

SILENT RUN

by Linnea Sinclair

Set in the same universe as my novel, Finders Keepers, this short story introduces Captain Shandy McAllister, who is about to become embroiled in a mixture of political intrigue, personal challenges... and learn a little about love in the process...

I

“Rinnaker shuttlecraft, you’re cleared for final approach to Bay Six-Fiver Beta. Acknowledge.”

“Deneb Approach, this is Rinnaker shuttle *Lancer-One*. Acknowledged. Thanks. Switching helm over to Deneb Auto Guidance.”

“Computer confirms. You’re on the mark, *Lancer-One*.

Cut power to one-third.”

“Acknowledged. One--”

“*Lancer-One*, this is Deneb Approach. Increase power. There’s a Tryll off your stern, mark one-eight-zero-point-three. Repeat. Increase power.”

“Power up.”

“Nanjir Tryll, Nanjir Tryll, this is Deneb Approach. Decrease power. Change course to nine-zero-point-five. Repeat. Decrease power! Change course to nine-zero-point-five!”

“Den... Nanj... Unable to...”

“Nanjir Tryll, change course now! This is Deneb Approach. You’re in the path of an incoming Rinnaker shuttle. Repeat. Take nine-zero-point-five immediately!

“*Lancer-One*, this is Deneb. Abort! Abort!”

“Negative, Deneb. We’re too tight. We’ll try to outrun thebastard. Clear the--”

“This is Deneb Approach. All craft hold position. We have an emergency in Bay Six-Fiver Beta!”

II

“We’re not lovers!” Shandy McAllister winced as the line of faces down the Port Tyber bar turned abruptly in her direction.

The man on her right leered at her. “Jump-jockey gossip says different. Says you’re right cozy with Captain Talvarrin. So how’s ‘bout using some of that horizontal influence for me?” His hand shook noticeably as he slid his journeyman’s

data-tab towards her. His breath reeked of the sour odor of a rafthkra junkie. "I can work drive tech, cargo tech, anything Rinnaker needs."

"I don't have any connections with Rinnaker, Hillard." Nor would she give him a recommendation if she did. The once respected tech had degenerated into one of the lowest forms of dock slime she'd ever met. And growing up in the Syar Colonies, she'd just about met them all.

Shandy slid off the stool. Hillard's hand clamped on her arm, halting her. "There's peoples who know 'bout you and him." His tone was distinctly threatening.

She shook him off, headed for the door. The *Lucy* had a schedule to keep.

"You look like you're ready to fire ion cannons at someone. If you had any, that is." Donata Caro's lilting voice drifted over Shandy's shoulder as headed for the podway to the spaceport.

Shandy gave her friend a tight smile. "Hillard thinks I have some pull with Rinnaker. You know he's always trying to cadge a favor." But it was the first time he'd ever gotten nasty. She didn't know if that should worry her or not.

The amber skinned woman raised an eyebrow. "Guess he's heard the talk about you and tall, dark and Talvarrin."

"Donni!"

"Oh, that's right. You and Captain Talvarrin aren't lovers. He's just a friend. Who alters schedules of one of the most powerful merchanter families in the Conclave so that he can have a few beers, now and then, with an obscure short-hauler."

"The *Lucy* handled a cargo transfer--"

"Once. Eight months ago. And the *Valiance* has been following the *Lucent Echo* ever since."

"You're exaggerating," Shandy said. Donni was a hopeless romantic. The plain fact was that the Syar Colonies were a popular transfer point. Which made it not unlikely that she and Captain Cameron Talvarrin might run into each other, share a few beers. And maybe hash over the usual opinions on the latest improvements in jumpgate technology, or the rumors of new markets opening in the Deneb sector. Or discuss the hazards in the space lanes out by the rim colony of Braskar, courtesy of the Nanjir faction now looking to grab some of the colonies' wealth.

Punctuated inevitably by Cam Talvarrin's pronouncements of how one Captain Shandy Alexis McAllister should conduct her business, and her life.

The pod arrived with the usual hiss and rattle.

"If he's not in love with you," Donni asked as they threaded their way through exiting passengers, "then why's he following you around?"

Shandy glanced out the grimy windows as the pod rumbled forward. "Maybe because the *Lucy* and I provide a good transport service at a fair price. He appreciates that."

"More likely he appreciates a gorgeous little brunette."

"You're prejudiced. And hallucinating. I haven't heard from him in a couple septis. And I doubt if I will." Especially as she'd told him it would be a cold day in hell before she'd give up a shot at the newly opened Braskar route because one Cameron Talvarrin deemed it a waste of her time. "Trust me. I'm really not his

type.”

“That’s why he kissed you.”

“Because we’d both had a few more beers than we should have that night. So forget about it, okay? I have.”

Liar, a little voice said. She hadn’t forgotten about it. But at least now when Shandy thought about those mind-numbing kisses it was with the stern reminder never to get in that situation again. She’d been around spaceport pubs, and spacers, for almost all of her thirty-two years. She knew what too little sleep, too much Syarian ale, and one undeniably sexy male with the most incredible blue eyes-- and enormous ego-- could do: break her heart.

She wasn’t interested.

The pod shimmied. “Green Terminal,” a tinny autovoice announced.

“That’s me.” Donni squeezed Shandy’s hand. “Catch you here in two months?”

“We’ll swap transmits before then. Stay out of trouble.”

“That should be your motto, not mine. And tell Cameron,” Donni said, stressing the name as she headed for the exit door, “I send my warmest regards.”

