

Alford -- 2

Ghost: Shadowed Vale

Chapter 1

Lionel D. Alford, Jr.
1704 N. Cypress
Wichita, KS 67206
(316) 636-9514
pilotlion@aol.com

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by
L. D. Alford

Athelstan Cying

In 12,496 ATA (Ancient Terran Accounting), the Twilight Lamb, a Family Trader Vessel, detected a derelict Imperial courier ship, the Athelstan Cying along its flight path. The spaceship was over two thousand years old. Its status was due to a misjump, and its crew had long ago turned to dust. What the Twilight Lamb's crew did not know was the ship once held escapees from an ancient Rep prison camp. They were all psyonic masters, bred for telepathic skills, and all members of the House Imperial.

On board the Athelstan Cying, the spirit and intellect of one of the crew was incredibly still alive. He was bodiless, but conscious and aware. When the Twilight Lamb approached the Athelstan Cying, the spirit prevented its destruction by disabling weapons secreted on the ship, and when the salvage crew came on board, he tried to protect them.

Den Protania, apprenticed in shuttles, was one of the members of the salvage team. Den was angry and disillusioned about his life among the families aboard the Twilight Lamb. He was the captain's only son. And he was already a self-made failure in astronavigation and command. Den's father, Mikal Protania had apprenticed him in command as soon as he finished his primary

With the rising waves of heat, the distant horizon near the center appeared absolutely flat. At the edges, the curvature of the planet twisted the lines to the extremes, and drove them downwards to form an obvious ellipse. In the thin clear air of Acier, there was little distortion. The planet, Acier, was slightly smaller than terra normal, and the light of Acier's white primary star blasted over the light sands and turned the landscape into a sheet of sparkling brilliance.

Across the bright desert a small gravvehicle moved at incredible speed. A rooster tail of sand and dust shot a hundred meters into the air behind it, and the boundary layer around the vehicle shimmered near supersonic as the air friction shifted slightly with the gravvehicle's motion. The vehicle moved with exact and careful precision. It seemed to dance along the sands at the edge of control, but never out of control. Inside the vehicle sat a man and a woman: Den and Natana Protania.

Den flipped off his Combat Environment Suit's visual sensors. He glanced at Natana in the driver's seat. A slight hum leaked from between her lips. She managed the vehicle with cat-like reflexes. Her mind took in a million bits of information every second and computed it. She turned it into precise movements of the controls. No one in the universe could think of driving this kind of vehicle at this speed across the sands of Acier, but Natana could. She could have

conversed with Den at the same time and run a few other advanced computations through her brain. Den knew that, but he didn't want to risk a break in her concentration. His was really an irrational view, but he didn't want to risk her life or his. He was too invested in her—he loved her too dearly. She was just always like this. She lived her life at the edge—always on the edge. Den hoped to be her governor—like the governor on a generator or a nuclear reactor to keep it from running out of control. Never her overseer. Perhaps her leader. Natana might like that. She was a fantastic First Officer for the Family Trader Vessel, Regia Anglorum, and he was the Captain.

Den knew Natana could have told him which of the brighter stars right at the horizon were the Regia Anglorum, their ship, but he didn't want to bother her—not now. He gazed longingly at her; Natana was incredibly beautiful to him. Her face was warm with a slightly sylphish look. Others, less kind, might have called her appearance foxy, but there was nothing sneaky about Natana. Her hair was short. Shorter than Den was used to in a woman, but on her, the style looked wonderful. It fit her perfectly. She constantly and perversely battled her hair to keep it out of her eyes and face. That was a habit she couldn't indulge in right now. At this speed, she couldn't remove her hands from the controls for even a single instant: the gravvehicle's autopilot and safety systems would not have been able to stabilize it at this speed and under these conditions.

Inside Natana's brain was embedded an experimental symbiotic computer chip. It integrated wholly in her mind and turned her into the perhaps most powerful human computing device in the galaxy. Few knew about Natana's electronic enhancement—the result of an illegal and uninvited experiment. But her capability came in handy. Specifically, in this risky and

breakneck flight across the Acierian desert—but, that was just her personality. In her work as the Chief Master Astrogator of a Family Trading Vessel, her skills were irreplaceable.

