

Across a
Star-Swept
Sea

DIANA PETERFREUND


author of *For Darkness Shows the Stars*



across a star-swept sea

DIANA PETERFREUND

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Dedication

For Eleanor, who is brilliant and beautiful and brave

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The history of the human race pivots on two points: the development of agriculture, which created civilization, and the Reduction, which destroyed it.

Before the Reduction, the few impoverished or dissenting peoples who didn't genetically engineer their offspring had been the object of scorn and pity. But a generation later, when these "perfect" children could only produce mentally and physically impaired Reduced babies, it proved what a colossal mistake had been made. The bulk of humanity affected by this tragedy—the Lost—did not accept defeat lightly. Instead, they turned on those who'd escaped unscathed, making them the target of envy, hatred . . . and, with the Wars of the Lost, utter annihilation.

After the wars were over, the survivors looked with horror and dismay upon what they had wrought. There was hardly any place left on Earth to make a life, and few untainted by Reduction left to live one.

In desperation, two poor servants defied their Lost masters. Out of the wars' most terrible weapons they terraformed a new home, an oasis in the wreckage of the world: New Pacifica. There, they declared, they'd rule forever over those responsible for the Earth's destruction.

It didn't work out that way.

—“HUMAN RIGHTS IN ALBION”
A TERM PAPER BY LADY PERSIS BLAKE

* Note: Though Lady Blake received an A– on this essay, her instructor saw fit to send a flutternote to her father, Lord Torin Blake, regarding the propriety of a young lady using such incendiary language. Lord Blake responded: “Actually, that sounds about right to me.”

One

IF THE WILD POPPY dared return to Galatea, Citizen Cutler was ready. He'd stationed armed guards at the entrance to the estate and placed an additional ten soldiers around the perimeter of the taro fields. Though no Reduced could even attempt escape, Cutler knew the real danger came from outside. The flowery Albian spy had "liberated" at least a dozen enemies of the revolution in the last few months, but it wouldn't happen on Cutler's watch.

During the better part of the morning, a sea breeze had moved across the sunken fields, stirring the taro leaves and making the water shiver and ripple like the skin of a snake. The Reduced prisoners moved slowly and methodically through their plots, following an ancient and, frankly, unnecessary tradition of cutting each root by hand and replanting the stalk to be ready for the next harvest.

The former lord of the estate—his name was Lacan, though Cutler doubted the man remembered after being Reduced—sloshed and stumbled through the field, hacking away at the taro stalks with a knife entirely too dull for the purpose. His gray hair was matted to his neck with sweat and mud, and his once-haughty mouth hung slack and stupid. As Cutler watched, the man's grip slipped, and the blade sank deep into his thumb.

Lacan wailed, and the guards began to hoot and holler. Cutler didn't budge from his position, leaning against one of the unused harvesting machines. Let his soldiers have their entertainment. It was boring enough out here on the rural east coast.

"Shouldn't we help?" asked his newest recruit, a girl who hardly looked old enough for basic training. Her name was Trina Delmar, she'd arrived this morning, and she never shut up. "Looks like he cut himself pretty bad."

Cutler shrugged and spat into the swamp. Silly girl. It was always the girls who got weepy over watching the prisoners. "That's the former master of this plantation. Do you think his kind ever cared for the thumbs of your ancestors, back when they kept Galatea in their grip?"

"Grip's not so good anymore!" cracked another guard.

"Don't feel bad for these aristos, Citizen Delmar," Cutler went on. "Had they ever cared about you, the cure for Reduction would have been discovered long before it was."

That's why it took a reg to make the Helo Cure, two generations back. For hundreds of years before the cure, most people who weren't aristos were born Reduced, sickly and simpleminded. They said only one in twenty had been a natural-born reg, with a regular brain and intellect. The Helo Cure stopped Reduction in a single generation—after the cure, every baby born was regular.

And now, thanks to this new Reduction drug of the revolutionaries, the aristos would have their turns wallowing in the muck. Out in the field, the old lord was wailing and clutching his wounded hand to his chest. Cutler gave him a week—two at most. Reduction wasn't designed to be a death sentence, but sharp knives and idiots rarely mixed.

"But Lord Lacan actually fought to distribute the cure to the Reduced," Trina said, "back when he was young. I've seen a picture of him with Persistence Helo—"

Cutler glowered down at her. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Citizen. If he’s here, means he’s an enemy of the revolution. An enemy of regulars like us.”

But Trina was still casting pitiful glances at Lacan. The recruit had been an annoyance ever since she’d shown up, questioning the pill dosage and schedule, as if it mattered that Cutler handed out the pink Reduction pills slightly more often than required. Once they were Reduced, it wasn’t like a few extra pinks could make them stupider. Plus, Cutler liked to watch the aristos writhe a little. Not much else to do all the way out here.

Now that idiot recruit was in the field. She was approaching Lacan, who’d returned to ineffectual swiping at the taro stalks with his uninjured hand. That was the Reduced for you. They’d work until they collapsed.

“Back to your post, Delmar!” Cutler cried. He wasn’t about to be shown up by some freshly cooled recruit.

The recruit ignored him and smeared some ointment on Lacan’s injured thumb before wrapping it in a bandage.

“Did I tell you to administer aid to this Reduced slime?” Cutler said, churning into the field and slamming the butt of his gun into Lacan’s side. The old man fell into the taro, and Trina wince. “You’d better watch it, Delmar. I’d hate to give a bad report to Citizen Aldred.”

Trina didn’t even look up. Good. Maybe he’d scared her back into line.

“You’re not here to help them. You’re here to keep them away from the Wild Poppy. Every time we lose a prisoner to Albion, it undermines the revolution.”

“What undermines the revolution,” she snapped back, “is—” but she ducked her head and went silent when she saw the dark look on his face.

Just then, a skimmer zipped down the path between the fields, dust clouding up from its lifter. There was an empty caged platform behind the cab. “Officer!” called the driver, a young man wearing a military uniform.

Cutler waded back to the edge of the field and squinted up into the cab. Trina trailed after, to her further irritation.

“Transfer request,” the driver said, holding out his left hand. His oblet sparked to life in his palm, revealing a hologram of Citizen Aldred’s face.

“All Reduced on outer plantations are to be transferred back to Halahou city prison,” came Aldred’s voice from the image.

“I’ve heard nothing of this.” Cutler pulled out his own oblet, and its black surface glinted in the sun like the obsidian pebble it was named for. No new messages from Halahou. No new messages at all.

The boy shrugged. His military cap shaded his eyes. “Figures. I get bad reception out here in the middle of nowhere, too.”