III

Shandy tabbed on the console lights on the *Lucy*’s small bridge. Her inbox icon flashed on her screen.

Two solicits from export agents, one on Q’uivera Station and one in Port Rumor, recommending she register her ship with them. For a small advance fee, of course. She cleared the words from the screen.

Next was a note from Nolan. Cargo Chief Nolan Ennis of the *Jero Hagan*, the title officially read. He’d heard she was scheduled for a pickup at Q’uivera, the *Hagan*’s home base. If she had time, the note continued, dinner would be nice.

“Long as I’m not dessert,” she commented absently, then corrected herself. “Don’t transmit that, *Lucy*!”

“Acknowledged,” came the reply.

Then came the message she didn’t understand, its Transmitting Terminal Designation skewed and incomplete. Shandy frowned at the cryptic words on her screen.

IMPER..., it read. DALGRA FI... T... ES... S.R... CAM-T/V.

The easiest part was DALGRA FI. That could only be Dalgra Five, the mining colony two jumps out from Port Tyber. Recent jump-jockey gossip stated the reclusive Dalgrans were looking to offer lucrative transport contracts for their mining production. Shandy knew, even before her conversation with Cam Talvarrin, that several Conclave merchant conglomerates were vying to meet on Deneb with colony representatives.

There were no such things as trade secrets in Syar.

She took a stab at the remainder of the message. IMPER. Imperfect? Impertinent? The latter she’d been called often enough. By the man whose initials ended the message: CAM-T/V. Cameron Talvarrin of the *Valiance*.

That was one more reason why she felt sure those kisses had been prompted by alcohol rather than affection.

But what troubled her more than their spirited discussions were two other initials in the transmit: S.R.. It was an old smuggler's term, demanding stealth and speed in an urgent matter. S.R.. Silent Run.

IMPER could well mean imperative. Urgent.

She put it all together; hoped she was wrong. It made no sense and only lodged a tense, sick feeling in her stomach. A blind, muddled request, no; a plea for help. From a man whose name alone could fund an entire rescue fleet.

For that very reason she knew it meant something more serious than she dared consider. And S.R. meant she couldn't contact him to ask what it was all about.

She leaned back in the pilot's chair, plopped her scuffed boots on the edge of the console. She owed him nothing. He was an arrogant scoundrel who was quite capable, she was sure, of taking care of himself.

But he'd challenged her mind with his wit, his intellect. And teased her mouth with his kisses. And had a habit of calling her "little girl" in such a way that she knew she was neither little, nor merely a girl, in his eyes. Which were the palest blue she'd ever seen.

So if he needed her help, she and *Lucy* would head for Dalgra, quickly and quietly. Silent Run.

IV

She cleared Port Tyber's outer beacon two hours later, but still had no plan to gain access to the Dalgra Sector, or Deneb Station. Deneb was a Conclave station; however, entry into the Dalgran sector was restricted to ambassadorial and approved science vessels. Her small L7-Class freighter qualified as neither.

But there were ways to get around just about anything labeled 'restricted'. Trouble was, Nolan was often her source for that information. He'd ask why, and he wouldn't like that her reason was Cam Talvarrin.

"He's not for the likes of you," Nolan had told her.

Funny. Cam had said the same thing about Nolan.

Lie, a little voice advised her. Something told her Cam's life might depend on it.

She keyed up her commpack, composed a message about an imaginary shipment of critical med supplies, knowing it could be hours before Nolan answered. She kept *Lucy* on a direct heading for the first jumpgate to Dalgra.

Nolan's answer came when she was an hour from jump. NO CAN DO. SORRY. SOMETHING BIG WENT DOWN ON DENEK LAST SEPTI. TWO SHIPS UNDER IMPOUND: MHISHARAN AND RINNAKER. NO ONE'S TALKING. NO ONE'S MOVING IN OR OUT EXCEPT CONCLAVE BRASS. MEET ME AT Q'UIVERA. I'LL KEEP YOU BUSY 'TIL ROUTES CLEAR AGAIN.

Damn. A Rinnaker ship under impound and no idea which one. There'd been nothing on the newsvids. Nothing even in jump-jockey gossip. Nothing. Except a

plea for a silent run.

She had to be crazy. No. She had to be crazy not to see that Nolan had given her an answer, even as he denied any ability to help. Shandy locked onto the coordinates of the jumpgate's outer beacon while her mind worked. A Mhisharan ship under impound. The only Mhisharan ships in the Conclave were research vessels. Cargo bays converted to science labs. Geophysicists and mineralogists elbow to elbow. It made sense. The Dalgran sector was a miner's dream. And a geologist's one as well.

She took the *Lucy* through jump, her mind moving almost as quickly as her ship.

When she came out of the second jump, she had her cover story well formulated. Not flawless, but at least in place.

She relayed it with feigned boredom to the Conclave officer staring suspiciously at her over her ship's vidlink. "I've been way the hell over in Gensiira for the past two months. Didn't know you have my client's ship on impound. What am I supposed to do with this shipment?"

"I suggest you find a depot--"

"It's time-dated! Didn't you read the manifest?" Shandy hoped he hadn't read it too closely. She tapped her lightpen on her compscreen, highlighting the same section on his copy. That was all she wanted him to see. The commodity transport code and time-date designation. And the fact that her client was a Mhishar science lab.

Not the smudging of the pick-up date: last year. It had taken her twenty-five minutes to scan and reformat the manifest file to blur the date.

The officer pursed his lips. "Just a minute."

Her vidscreen blanked, showing only the Conclave emblem topping the logo of Deneb Station. She edged the *Lucy* closer to the security beacons, drummed her fingers on her arm pad. Her heart pounded in a similar rhythm in her chest.

