

The Morcai Battalion:

The Recruit

Susan Kyle

One woman harbors within her the key to

lasting peace...

## CHAPTER ONE

Battered and sore, Dr. Madeline Ruszel stood at attention in front of the Holconcom commander, Dtimun. The tall alien perched on the edge of his liquiform desk with his arms crossed, glaring at her. His cat-eyes, which changed color to mirror his mood, were the dark brown of anger.

She knew she looked unpresentable. Her red Holconcom uniform was stained with synthale and her own blood. She was disheveled and bruised. Her long, wavy reddish-gold hair was in a tangle all the way to her waist, and also sweaty from her recent activities in the base officers' lounge. Contacted by the base military police unit, after her apprehension, Dtimun had ordered Ruszel brought to the Morcai, the flagship of the integrated Centaurian and human commando unit known as the Holconcom.

He hadn't said a word since she arrived, with bruises just coming out on the soft skin of her face, around one of her green eyes. She'd been standing at attention for several minutes, waiting for the

explosion. Holconcom were forbidden to engage in

brawls. That included not only the Centaurian complement, but the humans as well. The elite and feared military unit had, unknown to the human commanders of the Tri-Galaxy Fleet, genetically engineered superior strength, plus microcyborg enhancers that made brawling extremely dangerous. Besides that, Madeline was a combat surgeon. By constitutional galactic law, medical personnel were denied that sort of recreation.

Of course, they were also denied the use of sidearms. Madeline tried to conceal the one she was carrying tucked in her waistband, under her tunic, from the alien's penetrating gaze.

Finally, he spoke. "You are out of uniform, madam," he growled, indicating her uniform, unbuttoned at the throat.

She raised one hand and quickly fastened the button.

"And you are carrying a firearm," he continued.

"Firearms are forbidden to medical personnel. You are

a doctor.”

Technically, she wasn't only a doctor of medicine, but an internist in Cularian medicine, an anthropological group which included the Cehn-Tahr—or Centaurians as they were incorrectly known by humans—and their worst enemies, Rojoks. In her past, Madeline had captained an Amazon commando squad and had routinely carried a service weapon. But she wasn't going to push her luck by reminding him of that fact, given the state of his temper. His expression

might be benign, but his large slit-pupiled cat-eyes were still brown. Grimacing, she tugged the Jebob disruptor from her belt, stepped forward and laid it gently on the desk beside him. She returned to attention.

“Would you care to explain the purple discoloration around your left eye?” he added.

“It’s called a black eye,” she informed him merrily. “That would be from Flannegan’s fist. Sir.”

He made a rough sound deep in his throat and folded his arms across his broad chest. “I assume that you do have some justification for throwing Flannegan through the expensive antique glass patio doors at the officers’ club?”

She brightened, although she still hadn’t quite met his eyes. “Yes, sir!”

“Which is...?” he prompted.

“Flannegan called you a cat-eyed benny-whammer.

Sir," she added formally.

He just stared at her, as if he had doubts about her sanity.

"How can I justify the dignity of your position aboard the Morcai," he began solemnly, "as the only female, human or otherwise, ever to serve aboard her, when you spend hours in various bars across the base embarrassing both the Holconcom and me?"

She shook her head. "Sir, the honor of the unit was at stake," she said earnestly. "You must see that we..." She cleared her throat. "I mean, I, had to defend your honor."

“We.” His eyes grew darker.

“Me. I. Myself.” She gathered speed.

“And Stern,” he guessed, “and Hahnson and Komak.” The other two human officers, Captain Holt Stern and Dr. Strick Hahnson, were Madeline’s longtime comrades. Komak, a Centaurian, was Dtimun’s second in command.

She met his eyes, aghast. “Sir, I never said that...!”

He drew in a breath. “It is useless to try to deceive me.”

She straightened even more. “I’m really very sorry, sir,” she said. “I waded in to punish Flannegan, and his buddies in the First Fleet attacked me. I was outnumbered, so the others intervened to save me from them.”

“A pity,” he muttered darkly, “that they are not here to save you from me.”



“I was about to say that myself, sir,” she returned brightly. Her green eyes were twinkling, despite all her efforts to appear sincere.

The humor was contagious, apparently, because his cat-eyes flared into a green smile, if only briefly, before the angry brown returned.

“Brawling,” he scoffed. “Not only does it reflect poorly on your profession, but you have no business displaying a firearm to the entire base.”

“I had to relieve Flannegan of the firearm, sir— he’d taken it from a Jebob officer and he was using the grip to batter my head.”

His eyes narrowed. "I will remind you once more that medical personnel are not allowed sidearms. Lawson insists on it, and so do I."

Her green eyes glittered at him defiantly. "With all due respect, sir, I'm not going into a combat situation unarmed, whether or not Admiral Lawson likes it."

Dtimun stood up, shaking his head. "Your previous combat history as a captain with the Amazon Division is at war with your professional credentials as a healer. It will lead to grief."

"I always hide the firearm, sir," she assured him.

He turned, scowling, and gave her a long look that took in the nice fit of her red Holconcom uniform. There were no pockets. Neither was there room for a weapon. "Should I ask where you hide the firearm?" he questioned unexpectedly.

She gave him a horrified look. "Sir!" she exclaimed with mock embarrassment.

“At least reassure me that all of your Cehn-Tahr crewmates removed their microcyborgs before you engaged in this senseless slaughter,” he replied, trying to salvage something from the encounter. This was a deliberate deception, also. The microcyborgs were strength-enhancers, used by the Cehn-Tahr clones of the Holconcom. But their contribution to Dtimun and Komak’s physical superiority was minute. Dtimun and Komak were not clones. The humans had no idea of the real nature of the Cehn-Tahr.

“Komak collected them the minute Flannegan called you a cat-eyed...called you a name,” she

amended quickly, "and I threw a barstool at him," she assured him with a muffled grin.

He let out a long sigh and waved a hand at her.

"Get out of my office," he muttered. "And stay out of the base officers' club until I give you official permission to return there."

"Yes, sir!"

"And, you are grounded until further notice."

