

CHANGE

RESTORATION

The Second Book in the CHANGE Chronicles

By

N G Nelson

Content Advisory: Contains violence, substance abuse, sexual content, foul language
& very bad industrial metal

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CHAPTER ONE

NOW...

The Carmine Heart Foundation [CH Foundation] is the largest, corporate funded, not for profit organisation in known space. It was first endowed by the Carmine Heart [Transit] Corporation, circa 468 BI [Before Imperium]. The Foundation follows a Prime Directive to discourage and ameliorate cultural contamination caused by off-world incursions, affecting Class III cultures and below.

Additional activities include disaster relief, historical/ecological stewardship, and peacekeeping. To facilitate the latter, the Foundation maintains a paramilitary wing. The activities of which, are not well documented and little is known.

Appendix to: *The Wars of Imperial Succession*
Prof D Armstrong, New University of Lancashire, 1428 AI [After Imperium]

Planet Medval, Carmine Heart Foundation Protectorate, 4th of Arlane, 1108 AI

Bitter cold, arctic white. In the distance the city was frozen now. Clothed in snow camouflage battledress he looked around, saw the windows of the tower blocks sparkle in the early dawn light. Only their tips were visible. The rest lay buried under a sea of ice. Tiny platelets flicked back, across his neck, head and face, revealed the square-jawed man beneath the three-quarter helm of ablative armour plate. He shielded his eyes. Two moons hung high, in opposite quadrants of the light blue arctic sky. Snow flurries blew around the thirty or so others, assembled on the vast plateau of ice.

‘Alpha team – gear up. Secure the target, then meet at the exfil site.’ He pointed forward, slightly to the right. ‘Avoid the Red Zone on your display. It’s an area of prime historical significance – we don’t want anything bad happening today.’

He watched them sling weapons, grab their gear and move off. He followed their progress till the blizzard enveloped them. Moments later they were gone.

He squinted, replaced his helm. ‘Darn!’ The image fizzed for a moment. In infra-red, he spotted them inbound to the frozen city, ahead, to his left.

The white saucer hung high above the planet. It maintained a geostationary orbit around the glistening orb. Once populous, ice covered most of the world below, extending almost to the equator from the North and South Poles.

In the bowels of the structure, three armed humans stood. The red-hued chamber was silent. All wore white/light grey flecked battledress, hoods and full-faced helms of armour plate. Bodies tensed, they waited.

West Indian, part Caucasian, small build, about five foot five. Bernadette engaged her implant. Sharp, concise thoughts took shape in her mind.

'We are go. Site to site transfer in Ten, Nine...'

She slung her rifle, complete with silencer. 'Comms are hot, five by five!'

A staccato pulse gave her tactical data from the ground in real-time.

Shit! The deployment chamber faded, to be replaced by a snowy plain of pristine white.

Bernadette adjusted her visor, brought the tactical display online.

Brrrr! Her suit was warm, but sight of the blizzard sent a shiver down her spine. She stamped her feet, looked around. Ice-locked city towers shone, away in the distance. 'Er, right.' Today she was Mission Lead. The objective – clear the target – but she'd other things on her mind.

She called her two companions in. 'Comms off, helms up.'

They huddled in a group. Aerosolised snow flurried to shroud them. A bitter cold wind howled across the plain, it burned her face and lungs.

'LISTEN UP!' she shouted. 'We need to head through the Red Zone – take too long to go around.'

'Rules say we can't do that,' yelled the tall, stocky guy, in a North American drawl. 'That's a definite no, no, Berne – Red Zone's out of bounds.'

'Frank, trust me.' She shielded her eyes. 'Said we'd do some recon. All part of the plan.'

The small woman beside her, tugged her arm. In a Latin American accent, she spoke. 'We still have tracker. They track us. We have no cloak.'

'Took care of it, Glory.' Bernadette shook her head. 'Cloned our trackers, put them in Alpha teams packs. I set a data transfer delay. Anyone up there will think we're following in their tracks.'

'Ahh. Sí!' Gloria glanced skyward. 'Not know why, but – OK Berne.'

Gloria was sharp, been an intern. Worked for Frank – some kind of businessman, in his previous life back on Earth. She loved them both. *Can't tell 'em what I'm doing. No way that would work.*

So, instead... 'I took us out of the mission equation,' she said. 'Told them we'd do recon. We discussed, let your deputies lead, yeah? We all just go in as one of the team. That way we know it'll work without us, stay behind the scene.'

'Yeah, we discuss,' said Gloria. 'But we not agree.'

Frank rolled his eyes. 'Aww Berne, it's always...' He looked her in the eye. 'Guess it's done now. So, we do it this one time.'

'Les go,' said Gloria. 'This place, ees cold, right.'

She nodded. 'Still, beats Es-Ra. That place was...'

'Too right.' Frank adjusted his pack. 'Miracle we got out alive.'

Bernadette hesitated. 'Yeah. Lucky,' she replied.

They set off across the ice in the early morning light.

You had to say it. Why'd you do that, why? Bernadette thought back to Es-Ra. The planet of the damned. Over 3-years she'd been gone. A year in stasis, the slave pens, travelling out. Time was a blur on Es-Ra. Been a year and a half since she was rescued, round about.