Cutler snorted in agreement. “So what’s the problem?”

“I think—” The boy jiggled his oblet, as the message fizzed in and out. “It’s the Wild Poppy,” he explained as they waited for it to reload. “Citizen Aldred said even the increased guard isn’t sufficient to keep the spy from stealing our prisoners.”

“I’ve taken care of that.” And if Aldred would leave the comfort of Halahou occasionally and come see what his lieutenants were doing out here in the country, maybe he’d know it. But Cutler would never say that aloud. Citizen Aldred had liberated them all—first from their uncaring, foolish queen and now from the aristos who had followed her lead.

“Here it is,” said the driver, as the image of Aldred began speaking again.

“All Reduced prisoners to be fitted with nanotech collars to prevent removal from Galatea Island.”

foreign forces.”

The boy leaned out of the cab and dropped his voice. “I heard the collars will choke ’em to death the Poppy takes them off Galatea.” The boy smirked, and Cutler grinned. This was the type of recruit he needed around here. Tough-minded and right thinking.

Nanotech collars. Now that would be a sight to see. If only Cutler could get rid of all his idiots so easily. Then again, maybe he could. “Delmar, you help this boy load up the prisoners and accompany him back to the capital.”

“That’s not necessary—” the boy began.

“Oh, but it is,” said Cutler. “I haven’t kept these prisoners under control all this time just to have the Wild Poppy break my streak on their last trip across the island. Her recruit form says she’s good with a gun.” He nodded at Trina, who was already gathering the aristos. “And it’ll do her good to see how the revolution *wants* these prisoners handled.” It would also get the aggravating recruit out of his hair.

The boy scowled, but Cutler shrugged it off. Trina Delmar could be *his* problem now.

IF ASKED, PERSIS BLAKE would have agreed with the odious Citizen Cutler on precisely one point: the young recruit was indeed her problem. But it wasn’t an insurmountable one. After all, Persis had just single-handedly scooped up the Lacan family right from under the nose of ten soldiers and the officer. Persis could handle one more revolutionary, even if this Citizen Delmar was sitting in her skimmer.

And though the increased guard presence was a nuisance, Persis couldn’t help but feel a jolt of pride that, after six months of missions, the revolution was finally recognizing that the Wild Poppy was a real threat. Now, she just had to figure out how to get out of this predicament without ruining it all.

Think, Persis, think. Her long hair itched, shoved up under her Galatean military cap, but she ignored it, focusing instead on the girl sitting quietly by her side as Persis maneuvered the skimmer down the raised path that crisscrossed the swampy taro fields. Citizen Delmar looked too young to be a soldier; but then again, at sixteen, Persis was far too young to be her country’s most infamous spy, so she knew well how deceiving looks could be.

And whoever Trina Delmar was, she’d gotten on that officer’s nerves, which alone was worthy of more investigation. Persis had easily pegged the officer as the sort of petty, sadistic man who wouldn’t even bother to double-check his orders as long as Persis promised to inflict yet more cruelty on the prisoners. Her new palmport app was working wonders—with it, she could remix syllables from any of Aldred’s propaganda speeches to create whatever message she desired on her dumb oblet.

“I didn’t realize we recruited so young,” Persis said as they crossed the old wooden bridge that separated the Lacan estate from the main road. She’d left the jammers she’d used to block incoming messages to the officer’s oblet on, just in case someone on the plantation figured out the truth and tried to message Trina. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” the girl said so quickly Persis knew it must be a lie. “And you’re one to talk. Your voice hasn’t even changed yet.”

Perhaps this was a bad topic. She adopted a slightly gruffer grumble. “So you’re good with a gun? Best to know, especially since Persis’s one weapon was concealed beneath the gloves of her disguise and the supplements she’d taken were only good for a single shot.

“Very,” said the soldier, and her tone was more matter-of-fact than defensive this time, so it was

probably true.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Persis said, though she was thinking the opposite. “We wouldn’t want to be caught by the Poppy without any defenses.”

The skimmer picked up speed as it left the sunken maze of taro fields and hovered along the road bordering the northern coast. To the right sat cliffs and, far below, the black sand beaches that formed the boundary of Galatea. Beyond lay the glittering sea separating them from Persis’s home of Albion. The two islands were shaped like crescents about to kiss, but this far east, the distant shore was a bit too far to make out with the naked eye.

The guard was not enjoying the view. Instead, she cast a quick look back at the pathetic lot of prisoners huddled on the bed near the intake fans. “Careful with your speed. Those prisoners have had a tough enough day already.”

Persis raised her eyebrows. Sympathy from a revolutionary guard? Well, that was unexpected. She decided to press. “There was a Reduced—a true Reduced—living near me when I was very young. Probably the last one left alive. But he wasn’t like . . . this. Mute, yes, stupid, yes. But not the clumsy, broken people.”

There were those throughout history, and especially before the wars, who had believed in gods and immortal beings meting out punishments and rewards to humans based on some rarefied score sheet. Some believed that Reduction was retribution by these gods for humankind’s attempt to perfect themselves. Of course, that was silly.

Humans had been attempting to perfect themselves since the dawn of time. They created tools because they had no fangs or claws. They created clothes since they had no fur or scales. They invented eyeglasses to see and vehicles to travel faster; they protected their bodies from diseases and performed surgery to cut out things that could hurt them. They’d genetically engineered themselves before and after Reduction. It hadn’t been a punishment—it had been an unfortunate genetic mistake.

It shouldn’t be a punishment now, either. And Persis wouldn’t rest until she’d stopped it.

“They say it’s exactly what real Reduction was like.” Trina was parroting the party line.

Persis pressed harder. “Who says?”

“Everyone!” Trina snapped. “The . . . medics who made it. And Citizen Aldred, of course. You’re not going to get charged with insubordination if you keep talking like that.”

Persis rounded a curve and began to climb the bluff to the promontory where Andrine lay in wait. This Trina was a mystery Persis didn’t have the leisure to unravel. As she straightened the steering wheel, she began to loosen the fastening of the glove covering the palmport on her left hand.

“Oh, I can do better than that. Want to hear?” Persis asked.

“No,” the girl lied, even as she leaned forward.

“I think Reducing aristos is cruel and unusual punishment,” she stated, yanking the glove off as she drove. “I think that instead of changing things for the regs in Galatea, the revolution’s just punishing aristos.”

The girl’s mouth was open in shock, which was convenient for Persis’s purposes. She’d needed a direct hit for the knockout drug to work. She lifted her hand and summoned her focus. . . .

