

Tales from the Second Chance Saloon: Macawley's List

Linnea Sinclair

Telling her he loved her was on his list of things to do.

Dying before he had a chance to do so, wasn't.

The metal decking of Starbase Delta Five skewed suddenly under his boots. The shock wave of the first explosion blasted by him. He stumbled, slammed against the bulkhead. Debris cascaded down through the ruptured conduit panels. He swung his good arm up to shield his face and slid awkwardly to the floor.

“Macawley!” Her anguished voice called to him through the communications badge pinned to his shirt.

He almost said it, right then and then. I love you. I've always loved you. I'm just too much of a coward to tell you.

He ripped the badge from his shirt, threw it across the wide corridor. It skittered against a chunk of ceiling tile. If he answered, she'd try to rescue him. Even though he'd given her a direct order to pull out.

But she had a propensity to ignore his direct orders. That was one of the things he loved about her.

The station rumbled again. A large section of the corridor collapsed into the level below, taking the chunk of tile and his badge with it.

He hooked his good arm around a curved support pylon and hung on, though he didn't know why. He was already dead. A Duvri ion lance had severed his left arm at the elbow, cauterizing it neatly. And he was bleeding profusely from a shrapnel wound in his thigh.

But none of that mattered. What did was the destruction of Delta Five. His tactical team set the charges for that purpose an hour ago. That would bring the Duvri's invasion of the Galleon Quadrant to a dead stop, like slamming into a black hole.

“A waste of a few damn fine pubs,” Briony Winn had quipped just before she

followed the rest of the team into the escape shuttle.

That was another thing he loved about her. She always had a quip, some little sotto voce remark.

“I’m sure you and my crew will take it as a personal challenge to find replacements,” he’d shouted to her as he jogged backwards towards the airlock. He was headed down to the next deck to appropriate an X-7 fighter, and blow a few more holes into the station for good measure as he left.

She had the audacity to stick her tongue out at him just as the hatch was closing. “They’re my crew, too, Mac!”

They were all hers now. In the death of the captain, the executive officer automatically took command.

A Duvri suicide squad had greeted him at the fighter bays. They had an ion lance, shrapnel guns. He was trapped. And wasn’t about to recall the shuttle, risk the lives of eight team members -- and one irreplaceable Commander Briony Winn-- to save his own.

The station shuddered violently again. He heard the agonizing groan of metal stressed to its limits; the harsh snap of plasticrete as it twisted and shattered. The jagged ledge under his legs vibrated.

He had minutes. No, probably only seconds. The lights blinked out. A rush of wind drove gritty particles of insulation into his skin. He knew what it was. The station’s hull had ruptured. The air was being sucked out into the vacuum of deep space.

“I love you, Winnie.” It was the first time he ever said those words out loud.

It was the last thing he remembered.

Until he coughed.

He was face down in a pile of insulation dust. It coated his lips, stuck in his throat. He coughed again, planted his hands on the ground and pushed his shoulders up.

And heard piano music. Light, tinkling, jaunty piano music.

I’m dead. And someone in hell plays the piano.

He rolled over on one hip, sat up.

Hell is a desert. Legends said the afterworld had seven hells. He didn’t know which one this was. But he did know deserts. He spent three months on Nas Ramo

teaching a dirtside survival course for the Alliance. It was just before the Alliance gave him his captain's stars. Winnie was part of his team, but she was only a lieutenant.

Only a lieutenant. As if Briony Winn could be 'only' anything.

He looked around. This hell's desert was less mountainous than Nas Ramo's. The scrub cacti were taller, the sand almost pure white.

And someone was playing the damn piano!

He wrenched his head to the right. A two-story wooden building stood ten feet behind him. The architecture was unfamiliar. It was painted red-- fitting, he thought-- and had a wide porch with a crisscross style railing. Three slatted chairs waited, empty, on the porch.

Perhaps hell has a check-in point?

He pushed himself to his feet, wiped gritty hands on his pants. He felt a gust of hot wind ruffle through his hair. The sign hanging over the porch entry swayed slightly.

Second Chance Saloon.

The boards creaked under his boots as he climbed the three steps to the porch. His mouth was dry. He could remember the thick insulation dust filling his lungs, the shuddering of the starbase in its death throes.