Es-Ra. The carpet of submerged fields and vines, endless swamp spread out for miles. Nicotine-stained fog. She could still feel it. It weighed heavy on her lungs. Her back ached as she picked crustacea from the fields, beneath the ooze. *Some narcotic.* Therapy helped, but she couldn't forget it. *Don't want to think about...*

Scarface. If your load was short, the guards were brutal. *In the clearing, the*

beating. The day she lost Paul.

‘You OK, Berne?’ Frank moved in beside her.

‘Yeah, I’m fine,’ she lied.

Frank nodded. ‘This damn snow, right.’

Glad she was going back with Gloria and Frank. The American Theocracy fell in seven days. No point them going back. *Place is a nightmare.* Folks out there, shoot anything alien that moves.

The camouflage battledress was warm, but she still felt cold inside. The bitter wind buffeted her. She watched snow flurries dance across the sea of ice.

Rescue. That night on Es-Ra. *Was it luck, or something more?* In the compound, crammed in the corrugated hut, automatic fire outside. Guards kicked the door in, started shooting wild. Crushed under a bunk, she’d waited, but the shot had never come. The guards. *Dead.* Shot from behind. *Every last one of them, thank fuck.*

‘Nearly there.’ Frank broke her reverie.

‘Yeah. Rite,’ she replied.

The city was close. Their feet crunched through the snow as they made their approach. She checked out the tops of the iced-up buildings. Several storeys were buried beneath the snow.

After Es-Ra? She woke in a room in CH Foundation Medical, in Kiro City, on Prime. *Funny.* Didn’t seem odd now. Had over a year of rehab, seminars, battle tactics and the like. *Pushed me harder than the others.* Seemed like it at the time. Being in command wasn’t her idea of fun, but they’d pushed her into it. And back home...? DI-LAN Corp sent the slavers, then drove them off the Planet. *For resource rights; land, sea extraction.* Like saviours, they moved in. *But we’re all going home soon. And now we’re trained to kill.*

DIE-LAN Corp – quite appropriate. She thought.

They pushed through the snow toward a tower off to her right. The sound of their breathing and footfalls, broke the eerie silence.

And now... *Been challenging, to say the least. Lead on this, do that. Oooo and help us plan...* Like, tomorrow, she was due a paper on what happened to this place. *Pollution, warming, ice age, what more was there to say?* Apparently, a lot.

Whatever. Yeah – just kick it my way.

Her tactical display flagged the tower, showed the library database was intact. She frowned. *Let’s face it.* Last weekend. *Partied far too much.* Now she was in trouble. *Deadlines really suck.* She needed what was in that library. *Otherwise, I’m fucked.*

When they reached the base of the tower, she signalled them to stop. ‘Comms off.’

They retracted their helms.

‘We’re well ahead of schedule.’ She pointed to the building. ‘We rest, take it easy for an hour, maybe two, tops.’

Oooo. Frank and Gloria glared. *Scathing.*

She play-punched Frank. ‘Don’t want to be there ahead of time. Come on, quick pit stop?’

‘Cut it out.’ Frank, sighed. ‘Why this place. Berne, what’s going on?’

‘Good question.’ She looked up at him. ‘Tell you in a bit. I promise,’ she said.

She stepped close to the building. She chose a window, used a cutting beam to make a person-sized hole. ‘Come on.’ She beckoned Frank and Gloria and climbed inside.

‘Woh!’ She slipped. ‘Watch it!’ Ice covered the gloomy interior, floor, ceiling

and walls. She crossed the room, used the cutter, sliced up the chamber door. ‘Wait for it.’ She kicked the door – slowly it fell – landed with a dull thump on the floor. *All good.* Bernadette led them out into a frozen corridor. *Enhancements.* They made her strong. *Nanites.* Made her heal fast and other crazy stuff.

‘Gimme a minute.’ She checked a hand device, held together with binding tape and glue. ‘Down here.’ She pointed. ‘There’s a stairwell up ahead.’

‘Where you get that?’ asked Gloria.

They moved down the corridor, stopped by a door on the right.

‘Er, from Robbie,’ she replied. ‘Tech Robbie. He made it.’

‘**The** Gaffa Tape Robbie?’ Gloria laughed. ‘An’ you trust thees – you crazy. You know he can’t make shit.’

‘Yeah, yeah – whatever.’ Bernadette cringed. ‘He told me it’ll do the job. Got intelligent tape that thinks.’

‘Oooh, of course.’ Gloria grinned.

Bernadette sliced the door.

Frank moved forward – shoved it.

‘Yeah, rite.’ She avoided eye contact as they moved into the icy stairwell.

‘OK.’ Bernadette smiled sweetly. ‘I admit, I’ve gone off task. Got this presentation tomorrow. Rise of Ky-Pal. Last weekend, two bangin’ all-nighters, well, and there was this guy I... Can’t not do it. Professor Vin’s a...’

‘What the hell Berne?’ Frank shot her a stern look. ‘Jeez – if they find out. God knows, we can’t afford to mess this up.’

‘Hey, calm down,’ said Gloria.

Frank exhaled. ‘Whatever you gotta do, girl – for God’s sake hurry up!’

