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Description:

About the Author Diane Duane is the author of numerous science fiction and fantasy novels, amongst them the fan-favourite Star Trek titles DARK MIRROR and the 5-volume Rihannsu series of novels exploring the world of the Romulans (the first four volumes of which are now available as the omnibus THE BLOODWING VOYAGES 1416525777) released together with the fifth volume (THE EMPTY CHAIR 1416508910) in January 2007. --This text refers to the edition.

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Chapter One

Her name, to which various people had recently been appending curses, was Ael i-Mhiessan t'Rllaillieu. Her rank, in the common tongue, was *khre'Riov*: commander-general. Her serial number was a string of sixteen characters that by now she knew as well as she knew her fourth name,

though they meant infinitely less to her. And considering these matters in such a fashion was at least marginally appropriate just now, for she was in a trap.

How long she would remain there, however, remained to be seen.

At the moment her patience was mostly intact, but her spirit had moved her to rattle the bars of the cage a bit. Ael propped her elbow on her desk, rested her chin on her hand, and said to her cabin's wall screen, "Hwaveyiir. Erein tr'Khaell."

The screen flicked on, and there was the Bridge, and poor Ante-centurion tr'Khaell just as he had been twenty minutes ago, still hunched over and pretending to fiddle with his communications boards. At the sight of Ael he straightened quickly and said, "*Ie, khre'Riov?*"

Don't play the innocent with me, child, thought Ael. *You should have had that dispatch decoded and translated ten minutes ago...as well you know.* "Erein, eliukh hwio' 'ssuy llas-mene arredhaud'eitroi?"

She said it politely enough, but the still, low-lidded look she gave him was evidently making it plain to tr'Khaell that if Ael had to ask him again about what was holding up the dispatch's deciphering, it would go hard with him. Sweat broke out on tr'Khaell's forehead. "*Ie, khre'Riov, sed ri-thlaha nei' yhreill-ien ssuriu mnerev dhaarhiin-emenorriul-*"

Oh indeed! I know how fast that computer runs; I was building them with my own hands before you knew which end to hold a sword by. Of course, you can't just come out and tell me that the Security Officer ordered you to let her read the dispatch before I saw it, now can you? "Rhi siuren, Erein."

Poor tr'Khaell's face gave Ael the impression that t'Liun was going to take rather longer than "five minutes" to read the dispatch. Tr'Khaell looked panicstricken. "*Khre'Riov-*" he started to say. But "Ta'khoi," Ael said to the screen, and it flicked off.

Pitiable, Ael thought. *Truly I could feel sorry for him. But if he chooses to sell his loyalty to two commanders at once, who am I to deprive him of the joy of being caught between them? Perhaps he'll learn better.* And after a second she laughed once, softly, as much at herself as at tr'Khaell. *Perhaps the Galaxy will stop rotating.*

She pushed away from the desk and leaned back in her comfortable chair, considering with calm irony how little her surroundings looked like the cage they actually were. *They truly think they've deceived me*, she thought, amused and contemptuous, looking around at the spare luxury of her command cabin. *Pad the kennel with velvets, they say to each other; feed the old thrai on fat flesh and blood wine, put her in command of a fleet, and she won't notice that the only ones who pay any attention to her orders are the ones stuck inside the bars with her.* Ael's lips curled slightly upward at the thought. "*Susse-thrai*" had been the name bestowed upon her, half in anger, half in affection, by her old crew on *Bloodwing*; the keen-nosed, cranky, wily old she-beast, never less dangerous than when you thought her defenseless, and always growing new teeth far back in her throat to replace the old ones broken in biting out the last foe's heart. You might cage a thrai, you might poke it through the bars and laugh; but it would find a way to be avenged for the insult. It would break out and tear off your leg and eat it before your face -- or run away and wait till you had died of old age, then come back and excrete on your grave.

Then Ael frowned at herself, annoyed. "Crude," she said to the room, eyes flicking up to the ceiling-corner by the bed as she wondered whether t'Liun had managed to bug the place already since last week. "I grow crude, as they do." *Chew on that, you vacuum-headed creature, and wonder what it means*, thought Ael, getting up to pace her cage.

The most annoying part was that it was true. That courtesy, honor, noble behavior should be cast aside by the young, perceived as a useless hindrance to expediency, was bad enough. But that she should begin to sink to their level herself, descending into brute-beast metaphors and savagery instead of the dealing that had been tradition for four thousand years of civilization -- that was galling. I will not fight them with their own methods, Ael thought. *That is the surest way to become them. I will come by my victories honestly. And as for Sunseed --*

She stopped in front of another of her cabin's luxuries, one better than private 'fresher or sleeping silks or key lighting. Beyond the wide port, space yawned black, with stars burning in it -- stars that at *Cuirass's* present sublight speed hung quite still, apparently going nowhere. *As I am*, she thought, but the thought was reflex, and untrue. Ael grimaced again and leaned her forehead against the cool clearsteel.