"Yes, sir!"

He glared at her as she started to leave. "Take that weapon and give it back to Flannegan. And if I catch you carrying a firearm into combat," he began with the threat in his tone and his posture, "I will stand you up in the brig and let Komak use you as a practice target for his novapen. Am I understood?"

"Oh, yes, sir, you are," she assured him, grabbing the weapon off his desk.

“Ruszel,” he called as the door powered apart at her movement.

Her hair flew around her face as she turned back to him, her eyes questioning.

“Does Flannegan have a similar souvenir of the encounter?” he asked unexpectedly.

She grinned. “Indeed he does, sir. Two of them!”

Once again, there was the faintest flash of green in his elongated eyes. “Carry on.”

“Yes, sir!”

She was chuckling as she went out of the room and down the deck toward her medical quarters.

Dtimun watched her go with mixed emotions. She was so unlike women of his species, who were not allowed in the military, much less in combat. It had been a point of contention between himself and Ruszel since she and her Terravegan Strategic Space Command comrades, Captain Holt Stern and Dr. Strick Hahnson, had become part of the legendary Cehn-Tahr Holconcom unit now known as the Morcai Battalion. The humans frequently tested his patience to the limit. But they were fierce fighters, loyal and honorable, and they complemented the Centaurian soldiers in ways he hadn't imagined.

In the two and a half years since the Holconcom had escaped from the Rojok death camp, Ahkmau, the war between the Rojok dynasty and the Tri-Galaxy Fleet had intensified. The Centaurians of the Holconcom, except for Dtimun himself and Komak, were all clones. So were Captain Holt Stern and Dr. Strick Hahnson—through no fault of their own, since their originals had been killed by the Rojoks. Dtimun had carefully concealed this knowledge about Stern and Hahnson from the brass of the Tri-Fleet military, due to the inexplicable human contempt for clones.

His men and the humans, formerly of Stern's ship, the SSC ship Bellatrix, had been a volatile mix in the first days of the unit. Holconcom were not used to touch without combat, and the Terravegan humans were a physical race. Therefore, brawling had been strictly forbidden for fear that a massacre might ensue, and not only because of the secret tech used by the

Centaurian members of the Holconcom to boost their already formidable strength.

Not that it did any good to forbid brawling. Komak, Dtimun's executive officer, had gotten around the no-brawling rule by having the clones remove their microcyborgs, the tiny, highly-classified strength modifiers that all members of the Holconcom had embedded in their scalps. His comrades enjoyed the physical sparring with other races. Now the humans aboard the Morcai and their Centaurian comrades frequently trashed bars; but usually not on Trimerius, the headquarters planet of the Tri-Galaxy Fleet.

Admiral Jeffrye Lawson was not going to take Ruszel's participation in the sport lightly. He felt that a Terravegan lieutenant commander, as Madeline was ranked aboard the Morcai, should not brawl. Of course, he also felt that doctors should not help to create patients. But he had a soft spot for Ruszel, which was why she got away with so many infractions of regulations.

Besides Ruszel's brawling, Dtimun had two more equally disturbing problems. The first had to do with



the living machines aboard his ship, the Morcai. There were four kelekoms aboard the Morcai. The living, sentient machines bonded with their operators and were capable of incredible intelligence-gathering abilities. On Ahkmau, the ship had lost one of its operators and the unit had gone into hibernation after its companion had died.

None of the kelekoms had ever lost a companion since Dtimun's accession to head of the Holconcom. Because the joining was so intimate a relationship, it was also emotional. The unit had gone into advanced hibernation mode. Two attempts had been made, over the past two years, to find it a new companion. The first had seemed encouraging. The kelekom had made an effort to give the Centaurian officer time to become familiar with it. It had forced itself to go on missions with him, had functioned almost normally during the weeks that followed. The officer was delighted to be part of the elite unit. The kelekom accepted him in the months that followed and allowed him to join with it. Mission after mission had followed. And just when Dtimun was sure the match would be permanent, the young Centaurian officer had walked into an ambush and died instantly.

The kelekom, now robbed of two linked Centaurians by death, had gone into depression and had finally shut down all over again. Months had passed with no interest from it as Dtimun presented it with new candidates, none of whom seemed to be acceptable. Now, it seemed possible that it would die.

That, Dtimun could not allow to happen. He had to find a replacement operator, but none of his men aboard ship had inspired any interest in the declining bionic machine. So the ship had had to operate with only three units. He thought that perhaps Lawson might have a human computer technician to spare, one

whose very strangeness might appeal to the depressed living machine. It was a long shot, but it might work.

His second problem had to do with a complement of ambassadors who were holding an emergency meeting on Ondar, a neutral planet in the nearby Cerelles system. They were discussing the unexpected death of Rojok tyrant Mangus Lo while he was in Tri-Galaxy Fleet custody, pending a retrial in his conviction on war crime charges, and the latest incursion by his nephew and successor, Chan Ho, who had seized another star system in the New Territory with the help of Chacon, his respected field marshal.

Apparently, Chacon had managed to explain his part in Mangus Lo's arrest on Ahkmau. He had permitted the Morcai Battalion to escape from the horrors of Ahkmau, but no one outside the unit had been privy to that knowledge. Presumably, even if the explanation was sketchy, the Rojoks' new emperor was afraid to test his own power as commander-in-chief by attempting to try the people's favorite soldier, Chacon. There was interspace chatter, however, that Chan Ho favored his late uncle's terror policies and

had gone head-to-head with Chacon about their renewal. It was worrying.

The Tri-Galaxy Council was working on a diplomatic solution to the Rojoks' latest appropriation in the New Territory, claimed by member planets of the Tri-Galaxy Council. The Rojoks had already seized Terramer and its system, now they were spreading out to another nearby system, which contained abundant

natural resources. The ambassadors were on Ondar to vote on sanctions against the so-called neutral member-worlds of the Rojok dynasty, as well as a modified budget to fund the war against the Rojoks. It was a controversial meeting. The Rojoks might attempt a kidnapping.