‘I know, I know.’ She cringed, unslung her pack. ‘Won’t take long. I abseil down, rite. Save on anti-gravs.’

‘Where we go?’ asked Gloria.

‘Nooo, sorry. I go down to the basement. You guys stay up top. Fusion reactor down there, need to power it up.’

‘Sound dangerous,’ said Gloria. ‘To do thees. You no use Robbie’s stuff?’

‘Course not. Would never.’ She tensed. *Be OK, touch wood?*

Darn! She was fooling no-one. Their scornful expressions said it all.

‘Stay here, rite.’ She tugged the stair-rail, attached a winch. ‘Won’t be long, I promise. Be back in a tick.’ She set her headlamp, secured her cable. ‘Byeee bitches!’

She climbed over the rail, abseiled down the ice-lined shaft. It got dark, really dark, as the sub-floors flew past.

She slowed. ‘Steady. Steady.’ Bernadette moved off, the moment her feet touched the ground.

She looked around. Dim orange glow-ports illuminated the basement’s pockmarked concrete walls. *Less ice.* The air was dry down here. Still, her face felt cold.

There you are. A low hum came from the small, freezer-sized reactor, at the end of the chamber. ‘OK, Robbie...’ She approached a console, placed Robbie’s device on it, next to an old-fashioned data port. Bernadette pressed a button on the device, watched two tentacles shoot out. They dove into the data port. *Wait for it...*

‘Power’s up.’ She glanced over her shoulder. ‘3, 2, 1. I’m in.’

She checked the display. *Darn!* The flow line oscillated. *Can’t do this for long. 30 minutes, maybe – and that’s it.*

In her mind’s eye, she could see Gloria’s frown, knew exactly what she would

have said. '30 minutes – weeth Robbie's kit. Berne, you mad. You can't do thees?'
Whatever! Robbie's speeder got us home. Bernadette glared. *OK. Then it fell to bits.*

She spotted another workstation, over by the wall. She brought it up, produced a gel-drive, plugged it into a socket on the console.

Shouldn't take long. She'd set really tight search parameters. 'Come on, come on.'

Lo and behold, moments later, the data started to download.

Is this wise? Not for the first time, the pros and cons of continuing crossed her mind. *Archives priceless. 10,000 years of history. The Faculty bought the lot.* Her essay deadline loomed. When she learned where they were going. *Had to give this a shot.*

She heard movement. *Damn it!*

'Wotcha doing?' Out of the gloom lumbered Frank.

Gloria and Frank closed on her.

'Guys!' Bernadette glared. 'Yeah. I said to stay up top!'

'On comms, they ask for us.' Gloria tugged her sleeve. 'We need to move now Berne – don' you dare mess this up!'

'Folks are nervous.' Frank spoke. 'Blizzards worse. If we don't move now, we're stuck!'

'Yeah – but...!' Bernadette turned, nonplussed.

They grabbed her arms. She heard a ping. 'Wait! Got it.' Her hand shot out, grabbed the drive from the console. 'OK, OK, it's done.'

They didn't stop. Frank and Gloria bundled her out. Gloria attached her harness to the cable, clicked auto – winched her up.

'But...!'

They followed. Frank unclipped her when they reached the top. 'We're out of time Berne. No – just shut the fuck...!'

'I know, I know,' she interrupted. 'But...!'

She protested. Didn't matter. They dragged her down the corridor, through the room, out the window, onto the ice.

She turned.

'Uh, Uh!' Frank glared, put his hand on her back and gave her a shove.

'OK, OK.' She staggered, managed to stay up.

They engaged their helms, set their visors and moved off across the snow.

Whaddo I do? She shot Frank a look of contempt. *Darn, reactors unstable.*

Later – double back. She stomped past the drifts. *Really irresponsible, making me leave it like that.*

No-one spoke. They trudged through the blizzard, past city blocks. Around them the snow swirled.

Frank pointed. 'Target up ahead,' he said.

In front of her, what was left of the tower block pierced the ice. In its day, could have been awesome. Now, only twenty or so storeys were visible. It loomed before her, under the cold grey arctic sky.

'Berne – you're up,' said Gloria. She moved in close. 'You crayzee but you planned thees, so you do your job, right.'

'OK, OK.' Bernadette collected herself. She unslung her weapon. 'Frank take point. Keep to the walls. Let's get to the others, fast.'

'Yeah, Berne,' Frank replied gruffly. 'Let's just do that.'

She followed Frank. They hid behind drifts, hugged the building walls, till they

were about fifty metres from the tower.

Bernadette set her comm, broadcast wide. 'Teams Delta, Echo sound off.'

'Delta in... Echo in position,' came back.

'OK, go join your teams. See you on the other side, guys.'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Gloria. 'Jus see you get thees right.'

'Yeah, byeee. Missing you already.' She smiled and waved them off.

From her collar a layer of liquid metal flowed up. She caught the visual wave. Tiny platelets flicked to cover her neck, head and face. They clicked into place to form a three-quarter helm of ablative armour plate.

She moved forward, joined Charlie Team, behind a drift by the building on the left. She counted, all ten present. They turned as she approached.

'Berne, thank God.' Stocky black woman, medium height, beckoned her. 'Do we have a go?'