In one way, she had no one to blame for where she was right now but herself. When she had heard about the Sunseed project based at Levaeri V, and had begun to realize what it could do to Rihannsu civilization if fully implemented, shock and horror had stung her into swift action. She had taken leave from *Bloodwing* and gone home to ch'Rihan to lobby against the project -- openly speaking out against it in the Senate, and privately making the rounds of her old political cronies, all those old warrior-Senators and those few comrades in the Praetorate who owed her favors. However, Ael had not realized the extent to which the old warriors were being outweighed, or in some cases subverted or cowed, by the young ones -- the hot-blooded children who wanted everything right now, who wanted the easy, swift victories that the completion of Sunseed would bring them. Honorless victories, against helpless foes; but the fierce young voices now rising in the Senate cared nothing about that. They wanted safety, security, a world without threats, a universe in which they could swoop down on defenseless ships or planets and take what they wanted.

Thieves, Ael thought. *They have no desire to be warriors, fighting worthy foes for what they want, and winning or losing according to their merits. They want to be robbers, like our accursed allies the Klingons. Raiders, who stab in the back and loot men's corpses, or worlds. And as for those of us who remember an older way, a better way, they wait for us to die. Or in some cases, they hurry us along...*

She pushed herself away from the cool metal of the port, breathed out once. Somewhere among those stars, out in that blackness, ch'Rihan and ch'Havran hung, circling one another majestically in the year's slow dance around amber Eism; two green-golden gems, cloud-streaked, seagirt, burning fair. But she would probably never walk under those clouds again, or beside those seas, as a result of that last visit to the sigil-hung halls of the Senate. The young powers in the High Command, suspicious of Ael from the first, now knew for sure that she was opposed to them, and their reaction to her opposition had been swift and thorough. They dared not exile her or murder her, not openly; she was after all a war hero many times over, guilty of no real crime. Instead they had "honored" her, having Ael sent out on a long tour of duty, into what was ostensibly a post of high command and great peril. Command she wielded, but with eyes watching her, spies of various younger Senators and Praetors. And as for peril...it came rarely, but fatally, here in the Outmarches -- the deadly peaceful space that the power surrounding most of it called the Romulan Neutral Zone.

Names, Ael thought with mild irony, *names...How little they have to do with the truth, sometimes.* The great cordon of space arbitrarily thrown about Eism was hardly neutral. At best it was a vast dark hiding-place into which ships of both sides occasionally dodged, preparing for intelligence-gathering forays on the unfriendly neighbor. As for "Romulan" -- After first hearing the word in Federation Basic, rather than by universal translator, Ael had become curious to understand the name the Empire's old foes had given her world, and had done some research into it. She had been distastefully fascinated to find the word's meaning rooted in some weird Terran story of twin

brothers abandoned in the wild, and there discovered and given suck by a brute beast rather like a thrai. It would take a Terran to think of something so bizarre.

But whether one called Eisen's paired worlds ch'Rihan and ch'Havran or Romulus and Remus, Ael knew she was unlikely to ever walk either of them again. *Never again to walk through Airissuin's purple meads*, she thought, gazing out at the starry darkness. *Never to see that some loved one had hung up the name-flag for me; never to climb Eilairiv and look down on the land my mothers and fathers worked for a thousand years, the lands we held with the plowshare and the sword...* For the angry young voices in the Senate, Mrian and Hei and Llaaseil and the rest, had put her safely out of their way; and here, while they held power, she would stay. They would wait and let time do what their lack of courage or some poor tattered rag of honor forbade them.

Accidents happened in the Neutral Zone, after all. Ships far from maintenance suddenly came to grief. That was likely enough, in this poor secondhand Warbird with which they'd saddled her, this flying breakdown looking for a place to happen. Crews rebelled against discipline, mutinied, on long hauls...and that was likely too, considering the reprehensible lot of rejects and incompetents with whom she was trapped here. Ael thought longingly of her own crew of *Bloodwing*; fierce, dogged folk tried in a hundred battles and faithful to her...but that faithfulness was why her enemies in the High Command had had her transferred from *Bloodwing* in the first place. A crew that could not be bought, the taste of the old loyalty, made them nervous. It was a question how long even Tafv, so far innocent of the Senate's suspicion, would be able to hold on to them. And it was no use thinking about them in any case. She was stuck with the ship's complement of *Cuirass*, half of them in the pay of the other half or of her enemies in Command, nearly all of them hating nearly all the others, and all of them definitely hating her, they knew perfectly well why they'd been cut orders for so long a tour.

