

The Only Easy Day

By Kurt Springs

The Sylvaran Empire was ancient before humans looked to the stars. To those who had traversed the galaxy for tens of thousands of years, Earth seemed small and fragile. Human spacefaring was as primitive to them as Phoenician sailing ships would be to nuclear-powered aircraft carriers of Earth's 21st century. They stayed out of the affairs of lesser races.

The Sylvaran people were humanoid, with humanlike bodies. They were tall and elegant, with long, tapered ears tipped with points that would have made an elf jealous. Their eyes ranged from silver to lavender to gold, and their hair was similarly varied in shade, like humans'. They dressed in sheer robes and gowns and adorned themselves with jewelry. Yet few would tangle with them militarily. Their technology was among the most advanced.

The normally self-assured monarch was trying to hold back her emotions. A Zinthary missile had brought down the ship her children were traveling on, marooning them in a war zone. Human and Zinthary soldiers clashed in a savage war. Their weapons, though primitive, could still kill.

Kepler Alpha III, a former human colony, lay under Zinthary control. While her fleets could easily sweep aside opposition, such an attack would put the children in danger. Ships stood by, waiting for an opening that might never come.

Empress Kalisana Caranthir put on a brave face in public. Alone, she wept for her little ones.

Chief Petty Officer Robert Stennis waited as the dropship neared Kepler Alpha III. His Orbital Terrain Tactical Expeditionary Reconnaissance (OTTER) squad waited as they approached the drop zone.

“We insert off the beach near New Naples,” Petty Officer First Class James Croft explained to the team. “We hit the water, submerge, and swim to shore when the coast is clear.”

A few teammates snickered at the unintentional pun. CPO Stennis suppressed a chuckle. Other squads on their team were closing in on their targets, each with a role to play in the coming counterattack.

“We will knock out their surface-to-air defenses and establish a landing zone for the First Orbital Marine Expeditionary Division. The Marines are also sending several Force Recon units to secure the beach further up.”

PO1 Croft looked toward Stennis.

“We’re going for HALO, High Altitude, Low Open,” he said. “Once we splash down, we ditch the chutes and swim to shore. Follow your navigation system to the landing point. You all know the drill.”

“Drop zone, one minute,” the pilot announced.

“Visors down, air on,” PO1 Croft ordered.

As one, the OTTERs prepared to enter the planet’s thin upper atmosphere.

The Sylvaran cruiser hung just outside the system. The Empress’s nephew, Captain Amras Aegnor, prepared to surrender the bridge to his second officer so he could get some rest, if possible. The fates of his young cousins weighed on his mind, and he doubted he could find true sleep.

“Captain,” the scanner officer called. “Human dropships have entered low orbit around Kepler Alpha III in stealth configuration. Primitive by our standards, but the Zinthary have not detected them.”

Captain Aegnor looked over his officer’s shoulder.

“Move us in closer,” the captain ordered as the second officer entered the bridge. “I need a telepath up here. I need to know what they’re doing.”

“That’s risky, Captain,” objected the second officer, Lt. Commander Celebrean. “If we get too close—”

“Our stealth technology is millennia more advanced,” the captain countered. “Lieutenant Duillin will tell us how close we can get.”

He glanced up at the woman. “Take the science station. I’m staying here for now.”

Lt. Commander Celebrean hesitated. “Yes, Captain.”

CPO Stennis stepped out into the darkness first. One by one, the OTTERs, spiritual successors to the SEALs, followed him out of the dropship. HALO jumps were extremely dangerous, and they were jumping into Kepler Alpha III’s largest ocean, compounding the risk.

“The only easy day was yesterday,” he muttered, quoting the OTTER motto, which they had inherited from their SEAL Team ancestors.

The Heads-Up Display (HUD) in his visor showed his navigation data. He also cycled through his squad’s vitals.

“Baker, up your O2 and breathe,” he called. “I don’t need you passing out before we land.”

“Yes, Chief,” the seaman first class responded.

Everyone kept an eye on their altimeters. As they descended below 10,000 feet, they paid even closer attention. They had to open their chutes between 4,000 and 3,000 feet, or the water would be like concrete when they hit it.