'Yeah. About that Jules,' replied Berne. 'Orders. I'm out for this one. Fraid you're on your own.'

'What!' Jules looked incredulous.

'You can do it.' Bernadette patted her shoulder. 'Just treat me as part of the squad.'

'But?'

'Need to know you can carry this,' she said. 'In case the Big One goes wrong.'

'Oh, OK. Right,' said Jules. She shook her head. She turned to her fire-team leaders, quickly filled them in. 'So – Berne, you're with me. Any minute now, we're starting...'

'Droids are up.' One of the fire-team interrupted. 'No bodies showing. Scans must be blocked.'

Jules nodded. 'Get prepped. We go in 5, on my mark. Mark... 3, 2.'

'Woh!' Bernadette ducked. All hell broke loose. Beneath her the ground shook.

Percussive ordinance hit the tower. Shards of glaz rained down, cascaded across the icy floor. She heard the crack of pulse fire and RPG rounds echo off the surrounding building walls. *Non-lethal rounds?* She risked a look. *Oh fuck!* Defenders returned fire from the roof and through the windows, floor 9, half-way up.

Wait for it... She caught the flash. Scanned the roof.

Up there, the firing stopped. *Beta Team.*

Dots in the sky. She followed their anti-grav descent. *Oooo!* From the ground, the incoming barrage was constant.

Under fire, three of the squad positioned mortars, off to her right.

'GO!' yelled Jules.

As one, the mortars fired. Where they landed, the mid-storey windows lit up. *Gotcha!*

From the windows, nothing.

Here we go girl. Her heart was thumping as she moved off with the squad.

They spread out, snow flurried around them, the blizzard was intense. The incoming barrage lessened. Bernadette moved forward, filtered into the group. *Crap!* Multiple rounds smashed through the ice, to her left.

'MAN DOWN!'

She ran for the snowdrift, reached the base of the building, took cover with the rest. Someone grabbed the prone body, dragged it to shelter next to them.

Berne unpacked her grapple, attached the cable to a pack on her belt. With the others, she aimed ten floors up, above the centre window shelf.

Abruptly the barrage stopped.

‘Now!’ said Jules.

They took the shot... and they were off. She put her right foot on the building, hit her anti-grav and ran. The floors sped by as her harness winched her up.

She stopped at floor 9, next to the broken window, pulled a grenade and threw it in.

‘FIRE IN THE HOLE!’ She swung back, saw the flash.

On Jules’ mark, they entered through the window.

‘Three-man fire-teams. Clear the floor,’ yelled Jules. ‘RV by the centre stairwell.’

Her visor cut through the smoke. *Office. Open Plan.* Her visor painted them red. Six groggy hostiles crawled behind packing cases littered across the floor. Bernadette fired, took out two, stayed on Jules, took position left. Seemed like no time, the others took out the rest.

Fire-teams peeled off left and right – kicked through partitioned walls. ‘Contact!’

Bernadette hit the ground. *Non-lethal, my arse. Don’t wanna get hit by that.*

She crouched, pumped on adrenaline, moved with Jules toward the door. Jules pulled her blade.

‘Crap!’

The door fell. *Red, red!* A three-man team stormed through it and fired into the room.

Bernadette took one down. From somewhere, another took a shot to the head.

Jules took the last one. Didn’t fire her weapon. Used her stun blade instead.

‘Clear!’

Bernadette moved to the door, knelt, stuck her head out, scanned the corridor. She fired twice. ‘Incoming!’ She ducked back, shielded her face from the stun-grenade flash.

Then she was up.

She moved into the corridor, fired short sharp bursts. ‘Clear!’ She glanced behind her. ‘Damn it. Gotta man down here!’

Further up, three defenders lay sprawled. *Darn!* The other member of her fire-team lay motionless, face down on the floor.

Jules moved in, checked their suit vitals. ‘He’ll have a headache, but he’s fine.’

Shit! She caught movement, by the stairwell door up ahead. She took aim.

Phew! Bernadette relaxed slightly. Her visor painted the newcomer green.

‘Ees me. Ees me, OK. Don’ shoot Berne.’

The small battledressed woman moved forward, retracted her helm and grinned.

‘Gloria!’ Bernadette lowered her rifle. She took down her helm. ‘Glad to see you made it.’ She coughed. The heavy stench of ozone, permeated the air.

‘Frank go up with Echo Team,’ said Gloria. She pointed to the far stairwell. ‘We clear the entrance, met little resistance up to here.’

Just then, she heard firing. Came from above. Went on a while. The exchange was intense. ‘Do they need...?’

Jules shook her head.

‘Ah, right then.’

Finally, it ceased.

‘Building clear!’ A voice came in over the comms.

It was loud. A cheer went up in the room behind her, from the remainder of the squad.

Jules turned to her, saluted. ‘Good plan, Sir! Job done.’

‘Naa, this one’s yours,’ she replied. ‘I just got in the way, hun.’