He coughed again, his fist coming up to cover his mouth as he stepped through the open doorway. And for a moment he saw nothing. The white sands and the bright sun had bleached his vision.

His eyes adjusted. The piano music reached a crescendo and halted. A metallic skinned 'droid pushed back the piano bench and stood.

Light applause rippled through the saloon.

"Your kindness is appreciated." The 'droid snatched a tall, wide-brimmed hat from the top of the piano and shoved it onto its bald head. Then it ambled with a swinging gait over to the bar and leaned against the counter.

A dusky-skinned woman stood behind it, polishing a wide-mouthed drinking glass. He could see her face in the mirror behind the bar. Her eyes were dark, slightly almond-shaped. Her hair was a deep magenta color, like rich Trelgarian wine. It was braided and wrapped with strips of patterned cloth that matched the flowing tunic covering her tall form.

“Two fingers of premium grade synth-lube, Jezebel,” the ‘droid said.

The woman turned. “Sure thing, Tex. And how about you, Captain Macawley? Need something to wet your whistle?”

“You know me?”

She chuckled. “Know you? Why, child, we’ve been expecting you.” Her voice was a rich, warm contralto, as thick as the lubricant she poured into the short crystal glass. She slid it towards the ‘droid, then looked at Mac, folding her arms across her chest. Rows of metallic bracelets in a rainbow of silvers and golds jangled. It was a pleasant sound.

“Double shot of Pagan Gold?” she asked.

He didn’t realize hell kept track of his drinking habits. He nodded, stepped up to the bar and leaned his elbows on it.

Both elbows. Somehow the one he’d donated to the Duvri was back.

He glanced at his leg. Same gray uniform pants he always wore. But the material-- and his thigh-- was intact. No shredding. No blood.

Hell evidently liked its occupants in one piece. He sipped his drink, watched Jezebel pour another one. But it wasn’t a double shot of Pagan Gold.

It was a pale green liqueur in a tall, slender glass. Starfrost.

Jezebel thumbed open a small container, took a pinch of dark granules and sprinkled them on top.

Nightspice. Starfrost with a touch of nightspice.

Winnie’s drink.

He whirled around. If she were here... then she was dead. Which he didn’t want, Gods, no, he didn’t want her to be dead. He died so that she could live, damn it!

But if she were here, if she were...

He scanned the tables. The saloon was full. There was a trio of pretty women, all humanoid, at the table closest to him. A voluptuous brunette with shoulder-length hair popped open a sof-screen ‘puter on the table. The other two leaned closer. Petite, both of them, one platinum blonde, one a deep auburn. They seemed unaware, or uninterested, in his scrutiny.

At another table, a man and a woman, more felinoid than human, sipped something frothy from squat mugs. They wore commercial freighter uniforms, though none bore any insignia he recognized.

Then there was movement at the back stairs. A round-faced young woman sauntered down, her curls bouncing with each step. The light from the candles in the wall sconces caught the mix of colors in her hair: honey blonde, amber red, russet brown. She held a handful of her long, lace trimmed dress in one hand as she descended, careful, it seemed, not to catch her heels. She smiled, but Mac knew she wasn't smiling at him. She wiggled her fingers towards a young man sitting alone in the corner.

Mac turned, caught the man's answering nod.

He didn't know any of them. He didn't see Winnie anywhere.

He heard Jezebel slide the tall glass in his direction.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"Now, that's a strange question." Jezebel leaned over the counter towards him. "Most folks first ask, 'Where am I?'"

"I know where I am. One of the Seven Hells." He never had any illusions about going to heaven.

"Wrong. You're in the Second Chance."

"Semantics. I'm in a bar in hell. I'm still--"

"You're not."

The intensity of her tone startled him into silence.

"You're in the Second Chance," she repeated. "Which is exactly as its name implies: a second chance."

"A second chance at..." Okay. I'm not dead. I'm dying. Hallucinating as I die. Still, he had to say the word. "...at life?"

"No. At love."

At--?

"Love," she repeated. "The one thing left on your to-do list. The one most important thing. The one thing you couldn't bring yourself to do, until you were just about out

of time.”

He closed his eyes, swallowed the lump in his throat. He knew what he’d done, what he’d said, just as Delta Five turned into intergalactic debris. “I didn’t tell Winnie.” His voice was raspy.