Den himself was the Command Master, the Captain of the same vessel. They were the command pair and shouldn't have technically been alone together on the surface of Acier. Not that they shouldn't have been together, they were married after all, but both members of the command pair were never supposed to be at risk at the same time. That was the policy of the Family Trader Cooperative and the policy of their ship. Den, as the captain did use his command prerogative to accomplish what he and Natana needed.

Right now, they were searching for a long lost psyonic facility on the surface of Acier. They had discovered it through contacts with a psy community they found here on the planet. They knew the coordinates of the facility, but Den was certain the place would be difficult to find. They were lucky to be able to get down again to the surface so soon. Den had to pull some real strings with the ship's council. He and Natana were supposed to be recovering their gravvehicle—this gravvehicle. They did recover it; they just didn't tell the ship's council they planned to take it out on an extended trip across the planet. Den was certain this little side trip would achieve them a censure from the council. As though that really meant something—the council would just dock their pay. That was okay, they didn't need anything right now anyway. A censure would be embarrassing to the council and to them, but Den and Natana needed to make this side excursion. It was critical to their ship, the Family Trader Cooperative, and ultimately, the Confederation of Human Space. Natana and Den just couldn't tell anyone about what they were doing—not yet.

Den glanced down at his tablet computer, “We only have a few kilometers to go.”

“Yeah, I'm calculating it now.”

“Are you picking up the global positioning constellation?”

“No silly. I don’t have any antenna.” She tossed her head, “I’m making star and shadow line predictions based on celestial observation.”

“Oh, right.”

She hummed a little more, “By the way. We are close, but my calculations put the facility a little further to the left.”

Den nodded. He flipped down the telescopic viewer in his headset. “I can’t see the facility. The global positioning system shows you are headed to the left of it. It’s supposed to be on the horizon at about four kilometers.”

The gravvehicle slowed quickly and threw him forward against his harness. Natana turned them at an angle away from their target. She didn’t take her eyes off the controls or the terrain, “Any bads?”

“Continue around the facility, and I’ll take a long look. Spiral in toward it.”

“Roger!” Natana started a spiral with the center the coordinates she had calculated. “You know Den, I’m starting to break out the facility now. It’s a block house standing right out in the desert.”

Den glanced at her, then out toward the desert, “Nata, I can’t see it, and I’m using electronic enhancement.”

“Why not, Den? It’s less than a half klick away.”

“Can’t see it.”

Natana started to slow the vehicle. Then she dared take her eyes for a moment off the ground ahead and stared at him.

“Keep your eyes on it, Nata. When you get a chance, send me the offset, and I’ll use that to guide my suit coordinates.”

“Roger. I’ll stop the gravvehicle about a hundred meters away.” Natana slowed the gravvehicle. She stopped it right in front of a permacrete blockhouse that stuck up out of the desert sands.

“Nata, I still can’t see it.”

Natana reached out mentally to him and sent Den a feed directly from her sight.

Den shook his head, “I have your visual, but I just can’t make it out.”

Natana stared at the structure, “What do you think is causing this?”

“No idea. Visual distorter, maybe, but why would it affect me and not you?”

“Great question.”

“Grab your gear and buckle up your suit. I don’t see any reason to sit here anymore.”

The moment they opened the gravvehicle doors, their combat environment suit cooling kicked in. It felt great for a moment, but it wasn’t enough to really keep them cool for long. Den and Natana began to sweat inside the suits, and that provided the bulk of the real cooling. The suits automatically collected perspiration and urine to recycle for drinking. Natana wrinkled her nose and remarked, “I’m hot and thirsty already, but I’m not ready to drink that...” She touched a stud on her suit and blended instantly with the sand.

Den followed her lead. They communicated entirely by thought now. Natana stepped warily toward the blockhouse, and Den came right beside her. They moved forward through the repulsor field that surrounded the blockhouse and took up a position of protection. The hairs on the back of Den’s neck rose when he crossed the field. That was harmless. Natana continued toward the structure. They both held drawn weapons—automatic pistols. When they arrived at

the door of the blockhouse, Natana examined it carefully and tried to open it using the emergency release. She complained, 'It won't budge.'

Den watched the shimmering building through Natana's eyes, 'Your's, Nata. I still can't see it myself.'

