah," Iverson said, clearing his throat nervously and looking across the old ship's twisted decks. "Looks like she's gone, all right, the way the hullmetal's wrinkled."

"Sorry," Brim said lamely. Nothing else seemed appropriate.

Iverson dropped his eyes and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Wasn't your fault, Brim," he admitted quietly. "Everybody more or less expected the generators to go pretty soon. We just thought that, well, you know, maybe she'd last one more trip and pay for the repairs she needed so badly. I guess we should have told you."

Brim felt his gorge rise, along with a nearly uncontrollable rage. "You mean you *knew* about that power supply tube?" he snorted, taking an angry step forward, "And you let me take all those people into *Hyperspace* anyway?"

"Well," Iverson said, shrinking back and wringing his hands. "We

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didn't exactly *know*, you understand..."

Brim took a deep breath and, shutting his eyes, let out a long sigh. What use was it? Everything was all over anyway, with no one badly hurt, at least in a physical sense. And Iverson never would understand. Bean counters didn't see things the way Helmsmen did—they weren't *supposed* to. After a long silence, he unclenched his fists. "It doesn't matter, Mister Iverson," he said. "Just pay us off and we'll be on our way."

Iverson nervously pinched the fleshy part of his hand. "Y—yeah," he stuttered, "T—that's what I came to talk about, Brim."

"You *do* have the credits to pay us, don't you?" Brim demanded, narrowing his eyes.

"Um," Iverson stammered, "I d—don't exactly have that much *now*, but..."

"But," interjected a deeper voice from the aft companionway, "Mister Iverson is counting on that many extra credits once he's sold this twisted wreck for scrap—and paid *me* for the services of my tug." Centered in the hatch was a squat, muscular man dressed in white satin coveralls and a gray ebony cloak. Wearing a black velvet cap, gathered and puffed over the crown with elaborate ribbon lacings, he had a massive frowning brow, sharp nose, pointed moustache, and the cold gray eyes of a professional assassin. Brim recognized him in a moment: one of the most influential—and reputedly dangerous—men in Avalon's dockyard milieu.

"Zolton Jaiswal!" Iverson grumbled, a disagreeable look forming on his face. "I, um, was just coming to see you."

"Ah, I am comforted to know that, friend Iverson," Jaiswal pronounced without changing his own brooding demeanor. "We of the salvage brotherhood have been expecting the arrival of your ship for quite a while, now. Old *Jamestown* has functioned without repairs much longer than many of my colleagues expected." He laughed sardonically and stepped into the bridge. "They clearly reckoned without placing Mister Brim in their equations—as I did *not*. That is the reason my tug arrived alone." He chuckled quietly. "Everyone else assumed that you must have taken the old ship to another port for repairs; they stopped anticipating your call for assistance. On the other hand," he said, placing a hand over his heart, "I continued to monitor the distress channels, certain that you—with neither assets nor credit for such costly work—would count on Mister Brim here to keep your rickety equipment in operation until the last possible moment. And of course," he added, "I was right."

Iverson's face twisted with resentment. "So you waited," he

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continued in a bitter voice, "like the rest of the carrion-eaters who have feasted on the Fleet since Triannic's xaxtdamned Treaty of Garak."

"Think what you will, Iverson," the little man said with a grim scowl. "But were it not *me* here, someone else would be scrapping those ships." He touched the neck clasp of his cloak. "Like others, you mistake good business practices for traitorous double-dealing. But I am just as patriotic as the next man on Avalon, perhaps a little more, were the truth known."

"More like a thraggling CIGA, from where I stand," Iverson sulked.

Jaiswal's lip curled with ill-concealed rage. "Fortunately," he said, drawing a saffron plastic envelope from his cloak, "I am under no obligation to endure your petty insults. But you *are* under obligation to pay *this*."

"Yeah," Iverson groaned, with a look of utter defeat. "I know—let me have the invoice."

With a grim little smile, Jaiswal handed it over.

