

One's Aspect To The Sun

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Chapter One

Welcomes Warm and Cold

“Luta, we're about an hour from Earth. It looks good if the Captain's on the bridge when we dock.” Rei's cheerful voice woke me over the *Tane Ikai's* comm circuit. The dream faded slowly, fragments lingering in my mind like wisps of nebulae. It's always the same dream, when we near a planet.

I'm fourteen again, and I sprint through the crowded corridor of a space station, trying to keep my mother in sight, glimpses of her auburn hair taunting me. A press of people separates us. She doesn't slow, doesn't turn to look. I don't know if she knows I'm following her. Outside the station I catch glimpses of a ringed planet and the numinous dark shadow of a wormhole entrance.

Finally the crowd thins and I see her at a docking ring, waiting to board the ship. I call out, but no sound emerges. She turns and sees me, smiles sadly and shakes her head, lifting one slender hand in farewell. My chest tightens and I fight back tears. I don't want anyone to see me cry. She moves through the docking ring seconds before my leaden feet reach it. But there's no ship beyond. Only yawning, empty space, black vacuum starred with cold fairy lights. My mother is gone . . .

I fumbled a finger onto the ID biochip implant in my forearm to let Rei know I was awake and rolled onto my back. The ship's main drive throbbed like a giant heartbeat, pushing us closer to Earth, and my own pulse echoed the cadence. Outside the viewport above me, the pattern of stars was beginning to take on the familiarity of home. Earth

always triggered the dream. Probably because it was the last place my childhood family had lived in peace.

Finally I swung my legs over the side of the berth and hauled myself up. After all these years I still don't sleep as well in space as I do planetside, but when you're the captain of a merchant far trader you learn to cope.

I slipped into jeans and a clean white t-shirt, splashed cool water on my face and dusted on makeup. I ran a brush through my hair, glanced at my reflection. I'd long ago perfected the skill of checking the presentability of hair, face and clothes without noticing all those little things I didn't want to see, the uncomfortable reminders that I didn't look a day over thirty.

Which would have been fine if I weren't due to turn eighty-five on my next birthday. Which still would have been fine if there were any logical, scientific explanation for my youthfulness. Hell, I'd even take an illogical, unscientific one, but there was no explanation. I was an anomaly, an aberration—a freak, for lack of a better word—but I tried not to dwell on it.

Datapad in hand, I left my cabin. Voices sounded from the galley off to the left, and the smell of freshly brewed caff wafted enticingly down the corridor, but I turned right instead, my footsteps echoing on the metal decking. Rei dam-Rowan, my pilot, turned in her skimchair to smile at me when I emerged into the bright lights of the bridge. Rei was the only one of my crew who knew my true age. There's something about Rei that invites confidences, and assures that they'll be kept. She's twenty-nine, looks twenty by way of good genes and better attitude, and we've been friends for the five years she's been part of my crew.

“Earth ETA twenty minutes, Captain,” she said, then added with a grin, “How was your beauty sleep?”

I pulled a face at her. “Didn't need beauty sleep any more than you do. Everybody have something to do when we arrive?”

Rei nodded, her chestnut hair dark in the yellow-tinged light from the High Pressure Sodium overheads. “Viss says if we're going to be here more than a day he wants to clean out the plasma intakes, and he's planning to pick up a new thruster filter while we're Earthside. Yuskeya's downloading the star charts you requested and the datapoints for six new

wormholes. Baden says after he sees the cargo unloaded safely he has a meeting with an old friend, if you don't need him for anything else." She rolled her golden eyes. "So it's either a woman or someone who owes him money."

"And what about you?" I settled myself in the command chair and punched up the incoming correspondence on my datapad. The servos kicked in and adjusted the chair for me.

"Easy," said Rei. She yawned delicately, the darkly beautiful tattoo-like markings around her eyes elongating like rivers of spilled ink across her clear, pale skin. All the women from Eri wore *pridattii*. I knew they weren't permanent, but I'd never seen Rei without hers. "I'm getting a facial and a manicure, and maybe—no, definitely—a massage."

I shook my head. "All work and no play, Rei. You should try to relax a little."

She stuck her tongue out at me and we both laughed, but my smile dissolved into a frown when a message from PrimeCorp displayed. They must have had it in the queue, triggered to send the instant my ship entered Earthspace, and with PrimeCorp, it was never good news.

*Received: from [205152.59.68] PrimeCorp Main Division
STATIC ELECTRONIC MESSAGE: 25.7*

*Encryption: securetext/novis/noaud
Receipt notification: enabled
From: "Chairman Alin Sedmamin" <chair.primecorp*web>
To: "Luta Paixon" <ID 59836254471>
Date: Sat, 2 Nov 2284 17:57:29 -0500*

Captain Paixon,

We would appreciate your finding some time during your stay on Earth to meet with one of our representatives for an exchange of information. Thank you for your time and consideration.