'I'm going to connect to the system.' Natana plugged the connection from her computer into the slot. 'I'm plugged in....' She raised her hand, 'I know what you're thinking, but no funny business. Not til later.'

Natana tapped the tablet and then brought out her portable keyboard. She typed furiously on it for a moment, 'Distortor field on the facility. It's keyed to psy. Looks like my profile was once cleared into this one....'

'How could that be?'

Natana shook her head, 'This is ancient history, dear. How would I know? It's your history not mine.'

'Yeah, mine.'

'My profile is keyed without a name.'

Suddenly before Den's eyes the whole place came into sight. He sighed, 'I see it now.'

The door clicked open, and the lights inside flashed on.

Den pushed his way inside. Natana unplugged and followed behind him. She let her tablet hang from her wrist and pulled out her pistol. They climbed down a thin staircase and entered a long wide chamber. There were no decorations. The entire place was empty and bare. The dust of ages covered everything. Natana pushed close to Den, 'The reactors are still running, but they are low on fuel. The systems long ago went to minimal power. All the cleaning systems are off.'

‘What about basic survival?’

‘All on. Lights, ventilation, conditioning, security.’

‘Anything we need to worry about?’

‘Yeah, there are multiple security layers many of them based on psy. They were worried about keeping people out and in... and I don’t think we should use the elevators.’

‘Why not?’

‘They are all psy protected and sealed. If we get locked in one, we might not be able to get out again. This place has massive security.’

‘Anything else on this level?’

Natana shook her head.

Den detected her negative response mentally and smiled, ‘Next level down.’

They headed for the stairway. Natana opened the locks and they made their way cautiously downward. Natana’s pistol moved back and forth, ‘I don’t feel anything. I don’t think there is anything alive in here.’

‘Nothing alive, but there is a lot of heavy psy here. I can feel it.’

‘I can feel it too. It’s very powerful. It’s the last level of the security system. If we cut it off, the survival systems go too. They really didn’t want these people to get out of here—not alive. Do you know who they kept in here, Den?’

‘Yeah. Uncontrollable psyonics, those and the psy the Empire wanted to keep out of circulation.’

‘Why Mara?’

Den didn’t say anything.

Natana touched him, ‘Sorry...’

‘That’s okay. There was no reason.’

‘No reason,’ repeated Natana.

They entered the next level and found a long corridor bound by offices, a mess hall, clinic, and other administrative rooms. All the chambers were empty and untouched. They climbed down the stairs to the next level. Here Natana had to cut the psy cover. They found a level filled with individual cells and security. Natana slunk behind Den, ‘This was the least level of security. I can find nothing but cells here.’

‘The technology of the psy blankers and control mechanisms will be important, but I don’t see anything of use here either. Next level...’

They headed down the stairs. Natana cut the psy blankers to the next level and opened the locks. The stairs here had an additional layer of plasteel doors all palm and laser key locked. Natana had to work a while to get them opened. They found half the number of cells on this level as the previous. They were all psy blanked and had short foyers with plasteel doors sealing each of them. They found nothing of interest here either.

Natana and Den climbed down to the next and lowest level. The stairs here unusually traveled down two flights and missed an entire story. The facility diagrams Natana loaded from the computers showed a significant layer of equipment and systems between the floors.

On this lowest level, as expected, they found the highest level of security and psy protection. Natana struggled for a while to cut through it. She was finally able to override the main defenses on the floor. They discovered five cells each designed like a small prison in itself. Natana moved unerringly to the last door at the end of the corridor, ‘This was hers. This is where they kept her.’

The door from the corridor entered through two heavy plasteel doors in sequence to a guard room with an observation window to a cell. Natana had to break through the doors individually into the guard room. The entry to the cells required a double logon. She cracked the psy defense, the blockers, and the doors and alarms. She touched Den, ‘Den, there are gas and plasma weapons trained on the cells and the cell entrance.’

‘Knockout gas?’

‘No,’ she swallowed thickly, ‘Nerve gas.’ She tapped for a moment on her keyboard, ‘I have all the information on those who were confined here. Finally broke in...’ She took a deep breath, ‘The system confirms; Mara was in this cell. But how did I know...?’