CPO Stennis opened his shout at 3,010 feet. The squad maneuvered their chutes, forming up on him to land as a unit.

“So far, so good,” muttered PO1 Croft.

In their night vision, they could see the water getting closer. CPO Stennis felt himself slide into the ocean. He touched the switch to drop his chute and inflated his buoyancy vest. Then he dove underwater, removed his fins from his belt, and slipped them onto his feet. Their atmospheric suits doubled as drysuits, making them ideal for this operation. Once he was ready, he took a compass bearing and headed for their exit point. The weights on their parachute harnesses caused the chutes to sink to the bottom.

As they neared the shore, he motioned for the squad to stay submerged. He popped his head above water and immediately ducked back down when he spotted a Zinthary team patrolling the beach. He calculated how long it would take for them to be far enough away not to notice his team coming ashore, then popped up again.

Seeing no one, he dove again and signaled his squad to follow. Once on the beach, they stowed their fins and moved toward a house intelligence said was abandoned.

The OTTERs went up the beach, keeping their weapons at the ready in case the Zinthary showed up. Soon, they were past the dunes and into the residential area. Staying in the shadows, they headed up the street and spotted the beach house that would be their base.

Once in the backyard, they tried the door. It opened easily. CPO Stennis glanced at PO1 Croft and signaled, *Too easy*.

They slipped inside, ready for anything, or so they thought. They heard soft whimpering and someone trying to quiet another person. PO1 Croft grabbed the bedroom door handle. He yanked it open, and CPO Stennis led the first fireteam in to clear the room. They stopped short at the sight of three small figures huddled in the corner.

“They aren’t Zinthary,” Seaman Baker hissed. “Their kids.”

Two of the three faces looked up at them with frightened eyes. The third lay curled in a ball, shivering.

“They’re Sylvarans,” PO1 Croft announced.

CPO Stennis looked at his squad. “Secure the rest of the house. Croft, see to it. Baker, with me.”

PO1 Croft took the rest of the squad to ensure there were no more surprises. CPO Stennis and SA Baker shouldered their weapons.

Stennis raised his hands. “It’s okay. We aren’t here to hurt you.”

He walked forward slowly. The two children shrank back, trying to pull the third with them.

Within three feet, he crouched. “I will not hurt you. Can you tell me your names?”

“Nerdanel,” one said.

“Iimee,” the other whispered.

In his night vision, he could see that the two Sylvaran were sisters. The one they were trying to shield was a boy.

“Your brother?”

The two girls nodded.

“Rumil,” Iimee, the youngest, said.

SA Baker looked at them. “There’s a perfectly good bed in here, Chief. Why don’t we put him on it?”

The girls hesitated.

“I said we wouldn’t hurt you,” CPO Stennis said. “I meant it. Let us get him comfortable and take a look. We might be able to help him.”

Another moment’s hesitation, and Nerdanel nodded. Stennis stepped forward, scooped up the child, and laid him in the bed. He then began examining him.

“He has a nasty cut on his leg,” Stennis said. “It’s infected.”

He felt the boy’s head. “I don’t know much about your people, but he’s running a fever.”

“Chief,” SA Baker said. “We don’t dare give him one of our standard antibiotics or antivirals. It could kill him.”

“So could this infection,” Stennis answered grimly.

Irimee began to cry.

“Baker, go to the kitchen and check the freezer,” Stennis ordered. “Get ice. We need to get that fever under control. Check if there is anything we can put on the wound to draw out the infection. We may not be able to use oral or intravenous meds, but we may find something that can help topically.”

“Yes, Chief.” The young man dashed off to find something that might help.

CPO Stennis turned to the alien girls. “Hey, don’t worry. We aren’t giving up on Rumil. We’ve been trained to make do with what’s at hand.”

PO1 Croft returned. “House is clear, Chief.”

“Thanks, Jim.”

“Baker is checking the kitchen for anything that could help,” Croft went on. “Do you want me to radio command? Let them know we have a slight complication?”