Iverson glanced at the scrap of plastic, then set his jaw and took a deep breath. "Pretty xaxtdamned sure of yourself, weren't you," he snorted. "You've already included the tow to the breaker's yard."

Jaiswal shrugged indifferently. "I can make you a separate invoice, should that be necessary."

"Maybe I'll get some other estimates," Iverson spat back petulantly.

"Suit yourself, Iverson," Jaiswal sighed with a detached shrug, "but your rent on *my* gravity pool is high, as are the fees for my tug that even now waits—with its meters running—to tow this ship to the breakers."

Iverson clenched his fists and looked down at his worn boots. "I suppose you already know how much old *Jamestown's* worth as scrap."

"To the very credit," Jaiswal said, inspecting his fingernails. "I had an estimate made from my tug. The amount you receive will precisely cover the credits owed to your crew plus my towing invoice, with a modicum extra that will pay Mister Brim, here, for making the trip. Imperial law requires a certified Helmsman aboard all commercial tows, as you know."

"You bastard," Iverson groaned lifelessly. "I'm almost sorry Brim didn't let her sink."

"Without Brim at the controls, she would have sunk, Iverson," Jaiswal reminded him, hands at his chest, palms up. "And you would now be up to your reddish neck in murder charges for every

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passenger lost in the crash."

Iverson shook his head and looked at his feet again. "You don't have to remind me," he said.

"I assume it is settled then?" Jaiswal asked. "Shall we tow this wreck to the breakers before you owe me more credits than she is worth?"

Iverson peered around the cabin for a moment, fastening his gaze finally on Brim. Peretti and Hamlish were already packing their gear. "You'll ride her?" he asked.

"Yeah," Brim agreed, "I guess I might as well. Looks as if that's the last I'll ever get through the good offices of StarFleet Enterprises."

"You're right there, Brim," Iverson assured him. "Poor old *Jamestown* was the last card I had to play." Then he laughed cynically. "Nergol Triannic and all his starfleets never even touched me during the war. It took the CIGAs and their xaxtdamned *peace* efforts to *really* mess up my life."

"And shatter the Fleet," Hale added from the companionway. A small traveling case hovered at her heels, and she was dressed for the outdoors.

Brim stepped to the hatchway, frowning. "I guess you heard you'll get paid," he said, a discreet specter of perfume tempting his nostrils.

"Yes, thank the Universe," she said quietly, "Hamlish left the COMM channel open."

"I guessed that Jaiswal might do something like that," Brim said. Then, on an impulse, he took her hand—surprisingly soft and warm in his. "What can I do to help you?" he asked.

"You're helping right now," she said softly, smiling down at her hand. "And, of course, I *am* still alive."

Brim frowned and shook his head. "No," he protested. "I mean—"

"I know what you mean," she stated quietly. "And I appreciate it. But there's nothing much anybody can do about me—except myself. Besides, Mister Brim," she said with a wink, "you'll be tied up for at least two days with the tow, and by that time, I intend to be well on my way—wherever that way turns out to be."

Brim nodded and released her hand. He expected that she'd waste no time. Unless he missed his guess, there was considerable resilience under all her feminine sleekness. "I hope our paths cross again, Pam," he said. "You're pretty special."

"You're pretty special yourself, Mister Wilf Anzor Brim," she chuckled grimly. "Maybe we can get together the next time." Then she peered past him into the bridge. "Don't take any wooden credits,

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gang," she laughed. "Especially you, Jaiswal—I'd hate to hear there was anybody around slick enough to take *you* for a ride."

"Even wooden credits from such a sweet hand as yours would seem precious to me, splendid lady," he said, bowing elaborately and fixing her with a penetrating stare. "Perhaps I can offer a ride somewhere in my limousine."

Hale raised her eyebrows, and she considered the dark little man for a moment with new interest. "All right," she said at length, "perhaps you can." She turned for a moment to wink at a surprised Brim, then started back down the companionway, her traveling case bobbing along the treads after her. "I'll be outside the brow, Jaiswal," she called over her shoulder. "Don't be long." Then, except for the spicy afterglow of her perfume, she was gone.