They entered the very high security chamber. The walls were smooth permacrete. The corners and seams were filled with electronic observation equipment and single shot plasma cannon. Ceriplast covered the junction of the walls, floor, and ceiling in a jointless clear ridge. In the corner were a toilet and a sink. They were both sealed into the permacrete. A hole in the wall above the sink provided an intermittent flow of water. The toilet was a dry system and contained no water. It flushed randomly. The facilities were all automatic. A lip of clear ceriplast formed a bunk and bench. Cameras and plasma weapons aimed through the underside of the lip upward.

Natana gazed around, ‘No privacy. No true seclusion. Complete isolation without any solitude.’ Her eyes took on a peculiar gaze. They glazed over, and without any other warning, Natana slumped to the floor.

Den fell into a defensive crouch. He put his arm around Natana. An electric shock traced through his body. His mind disconnected from reality and from his body. He touched Natana’s mind and suddenly everything was a whirl...

She lay in her own vomit. The moment she twitched, the sensors, cameras, and weapons in the cell whirred and moved and pointed at her. She heard them and saw them without opening her eyes. She remembered pain in her body and felt it piercing, burning. Pain in places she had never allowed intimacy. The pain was still there, and it wouldn't go away. Her face felt swollen and her cheek stung. She remembered blows. She wouldn't follow their instructions. They put a blanker on her head and tied her and used her. The thought was horrible. She heaved again and brought up bile. Her clothing was a simple loose shirt and pants. Blood stained the pants and her shirt.

She raised herself up and shakily came to her feet. She stumbled painfully to the washbasin. She let down her pants and tried to keep her body covered from surveillance as much as possible. She didn't want to attract that kind of attention ever again. She didn't want to excite the lust of her captors again. Now she knew there was no protection from them. No one here would keep her safe.

She washed herself the best she could while still trying to hide her body. The cameras gave her no privacy. She heard them as they moved and aimed and gazed at her through the heavy ceriplast. She knew now the scrutiny was more than security. She pulled her clothing back over her body and went to the hard lip that was a bunk. She lay down and closed her eyes. She let her mind reach out. She felt the edges of the room. Blankers covered every portion of the cell. She pushed up her power and an alarm went off. She felt an electric jolt. That was a simple warning. They allowed her a tiny bit of psy, but didn't want her to extend her power too far. She wondered what would happen if she pushed her power up a little. She did. The alarm went off, and the electricity crackled directly through her body—the shock was a little greater.

She rolled off the bunk into a crouch then stood in the center of the cell. She stretched out her power. She drew it around her. She let it reach out. She felt it fill every corner of the chamber. In the background, she heard the alarm sound in a continuous shriek. She felt jolts coursing through her body. She cut out the electrical shocks and exulted in that. Still she cringed. What would be the next level of punishment?

A laser burned her leg. It made a slight cut that sealed itself immediately. She knew what to do now. She interfered with the detection circuits. The lasers continued to fire, but not at her. She didn't think they would use deadly force—not now, not yet. She pressed the defenses of the cell. The cameras all held her in their gaze. She turned to face the door. It burst open and two women guards ran in. They wore blankers and held electric shock prods.

The first woman brought the prod down on her shoulders. The shock went through her body. The other one copied her. Mara didn't touch them. She blocked them. She reached out toward them. She reached beyond their blankers, and they both came to ridged attention. They didn't move—couldn't move. The lasers stopped. They couldn't hit her without striking the guards.

Mara stretched her power to the limits of the door. She pressed outward and felt another layer of blankers that covered the cell. She felt the extent of the mental pressure. That pressed her down. She knew she couldn't defeat the system—not yet, not now. She couldn't defeat it yet. She knew the next level of punishment was 'maim.' She didn't want to be maimed. That's when she allowed herself to speak. She turned her serene face toward the higher ranking guard, "I could kill you now. I won't. This time. If they touch me again in here. I will kill the next person who enters my cell. Do you understand me?" The threat in her tone was unmistakable.