Her screen blinked on again. She almost jumped.

"One of our patrol ships will escort you to Dalgra Five. The research labs use the Owens Spaceport."

Dalgra Five? Shit, no! She didn't want to be dirtside. She needed access to Deneb Station, to whatever Rinnaker ship was out on impound orbit. She--

--nodded. Smiled. Had no choice. Get past security, first. Go to Dalgra, if you have to. They might be less concerned with you on the way out. "Acknowledged. I'll wait for your escort."

Shit. What in hell was she going to unload when she got to Owens? The *Lucy*'s cargo holds were empty.

V

It didn't matter. Six armed Owens security cops met her at the base of the *Lucy*'s ramp. Someone must have examined her forged manifest more closely.

"Don't try to run," the tallest one said and shoved her forward, his laser rifle in

her back. She held her hands away from her sides as another yanked her pistol from her utility belt holster.

Twilight darkness eradicated the shadows. She marched across the tarmac towards the cargo hangar office. The evening breeze was dry, dust-filled. That's probably what made her throat feel so parched, her chest so tight.

Shandy hated being dirtside. She hated being surrounded by sec-cops, with the *Lucy* under impound. And a request for a silent run that meant she could trust no one except the sender of the request, Cameron Talvarrin.

She knew the threats even before the tall security sergeant made them. Revocation of her captain's license. Loss of her ship. A definite jail sentence. A hefty fine.

"We want answers, McAllister."

"Hell's patrons want ice water, sergeant."

"You want hell? I'd be glad to arrange--"

"You'll arrange nothing," a deep voice said with undeniable authority.

Shandy swiveled in her chair, as best she could with her hand sonic-cuffed to the armrest. A small flutter of anticipation trembled around her heart. For a brief moment she thought she recognized the voice.

But when she saw the broad-shouldered man standing in the doorway, she knew she didn't.

She also knew why she thought she did.

He wore a dark blue Rinnaker officer's uniform. But from the jacket gleamed not the three stars designating the rank of captain, but five. The rank of commodore of Rinnaker's fleet.

Thick silver hair topped a face that was still handsome, though lined by age. More lines flanked a pair of blue eyes; startlingly pale blue. Like Cam's eyes.

But this wasn't Cam, glowering at the sec-cop behind the desk.

This had to be Gareth Talvarrin, head of Rinnaker Port Transit for over thirty years. Undisputed patriarch of the Talvarrin family. Cameron's uncle.

His icy gaze swept over her. She felt suddenly chilled.

"I'll handle Captain McAllister."

"But, Commodore, I can't release--"

"You can. You will." He made a curt motion with his hand. "Unlock the cuffs."

For three heartbeats no one moved. Then the sergeant gave a brief nod. The sec-cop closest to Shandy tapped in the code.

She shook out her wrist as she walked towards him, her mind whirling. But his expression, as he glared down at her, halted any questions.

And made her consider that perhaps this wasn't a rescue after all, but rather a one way ticket to hell. Which, gathering from the Commodore Talvarrin's frosty demeanor, was shortly about to freeze over.

VI

Gareth Talvarrin made no comments as he guided the hovercar through the spaceport gates then turned right, heading for a distant glow on the horizon.

Shandy wondered why an aide hadn't driven him, thought better than to ask. The glow brightened. A row of entry lights illuminated the emblem of the Conclave Trade Embassy on the gates, which opened as the car approached.

They were expected in spite of the late hour.

She followed the silver-haired man down a long, empty corridor to a set of double-doors. An office he'd been assigned, or permitted to use, Shandy guessed.

No, appropriated. Gareth Talvarrin was a man who took what he wanted, and accepted nothing less. Like someone else she knew. Someone who was constantly telling her how she should run her business, her life.

He unlocked the doors then strode into the dark office, flicking on a small lamp on the corner of his desk with obvious irritation.

"Sit." He pointed to a chair. "Please."

She detected a clear note of exasperation in his last word. "Thank you," she said. And she didn't mean for the chair.

He stood behind his high-backed chair, arms folded across his chest. Studying her. Struggling with something.

She didn't know what, unless it was her unexpected appearance. Gareth Talvarrin didn't look like a man who enjoyed the unexpected.

"What are you doing here?" His voice held the tight note of someone at the end of his patience.

She knew her answer wasn't going to help. "I can't tell you."

His eyes widened, briefly, in shock. Shandy guessed not many people refused to answer Commodore Talvarrin's questions.

"Shandy Alexis." He paused. "McAllister."

But for the addition of her last name, that was the way Cam would refer to her when he was angry. *You're not listening to me, Shandy Alexis.*

She had a feeling Gareth Talvarrin had been forewarned. She couldn't imagine what Cam had told his uncle about her. No. She could. "Yes, that's me. And no, I can't tell you."

"You damn well better tell me. You just don't show up in the middle of a war zone--"

"War zone?" There'd been no reports of a declaration of war. No reports of even a skirmish let alone military action.

He cupped his hand over his mouth as if holding back his words. "Unofficial war zone," he said finally. "The Nanjir have taken aggressive action. Problems have been contained to this sector, for the moment. But your response tells me that's not what brought you here."

Shandy shook her head. "I really don't know why I'm here, sir. But," and she took a deep breath, watching for his reaction as she said the name, "Captain Cameron Talvarrin does. He sent me a message yesterday."

Only a slight flicker of surprise showed in his eyes. "What makes you think you received a message from the *Valiance*?"