“Tell her what?” The flickering light from the candles in the chandelier overhead danced in Jezebel’s dark brown eyes.

“The last thing on my list. What I never told her.”

“And what did you never tell her?”

He stared at the bartender. It was clear from her tone she knew what he never told Briony Winn. Why in hell was she being so obtuse?

Frustration tinged his voice, made him narrow his eyes. “You know damn well--”

“Yes, Raphael Macawley, I do. Know damn well. But that’s not at issue here. What’s at issue is, do you know? And can you tell her? Because if you can’t, there’s no sense in our sending you back to her, now is there?”

“You can send me back to my ship?”

Jezebel made a tsk-tsking noise with her tongue. “Not if you can’t tell her, we won’t.”

Tell her. Tell Commander Briony Winn he loved her. Loves her. He nodded his head vigorously. “I can.”

“Good. Let’s hear it.”

His eyes widened. “Now?”

“No time like the present.”

“But she’s not here.”

“For good reason. You need to practice first. You weren’t born a starship captain, you know. You had to work your way up to that exalted position.”

He picked up his glass, let the last shot of Pagan’s Gold burn down his throat. Then he drew a deep breath. “I love her.”

Someone in the saloon behind him made a rude noise. Loudly.

Jezebel slapped her hand on the bar. “None of that, now! Man’s a virgin here. You got to cut him some slack.”

Virgin? He’d rarely lacked bed partners. Mac almost burst out laughing, but sobered quickly as Jezebel’s eyes narrowed.

“Raphael. Now, listen up.”

He flinched. No one ever called him Raphael. And remained standing for very long.

“You go say ‘I love her’ to Briony and she’s going to be looking left and right for whoever this ‘her’ is. You’ve got to say what you’ve got to say to her. Understand?”

He nodded.

“Well?”

He closed his eyes, saw her quick smile. The way she wrinkled her nose. The way she fiddled with her hair when she was tired.

The way she chewed on the end of her lightpen when puzzled over incoming data, or some glitch the sensors couldn’t unravel.

The way she shared high-fives with the crew when a problem was solved. And that little hip-bumping victory dance he caught her doing once, down in engineering.

And more than once, a compassionate hand on a shoulder, when things were less than victorious. When just being there said more than kindly words.

He opened his eyes but still saw her, and not the rainbow of colors dancing through the rows of etched crystal glasses, or the warm tones of the ornately carved bar.

“I love you, Winnie. I love you, more than you’ll ever know.” His voice became thick with emotion. “More than I can ever explain. I’ve loved you, and always will.” He looked down at his empty glass, turned it around in his hands.

Jezebel sighed softly. “There’s hope for you yet, Mac.”

“So how do I get back to the Intrepid?”

“You don’t.”

“But you said--”

“I said you get a second chance at love. I didn’t say you can pick up your life right

where you left off.” Jezebel drummed her fingers on the bar. “Listen up, now. You screwed up, you admit that?”

He nodded.

“That has to be undone. Or else all your pretty words are for naught. She’s convinced you’re heartless, you know.”

Because she knew him well. Most of his crew saw only his competence, his unflagging dedication. “A tireless compulsion towards perfection,” one division chief’s review stated early in his career. “A true Macawley.”

But Winnie knew his compulsions were a facade. And she didn’t give a damn that he was a true Macawley.

“How do I undo all that?”

She held up her hand, splayed her fingers in his face. Jeweled rings glistened. “My people have a story. It says that fate has five fingers. But we always start here, first.”

She touched the center of her palm. “From there, we have choices. We say, five choices. But each choice we make only once.”

She wiggled her index finger. “This was your choice, many years ago. From there, you made your next choice.” She touched her index finger to the center of her other palm. “That gave you five more choices.”

He understood. Each finger, each choice was a path. A one way street. Every decision he made-- or didn’t make-- led to the next one.

“There was a time, a point at which telling Briony Winn how you feel about her would have mattered to her. But you didn’t make that choice at that time. So it doesn’t matter to her now.”

Something hard constricted in his chest at her words. He’d loved her for so long, it was almost second nature to him. And he assumed, if he ever told her, she’d respond in kind. He loved her so damn much!