The woman nodded fearfully. She trembled, and Mara released them both at once. They both turned and ran, and Mara pulled back her power. She waited until the lasers turned off and

until the psy force reduced. She slowly pulled her power back. The electric shocks decreased. She stopped blocking them. They were gone. The alarm halted. Mara filled her lungs with a deep breath. She glared at the surveillance devices. She curled her lip at them and stepped grandly back to the ceriplast bunk. She lay down on it and covered her head with the collar of the long shirt. She made sure her body was entirely covered.

Just before she fell into sleep, she allowed herself to think of him. She wondered if he thought of her. She wondered if she would ever see him again. She was only sixteen standard. He won't think of her—she knew. She had been at his side before they brought her here. That was an accident, but she had helped him and protected him. She had given him her power, and she had touched his mind. She loved his mind. She loved him before she met him. Everyone knew who he was. She had been with him. She had been there before they brought her here—to this hell hole. She wished she was in his arms. She wished he was the first to touch her body that way. She wished she weren't here at all. She wondered if they would ever let her out of this place. ...but she allowed herself to think of him, and with a smile, fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Den held Natana in his arms. She raised her eyes to his as though she were rising out of sleep. He whispered, "Nata. Nata. Are you all right?"

"Nata?" she touched his face. "Who are you? She reached into his thoughts. She pressed her way into his mind and smiled, "Hello, Fredrick. I missed you all these many years. I wished you hadn't seen this. I never let you before."

Den pulled her closer and rolled her face into his chest, "I know."

"You never really realized I was that girl—did you?"

“I knew it Mara. I just couldn’t let myself think about it. You experienced so much pain because of me.”

“...and with you, so much pleasure, Fredrick. You love her—don’t you?”

“Yes. She loves you too, Mara.”

“I know. She is a part of me, and I am part of her.”

Den held her closer, “How can this be?”

“I don’t know, but I do love her, and I love you. This has been allowed.” She pressed herself back and stared in his eyes, “Remember this. We had a purpose and failed—I failed you. You have been given a second chance, Fredrick. And in some ways, it appears I have too.”

“You never failed, Mara. You never failed me.”

“I couldn’t even give you my virgin body.”

“That doesn’t mean anything to me, Mara.”

A sob caught in her voice, “At one time, it meant something very important to me, Fredrick.”

“Yeah, I know, Mara.”

“She could give you that, Fredrick. She gave you to me too.”

“I know.”

“I will go now, Fredrick. I must.”

Den’s voice was thick, “I know.”

“She let me out. She loves you that much.”

“I know, Mara.”

Suddenly Natana’s eyes changed. They turned from the hard strange look that was always Mara’s to a gentle strength that was Natana’s. She smiled, “Mara was here.”

Den pulled her to his chest, “I know.”

“There’s nothing we need here, Den.”

“Yeah, there was. Mara wanted to speak to both of us.”

She stared at him, “Yeah, she did. She’s always with me.”

“How long, Nata?”

“I...I don’t know, Den. I lived her so long in your memories that she became a part of me. I think she is a part of me like I am a part of you.”

Den held her for a few moments more then he lifted her and all her gear in a single movement. She smiled at him, ‘Den, you really are strong.’

‘Let’s get out of here.’

Natana backed them out of the facility. She set all the security back in place and sealed all the doors. At the blockhouse, Natana turned toward Den, ‘I wish I could seal this place away forever.’

Den gave her a look.

‘They treated her like that. No one should be treated like that. How did she ever escape?’

Den took Natana’s hand and led her back to their gravvehicle. He coded it open and let her in the driver’s side. He sat in the passenger seat. The seat adjusted to him. The heat was still high inside the gravvehicle until Natana sealed the doors and the environmental system came on. Natana touched the controls. She lifted the gravvehicle to the optimum height for the gravity of Acier, and moved the vehicle in a wide arch, then shot them away from the place. Den turned his face to her. He watched her profile for a while then leaned toward her. He didn’t stop speaking directly to her thoughts, ‘Nata, the Reps took Mara out of this prison. They brought her to Arienth. For a while, she thought she was going to a place of greater freedom. Any hope of that was quickly dashed. The Reps wanted to know about psy training techniques. Mara was

trained but she didn't know anything about Imperial training. She was the most powerful psy of my time. The Reps tortured her mercilessly. They abused her until the day we escaped from their prison. They gave her the scar on her face and the scars on her back. Imperial torture was more subtle. It didn't mark her body as much, but it affected her mind. They couldn't break her. No one could break her, Nata. She was much like you.'