Dtimun had word from a spy in his circle of acquaintances who said that a contingent of Rojoks was planning to establish a covert base within skimmer distance of the council chambers. He'd taken that information to Lawson, who advised patience. Dtimun had none. Despite the Holconcom's alliance with the Tri-Fleet, it was autonomous. Dtimun could ignore Lawson's dictates and do what he pleased.

Since the chambers were on neutral ground, in a neutral system, the Tri-Galaxy Fleet had been ordered to stand down while the diplomats debated.

Just to annoy Dtimun, the Centaurian emperor, old Tnurat Alamantimichar, had sided with Lawson on the issue and insisted that the Holconcom stay away from Ondar. He interfered frequently. It was ongoing

payback for his Holconcom commander's deliberate provocation of his chauvinistic policies by allowing a female—and a human female at that!—in the Holconcom. The old emperor had been outraged at the news. He and the Imperial Dectat had tried to have Ruszel arrested and executed. Dtimun and Lawson had spiked his guns with the Tri-Galaxy Council. Over the years the emperor had been making the Morcai's commando raids more difficult. His word carried

weight with the Council. Most of the member worlds were terrified of him. Dtimun was not. Nor was the old Centaurian going to keep him planetside if he had intel that the delegates on Ondar were in immediate danger. But for the time being, Dtimun sought more confirmed intel.

Meanwhile, he'd grounded Ruszel, forbidding her to leave her medical unit planetside as well as her office on his flagship until further notice. He would have put her in the brig, but grounding her, along with the threat of the brig, might be enough to keep her in line. For the time being, at least.

Privately, he admired her fighting spirit and valued her in combat situations. Even though she frequently pushed his temper past the breaking point, she pulled her weight aboard ship, and she was popular with the whole crew, including the Cehn-Tahr element. She was capable, intelligent and afraid of nothing. She was also beautiful. He found himself watching her and had to work at controlling his impulses. It was fortunate, he considered, that she had no emotional attachment to him. There were dread secrets in the past of his people,



scientific experiments, genetic tampering, which had resulted in terrifying behaviors beyond their control. The Cehn-Tahr were so ashamed of them that they never permitted any knowledge of their social patterns or mating rituals to be known by outworlders. Had Ruszel displayed any physical interest in him, the results might be lethal. It was a good thing, he decided,

that the human military mentally neutered its crewmen and officers for duty.

He was more wary than most of his race about interspecies relationships. In his youth, his defiance of the rules had ended tragically. It must not happen again. However, he had to admit that Ruszel was the most interesting, and desirable, female he had ever known. If regulations forbidding it had not carried the death penalty in both their societies, and the difference in their species not so great, his reaction to her might have been very different.

As it was, he put her out of his thoughts and went back to work.

Madeline Ruszel was animated as she explained her confrontation with Dtimun to Holt Stern and Dr. Strick Hahnson in her office at the base medical center.

“He was furious!” she chuckled, her green eyes gleaming. “But he let me off with a lecture. I didn’t even draw brig time for the gun. Of course, it was Flannegan’s gun,” she added.

“Not really” Dr. Strick Hahnson grinned.

“Flannegan knocked out a Jebob tech and stole it from him to bash you in the head.”

“You’re going to get yourself in serious trouble one of these days, Ladybones,” Stern said somberly. “The old man won’t overlook these infractions forever.”

“He’s been overlooking them for almost three years,” she reminded him.

“Yes, but the casualty lists are growing longer, and he’s more somber than I’ve ever known him,” Hahnson put in. He sighed. “He’s worried.”

“Aren’t we all?” Stern agreed. “I thought capturing Mangus Lo would end the Rojok threat. Was that naive, or what?”

Madeline could have answered that he was naive, in a sense. His entire life span amounted to only a little under three years. Like Hahnson beside him, he was a clone. The Rojoks had killed their originals; Stern on Terramer during the rescue of the colonists, and Hahnson on Ahkmau in a bout of torture that still could make Madeline sick to her stomach. Stern had fought off his conditioning and helped save his comrades. Hahnson had been cloned and returned to them by Dtimun as compensation, as he put it, for pulling them out of the Terravegan military and into the Holconcom. . The human clones of her friends still had most of the memories of their originals. So the bond between the three officers was as strong as it had ever been.

That was nonregulation, of course. All members of the Terravegan military were mentally neutered before they ever put on a uniform. The authorities had decided that most conflicts were based on sexual or violent emotional issues. They simply used chemical means to remove the ability to bond from members of the military. But once in a while, a candidate fell through the cracks. Madeline was one. So was her father, Clinton Ruszel, a colonel in the SSC Paraguard

Wing. Although she'd been reared in a government nursery, Madeline was one of the few children who actually knew one of her birth parents. Her father had contacted her when she was very small. In fact, he and Dtimun had saved her from terrorists in the Great Galaxy War. Dtimun didn't look it, but he was eighty-nine human years of age. He could have passed for a human in his thirties. He was only in the middle years of his life, at that. He could look forward to another eighty-nine years or more before he died.

"You drifted off again," Hahnson mused, tapping her on the hand.

"Oh! Sorry." She smiled self-consciously. "I was thinking about..." She started to say Ahkmau, but that would have brought back really awful memories for all three of them. "I was thinking about how I ended up being the first woman on a Holconcom ship."

Stern whistled through his teeth. "Now, there's a story of legend."

"You aren't kidding," Hahnson laughed. "Old

Tnurat Alamantimichar, the Centaurian emperor, had a screaming fit about that.”

She grinned. “We heard that he sent the officer who reported my assignment to the brig for a standard month.”

“Well, the C.O. does do everything he can think of to tick off the emperor,” Hahnson commented.

“They’ve had an ongoing feud for decades. Nobody knows what started it, but it’s heated up in the past few years. Your assignment to the Holconcom tied the old

emperor up in knots. He can order people killed on Memcache, the home planet of the Cehn-Tahr," he added, giving the true name of the race that humans in first contact had mistakenly called Centaurians, thinking they came from the star-system nearest old Earth.

"He's an emperor," Madeline pointed out.