‘Yeah, right.’ Jules smiled. ‘So, totally my fault, if we hadn’t won.’
‘Yep, totally.’ Bernadette grinned. ‘Good thing we did, huh.’
She went on comms. ‘Well done guys. Stand down. Think we’re ready for the Big One?’
The comms roared. Seemed like they were ready. *Find out soon enough.*
Jules left them to it, walked back into the room.
‘Jus one thing,’ said Gloria. ‘Frank and I not happy. That shit you pull today. So here, little thank you from me an’ Frank, OK.’
Gloria raised her weapon, aimed and took the shot.
‘Fuck!’ Bernadette flew back, felt like she’d been kicked in the chest. ‘But!’
Time stood still. *Bastards!*
Darkness rushed in, and she was gone...

Bernadette drifted gently in and out. One minute swathed in darkness, then bathed in pulsating disco lights. She sat in a semi-circular alcove, with her mates either side. Out on the dancefloor, the electric beats went on. It was the Saturday before Christmas. ‘Let’s party!’ Like, nothing can go wrong?

‘Cheers!’
Beside her, her mate Cleo made her down a shot.
See that guy there? That one.’ She pointed. ‘Got his eye on you,’ she said.
‘Yeah, name’s G. Was talking to him earlier.’ Bernadette’s short dress rode up, as she crossed her legs and grinned.
She checked him out. Black, early thirties. Goatee, corn row braids with fade. *Mmm. Tasty.* She thought. *Shouldn’t have done that pill.*
She got up, half staggered over and smiled up at him. ‘You dancing?’
‘You askin’?’ He smiled back. ‘Yeah. OK,’ he said.
She took his hand, pulled him onto the dancefloor. Then things went wild for bit. Finally, he pulled her close. In a smiley embrace, they kissed.
He leaned in, whispered in her ear. ‘Wanna get out of this place?’ he said.
‘Yeah, rite.’ Bernadette grabbed his hand, dragged him across to her mates.
‘Names G. All good. We’re leaving now. Totally out of my face.’
Cleo moved toward her, whispered something in her ear. Bernadette nodded sagely. ‘Yeah totally.’ *Can’t hear nothing in here.*
‘Uh?’ She felt a tug on her hand, and they were outside. The rest was just a blur.

Transition: The interface of consciousness, via bio-technology, with the virtual world

She came to, on her bed, fully clothed in the early morning light. Except...?
Bernadette opened her eyes, looked up at the grey arctic sky. She tried to sit up, couldn’t. ‘Bollocks!’ She lifted her head, couldn’t move, realised she was strapped to a mobile stretcher-bed. Her body ached. ‘Gloria! What the f...? When I get free,

you're dead!'

Gloria moved in beside her, followed by Frank.

Gloria grinned. 'Yeah, we thought it best you be restrained. What you do thees morning. Not a good thing,' she said.

Gloria jabbed her arm with something.

'Ouch!'

'For your head,' Gloria said.

'Yeah, feeling better already,' replied Bernadette.

Actually, she was. It crept over her. Euphoric almost. 'Come on guys, unstrap me. Just chill. It's totally fine.'

Gloria stopped the stretcher. 'OK, we truss you, but remember next time.'

They released her.

Bernadette swung her legs off the stretcher, found her balance, got to her feet.

Felt a bit wobbly, first few steps at least.

Gloria moved to help her.

'Nooo. Touch me and die, bitch!'

They walked on. It was like moving through an icy canyon, buildings towered on either side.

After a while they moved out, into a wide, open square. In the centre. She spotted three troop carriers parked there. Two of their trainers stood, by one of the rear deployment ramps. One humanoid, the other, a reptile.

Name was Sorn. Been on her case from the start. He was a Colonel in the CHF Special Executive Arm. *A charity with muscle?* They were trained to do some harm.

Frank and Gloria looked at her.

'Yeah. Don't worry guys,' she smiled.

From their expressions, they seemed relieved.

'I'll take my revenge... another time.' She grinned.

Frank frowned. 'Er, look Berne...'

'No. Feel great,' she said. 'Reckon I deserved it, rite.' Had to be the meds. Right now, she didn't give a shit.

But, later – maybe...

Gloria smiled awkwardly.

Echo team followed them as they made their way inside. Somewhat dishevelled, Alpha team, followed on behind.

Standard passenger craft layout. A cheer went up as she walked on board. She smiled, patted some backs, took a seat next to the aisle. *Erm.* She'd a nagging feeling, like, she'd forgotten, something outside...

'Ooo, Ooo,' she started to rise.

She felt a hand on the shoulder.

'Congratulations.' It was Sorn. He pointed toward the flight deck. 'No rest for you. You're flying this bird tonight.'

'What – yeah, but no, I have to – like...!'

Sorn shook his squat reptilian head and escorted her down the aisle.

The reactor? 'OK, OK.' She could sneak back later. *But Robbie said if I...*

Nothing she could do now. *Aw, don't worry. It'll all turn out fine.*

Damn it. She sat at the console, strapped herself in and brought her implant online. Bernadette transitioned; her perception flowed through the vessel as the system pulled her in. She merged with the craft, wore the shell as if it were a second skin. She ran through pre-flight, engaged the engines. *Oooo.* She felt the meds. Really kicked in. *Think Sorn noticed?* She couldn't help but grin.