But she didn’t love him. Couldn’t love him. He’d been a fool. In his selfishness, in his cowardice, he let the moment go by.

“Then why even bother with all this?” he asked harshly.

She wagged a finger in his face. “Temper, temper, Raphael. We’re bothering because what is now isn’t the only reality. You will get a second chance with Briony.

But not with Commander Briony Winn of the Alliance ship, Intrepid. But with Lieutenant Briony Winn, junior grade drive tech on the Versatile.”

The Versatile! Hellfire and damnation, he’d just made X.O., been transferred to that damn rust bucket and let everyone on board know he was damned unhappy about it. Including one still-wet-behind-the-ears and straight out of the academy Briony Winn.

He was a Macawley, after all! Of the Radley’s Station Macawleys. His uncle was a senator. His grandmother, an admiral. His father took the millions his own father had made with Radley Intergalactic and made another billion on top of that.

The Winns were nobody in particular. And nobodies in particular got assigned to derelicts like the Versatile. Not a Macawley.

If Briony Winn hadn’t been so damn good at her job, he probably wouldn’t even have noticed her. Third shift drive techs were not his usual fare.

She had been good, brilliant in fact. And she had a mischievous smile and sparkle in her eyes to go with that brilliance.

By the time he’d realized just what a priceless gem she was, she was lost to him. Or rather, she was totally unfazed by his pedigree, his money, his rank and his infamous attitude.

The last of which she took great pains over the years to rattle every chance she got.

Which was why he loved her as much as he did.

Because she didn’t give a damn that he was Raphael Macawley.

“It won’t work, Jezebel. She made it clear a long time ago our relationship is purely professional.”

“Then you’re going to have to change her mind, won’t you?”

“You don’t understand. At the point I met her, on board the Versatile, I--” He stopped as if a blinding light were suddenly flashed in his face.

“I’ll know it’s possible for her to love me. That’s it, isn’t it? You send me back ten years, and I’ll know--”

“You’ll know everything at the moment you return, yes. But minute by minute, Raphael, you’ll forget. Your memories of the past and what had been your future can’t coexist. By the twenty-four hour mark, you’ll forget everything.”

“Twenty four hours?” He straightened abruptly. “Gods damn it, that’s not fair! The first twenty-four hours I was on that damned ship were a bloody nightmare. It was chaos! The captain was stinking drunk, half the crew’d been left behind on shore leave, the sani-facs only worked on alternate decks... I was thrown in the middle of that and then told to expect an admiralty inspection. If I didn’t get that ship at least functioning my entire career was at stake!”

“Sounds like you pissed someone off royally on your previous posting.” Jezebel’s deep chuckle returned. “But be that as it may, child, you’re going to be here again.” She pointed to the middle of her palm. “You can pursue the fame and glory of your career. Or you can pursue the woman you love.”

He clutched the edge of the counter. “If you could just return me to the point where I got command of the Intrepid. The awards ceremony, right before that. My grandmother was there. Winnie and I--”

“No.”

His heart sunk. “It has to be the Versatile?”

“Yes.”

He slowly relaxed his grip on the bar. “And if after the first twenty-four hours, I can’t change her mind?”

“Then you have ten years to deep-six the plans to use a X-7 to get off Delta Five. Take the shuttle, instead. At least then you’ll be there when Commander Montalvo asks her to marry him.”

Monty? His Chief of Engineering?

“And you’ll be there to hear it when she says yes.”

“I’m dying and she says ‘yes’?”

“Death has a way of making some people face their priorities.”

He understood that. It pushed his love for Winnie right to the top of the list. Then the station exploded. And she said ‘yes’ to that slime, Monty.

He balled his hand into a fist, nodded at Jezebel. “I don’t have any choice, do I?”

“You always have the option to turn down our offer.”

“That would be abysmally stupid of me.”

“You’ve shown a certain flair in that area before,” Jezebel said dryly. Chuckles came from the trio of women behind him.

Mac bit back his comment. “The Versatile it is, then. How do we do this?”

Jezebel retrieved a new glass from the rack behind her, pulled out a bottle of clear liquid from under the bar. “Drink up.”

He didn’t even hesitate.

It took him a few seconds to get his bearings. The corridors weren’t quite as filthy as he remembered. Maybe the years had added more grime and stench to the memory of his first hour on board the aging destroyer.