And if those problems failed to wear her down to suicide, or kill her outright, there were others that surely would. Those problems had names like *Intrepid...Inaieu...Constellation*. If Ael survived too long, she knew she would be ordered into the path of one of them. Honor would require her to obey her orders; and since *Cuirass* was alone and far, far from support, honor would eventually be the death of her. Her unfriends in the Senate would find the irony delightful.

Well, Ael thought. *We shall see*. She shifted her eyes again to the desk screen and reread the letter coolly burning there, blue against the black.

FROM THE COMMANDER TAFV EI-LEINARRH TR'RLLAILLIEU, SET IN AUTHORITY OVER IMPERIAL VESSEL *BLOODWING*, TO THE RIGHT NOBLE COMMANDER-GENERAL AEL TR'RLLAILLIEU, SET IN AUTHORITY OVER IMPERIAL CRUISER *CUIRASS*, RESPECTFUL GREETING. IF MATTERS ARE WELL WITH YOU, THEN THEY ARE WELL WITH ME ALSO. HONORED MOTHER, I HEAR WITH SOME REGRET OF YOUR RECENT ASSIGNMENT TO THE OUTMARCHES, IN THAT I SHALL FOR SOME TIME BE DENIED THE PRIVILEGE OF PRESENTING MY DUTY TO YOU IN PERSON. BUT WE MUST ALL BOW WILLINGLY TO THOSE DUTIES EVEN HIGHER THAN FAMILY TIES WHICH THE IMPERIUM REQUIRES OF US; AS I KNOW YOU DO.

PATROLS IN THIS AREA REMAIN QUIET, AS MIGHT BE EXPECTED, OUR PRESENTLY-ASSIGNED CORRIDOR BEING SO FAR FROM ANY ENEMY (OR COME TO THINK OF IT, ANY FRIENDLY) ACTIVITY. HIGH COMMAND TELLS US LITTLE OR NOTHING ABOUT HAPPENINGS IN THE OUTMARCH QUADRANTS WHICH YOU ARE PATROLLING -- SECURITY UNDERSTANDABLY BEING WHAT IT IS -- BUT I CAN ONLY HOPE THAT THIS FINDS YOU SAFE, OR BETTER STILL, VICTORIOUS IN SOME SKIRMISH WHICH HAS LEFT OUR ENEMIES SMARTING.

MASTER ENGINEER TR'KEIRIANH HAS FINALLY MANAGED TO DISCOVER THE SOURCE OF

THAT PECULIARITY IN THE WARP DRIVE THAT KEPT TROUBLING US DURING *BLOODWING'S* LAST TOUR OF THE MARCHES NEAR THE HA-SUIWEN STARS. EVIDENTLY ONE OF THE MULTISTATE EQUIVOCATOR CRYSTALS WAS AT FAULT, THE CRYSTAL HAVING DEVELOPED A FLUID-STRESS FAULT THAT MALFUNCTIONED ONLY DURING MEGA-GAUSS MAGNETIC FIELD VARIATIONS OF THE KIND THAT OCCUR DURING HIGH WARP SPEEDS -- AND NEVER IN THE TESTING CYCLE, WHICH IS WHY WE COULD NOT FIND THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM BEFORE. I HAVE RECOMMENDED TR'KEIRIANH FOR A MINOR COMMENDATION. MEANWHILE, OTHER MATTERS ABOARD SHIP REMAIN SO UNREMARKABLE AND SO MUCH THE SAME AS WHEN I LAST WROTE YOU THAT THERE IS LITTLE USE IN CONTINUING THIS. I WILL CLOSE SAYING THAT VARIOUS OF *BLOODWING'S* CREW HAVE ASKED ME TO OFFER THEIR OLD COMMANDER THEIR RESPECTS, WHICH NOW I DO, ALONG WITH MY OWN. THE POWERS LOOK ON YOU WITH FAVOR. THIS BY MY HAND, THE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH SHIP'S DAY SINCE *BLOODWING'S* DEPARTURE FROM CH'RÍHAN, THE EIGHTY-NINTH DAY OF MY COMMAND. TR'RLLAILLIEU. LIFE TO THE IMPERIUM.

Ael smiled at the letter, a smile it was well that none of *Cuirass's* crew could see. Such a bland and uncommunicative missive was hardly in Tafv's style. But it indicated that he knew as well as Ael what would happen to the letter when Ael's ship received it. It would be read by tr'Khaell in Communications, passed on to Security Officer t'Liun, who had tr'Khaell so firmly under her thumb, and avidly read for any possible sign of secret messages or disaffection -- then put through cryptanalysis as well by t'Liun's tool tr'Iawaain down in Data Processing. Much good it would do them; Tafv was not fool enough to put what he had to say in any code they would be able to break.