The scrapyards of Z. Jaiswal & Co., Shipbreakers, at the dismal seaside town of Keith'Inver was ugly—extravagantly so. Located on Inver Bight, a bend of the Imperial continent's bleak and nearly treeless boreal coast, the mean little village incorporated cheap wooden housing, bad sewers, and worse pavement. During winter, which was both heavy and long, the air was chilly, and the dampness penetrated to the marrow of one's bones. Local dwellers coughed and sneezed and watched advertisements for useless patent remedies, in an age that had all but forgotten disease. It was a grim annex of the Imperial capital that never appeared in tourist ads. Due to a perverse ocean current, its sky was gloomy most of the year, as were its gray, squalid landscape and most of the structures that interrupted its cheerless uniformity.

Defunct and empty, *City of Jamestown* listed silently in thick quayside scum, moored alongside the unkempt corpses of I.F.S. *Treacherous*, a relatively late-mark T-Class destroyer, and the battle-worn I.F.S. *Adamant*, an ancient frigate. Behind these luckless starships, busy cutting torches were already throwing showers of sparks over the grimy, opened hull of I.F.S. *Conqueror*, once-mighty flagship of Vice Admiral (the Hon.) Jacob Sturdee during the historic battle for Atalanta. Busy, weather-blackened derricks hoisted massive plates of dulled hullmetal from the great starship's savaged cadaver and dropped them unceremoniously into waiting scrap barges bound for collapsium forges elsewhere in the galaxy.

Halfway across the bay, a cloaked, one-eyed hunchback with a crooked mouth and twisted hands bent over the controls of an open ferry, taking Brim to Keith'Inver's public dock and the single daily

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train to Avalon City. The Carescrian shivered in biting, wind-driven dampness, hardly able to gaze back at the old warships. But no matter where he cast his eyes, some gallant vessel was being dismantled. Z. Jaiswal & Co. had ample jobs, all right—for people with no regard for what they were doing. He ground his teeth at the appalling irony taking place before his eyes. In six years of bloody, pitiless warfare, the enormous battlefleets of Nergol Triannic had been unable to achieve what the Imperial Admiralty was doing to itself of its own volition. With a bit of assistance, of course, from Nergol Triannic's Treaty of Garak, as well as *patriotic* organizations like the Congress for Intragalactic Accord.

Brim shook his head sadly as the unkempt ferry ground alongside the terminal wharf. The Treaty of Garak: CIGAs stalwartly claimed it had ended a war—but had it actually? Were Nergol Triannic's minions *really* sending ships to the breakers as they claimed? Brim had called Leaguers a lot of vile names in his day, but "quitter" wasn't one of them so far as he could remember.

He carefully counted out his fare to the hunchback, then climbed to the grimy surface of the wharf and made his way to the train platform, still troubled by recent events. A lot of other people claimed that the treaty was only a ruse. And if they were correct, then the real benefits of the so-called peace would accrue solely to the League, buying them time to recover from their disastrously unsuccessful attack on Atalanta at Hador-Haelic. And while powerful CIGA peacemongers—many within the Admiralty itself—busily demonstrated their willingness to banish war by calling for more cuts in the size of the Imperial Fleet, the League of Dark Stars might very well be rebuilding theirs in secret, biding time until they were handed their goal of galactic domination on a silver platter.

After a chilly wait, Brim watched his train snake out of its tunnel—like a long segmented needle, then sigh into the station, radiating heat as it slowed to a hover over its single glowing track. A door hissed open and Brim, alone on the dingy platform, stepped inside, taking a cramped seat at the rear of the windowless third-class compartment. He looked at his timepiece and nodded to himself. With a little luck at the Avalon end, he'd be back in his flat just in time for the message Margot promised to send when she returned.