'Why did the Imperials put her in there?'

'They had to. They had to keep us separated. You saw what happened when we were tested at the training facility. We together could have overborne anything, any psy, any biological psy, any mechanical psy. The Emperor couldn't allow that. Married couples in the Empire were matched as a result of political and military prowess. The man brought political connections and military power. The woman provided strategic and political influence. The alignment of Mara and me would have threatened the Empire in more than one way. It might have led to a revitalization of Imperial power and influence. The problem was that many nobles would have lost power and prestige. We together were dangerous to them. They chose to let me continue in training because I was weaker and stupider and easier to control.'

'Yet you became an important and powerful leader.'

Den stared at her, 'Nothing like I could have become with Mara by my side. Because of that, I will never let you get too far from me, Nata.'

'You better not. I won't let you.' She scowled at him. The gravvehicle slowed suddenly and came to a halt.

Den gave her a warning look, 'What's wrong, Nata.'

'You know what's wrong. You're broadcasting that, and I can't stand it, Den Protania.'

Natana leapt out of the driver's seat and across the wide center pedestal. She landed on him and

put her lips on his. Her hands reached for the seams of his CES. Den wasn't sure how they both removed enough clothing in the confined seats of the gravvehicle, but eventually they ended up in the back seat. There was a lot more room. Natana's eyes were wild and filled with excitement. Den was certain he saw flashes of Mara in Natana's actions and glance. After a long time, Natana finally let him up. She helped him dress and dressed herself. She took her place back at the controls. When Den was seated and belted in, Natana threw the power up to full and sent a rooster tail and a big donut across the sands. She headed directly for their rendezvous point at the spaceport.

Finally Den stared at her, 'What was that all about, Nata?'

She laughed and almost skidded the gravvehicle, 'Don't you know silly?'

Den shrugged.

'Mara had a crush on you from the very beginning. She longed to give you her body, but she couldn't. She spent years in that place with only the thought of you to console her. What do you think her reaction would be to finally being free, unfettered, and right beside you?'

'But you're Nata.'

Natana smiled a strange smile.

'Don't scare me, Nata.'

'We both love you Den. Mara is long dead, but so is Fredrick-Keris.' She gave him a look of longing that was as powerful as the desire she spent on his body, 'All that time of longing is still pent up in that younger Mara. You'll just have to put up with us, Den.' She chuckled, 'I will give Mara everything she wants, Den, and I mean everything.'

'What does that mean exactly, Nata?'

Nata didn't say anything. She didn't slow the gravvehicle down this time until the spaceport at the city of Dust came into sight. Their electronic security pass let them onto the spaceport tarmac. They headed toward the Regia Anglorum's heavy lifting shuttle at the far end of the ceriplast.

Shuttle Master Steven Larsen shook his head when they came driving up. He pointed toward the loading platform at the back of the shuttle. Natana gunned it and came to a sudden stop exactly in the center of the platform. Steven Larsen shook his head again. Like many Family Traders, he was brown haired, unlike many, he was tall. He was young for a Shuttle Master. Many of the masters of the Regia Anglorum were young. The ship was the newest in the Family Trader Fleet. Den and Natana were both very young, the youngest command pair in the fleet. She was nineteen and he was twenty-two. Den and Natana stepped out of the vehicle. They both had to rearrange their clothing a bit.

Steven rolled his eyes, "Glad you could make it back before departure. I thought you told the council you were just picking up your gravvehicle."

Natana stepped to the shuttle's airstairs and pursed her lips, "We took our time."

"Three days? We almost alerted security again."

Natana stared at him, "Why didn't you?"

He held up his tablet computer, "We had you on the trackers the whole time. Plus, we were listening in. You didn't talk too much. Really didn't want to embarrass our Captain too much."

Natana turned red to the roots of her hair, "That's just going too far, Master Larsen."

"If you two would keep in contact like the council expects we wouldn't have these...um, problems." He stared at her, "First Officer, we can't afford to lose you or the Captain."

Natana scowled at him, "Understood. Come on Den."