“We need to maintain radio silence until the fleet arrives,” CPO Stennis replied. “We’ll lie low until tomorrow, then take out those launchers. If we can keep him stable until the Marine Expeditionary Division arrives, we can evacuate them and let the diplomats contact the Empire to arrange to pick them up.”

Croft started to say something, then stopped. Baker returned. “Ice and I made a poultice. It should slow the infection.”

Stennis nodded. “See to it.”

Captain Aegnor began to doze in his command chair.

“Captain,” Lieutenant Duillin called.

Aegnor came fully awake. “You have something.”

The telepath nodded. “I surface-scanned the humans. They are part of the Earth Fleets Orbital Terrain Tactical Expeditionary Reconnaissance force. Their Echo squad found the children.”

Captain Aegnor shot to his feet. The lieutenant held up his hand.

“They do not know who they are, Captain,” Lieutenant Duillin assured him. “All they see are two frightened children and a sick one. At the moment, one is applying home remedies to bring down Prince Rumil’s fever.”

Captain Aegnor resisted the urge to shake the telepath in his panic. “What happened to Rumil?”

“Scanning Princess Nerdanel’s mind, he was badly cut when he exited the crash,” the telepath replied. “They escaped detection and hid in an abandoned human beach house. He’s been steadily getting worse.”

“What are the humans planning?” the captain asked.

“Their orders are to destroy an air defense battery, then hold a perimeter until a larger force relieves them. They are more than a little worried. They must maintain radio silence for the mission to succeed. Their leader, Chief Petty Officer Stennis, is torn. He wants to help them and complete the mission, but he is worried he can do one and not the other.”

The captain sat back in his chair. “Did Princess Nerdanel detect your presence?”

“Yes, Captain,” the telepath nodded. “I told her not to let the humans know we can communicate yet.”

“Captain,” Lt. Commander Celebrean called. “I pulled up what human units of this type carry in their trauma kits. They have a broad-spectrum antibiotic. If they give the prince no more than 5 *cranils*, or 10 of their milliliters, every four hours, they could stabilize the prince’s condition until evacuation. I’ve confirmed this with our chief medical officer.”

Captain Aegnor frowned. “Which means we are letting the humans know we are here. How is the rest of his team handling this?”

“Concerned,” the telepath said. “They don’t like seeing children suffer, but their presence complicates an otherwise straightforward mission.”

“I can well imagine.”

“I picked up something else from the chief petty officer,” Lieutenant Duillin told them. “After running the problems through his mind, he focused on their unit’s motto.”

“And what is that?”

The Sylvaran smirked. “The only easy day was yesterday.”

The captain sat back. “Sounds like a being I can respect. Relay the information to my niece. Tell her she may inform the humans of our presence, but we can’t expose ourselves to help without getting involved in this war.”

The telepath nodded, then returned to his trance.

CPO Stennis was staring out the window when SA Baker approached with the older girl in tow.

“Chief, Nerdanel has something she needs to say to you.”

Stennis looked at the child and sat in a chair to bring himself to the child's eye level.

“My people have ships near the planet,” she began hesitantly. “My uncle had his mind-speaker talk to me.”

Chief Stennis rocked back at the news. Intelligence on the Sylvaran hinted at telepathic abilities. He did not realize it was this powerful. He needed information and help, but he also did not want to frighten the child.

“What did he say?”

She closed her eyes, like a child trying to repeat something correctly so it would not be misunderstood.

“He said their healer said you could use your broad-spectrum antibiotic on my brother,” she repeated. “No more than 10 milliliters every four hours.”

He looked at SA Baker.

“I can adjust a syringe, Chief,” the man assured him. “I’ve taken care of my little brother when he was sick.”

“Do it.”

Baker retrieved the squad’s trauma kit and returned to the bedroom as CPO Stennis turned back toward the child.

“What else did he say?”

“They cannot help without causing problems for our people, but they can keep you informed.”

Chief Stennis nodded. *It makes sense. They can’t come in guns blazing, but they can tip the scale enough for us to have an opportunity to send the kids home.*

Another thought occurred to him. *Any family would want their kids home safely. To send ships... Who are these kids?*

He examined Nerdanel more closely. *Her clothes are in rags, but undamaged cloth like that costs a fortune. They must be royalty. They must be afraid we’ll use them as leverage. The scary part is that some people would.*

The thought made him more than a little queasy.