That thought produced visions of loose golden curls framing a glamorous oval face, languid blue eyes, generous lips, and a brow that frowned in the most lovely way possible every time she smiled. Her Serene Majesty, Princess Margot of the Effer'wyck Dominions and Baroness of the Torond was not only Brim's one true love—as

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well as extravagant lover—she was also intelligent, courageous, and deliciously heretical. At the time she and Brim met aboard I.F.S. *Defiant*, she specialized in perilous covert missions to League planets that had produced some of the war's most valuable intelligence information. However, once Emperor Greyffin IV, her uncle, caught wind of these dangerous activities, he forbade them to continue. A politically-dictated marriage (to Baron Rogan LaKarn, first in succession for the throne of The Torond) was simply too valuable an asset to risk. Temporarily stymied in her efforts at direct action, she continued her military career by managing an important intelligence organization in Avalon, and even found time to secretly participate in the defense of Atalanta, during which she was severely wounded.

Wryly, Brim considered her coming visit. He'd seen so very little of her since his return to Avalon. Not that he could blame her. She was, after all, obligated to accompany her husband wherever he went. And LaKarn was a devoted traveler. Until he was someday crowned Grand Duke—upon the eventual death of his mother—he ostensibly served as Ambassador to the Empire, with residence in Avalon. But the "residence" part was little more than a joke, as was his post at the embassy. Like many other super-wealthy young men of the postwar civilization, LaKarn was on a pleasure spree, traveling regularly among the great cities of the galaxy, visiting celebrated spas and casinos, and hobnobbing with other members of a new, fast-moving, freewheeling leisure class.

During the rare times Brim and Margo had been able to steal a moment together, she often decried the meaningless life she was forced to live. But during her long absences, Brim found himself struggling bitterly against resentment for the vast difference between his own deepening poverty and the lavish lifestyle she followed.

Little more than a metacycle later, he was back in Avalon, hurrying through the wintry streets on foot. With the job market as unpromising as it was, he needed to husband every credit, especially if he expected to eat with any regularity. As he crossed over a busy thoroughfare, speeding limousines below reminded him of the days past when he traveled these same boulevards in similar transportation—once in one of the Emperor's own. And even though he'd been poor most of his existence, the taste of the good life he'd received in the Fleet was not easily forgotten, nor relinquished.

A large and colorful tabulator board farther along the street touted

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someone's news service. Brim stopped to look. What caught his eye was a sleek starship in the background of the ad. Lean and powerful-looking, it was one of the three modified war-surplus attack ships—they called them *Astroplanes*, these days—the Imperial Starflight Society planned to enter in the Mitchell Trophy Race, to take place in less than a year as he remembered. By the Universe, he thought to himself, *there* was a ship he'd like to fly! He grinned and thought of Pam Hale's words about being "rich and famous." Well, he might be broke and obscure, but he'd once rubbed elbows with a few of the swells that belonged to that exclusive club, although he suspected they'd be ashamed to admit they knew him these days.

He sighed as he made his way up a narrow staircase to his apartment. Cooking odors from neighboring flats reminded him that the last morsel he'd eaten was a cold box lunch provided by the tugboat captain almost a day ago. Tonight, he would skip supper as well. He wanted to toast Margot's visit with good Logish Meem, and that meant he must economize.

He keyed the lock on a peeling, age-stained door, then entered his chilly one-room flat, nearly devoid of furniture, or much of anything else for that matter. As his funds had dwindled, he'd pawned off most of his meager possessions—even his prized wartime medals and a rare old Sodeskayan blaster—always optimistic that new employment was around the corner. But it never was. So many jobless Helmsmen were idle on the streets of Avalon, and so few ships were still in commission, that only the well-connected found jobs; skills were secondary attributes in that cutthroat market. Unfortunately for Brim, "connecting" with the influence he unquestionably possessed meant accepting help. And that was something quite beyond his experience.