"It didn't carry the ship's TTD. Just Cam's... Cameron Talvarrin's name."

"Based on that, you forced your way into the Dalgra Sector?"

She heard the disbelief in his voice. Could guess how foolish her actions must seem to such a disciplined figure as himself. To risk everything because of an

unauthenticated message. "I've known Captain Talvarrin for almost a year."

"Eight months. What was the content of this message?"

"I have to talk to Captain Talvarrin before I can tell you that."

He clenched his hands. Struggling to control his temper, no doubt. But troubles of a different kind clouded his gaze when he looked at her. "You can't talk to him."

There was no anger in his voice, only sadness. Something cold clasped Shandy's heart, as if it knew she needed numbing to hear his next words.

"Cameron Talvarrin was killed in a shuttle accident ten days ago."

VII

"No." The iciness inside her exploded into sharp shards of pain. She was conscious of her fingers digging into the padded armrests of the chair. Of her breath coming in short gasps and then not seeming to come at all. Her throat tightened. She sucked in a sob, mentally railed at herself for a thousand stupid things, for wasted time, lost moments. And for the foolish urge to cry.

She had no reason to cry. They weren't lovers. She'd only known him for about a year.

Eight months. Even Commodore Talvarrin had known that.

She let out a shaky breath and was surprised to find him standing next to her, offering a snifter of a golden liquid.

She grabbed it, downed half of it, coughed.

He patted her on the back, his hand slowing to massage circles against her shoulder.

She sipped the rest, tried to will herself to stop shaking. Tried to will herself to forget Gareth Talvarrin's voice telling her Cam was dead.

He pulled his hand away, then retreated to the corner of the desk and leaned one hip on it.

Shandy turned the snifter around in her hands. "I'm sorry." Her voice sounded hoarse. "I'm, I'll be okay."

"This wasn't meant to hurt you. But you need to understand why I don't believe you received a message."

"I did!" She raised her face, blinking back unwanted tears of anger. Tears at not being believed. That's all they were.

"But not from Cam Talvarrin."

Because Cam was dead. There was no way he could've sent a transmit yesterday if he'd been killed ten days ago. She swiped at her eyes with her hand. The tears weren't only from anger.

"I need to see the original of that message."

She nodded. "It's in a secure file on the *Lucy*, the *Lucent Echo*. But it's pretty mangled. No TTD. I don't know if--"

Doors whooshed open behind her, halting her words. Shandy glanced over her shoulder. A shaft of light rimmed the tall form of a young man in Rinnaker blues. He stepped into the office, doors closing behind him.

"I just heard that--" He stared at Shandy, then jabbed a finger in her direction.

“What’s she doing here?”

The older man seemed unperturbed by the intruder’s harsh tone and rude manner. “Captain McAllister, may I present Lieutenant Rory Talvarrin.”

His son. Cam’s younger cousin. And in appearance, like a reflected shadow of Cam Talvarrin. Same thick, dark hair. Similar straight nose, strong jaw line.

He even had Cam’s persistence. “Do you have any idea what’s at risk here? Your life, hers, everything we’ve worked for in the past two weeks?”

“More than you realize. Take a seat.”

“I doubt that. Or you wouldn’t have brought her here--”

“I didn’t.”

--when we’re less than two days from the meeting. If the Dalgran realize--”

“They won’t. Now sit, Rorrick!” The commodore’s eyes held the same steely hardness as his tone.

Rory took the chair next to Shandy, leaned his elbows on his knees. “Sorry. Sir.”

“Captain McAllister was just telling me about a message she received yesterday. From Cameron.”

Rory’s face jerked up. “But you said you--”

“Lieutenant Talvarrin. You’re not listening to me.” He pushed himself off the edge of the desk.

Rory straightened, finally seemed to realize he was being disrespectful not only to his father, but to the head of the Rinnaker fleet.

Cam should have been his son, Shandy thought. Rory was more like herself, impulsive. Impertinent.

“Sorry, sir,” he said again, sounding as if he meant it this time.

“Someone sent Captain McAllister a transmit. Drawing her here, under the pretense the message came from us.” The commodore paced the dim recesses of the office. “Which makes me now question a number of parameters I’d believed were secure. Hopefully, when I see this transmit, I’ll be able to tell just how, and where, we were lax.”

Rory turned to her. “What’s the TTD?”

Shandy started from the beginning. No TTD. Message lines corrupted, broken. The only things she could clearly make out were Dalgra Five, the old smuggler’s term for a silent run, and Cam’s signum.

“Not much to work with.” Rory sounded frustrated. He looked at his father leaning against a bookcase on the far wall. “And it’s late. Sir.”

The older man nodded. “I’m well aware of that.”

“At your age--”

“Thank you for reminding me.” A wry grimace cross his lined features.

“Accompany Captain McAllister back to the *Lucy*. Get a copy of that transmit.”

Shandy hesitated in the doorway. “I’d like to stay and help, sir.”

One gray eyebrow arched. “Did you think I was giving you permission to depart? Someone went to a great deal of trouble to lure you here. You’re staying, until I know just who has done this. And why.”

VIII

Shandy spent a restless night in a small guest suite in the embassy. Dreams of a blue-eyed man haunted her. Rory showed up early the next morning, with two cups of coffee. And noticeable shadows under his dark eyes.

"I've been told to bring you up to date."

She sat on the edge of an overstuffed chair, sipped the fragrant brew. Listened without interrupting. Cam would've been pleased.