“I think it might be, too,” the girl said, and Persis stopped.

She lowered her hand back to the steering wheel. “You do?” Maybe she had this girl all wrong. A Galatean soldier could be a true help to the League of the Wild Poppy—particularly if she was good with a gun. That was one area where Persis’s expertise was lacking. After all, they didn’t teach combat at cotillion.

The girl nodded. “But I’m not stupid enough to say it. You’re as bad as my brother. I swear.”

everyone around here is asking for trouble. Now, you keep your eyes on the road and I'll keep lookout for the Wild Poppy."

Persis sighed. At the top of the bluff, a large, bare rock jutted out from the cliff, the remnant of some old explosion from the island's fiery birth. Persis clenched her jaw, readying the command to her palmport even as she steered the skimmer to a steady stop.

"What are you doing?" Trina spluttered, straightening. In the caged bed, the Reduced prisoners were watching them with wary eyes.

Persis opened her hand, but the moment Trina caught sight of the golden disk set in her palm, she lunged at Persis and they both careened out of the cab.

"Who are you?" she screamed as they landed in the dust. Even as she fell, Persis withdrew the mental command to her palmport, halting the app. She couldn't afford to use it unless she had a clear shot.

Trina was reaching for her gun, and Persis kicked and slapped, trying desperately to dislodge the soldier's grip. The pistol thumped against the ground and slid beneath the skimmer's lifts.

"Stop!" Trina cried.

"You stop!" Persis shouted back, struggling to fight the girl as they each lunged toward the gun. Where was Andrine? She could certainly use backup right now. The Reduced watched silently from the cage. She wished any of them still had a mind.

At the same moment, both their hands closed tight around the gun barrel and they wrestled in the grass. Trina raked her nails across Persis's face and knocked off her cap, then reeled back in surprise as hair the color of frangipani came tumbling down on them both. Persis used the opportunity to wrench the gun from the recruit's grip.

"You're a girl?" Trina spluttered.

Persis stood, gun trained on Trina. She sighed and swept her yellow and white ropes of hair out of her face with her free hand. "This surprises you? *You're a girl.*"

The girl's face was filled with disgust. Persis shook her head and shrugged. It was disappointing, really. They were *almost* in agreement.

Trina, her face contorted with rage, kicked out and swept Persis's feet out from under her. Persis felt the girl's fingers on her gun, and everything was a cloud of dust and hands and white and yellow hair.

Out of nowhere, she heard a chittering, and a red streak darted between them, sinking sharp little teeth into Trina's shoulder.

Trina screamed and again pulled away, and Persis scrambled to her feet. "Slipstream, heel."

The sea mink let go of Trina, trotted obediently to Persis's side, and wiped his whiskers with his flippery paw. His long, sleek body was damp from his latest swim, and the soldier's blood hardened against his deep red fur.

Still holding the gun on the girl, Persis caught sight of Andrine racing up, her ocean-blue hair trailing out behind her. "So good of you to show up," Persis said to her friend.

"Sorry for the delay." Andrine unlocked the cage and began unloading the prisoners. "You didn't mention you were bringing an enemy combatant."

"Last-minute addition," Persis replied lightly. Trina was still crouched on the ground, holding her bleeding neck with both hands.

"I know who you are," she said with a sob. "You're the Wild Poppy."

"What a brilliant deduction," Andrine said as she helped the last of the victims off the truck. "Exactly how long did that take to put together?"

Persis gave her friend a quick look. Now, now, there was no need to be smug. They were pointing *gun* at the poor girl.

“And you’re finished,” the soldier spat angrily. “You have no idea who you’re dealing with. You have no—”

Now Andrine chuckled. “Awfully high-and-mighty for a girl who was almost a snack for a se
mink, isn’t she?”

The soldier’s eyes were wide and wild. “I’m going to tell Citizen Aldred everything.”

“Oh, really?” Persis said, tilting the barrel of the gun toward the girl’s face. “How do you plan
do that from beyond the grave?”

At once she felt a hand on her elbow. At first, Persis thought it was Andrine’s, though she knew her
friend had more faith than that. Persis wasn’t actually going to *shoot* the soldier. After all, she still had
her palmport dose—she could just knock her out. She risked a glance out of the corner of her eye.

Lord Lacan stood there, silent, an expression nearing clarity in his somber old eyes.

Persis lowered her arm. “It appears you have made a powerful friend, little Galatean.” She sighed.
“But what to do with you? You have no idea what it is you’re fighting for.”

“Of course I do,” said Trina. “My country.”

Persis stared at her for a moment, then laughed. “I was going to say you were very foolish, seeing
how outnumbered you are. But in fact, you’re terminally brave. And that should never be snuffed.
Besides, I like your style. That move with your foot there almost had me. Very well, then. I will let the
Lord Lacan decide what will happen to you.”

Trina looked baffled. “But he’s Reduced. He can’t even help himself.”

“Don’t worry, little soldier,” Persis said as something began to spin out of the golden disk set
the center of her palm. The girl’s mouth had opened again, which was remarkably convenient. “We
take care of that part, too.”

A moment later, Trina Delmar collapsed on the ground.

Another mission accomplished.

Two

THE ROYAL COURT OF Albion was often likened to a riotous garden, but it buzzed with more than bees and was filled with colors never found in nature. Bougainvillea hedges encircled the public court and hibiscus topiaries lined the aisles, but no flowers could compete with the whirlwind of gowns, cloaks, leis, and most of all, the towering hairstyles of the island's most fashionable aristocrats. Their chatter drowned out the sounds of the sea beyond, the constant hum of flutternotes zipping to and fro among the courtiers, and even the delicate tinkle of the famous Albion water organ.

One particularly crowded corner was currently occupied by Lady Persis Blake and her retinue of admirers. This evening she wore a simple, bright yellow sarong fastened about her neck with a length of crocheted gold links, and a matching gold wristlock—the leather fingerless glove that covered the palmport on her left hand. The elegant fall of her gown could only be achieved using the finest Galatean silk, a difficult product to come by since the revolution began, but you could count on Persis Blake to have the inside scoop on where to get the best fabrics. Its hue matched exactly the yellow tones in her hair, which had been twisted, braided, and otherwise arranged so that its upswept yellow and-white strands resembled the frangipani flower on the Blake family crest. Her beauty stood out even among the kaleidoscope throng of the court.

In the six months since Princess Isla had ascended the throne as regent and brought along her old school chum as her chief lady-in-waiting, Persis had become one of the court's most glittering and popular members. Hardly anyone remembered a time when a party or a boating trip or luau was complete without the addition of Albion's loveliest, silliest socialite.