“Nerdanel, I have children about your age,” CPO Stennis said. “I know your parents must be worried sick. I promise you, we will do everything in our power to send you home.”

The girl looked up at him, her eyes brimming with absolute trust.

“Please go back and help Baker with your brother, and keep your sister calm,” he said.

“One of us will be there if you need us.”

The girl nodded, then returned to her siblings.

Stennis dozed off in the kitchen, then suddenly snapped awake.

“Okay, Chief?” asked PO1 Croft.

Stennis rubbed his eyes, then nodded. “How are we?”

“Everyone is alert,” Croft replied. “No enemy movement. Baker says the kid’s fever is coming down. Sanchez is with them now.” He grinned at his boss. “Sanchez has been singing Spanish lullabies to them. The three of them, along with Baker, are fast asleep.”

Stennis suppressed a laugh, then looked at the floor. “I wish we could call Fleet and get them out of here.”

“The mission comes first, boss,” Croft said. “I wanted to suggest we send runners to Delta and Foxtrot to let them know what’s happening and see what they recommend.”

“We send runners, Jim, and we have half our squad running around where enemy troops can spot them.” Stennis shook his head. “We could compromise the whole mission.”

“We could have the Sylvaran telepath relay Zinthary positions to us,” Croft suggested. “Then we wouldn’t need two runners per destination, just one. They could avoid patrols more easily.”

Chief Petty Officer Stennis considered it for a moment. “I don’t think even their telepaths are perfect. The risk still remains, but...”

“Why don’t we ask before we give up on it?” Croft countered. “They know what’s going on and what they can do better than we can. Let them tell us whether this is worth a shot.”

Nerdanel entered the kitchen, Sanchez in tow.

“Sir, my uncle’s telepath wants me to tell you something.”

Chief Stennis and Petty Officer Croft glanced at each other, then leaned closer until they were level with the girl.

“Yes, Nerdanel?”

“He doesn’t think sending people on foot to communicate is a good idea,” the child said. “My uncle is sending a drone so you can use your communication devices here so the Zinthary can’t hear you.”

“That would certainly be a better solution,” Stennis said slowly.

“If I touch your head,” the child continued, “you can communicate with my uncle. Then he can tell you things I don’t understand.”

Stennis hesitated, uncomfortable with giving an alien direct access to his mind, but he needed a way to fulfill his mission and keep his charges safe.

“Chief?” PO1 Croft shared his concerns.

“If we’re going to coordinate with them, this is the easiest way,” Stennis said. “All right, I’ll take a chance.”

He sat on the floor so that the girl could reach his head more easily. She placed her hands on either side of his head.

Stennis found himself on the bridge of what could only be the Sylvaran flagship. A Sylvaran male stood before him.

“Chief Petty Officer Robert Stennis?” he began. “I am Captain Amras Aegnor of the Sylvaran Imperial Fleet.”

Stennis’s eyes narrowed. “Tell your telepath that I’d normally object to this intrusion, but—”

“But you realize it is necessary,” the captain finished for him. “I know you pieced together who my nieces are and why we are so desperate.”

“I think they are royalty,” Stennis confirmed.

The captain nodded. “There are two princesses and one prince of the Imperial House. And yes, their mother is, as you say, worried sick.”

“I know I would be if they were my kids.”

The captain smiled. “I hope you survive to see your family again. I need you to understand—”

“That, for political reasons, the help you can offer is limited,” the chief said. “Your niece said you have a drone to help us communicate without Zinthary listening posts hearing us.”

Captain Aegnor nodded. “I can’t help you communicate the situation to your fleet, but I can help you communicate locally.”

“That is still useful,” Croft agreed. “In fact, we can communicate with our team commander to figure out how to protect your children and complete our mission.”

“We will monitor the signal and communicate directly with you,” the captain agreed. “This will make explanations simpler.”

Croft laughed. “I wasn’t keen on explaining why I was breaking radio silence.”

