

DAVID WEBER

IN FIRE FORGED

**WORLDS
OF HONOR
#5**



In Fire Forged
Worlds of Honor V-ARC

Advance Reader Copy

David Weber

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IN FIRE FORGED

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Ruthless

Jane Lindskold

Gone. Her child was gone.

Frantically, Judith Newland searched the small apartment she shared with her two-year-old daughter Ruth.

Bedroom. Bathroom. Living area.

When she started opening cabinet doors and bending double so that she could look all the way to the back, Judith admitted to herself what she had known all along.

Somehow, during the short time she had stepped out into the hall to talk to that new woman from Human Services, little Ruth had completely and utterly disappeared.

A momentary urge to scream, to panic, filled Judith's heart. For all that her nineteen years had included kidnapping, rape, murder, piracy, and countless other horrific experiences, these last two years had been relatively peaceful. Almost without her noticing, Judith had allowed herself to be lulled into accepting peace—rather than all the rest—as normal.

Now the steel at the core of Judith's soul, the quality that had permitted her not only to survive her long captivity on Masada, but to prosper and grow, met the urge to panic and pushed it back.

Judith closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Ruth wasn't in the apartment. Very well. Where might she be? The apartment had only one exit, but there was a safety escape outside the bedroom window. There had been a drill just a few days before. Ruth had been fascinated by how the grav tube had appeared at the touch of a button concealed in the programmable nanotech "wallpaper."

Judith didn't think Ruth could have reached the button and activated it, but then again, Judith was the last person to underestimate someone merely on the basis of age. If her former husband had not underestimated Judith...

But, no. She wasn't going to think about that. That, at least, was done.

Already Judith's feet were hurrying her down the hall to the bedroom. A quick glance was all she needed to see that the grav tube remained undeployed. Ruth hadn't left that way.

Panic was trying to rise again, but Judith ignored it. Grabbing her apartment keys, she hurried out to check if any of her neighbors had seen anything.

The residential tower where Judith and Ruth lived was unique even among Manticore's eclectic society, for it housed most of the four hundred or so refugees who had fled in a body from the planet Masada something over two and a half years before. This alone would have made the complex peculiar, but since those refugees had been nearly all female—the males had been small children, usually under five years of age—the dynamic was skewed again. Add to this that most of the women had been accustomed to life in communal harems. They continued to find privacy, rather than the lack thereof, unsettling. Therefore, the three floors of the tower they occupied more resembled a beehive than a modern residential community.

Judith herself was one of the few who treasured privacy and hadn't chosen to reside in a large apartment with two or more adults and any associated children. But then Judith was different from her fellow Sisters of Barbara in many ways, including her birthplace, level of education, and complete lack of the faith that—although modified—continued to be a dominant influence in the spiritual lives of her associates.

However, Judith still felt closer to her fellow refugees than she did to almost any Manticoran. She

was especially attached to the woman to whom she now fled with her problem.

“Dinah!” Judith said, rushing in past Dinah and closing the door behind her. “Ruth is gone from our apartment, vanished completely.”

The tale poured from Judith’s lips, how the doorbell had rung, how the new woman from Human Services had asked if she could speak to Judith. How Ruth had been napping, so they had stepped out into the hallway.

Dinah listened without interrupting, her gray eyes hardening to steel as the import of what Judith was telling her went home. Too old to be given the Manticoran’s anti-aging prolong therapies, nonetheless Dinah had benefitted from the Manticoran’s advanced medical science. The heart condition that had nearly killed her during the escape from Masada had been completely reversed. Without a weak heart subtly undermining her strength, Dinah now appeared a decade or more younger—a gray-haired, gray-eyed, round-figured dove rather than the haggard old woman her thirty-eight years of marriage Ephraim Templeton had created.

“I wasn’t gone more than five minutes,” Judith concluded. “When I went back in, something seemed a little off. I went to see if Ruth had climbed out of her crib—she’s getting better and better at that—and she wasn’t there.”

“You checked everywhere.” Dinah’s words were a comment, not a question. She knew Judith better than most, and knew she was thorough, often to the point of obsession. It was a trait that had served them both well in the past.

“I did.”

“But you wouldn’t be offended if I checked again?”

“No.”

“Good. I’ll do that. You go and speak with our neighbors. Ask if they saw Ruth. Ask about the woman from Human Services, too.”

Judith was thrusting her keys into Dinah’s hands when the oddity of that last statement caught her.

“Her? Why?”

“From what you told me about the questions she was asking you, I find it peculiar that she didn’t come and speak with me. I have been home for the last several hours, preparing texts for tomorrow’s service.”

Judith frowned. That omission was odd. Although Judith’s skills had made the escape from Masada possible, there was no doubt who was the leader of their community—and who had been the head of the Sisterhood of Barbara before they had ever left Masada. The new woman should at least have introduced herself to Dinah.

“I’ll ask,” Judith promised. She hadn’t thought she could be any more afraid, but Dinah’s words had crystalized a fear that had been budding in her heart.

She didn’t wait for the lift, but ran for the stairs.

* * *

“Oh, Michael!”

The speaker’s voice was feminine, high pitched yet musical. It held a distinctly lilting note of welcome and invitation. Even so, rather than slowing at the sound, Michael Winton, lieutenant, senior grade, serving in Her Majesty’s ship *Diadem*, picked up his pace.

Michael tried to act as if the call might be meant for another Michael, not him, but although the name and its variants were very common in the Star Kingdom, his appearance was not. Michael’s skin was the dark brown of the Wintons, rather than one of the more ethnically blended mixes more common in the realm. Although Michael had been away from home over the last two years, there was

no reason for him to believe his slight increase in height, and slightly more mature musculature was adequate disguise. For one thing, he looked far too much like his father—and the late Roger Winton's portrait still hung in many a public place, never mind that the king had been dead for over nine T-years.

Michael's companion, a young man with dark blond hair and laughing, light brown eyes, hissed under his breath.

"Michael, what's your problem? She's waving at you! Since when did you start running away from pretty girls?"

Square-jawed and handsome, Todd Liatt, one of Michael's closest friends, was always trying to get his more retiring friend to join him in his leave-time pursuit of the fair.

Michael glanced side to side, looking for a route of escape, but although he knew both the public and private areas of Mount Royal Palace as well as he knew his own cubby aboard the *Diadem*, he knew he was couldn't get away without being obviously rude—and pure rudeness was a tactic denied to him.

He slowed his pace and swallowed a sigh. Then he schooled his dark, boyishly handsome features into a polite smile as he turned to face the young lady who was hurrying down the wide corridor toward him.

She had skin the color of coffee with lots of cream. The freckles Michael remembered from when they had been children had faded, but she still wore her dark honey-colored hair loose, the thick, tightly curled mass falling past her shoulders to the middle of her back. She'd been cute as a child, but now Michael had to admit Todd was right, she was decidedly pretty, maybe even almost beautiful.

"Alice! What a surprise to find you here."