Even better, almost no one at court had been at school with Persis before she'd dropped out—not one who could paint a very different picture of the girl who was gaining quite the reputation for being nothing more than stylish, sweet, and above all stupid.

Along with her gown and her jewelry, today Persis wore a look of sheer boredom as the conversation took a turn in the direction of the revolution. The casual observer would guess it was because such an ornamental creature would find politics a tedious topic.

The truth was, no one here had a clue what Galatea was really like these days.

"The southerners' civil war will spread to our shores," said one young courtier with obvious aspirations to the Royal Council. "And when it does, we must quell any reg uprising before we find ourselves in the same predicament as the Galateans."

"Surely not," Persis said. "It's hard enough finding silk merchants in Galatea who remain open these days. I'll simply die if the Albion shops close down, too."

"How like a woman." The courtier chuckled indulgently. "Lady Blake, if there's a revolution against the aristos in Albion, what you wear is going to be the last of your concerns."

"Never!" Persis replied. "I have a reputation to uphold. We mustn't let a silly thing like war make us forget our duties."

There was another ripple of laughter among the young men sitting near her.

“I’m serious!” she added, forming her mouth into a pink pout. “Even with my responsibility Princess Isla and her royal wardrobe, my dear papa hardly ever lets me sail down to visit the shops Halahou anymore. He says he fears for my safety, but you’d think he’d spare just a smidge of concern for my clothes as well. If any of you fine gentlemen know the identity of the Wild Poppy, won’t you please ask him to rescue us some dressmakers on his next trip to Galatea? It’s getting old that all he’s been rescuing lately are other aristos. Honestly, they aren’t useful for anything but competition.”

“If I knew the identity of the Poppy,” said one of the courtiers, “I’d be the most popular man on both islands. In Albion all the ladies would adore me”—several ladies tittered as proof—“and in Galatea, I’d be Citizen Aldred’s very best friend. The Poppy is Galatea’s most wanted.”

“Then my proposal would solve everyone’s problems,” Persis argued. “Citizen Aldred probably wouldn’t mind so much the loss of a tailor or two, and I would get that meticulous Galatean attention to sartorial detail that I’ve been missing. Everyone wins!”

“Except the aristos,” mumbled another of the courtiers, but no one listened to him. After all, talk of prisoners was deemed ever so dull by the Albion courtiers, and thinking about Galatean aristos they knew who might even now be imprisoned did terrible things to one’s mood.

Just once, Persis wished she could steer the conversation in this direction instead of away from it. Would things change if more aristos started questioning the Council’s hands-off position regarding the war? Would it be worth it to try, even if it endangered her carefully wrought disguise?

She looked up to see Tero Finch gesturing to her from the edge of the circle. As a freshly cooled member of the Royal College of Engineers, Tero’s clothes weren’t quite as stylish as the aristos surrounding him, but his height, broad shoulders, and perfectly dyed metallic bronze hair still had several of the young ladies turning his way. “Persis,” he called, “the princess can see us now.”

With a trilling laugh that grated even on her own ears, Persis sprang to her feet. “I must leave you lovely. Please make sure to have some good gossip when I return.”

She met Tero, and together they ascended the wide marble steps to the terrace.

“Where’s my sister?” Tero asked under his breath. “You didn’t get Andrine arrested, did you?”

“Probably in Scintillans Village by now, safe and sound and doing her homework,” Persis reassured him as they entered the throne room of the princess regent of Albion. Tero was convinced Persis and Andrine were risking their lives with every trip to Galatea. That he was right hadn’t dissuaded them yet.

The sunset filtered through bamboo blinds drawn over the colonnade that formed the outer wall of the room. Vases three meters high were stuffed with drooping palm fronds strung with orchid leis, and the scent of the royal flower hung heavily in the room. Princess Isla sat in the middle of the floor, heedless of the giant white cushions strewn nearby. Her wide-legged white pants were gathered in bunches in her lap, and her white cape lay forgotten on one of the chaises behind her. For a moment Persis could imagine they were children again, playing with puzzles or building pillow volcanoes on the floor.

Isla held her left hand out to the toddler who sat before her, a bright-eyed boy who squealed with delight at the tiny golden threads leaping around on Isla’s fingertips.

“It works!” Tero cried, dropping to his knees at the princess’s side.

“Another new app?” Persis asked as she gathered the trailing ends of her yellow sarong and sat down, too. Tero seemed to spend half his time at his new job in the Royal College of Engineers developing palmport apps for Isla.

And the other half secretly working for the League of the Wild Poppy.

So now it was jumping threads. The week before it had been an app that would allow Isla to contr

the playlist on the water organ in the courtyard. And before that, Tero had cooked up some code that combined optic identification with a visual skin, which if you ran the app made Councilman Shift look like an armadillo. Anything to make Isla laugh, or even forget for a moment that she wasn't just the schoolmate anymore. She wasn't just Persis's best friend. One little accident, and she'd found herself an orphan, a mother, and a ruler of a country on the brink of war.

"What kind of supplements does it take to run it?" Persis asked, as if none of that mattered, and they could talk as they used to.

"Intense ones," Isla said with a sigh, "but it's a real flare with the king." She shrugged, and the figures crumbled into shimmering dust around the gold disk inset in the center of her palm. The baby squawked in protest, but Isla grabbed him and turned him upside down until he started laughing again.

"The King of Albion," Tero added with mock haughtiness, "has exquisite taste for a child who only recently began walking." He smiled at Isla and bowed his head. "I'm glad you liked it, your Highness."

Your Highness. When had Tero gotten so formal? There'd been no bows ten years ago when he was crashing their slumber parties and chucking cuttle jellies at their heads.

But a lot had changed since then.

Isla watched Tero leave, then patted the king on his diapered bottom. "All right, Albie. Go play while your sister talks to Auntie Persis."

The infant King of Albion obeyed, toddling into the waiting arms of his nurse.

"Princess," said Persis gaily, keeping careful watch of the toddler and his keeper, "I've just come back from Galatea and I've brought you some . . . lovely silks."

"More of the usual?" asked Isla, lying back against the cushions and flicking a few locks of her silver hair behind her shoulders. Unlike Persis's hair, Isla's color was natural. Everyone knew the hair of Albion royals went white in their teens—it was such a genetic signature of the dynasty that even Isla still had the dark Polynesian hair of their youth, she would have had the color removed. It was hard enough gaining recognition as the island's rightful ruler.

Persis giggled. Loudly. "Are you telling me you're bored by my efforts to bring you the best Galatea has to offer?"