“Very well,” the captain said. “I will have my telepath release you so you can get back. I’ll use the drone to communicate with you first, and I’ll step in if your team leader gets worried.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

With a nod from Captain Aegnor, he found himself back in the kitchen.

To say that Commander Hayes was a little distressed was an understatement. He had made his way to the beach house as soon as the message came through.

“This complicates things,” he said as he came through the door. “I don’t know how I’m going to explain to the brass that we’re using a Silvaran drone to communicate locally.”

Chief Stennis shrugged. “Technically, we’re taking advantage of an opportunity.”

Commander Hayes let his shoulders slump. “Before I start complaining, can I have a look at what I’m complaining about?”

CPO Stennis gestured toward the door. PO1 Croft led him to the bedroom where the children slept.

Seaman Jeffery Sanchez and Apprentice Spaceman Baker sat near the bed. The two sisters curled up next to their brother, asleep. The boy looked as if he was out of any immediate danger. Sanchez looked at their boss and nodded.

Stennis saw the commander gazing at the children. They closed the door and went back to the kitchen.

“You do realize you’re going to help me with the paperwork,” Commander Hayes muttered.

Stennis laughed. “The only easy day was yesterday.”

“I’m shifting my command post here.” The commander turned to face him. “That way, someone will be here when you go to complete your mission. With that communication drone the Silvaran are lending us, we will be able to communicate, so we won’t have to rely on timing and luck.”

Stennis nodded.

A few moments later, four more OTTERs arrived, carrying their gear.

“Get some rest,” CDR Hayes said. “You leave in three hours.”

“Yes, sir.”

Stennis returned to the bedroom and woke Baker.

“Your watch,” he told the man in a quiet voice.

SA Baker nodded, put on his gear, and returned to the main living area. Stennis claimed the chair and leaned back. A sudden movement caught his attention. The youngest child, Irimee, woke as if from a nightmare. She looked around, climbed out of bed, and went straight to CPO Stennis. Without a word, she reached out her arms to him, and he lifted her onto his lap. She curled against him and held onto him as if she would be taken away if she let go.

“Safe,” she whispered.

He held her close, and they drifted to sleep together.

Chief Petty Officer Stennis woke to a gentle shake on his shoulder.

“Time, Chief,” PO1 Croft whispered.

Stennis nodded and rose carefully from the chair. He returned the child to her siblings and wrapped the blanket around all three. On impulse, he kissed each of their foreheads.

PO1 Croft smiled at his boss and followed him out of the room.

CDR Hayes looked up from his map. “I don’t need to tell you your mission, Chief.”

“We’ll get it done, sir.”

CDR Hayes nodded, glancing at the room. “We’ll watch over them, Chief.”

Stennis pulled on his helmet and headed out the door.

Chief Stennis led Echo squad toward their target. The Zinthary orbital defense battery watched the stars, waiting for the human fleet to warp into orbit and begin its bombardment ahead of the invasion.

Stennis checked his watch as his fireteams took their positions. He glanced at the surrounding buildings. Sanchez and Baker were now above them, their sniper rifles at the ready. Sanchez signaled they were ready.

He nodded to PO1 Croft. Croft led his fireteam to the compound gate. Their silenced rifles took down two guards, and they were in. However, the Zinthary had noticed. Plasma fire erupted from several directions. Sanchez and Baker kept up a steady stream of fire, taking down Zinthary soldiers as they became threats.

“Echoes 5 and 6, get those charges set up,” Stennis ordered.

A Zinthary soldier fired from above. Echo 6 went down with a cry.

“Baker!” Stennis barked into his comm.

A shot flashed from Baker’s position. A body tumbled from a building across the street.

“Got him, Boss,” Baker called back.

“Move people,” Stennis ordered. “Fleet needs this thing down.”

PO1 Croft seized the explosives Echo 6 had carried. Another OTTER grabbed his injured comrade. As the Zinthary either fell or pulled back, Croft and Echo 5 set the charges.

“Set, Boss,” Croft called.

“Echo squad, pull back to a safe distance.”

Stennis took cover with his team. PO1 Croft took cover beside him, holding the detonator.

“Fire in the hole!”