"Daddy's attending a meeting of some committee or other," Alice said, clasping the hand Michael politely offered to her between two of her own. Her amber-flecked golden eyes danced with mischief. "His secretary is on holiday, and I'm filling in. What luck he told me he didn't need me just when you were going by!"

Alice released Michael's hand and stepped back a pace, looking up at Michael admiringly. "I thought it was you, but I wasn't sure. You're so much taller, and that uniform is so dignified."

Given that they hadn't seen much of each other since Michael had switched his study program at the age of thirteen T-years, when he began seriously preparing to attend the Naval Academy, Michael thought Alice's comment about his height idiotic. However, his training in not saying what he thought pre-dated his Academy education by many years.

"I would have known you," he said. "You still wear your hair the same way."

Alice laughed delightedly. "And you used to love to pull it. I remember you saying you liked how the curls bounced like springs."

She shook her head just a little, as if inviting Michael to take a tug, but he felt no such temptation. A slight motion at his side reminded Michael that his social duties were not concluded.

"Alice, let me present my friend, Todd Liatt. Todd was my roommate at the Academy, and now we're bunking together in *Diadem*. Lieutenant Liatt, this is Alice Ramsbottom. As you must have gathered, we went to school together."

Alice offered Todd a slim hand and a polite smile. Todd was generally thought the more attractive of the two men, but Alice's attention didn't stray from Michael. She gave a light laugh.

"Ah, good old school days," she said in a deliberately affected manner. "You were Mikey, then, but someone told me that you go by 'Michael' now."

Alice paused, and Michael observed with slow horror that she was actually simpering at him.

"Of course," Alice went on, "I realize I should have addressed you as Crown Prince Michael or You

Highness, but I was so thrilled when I saw you, I didn't think. I hope you don't mind..."

She fluttered long lashes at him, and Michael felt relieved—not for the first time—that his dark skin prevented anyone from seeing him blush.

"No. Sure. I mean, we've known each other since we were kids. Anyhow," Michael realized that he was babbling, but the combination of Alice's flirtatious manner and Todd's poorly concealed amusement were too much. "I mean, the 'Crown' bit is really a formality now that my nephew Roger is showing himself such a promising young man."

"Prince Roger is a darling boy," Alice agreed. "I've seen him at all sorts of receptions, so straight and manly in his formalwear, escorting little Princess Joanna so seriously. The prince is how old now?"

"Six T-years," Michael responded promptly. "In fact, he's almost seven now. In less than four more T-years, he'll take his qualifying tests and be formally named heir apparent. Princess Joanna will second him in just a few years more, and the 'Prince' in front of my name will become in truth what really is now—a mere courtesy title."

"You're so modest," Alice said, "as if anyone could ever forget you're Queen Elizabeth's only brother, and a scion of the House of Winton."

"I wish they would," Michael muttered.

Alice's amber-flecked golden eyes widened in surprise, but like him she had had training from the cradle on that kept her from saying the first thing that came to mind.

"Well, it's awfully nice that you gave me permission to call you by your first name," Alice said. "I don't suppose you—and Lieutenant Liatt, of course—have time to go grab coffee or something?"

Michael saw Todd starting to nod agreement and cut in quickly.

"Perhaps another time. We have someplace we need to be."

"Sure." Alice looked disappointed, but Michael thought he caught a flicker of another emotion—relief? It was gone before he could be sure. "Anyhow, I probably should be checking in with Daddy. You're on leave for a while?"

"A while," Michael agreed, deliberately vague, lest he be pressed into setting up another meeting.

"Well, I'm off to Gryphon this afternoon to take care of some business for Daddy, but I'm sure we'll see each other again. 'Bye now, Michael. A pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant Liatt."

The two young men echoed her farewells, and turned away. As they walked down the corridor, Michael heard the soft whisper of following footsteps.

He didn't need to turn and look to know they belonged to Lieutenant Vincent Valless, Palace Security, the crown prince's bodyguard.

For Michael, accustomed as he had become during his time in the Navy to going where he pleased without needing to be trailed—the logic being that the entire ship's company could be considered the crown prince's bodyguard—Valless's presence was disquieting.

Michael knew that most of his shipmates were looking forward to this holiday as a relief from the formalities and rituals of military service.

Why am I the only one, Michael thought with a flare of an anger he had thought long buried, who doesn't get a holiday?

* * *

Todd held back the questions Michael knew he was aching to ask until they were in the air. Michael had been issued to use as his own during his leave and the flier had been cleared for departure from the palace grounds. The assigned sting ship followed it off the field, hovering discreetly in the background.

“Michael, why did you turn tail and run like that? You were almost rude.”

“And I’m never rude,” Michael replied seriously. “I know.”

“That isn’t an answer. We have hours before we’re due to meet up with that friend of yours. We could have had coffee or something. I thought that Alice was cute, and she clearly was glad to see you.”

“Me?” Michael retorted, feeling that familiar anger again, fighting to keep it from touching his voice. “Me or ‘Crown Prince Michael’? When I’m shipboard, I almost forget what court is like. Even since the Masadan affair when I was a middie, most of the Navy accepts me for what I can do, not for who I was born.”

“Alice called you ‘Michael,’ Todd reminded him.

“Yeah. I would have felt that was more genuine if she’d called me ‘Mikey,’ like when we were kids.”

“You weren’t crown prince then, were you?”

“Nope. Elizabeth stood between me and responsibility,” Michael said, trying to keep his tone light. “Then our dad died, and she was queen at eighteen T-years, and I was crown prince. I’d never expected to be, you know. Dad was young enough that he’d been eligible for Prolong. I was just a kid, still trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up, and suddenly I was next in line for the throne of the Star Kingdom of Manticore.”

Todd knew this, of course, but oddly enough, they’d never really talked about it. Todd’s easy acceptance that Michael Winton wanted to be treated as nothing more, nothing less, than another student at the Naval Academy had cemented their friendship, a friendship that had not weakened over the years they had been separated for their different middie cruises and junior officer assignments.

Todd heard Michael out, then said softly. “That had to have been rough. Still, you’re never going to escape that you’re Queen Elizabeth’s little brother, no matter how many others come to stand between you and the throne. Isn’t it about time you came to terms with it?”

“I thought I had,” Michael said, and Todd—who hadn’t specialized in tactics without learning a thing or two about choosing his battles—had the sense to change the subject.

“Tell me about this friend of yours we’re going to visit. You met her during that Masadan affair you mentioned, right?”

Michael nodded. “Judith was one of the ringleaders, only sixteen, about three-months pregnant, and as fierce as hell.”

“Wildcat?”

“No. The reverse. Calm. Controlled, but with fire in her soul. Impossible as it may seem, Judith taught herself to pilot a spaceship with nothing but virtual sims—no tutoring, no practice flights. She did so despite the likelihood that she’d be beaten or even killed if anyone found her out.”