"About two years ago, Mhisharan scientists discovered Dalgran mines held enough crystal to fuel several fleets for a few hundred years. Or more. The Nanjir were immediately interested. So were the Conclave and the Z'fharin. However, you know the Dalgrans, for religious reasons, won't ally with any government. That kept the Z'fharin Empire out of it, and our own government as well. But they will trade with a free merchanter, like us, G.G.A. or Norvind. Or one of the Nanjir traders.

"After months of secret negotiations, it's come down to us or the Nanjiran Kodi. This week, President Fabiar will make her choice." Rory sipped his coffee.

"Commodore Talvarrin is here to represent your family."

"More than that. Fabiar's religious edicts demand a Holy Seal of Agreement must be executed by a family elder who's held that position for five years. Skure has been the *Jdal* of the Kodi merchanters for ten."

"Your father's held his position for more than thirty."

Rory nodded slowly. "That's why they attacked his shuttle, believing the commodore was on board. *Lancer-One* was outbound from the *Valiance* on approach to Deneb Station. A Nanjiran Tryll veered off course, claiming a malfunction. Both ships were destroyed." Rory looked away, his mouth a tight line.

A suicide mission. By the Nanjir to guarantee the mining contract with the Dalgrans. Shandy knew who would have been next in line to command Rinnaker if the commodore had been on that shuttle. Cameron Talvarrin. But he would've held his rank only days. Not the required five years.

But the Nanjir hadn't succeeded in killing the commodore, only his successor. Cameron.

"We've tightened security," Rory said. "The Nanjir will try again. It may well be why you're here."

Shandy almost dropped her coffee. "Are you accusing me of--?"

"Sorry. I'm explaining this badly." He wiped one hand over his face. "That transmit you received shows traces of passing through Nanjiran communications filters. They want you here."

"Why?"

"My guess?" Rory's tone softened. "They know Cam's been following you all over Syar."

Echoes of her conversation with Donni replayed in head. And a small pain closed once more around her heart. "So they lure me here, why? Thinking I'll come after them for revenge for--"

Shandy stopped, listened to her own words. She could almost hear Hillard's leering appraisal of her 'horizontal influence'. Could almost envision the newsvids'

lurid take on the story: the grief stricken lover of a dead Rinnaker captain attacks the Nanjiran delegate, halting sensitive trade negotiations. Or worse. Disqualifying Rinnaker Port Transit. The Nanjiran Kodi would win by default. “They want me to try to kill *Jdal* Skure. But they’ll be prepared, make sure I don’t succeed. And make sure the Dalgrans don’t grant you the contract as a result.”

“That’s also my guess.”

“But not the commodore’s?”

He shook his head. “He knows. He just doesn’t like it. I’m supposed to escort you to the *Valiance*.”

Supposed to. Shandy heard the words, heard the clear tone of disagreement in Rory’s voice. Knew why. “If you do that,” she said slowly, “then the Nanjir will know we’ve uncovered their ploy. They’ll just make new plans. Plans we don’t know about.”

“And can’t defend against.” Rory’s words paralleled her thoughts. “All delegates are banned from carrying weapons.”

“When is President Fabiar announcing her decision?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“If I leave, they might try to kill Commodore Talvarrin again.”

“He seems less concerned about that than your safety.”

“You don’t agree.”

A pained expression crossed Rory’s face. “The Nanjir have already destroyed one life that meant as much to me as my own. I can’t let them do that, again. But I also can’t ask that you risk yours.”

“I’m willing to take that risk. Permitting murderers to sit in that meeting, to proceed unmasked and unpunished, is wrong.” Then Cam’s death would mean nothing. It would be forever logged as an accident. An ignoble epitaph for a man who was worth so, so much more.

She turned away from Rory, waited for the mist to clear from her eyes.

“He was right about you.”

She turned back to him with a cautious, questioning look.

“Cam. He said you were the most unorthodox, brilliant--”

“Impertinent,” she put in, even though her voice broke.

“-- feisty woman he’s ever had the misfortune to fall in love with.” Rory brushed a tear from her cheek. “Silent run, Captain McAllister. Speed and stealth. We need it all, now.”

IX

“I’m sure you can see,” *Jdal* Skure smiled thinly at President Fabiar from his position on the podium, “that the Nanjir are honorable, trustworthy and deserving of a Holy Agreement with you. We have never violated any of the Dalgran holy trade edicts.”

“I can name two violations right now, Skure.” Shandy’s voice rang out clearly in the small auditorium. Faces jerked toward the main doors.

“And murder is one of them.” She swiftly made her way down the steps

towards the oval table, her heart pounding. Nanjir brown uniforms ringed the table on the right. Rinnaker blue filled the seats on the left.

Shandy met Skure's intense gaze from the center podium with one that signaled her own fierce determination. She glanced briefly at Rory. His dark head moved in an almost imperceptible nod.

The gray haired man next to Rory rose halfway in his seat. "Shandy Alexis!" His voice was hoarse.

Rory's hand clamped on his forearm. "Don't."

Commodore Talvarrin shot a deadly, cold look at the younger man. "Damn you, Rorrick! I ought to--"

"Young lady, this is not a public session." Skure made a quick motion to one of his aides. "I request you be removed."

"I request justice." She ignored the aide striding towards her. "The Tryll accident on Deneb was no accident! An unmanned fighter, *Jdal* Skure. You used an unmanned ship, solely for the purpose of murder. You--"

A man in a brown Nanjiran tunic jumped to his feet, pointing at Shandy. "She's got a gun!"

Laser-pistols emerged from beneath brown tunics. The two Dalgran security guards behind President Fabiar appeared startled, then quickly moved forward, their own weapons drawn.