Oh, t'Liun would find *something* in cryptanalysis, to be sure. A stiff and elegant multiple-variable code, just complex enough to be realistic and careless enough to be breakable after a goodly period of head-beating. She would find a message that said, PLAN FAIL, APPEALS TO PRAETORATE UNSUCCESSFUL; FURTHER ATTEMPTS REFUSED. Which, being exactly what t'Liun (and the High Command people who paid her) wanted to hear, would quiet them for a little while. Until it was too late, at least.

Ael leaned back and stretched. Tafv's mention of repairs to the warp drive told her that he and Giellun tr'Keirianh, Powers bless both their twisty minds, had finally succeeded in attaching those stealthily-acquired Klingon gunnery augmentation circuits to *Bloodwing's* phasers -- an addition that would give the valiant old ship three times a Warbird's usual firepower. Ael did not care for the Klingon ships that the Empire had been buying lately; their graceless design was offensive to her, and their workmanship was usually hasty and shoddy. But though Klingons might be abysmal shipwrights, they did know how to build guns. And though the adaptation to *Bloodwing's* phasers had bid fair to take forever, it had also been absolutely necessary for the success of their plan.

As for the rest of the letter, Tafv had made it plain to Ael that he was close, and ready, and waiting on her word. He had also told her plainly, by saying nothing, that his communications were being monitored too; that Command had refused to allow him details on Ael's present location, which he evidently knew only by virtue of the few family spies still buried in Command Communications; that there was some expectation of the enemy in the quadrant to which Ael had been sent; and that her old crew was willing and ready to enact the plan which she and Tafv had been quietly concocting since the "honor guard" had come to escort Ael off *Bloodwing* to her new command on *Cuirass*.

Ael was quite satisfied. There was only one more thing she lacked, one element missing. She had spent a good deal of money during that last trip to ch'Ríhan, attempting to encourage its presence. Now she had merely to wait, and keep good hope, until time or Federation policy produced it. And once it did...

The screen chimed quietly. "Ta'rhae," she said, turning toward it from the port.

Tr'Khaell appeared on the screen again, his sweat still in evidence. "*Khre'Riov, na-hwi reh eliu arredhau'ven-*"

Four and a half minutes, Ael thought, amused. *T'Liun's reading speed is improving. Or tr'Khaell's shouting is.* "Hnafiv 'rau, Erein. "

The man had no control of his face at all; the flicker of his eyes told Ael that there was something worth hearing in this message indeed, something he had been hoping she would order him to read aloud. "*Hilain na nfaaistur ll' efwrohin galae --* "

"Ie, ie," Ael said, sitting down at her desk again, and waving a hand at him to go on. News of the rather belated arrival in this quadrant of her fleet, such as it was, interested her hardly at all. *Wretched used Klingon ships that they are, they should only have been eaten by a black hole on the way in.* "Hre va?"

"Lai hra'galae na hilain, khre'Riov. Mrei kha rhaau-khir Lloannen'galae...te ssiun bhveinu hir' Enterprise *khina.*

Ael carefully did not stir in her chair and kept most strict guard over her face...slowly permitting one eyebrow to go up, no more. "Rhe've," she said, nodding casually and calmly as if this news was something she might have expected -- as if her whole mind was not one great blaze of angry, frightened delight. *So soon! So soon!* "Rhe'. Khru va, Erein?"

"Au'e, khre'Riov. Irh' hvannen nio essaea Lloann-'mrahel virrir -- "

She waved the hand at tr'Khaell again; the details and the names of the other ships in the new Federation patrol group could wait for her in the computer until her "morning" shift. "Lhiu hrao na awaenndraevha, Erein. Ta'khai." And the screen went out.

Then, only then, did Ael allow herself to rock back in the chair, and take a good long breath, and let it out again...and smile once more, a small tight smile that would have disquieted anyone who saw it. *So soon*, she thought. *But I'm glad...O my enemy, see how well the Powers have dealt with both of us. For here at last may be an opportunity for us to settle an old, old score...*

Ael sat up straight and pulled the keypad of her terminal toward her. She got rid of Tafv's letter, then said the several passwords that separated her small cabin computer from the ship's large one for independent work, and started calling up various private files -- maps of this quadrant, and neighboring ones. "Ie rha," she said as she set to work -- speaking aloud in sheer angry relish, and (for the moment) with utter disregard to what t'Liun might hear. "Rha'siu h1un vr'*Enterprise*, irrhaimehn rha'sien Kirk..."

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