“Those Masadans are savages,” Todd said. “I’m glad the government has decided to throw in the towel with the Graysons. Your friend wasn’t the only one who escaped Masada at that time, was she? I seem to remember there was a whole shipload.”

Michael grinned at the memory, although he’d felt like anything but smiling at the time.

“Somewhere around four hundred women and children. Only a few of them had skills beyond borderline literacy or maybe some simple mathematics. Even those who had learned some technical skills found them antiquated by our standards.”

“So, what did they do?” Todd asked.

“They were given asylum by the Star Kingdom, and when the ship they’d made their get-away on was sold...”

“I bet that was one ship that didn’t go to a scrapper,” Todd said, “bet Intelligence couldn’t wait to get it.”

their hands on it.”

“For more reasons than one,” Michael agreed, relaxed now and cheerful. “Turns out Judith kidnapper—I refuse to call him her husband—was a pirate as well as a merchant. That ship and its computers solved more than a few ‘missing vessel’ reports.”

“So what do Judith and her associates do now?” Todd asked.

“They were settled in a nice community here on Manticore. A lot of people don’t realize that Human Services has an entire division that specializes in integrating refugees into the population, but Dad organized it very quietly when we started getting so many of them from worlds the Peeps had conquered. HS has had a lot of experience dealing with culture shock, and they recommended we find a place far enough from the big cities that the Masadans wouldn’t be overwhelmed—Masadan society is highly anti-tech, remember. Of course, even one of our ‘small-town’ towers was pretty overwhelming anyway, when they first saw it, but at least Friedman’s Valley is a lot slower-paced and more laid-back than someplace in downtown Landing.

“Since then, Judith and her associates have been getting educated and more integrated into our society. A few of them continue as consultants for Intelligence. They’re not a burden on the taxpayers, in case you’re wondering. The money from their ship, even when split, gave them all a stake. After what they did to escape Masada, they’re eager not to be dependent.”

“I’d guess not,” Todd said. “After all, if they wanted to stay barefoot and pregnant, they would never have left Masada. You know, I’m looking forward to meeting this Judith of yours.”

“Not mine,” Michael said, maybe a little too quickly. “Very much her own. If she belongs to anyone, it’s to her daughter, Ruth. You’ll like Ruth, cute as a button, and smart...”

Michael glanced at the air car’s chronometer and shrugged.

“We’ll be a little early, but not too much. Why don’t we go on ahead?” He glanced back at Valles. “Any problem with that, Vincent?”

“None, sir.”

“Todd?”

“If you think we’ll be welcome,” Todd said. “Absolutely. Like I said, I’m looking forward to meeting this Judith.”

* * *

As outsiders saw them, George and Babette Ramsbottom were a highly unlikely couple.

George was a staunch Conservative. Babette was an outspoken Liberal. Although neither was noble, both were something more important—rich and influential members of the most active and important levels of the Star Kingdom’s society.

George spent all his free time—when he was not serving in one senior ministry post or another appearing before Parliament as an “expert witness” in favor of some bit of legislation—focusing on his many and lucrative business interests.

Babette, on the other hand, had run for office several times with the support of her party. She’d won against her husband’s favored candidate more than once, and, like him, she had also served in appointed posts that had somewhat less public visibility, but no less opportunity for influence. When she was not involved in politics, Babette was a highly visible socialite, seemingly as devoted to spending her husband’s money as he was to making it.

They had been witnessed arguing both in public and when they believed themselves in private. Enemies wondered why they didn’t simply get divorced. Friends of one or the other—they shared few in common—had other theories.

George and Babette stayed together because neither wished to risk losing contact with their children.

George didn't want to settle any money on Babette. Babette didn't want to lose access to the money George made with such seeming lack of effort. Another popular theory was that neither would budge on who received custody of the sizeable and historic Ramsbottom estate—an estate where both, despite their apparent acrimony, continued to reside.

Oddly enough, for the amount of gossip and outright snooping expended on the effort, none of the speculations was correct, for all of those doing the speculating lacked a key piece of information.

Far from being each other's most violent adversaries, George and Babette Ramsbottom were each other's nearest and dearest friend and ally. They managed to hide this even from their three children—largely by sending the children away to boarding schools and expensive educational camps, and making their frequent and attentive parental visits separately.

The Ramsbottom estate did have servants, but George and Babette took care to maintain the charade even in front of these. And if the estate—and most especially the private offices and conjugal suites—were as heavily shielded as the most secure areas of Mount Royal Palace, what of it? George had been heard to say frequently and loudly that he wasn't going to let Babette snoop on his business and she to retort that she certainly didn't trust him with her private matters.

If everyone overlooked that the same shielding protected George and Babette from being detected during their private conferences, that could certainly be excused. No one knew better than George and Babette Ramsbottom that people love a flamboyantly fighting couple. Moreover, no one ever looks for what could not possibly be there.

“When do we place the call?” Babette asked.

“Three more minutes,” George replied.

“And if Judith Newland isn't there?”

“She'll have a comlink with her.”

George spoke with the confidence that had closed many a business deal, but when three minutes had passed and they placed their call, there was no answer.

“So she didn't take her comlink,” Babette said with just a touch of the acid she used so well in public. “Remember, she's a primitive, probably never thought of it.”

George scowled. He took *his* comlink with him even into the shower. The idea that someone—especially someone in a crisis—wouldn't take her link was alien to him.

Babette softened. “Don't worry. She'll think of checking her phone before long.”

“But I want her to get the call before Prince Michael arrives...”

“Don't worry.”

The next time George placed the call, a female voice, quite familiar to them from the surveillance tapes they'd viewed, answered. A moment later, an image appeared on their screen.

It was of a young woman, slim and graceful, her thick, dark auburn hair pulled back from her face. Even if her features had not been tight and stern from worry, no one would have thought Judith Newland pretty, but hers was a face that many would turn to look at twice, and then a third time, after prettier faces had been forgotten.

The eyes were what would bring a person back—green eyes, ringed with brown, not blended as with more traditional hazel. Their expression was as fierce and focused as that of a bird of prey.

Babette found herself pulling back when that gaze was directed to the screen, even though she knew the dummy program George had set up displayed a crowd of sexless, featureless wraiths. The shadowed forms overlapped, creating an image far more ominous than a mere blacked out screen could ever have been.

“Yes?”

“Are you alone?”

Babette heard George’s words twice: once as spoken, once in the whispery voices supplied by the avatar program.

“I am. Is this call to do with my missing daughter?”

Despite the research that had told them Judith Newland was a tough young woman, Babette was surprised by this composure. That same research had told them that if there was one person in the universe that Judith loved without reserve it was her young daughter, Ruth. Babette had expected crying and wailing, at least those green eyes flooding with tears, not this iron control.

But George had permitted himself a chuckle. Without speaking, he pointed to a line of figures streaming across the bottom of the screen. Using infrared scanners and some very sensitive analysis programs, the computer gave lie to Judith’s apparent calm. Her pulse rate was elevated, and George tapped an overlay where green and black patterns showed hot spots beneath Judith’s skin, hot spots that revealed just how upset that composed young woman really was.