Skure's aide lunged, grabbing a handful of Shandy's jacket as she backed away, stumbling against a pylon behind her. Laser fire burned overhead.

Instinctively, Shandy dropped to the floor, the aide tumbling down beside her.

Shouts, screams echoed. Shandy thought she heard her name called as she wrestled with the Nanjiran. He squeezed her right wrist so tightly her hand felt numb. But she refused to let him thrust a small object into her fingers.

She shoved her forearm against his chest, brought her knee up. He twisted away, her knee slamming into the hard bone of his hip.

His breath was foul in her face. She tried to yank her hand out of his grasp. He pinned her shoulder to the floor. The small metal cylinder in his hand dug painfully into her collarbone.

She smashed her fist against his elbow. He grunted and bucked forward. Then suddenly he reared back.

Commodore Talvarrin had him by both shoulders. He spun the aide around, plowed his fist into the man's face. The man flailed backwards.

Shandy struggled to sit up. Four laser pistols were aimed at her.

"She tried to kill the *Jdal*!" A Nanjiran officer crouched down, came up with a triumphant smile on her face. And a small laser pistol in her hand. "I saw Burak take this from her."

Commodore Talvarrin reached for Shandy. A Nanjiran guard swung his laser pistol, stopping the gray haired man. Talvarrin shoved him aside. "Get the hell out of my way!"

Shandy accepted his outstretched hand, let him pull her to her feet. He yanked her against him, trapping her against his chest. His voice was a harsh whisper in her ear. "You damn near got yourself killed! Don't you ever do that again, do you hear me, little girl?"

Shandy had only a moment to stare up at him in wide-eyed confusion before a Dalgran guard separated them.

“Commodore!” Talla Fabiar held up her hand. More Dalgran guards flanked the stately, red-haired woman as she strode into the circle of officers and delegates around Shandy. “This is unacceptable. Blasphemous.” Her gaze went from Commodore Talvarrin to the Nanjiran representatives and then to Shandy. “Who are you?”

“Shandy Alexis McAllister. Captain of the Independent Freighter, the *Lucent Echo*. Ma’am.”

“We were warned about her.” Skure’s voice held a forceful, gloating note. “She was Captain Talvarrin’s lover. His death, a complete accident you know, has obviously unbalanced her. Which they knew,” Skure continued, with a nod to Rory and Commodore Talvarrin, “but permitted her presence here. Proof that they do not honor your Holy Edicts.”

“And your weapons do?” Commodore Talvarrin pointed to the laser pistols surrounding them.

“Self defense,” Skure countered. “My aide fortunately spotted her weapon before she could use it. Fought with her at the risk of his own life.” He held his hand out. The female Nanjiran officer gingerly placed the laser pistol in his palm. “A Conclave issue weapon, as you can see. I wouldn’t be surprised if it turns out to be registered to Rinnaker.”

“It probably is.” Rory spoke up from beside Commodore Talvarrin. The older man stared hard at him. “We had several weapons stolen two months ago. Reported them--”

“Because Cameron Talvarrin gave them to her,” Skure said.

“Then her fingerprints would be on the weapon.”

“Of course.”

“Except they’re not.” Rory nodded to Shandy. She raised both hands, palms out. “President Fabiar, your guards all carry scancorders?”

“Yes, but--”

“Set them to detect level 6 thermoluminescence. Scan Captain McAllister’s hands, then the laser.”

Fabiar’s nod initiated the task. Shandy’s palms glowed faintly. The laser didn’t.

“We knew,” Rory told Skure. “We have the forged transmit. Captain McAllister agreed to cooperate, not to harm the *Jdal*. But to uncover your plot to murder a Talvarrin. Again.” He turned to President Fabiar. “If she’d touched that laser pistol, the coating on her hands would be on it. I think that’s sufficient proof of the Nanjirans’ intentions. But if you need more, the Commodore and I will be glad to show it to you.”

Talla Fabiar examined the assembled group with narrowed eyes. “*Jdal* Skure. You and your people will be sequestered, under guard. For our protection, and yours. Commodore Talvarrin. Lieutenant. I would like to see all proof you have, relating not only to what has just transpired. But concerning the unfortunate accident on Deneb Station. My chambers. Five minutes.”

X

Shandy waited four hours in the embassy library, her legs tucked under her, a darkened reader-pad on her lap. The high back chair was plush, cushioned. She could have fallen asleep. Should have. But for a voice and a pair of blue eyes, haunting her.

When Commodore Talvarrin had pulled her off the auditorium floor, it was Cam's voice she heard growling in her ear. But when she turned, Cam wasn't there. Never would be, again.

Gareth Talvarrin had the misfortune to have a similar tone and timbre to his late nephew. In the same way that her friend Donni sounded uncannily like her mother. Many times she'd walked into the Caro apartment and thought it was Donni answering her hellos. Not her mother, Dominica.

Until the older woman's curly gray head would poke around the corner of a door, usually wide-eyed at the turn the conversation had taken.

And then they'd laugh.

Hearing Gareth Talvarrin's voice only made her want to cry.

She looked up at the sound of footsteps muffled by the thick library carpeting.

"It's settled." Rory sat in the chair opposite her. "The Nanjir have been disgraced, may face a criminal investigation by the Dalgrans. We won the contract." He reached over and squeezed her hand. "We won."

"You paid a high price for your victory."

His smile faded. "About a month ago, my father came down very hard on both Cam and myself for just that reason. He warned, and he was right, that we'd become a little too full of ourselves. Overconfident. He reminded us that immortality was not a Talvarrin trait. And that if we weren't careful..." His voice trailed off. He stared at his folded hands.