"Couldn't he just order the C.O. to give me back to Lawson?"

"That's a whole other story," Hahnson mused.

"You see, old Tnurat was the first commander of the Holconcom. He gave it, and its commander, absolutely autonomy during the Great Galaxy War and thereafter. He can't command it. Neither can the Cehn-Tahr Dectat, their parliament. Dtimun has absolute authority."

"I begin to see the light," Madeline said, grinning.

"Poor old emperor."

"He is, sort of," Hahnson said thoughtfully. "He only has one child left, a daughter, the princess we



rescued from Ahkmau. All his sons are dead, including the one you tried to treat on Terramer, the day we met the Holconcom for the first time.”

“I’d forgotten that his son died that day. Does he have a wife?” She frowned. “Do Centaurians have wives, or do they have harems?” she continued absently.

“You’re our resident Cularian medicine specialist,” Stern pointed out. “Shouldn’t you know the answer to that?”

She gave him a droll look. "Centaurian social behaviors, and mating rituals, are forbidden knowledge. We aren't even allowed to research them."

She had an angelic expression on her face.

Hahnson raised a blond eyebrow. "There are black-market vids that purport to explain them."

She shifted some virtual paperwork. "I've heard about those."

"Have you also heard that they're filmed in a studio in Benaski Port by people who've never even seen a Cehn-Tahr?" Hahnson persisted.

She gasped. "They're what? Those pirates!" she raged. "I paid two hundred mems for...for..." She broke off. They were giving her odd looks. She cleared her throat and lowered her voice. "I mean, why would someone pay so much money for misinformation?" she corrected innocently.

Her comrades laughed.

“There’s a much easier way. Ask the C.O.,” Stern suggested.

Madeline actually flushed. “Are you nuts? They’d space him for even listening to such a question. They’d space me for asking it.”

“I was assigned to medical duty with the Cehn-Tahr during the Great Galaxy War,” Hahnson recalled. His eyes lowered. “There are things humans are never allowed to learn about them.”

Madeline was openly curious. “Such as?”

He looked up and smiled sadly. “Just things.”

“Didn’t you learn something you could tell me?”

she persisted.

He hesitated, as if weighing his answer. “Well, Cehn-Tahr males mark their mates in some ancient rite of passage.”

Madeline was taking notes. “Mark them. How?”

Hahnson shook his head. “Don’t know. But it does leave a scar.” He lifted his eyebrows again. “Does that help?”

“Not a lot,” she sighed. She leaned her chin on her elbow. “Rojoks are a lot more forthcoming. But their customs aren’t the same as Centaurians. I mean, what if I ever have to treat a social disease or give counseling to a Centaurian woman? I’d be useless.”

“They don’t have social diseases,” Hahnson said.

“Because they don’t frequent brothels. They’re amazingly pristine in their intimate habits. They also don’t mate outside their own species, ever. It’s a capital crime.”

"I know," Madeline said quietly. Her companions tried not to notice the hollow tone of her voice. Her covert glances at the Holconcom C.O. hadn't gone unnoticed by her longtime friends.

"Dr. Ruszel?" A small, pretty blonde woman in a green SSC Terravegan medical uniform popped her head in the door. Bright blue eyes glanced from one officer to the other. They lingered on Holt Stern just a few seconds too long for polite interest. "We've got an Altairian diplomat with a nasty cellulitis. Do you want to treat it, or shall I?"

Madeline smiled. Lieutenant (J.G.) Edris Mallory was a sweet woman. She'd actually started out in Cularian medicine. But just after graduation from medical school, she'd wanted to become a breeder. In fact, she'd come back to the medical unit from a breeder colony after tests had found her ineligible as a host parent. Any slight defect in genetics could disqualify a candidate and Mallory had one that couldn't be corrected by genetic engineering. She'd been devastated by the rejection. Then she'd decided to try her luck in the military. She'd even agreed to the mental neutering, dangerous in a woman of twenty. She flunked out of combat school with the lowest score in academy history. After that, she landed in the medical corps. Madeline liked her. She was a hard worker and she never shirked a task, even the unpleasant ones. She was only twenty-two. Ruszel, approaching thirty, found her shy presence comforting, in some odd way.

"Go ahead, Edris," she said. "I'll be around if you need me."

She grinned. "Thanks, Dr. Ruszel," she said.

“Hello, Doctor,” she greeted Hahnson warmly. She flushed a little as she glanced at Stern and then quickly away. “Captain.” She darted back through the door.

“She knows I’m a clone, doesn’t she?” Stern asked a little irritably. She’d barely looked at him.

“Oh, it’s not that.” She leaned toward him. “She’s shy. But she thinks you’re hot.”

He frowned. “It’s cool in here.”

“She thinks you’re desirable,” she corrected.

He flushed. “That’s not allowed.”

“She wanted to be a breeder,” she reminded him with a wicked grin. “But her genetics disqualified her to produce a child for the state, so when they expelled her from there, she decided to try combat medicine. She already had her degree in Cularian medicine.”

Stern glared. “How nice for her.”

Madeline shook her head. She knew it was the memory of Mary, his only love, that prompted that response. The original Stern, too, had come out of the neutering basically unaffected. He’d loved a woman named Mary who sacrificed her own life to save the lives of children. He carried a piece of blue velvet ribbon that had been attached to the posthumous medal they’d given her. He and Hahnson and Madeline passed it around between them as an accolade for heroic deeds. It was one of their best-kept secrets.

Hahnson’s wrist unit alarmed at the same time



Madeline's did. They looked at each other and grimaced.

"New medical transports are coming in from the occupied territories," Madeline explained to Stern. "I guess we've got work again, Dr. Hahnson."

"I guess we have, Dr. Ruszel," he agreed. "Good thing we're in port for a few days. Medical is overwhelmed already."

"Mallory, casualties coming in!" Madeline called to Edris. "Call in all off-duty personnel, if you please."

"Right away, Dr. Ruszel," she replied.