Babette relaxed. George spoke.

“We are. Here are our terms. Ruth is alive and intact—for now.”

At that cue, a picture of Ruth, the date/time stamp showing it was concurrent with the transmission (although that stamp was a forgery) appeared on the screen for a tantalizing half-second. The little girl was curled on her side, wrapped in a pale pink blanket, sound asleep. Her balled fist was snuggled close to the rosebud of her cupid’s bow lips.

Even Babette, who normally preferred almost anything to small children, had to admit Ruth looked adorable.

George continued to speak.

“If you wish Ruth returned in that state, you must convince your friend Michael Winton to publicly and openly behave in a fashion unbecoming his rank and station. Public lewdness would be an admirable choice. If he is asked about his behavior...”

As we will make certain he is, Babette thought smugly. She already had the newsie picked out and primed.

“...then he is to comment that he is a Winton, and that the Wintons have always done what they desired—and that nothing, especially not the reaction of a bunch of superstitious, prudish primitives, even if they are the residents of a newly allied world makes the least difference to him.”

For a moment, the wooden expression on Judith’s face changed to one of confusion.

“Why do you think he’d listen to me?”

“Just do it,” George said sternly, his avatar voices hissing and echoing in a truly frightening fashion. “And remember, mentioning to anyone that Ruth is missing would do at least as much damage as anything Prince Michael might say. After all, if the Wintons cannot protect those who live on their own home world, what can they do to protect those who live in distant systems?”

Judith’s face again became carved wood. “And if I do as you wish?”

“Within a day of Prince Michael’s announcement, you will be told where Ruth can be found.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then Ruth will be returned to someone who wants her very, very much—her father, Ephraim Templeton.”

This time Judith’s composure broke completely.

“You wouldn’t!”

“Return a daughter to the father who has never had the privilege of holding her in his arms, stroking her soft, fair hair... Why, I think that would be a wonderful thing. Don’t take too long, Mr

Templeton. I get teary at the thought of such a wonderful family reunion.”

Judith was stammering something incoherent, but George cut the transmission.

“There,” he said with satisfaction. “Message delivered. I was a bit concerned by Judith’s reaction when I indicated that she could influence Prince Michael to behave in a fashion so out of character—and so contrary to his sister’s policies. We couldn’t possibly be wrong...”

“About how close she and Prince Michael are?” Babette concluded. She shook her head decisively. “Not in the least. Remember, this whole idea came to me when I happened to see them together a year ago. He tried to hide it, but it was very apparent to me that the sun and moon rose and set in the unattractive primitive’s green eyes.”

Babette stretched catlike, and continued, “And I’ve done quite a bit of research since. They write each other regularly. He sends little presents. She sends photos of the kid. I managed some rather adroit questioning of the social secretary who handles Prince Michael’s appointments those rare times when he’s in-system and off-duty. She was quite amused that the first—and only—thing Prince Michael always insists on is time to visit with Judith Newland.

“More importantly, although there was every evidence before he met Judith Newland that Prince Michael was a perfectly active heterosexual young male. Since he met her, he has had no serious relationships—not even flirtations. I couldn’t even get any solid evidence that he has frequented pleasure parlors—and what sailor on leave does not?”

“One,” said George, who truly was more conservative and straightlaced than his wife, “who values his reputation, and that of his family.”

“True, true,” Babette said, leaning forward to kiss George on the tip of his nose. “All the more reason why Prince Michael’s lack of public restraint will be such a shock. He’s always been such a good boy...”

“But what if he refuses?”

“He won’t,” Babette said with certainty. “He loves Judith—and the brat, too. Even if Prince Michael doesn’t react as I’ve calculated, we still have the child. Then our assistants hand little Ruthie over to Ephraim Templeton and record the exchange on video. It should be quite ugly. Templeton hates the mother. Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if he gives the kid a wallop or two as soon as he has her in his hands...”

“And that behavior,” George said, “can certainly be turned to our advantage. Not only will the Star Kingdom’s residents see once again what brutes the Masadans are, but the Graysons can be made to understand that a Star Kingdom that cannot protect a single child is a weak ally indeed.”

“And then,” Babette concluded, her face suddenly serious, her eyes shining with the fervor of a reformer, “we can get the Star Kingdom back on track, stop concentrating on making alliances with foreign powers, stop exhausting our resources propping up their primitive technology.”

“That’s right,” George said. “For the price of a little nasty gossip little Ruth will be home with her mama, and the Star Kingdom’s policy will be refocused on our domestic needs.”

* * *

Until the air car settled on the tower landing and Michael got out, Judith had been so overwhelmed by the events of the past hour or so that she had completely forgotten that her first and best Manticoran friend was scheduled to visit that day.

For a moment Judith marveled at the coincidence. Then something hard and cold whispered in through her soul. They’d known. The kidnapers had known, and they’d timed both Ruth’s kidnapping and that horrible call to take advantage of Michael’s visit.

Judith glanced at her chronometer. Michael was at least half an hour early. Depending on just how

much information the kidnapppers possessed, his early arrival might spoke their wheels.

Judith advanced toward the air car, not bothering to hide her eagerness, hoping her desperation didn't show. She slowed slightly when a second young man got out of the passenger side. She recognized him from pictures Michael had sent her as Todd Liatt, one of Michael's best friends. She wondered what Todd would think when she asked Michael to betray his queen and her interstellar policy to save one small girl.

And why do the kidnapppers think Michael would do such a thing? He's a military man. There must have been dozens of times when he or his commanders have had to make the decision to let some die, others might live. If we lose our alliance with Grayson, it tears a hole in a critical part of our coverage against the People's Republic.

Judith actually stopped walking forward as the significance of that "we" hit her. The Star Kingdom wasn't just Michael's responsibility. It was hers as well, hers as a citizen. She might not command starships or gun batteries or hold political office, but she felt a responsibility nonetheless.

I can't ask Michael to betray his people—our people. Not even for Ruth. But I can't let Ruth be returned to Ephraim.

Michael Winton had come up to Judith as she stood caught in this revelation. Todd Liatt stood to one side about a pace back. A thickset, dark-haired man with "bodyguard" so written into his watchful posture that his Palace Security uniform was hardly necessary stood three paces behind the crown prince.

Crown Prince, Judith thought, glancing away from the security man to the small dot of the sting ship hovering overhead even now. *Not just Lieutenant Michael Winton.*

She reached out one hand and took Michael's dark one in her own.

"Michael, I can't say how glad I am to see you." Judith was relieved that her voice didn't quaver. "This must be Todd—excuse me, Lieutenant Liatt. I feel as if I know you from Michael's correspondence."

Todd grinned and politely shook the hand she now extended to him. "'Todd' is fine. Just don't call me 'Toad Breath' as our mutual friend has been known to do."