"We weren't." He raised his face. "We assumed the Talvarrin name would guarantee the best docking berths, top notch security, flawless responses to our requests. My father warned us: Never stop looking over your shoulder. We had. But we won't, anymore."

A high price. And a hard lesson learned. Shandy unfolded her legs. "I hope, well, next time you're in Port Tyber, I'll buy you a beer. We can talk about how well Rinnaker is doing."

"This sounds like good-bye."

"I have work to do." Work to lose herself in, to try to forget Cam.

Rory nodded slightly. "He said you'd say something like that. I'm supposed to bring you to his office."

Supposed to. She'd heard Rory's 'supposed to' before. "So the commodore can quote me chapter and verse of all the things I did wrong?"

Rory grinned wryly. "What do you think I've been listening to for the past hour? He threatened to vent me out the *Valiance's* exhaust at least a dozen times."

Shandy stood, put the reader-pad back on the shelf. "Tell him he's welcome to chase me down at Port Tyber with a long list of my faults, if he wants to. I'll even agree with most of them. But right now," she let out a short, tired sigh, "I need some time by myself. Because you weren't the only one who felt immortal. Who believed

there'd always be a tomorrow to be with someone she cared about."

"I think the commodore needs to hear that."

"That he was right about immortality?"

Rory nodded, rising. "That, too."

An unfamiliar Rinnaker officer met her at the wide double doors. "Commodore Talvarrin's expecting you, Captain McAllister."

Shandy took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders and, head held high, strode through the doorway.

XI

His desk was empty. It took Shandy a moment to notice the tall figure standing at the bookcase, his back to her.

She took a deep breath. "I came to say good bye."

Commodore Talvarrin turned as the doors hissed closed.

"And to say I'm sorry," she continued. "You--"

She stared at the man stepping out of the room's shadows. The five stars on his jacket glinted in the soft lights. Five stars denoting the rank of commodore. The young officer in the corridor had even said that. Commodore Talvarrin.

But the man standing before her had never seen his sixtieth birthday. Nor his fiftieth. Maybe his fortieth. And his hair wasn't gray. It was black.

Yet the blue eyes that had glared down at her in such anger in the auditorium were exactly the same.

She sucked in a shaky breath. "Cameron?"

He held out his hand.

Her heart was pounding so hard she couldn't move. "What happened?"

"I got tired of being old."

"You got--?"

He seemed to realize his flippancy was ill timed. "I never meant for you to be hurt by this."

Shandy drew in another breath, closed her eyes. Opened them. He was still there. He was still Cameron. He was alive.

"I can explain."

She didn't want explanations. She wanted—

"Oh, Gods. Cam!" She threw her arms around his neck. She needed to feel the solid warmth of him, breathe in his masculine scent. Somewhere in the midst of reassuring herself he was real, she realized she was crying.

"Hush, little girl." His arms closed tightly across her back, crushing her against him. His mouth brushed kisses onto her temple, her cheek. "I never meant to hurt you. But there was too much at risk to tell you the truth until now."

"Who was on the shuttle?" she asked softly.

"Rory's father. Gareth."

Shandy remembered the bitterness in the younger man's voice as he'd talked about the accident. About what he'd lost; someone important to him. Someone he'd not been permitted to truly mourn. She wasn't the only one who'd been hurt by the game Rinnaker had been forced to play.

"He took it very well," she said.

"Of course. He's a Talvarrin." As if that explained it all.

She looked up into pale blue eyes and sighed. "You know, once I get over the fact that I'm very glad you're alive, I'm going to be mad as hell at you." She touched his face. "How did you do it?"

"Do you want the technical explanation? Or will you settle for the fact that, as I once told you, Rory and I had spent a couple of months when we were kids traveling with a theater troupe?"

She should have guessed. Entertainers used temporary cosmetic alterations all the time. Sonic surgery could alter an appearance drastically for a few hours. A good method but it wasn't foolproof.

"But your crew, and others who knew Commodore Talvarrin. Wouldn't they have known?"

"That's why I stayed on Dalgra with a minimum of personnel, none of whom had had any dealings with Gareth before. They saw these," he brought her hand to rest on top of the gold stars, "and just assumed I was who I said I was. Of course, a very strong family resemblance helped, too."

She traced the edges of the stars with her fingertips. "But you are who you said you are. Aren't you." There was no questioning tone in her voice. She knew the answer.

"Somebody has to do it."

It had been difficult enough for her to deal with Cameron Talvarrin as a Rinnaker captain. As commodore, suddenly the distance between them seemed more than any Indy singlehander could manage. She could almost hear Nolan's voice: he's not for the likes of you.

"Shandy?"

She felt a pang of longing for her own small bridge on the *Lucy*, with its rehabilitated scanners and rebuilt comp boards. A check-valve on the portside alpha-thruster was showing signs of wear, and with a little luck, she might be able to find a slightly used one at a dealer in Port Rumor. Self-consciously, she rubbed the top of one scuffed boot against the back of her pant leg.

"I'd best be going." She stepped back. He reached for her. She hesitated, her hand coming up towards his, but stopping in midair and withdrawing, suddenly. It was an awkward movement. She avoided his questioning gaze.

"Shandy?"

"I put in for Q'uivera. Flight plan filed and all that. Should really get going." She shrugged, offering him a tremulous smile. "I've got almost a week's worth of downtime to account for. Customers want results, not excuses."