Yeee – Haa! Bernadette hit thrusters, let the engine rip and they shot up into the sky. *Naa.* She hesitated. *Don't pull inertial dampers – literally got loadsa shit last time.*

The library? Put that on hold. *Just sit back, enjoy the ride.*

Beneath the vessel, the last wisps of atmosphere fell away.

Will you look at that! Her perception scanned the ice-covered waste, laid out like a carpet below. She corrected. Thrusters fired.

A white saucer hung above the planet, up and to her right. *Pretty.* It maintained a geostationary orbit round the pristine orb, which glistened in the night.

Bernadette opened up the engines, climbed toward the craft. *Nearly there.* She requested docking clearance.

'C H Light Thirty confirmed. Continue your approach,' came back.

She felt a slight push as the vessel slowed. *Steady.* Bernadette adjusted trajectory. She eased the bird through the brightly lit orifice, into the saucer's flight deck. Slowly, carefully, she eased the vessel down.

A short while later, they assembled in ranks, in the white panelled ready room. A class of around 70, they stood to attention. They faced the view-wall. She could see the ice-covered northern hemisphere of the planet, spread out like a carpet below.

Sorn was there, he beckoned her forward. Bernadette joined him, stood with her back to the wall. She tried not to smile, as a respectful hush settled over the room.

Sorn spoke. 'First, let me congratulate you all on a job well done. We know you're more than ready for the real mission ahead of you. I know. Yes – it will be tough. But we've prepared you well. Soon you'll leave us, and the fight for your home world will have really begun.

'Second, a big thank you.' He glanced over his shoulder, pointed to the planet below. 'We told you to steer well clear of the Red Zone. The historical data down there, is irreplaceable, as you know.'

Bernadette cringed, looked at Frank and Gloria. Frank and Gloria glared back.

Sorn continued. 'It's a repository, second to none. On behalf of the Faculty, I'd like to thank you for observing mission protocol. They've an archaeological team heading down there, now we've all gone...'

Phew! She looked over her shoulder, watched the shuttle make its way slowly, in toward the icebound city sprawl.

She returned, eyes forward. 'Huh?'

Around her, the room lit up with a blinding red flash.

With those assembled, Frank and Gloria stared, aghast.

'Oh crap!' She span round, staggered.

In silence, from the city, a fiery red half-bubble rose up. It expanded, engulfed the buildings, spread out to...

'...if we'd damaged...' Back to the wall, Sorn continued, oblivious.

'What?' He turned to the view-wall. 'WHAT THE F...!'

Bernadette winced. The bubble grew exponentially. It covered a quarter of the continent before finally it stopped. The rock and ice around it churned, as the shockwave billowed out.

Bernadette looked down, then looked up. *Oh, you are kidding me. Fuck!*

Oooops! She looked at Sorn. 'What just happened?'

The archaeologist's shuttle did a slow U-turn, below and to the left.

Sorn glared at her. 'Take over.'

He turned abruptly, exited the room.

No, no, no. They moved with a purpose. Frank and Gloria closed in.

‘What I tell you?’ said Gloria. ‘Robbie’s stuff ees shit!’

CHAPTER TWO

Two Standard weeks later – Somewhere beyond the Imperial Fringe – 18th of Arlane, 1108 AI

The sleek, grey Orrisian starship, ploughed through the red-hued hyperspace abyss. Two horizontal black decals identified its origin, to any one fortunate enough to look. In its wake, tethered aft, a battered dead hulk. A kilometre in length from the tail, to the spherical living quarters at the prow. The remnants of a fighter protruded, close to the drive, on the pock-marked near side.

A blue field extended from the Orrisian craft, to envelope the stricken Hyperdrive Transport.

When it was done, like a bubble, the force field popped. Both craft emerged from the abyss, into the normal space-time continuum.

Below to port, lay a gas giant, encircled by rings of rock and ice. It hung silently in space, the sixth planet from the star. Yellow-brown bands of cloud encircled the vast sleeping Titan.

All was quiet within the dim-lit living area of the captive Hyperdrive Transport. Then...

Suspensors hummed, the steel-grey sphere flew on. From it, green beams flicked out, this way and that. They scanned the walkway ahead, as it curved up and out of sight. Red emergency lights flickered. At intervals, from pipes on the ceiling, gas streamed out in bursts.

It descended, settled onto a console, to the right of the thoroughfare.

The orb hummed, the console booted, the display flashed a patchwork of red. Over the comms a woman’s voice stated...

‘Intervention Required. Drive Failure Imminent, in 10...!’

On the console, lights changed from red, to amber then stopped. Job done; the sphere hissed. The orb crumpled and turned to dust.

Over the comms.

‘Drive Team – request extraction... we have a man down.’

‘*That’s a negative,*’ came the reply. ‘*Drive and life support are not online.*’

‘Life Support – we have contact, we’re taking fire...!’

‘*Do not engage, repeat, do not engage!*’

‘...came from nowhere... no warning... revival sequence just went live!’

‘*Acknowledged. All teams. Prepare for exfil on my mark...*’

Blue transport beams raked the hull of the stricken hyperdrive craft.

When it was done, the Orrisian ship jumped. A blink of an eye and it was gone.

The derelict Transport vessel hung alone once more, above the remote gaseous

world.