“She and I are the only two Cularian specialists on the base until the graduates from the Tri-Fleet Medical Academy arrive,” Madeline commented. “I suppose we’ll do double duty again. Not that we get many wounded Rojok prisoners to treat.”

Stern was somber. “Good thing. Three cadets who were in the last firefight tried to break into sick bay and hang a wounded Rojok when the last medical transports came in.”

“Sadly for them, the commander was here reading me the riot act for another bar brawl when it happened,” Madeline recalled with a faint chuckle. “You never saw cadets run so fast. Pity they bothered. He had all three of them before they made the front door. They were so shaken up that the military police didn’t even have to cuff them.” She shivered with mock fear. “The C.O.’s pretty scary when he loses his temper.”

“To everybody else except you,” Hahnson mused, tongue-in-cheek. “He could space you if he wanted to. But all he ever does is ground you.”

She leaned forward. "He's not sure that I didn't sew up a boot or a glass of synthale inside him when I operated on him at Ahkmau," she said with malicious humor. "He wouldn't dare space me until he's positive that I didn't."

"He keeps you for a pet," Hahnson said with a chuckle.

"Eat worms, Hahnson." Madeline made a face at him before she followed Mallory into sick bay.

## CHAPTER TWO

Sick bay was full. Not only were there combat casualties brought in from all parts of the battlefield, but a new type of influenza was making itself felt among members of the Tri-Galaxy Fleet. There was no vaccination so far, and hardly any treatment that worked.

“I remember Dr. Wainberg, head of the Exobiology Department at the Tri-Fleet Military Academy, lecturing us on viruses,” Madeline said as she and Edris Mallory worked side by side on combat wounds encountered by two Dacerian scouts who’d been ambushed near Terramer.

Edris laughed. “So do I. He and our human anatomy chief, Dr. Camp, gave lab exams that were, to say the least, challenging.”

Madeline grinned. “Challenging to cadets who thought they could pass those courses by dissecting holospecimens instead of the real thing. The medical sector didn’t tolerate slackers. They meant us to be

taught proper surgical techniques, and we were.” She  
frowned. “You know, it’s still fascinating to me that

viruses aren't actually alive. They're like a construct, an artificial construct."

"Who knows," Mallory agreed, "maybe they were originally part of some long forgotten engineered bioweapons tech."

"Viruses are already dead, Mallory," Madeline repeated.

Mallory frowned. "But, ma'am, how can they be dead if they were never alive?"

Madeline rolled her eyes. She finished a restructuring job and motioned for one of the medtechs to take the unconscious patient in his ambutube out to the floor. She stripped off her glove films and smiled at the younger woman. "We can debate that over a nice cup of java after lunch."

The younger woman hesitated. Her blue eyes grew large. "Java? You don't mean, real coffee?"

Madeline leaned closer. "I have it shipped in

illegally from the Altairian colony on Harcourt's Planet," she confided. "Then I grind the beans and brew it in my office."

"Coffee." Mallory's mouth was watering. "I dream about it. What passes for coffee in the mess hall is an insult to a delicate palate."

"I agree."

She pursed her lips. "Ma'am, are you going to tell me something I won't want to hear? Is that why I'm being treated to such a luxury?"

"You have a suspicious mind," her colleague replied. "Hurry up. We don't have a lot of time."

There's a medical transport coming in from Terramer in about a standard hour and we may have more work."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I have to go over to Tri-Fleet HQ and report to the commander about this latest batch of casualties. You can flash me if there's anything urgent before I get back."

"Yes, ma'am."

Madeline located Dtimun in his temporary office at Tri-Fleet HQ. It was smaller and more cramped than the one he maintained aboard the Morcai, but closer to fleet operations.

He frowned when she was admitted. "You have never reported to me on battle casualties. Is there a reason for this deviation from protocol?"

"Yes, sir," she said, standing at parade rest. "It's about Mallory."



His eyebrows lifted.

“Lieutenant J.G. Edris Mallory?” she prompted.

“My assistant?”

“Yes. What about her?”

“Sir, she needs to be familiarized with the routine aboard ship, in case I ever have to bring her with me on a mission.”

He stood up, cold and unapproachable. “I will not authorize the presence of a second human female aboard my flagship,” he said flatly.

“Only to observe,” she persisted. She let out an exasperated sigh. “What if I were captured by Rojoks on the battlefield?”

“I would send them my condolences,” he returned.

She glared at him. “You’d have nobody aboard who could save you from a health crisis,” she tossed back.

“It amazes me that you have never questioned the reason I carry no complement of Cehn-Tahr medics aboard the Morcai.”

She blinked. “They said you had a fine contempt for medics of your own species. I assumed that was the explanation.”

His eyes narrowed and became a steady, searching blue as they explored her face. “You know nothing about us except what we permit you to know.”

“You can pin a rose on that,” she returned bluntly.

“I’ve had to resort to black market vids to find out anything at all about Cehn-Tahr society.”

His eyes flashed green with humor. "Those vids are made at Benaski Port..."

"...by pirates who never saw a live Cehn-Tahr, yes, I know. Hahnson informed me after it was too late to demand my money back!" she muttered.

The green grew broader in his eyes. He cocked his head. "It did not occur to you to ask me?"

She cleared her throat. "I wouldn't dare!"

"I have found very little that you would not dare, Ruszel," he retorted.

She shifted restlessly and averted her eyes. It would be embarrassing, even for a physician, to put any of her burning questions to him.

“I realize that,” he said softly.

She grimaced. “I wish you wouldn’t walk in and out of my mind, sir. It’s very disconcerting.”

“You are far too easy to read,” he pointed out.

“Telepaths learn to block unwanted intrusions at a very early age.”

She lifted her eyes to his, searching them quietly.

“You healed the little Altairian child with nothing more than your mind,” she recalled. “I’ve never spoken of it, but I think your mental abilities are greater than you allow us to see.”

“Much greater,” he said in her mind.

“You keep secrets very well, as a species,” she pointed out.

“Some are best kept,” he returned silently. “If your species knew the true nature of mine, few humans would feel secure enough to serve with us.”

That was a revelation. It disturbed her at some deep level. “We’ve seen you fight,” she said, assuming that was what he referred to.