"Not at all," Isla replied, darting another glance at the king's nursemaid, "but I find myself more curious about another Albion smuggling Galatean goods to my shore. I've heard rumors the Wild Poppy has just concluded another raid today."

"I've heard so, too," replied Persis, taking care that her tone was every bit as gossipy. "Apparently he rescued Lord Lacan and all his family."

"Even the children?"

Persis nodded.

Isla could not contain her smile. She immediately sobered, however. "But that's only six. I heard the Poppy made off with ten refugees."

"Goodness, Princess!" Persis exclaimed. "You can't expect *me* to know anything about that!"

"Persis . . ." Isla could look very royal indeed, when she chose.

"A few regs who ran afoul of revolutionary principles . . ." Persis confessed, "most likely."

"*Most likely,*" Isla repeated, pursing her lips, "knowing what a soft sell the Wild Poppy is. I wonder whatever *he* thinks I'll do with all the reg refugees he crowds onto my shores."

Persis gave her friend a hopeful smile. "*He* probably thinks you'll do right by them, given what benevolent despot you are." She'd been teasing Isla with the title for years, ever since they'd learned in ancient history classes. But school was out now, for both of them. Isla was the de facto ruler of the

island, and Persis—well, Persis had other activities to keep her occupied.

“~~And give my Council members yet another reason to suspect I know his identity?~~” Isla asked. Albie’s nursemaids were maintaining a respectful distance, but you never could tell.

“Surely they don’t think that?” said Persis, looking skeptical. “I thought everyone in Albion knew you care for nothing but competing with me for being the prettiest dressed woman on the island. You’re regent in name only, and you intend to let the Council decide the direction of the country until the king comes of age.”

Isla stared at Persis, a warning blazing in her dark eyes. Persis stared at Isla, a twinkle in her amber eyes.

“Fine,” said the princess at last, giving her friend an indulgent smile.

Inwardly, Persis breathed a sigh of relief. Isla might be the most regular-friendly ruler Albion had ever known, but she felt no particular obligation to the regs from Galatea, especially since it had been their revolution that had torn the country asunder.

Yet Persis couldn’t help but pity the poor regs she’d rescued while on the Lacan mission. They’d been trying to lead simple lives, untouched by the perverted aims of the revolution, and had been reduced merely for standing in support of the innocent Lacans.

This war was a travesty. If only she could save them all.

If only Albion would. But Persis knew Isla’s hands were tied. And while her friend focused on the needs of her nation, Persis did what she could to provide the assistance both girls wished the country would.

“What do you think the Council *would* say to the Wild Poppy, if it had the chance?” she asked the princess.

““Stop bringing us poor people?”” Isla suggested.

Persis snorted with derision. “Even the Galatean aristos are poor when they get here. They’ve been stripped of their estates and all their worldly possessions.”

“Not to mention their brains.”

Persis rolled her eyes. “Thankfully, that wears off.” Detoxing from the Reduction drug wasn’t a pleasant process, but it was better than the alternative.

And until the Galateans stopped punishing their regs along with their aristos, the Wild Poppy would be an equal-opportunity rescuer. Persis was a Blake, and an aristo, too, but her mother was a reg. And, more important, suffering was suffering. No one should have their mental capabilities stolen from them. Ever.

The nursemaids herded King Albie off for his nap. Isla watched them until they’d left the room. “With any luck, this revolution will wear off, too, and the Galateans flooding our shores will regain their fortunes and find a way to pay us back for our kindness.” Isla shook her head. “I was never supposed to rule, let alone to do so in such interesting times.”

Persis placed her hand on her friend’s shoulder. There were whispers in court that Isla’s father might have prevented the revolution. He could have counseled Queen Gala at the start of the strife. There were still claims that the revolutionaries had played a part in the boating accident that had claimed the lives of old King Albie, his wife, and his eldest son a little more than six months ago.

Persis didn’t believe that, but she *could* put stock in the theories that Citizen Aldred and his army acted when they did six months back because they knew that Albion, still reeling from the loss of its king and grown heir, could hardly step in to help when the Galateans deposed, and then Reduced, the queen.

Queen Gala had been the first victim of this monstrous new “Reduction drug” the revolutionaries

were calling pinks. Two weeks into her sentence, she'd been found dead in her prison cell. Another accident, the revolutionaries had claimed.

Then they'd fed the queen's corpse to her own guard beasts, the pod of mini-orcas she'd kept in her private cove near Halahou. After that night, Persis had been sure her own country would speak up against the revolution's tactics, sure that Isla's righteous fury over the death of her neighboring monarch would translate into action against her killers. But six months later, the Albian Royal Council was still dithering and, worse, preventing the princess regent from doing anything at all.

Some said they wished to avoid war at all costs. Others feared the revolution might spread to their shores. But the loudest voices of all were the ones that were using the strife as an opportunity to advance their own causes—especially the cause of making the princess look weak.

Now Isla stood and shook out her pants, which fell in creamy wrinkles to her feet. The white was strategic, too. Against the lush colors of the courtyard and the garish dress of the other courtiers, Isla stood out. Cool. Unapproachable. Unmistakable. Persis grabbed Isla's cape off the floor, but her friend made a face as she took it. "I hate this thing."

"Trappings of power," Persis said, helping her friend with the clasp. And Isla could use all the trappings she could muster, too. The Albian laws against female inheritance not only kept Isla from becoming the true queen but also made even her temporary regency suspect in the eyes of most of her people.

When the king was still alive, the Albian Royal Council had been held up as a model government compared to the Galatean queen's absolute power. In Albion, the monarch was subject to checks and balances by the Council. But now Persis and Isla saw the truth they hadn't learned in school—the Council could also hamstring the ruler and blame lack of action on her.

Their only recourse was the Wild Poppy—and they could never let anyone know.

"Ah, well. Kings of old wore feathered cloaks and giant metal crowns every day. It's a wonder they could walk." Isla sighed. "Fifteen years before my brother can take over."

"And how many before you do?" said Persis, then immediately regretted it. Isla got enough doubt from the Council and the populace. She didn't need it from her best friend.

Isla's face turned grim. "Galatea is Reducing its citizens at the rate of dozens per day. The country is being torn apart by a war. With that on the horizon, how do you think it would be viewed if I condemned the Council for their inaction?"

"I understand that, but—"

"But what, Persis?" Isla's commanding voice was tinged with an edge of frustration. "I don't want a war in Albion. If that means playing nice with the Council until the dust settles from my father's death, so be it."