Michael turned to indicate the bodyguard, "And this is Lieutenant Vincent Valless."

Judith did not offer Valless her hand—she still found associating with strange men took a real effort—but she forced herself to give him a warm smile.

"Won't you all come to my apartment? I have some refreshments."

Michael looked around. "Where's Ruth? You wrote that she's gone from toddling to running. I was expected to get tackled."

"I'm sure we'll find her," Judith said, and hoped the words would be prophetic.

* * *

Michael didn't bother to hide his surprise when Dinah—with no trace of Ruth in sight—greeted them at the door to Judith's apartment. The older woman's face was seamed with worry, and Michael sensed some unspoken communication between the two.

Judith drew Michael to one side.

"I need to speak with you," she said. "Can I do so without him," she glanced over at Vincent Valless, "listening to every word?"

Michael's heart skipped a beat. "I'm not sure. If we were at Mount Royal Palace, but this is an unsecured area..."

Judith gave a deep sigh, not of exasperation, but of despair. She glanced at her chronometer.

"We can't wait. I can't wait. I'm just going to have to trust... Michael, can you at least ask him an

Todd not to interfere?”

“If you’re not planning to overthrow the government,” Michael replied, trying to make his voice light.

To his utter astonishment, Judith’s eyes flooded with tears. He’d been present when she’d been interrogated about the deaths of her parents, about her own capture by the Masadans, about the brutal treatment she had received while in Ephraim Templeton’s custody. She’d never shed a tear. In fact, as far as he could remember, the only time he’d ever seen Judith cry was when she believed Dinah was dying.

Michael didn’t reach to brush away the tear that now trickled down her cheek, knowing that even now Judith found all but the most impersonal physical contact distasteful, but he moved to shield her from view while she got herself under control.

It didn’t take long. In three deep breaths, the tears had vanished, and Judith, with another glance at her chronometer, turned to face the other three.

Todd and Dinah had been exchanging awkward introductions, pretending they were not aware of the tension between the other two. Vincent Valless was outwardly impassive—a benefit of his extensive training—but Michael had no doubt that the bodyguard was also puzzled by this strange turn of events.

Judith motioned toward the round table that stood to one side of the immaculate, if sparsely furnished, apartment.

“Please, be seated. I did get some refreshments, but while I pull them out, I’m going to start talking. I have a feeling that time may matter.”

Dinah, Todd, and Michael moved to the seats indicated. Valless stood where he could watch both window and door. Judith stepped into the small kitchen, and while she got out a plate of little sandwiches and some sweets, she started talking.

“Ruth has been kidnapped,” she began, then held up one hand to still the gasps of protest. “Yes. I’m certain. I had just come up from asking my downstairs neighbors if they’d seen her, when I was called by the kidnappers.”

Dinah nodded. “Judith is not hysterical. I was here when the com chimed the first time, but didn’t pick up. When Judith returned and took the call, they asked if she was alone.”

“I lied,” Judith said. “I wanted someone else present in case there was any detail I forgot.”

“Odd that they’d trust such a call to a public com,” Michael said, “and asking you if there were witnesses and then trusting you...”

Despair filled Judith’s green eyes. “Actually, I don’t think they really would have minded witnesses. I think they would have preferred them. I think you’ll see why when I tell you what they said.”

She reported the call in clinical detail, but her cheeks blushed dark rose as she stated the conditions for Ruth’s return.

“I’ll do it,” Michael said, instantly.

Two voices overrode his words before he could clarify.

Todd said, his voice alive with horror. “Michael, you can’t!”

And Judith said even more firmly, “I won’t let you.”

Michael stared at her.

“I won’t,” Judith repeated. “I have no idea why they think they can use me to manipulate you, but I’m not going to let someone destroy both a key alliance and your reputation.”

Michael thought. *You have no idea, do you? I do. Looking at Todd, he does. Dinah does. I bet even Vincent has a pretty good guess. I guess I’ve been better at hiding my feelings, at least from you, than*

I thought.

But he didn't say this. Instead, he said incredulously, "You're not going to let them hand Ruth over to Ephraim Templeton, are you?"

Judith shook her head, the dark auburn hair cascading around her shoulders in a silken fall.

"I am not. I'm going to find her and I'm going to get her back. Then when I have her back, I'm going to blow them all so high that they'll never do anything like that again."

Michael wasn't in the least surprised, but he doubted that Judith had the skill necessary to find Ruth and he wasn't about to let her destroy herself and her child when he could help. He could also tell that arguing further would be a waste of valuable time.

"If you're going after her, I'm helping." Michael turned and looked at his bodyguard. "And you're going to have to trust me, Vincent. There's a little girl's life at stake, and from the demands Judith says they're making, this has 'political motives' written all over it. But we don't know a damned thing—yet—about who these people are. Until we know more about the situation we can't risk any communication outside of this immediate group."

"The entire Masadan exile community here may suspect Miss Ruth is missing," Vincent reminded the prince delicately.

"I know," Michael said, "but other than Judith and Dinah, no one knows Ruth has been kidnapped."

"Actually," Judith said, "Dinah was suspicious before I was. Something she said made me very careful when I went down to check with my neighbors. When they said Ruth wasn't with them, I said that I guessed that Ruth must have gone across to Dinah's apartment, and I'd check there. When I came back up here to report to Dinah, that's when the call came."

Dinah smiled and pushed herself back from the table. "But I'll wander downstairs with the excuse that you forgot to get milk for the tea. While I'm there, I'll mention how excited Ruth was to see her 'Uncle Michael.' "

When Dinah had left, Judith motioned everyone to seats around the round table that dominated one end of the room.

Michael returned his attention to Vincent Valless.

"Vincent, I know your job is to keep me out of physical danger. If I promise to duck if you say duck, retreat if you say retreat, will you work with me on this?"

"If I have your word," Vincent said. "I would be more comfortable, however, if I could report the changed situation—especially one so charged with political implications—to my superiors."

"I know," Michael said. "So would I. There's just one problem. Until we know who took Ruth, no avenue of communication is safe. For example, while I'm certain Elizabeth isn't involved—"

"I should hope you would be certain, sir!" Vincent looked shocked at even the implication that the Queen might be so accused.

"Right. But I don't know if someone close to her might be involved. Someone might have a tap on Mount Royal communications. Or it might be something simpler, someone near at hand, nearly omnipresent—a servant, say—paid to report if certain matters are discussed or even if I call Elizabeth within the next few hours."

"I understand," Vincent admitted. "I don't like the implications, but I understand."

"I thought you would," Michael said. "I wouldn't need you to be my second skin if people were honest and the world was a safe place. Very well. You have my word that I won't put myself in physical danger or go against your direct command if you decide I'm in such danger."

Todd, whose alert silence had reminded Michael that his friend was training in Tactics with every intention of winning a command of his own someday, now spoke directly to Judith. "Count me in. I've

been security checked this way and that, I'll bet, since I've been Michael's roommate not once, but twice. You can trust me."