Off the main corridor, seven stasis pillars stood within a softly-lit, oval room. The occupants were motionless. Embedded in a field bonded, glaz-like material, they looked cold as the grave.

Lights flickered and came up, inside the Transport's mirrored, oval stasis chamber. Within their pillars, seven occupants stood motionless. Their bodies frozen. Embedded, in their glaz-like tombs.

Harsh white. The light changed hue. Once, twice, three times...

A short while later, time began again for Major Patricea Markis.

Patricea staggered as the pillar melted away. *How long?* For her, seemed like no time since she'd stepped into the...

Grey, beyond middle years, the Orrisian Priest approached.

'Thanks.' Father Sevas steadied her while she found her feet.

'Bek and Corram just left on recon. Your pillar was glitching,' he said.

She glanced at the mirrored wall, saw herself staring back. Thirty-two Standard, high cheekbones, softly tapered chin. She wore black battledress, as did the three other adults in the room. Her dark auburn hair was plaited, pinned back military style.

A broken voice, the vessel's AI, came over the comms.

'Drive fail... imminent! ...vention required!'

Damn it! They'd escaped the Capital, made orbit. *Then it all went wrong.* Three interceptors. The ensuing battle. *The Lady Darteane?* Her heart missed a beat. Was that the remains of the Lady Darteane's fighter, lodged to the rear, near the drive? It damaged the vessel. Still, they had to make the jump. *Did we make the right choice? Must be pretty banged up.*

'Patricea!'

Aged eight cycles, short blonde hair. The young Prince Kal Jerran ran in and held her close.

She pried him loose, went down on one knee. 'Are you alright?' she said.

'Yes, yes.' Kal Jerran nodded.

'Where's your sister?'

Kal Jerran pointed.

Trouble! Princess Vel Nadia. Young, fine boned features. Small, dark haired, lithe. She'd pinned the stowaway reporter, Hellia Vallion, to the wall on the opposite side.

'She tried to run!' snapped Vel Nadia.

Slim, dishevelled, late twenties, platinum blonde. Hellia Vallion struggled. 'Will you just fuck off!'

Sevas intervened. 'Highness, perhaps you should release her?' He strode toward Vel Nadia. 'She has nowhere to go, and she is bound as you can see.'

'Yes, yes...' Vel Nadia relaxed visibly, let the reporter fall to her knees.

'Nothing's changed.' Patricea looked at Hellia, then at Kal Jerran. She stood and took his hand. 'That woman doesn't do herself any favours, so I sort of understand.'

Kal Jerran nodded, knowingly. 'And Nadia is quite volatile,' he said.

'We should go,' said Sevas. He motioned them into the corridor.

One at a time they filed out, into the dim-lit main thoroughfare. Patricea and Kal

Jerran followed Sevas. Hellia and Vel Nadia were last in line. *Not good.* Here and there, wall panels were buckled. She smelled ozone, saw a couple of fractured pipes.

Just then Bek's voice came in over the comm. His tone. Clipped, military. *Sounds like something's wrong.*

'Patricea, Sevas, hurry, check the main console,' he snapped.

'On it.' Patricea nodded. 'Yes, yes. We'll do that.'

The comms crackled. It was Corram, Bek's subordinate. 'Headed to Engineering. See what's happened aft.'

'Bek, Corram, we're moving,' said Vel Nadia. 'When we're settled, I'll report back.'

Again, Bek's voice on the comms. 'Right. Copy that.' He paused. 'There's no Network. Patricea, check the ship's chronometer. Find out how long we've been down. And, see if you can reach Varian. Let him know we survived.'

'Right, were going. Will do,' Patricea replied.

Vel Nadia turned to Hellia. 'Behave yourself. It's up to me if you stay alive.'

'Nadia! You mustn't.' Kal Jerran frowned. 'I'll stay with you, if that's alright?'

Vel Nadia nodded, grudgingly. 'Oh, very well. If you must.'

At least for the moment, Hellia Vallion looked subdued.

Patricea walked with Sevas along the central walkway, which curved gently up and out of sight. *Looks bad.* Here and there, gas jets hissed intermittently. *Must be inert.* Sparks flashed from broken conduits along the battered thoroughfare.

'Oh...!' She felt faint for a moment. She put her hand against the bulkhead and slowed. 'Are you alright?' asked Sevas.

'Yes, yes.' She nodded. 'Don't worry, I'll be fine.'

Must be the Sync. She felt distant, really not herself at all. She remembered the Palace, the drug Orphalia gave her at the lavish Hiltatz Ball. *It's still happening.* The Lady Darteane slipped her Sync, some of what followed was a blur. The drug had tele-connective properties. At intervals, their consciousness exchanged and merged. *Was I seduced, or was I complicit...?*

Patricea shivered, felt the touch of Orphalia's fingers on her skin. The sensation lingered. It was exquisite. *Darn it!* The feeling of separation, tore at her inside. Flying the drone, during the escape, she'd had Orphalia's fighter in her sights. She'd fired the missile, but she... *Detonated short.* In her mind's eye she relived it, the flash lit up the night.

It was close enough...