The Council argued that intervening in Galatea might cause a commoner uprising on their shores. But Albian aristos were none too happy to see the court do nothing while Galatean aristos were tortured and Reduced. Isla knew it. The dangers of an aristocratic coup would hurt *her*, not Council members. And Persis was sure the Council leaders—mostly aristos—knew *that*.

"And if the Council *leads* us into civil war?"

"Then I'll count on the Wild Poppy to save us." And with that, Isla brushed aside the bamboo blinds and the two girls exited into the courtyard. Even the silly girl Persis pretended to be could read her friend's intent. The conversation was over. And perhaps that was for the best. It wasn't as if they could change anything. All Isla had was Persis, and all Persis had was the Poppy.

Outside in the courtyard, water trickled melodically through an artificial creek and down a series of musical locks. The water organ had been designed during the reign of Isla's grandfather by a naturalist.

born reg and was one of the prides of the Albion royal family. Their early support of natural-born reg as well as quick adoption of the Helo Cure were two facts the Council liked spread far and wide in order to keep the population in support of the monarchy. The state-run sanitarium for those with Dementia of Acquired Regularity—or Darkening, as most laymen called it—should have been a third but no one liked being reminded of the shadow that lay over the cure.

Not even the Darkened.

All around the courtyard, hibiscus bloomed and palm fronds waved above the heads of the courtiers, who wandered in groups, gossiping about the Wild Poppy's latest exploits or which aristocrat had been found with another's wife. Here and there you heard the buzz of flutternotes winging from person to person, carrying messages or promises or even just sensations. It was a waste of energy, but all the rage nonetheless. Persis was partly responsible for that. She supposed it couldn't be helped.

All anyone wanted to talk about was the Wild Poppy. Every aristo in Albion who wasn't claiming to be his secret lover had broadcasted a desire to become so, should the Poppy be interested. Sometimes, Persis had the wicked temptation to play a trick or two. What would they do if they did get a wild poppy-shaped flutter, telling them to, say, meet him at dawn in the gazebo on the northern promontory, wearing nothing but a lei of poppies and a smile? But she wouldn't risk it. She had real work to do.

Which reminded her. The situation with the young soldier earlier today had been far too close for comfort. Her hand drifted up to touch the towering pile of yellow and white braids, curls, and twists that was the envy of every girl at court. Persis loved her hair. She loved the way it framed her face when she studied her reflection, the way it set off the deep golden tone of her skin. She loved how each twist and knot reminded her of the hours her mother had spent with her on the stone lanai at Scintillans, teaching her how to braid.

Her mother had once been the reigning beauty of Albion, and her thick, full hair was one genetic legacy in which Persis could take pride. But if she had to sacrifice it for the Wild Poppy, for the mission, she would. After all, the days of braiding her hair with her mother on the lanai were long gone.

A flutternote buzzed about her face, shaped like a flying fish. Andrine. Persis stripped off the wristlock protecting her palmport. The flower sank seamlessly into the disk in her hand, and the message whispered across her consciousness.

Cargo safely transported to clinic. All still unconscious.

She closed her eyes briefly, focusing to compose her reply. She coded its shape as a poppy, rather than her default, the Blake family's frangipani.

Keep the soldier asleep until further notice.

"Persis?" Isla asked, eyeing the spun-sugar flutternote assembling itself on Persis's palmport. "Everything all right?"

And indeed, it was rare for Persis to conduct the Wild Poppy's business in public.

As the flutternote was whisked away on a breeze from the sea, Persis forced a smile. "Nothing I can't handle."

The soldier Persis had captured during the Lacan raid had been an unexpected complication. Until now, Persis hadn't taken anyone from Galatea except revolutionary prisoners, and she wasn't quite

prepared to deal with a prisoner of her own.

~~“I’ve been considering some improvements to my . . . workout clothing,”~~ she said meaningfully. “Conventional methods aren’t quite sufficient for our needs lately. I’m thinking of trying something a bit more . . . radical for my workout tomorrow.”

Isla regarded her for a long moment. “Genetemps are dangerous.”

“So is getting caught by the Galateans.”

The princess shook her head. “I don’t like it, Persis.”

“You don’t have to. Genetemps can be found fairly easily on the street in Galatea these days.”

“As the horror stories that make their way across the strait prove daily,” Isla replied. “How many deaths has back-alley gengineering caused since the revolutionaries stopped policing it?”

“Not as many as the revolutionaries’ own drugs.” Persis refastened the wristlock over her palm. Besides, the risk posed by a genetemp was less dangerous than wrestling a gun off a Galatean soldier as she’d had to do earlier today. And if Tero had enough free time to be making palmport apps for the amusement of Isla and Albie, he could whip up a few genetemps for her.

“What if you get sick?” Isla asked. “How ever will I explain it to your parents?”

Persis bit her lip. How would Isla react if Persis revealed that a genetemps accident might be the least of the Blake family health concerns? “You’ll tell them it was in the line of duty. That should be sufficient for Torin Blake.” And her mother, if it happened to be a day she remembered she had a daughter.

“And to the court? To the Council?”

“Easy.” She shrugged, pushing thoughts of her mother from her mind. “Everyone knows Persis Blake is foolish enough to try anything.”

Three

AS THE SUN PEEKED its head over the lip of the sea, lighting the shore with a rosy golden glow, the Ford children stopped writhing and fell into an odd, restless sleep. Sharie hoped this was normal. Her contact hadn't told her exactly what to expect from the pinks—just that the children would be easier to transport to revolutionary officials if they were already Reduced.

She didn't like the look of them, lying there on pallets with pink foam drying around their mouths. She didn't like the fact that her contact was supposed to have been here well before sunrise. If the Fords noticed the children were missing—if they found her with them like this . . .

Finally, she couldn't stand the sight of their pathetic little figures anymore, and she escaped to the beach. Soon enough, the shadow of a skimmer loomed long across the sand in front of her. She hadn't expected it from the direction of the beach but instead from the road. It didn't matter. The pickup was here at last. The driver was . . . not exactly the police escort she'd expected. Then again, maybe the revolution preferred to do such dirty work through unofficial channels. The woman was a crone, hunched and craggy, with ropes of gray hair and deep-set eyes surrounded by masses of wrinkled, peeling skin. She was swathed in a heavy, hooded robe, and as she moved to lower the skimmer's brakes to the sand, Sharie could see that her hands were encased in long linen gloves.

"You're late," said Sharie, wondering if the old woman would even be able to help her move the bodies.

The woman rolled her ancient shoulders. "Money doesn't have an expiration date. But the revolutionary army's offer does."