Croft hit the detonator, and the explosion from the surface-to-air battery shook the entire city.

“Overlord, Echo 1. Target neutralized.”

“One, move to the secondary target. Fleet warping into orbit now. Expect the Expeditionary Force within the hour.”

“Wilco.”

Two hours later, Chief Petty Officer Robert Stennis waved to a Marine officer.

“You’re relieved, Echo.”

Echo squad pulled back from its position, allowing the Marines to assume control.

“Overlord, Echo 1. Marine Expeditionary Force has relieved us,” Stennis called into his comm.

“Good Copy, One,” CDR Hayes replied. “Return to the beach house. I’ll let you explain to the Admiral what’s going on.”

CDR Allan Hayes greeted Echo at the door.

“Sylvaran ships are decloaking.” The commander patted Stennis on the shoulder. “Gave Fleet a bit of a turn. Zinthary are standing down.”

“Is the admiral on the comm?”

The commander shook his head and led them into the living room. To Stennis’ surprise, Admiral Jackson’s secretary was reading to the two princesses. The girls looked up and waved. She was reading Dr. Seuss’ *The Sneeches*. In the bedroom, the admiral held the prince’s hand as the fleet surgeon examined the boy.

“I’d say he’s far enough out of danger that we can wait for their physicians to take over,”

Doctor Adams told the admiral.

“Their equivalent of dropships is heading here now,” the admiral agreed.

“Does that mean I don’t need to be pinched again?” Prince Rumil asked.

“You don’t need to be pinched again,” the doctor promised with a smile.

The young boy looked visibly relieved.

Stennis came to the other side of the bed. “How are you doing, kiddo?”

The prince managed a weak smile. “Still tired.”

The admiral, himself a grandfather, gave the boy’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“You rest now, son,” the admiral said. “You’ll be home before you know it.”

The admiral stood. Chief Stennis could not read the admiral’s expression as the admiral turned to him.

“You and I need to talk.”

“There’s coffee in the kitchen,” CDR Hayes said.

Whoever owned this house had good taste in coffee. With his squad enjoying cups throughout the house, the admiral, the commander, and Stennis sat at the table.

“I know finding the kids added to the complications you faced, Chief,” the admiral began. “I wish you could have told us. Sylvaran warships turning up like they did...”

“OTTERs deal with complicated matters, Admiral,” the commander said.

“Agreed.” Admiral Jackson turned to Stennis. “I’d like your take on this, Chief.”

CPO Stennis started from the beginning. Once finished, they stared into their coffee.

“Interesting,” the admiral commented.

An OTTER from Alpha popped his head through the door. “Sylvaran dropships are landing now, sirs. Also, a Zinthary transport is approaching under a flag of truce.”

The admiral laughed. “The Sylvaran arrival has sparked a diplomatic incident. The Zinthary would like them to negotiate peace between us.”

“I think they’re tired of the war, sir,” Stennis said. “I know I am.”

Captain Amras Aegnor was the first through the door. General Cathar of the Zinthary followed shortly thereafter.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” the Sylvaran said with a slight bow. “I want to get my nieces and my nephew to the ship.”

“More than understandable,” the admiral said. “We’ll save you a cup.”

The Sylvaran smiled and stepped into the living room. They heard squeals of delight from the two princesses.

The Zinthary leader looked bemused.

Admiral Jackson gestured toward an empty seat. “Grab a cup and join us.”

By the time Captain Aegnor returned, holding his nephew, the three humans and the Zinthary general were making awkward small talk over coffee.

The girls raced past, then threw their arms around CPO Stennis.

“Thank you,” Nerdanel whispered. “Thank you for helping us.”

“It was my pleasure,” Stennis replied, his voice hoarse.

He hugged the two children for a moment longer, then let them go. “Behave yourselves.”

They returned to their uncle’s side. With a smile, Captain Aegnor led them out of the house.

“I take it they weren’t part of your mission profile,” the general asked, somewhat bemused.

“No, sir,” Stennis said.

With her children safely home, Empress Kalisana Caranthir invited the humans and Zinthary to Sylvaran Prime for peace talks. It took only a few days to hammer out the peace treaty. Both the humans and the Zinthary seemed relieved that the empress’s force of will was so indomitable. They had an excuse to accept reasonable terms.