His eyes became solemn. “You have seen a greatly restrained version of our fighting style,” he said surprisingly. “We modified it for the benefit of our human crewmen.” He looked at her closely. “Why do you think our emperor was able to conquer over one hundred and fifty worlds with little more than the Holconcom?”

That was a question she'd never asked. "I never thought about it, sir."

"Some races who were victims of his first conquests still remember the Holconcom attacks. The fear alone kept them in line. It does, even today." His face grew hard. "We are an aggressive, violent species. Mercy is unknown to us."

"My little Altairian patient might disagree with you," she said, smiling in memory.

"The child was not my enemy," he pointed out.

She studied his hard face in silence. "Why don't you want other races to know anything about your society?"

"It would serve no useful purpose," he said curtly.

"We never mate outside our own species."

She felt cold inside. She wasn't quick enough to divert her mind. He saw the sadness, and understood it all too well.

His eyes narrowed. "You are a fragile race," he said.

She stared at him, uncomprehending. "I could remind you that I took down several Rojok soldiers when we were in Ahkmau."

"I could remind you that only Chacon's intervention saved your life during the escape."

"Rub it in," she muttered, flushing. "I was intent on saving a patient. I didn't see the Rojoks rushing me."

"Your impulsive nature could lead you to tragedy," he said. "You must exhibit more control of yourself."

"I do try, sir. But human nature is what it is. We can't change what we are."

He grew contemplative. "No," he said, an odd bitterness in his tone. "We cannot."

"About Mallory, sir..."

"You can use the comps to give her a virtual tour of the ship," he said firmly. "I do not need any more distractions aboard. You and your temper provide quite enough already."

"My temper?" she exclaimed. "Look who's talking!"

"Remember to whom you are speaking!" he shot back.

"I didn't break a Gresham in half with my bare hands when I lost my patience...!"

"Dismissed!"



She almost bit her tongue off keeping the reply back that she wanted to make. She saluted sharply, turned and marched out of the office. Behind her, she heard muffled curses in Cehn-Tahr, and marched faster.

Lieutenant (J.G.) Edris Mallory's expression was one of pure joy as she sipped the illegal caffeine in Madeline's office. The use of stimulants, even natural ones, was prohibited by Tri-Fleet regulations. Not that anyone enforced the law, especially since Admiral Lawson himself sneaked in java from the Altairian colonies. Of course, he was an admiral and could get away with it. Madeline might not fare as well.

Edris closed her eyes and savored the taste and scent as she lifted her head. "Oh, bliss," she sighed.

Madeline laughed. "It is pretty special, out here in the big black, isn't it? We're so far away from anything that can't be grown in solution." She sipped her own coffee. "I have to talk to you about something."

Edris grimaced. "I've screwed up again, haven't I?" she asked. "I'm just not suited to life in our present age, you know. I washed out of combat school with a memorable low grade, then I couldn't get accredited as a breeder. Now here I am doing combat medicine, and I fumble more than I fix..."

"You're doing well," Madeline interrupted. "All you lack is confidence in your own abilities. Well, that," she added hesitantly, "and the ability to talk back to people. To the Cehn-Tahr specifically."

The slender young blonde moved restlessly in her chair. "They're very intimidating, especially the Holconcom commander," she replied. "He glares."

“You have to learn to glare back,” Madeline told her. “They’re a misogynist culture. Their own women are denied access to the military, much less combat. The Cehn-Tahr think our military is mad to permit women to serve in it, mentally neutered or not.”

Edris finished the last precious drop of her coffee.  
“I’m just glad it’s you and not me serving aboard the Morcai.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about,” Madeline told her. “Since Holmes and Watts shipped out, you

and I are the only experienced Cularian specialists on base right now. There are twenty in graduate school, four of whom are due to be assigned to Trimerius when they graduate. But if something happens to me, you're the only backup around."

"Nothing will happen to you, ma'am," Edris assured her with a smile. "You're one of the bravest people I know."

Madeline hesitated. "Anyone can die. The Holconcom can't function without a medic who can operate on Cehn-Tahr soldiers in an emergency. The commander hates medics as a rule, and he won't permit the Dectat to assign physicians to him. He's reluctant to have me aboard, but Ahkmau convinced him that it was lunacy not to carry a Cularian specialist into battle."

"He scares me to death," Edris commented, wrapping her arms around her slender figure. "I don't know what I'd do, if I ever had to substitute for you in the Holconcom."

“That’s just the point. The commander agrees with me, that we need to start letting you come with us on certain missions aboard the Morcai so that you can get used to the routine aboard ship.” She deliberately didn’t meet Mallory’s eyes as she lied to her. It was in a good cause.

Edris lost two shades of color. “No,” she said at once. “Oh, no, I can’t do that. I can barely manage here, when you’re away with the unit. I could never...I mean, I can’t...”

“You can,” Madeline said, and in a tone that didn’t brook argument. “You got through medical school. You’ll adapt to the Morcai.”

Edris bit her lower lip. She looked hunted.

“They’re just men,” she said, exasperated. “Alien men, but males are pretty much the same anywhere.”

“Not the Cehn-Tahr,” Edris argued. “I’ve heard stories.”

Madeline raised both eyebrows.

Edris hesitated, but the gossip was too juicy not to share. “They say,” she said in a conspiratorial tone, “that a Cehn-Tahr soldier ate a young Jebob recruit during the Great Galaxy War...ma’am?”

Madeline was doubled over, laughing. That story had gone through the ranks over the years like a fever. Some people did actually believe it.

“Well, they said,” Edris said defensively.

“Edris,” Madeline replied, wiping away tears of near hysteria, “I can give you proof that no Cehn-Tahr has ever eaten another soldier.”

“You can?”

“The C.O. has never eaten me,” she reminded her colleague. “And nobody over the years has given him more cause.”

“You do wear on his nerves, I hear.”

Madeline laughed. “His nerves, his temper, his patience. He’s dressed me down, grounded me, brigged me on occasion,” she recalled. “But he’s never taken a bite out of me.”