"I do," Michael said. "Even without the checks."

"And I will," Judith said, "if Michael says so."

Vincent Valless cleared his throat and said, "I have seen those reports. You are wise where you trust."

Todd flushed in pleased embarrassment, but Michael had returned his attention to Judith. "Thank you for your patience. I realize you must be aching to get a move on."

"I would be," she replied, "except that we don't have the least idea where to make that move. Running about aimlessly would do neither Ruth nor our cause any good."

Michael saw Vincent shake his head in admiration for this display of self-control.

You should see her on the bridge of a starship under fire, Michael thought.

Judith, apparently unaware of these reactions, had continued speaking. "Obviously, the place to start is that woman from Human Services who came to talk to me. She gave me a name: Dulcis McKinley."

"Probably an alias," Todd said. "Still, it's something."

"What did this Dulcis McKinley look like?" Michael asked.

"She was about a handspan taller than I am," Judith said, gesturing, "and very slim. Fair hair, pale skin, light eyes—blue or gray, I think. She wore her hair short, almost shaved at the back of her neck. In spite of this, there was nothing at all mannish about her appearance. Her lips were full, and I remember admiring her cheekbones. Very high and elegant."

"Short hair isn't exactly in fashion right now," Todd said with the air of one who had been using his leave to make a detailed examination of women who were not Navy personnel. "The one set of professions where short hair remains perennially popular are those where you regularly don a vacuum or related gear. Hair gets in the way."

Michael nodded, running a hand over his own tightly curled crop. "Okay. So possible space-side service."

He'd carried in his minicomp, since he'd been planning to show Judith and Ruth pictures of some of the places he'd been since he sent his last letter. Now he pulled it out. "I'm going to check on the name," he said.

"Is that wise?" Judith asked. "Someone might have set telltales to warn them of just such an inquiry."

"Actually," Michael said, "given the situation, it would make less sense if you didn't make just such a query. Let me use your comp. They may not bother to check registration numbers, but I would..."

The search did not lead them to their target, but it did turn up an interesting bit of trivia. Dulcis McKinley was the name of a secondary character in *Hearts Aloft*, a romantic comedy that had been popular about fifteen T-years before.

"That's why the name sounded familiar!" Todd said. "My sister had a crush on the male lead and for weeks she kept downloading the damn thing and watching it on the biggest display we had. I think she knew every line."

"Not useful now," Michael said, "but it might turn out to be. Now..."

He turned to Judith. "Why don't you and Todd see if you can generate a computer reconstruction of Dulcis McKinley?"

"And you?" Todd said.

"First, I'm going to set up some jamming fields so no one can tell what we're doing here."

"Won't someone notice?" Judith said anxiously.

“Not if I’m careful,” Michael said. “The Navy has been training me to be extraordinarily good getting information out of both people and machines without their being aware of my interest. The same goes for setting up diversions. If someone snoops here, they’ll find about the right level of jamming. Beneath that they’ll get traces of agitated talking, weeping, et cetera.”

“Vincent, I want you to see what you can do about tracking vehicles,” Michael went on, “the woman from Human Services got here somehow, and Ruth didn’t leave here by magic. I know you have access to satellite records of traffic patterns. Can you make an excuse to look at those that surround this area?”

Vincent was looking almost animated. “I can do better than that. I can get records for this entire tower and both of its neighbors. This entire neighborhood is under full-time surveillance.”

Michael cocked an eyebrow, and his bodyguard shook his head. “We didn’t have anything to do with it, Your Highness. I only know because it’s part of my job to check about things like that before I let you go somewhere, but they’re there, all right.”

Dinah was letting herself in as he spoke, a cup of milk in one hand. She shut the door carefully behind her and said, as if answering a question, “That’s right. When we first came here, many of the women were nervous about predatory males. That was foolishness, but we did have some problems with a few curiosity seekers. The cameras were set up then, and they’ve stayed.”

“Inertia,” Michael said, “can be useful.”

Vincent already had his minicomp out. “My request should go through without question. It’s pretty standard to check traffic patterns in an area before and during a sensitive transit situation.”

“Want to see who might have been hanging around for just a bit too long,” Michael said. “Good. Go on it.”

“What are you going to do when you’re done with the jamming field?” Todd asked.

“I’m going to take a look at the chip Judith made,” Michael said. “You recorded it, didn’t you, Judith?”

“I did, but what good will viewing it do?” Judith asked. “I told you, they used some sort of avatar program.”

“I know,” Michael said. “Trust me. I won’t be wasting our time.”

His stomach did a funny flipflop when Judith looked at him, those brown-rimmed green eyes steady. “Never doubt it, Michael. I trust you.”

* * *

Judith jumped when Vincent Valless broke the intense silence that had filled the room as each had turned to their assignment. True, she and Todd Liatt had talked a little as he helped her access and set up the right graphics program, but once that was done, and Judith focused on building up an image of Dulcis McKinley from Human Services, talk had hardly been necessary.

“Sir,” Vincent Valless said, “I have something I think you should inspect without further delay.”

He projected the data from his minicomp so everyone could see. “This is the scene immediately around this tower shortly before Ruth was taken.”

He zoomed in on a landing platform one floor below the Judith’s apartment. “This is the vehicle from Human Services. These…” He showed a line of mismatched air cars, “are all registered to residents of this complex. This one vehicle is the only anomalous one.”

He indicated a neat van bearing the logo of Anywhere Anytime, a well-known delivery company—type of vehicle so ubiquitous that no one would give it a second glance.

“The A.A. van,” Valless went on, “arrived at approximately the same time as the air car from Human Services. The A.A. man went to a service entry. The woman from H.S. went to the public entry.”

“Surveillance cameras don’t extend beyond the entryways into the building,” Valless continued, “but those on the exterior captured the following sequence.”

The delivery man had entered the building carrying a bundle, easily recognizable as one of the unassembled shipping boxes A.A. supplied for their customer’s convenience. When he exited just a few minutes later, he was carrying a similar box, but assembled. Judith imagined Ruth tucked inside, body bent in a fetal position. She pressed her fist to her lips to keep from screaming.

The man from A.A. loaded the box into the back of the van, made certain the back was locked, got into the driver’s side, and a moment later, the vehicle pulled away from the building and left the complex.

“Judith,” Michael asked, “is there another entry into this apartment?”

“Only the windows,” she began, but Dinah interrupted.

“There is,” she said. “There’s a conduit from which pipes and other such things can be serviced without the need to cut holes in the walls. Technically, the conduit doesn’t ‘enter’ the apartment at all, but if someone entered the conduit and knew the layout of the building, they could get into an apartment.”

Todd was nodding. “They’d need to remove a couple of wall or ceiling panels, but if they had the right tools, it would be easy. I worked summers for a company that did repairs, and I always felt a bit like a burglar. Of course, entering that way without permission is highly illegal…”

“But so is kidnapping,” Judith said sharply. “Lieutenant Valless, where did that A.A. van go?”