Seating himself on a carton before a battered public correspondence socket, he called up his mail. Immediately, messages appeared from Nikolai Yanuarievich Ursis and Anastas Alexi Borodov, wealthy Sodeskayan Bears and comrades from a thousand days of desperate warfare. They were again solicitously offering employment on freighters of G.F.S.S. (Great Federation of Sodeskayan States) registry.

Concluding one more time that the Bears' proposals were made more from compassion than from actual need, he turned them down by return mail, writing of fictitious opportunities that would keep him lucratively busy for a year or more. When he finished, his face burned with embarrassment; he had an almost morbid fear of receiving charity. Carescrians might collectively be the poorest people in the Empire, but they were also proud, and fiercely

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independent.

Another message was from Lieutenant Commander Regula Collingswood, now married to Erat Plutron, one of the surviving old-line Admirals in the Imperial Fleet. She was also an officer of the Imperial Starflight Society, if he remembered correctly. Her note was one more invitation to Bemus Hall, their ancient manor house near the boreal shore of Lake Mersin. Brim shook his head sadly; Collingswood, too, was concerned for his situation. With deep appreciation and considerable regret, he sent a polite message of refusal. Facing that magnificent person from his present poverty was simply unthinkable, as was accepting help from flighted A'zurnian embassy officials who, in still another message, were making their regular check of his situation on behalf of a nation whose everlasting gratitude he had earned in a bygone land campaign. He politely refused this as well. If a person couldn't make his own way in the galaxy, then he didn't deserve to live, and that was that.

As usual, he saved Margot's correspondence for last. Hearing from her was almost an obsession with him, but lately, he had begun to view her messages in a new and altogether unsettling manner.

During his tenure in the Fleet, the tremendous disparity in their economic circumstances had never seemed very significant. Then he had been an officer, and surely on his way up. These days, however, while she was still a Royal Princess, he was now a nobody, with few prospects of any kind. It bothered him that poverty seemed to distort his point of view, especially because he was reasonably sure she remained constant in their star-crossed love affair. If anything, the messages she sent were now even more loving and erotic than they ever were before her marriage.

Within the metacycle, he discovered that her latest posting was no exception. "Wilf, dearest love," she whispered as her flushed countenance faded for the last time from the display, "soon, we will be together, and I shall no longer have to do this for myself." After a few moments, he wiped his brow, then checked his face in the mirror for the thousandth time. Her "soon" was less than two days hence. He hoped to Voot that the swelling in his bruised nose would subside by then.

Brim's run-down bed creaked as Margot drowsily rolled a leg over his hips and covered his face with wet, perfumed kisses. "I love you, Wilf," she sighed drowsily, "—more than the Universe itself..."

Strangely wide-awake after a long evening of unrestrained

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lovemaking, he gently caressed her silky hair with his free hand until her breathing evened out and she lay still in his arms. In the late-night silence, his mind's eye retraced their surreptitious meeting that evening in the romantic shadows of a snug, out-of-the-way bistro. Somehow, his cheap clothes didn't seem so noticeable there, and from the time he kissed her long, tapering fingers, all the hopelessness of his current life healed in the warm glow of her soul. Later, she had even made his shabby walk-up seem like a suite in some grand hotel as, garment by garment, she slowly bared her glorious body.

In the stillness of the night he let the warm perfume of her breath restore his shattered spirit. Clearly, she cared for him as much today as she had on that glorious evening years ago when they first made love in her private suite at the Effer'ian embassy.

Then—infernally—a wave of despair swept all his treasured warmth away. In those days, he had been Wilf Brim the Helmsman, a proud man with a mission and a future—a man who could damn well contend for the most desirable woman in the Empire. What mattered most in that wild tumult of battle were skills, guts, and confidence. He had them all—in great quantities. Lately, however, it seemed that skill and guts counted for very little in the peacetime Empire of CIGA politics. And to his everlasting shame, he deathly feared that he was now losing his confidence. It was a long time before he finally drifted off into a confused state that only vaguely resembled sleep.