They boarded the shuttle and took their usual seats at the front. When Steven finished the loading and the walkaround, he came through the lock and sealed it. He ran through the safety briefing.

Den interrupted him, “Steven, do we really need to go through this? If you do, why don’t you send your copilot to do it?”

Steven stared at him, “Yeah, we really need to do it, and I’m the copilot today, so sit down and shut up and enjoy the flight.” He continued with the safety brief.

Den sat back and tried to be calm—Steven was one of his best friends. He didn’t need to irritate his friend or his Shuttle Master.

As the shuttle rose crisply through the atmosphere of Acier into orbit, the Regia Anglorum grew quickly out of the star sprinkled blackness. The Family Trader Ship, Regia Anglorum, was over eight kilometers long, five kilometers wide, and weighed over one hundred million metric tons. She was large for a family trading ship. Her lines were very modern and stylish. She once sported a flair of external coverings that many large modern ships needlessly employed, but no longer. Those cosmetic enhancements had gone when the ship was refitted at Lojirne. The Regia Anglorum was originally christened as a passenger liner. She now possessed extensive cargo bays aft of the center section. Three large engine pods protruded from the aft section that was almost directly connected to the reactors. Everything was separated from the bulging center crew areas by a long compartmented beam. All the areas on the beam were now used for external storage, cargo containers, and space safe cargo. This extra storage made the Regia Anglorum one of the largest cargo carriers in the entire Family Trader fleet and in the Confederation of Human Space. That was very important since the costs incurred in its modification required enormous payments to the Family Trader Cooperative. The Regia

Anglorum's surface was pocked by thousands of kilometers of wiring, ductwork, and structure—everything that didn't need to be placed within the ship's pressure vessel.

The crew handled the shuttle with precision. They made an approach to the top of the Regia and then dropped straight across in front of the center shuttle bay near the aft portion of the cargo section. When the bridge cleared them, the shuttle nosed into the open bay and let down without a bump. Den and Natana unstrapped and waited for Steven to open the lock.

The moment Den and Natana arrived onboard, the senior members of the Ship's Council met them. Shuttle Master Larsen followed them down to the deck on the shuttle dock. Services Master Mary Polar was the oldest. She was a middle aged and beautiful. Even though she was the services master, she still taught the eleven, twelve, and thirteen year old triple during second shift. Nikita, Den and Natana's adopted daughter, Nikita, was in her class.

Merchant Master Elizabeth Shear was in her thirties standard. She was a good friend of Natana's and always wore a slightly amused expression especially where Den and Natana were concerned. Lifesupport Master Doctor Karl Lasker and Chief Doctor Dieter Larsen stood beside one another, while Engineering Master Kim Lasker held tightly to Karl her husband. All of them except Elizabeth wore a frown as though they were about to address disobedient students.

Mary Polar stepped forward, "We were worried about you Captain." She nodded toward Den then Natana, "First Officer. You didn't follow the stipulations we placed on your travel on the planet Acier, and therefore we must apply the censure we already agreed to. I'm afraid we must take two months pay from both your salaries." Mary took Natana's hand, "Sometimes, I wonder that you two are just like the children in my triple."

Natana looked down, "I assure you, Master Polar, it was necessary."

"That doesn't mean we don't worry about you, First Officer."

“That’s all right. Sometimes we all still need our teachers. In this case, we choose to break our family’s rules to do something of importance.”

Den stepped forward, “Natana!”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t say anything more.”

Elizabeth Shear smiled, “If you told us what you are about, perhaps we could help you.”

Natana didn’t say anything else.

Den took her arm and steered her away from the group, “We are happy that you trust us as much as you do. This work is very important to us. Thank you.”

As Natana and Den stepped away from them, Elizabeth whispered, “You are thanking us for taking away a couple of months of your pay.” She glanced up, a troubled smile. The Ship’s Council slowly dispersed toward their quarters.

As Den and Natana left the cargo shuttle deck, a sweet youthful voice called to them, “Mom, dad!”