Valless snapped his head in a curt, military nod. “I tracked it, and I believe you’ll find the following sequence quite informative.”

In her impatience, Judith appreciated that Valless had set his record to run slightly faster than real time, but seeing the van speed away made her heart beat faster, as if Valless was causing Ruth to vanish more quickly.

Valless had highlighted the A.A. van in pale turquoise, so it was quite easy to track. He pulled back the perspective, and directed their attention back to the tower.

“Less than thirty seconds later, the ostensible Human Service’s representative also took her leave.”

This vehicle was highlighted in a bright violet. Although air traffic did not follow roads as such, traffic patterns created the illusion of them in the trackless sky. It became rapidly evident that the two vehicles were following the same route.

“Where do they end up, Vincent?” Michael said. “I’m assuming they end up at the same place?”

“Yes, sir. At the Colonial Memorial Spaceport.”

“No!” Judith gasped, but she was already on her feet, heading for the door.

Dinah grabbed her. “Judith, this was twenty minutes ago. Nothing can be gained by blindly following them.”

Reluctantly, Judith slowed. She looked at Michael. He was looking at Valless.

“Yes, sir,” Valless said in answer to an unasked question. “I’ve accessed the records from the cameras inside the spaceport. However, no one matching our two alleged kidnapers has left the parking facility and entered the port.”

“Aren’t there cameras in the garage?” Todd asked indignantly.

“There are, Lieutenant Liatt,” Valless said, “but they don’t provide a hundred percent coverage. My assessment of the situation is that the kidnapers had located one or more of these blind spots in advance, and made their arrangements accordingly.”

“Reasonable,” Todd said, “but where did they go? Did they go into the port, or did they merely use the garage as somewhere to change vehicles?”

Judith felt that urge to scream again, to remind them all that this was no intellectual puzzle, but her living breathing daughter they were discussing. Dinah's hand tightened on her arm, and Judith nodded. Screaming would not help, any more than tears and protests had stopped Ephraim Templeton from raping his twelve-year-old "wife."

I must think, she thought. I must put aside that this is Ruth, and think.

"Lieutenant Valless," she said, "did you get a good image of the woman from Human Services?"

"Not a very good one," he admitted. "I believe she'd studied where the cameras were, and did her best to assure that her hand or hair would 'accidentally' block her face from view. You will note that the man from A.A. managed something similar between his uniform cap and the boxes he was carrying."

"Not a trick," Michael said, "that would work at Mount Royal, but perfectly fine for an apartment building. Still, Vincent, pull me what you can. Judith, how did your image come out?"

"Fairly well," she said. "I think."

"Feed it to me as well," Michael said, "and I'll combine it with what Vincent has. I have some video feed of Ruth in here already."

He made a few adjustments with his minicomputer as the data came in, then nodded to Valless.

"All right, Vincent. Access images of the incoming traffic from the garage into the spaceport—for traffic, arriving passengers, and the like. I've set up a program to search for any one of our three targets, separately or in combination. We'll see what comes up."

"Separately?" Dinah asked.

"That's right. We don't know that the same kidnapers will be operating at all stages. The woman from H.S. and the A.A. man might have handed Ruth over to someone else."

"You say 'Ruth,' " Todd said curiously. "Don't you mean the box?"

"I don't," Michael said. "You've been in the Navy too long, bud. Routine security scans quite likely would find a child in a packing crate. My guess is that they've done a few things to change her appearance, and will bring her through as a sleepy little girl. No bored security officer would look twice except to be grateful that she's not screaming or whining."

"Maybe," Judith said eagerly, "we should call the space port, ask..."

She stopped herself, shook her head. "I forgot. That would start questions, and while our enemies might like questions and the scandal they might generate, that's the last thing we want."

Michael nodded. His dark brown gaze was abstracted, watching the datafeed, but his voice was perfectly alert.

"Judith, I don't care about the scandal, neither will Elizabeth when she understands why I did it. Just let me..."

"No!" Judith said firmly. "I'm glad you and the Queen would be so willing to accept disgrace, but disgrace is the least of this. If the alliance with Grayson is disrupted, lives will be lost. How can I sacrifice someone else—many someone else—for anyone, even my own daughter?"

And, she thought to herself, how can I sacrifice you, who have been my friend? I know I should care more about Ruth, and I do care more about Ruth, but I care about you, too, Michael Winton. I care...

"Judith," Michael said quietly, "if it comes down to a choice between letting them get away with Ruth and our calling in reinforcements, I'm calling in the reinforcements." He looked up from his display for a moment. "If we get her back, the scandal will be survivable, trust me, and I am *not* losing your daughter."

"Michael—" she began, then stopped herself.

What am I going to say to him? How noble can I be? This is my child. The trigger for our entire

~~escape was to save her from being aborted by Ephraim, murdered before she was even born! God only knows what he'll do to her now, if only to punish me. I can't let her be handed back over to him, but I can't hurt Michael, either, so—~~

She forced her mind away from those uncomfortable thoughts and said aloud, "I'm tired of being used. Even if permitting someone to use you shamefully would get Ruth back, how could I ever feel safe again? No. I'll get her back. *We'll* get her back, without giving them *any* of the scandals they want, and then..."

The words trailed off into inarticulate fury, but Judith was saved from having to explain what one lone refugee could do against those who had orchestrated this kidnapping by a sharp beep from Michael's minicomp.

"Match!" he said. "I'll bring up the image."

He did. It showed a delightfully domestic unit. A man, a woman, and a sleepy little boy in a pram. The man was guiding along a trunk that hovered on anti-grav skids. The woman pushed the pram. Both looked peaceful as they turned to follow signs directing them to "private vessels."

"That woman doesn't look anything like the one Judith was designing," Todd said dubiously. "The H.S. lady looked like a Valkyrie turned executive secretary. This one is almost dumpy."

"Near perfect match," Michael said satisfied. "The program ignores the things that have distracted you like hair color, weight, and attire. It focuses on subtleties like posture, shape of the eye, bone structure."

"Is that little boy..." Judith asked.

"Even a closer match," Michael said. "They've cut her hair and darkened it, changed her clothes. With her asleep, she's not going to be talking and giving anything away. And—" he smiled thinly—"they lost time doing it, too."

He shook his head to dissuade further conversation. "I want to track where they're headed."

No one spoke as the images zipped down corridors, through tubes, and down underpasses. The little family never paused, but they never hurried either. They acted like what they seemed: a moderately well-off family, heading back to their ship.

Perhaps the father worked for a company located on Sphinx or Gryphon, and had brought the family to the city with him for the day. A nice outing. Now they'd take the company ship back home.

Or perhaps they were wealthy enough to own a ship of their own. Interplanetary vessels were not as expensive as hyper capable. As the Star Kingdom became more prosperous, such "commuter ships" didn't turn a head, and could even be considered economical if the time savings aspects were computed into the equation.