But those years and all his future mistakes would be gone. He was alive, damn it! And Winnie was around here somewhere.

He turned the corner, caught his reflection in the cracked mirrored wall as he passed by the ship’s gym. The wide doors were open. Stuck as usual. The man who stared back was in his thirties.

Not forty-two. Thirty-two. He took his position as X.O. when he was thirty-two.

He hesitated for only a second, grinned, trudged on. Damn, it felt good to be alive. Young and alive.

Gray-clad crewmembers saluted stiffly as he strode by. Not one smile, not one friendly greeting called out.

That was just as he remembered.

Of course, it was just his first day. He’d do things differently this time. Get to know the crew, slovenly bastards that they were.

Get to know Winnie.

He stepped into an empty lift. “Engineering deck.”

It shuddered and jerked for fifteen seconds, then stopped, the doors squealing open.

He heard the low rumble of voices as he headed down the short corridor. Then a laugh, a throaty laugh that belonged to only one woman.

He wiped his palms down the side of his uniform pants. They were slick. His heart hammered in his chest and he regretted not stopping longer in front of the gym’s

mirror. Did he look okay? He ran his hand through his short-cropped hair. Everything felt normal.

He stepped over the wide hatch-tread, immediately looked left towards her station.

Briony Winn. Lieutenant Briony Winn. His Winnie. Oh, Gods, she was there and she was alive and she was even more beautiful than he remembered. All of twenty four years old. Impulsive. Animated. Sassy. Downright sexy as--

“Commander Macawley, is there a problem?”

“No.” He shook his head without looking at the officer speaking to him. He held out his hand as if to push the woman away.

Winnie, Winnie. Look at me. Turn towards me. Give me that smile. Please, Winnie.

His footsteps sounded muffled on the latticed decking. But she must have heard, because she turned. Her eyes narrowed.

“Macawley. You’re late.”

Late? How could he be late? They hadn’t met yet. He clearly remembered his first few hours on board, touring the ship from top to bottom, from bridge to engineering. That was where he first saw her, sitting at her tech console on the left.

He glanced over her head at the stat-board. Eleven-twenty. He’d come on board at oh-eight-hundred. That was about right.

But she called him Macawley. Not Commander. They hadn’t been introduced yet she knew his name.

He stared back at the stat-board. Eleven-twenty-one. Galactic Date 874-987.

He’d been on board the Versatile for three months. He’d already made three months of abysmally stupid mistakes.

“That bitch!” The words exploded from his mouth before he could stop them. But no one turned at his outburst. Winnie seemed unruffled. They were already used to him.

That bitch Jezebel had tricked him. With her sultry voice and fanciful tale, she’d tricked him. He wasn’t starting at the beginning with Briony Winn, as she promised. He was--

She hadn’t promised. He grabbed the back of the vacant chair next to Winnie, leaned on it. Jezebel hadn’t promised to send him back to his first day on the

Versatile. She promised to send him back to the day that would make a difference in his relationship with Winnie.

No wonder the ship didn't look as bad as he remembered. He'd been pounding it back into shape for three months.

He collapsed into the chair, leaned his elbows on his knees, ran his hands over his face. He peered at Winnie from over the tips of his fingers.

Every finger represents a choice.

What was today? Damn it, why couldn't he remember? Jezebel said--

--that he would begin to forget from the moment he got back on board. That his past and present memories couldn't coexist.

Galactic Date 874-987. What was it?

Winnie was staring at him. "You okay? Maybe you should be in sickbay."

"No. I'm fine. It's just that--" Think! Think! What's today? Or more importantly, what happened before today? "--I need to talk to you. It's a matter of..." He waved one hand aimlessly in the air, let his voice trail off as two techies thumped by in their thick soled black boots.

"Life and death?" She wrinkled her nose at him. His heart did a flip-flop. "What is it this time? Can't find a power outlet for your personal massaging recliner?"

Gods, he forgot about that. A gift from his uncle the senator.

"Winn-- Briony." He used her given name deliberately. He didn't remember doing so before. He needed some way to signal to her that he was desperate. "I really need to talk to you."

The fact that she didn't come back with another quip told him she was at least taking him seriously. "I'm off shift in four hours."