He awoke with a start to quiet weeping from the pillow next to him. "Margot," he whispered with anxious concern, "what is it? What's wrong?" By the glow of his wall heater, he could see her cheeks were streaked with eye makeup.

She only buried her head in her hands and began to cry aloud until her body was wracked with violent sobs. Truly distressed by this time, Brim held her close, caressing the back of her neck and her shoulders until she seemed to regain some control and the fitful wrenching subsided. When her breathing returned to something like normal, he put his lips to her ear. "Want to tell me about it?" he asked in a whisper.

With her face still buried in the crook of his arm she shook her head. "No, Wilf, I don't," she murmured bitterly, "but I must." Without another word, she slipped from the bed and stepped to his sink where she turned up the lights and began to wash her face.

Even in Brim's anxiety, the sight of her ample buttocks and long, shapely legs were enough to cause a familiar excitement in his loins. Margot Effer'wyck was absolutely the most desirable woman he had

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encountered anywhere in the galaxy. What could have happened to her? He bit his lip. All he could do was wait patiently until she decided to share her troubles.

Inspecting her face in his tiny mirror, she at last turned and made her way back to the bed where she settled cross-legged beside him and took his hand in hers. "At first," she began, peering at him with a grave look, "I thought I ought to keep this from you for a while." She sighed quietly as light from the heater turned her hair into a golden halo. "But tonight," she continued presently, "I suddenly awoke with the fear that if I did, I might lose your trust. And without that, I would lose *you*, Wilf Brim."

Her red-rimmed eyes gazed at him with such fierce emotion that Brim raised himself to a sitting position. "You can tell me, Margot," he said gently.

Almost as if she were at prayer—he'd actually seen people doing that—she bowed her head and closed her eyes for a moment. Then she looked him directly in the eye. "I'm pregnant, Wilf," she whispered quickly, as though the words themselves were bitter in her mouth. "I'm going to bear Rogan's son in a little less than eight months."

From a thousand c'lenyts distance, Brim heard his breath catch and he felt the sharp knife of dismay turn in his gut. "His son?" he asked weakly.

"His son," Margot repeated with the same intense look. "I'd managed to prevent that from happening for a long time, but I...well..." She shrugged. "We were in Tarrott after touring the League a few weeks back. Rogan was dickering with Gorn-Hoff for three of their attack ships he wants to modify for the Mitchell Trophy Race, and, well, you can imagine how a big consortium like Gorn-Hoff entertains..." She raised her open hands guilelessly. "At any rate, after a huge banquet and a *lot* of Logish Meem, I simply *needed* company, and for once Rogan didn't let me down." She took a deep breath. "If it's any recompense, I was thinking about you most of the time—especially when..." She paused and smiled ruefully. "Anyway," she continued, "it wasn't until morning that I remembered I'd taken no precautions—and I was too embarrassed to ask for *that* kind of medical help in a foreign domain. Besides," she added, "Rogan would have killed me—he's been trying for a long time." She looked into his eyes again. "There," she said grimly. "Now you know everything about it."

Brim fought his emotions to a draw and gently lifted her chin until she was looking into his eyes. "It's all right," he said gently. "It was bound to happen someday..." But somehow, inside it *wasn't* all right.

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He gazed at her small breasts and the sensual curve of her stomach and suddenly things were different. Instead of his usual stirrings, a wave of regret coursed through his spirit like a gust of icy air. It was as if LaKarn had been there all night with them, watching.

"Are you all right, Wilf?" Margot asked with a sudden look of concern.

Brim took a deep breath. "Yeah," he said presently, "I'm all right. I guess I just wasn't ready for that kind of news..."

Margot gently bent to kiss his fingers. "Neither was I about a week ago," she said with a shake of her head. Then, a shadow of concern passed across her eyes and she threw her arms around his neck. "Hold me for a moment, Wilf," she begged anxiously. "I don't want to let this thing come between us!"

Brim eased her head back to the pillow. "The Universe knows I love you, Margot," he whispered ardently, "—better than life itself. And tomorrow I shall love you even more—for every tomorrow I live to see." It was no meaningless platitude: he meant every word. Then, he brushed her damp eyelashes with his lips and began to gently kiss her on the mouth.