Natana and Den looked up. Their adopted daughter, Nikita stood only a few meters away. A group of her friends surrounded her. Natana noticed Signa Fleet beside her and Alex Porson a little to her rear. Nikita was small and short for her age. Doctor Dieter Larsen thought that Nikita was at least twelve. She looked like she was only nine. Until Natana rescued her, Nikita had been raised in the streets of El Rashad and lived on garbage. She was brown haired and brown eyed. She looked almost exactly like a smaller version of Natana. She was the offspring of a Trader Family, likely a member of the Kern family, and also a high level psyonic. Not quite as high as Den, but nearly the same level as Natana. That’s how Natana found her. Nikita thought Natana had the most beautiful mind she had ever touched.

Nikita limped with a brace and a cast encased her left arm. She had been injured only a week ago during school and was still healing. She had her own run in with the Ship's Council and luckily came out with her funds and everything else intact.

Signa Fleet was a quiet girl with light hair and an open face. Her family almost in every generation worked aft of cargo, that is, in engineering and services. Most of her family worked in engineering now. They would be concerned that Signa was training with Nikita in Astrogation—they didn't know yet.

Alex Porson had the opposite problem. He was a genius in engineering design and everyone in his family happened to be in command. It was a terrible humiliation to him, and he had caused Nikita her current infirmities. That in itself had become a point of embarrassment for him and his family. Alex was determined to make it up to Nikita. He was on his way. Alex was tall and thin. He was thirteen and tall for his age.

Nikita hobbled over to Natana and Den. Her mom and dad ran over to her. Though Nikita always needed some means of escape, still, Natana almost picked the girl up in her arms. Nikita was improving better, and Natana was on her safe list. She gave Nikita a hug and kissed her. She whispered, "Hi, Kita. I didn't expect to see you here."

Den kissed Nikita and gave her a gentle squeeze.

Nikita was all smiles, "Hey mom and dad, I'm glad I caught you here. We're waiting for our ship's first celebrity to arrive."

Natana didn't let go of Nikita. She asked, "Is Nichol returning to the ship now?"

"Yes, she is on the next passenger shuttle with Gigi and Alaina."

At the other side of the corridor, Nichol Maur's family and the Dacres were also waiting. Den and Natana waved. The Maurs and the Dacres waved back.

The shuttle dock became active. The lock lights went red. Everyone watched with anticipation. The warning lights turned green and the hatches unlatched. They all filed together through the doors. Nichol came down the shuttle airstairs first. Alaina and Gigi stepped right behind her. Nichol was dressed in a beautiful shipsuit. It was the current style of the Trader Families, but multicolor and glistening. Nichol ran ahead. She kissed her mother and father. Then she ran to Nikita. Nichol put her hands carefully on Nikita's shoulders and held her. She bit her lip then she carefully embraced Nikita and burst into tears, "Thank you, Nikita. Thank you so much. They loved my music, and they loved me. It was all because of you."

Nikita smiled and hugged her back, "I'm glad it worked out."

Alaina and Gigi hugged their mother and father and ran to Nikita and Nichol. Alaina cried out, "It worked Nikita. The whole plan worked great. Your plan worked great. Look at the shipsuit they bought her. We got special shipsuits too." They were both dressed in silver. It was becoming but gaudy.

Nikita grinned, "That's fantastic Nichol, Alaina, and Gigi." She squeezed their hands.

Nichol smiled through her tears, "I made the top ten the whole time we were on Acier."

Alex stepped forward, "Did you sell the albums?"

Gigi yelled, "We sold every one of them—without any discounts."

"No way," Alex cried.

Gigi looked smug, "I already have our profit statement, and I sent the credits to your accounts. All according to our contract."

Den touched Nichol's shoulder, "Congratulations Nichol. I can tell you from the entire ship, we are proud of you. You have done something that no one in the history of the Family Traders ever accomplished."

Nichol stuttered. It was the first time, Nikita had heard her unsure of her words, “Thanks Captain.” She held out her hand and Den touched it. Natana touched it too.

Natana smiled broadly, “Thanks Nichol. You did something great for our whole family.”

Nichol’s eyes filled with tears, “It wasn’t me. It was Nikita. She did everything and figured out everything, but I was happy to be a part of it.”

“You are sweet, Nichol,” Natana held her hand, “but we all work together to achieve everything on this ship. We are proud of you and Nikita and Signa, Alex, Alaina, and Gigi.”

“Thank you First Officer,” Nichol’s eyes were full of adoration.