The Zinthary ambassador told his government that she had told them in a tone that left no room for argument: “If you’re going to play together, you have to learn to share.”

Weeks later, Echo Squad was sent to Sylvaran Prime.

Chief Petty Officer Robert Stennis and the OTTERs of Echo Squad were led down a crystalline hallway with their families. They wore their dress uniforms. Stennis held the hands of his two daughters. Seven-year-old Emmily looked around with wide eyes, sometimes turning to stare at something beautiful. Five-year-old Jessica huddled close to her father. Petty Officer First Class James Croft carried his two-year-old son while his wife, Samantha, carried the infant born during the battle. Henry Baker earned the rank of Spaceman for his part in the battle. He held the hand of his fiancée.

To Chief Stennis’ surprise, the royal guard captain did not lead them to the throne room but to a garden where a table and benches were set. Empress Kalisana rose from a smaller version of her throne at the head of the table, her children gathered around her.

“Welcome,” she said with a smile. “I thought I would welcome you with royal tea, similar to what humans in England do.”

The Princesses looked expectantly at their mother. She smiled at them and nodded. The girls ran to the OTTERs and greeted them all with fierce hugs. Then they welcomed Emmily and Jessica. The older princess, Nerdanel, took charge of Jessica and helped her into her chair. Emmily and Irimee began to get acquainted and soon were giggling over private jokes.

Rumil stepped forward with quiet dignity.

“Welcome, Chief Petty Officer Stennis.”

“Hello, Rumil,” Stennis replied. “How is the leg?”

The boy smiled. “Better. Thank you. If not for your kindness, I would not be here.”

The empress approached from behind her son, who turned at her approach. “Mother, this is Chief Petty Officer Robert Stennis.”

The boy’s memory was excellent. He introduced each member of Echo Squad, treating them as his personal heroes.

The empress smiled and greeted each in turn. “I am grateful for your kindness, though I understand it is matched by your courage. Come, let us sit while the cooks put the finishing touches on our meal.”

Empress Kalisana seated Chief Stennis on one side of her. Petty Officer Croft’s wife sat on the other side, allowing the empress to hold Samantha’s infant son. The galaxy’s most powerful monarch cradled the child, remembering when her own children were this small.

“You only have your daughters with you, Chief Petty Officer?” the woman asked, bouncing the child in her lap.

“I’m a widower, your majesty,” the chief said. “My parents were watching the girls while I was away.”

The empress’s face softened with sympathy. “That can’t have been easy for any of you.”

“It wasn’t,” Stennis admitted. “The girls tried to be brave, but they are too young to fully understand what was at stake.”

The empress looked at her daughters. Chief Stennis followed her gaze. Nerdanel was teaching Jessica a few Sylvaran phrases. Emmily and Irimee were playing a game among the crystalline flowers.

“You underestimate them, Chief Petty Officer,” the empress told him. “They knew they might lose another parent. They were brave because they were proud of you.”

He felt his heart constrict.

“What will you do with your life now?” the empress asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. For my daughters, I need to get off this Crazy Train. The problem is, I’ve been an OTTER my entire adult life. Maybe I should take a training assignment.”

The queen cocked her head. “Perhaps you would consider a diplomatic post here.”

He shook his head. “I’d make a terrible diplomat. I’m too blunt.”

The empress laughed. “Perhaps a military liaison. My nephew tells me your warriors have a variety of skills that even our best lack. You handle medical emergencies that Imperial Guard medics would find difficult. True, your weapons and tools are obsolete by our standards, but you use them with an effective competence our soldiers have forgotten. Because of our past success, most powers don’t trouble us, but that sword has two edges. It means we are out of practice.”

“Are you asking primitives to teach your soldiers to fight?”

“I’m asking veterans of a real war to prepare my soldiers for a real war,” the queen corrected. “How to put aside the polish and get their hands dirty. To teach them to live the OTTER Motto. ‘The only easy day was yesterday.’”

Chief Stennis turned the idea over in his head. It was a new adventure.