Sharie quickly ushered the lady into the house before she could change her mind. The three children were still unconscious but sleeping fitfully. Pink stains crackled along their cheeks and throats and lay in spongy mats in their hair.

"You gave them pinks," the woman stated flatly.

"Yes," said Sharie. "As instructed."

But the woman made no response other than, "Where's the fourth?"

"Couldn't get to her. She's the heir, so she gets her own wing." Sharie rolled her eyes. "You know aristos. Even under siege, they have to keep up appearances."

The old woman snorted, a phlegmy, disgusting sound, and reached for the leather purse hanging by her side. "So, the agreement was a hundred each, right?"

"Three hundred," Sharie corrected. She hadn't braved smuggling the children out of the Ford estate's blockade for pocket change! "Three hundred each."

The crone paused, thinking. "Well, without the heir, I won't get full price for the lot. The plan's to trade these children for Lady Ford and her husband. It's them Citizen Aldred wants—they're leading the royalist resistance. But without the heir, Lady Ford might just decide her other children are spare necessary sacrifices, just like all those guards who've been dying to keep the blockade strong against the revolutionary forces."

“They won’t,” Sharie insisted. She could see the deal crumbling before her eyes. “They might be aristos, but the Fords love all their children. Believe me, I was their nanny for five years.”

“Five years,” said the crone. “You took care of these brats, and now you’re Reducing them?” Sharie whistled through her teeth. “What are you gonna do with the money? Buy a nice new life in Halahou where you never have to take care of some aristo’s spoiled spawn again?”

Of course. Sharie had no experience other than child care, and with the aristos dropping like flies there was no one left to hire her anymore. Might as well get as much as she could while the getting was still good. The Ford children were doomed anyway. The blockade would fall, and when it did, the whole family would be Reduced—they and anyone caught helping them. Sharie could see the writing on the wall, and she had no intention of being there when it crumbled.

The crone was making some mental calculations as she looked at the sleeping children. “A hundred and fifty each. That’s my final offer, and you’d better take it. Time’s running short.”

“Fine.”

The woman handed over the money in the leather purse. The coins clinked against one another surprisingly heavy. Sharie had never held so much money in all her life—or much metal money at all. The Fords had paid in royal credits, all nice and aboveboard. But with everything still in flux with the government, it was best to carry cash. Especially if you weren’t exactly working aboveboard.

She slung the purse around her shoulder, then, one by one, helped the old woman carry the children into the back of the skimmer’s cab. As she settled the youngest, Mardette, the girl’s eyes fluttered open.

“Guuuuuh,” she mumbled.

Sharie swallowed. Mardette had a beautiful singing voice. She wondered if Reduced even knew how to carry a tune.

They’d be captured anyway. They’d be Reduced anyway. There was nothing Sharie could do to stop it. If she tried to help them, she’d wind up punished, just like all the other regs on the Ford estate. Sharie squeezed the purse hard, reassured by the weight of the money inside. And in addition to her wealth, she’d helped the revolution. They owed her now.

“By the way,” said the crone as she climbed back behind the driver’s seat of the skimmer, “what’s your plan if Ford’s people come looking for you?”

Sharie shook her head. “If they could escape the revolutionaries’ blockade, don’t you think they would?” She needn’t worry about the Fords, anyway. The revolution would protect her. Sharie had picked the winning side.

“Hmm,” said the crone, and took off.

As soon as she was gone, Sharie ran back into the house. The pallets on the floor still held the pin-stained imprints of the bodies of the Ford children, and Sharie averted her eyes. At least she had the money. She thrust her hand into the purse, reveling in the cool feel of the coins. This money would be more than enough to start her life in Halahou. She opened the purse, the better to see her reward. There they were, forty-five silver pieces. Money for nothing, except saving herself from the wrath of the revolutionaries. Light from the rising sun filtered in through the cottage windows and glittered on the surface of the coins.

Which began to change.

Before Sharie’s eyes, the engraving on each coin began to melt and swirl on the surface. Sharie blinked hard, but the optical illusion continued. She grabbed one of the coins and brought it close to her eyes. The face of old Queen Gala blurred, the lines becoming sharp and jagged, until they reformed themselves into the shape of some sort of sharp-leaved flower.

She shook her head in shock and dismay. Nanotech wasn't used on coins. Had she been tricked given counterfeit money by that old crone? She flipped over the coin to see what it showed on the back.

My eternal thanks, the Wild Poppy

The coin thudded to the counter. Sharie staggered backward. *No.*

There was a pounding on the door outside. "Sharie Bane? We've come for the children."

Sharie clutched her hands to her chest, feeling the trap close tight. How could she have been so foolish? With trembling fingers, she opened the door. On the threshold stood two revolutionary guards and a third figure—a young woman in a pair of smart black pants and a matching military jacket with an insignia that marked her as a captain. Sharie's gaze dropped to the name embroidered on the woman's coat.

Aldred.

Vania Aldred, the young captain in charge of the Ford siege. Citizen Aldred's own daughter. Sharie's throat went dry.

"You *are* Sharie Bane?" the captain asked, cocking her eyebrow until it disappeared under her dark bangs. Her black hair was unfashionably long, and straighter than water flowing from a tap.

Sharie considered feigning ignorance. "I—"

The woman brushed past her, scanned the room. "Where are the Ford children? Have you failed to deliver on your promise to the revolution?"

"No . . . I . . ." Sharie's gaze shot to the coins on the counter. The young woman—hardly more than a child herself—looked that way, too. She picked up one of the coins, then hissed and let it thud back to the counter.

"You idiot. What did he look like?"

"An—an old woman." Sharie swallowed, stepping back. "Please, how could I have known? I didn't . . ."

The captain gave a little jerk of her head. "No, you didn't do anything you *should* have." She turned, marched toward the guards at the door, and whispered a few orders. The guards started forward.

"Please . . ." Sharie begged.

"Useless idiots like you," Captain Aldred said, "don't deserve your brains."

JUSTEN HELO STROLLED DOWN the dock, hands in his pockets as if to protect the oblets he'd hidden there. He doubted anyone could actually see the pebble-sized computers, but he still felt better with his fists around them. So far, his escape had been uneventful. The staff at the records hall had barely noted his visit, and guards near the palace gate had merely inclined their heads in his direction as he passed. Now he was one narrow strait from safety.

Was he really going through with this?

Did he have a choice? As soon as the officials at the Lacan estate began to notice what he'd done, arrest would be right around the corner. He'd no longer be able to put his uncle off, no longer be able to prevent his research from becoming a mockery of everything he'd spent his life working toward.