He didn't have four hours. He could no longer remember the name of the bitch in the Second Chance Saloon.

"Now. Before I forget what I'm going to say. Or the rest of my life will be a total waste."

"You'll have to clear it with Admiral Wellinsky. But I don't think he's going to put up with any more delays."

Wellinsky? What would that pompous son of a bitch be doing on board?

He groaned. The Parken Random Calibration Unit test run. The PRCU was Wellinsky's pet project. Better to risk blowing the drives on the Versatile than on one of the Fleet's better ships. If the unit didn't work and the Versatile had to sit in spacedock for months for repairs, no great loss. At least, not to Wellinsky.

He glanced at the data on Winnie's console. A strange lightheadedness washed over him. Wellinsky's voice bellowed at him through his com badge but the hand that moved in extreme slow motion to tap at it in response didn't feel like it was his. The air around him felt thick as Suralian honey soup.

"I'm waiting on your release code, Macawley!"

Release code. A safety procedure. The captain and the X.O. had release codes to be entered at separate stations before the test could begin.

"Ten seconds, Macawley!"

Seconds. Seconds. The word echoed in his mind.

"I said you get a second chance at love. I didn't say you can pick up your life right where you left off." A woman's voice, sultry, soothing.

He felt his eyes move slowly towards Briony Winn. She hadn't spoken. Then who? Who's voice was that?

His fingers touched his com badge and he snapped back into the present.
"Acknowledged, Admiral."

Hell, that's the last time he has Oysters Galafar for a late night snack. Felt like he was going to keel over there for a moment.

He reached for the console, keyed in his codes, saw the PRCU initialization sequence scroll down the screen. Then a flurry of activity around him as the experimental matter conversion system came on line.

Time to get back to the bridge. He didn't trust Wellinsky's tinkering but the Chief would handle the problems -- and he knew there'd be problems-- as they surfaced. Plus Winnie was on duty. Whatever Damaris Lagronde couldn't tackle directly he knew Lieutenant Winn would solve, albeit in some wildly unorthodox manner.

He pushed himself out of the chair, nodded to Lagronde, who was already frowning. But something made him stop just before he reached the corridor. He turned, saw the stout woman leaning over Winnie's shoulder, talking to her.

Talking to her. What was it he had to talk to Winnie about?

He shook off an inexplicable sense of edginess and strode briskly for the lifts.

He just stepped onto the command deck when his existence shifted again.

“Love.” A woman’s voice. That woman’s voice. “The one thing left on your to-do list.”

Winnie. He didn’t tell Winnie he loved her.

He did an about-face, reached for the lift pad.

“Commander Macawley, the Admiral’s waiting for you.”

Gods damn it! He spun on the young ensign in the corridor, fist clenched. He didn’t have time for the Admiral’s petty experiments.

The young man stepped back quickly. Mac reigned in his emotions. Yes, the crew knew what he was like. Knew he was an unmitigated bastard who trampled over people’s feelings like a gelzrac on a rampage. Three months and they already knew it.

So did Winnie. Because he’d brutally trampled over her feelings last night. Then downed a bottle of Pagan Gold and a dozen spiced oysters to ease the pain.

He knew now why he was here. And why he had to apologize. And why if he didn’t in the next few hours, he’d never be able to. He had to get back down to Engineering.

“Tell the Admiral I’ll monitor the test run with Chief Lagronde.”

“Sir, I don’t think he’ll agree to that.”

It’s not your job to think! he almost barked at the young man but stopped. He had to do more than just apologize to Winnie. He had to change everything about himself. Starting now.

“No, Ensign. I’m sure he won’t. And I’m sorry to put you in the line of direct fire.” He twisted his mouth into a wry grin. “But the Admiral’s less my concern than this ship is. Help me out here. I’ll owe you one.”

He admired the young man’s ability to prevent his jaw from dropping. But it did take him three attempts to get out a stuttered: “Yes, sir!”

The lift, uncharacteristically, appeared when summoned. He stepped in and, for

fifteen shimmying seconds, leaned his forehead against the slick metal wall. A sense of disorientation returned. Damn those oysters!

The doors opened and he trudged towards Engineering, shaking his head. He just left here. But had to come back, for some reason, some important reason.