After some time, she began to clamp his shoulders more tightly and her breathing became labored. Suddenly, her mouth opened and her tongue darted between his lips while she rolled onto her side and rhythmically crushed her groin into his hip. "Wilf," she moaned in a low voice, "I need you again..."

At that moment, panic struck Wilf Brim with the force of a runaway starship. He wasn't ready. He ground his teeth and concentrated.

"Wilf," she urged breathlessly, throwing her leg over his waist, "hurry! I have to leave in less than a metacycle." *She* was ready, no doubt about that.

Totally incredulous, he squeezed his eyes shut. "I—I'm not ready," he confessed with a groan. "I can't."

"You what?"

"I can't," he croaked, rolling over on his back.

"Oh, Wilf, my poor darling," she whispered in dismay. Suddenly she covered him with her body, placed her hands on his cheeks, and smothered his face in gentle kisses. "It's all right," she whispered in a voice filled with compassion. "You don't have to prove anything to me—ever. I *love* you. That's all that counts."

In spite of her tender words, Brim couldn't relax. "Oh great Universe," he moaned between clenched teeth, "now I've failed you in *this* too." He rolled from under her and swung his legs onto the floor, sitting with the sheet gripped in both hands as if it were his

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only anchor to sanity.

Margot quickly knelt beside him with her arms around his neck. "Wilf, Wilf," she sobbed. "What have I done to you?"

"Nothing," he answered, his voice cracking with emotion. "It's just that...well, I can't seem to win for losing, these days." He put his face in his hands, feeling the emotions welling within him.

Suddenly, he felt her hand on him. "Dearest Wilf," she whispered, urging him onto the bed again.

She never got to finish. Discreet rapping at the door preceded the unmistakable voice of Ambridge, her chauffeur. "Madam, we must make haste. The household plans to awaken much earlier than usual today."

Brim felt her whole body go rigid beside him. "I hear you, Ambridge," she called presently. "I shall be there in a moment." She hesitated for no more than a click longer, then placed her hands on his cheeks and kissed him full on the mouth. "Wilf," she said as she sprang from the bed and began to pull on her clothes, "you must *not* let this affect you in any way." She frowned as she struggled with the buttons on her ornate blouse, then turned to look him full in the face. "You are no less a man this morning," she said, her hands on her hips, "than you were last night when you caused me to wake everyone in this building with my happy moaning."

Still in a state of shock, Brim could only sit numbly while she stepped into her shoes. After a long moment, he got to his feet and held her cloak. "I don't know what to say, Margot," was all he could mumble.

"Wilf," she said with a look of deepening concern on her face. "Wilf, *look* at me. You certainly aren't the only man this has happened to. I mean—"

Quiet but insistent rapping commenced at the door again.

"Madame," Ambridge whispered.

"I'm on my way," she answered over her shoulder. "Wilf, are you going to be all right?"

Brim gathered the remaining shreds of his ego and pulled himself erect, feeling more than a little foolish standing naked in front of this very thoroughly dressed woman. "I'm all right now," he lied, nervously fingering her ring as it dangled from the chain around his neck. Somehow the metal felt unnaturally cold. "Don't worry about me."

"You're sure, Wilf?"

"You can count on it." He took her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth while Ambridge continued to knock at short intervals. "You'd better go now," he said after a moment.

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She nodded. "Don't *ever* forget that I love you, dearest," she said. "For thee, my own sweet lover, in thy heart, I know myself secure, as thou in mine: We were and are—I am, even as thou art—Beings who ne'er each other can resign; It is the same, together or apart..." The she opened the door and was gone in the blink of an eye.

During all those dreary years that followed Admiral Kabul Anak's first great attack on Carescria—the raid wiped out every member of his family—Wilf Brim had become convinced that he could never again find the necessary tears to cry.

He was wrong.

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