"To hell with customers! What's the matter?"

She backed away again. "Nothing, Commodore."

"What's this commodore stuff all of a sudden? Five minutes ago it was Cam? What happened to Cam?"

She knew the answer, but didn't know how to explain it. She reached for the wall-panel.

"Shandy Alexis, damn it! Don't you walk out that door!" He crossed the room swiftly and snatched her hand away.

She twisted halfheartedly in his grasp. "You're going to be very busy--"

"Of course I'll be busy," he cut in gruffly. "What in the Seven Hells of Procyon does that have to do with anything?"

She took a deep breath. "Your work's more important than before. I have enough to do just keeping the bill collector's off my tail and--"

"And?"

"And I don't think anything between you and I is feasible at the moment because--"

"Shandy, I--"

"Because we're going in two very different directions. Not to mention the fact that I catch all sorts of hell whenever--"

"Shandy, I love you."

"Whenever people say--" She stopped staring at the scuffed tips of her boots and looked up at him. Not sure if she'd heard correctly. Not sure what she'd do if she had.

"Shandy." He took her other hand and brought both to his lips. "I love you. And I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to lose me, either, Commodore Talvarrin," she replied honestly, startled by her own admission. "I may not have much. Hell, my net worth is probably less than what it cost Rinnaker to put this office together. But it's all mine. The profits and the debts. And McAllister's *Lucent Echo* has a schedule to keep."

"You're a stubborn little girl, you know that?" he asked softly.

"Yes sir." They stood in silence for a few moments before Shandy reached for the wall panel. The door slid open.

"McAllister!"

Shandy turned.

"I still love you."

She let him pull her into his arms. His kisses spoke of promises, of need, of love. She wrapped her arms around his neck, fitting her trembling body against his.

"Just give me some time, Cam." She placed her hands against his chest, felt the pounding of his heart beneath his commodore's stars.

Reluctantly, he released her. "You know where to find me, little girl."

Standing on her tiptoes, she brushed a soft kiss across his mouth. Then stepped out into the wide corridor of the Conclave embassy.

The *Lucy* had a schedule to keep.

XII

The *Lucy* scooted gracefully between two lumbering G.G.A. tri-haulers as she cleared Q'uivera Station's outer marker, her large holds empty for the first time in many septis. She had a tendency to be a bit more skittish without the accustomed

weight of cargo, and other star-freighter captains might have taken the move between the two tri-engined ships more conservatively. But Captain Shandy Alexis McAllister was a singlehander; she literally ate, lived and breathed her ship. She helmed the *Lucy* as if she choreographed a dance.

Shandy gave the navcomp the freedom to make the final adjustments and reached for the steaming cup of coffee before her. Her navcomp acknowledged the *Lucy*'s release from Q'uivera Departure Control. Her inbox icon flashed.

The agent in Port Rumor still wanted to add the *Lucy* to her roster, especially now that the Dalgran situation had been settled and trade was back to normal. She cleared the transmit from her screen along with several others that were of little interest, including one from Nolan Ennis.

And then there was a message from Cam. True to Rory's observations, he'd rarely let her out of his sight. At least, she frequently picked up the *Valiance* on her scanners. But she hadn't seen him since their meeting at the embassy; her feelings for Rinnaker's new commodore as incomplete, cryptic and frustrating as that broken transmission she'd received less than two months ago.

He could be an arrogant scoundrel and was a powerful man in Conclave merchant trade. And he now had the contract with the mines on Dalgra, adding it to the growing list of acquisitions for Rinnaker. Even Nolan Ennis had grudgingly admitted Rinnaker was a far bit better to deal with than the Nanjir.

Still, Cam was not only the commodore, he was also a Talvarrin. And worried tongues, loosened by pints of ale in spaceport pubs, wondered just what Commodore Cameron Talvarrin would attempt to do next.

What worried Captain Shandy Alexis McAllister was she knew.

She stared at the transmission on the screen, knowing she owed him an answer.

It would mean giving up the *Lucy* for a little while, not that her ship didn't need a rest. Her thruster feeds were acting up again. The ship could use a complete overhaul. And if this deal came off like Cam had told her it would, she could pay for the overhaul twice over!

But she was a captain, damn it, an Independent. To ally herself with Rinnaker-- even in an advisory capacity-- was, well, dangerous. Life was so much easier when all you did was pick up a shipment here and take it there, pick up another shipment there and...

She drew a deep breath. That's exactly what she'd done for the past two months. She was bored to tears. Cam knew it; he told her he'd known it even before that day on Dalgra. She was wasting her time hauling freight.

But take on the Ycsko's Beffan Syndicate? Hell, since the Z'fharins wiped out half the 'Sko fleet last year, no one even knew where they were based. Nor where they stored their millions in rare gemstones. No one, that is, except Cameron Talvarrin.

Yet it wasn't the gemstones or her boredom that formed her true motivation. But a blue-eyed man whose kisses she couldn't forget.

She keyed in her TTD and signum, then her reply:

TOP PRIORITY SCRAMBLE CODE 3

I'LL DO IT. MEET YOU PORT RUMOR SD99503.15. FLYBOY'S BAR.
S.R..

She hesitated only a moment before adding: I LOVE YOU.

--SHANDY

The reply came back before she was even halfway finished with coffee.

TOP PRIORITY SCRAMBLE CODE 3

SOUNDS LIKE HELL JUST FROZE OVER. I'VE GOT A DEAL ON SOME
HOT ICE. PACK YOUR GEAR, LITTLE GIRL. I LOVE YOU. FOREVER.

--CAM

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