*Chairman Alin Sedmamin
Per Beli Elaoudoka*

I sighed. Nothing new there. I'd only done the meeting-up

thing once or twice, in the hope that they might actually offer some news of my mother. I'd given up in disgust after that. All they wanted was to pump me for information I didn't have, and get my permission to poke around inside my genes for anything that might belong to them, which I wouldn't give. Since the Genetic Materials Privacy Act came into being about a hundred years ago they couldn't force me, but I'd made my refusals politely—when I could. You never knew when they might have something I wanted. I wasn't sure I liked the notion that they were keeping a watch out for me, though.

Rei mistook my expression, or the reason for it, because she lowered her voice and asked, "Are you going to see Hirin right away?"

I nodded, carefully not looking up from my screen when my heart lurched at his name. "It's been two months. He'll be getting anxious. And I picked up some herbal supplements on Vileyra that might help him some."

Rei was silent for a moment, then said, "Luta, don't you worry that sometime you'll come back and Hirin will be . . ."

"Dead?" I finished for her when her voice trailed off. "Of course I do. But we both agreed that this was the only way. I can't keep him in the best care unless I take the big-paying jobs, and those are all multi-skip runs. This is the practical solution."

"You miss him, though. It must be hard."

"I miss—I miss how we used to be. I don't know if I miss being around him all the time now. It's not easy."

She nodded and turned back to the pilot's screen, and I tried to bury myself in tenders for our next job.

Hirin is my husband. He's ninety-two. Unfortunately and unlike me, he's not an anomaly, an aberration, or a freak. He lives in an elderly care facility, and he looks and feels every day of those ninety-two years. With Vigor-Us treatments, even ninety-two isn't extremely old, but a virus Hirin picked up fifteen years ago left him damaged in ways that even the rejuv couldn't ameliorate much.

The rest of my crew had met Hirin, but they didn't know he was my husband. They thought he was some elderly relative for whom I had a soft spot. It was true enough. They'd also never met my children—didn't even know about them, in fact. Looking fifty years younger than my

chronological age isn't something I flaunt. Too many uncomfortable questions for which I don't have the answers. Moreover, there's always the lurking presence of PrimeCorp, which would be a good reason to keep to the shadows all by itself.

More footsteps sounded in the corridor behind us and a soft voice said, "*Bonan matenon*, Captain."

I glanced up with a smile as Yuskeya Blue slid into her seat at the navigation station and set a steaming cup down within easy reach. Yuskeya was the tallest woman I'd ever met, topping even Rei by a couple of inches, and she had the striking features and ebony hair of her American Indian ancestors. Her home planet was Quma, which a huge collection of Earth's aboriginal people had colonized for themselves about a century ago. Yuskeya was quiet, dignified, an excellent navigator and a competent medic, with a dry sense of humour and a taste for heavily spiced chai. She'd been part of my crew for over a year, but that was just about all I knew about her. I had a notion that on occasional nights she shared a cabin with Viss Feron, my engineer, but I wasn't certain and didn't know if I wanted to be. Everyone's entitled to their secrets.

"Good morning! I hear you're getting some new wormhole datapoints when we dock."

"That's right. Rumour says one of them might cut weeks off the trip between MI 2 Eridani and Beta Comae Berenices."

I raised my eyebrows. "Let me know what you get, then. It might influence what job we take next."

"Will do." Yuskeya nodded and began checking the nav computations for our arrival Earthside.

I opened a batch of new job postings and ran my eye down the list. None of them looked terribly promising, most looking for carriage to systems at least three wormhole skips away, but I stopped short of deleting any until I had the reports on Yuskeya's new wormholes. Any planet in any system could get a whole lot closer if an advantageous wormhole were discovered.

"Beta Comae?" a voice boomed suddenly right behind me. "We don't want to go to Beta Comae, do we?"

Baden Methyr was an outstanding communications officer, but his practical jokes were usually the juvenile kind.

I was glad I hadn't jumped. He'd managed to sneak up behind me silently and look over my shoulder at the screen.

"We might," I said mildly. "Some reason you don't want to visit Jertenda, Baden? A woman with a grudge, perhaps?"

"A grudge and a plasma rifle, maybe?" Rei suggested sweetly. "Wouldn't be the only planet in Nearspace, would it?"

"Ladies, you wound me," he said, placing a hand theatrically over his heart and sliding into the comm station skimchair. He set down the mug he was carrying and docked the thumb-sized communications module into the implant on his left forearm. "Shall we let Earth know we're almost there?"

"Go ahead." I nodded. "And find out where they want to berth us."

"Do you want Central Mass for the cargo?" Baden asked. "Or somewhere else first?"