She'd scanned the debris. Beneath the exposed fuselage, cables sparked and flashed. Above the wing, trapped in the cockpit, Orphalia stared back. As the vessel spun, Orphalia hammered on the canopy. *That was the last I saw, of the Lady Orphalia Darteane.*

If she got aboard...? She'd seen it, fighter debris, lodged near the rear drive.

She shook her head. *Face it.* Orphalia was gone. *No way she could have survived.*

Her heart sank. *We were Sync'd. Orphalia knew what I knew. That's how she found us. I betrayed us all.*

'Let's go.' She glanced at Sevas.

His steel blue eyes possessed the depth and clarity expected of a member of the Orrisian Order. So far he'd done his job, despite the Archive, what she'd seen. *True.* She was ill-placed to judge. *Still, nothing's what it seems.*

They passed some storage units, then halted next to two blast couches on the right of the walkway. She seated herself at the console. Beside her Sevas did likewise.

Patricea looked it over, brought the antiquated console online. ‘Huh!’ Three small black lines, burned into the unit on Sevas’s side. She brushed a layer of dust from the station. *That wasn’t here before.* She looked up. *No cracks, no visible damage.* The dust sparkled on the floor.

‘What do we have?’ asked Sevas.

She hesitated.

‘Not good,’ she finally replied. ‘A few amber, most indicators are in the red. We’ve no main drive and life support is hanging by a thread.’

‘Same here.’ Sevas turned. ‘Minimal life support,’ he said.

‘Jump and Hyperdrive’s junk,’ Bek’s voice came over the comms. ‘With some work we might manage one fifth impulse at best.’

‘Did you...?’ Patricea’s voice faltered. ‘The crashed fighter... any?’

‘That’s a negative,’ Bek came back. ‘Stay alert. We’ve got blood and weapon burns in engineering. Something happened here. Withdraw if you make contact.’

‘Acknowledged, copy that.’ Patricea’s heart missed a beat. *Was it her, was it the Lady Darteane?*

‘How long were we down?’ asked Bek.

Patricea checked the chrono. *Gods!* ‘About – one cycle. Navigations fried. No idea where we are,’ she replied.

‘...right,’ Bek sounded terse. ‘Check external comms. We’re heading to Life Support. We’ll let you know what we’ve got.’

‘Acknowledged,’ she said. ‘Copy that.’

Woh! She felt dizzy. ‘Sevas, I...’

It was like her seat slipped, she caught the tell-tale blue flash. The console faded. The world fell silent. Everything went black.

The change was abrupt.

Patricea stood.

No sign of the console, the walkway – all of that was gone. *Gods, no!* She looked around, found herself in a dingy corridor, somewhere in the bowels of the craft. *The Sync.* In her hand she held a sidearm. The barrel still felt warm. She glanced around, replaced it in its holster. Her slender fingers did her bidding, but she knew they weren’t her own.

Orphalia. *She’s alive!*

Their narcotic connection was still active. Patricea looked down the corridor, through the eyes of the Lady Orphalia Darteane.

At the end of the walkway, a support beam had collapsed. On the wall. *Section 20.* Off to her left, a door to a chamber. *Stasis Chamber – Deck 5.* Patricea put her hand on the door pad. It opened. She stepped inside. *Darn! I’m in her body. That means she’s in mine.*

‘Uh!’ Patricea winced. Her side burned when she moved. She looked down, checked her flight suit. *Bad pulse wound.* She noticed the helmet, the air pack, laid against the mirrored wall. Patricea gazed at her reflection. Orphalia Darteane stared back at her. *By the Risen!* The burgundy sim-leather suit clung to her, as if moulded to her form. Slim, tall, her body was toned like an athlete, or a dancer from the classical school. Her hair was plaited in a braid, a deep sultry red. Patricea parted her

moist red lips, her heart thumped in her chest. ‘Darn, it’s not over. Can’t deal with this.’

Her lips. Patricea approached the air pack, found a pocket, reached inside. She found it, produced a lipstick, scrawled a message on the wall. ‘*Stay here – I’ll find you – if you care for me at all.*’

‘Oh, my!’ It was like a pulling sensation, came from deep within her chest. The world flashed blue; the chamber receded...

The stasis vault was gone. The blast couch and the thoroughfare reformed.

She blinked. She was back at the console. Sevas was at her side.

‘What do you mean?’ He seemed concerned. ‘Patricea, are you alright?’

‘What was I...?’ She gathered herself quickly. ‘Yes, yes, I’m fine.’ Patricea checked her console, stared at it wide-eyed. *Oh, my!* An external text channel was open. It was blank, but the link was still live. *What have you done Orphalia?* She ran a quick diagnostic. *Good.* The external comms array was offline.

‘Erm.’ She closed the channel, turned to Sevas. ‘Actually, I don’t feel so good. I think I should take five.’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ Sevas replied. ‘We’ve done all we can for the moment. Given what happened on Reagal, you have had quite a time.’

‘I’m sorry, I’m not – see you later.’ She stood up, nodded to Sevas and smiled.

Patricea set off down the gently curving corridor, passed the storage unit on the right. She glanced back, paused to steady herself. Sevas was out of sight. The ship’s status was important, but she had other things on her mind. *Orphalia. The text box? Huh?* She heard something, glanced back. From up around the bend, a flickering light...