Michael was slowing down the image. "Shuttle pad twenty-seven. And the shuttle on it was registered to *Banshee* out of Sphinx. Vincent can—"

"I'm already on it, sir."

The words were polite as ever, but Judith was pleased by the thrill of excitement that underlay them. Vincent Valless was completely committed to their mission.

"It's registered to Highland Mining Associates of Gryphon. They have interests all over the binary system, sir, including corporate offices and subsidiaries on all three planets. I fear we won't be able to use that to anticipate *Banshee's* ultimate destination. The flight plan they filed with Astro Control doesn't state more than Sphinx as a destination."

Michael nodded, but he was now pushing himself to his feet.

"Right. That's at least a four-hour trip, and that shuttle only left the pad three minutes ago. Time for us to get moving. My air car will hold all of us."

He looked at Dinah, but the older woman only shook her head.

~~“No. I’m not coming. I’ll remain here and defuse any interest that arises. No one will be surprised
Judith goes off with her friends.”~~

“Even if she goes without her daughter?” Valless asked. “We don’t want to trigger any alerts, and
know local law enforcement does keep an eye on this area.”

Dinah shook her head, and it seemed to Judith that the older woman was trying to conceal what—
given the circumstances—seemed like a wholly inappropriate smile.

“No, I don’t think anyone will think it strange if Judith goes out without Ruth, especially if I lead
them to believe the child is with me. Go with God, my friends, and bring back our lost lamb safe and
sound. I will pray for you.”

Michael Winton gave the older woman a slight bow. “Thank you, Dinah. We’ll need every prayer
you can spare. I’m going to leave you with two very important things. One is a priority code that will
enable you to contact us if there are any difficulties. The other is a short report I’ve dictated
explaining to my sister why I’ve made the choices I did. If anything happens so that I’m not in
position to explain, I want you to get this to her.”

Dinah accepted the information, shooing them out of Judith’s apartment as if they were wayward
schoolchildren.

“I’ll take care of it. Now, go. And hurry.”

* * *

Michael was glad Judith hadn’t broken down. He thought she’d been close, but she’d managed to
collect herself. That was a relief, because if she’d started crying, then he wasn’t sure he’d have been
able to keep from gathering her up in his arms, and that would almost certainly have made matters
worse.

Even though Michael had started falling in love with Judith on the bridge of her embattled ship, he
had never spoken of his feelings—not only refusing to speak to her of his love, but to anyone else. He
wanted no pressure, no matter how subtle or well-meaning, put on her. These last two and a half years
had been the closest Judith had ever had to a life of her own, and he wanted her to have a sense of her
own self before he tried to convince her to join her life with his own.

Michael thought Todd knew how he felt about Judith, and he was beginning to think Dinah did, too.
well. He wondered how many other people had read significance into what he thought was his very
guarded, very proper behavior around the lady.

Certainly at least one person has, Michael thought grimly as he settled himself into the back seat
of the air car and let Todd handle the driving. *Or they wouldn’t have thought they could use Judith to
manipulate me.*

After giving Todd instructions and warning air-traffic control that he intended to exercise the royal
family’s priority clearance, Michael pulled out his minicomp. The ride wouldn’t be overly long at the
speed his clearance would permit, but he had an idea or two. Hopefully, before long, he’d have
narrowed the field regarding precisely who the kidnappers might be.

* * *

“Mount Royal spaceport,” Judith repeated when Michael announced their destination. “We are going
after them.”

“That’s right,” Michael reassured her, his fingers still busy with the minicomp balanced between his
hands. “I’ve already requested flight clearance for one of the ships that was set aside for me when
I came home on holiday.”

Judith now understood the flurry of quiet activity that had held Vincent Valless since they had

entered the air car. Without ever losing his attitude of quiet alertness, Valless's fingers had been skittering over his own minicomp, doubtless handling the security arrangements that would make the crown prince's arrival and departure so fluid as to almost create the impression Michael Winton was an ordinary person, who could come and go as he chose.

Michael touched a send icon on his minicomp and looked up at her, his dark brown eyes holding an expression both serious and reassuring.

"*Banshee*," he explained, "is a *Pryderi*-class ship. It's a nice little runabout—bigger than a standard cargo shuttle, but not a lot—and it's got some fairly comfortable passenger accommodations. But it's an off-the-shelf civilian design, and it's way too small to be hyper-capable. That means they aren't getting out of the system without our being able to track them. And anything we can track, we can chase.

"And, speaking of chasing," he smiled that thin smile again, "*Ogapoge*, the ship I've arranged for you to take, is an *Arrow*-class. The *Pryderis* aren't bad, but they use standard civilian components because they were designed for economic maintenance and extended service life. The *Arrows*, on the other hand, use *Navy* components. BuShips designed them as high-speed intrasystem VIP transports, and they're a little smaller than the *Pryderis*, which gives them a higher acceleration rate. And *Ogapoge* is one of the *Arrow-Alphas*. That means she's armed."

Ruth's eyes widened, and he shook his head.

"Don't be thinking they're any sort of warship, Ruth. They've basically got the same weapons fit as a standard assault shuttle, but they were intended from the beginning for really *important* VIPs." This time, his smile was more than a little crooked. "Vincent's people will actually let me fly around in orbit of these without insisting that an entire destroyer follow me around 'just in case.'"

Judith nodded in understanding, and he shrugged.

"*Banshee*'s acceleration rate is going to be somewhere around four or five percent lower than ours, but their particle screening is just as good, so we won't be any faster than they are once we're both up to maximum safe cruising speed. Still, we'll *reach* max speed faster than they will, and we'll decelerate faster, too, so it's probable we'll make up time in pursuit. But," he looked at Judith, offering her the honesty she deserved, "it won't be a lot, I'm afraid."

"How long will it take us to get there?" Judith asked.

"If they're going to Sphinx?" Michael replied. "I've run the numbers, and a *Pryderi* should do it in roughly four hours and fifty minutes. We can only shave about seven or eight minutes off of that time, and they'll have a good twenty-minute head start. That means we aren't going to catch them short of the planet, but we'll be right on their heels, certainly close enough to see where they go, and we can come ahead to have a shuttle waiting for us when we make orbit. I expect we'll have just a few advantages when it comes to getting Astro Control to clear us to planet, too. We may actually be on the ground before they are—assuming they're headed for the surface, and not one of the orbital habitats. If we don't beat them down, it'll be neck-and-neck, at the very worst."

"And *Ogapoge* is large enough to fit us all?" Judith asked.

"More than," Michael said. "I'd hoped..."

A funny note came into his voice and he cleared his throat and started over again.

"I'd hoped to take some friends out to see more of the other planets in-system, but I wasn't sure just how large our party might end up being."

Judith blinked. *He means me. I'm sure he means he wanted to take me and Ruth out. And he prepared from the start not only for the two of us, but whoever I might want with us so I wouldn't think the word of him... And bodyguards. Always bodyguards.*

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