"Take Central Mass if we can get it. I'm going to visit Hirin, but I can take a flitter up to Nova Scotia. Judging by the number of job proposals on this list I'd say it's a busy time, so we'll have to go where they send us. If we can't get reasonably close to Boston, I'll hire out the delivery."

"See what I can do." He ran a hand through his cocoa-coloured hair and was all business suddenly, although I knew he would turn on the sweet talk if the situation warranted it. He'd just see who he got on the other end of the communications Wave Augmented Visual Emmission at Berthing Administration first.

"Where's Viss?" I asked. He should have been down in Engineering by now, but he hadn't reported in.

"Encrypted message came in for him," said Baden, putting a finger over the tiny mic on the comm module he was using to talk to Berthing. "He took it down in Engineering. I expect he'll be calling up any minute. And there's a live incoming for you via WaVE, Captain. Karro Paixon, Sagan Space Station."

"I'll take it in my quarters. That's my uncle," I lied easily.

Baden nodded, his fingers skimming the touchscreen as he transferred the feed. He turned his attention back to Berthing with a wide grin. "Well, hello again, *karulino*."

I rolled my eyes. If he was flirting with her, it looked good for a berth wherever we wanted it. Baden has a certain touch.

I didn't run down the corridor to my quarters, but I

hurried. "Karro?"

His face grinned at me from the screen. "All secure?"

I nodded.

"Great. Hi, Mom. Thought I'd tell you where I am, since you're passing through."

"Hello, *filo*. How'd you know I was here?" He looked good, happy. A little more grey at the temples, a few more wrinkles around the eyes. Whatever the secret of my longevity was, it hadn't found a way past the placental barrier and into my children.

He chuckled. "You're a hard woman to catch up with. I always leave a standing request at the station comm to notify me if the *Tane Ikai* passes heading Earthside. You look great."

"Thanks. How's everybody?"

"Aliande's here with me this time, just for a change of scenery. She's not going crazy yet, inside what she calls 'this metal cave,' but we're here for another month. Joash and Klaire are Earthside. We're all well."

Surely he'd have told me any bad news by now, but my chest felt tight as I asked, "And your father?"

Karro shrugged and shook his head, a frown threatening to overtake his features. "I don't know, Mom, he's up and down. Maja's trying to get him to try some new treatments but he seems . . . I don't know . . . too tired to be bothered."

I nodded. "I've got some medicine for him, from Vileyra. Maybe he'll try that."

"Are you going to see Maja?"

"Probably."

"Good luck," Karro said, his grin returning. He knew how well Maja and I usually got along. Or didn't.

"Oh, don't be mean. Your sister's just—"

"I know, I know. She's just Maja. I guess my time's about up. Will you be stopping at the station?"

"Don't know yet. It depends on what jobs come up. I'll be in touch, though."

"Okay. Give my love to Dad when you see him. Love you, Mom." He blew me a kiss, and I saw age spots on his hand that I hadn't noticed before.

"I love you, too, Karro. I'll try to see you soon. Love to Aliande." His face faded as the WaVE ended.

"*Kapitano?*" Viss Feron's gravelly voice emerged from the

ship's comm.

“How's everything down there, Viss?” I asked.

“Clear sailing. Tell Rei the ship's ready to bring us in. Any idea how long we'll be in port this time?”

I knew he was itching to start tearing things apart, just so he could put them back together. “Not yet, Viss. I'll have a schedule soon. We won't leave 'til you get that new filter in place.”

“I'd like to clean the plasma intakes, Captain. A day is all I'd need.”

“Noted. I'll keep you up-to-date.”

I switched the view on my screen to mirror the bridge view, and Earth floated before us, more beautiful, in my opinion, than any other planet in Nearspace. Humans have colonized enough planets to call many places home, but Earth is the one I love. I sat back in my desk chair and let the servos massage my back for a minute while I took in the vista of the slowly-spinning planet. We were home again, with a hold full of top-notch cargo and plenty of job offers on the board, the *Tane Ikai* was in fine shape, and my crew was still managing to get along. My family was well. Life was good.

The feeling lasted almost a full minute before a familiar knot of sick apprehension twisted in my stomach. How was Hirin, really? Would I have a fight with my daughter this time around, or would we just ignore each other? I was never sure which was worse. And would PrimeCorp back off or keep hounding me if I left their message unanswered?

Then there was the big question, the one that raised its head every time a planet, Earth or any other, shimmered to life on the viewscreen. Could my mother be here? Alive? She'd be getting close to a hundred and thirty years old, the average lifespan for humans these days, and she'd been on the run from PrimeCorp for decades. Every day I felt my chances of finding her dwindling.

I glanced down at my unlined hands resting on the datapad. Maybe I'd never understand why, but if I could find her, she might have some answers. That was the driving force that had kept me plying the vastness of Nearspace for over fifty years. As long as I thought she was out there, I'd keep looking.