Up ahead, a beautiful yacht tugged impatiently at its mooring ropes. It was Albian by the look of the rigging. Better and better. Travel between the nations had slowed since the revolution, but Justen had hoped there'd be someone at the port of Halahou who might give him passage. He strolled by the

ship twice, hoping to catch a glimpse of the skipper, but saw no one on deck. On his third pass up the quay, one of the guards looked at him for a little too long, his eyes lighting with what might be recognition.

This had been a mistake—the latest of many. He should have known his uncle would guess his plans. There was a reason Damos Aldred had been the first to challenge Galatea’s ruling elite in the centuries since the island had been created.

“You there,” said a guard, and Justen tensed. But the man, clad in his revolutionary uniform, was not pointing in his direction but rather at someone behind him. Justen turned to see a figure staggering down the dock. Tall and elderly, the woman was an aristo by the look of her outfit, a cascade of silken ruffles in rust and midnight blue from her collarbone to her ankles. Her hair was arrayed in an elaborate tangle of curls and braids the color of storm clouds. Justen was surprised. He’d doubted there was an aristo on all Albion with natural-colored hair. And this aristo was most certainly Albian. A Galatean noble who’d somehow avoided the revolution this long would not come out dressed in such finery. That was just asking for trouble.

“You there,” the guard repeated. “Identify yourself.”

The aristo, whoever she was, paid no heed. She was focused on the yacht, as if she could maneuver herself aboard by sheer force of will.

An intoxicated Albian aristo entertaining herself with cheap thrills in the slums of the dock district. Contempt flashed through Justen and with it, regret. For all its claims, the revolution hadn’t done much to help the poorest regs. What was the point of punishing aristos for their behavior if the victims weren’t protected?

“Stop at once,” the guard cried.

The woman did stop now, and Justen noticed for the first time how iridescent the ruffles of her gown were as they shimmered and shivered in the sunlight. A split second later, he realized why. The aristo was shaking—shuddering so hard it was a wonder her teeth didn’t shatter in her mouth.

Genetemp’s sickness. That’s what it looked like, at least, and the most likely culprit if she’d been partying in the slums. With the instinct born of years of medic training, Justen reached out to her, and she collapsed against him. He clutched her head as she twitched and trembled in his arms. Greasy grease paste smeared onto his fingers from her braids. She slumped in his arms as boots pounded the planks behind them.

There was about to be trouble here. Trouble and attention, neither of which he could afford.

As the first of the guards reached them, the woman was yanked out of his hands. “Who do you think you are?” the guard shouted as she dangled like a limp eel in his meaty grip. “Aristo scum, you answer to us.”

Justen began to back up. Thankfully, they didn’t seem half as interested in him. On the yacht, he saw a flash of turquoise as an occupant peered over the rails at the commotion. The woman in the guard’s grip looked up at the boat and shook her head once. But even that effort seemed to be too much for her, and her eyes rolled back in her head.

Another guard snorted. “This one looks like she just got her first pink. If we wait ’til it takes effect we can have some real fun.”

At this, Justen stiffened, and a chill shuddered through his veins. *Her first pink*. So this was what had come to on the streets of Galatea? Making jokes about the Reduction drug? He really *had* been sheltered. And if he didn’t get off this island, it would get much worse. For everyone.

Caution fled, and he opened his mouth, speaking in a voice more accustomed to addressing lords and techs than dock security. “Gentlemen, can’t you see? This woman is an Albian, even if she’s an aristo.”

too.”

“And who do you think *you* are?” the first guard asked, looking down his nose at Justen.

Justen straightened, though it still didn't make him as tall as the soldier. “An interested bystander, sir, and a friend of the revolution. You know Citizen Aldred has granted immunity to visiting Albians. We certainly wouldn't want to anger their princess over this silly aristo, and neither would those in the palace. Am I right?”

“That's your opinion, young man.”

“Correct, it is.” He was ready to unleash his secret weapon, when the aristo proceeded to vomit a bucket over the pavement.

The guard grimaced. “Let Albion have her, then.” He let go and the woman collapsed on the dock, senseless. When the guard kicked her, she barely even grunted.

Justen's mouth opened, but he said nothing. As long as they left, and left her alone, a kick would not hurt her worse than the genetemps sickness already had. He reached down and pulled her up again. The shaking had only worsened.

“My boat,” she croaked.

“Yes,” Justen replied curtly. Messing around with temporary genetics was foolish at best and deadly at worst. Since the revolution, the market for unlicensed genetemping had flourished in the Halahou's sketchier neighborhoods, offering everything from glow-in-the-dark skin and feathers to snake eyes and sex changes. It was all the rage among the teen regs—even Remy had expressed interest in giving it a whirl, until Justen had explained exactly what could happen to her if things went wrong.

Genetemps were also wildly popular with bored Albian aristos looking for a little adventure on their holidays down south. Justen didn't bother to hate them. The hell that was genetemps sickness was punishment enough. This one, though, was old enough to know better. She looked like she was as old as the Helo Cure.

He dragged the old woman back to her ship, where the turquoise-haired Albian he'd spotted earlier had met him at the ramp. She was a few years younger than Justen, with full, rosy cheeks and a keen, intelligent glint in her deep brown eyes. “Thank you, Citizen,” the girl said, grabbing the older woman out of his grasp. “I appreciate your assistance with my grandmother. She's . . . quite frail . . .”

“She's got genetemps sickness,” he snapped at the girl. “I'm not an idiot. The code's breaking down badly and her cells are going into shock. Do you have a medical kit on board?”

Turquoise cast her grandmother a fretful look and said nothing.

“Listen,” Justen hissed. “She needs medical care or she'll go coma. I'm a medic. I can treat her here, or we can take her to the hospital in Halahou. Your choice.”

Turquoise went for the kit. Justen arranged the old woman's body on a cushioned bench. He brushed her hair from her face, and gray grease smeared on his fingers. The color was fake, he realized, noting how the gray flaked off her braids.

The woman's eyes fluttered open. He'd expected the watery, sunken look of age, but they were clear, golden brown. And her wrinkles appeared fewer and far shallower than they had on the docks.

“An aging genetemps?” he asked, as if he were back in the clinic surrounded by other medical cases. “There's a new one.”

“It didn't work right,” the woman said, the croak subsiding to leave the voice of a girl. “It was supposed to make me look thirty, not ninety.”

“Ah.” Justen nodded. This aristo was no one's grandmother. She must have been trying to get into an establishment with age restrictions. Though it didn't explain the gray hair. He'd never understand

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