

Moments

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

One

"We have to be prepared," Hoa Nguyen said as she strapped on her laser pistol. She also carried a stun stick. She had attached an emergency aid patch to the inside of her left wrist. Her black hair was pulled back, and she wore a medium level environmental suit. With a soft voice command, the suit would seal around her ankles and wrists, raise a hood that would cover her entire face, and protect her against a hostile environment. She hoped she wouldn't have to use it. "Everything could change in an instant."

The two members of her security team watched as if they had never seen her before. JaVon Daschle and Nils Svenson were men used to routine; they'd never encountered a situation like this one before.

She hadn't either, but she had encountered other things. And the only control she had was in her preparation.

They stood in the prep room near the docking ring. Behind her was an interlinked series of locking doors, all of which would shut in case of a structural breach or damage to the environmental systems.

The prep room was small, and only the security teams had access to it. Inside were the environmental suits, weapons, and other gear specially designed for trouble on the docking ring.

"Traffic Control tells me the landing was rough. The compensations we sent for the new docking ring were not used, and no one answered when we tried direct contact. The ship stabilized, depressurized and went through standard procedure, but no one has disembarked in the hour since landing."

JaVon strapped on his own laser pistol. He was large, muscular, barely within the physical requirements for security on the space station. "Has the ship been decontaminated?"

"Decontamination can't proceed until the crew is evacuated," Hoa said, letting her annoyance show. Her security team should know procedure.

"Then I'm not going in," Nils said, his pale skin flushed. He had never defied her before.

"Fine," Hoa said. "You don't go in, and you're fired."

Anger flashed through his blue eyes, but he said nothing. The termination of any member's position on the space station meant that the person had to return to Earth at his own expense. The return trip would be taken on the first Earth-bound ship leaving the space station, and there was never time for review.

In Hoa's fifteen years here, only five employees were terminated and all five were off the station within 24 hours. The journey was long since the space station, called ISS3 because it was the third International Space Station in a series of five, floated in geo-synchronous orbit above Mars.

"I don't like this," Nils said, his tone sullen. It was an acquiescence, but a reluctant one. They both knew she would write him up when this day was done.

"You don't have to." She slipped on her gloves. The thin material was cool against her skin. "I have no idea what we will encounter inside. This ship came from Europa, one of Jupiter's moons. We've been checking the nets and our other information, but so far, we've heard no whisper of trouble there. Other ships, even ones that work for the same company, Pribox, have made the trip with no difficulty."

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onto security understanding that the job had risks. Quelling disturbances outside the restaurant in the main section, settling disputes among the locals over personal items, investigating petty thefts and assaults did not count as risk.

Approaching a ship that had landed under strange circumstances did.

"I'll go first," she said. "You will follow my lead and take instructions from me. Any deviation from standard procedure will result in black marks. Is that clear?"

She didn't wait for their responses. Instead she palmed the door latch, letting them into the docking ring. The open doors created a brightly lit tunnel that ran to the ship. The tunnel's silence was

eerie; usually newly docked ships were full of noise --the laughter of crew members, happy to be somewhere new; the clangs of equipment being moved; or the voice of a commander shouting orders. In all her years, she had never approached a silent ship.

Her stomach clenched, and she felt a whisper of nerves which she wasn't about to let her team see. She stepped inside the tunnel, resisting the urge to activate the environmental controls on her suit. Nils'

worries had infected her, more deadly than any microbe that had somehow escaped all the filtration systems in the docking ring and on the still-functioning ship.

Her boots clanged on the metal floor. She moved forward slowly, straining to hear anything beyond her own breathing. The men were close behind her, their own boots clanging against the surface. She glanced over her shoulder. Even JaVon looked nervous now, his tall powerful body bent to accommodate the tunnel's low ceiling.

As she got closer to the ship's entrance, she saw that the regular lighting was on. The ship appeared to be functioning normally. She caught the faint whiff of something fetid, but told herself that was her imagination. Strong smells were filtered like everything else; the air, even in this small a space, should have had a clinically pure, almost

metallic odor if it had any odor at all. But the closer she got to the ship, the more she was certain she was smelling something new, something she didn't like.

"_Skimmer 4_," she said as she reached the last of the ring's doors. "This is space station security. Is everything all right?"

Her warning was standard, something any ship's crew, no matter how inexperienced, should recognize. All pilots were trained in the standard response. Any deviation was to serve as a warning of danger ahead.

But she had been trained to expect a verbal deviation, not silence. And silence was what greeted her. Sweat ran

down her spine, pooling against the small of her back. The tunnel was perfectly cool; it was her nerves that were creating her discomfort.

"_Skimmer 4_," she repeated as she reached the ship's open door. "This is space station security. Is everything all right?"

The fetid odor was stronger now, as if the stench were so overpowering that the ship's standard systems couldn't compensate. The hair on the back of her neck rose, and she resisted the urge to look at her team. Something told her that if they saw her face, they might run.

Even though the ship had had a difficult landing, the seals were all intact. The doors met perfectly, giving

her a view of the ship's main corridor -- if she could call it that.

She'd never seen a ship so small. Normally the main corridor split and circled the ship. This corridor seemed to go straight. It ended in a small area that served as the main recreational center. The ceilings were so low that she felt uncomfortable --and her slight frame was perfect for the close quarters found so often in space-going vessels.