Which he couldn't remember. But it didn't matter because when he stepped over the hatch-tread, all hell broke loose.

"Chief, we've got a full system lock-up starting in the starboard feed!" Winnie's voice carried clearly over the discordant beeping of alarms.

Mac sprinted to her station. Lagronde came puffing up behind him, swearing.

"Gods damn him! Gods damn that asshole, Wellinsky!" The stout woman glared at the data cascading down the console screen then turned, startled, towards Mac.

"Macawley? Thought you went back up."

"I did. But then I remembered something." He slid into the seat next to Winnie's. And recognized the slight skewing in the initialization sequence codes. He'd seen it once before, but only in a sim at the academy.

"You don't want to see this in real life. Ever," his aged professor had growled.

He was looking at it now. "We've got a breakdown--"

"In the anti-matter core slough," Winnie finished for him. Her fingers flew over her console.

"A shutdown will rupture us." Lagronde yanked the datapadd from her utility belt, keyed in her own commands. She slapped it into an open terminal port.

"Containment field activated," she hollered over the din.

"You picked a bad time to go slumming," Winnie said to him as Lagronde hurried away. Her voice was light but he clearly heard an undercurrent of pain. And knew it wasn't related to their present somewhat critical situation.

"Actually, no. I always wanted to see a real core slough failure. The sims just don't seem to have the same urgency." He picked up on the modification she was entering on her console, nodded in approval. Then keyed in a few adjustments of his own.

She hazarded a glance in his direction, arched an eyebrow. "I never thought dying down here with the black shoes was on the top of your to-do list. You strike me as more of the 'in the arms of a beautiful woman' type."

Her console beeped twice. “I didn’t ask for your opinion!” she told it and entered another sequence. It quieted.

His mind hung for a moment on her words. His list. His to-do list. They were a regular item already: Mighty Macawley’s To-Do Lists.

What was it that topped his to-do list?

Not dying on the Versatile. Even in the sim, he’d not been able to stop the disintegration of the slough. And that was a sim based on topnotch equipment. Not an aging destroyer that didn’t have half the fail-safes and sensitive components the newer ships did. The Versatile was a basic starcruiser. Functional. No frills. No--

He pulled up a secondary screen, his eyes racing over the data. Somewhere, somewhere.... there!

“We can manually override her slough filters!” He took his fingers off the pads just long enough to grab Winnie’s arm.

She looked at him, startled. Then her eyes grew wide in amazement. “Damn straight! Damn straight we can.”

He fed her some code strings. She segued them in then threw the modified functions right back at him.

The first in a long row of alarm lights stopped blinking.

He tagged Lagronde’s terminal, sent her the data. A few seconds later her whoop of joy sounded over the wails of alarms just now beginning to recede.

An hour later, the containment field was lifted and a red-faced Admiral Wellinsky harrumphed through Engineering and out again.

Lagronde stood with her arms folded in front of the main console. A detailed recreation of the entire fiasco scrolled by. “Lucky as hell you came down here, Commander.”

Lucky as hell. But not for Wellinsky, who wanted to blame the Versatile for his project’s failure. But this time, he couldn’t. The slough didn’t rupture. The evidence the PRCU itself was flawed wasn’t destroyed. And Lagronde’s career, along with the careers of a few other competent, and equally as innocent, black shoes, wasn’t ruined. After all, who would dare find fault with the Wellinsky? Only the Mighty Macawley--

Who had no idea how he knew all that, but he did. Just as he knew he was standing in Engineering, with Lagronde on his left and Winnie on his right, so close he could

feel the heat of her body against his arm.

Winnie. He had to talk to Winnie. He grabbed her elbow, pulled her towards him as she shot him a startled glance.

“Ten minutes. Please.”

That made Lagronde turn and he knew why. It was probably the first time the Mighty Macawley ever said ‘please’ on this ship.

“With your permission, Chief.” Another first. “But Lieutenant Winn is mine. Until further notice.” Until all of the Seven Hells freeze over. And until the roof collapses on the Second Chance Saloon.

He propelled a protesting Briony Winn into the corridor. The small conference room at the end was empty. He guided her inside, locked the door.