That was true. The battles between the commander of the Holconcom and his chief Cularian medic had assumed the mantle of legend. Once, Madeline had followed Dtimun off the ship raging about his refusal to let her suture a bone-deep wound in his leg. He trailed blood out the airlock and just kept walking, even when she threw a cyberclamp after him in impotent rage.

“Isn’t it amazing that he never busted you in rank?” Edris mused.

“He did try,” Madeline assured her. “But my father is a colonel in the Paraguard Wing and best friends with Admiral Lawson. They ganged up on Dtimun and refused to let the demotion go through.” She grinned.

“The C.O. was livid! And did he get even! He requisitioned my billet for storage and I had to sleep in the cargo hold for a solid week. He only relented when I borrowed a player from Hahnson and flooded the hold with ancient human drum and bagpipe music.”

“I heard about that,” Edris chuckled. “Didn’t he break a Gresham in half...?”



“With his bare hands, and lucky for him that the power pack was drained,” Madeline nodded enthusiastically. She pondered that. “You know, they really are incredibly powerful.”

Edris toyed with her java cup. “Do I have to go?”

Madeline nodded.

Edris sighed. “Okay, then.”

Madeline smiled. “Good..”

Edris Mallory had never been aboard a Cehn-Tahr ship before. Everything about it fascinated her, from the way personnel ran to and from positions down the wide corridors to the temperature, which was several degrees cooler than SSC ships.

“Their core body temperature is three degrees higher than our own,” Madeline reminded her as they jogged toward the Cularian medical sector. “They cool the ship to make them more comfortable.”

Edris was looking at the alien script on the compartment hatches as they passed them. She shook her head. “I don’t know how anybody ever reads that.”

“It’s not so hard,” came the amused reply. “It’s a lot like old Asian languages on Terravega, mostly symbols. Pronouncing it, though, that’s hard.”

“They pronounce names differently according to kinship and relationship status, too, don’t they?”

“Yes.”

Edris frowned. "Why are they so secretive? I mean, we know a lot about their physical makeup, but nothing about their culture or even their behavioral patterns."

"They don't volunteer information," Madeline said, still smarting about her black market vids that had been a scam. "I've spent years trying to dig it out of Komak. He won't tell me anything."

"You could ask the C.O.," Edris suggested.

"Only with a good head start," Madeline assured her. "You just don't bring up those topics with him."

"I suppose not. I wonder if..."

“Who authorized you to bring Mallory aboard?”

came a terse, angry deep voice from behind them.

Madeline stopped with easy grace and turned. Edris was frozen in place, her blue eyes like saucers as she stared uneasily at Dtimun.

“If I go down sick, you have to have a Cularian specialist aboard,” she said simply.

“You are never unwell,” Dtimun pointed out.

“I could catch that Altairian flu and be laid low for a week,” she replied. “We have to have backup, and there isn’t anyone else.”

“Holmes,” he began.

“Holmes shipped out to the Algomerian sector last week,” Madeline told him. “Besides, he wasn’t comfortable aboard the Morcai.” She said it with a hint of reproach.

Dtimun’s eyes narrowed and his jaw firmed. “I

have competent physicals on my own planet, given by my own physician," he replied. "I do not require the services of a Terravegan Cularian specialist!"

Madeline pursed her lips and smiled. "Ever?"

He glared at her while Edris tried to melt into the deck.

"If I hadn't been at Ahkmau," she began, "you'd be dead now. Sir."

"Will there ever be an end to the constant revisiting of that medical procedure?" he wondered.

"Well, not as long as I'm alive, sir," she said with twinkling green eyes. "You are, after all, my greatest medical accomplishment."

He didn't speak. He was still glaring.

"Some surgeons couldn't have managed what I did under laboratory conditions," she continued, warming to her subject. "I did it with a couple of purloined tools and almost no pure water, with Rojok patrols right outside the prison cell."

His lips were now making a thin line.

"You know, I don't recall that you ever even thanked me for it," she continued.

He bit off some comments in his own language.

"Sir!" she exclaimed.

He made a rough noise in his throat and turned his attention to Mallory. "Make sure that Ruszel acquaints you with shipboard protocol. No wandering is allowed, especially in the kelekom sector."

Mallory saluted, rigid as a board. "Sir, I never wander. I've never seen a kelekom. I mean, I don't

want to see one. I mean, not that they aren't interesting, I'm sure...!"

Dtimun turned back to Madeline, exasperated.

"There is no one else?"

She glared at him. "Edris is perfectly competent."

"To do what?" he demanded.

Edris made a hunted sound. She looked as if she wanted to hide under something.

"Sir, don't you have some pressing military function to perform that requires your attention elsewhere?" Madeline asked pleasantly. "Lives must be at stake somewhere."

"One day, warwoman," he bit off.

She raised both eyebrows. "One day, what, sir?"

she asked innocently.

He darted a killing glance at Mallory, another at Madeline and turned on his heel, muttering in his own tongue as he stalked off.

"Can you translate that?" Edris asked timidly.

"Oh, you don't want me to do that," Madeline assured her. "Let's get you settled. It's going to be a long few days."

On that score, she was absolutely right. There was an emergency on one of the Coromat system planets near Terramer which required the skills of a Cularian medical specialist. Madeline elected to take Edris along, to let her get the feel of an away mission.

Sadly, no one had thought to tell the new recruit that the commander did high grav landings. He put down at six megs and Mallory threw up all over the deck. Dtimun was eloquent.



When he left the scout ship, Hahnson and Stern and Komak roared with laughter.

“Sorry,” Hahnson told Edris, “we aren’t laughing at you. It’s just that the C.O. does line himself up for these mishaps. I mean, who puts down at six megs?”

Stern raised his hand.

“Not in a Cehn-Tahr scout, you never did,”

Madeline pointed out.

“I’m just so sorry,” Edris moaned, pressing a medicated wipe to her face. “I’m so embarrassed! I’ve never done anything like that.” She dotted an enzyme

eraser onto the mess she'd made on the deck, cleaning it efficiently.