“Sit.” He pointed to a gimbaled chair at the end of the table.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ll stand, if you don’t mind.” A tired defiance played across her features. He knew his timing was horrendous. They were both exhausted, physically, mentally and emotionally. And not only because of Wellinsky’s foolish experiment.

He had to make things right.

“I mind. Now sit.”

“Give me one good reason.”

He heard it in her voice. She was pissed, royally pissed at him.

He sucked in a deep breath. “My reason is that I’m going to get down on my knees and beg for your forgiveness. And that’s going to be damned awkward to do if you’re standing up.”

She sat, her eyes wide with surprise.

He knelt before her. “I’m an idiot. A moron. An unspeakable imbecile. I know you’re angry with me and I know you have a right to be. Even if I have no idea of exactly what I did.”

“You don’t know?”

Not completely. It was still only a sensation, a sickening sensation; much less than a memory. Still, he could make a stab at it. “I don’t know which of all the abysmally

stupid things I've done tops the list."

"Besides being ill-mannered, arrogant and insufferably rude?" She pointed her finger in his face. "Berating and belittling every member of the crew? Then demanding we jump when you say 'jump', just because you're the Mighty Macawley?"

He nodded. "Besides all that."

She looked away from him. "I don't like being reduced to a name to be crossed off a list." Her voice was soft, laced with bitterness.

"This is about last night."

"Yes. No!" She turned back to him suddenly, her eyes bright with tears. "It's about your damned lists. And that one list of suitably worthy women that a Mighty Macawley could spend time with, and still maintain his high standards."

He reached for her hands. They were balled into small fists. She snatched them away.

"I don't meet your high standards, do I? And you made damn sure I knew that, Raphael! You figured it all out from one short kiss."

It wasn't one short kiss. It was one of the most intense kisses he ever experienced packed into a very short period of time. It scared the hell out of him, made him jump from the lumpy couch in his small quarters and turn his back on her.

And then, because she couldn't see the agony on his face, say some very nasty, very unkind things to a very young Briony Winn. Because he knew if he didn't push her away then, he was never going to let her go. And that just might affect his perfectly orchestrated, Macawley-like soar to the top. His finely honed love-'em-and-leave-'em image. The facade he called his life. His former life.

"I didn't mean what said I last night."

She sat very still. Some of the anger seemed to drain out of her. Finally, she shrugged, but wouldn't look at him, toyed with her academy ring instead. "It's no big deal. You're not the first guy to dump me. Probably won't be the last. I have this tendency to fall in-- to pick the unsuitable."

Fall in love. He heard her almost say it. He swallowed hard. Could you love me, Briony Winn? He hoped so. His knees were starting to hurt.

"I'm definitely unsuitable." He reached again for her hands, grabbing hold of her before she could pull away. "An arrogant bastard. But I'm also very much in love with you."

She raised her lashes. A small tear glistened in the corner of her eye. He felt as if an ion lance pierced his chest.

“That’s why I had to stop kissing you. And that’s why I said what I did. Because if I didn’t, I would’ve gotten down on my knees,” and he winced as he brought his left knee up, “and begged you to stay. To give me a chance. To let me love you.”

He rose-- damn, that hurt!-- and pulled her out of the chair. He held her hands against his chest and, when he was sure she wouldn’t back away, let them go, and wrapped his arms around her. “I love you, Winnie. I want to spend the rest of my life telling you that.”

She gave him a tremulous smile. It heated his blood like no bottle of Pagan Gold ever could.

“I’ve no reason to believe you,” she said cautiously, but a haughty look crept into her eyes. “But then, I never thought you’d stand up to Wellinsky, either. I think there’s hope for you yet.”

I think there’s hope for you yet, Mac. A woman’s voice, sultry, yet now not much more than a fading whisper.

He lowered his face. “I’d like to try that kiss again, if you don’t mind, lieutenant.”

She brushed her lips across his. “I think I’d like that, Commander.”

And this time the Mighty Macawley didn’t pull away when bolts of lightning arced across an imaginary sky, or waves crashed fiercely against an imaginary shore. Or a thousand imaginary stars exploded and vibrated in a little hip-bumping victory dance inside his heart. A dance accompanied by a jaunty piano tune which haunted him at the oddest moments.

Like whenever anyone, other than Briony Winn Macawley, tried to fill the number one spot on his list of things to do.

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