"I threw up the first time I did a high grav landing," Madeline assured her.

"Not on Dtimun's ship, you didn't," Hahnson reminded her.

"Oh, like you know," Madeline muttered.

"Actually, I threw up, too, the first time I had to fly with Dtimun," Hahnson confessed. "He's just short of suicidal when he's piloting a small ship. But that high grav landing really weirds out enemy combatants. They never expect it."

"I suppose it would give us an edge in battle," Edris commented weakly.

"I don't suppose you'd know why the C.O. looks as if he's been chewing on the hull plates?" Stern asked Madeline.

She gave him an angelic smile. "I'm certain it doesn't have anything to do with me," she assured him.

"What did you say to him?" Stern persisted.

"I only mentioned how lucky he was that I was with him at Ahkmau when he needed emergency surgery," she replied. "And there was the matter of bringing Edris aboard."

"But you said the commander wanted me to learn the routine aboard the Morcai," Edris burst out.

"He did say that. Sort of," Madeline hedged.

"What exactly did he say?" Hahnson piped in.

Madeline shrugged. "That I could give her a virtual tour of the premises." She blinked. "Virtual, real, I mean, with the vid systems we have today, really, is there a difference?"

Edris put her face in her hands. "He'll kill me."

"Yes, but he can't eat you," Madeline assured her.

"And we've already had that discussion. That Jebob soldier they said the Cehn-Tahr ate during the Great Galaxy War—he was actually eaten by a Rojok, wasn't he?" she asked the men.

Edris covered her mouth with her hand and went pale.

"Rojoks don't eat Jebob nationals," Stern scoffed.

"They're far too stringy." He yawned. "It was an old Altairian, and they'd just run out of rations...Mallory? You okay?" He winced. "Damn, and you just cleaned the deck already!"

Madeline hit him. He just laughed.

“I am certain that I don’t want to serve aboard this vessel,” Mallory said when they’d treated the diplomatic patient and were safely back aboard the Morcai, heading back to Trimerius.

“You just had a bad introduction to Holconcom routines,” Madeline said soothingly. “First times are always difficult.”

“This first time will give me nightmares every night from now on.,” Edris assured her. “How could you bring me aboard without telling the C.O.?” she moaned.

“Well, if I’d actually told him, he wouldn’t have let you come,” Madeline said reasonably, “and you have to learn someday.”

Komak came up beside them, running backward to keep pace. He was grinning. “Have you shown Lieutenant Mallory the kelekoms?” he asked.

“No, sir, and she’s not going to,” Edris interrupted firmly before Madeline could get her mouth open. “I’ve done enough damage for one mission. With my luck, I’d sneeze on one and give it some fatal disease.”

“They are quite used to humans now,” Komak chuckled. “It has been a long time since one of them was ill.”

“Has the C.O. had any luck finding a new partner for the inactive kelekom?” Madeline asked.

Komak shook his head. “Lawson will not provide him with any candidates.”

“Brave Lawson, to refuse the commander,” Edris

murmured.

“He intimidates her,” Madeline explained to Komak.

“Who, Lawson?” he asked.

“No. The commander.”

“Oh.” Komak grinned. “He does not intimidate you, Madeline,” he said.

“I’ve had all my shots.”

Komak frowned. “Excuse me?”

She chuckled. “Private joke.”

The intership speakers blared with Dtimun’s deep voice speaking in Cehn-Tahr.

Komak grimaced. "I am told to mind my own duties and refrain from delaying other crew members from attending to their own."

"How did he know?" Edris asked, looking around warily.

"AVBDs," Madeline said, bending the truth. She knew that Dtimun was a telepath, but she'd never told anyone. "They're everywhere, except in the C.O.'s own office. You won't see them," she added. "They blend. See you, Komak."

He smiled, turned and put on a burst of speed, leaving them behind.

"That officer, Komak," Edris commented as they jogged down the corridor of the Morcai on their way to the airlock, "he doesn't seem a lot like the rest of the Cehn-Tahr."

"I know. He's spent so much time around humans that he's taken on human characteristics," Madeline laughed. "Odd, though, when we were in the death



camp on Enmehkmehk's moon, I was using Komak for blood transfusion for the C.O. When I synched and synthed compatibility factors, his blood seemed to have human elements." She sighed. "And that's impossible. We know the Cehn-Tahr never mate outside their own species."

"Why?" Edris wondered.

Madeline blinked. "I suppose it's their racial laws. It carries the death penalty."

“Just like our military punishes any sexual fraternization with death,” Edris replied. “Isn’t it odd that both societies are so xenophobic?” she asked.

“I’ve heard it said that all Terravegans were originally tea-colored with dark hair.”

“I’ve heard that, too,” Madeline said. “But I think you and I are proof that it’s just an old legend,” she added, smiling. “Your coloring and mine put paid to that theory.”

Edris fingered her blond hair and eyed Madeline’s reddish-gold hair and nodded. “Will the C.O. get over it? That I threw up all over the scout, I mean?”

Madeline stopped and looked at the other woman. “He’s amazingly tolerant sometimes,” she said. “He does have a temper, and he can be irritating and stubborn. But he’s the best commanding officer in the fleet. All of us would follow him out the airlock if he asked us to. Of course, he does have this deplorable, primitive attitude about medics being unarmed, and I do have to sneak weapons off the ship in my equipment bag...”

Edris's eyes had widened and she was staring apprehensively over Madeline's shoulder.

Madeline's teeth clenched. "And he's standing right behind me, isn't he?"

Edris only nodded.

Madeline turned with a sigh. Dtimun was glaring down at her with both hands locked behind his back, looking stern and unapproachable.

“Shall we lengthen the period of your confinement to the base by two standard weeks?” he asked.

“Now, sir, why would we want to do that?”

Madeline asked innocently.

He pursed his lips. “From now on, I intend to have your equipment bag searched every time we leave the ship.”

She groaned.

He nodded curtly, turned and jogged off down the corridor.

Edris, wisely, didn't say a word. Dr. Ruszel's face was almost as red as her hair with bad temper.