Hoa climbed down two shallow steps into the ship. Her discomfort grew. The air had an almost oily feel to it, as if it had been recycled one too many times. It was too late to put on her environmental suit -she'd have to go to decontamination when this was all over. The men behind

her wouldn't feel the strange air. Both of them had put on their full suits before stepping into the tunnel. She was going this part alone.

Ship's systems seemed to be fine. Full lighting, normal temperatures. The equipment, including the nearby computer controls, seemed to be functioning just fine. The door to the cockpit was closed, just as it should have been for landing, securing the pilot and co-pilot inside. Cockpit doors had special locks and seals which activated automatically when landing or docking sequences started. She wouldn't be able to enter, but she knocked. The pilot should have shut off the automatic system when the docking was successful.

No one answered. Even though she had expected that, her unease grew. Where was everyone?

She glanced over her shoulder. Her team had moved in different directions, just like they were supposed to. She could see the back end of JaVon's suit, but saw nothing of Nils. She could hear him, though, his boots shushing on the plastic flooring. His steps were hesitant, as if he was afraid of what he would find. She was growing afraid too, and it pissed her off. One of the reasons she went into security was so that she would never feel afraid again. She got training, learned how to be brave in any situation. Her slight stature was a benefit, not a liability. She was strong. She had to be.

As she recited her mantra, she walked past through the recreation area into the galley. The kitchen was tiny --barely large enough for a person of her size. Prepared food rotted on an open tray and a digital display informed her that the galley's stove had been shut down by computer. The gravity had never been off, or the food would have splattered all over the galley.

Her mouth was dry, and her fingers itched. She almost opened her communication line, then decided to wait. She had proof something was wrong, but she didn't know what it was yet. No sense bringing in extra security when there was no obvious threat.

She slipped through the galley into the

mess. The fetid stench seemed stronger here, and she realized she hadn't smelled it at all in the tiny galley. Obviously the rotting food hadn't been the source of the odor. Hoa reached for her stun stick, keeping the pistol attached to her side. She was so nervous that she might hit the trigger accidentally, hitting her own men.

The mess was L-shaped, with no portals open to space as was customary in most vessels. The table and chairs before her were bolted into position, their surfaces empty.

She felt as if she were being watched. She whirled, looked into the bottom part of the L, and froze. They were all there, all five crew members. Four were clearly dead, sprawled across tables,

under chairs, arms extended and blood everywhere.

The fifth, a bald man of indeterminate age, sat in the center of the carnage, his pale eyes watching her every move.

"Did you come to take me home?" he asked.

-----*Two*

Darren Alnot stepped out of the med center, hands shaking. He hadn't seen anything like this in twenty years of detective work. Four people killed by a swift and savage attack, then left to decompose in the ship's mess. The virtual med lab was able to reconstruct the bodies as they must have looked when they were newly slaughtered --the expressions lax, the hands open in

supplication or protection, the wounds gaping and clear.

Most of the blood spattered across the tables and chairs had been arterial. That suggested the wounds to the jugular came first, followed by the narrow slashes to the hands --defensive wounds found in the pilot and co-pilot (who were probably killed last and figured out, in those brief seconds between life and death, what was happening to them).

The deep puncture wounds to the chests and backs had the final insult. Most of the blood had come from the knife, mixing the various types. By the time the puncture wounds started, the hearts had stopped pumping and blood no longer flowed through the bodies.

It flowed out of them.

Alnot clenched his fists, willing his hands to stop shaking. Most of the cases he investigated in Ares, Mars' only domed colony, were domestic abuse. He'd only covered a handful of homicides, and those had generally been the product of too much drink, or a beating that had gotten a bit too violent. He'd never seen anything like this before.

He wasn't qualified to be here. He'd only been assigned to this case because he was the closest investigator with the most years on the job. There were other investigators with more experience in homicide, but they were on the Moon. The Moon's older, more established

colonies gradually developed the vices of Earth. Most of those hadn't hit Ares yet.

And, of course, there were no investigators on ISS3. None of the space stations had a real police force. Security was supposed to handle the complaints - -separate the brawling drunks and investigate petty thefts --sending any notes they needed for potential trials to investigators in nearby colonies. Alnot had received hundreds of reports over the years from ISS3, all of them minor. They had never requested his presence on the station before.

He wished they hadn't requested it this time. The ship had been hard enough to take, with the blood dried brown on the

surfaces, the rotting food on the floor, mixing with the dried fluids left by deceased bodies. Hoa Nyugen told him that the stench had left with the victims, but Alnot didn't believe it. He had still been able to smell it, faint and ever-present, as he stood in the center of all that carnage. Nyugen was competent, one of the best he'd ever seen in station security. She'd made sure the evidence was left intact. She'd taped the scene before the bodies were removed using three different cameras --a video camera, a holoprojector, and a VR vid which allowed him to walk through the scene as she had found it.

He didn't have the nerve to do that just yet. He barely survived the Med Center.

But he had all he needed to know. The physical evidence from the bodies alone confirmed the obvious; Gil Houk, the only surviving member of the _Skimmer 4_ had slaughtered his crewmates. The attack had been swift and vicious, completed with a great deal of force. The weapon was a sharpened steak knife of a type banned from all government and most commercial vessels. It had been found next to Houk and had only his fingerprints on it.

Alnot knew the who and the how, but those were only the beginning. He needed to make a case, an example of Houk so this sort of thing never happened again. The case needed to be airtight because news of the attack

leaked in the three days it took to get transport to ISS3. He'd only been on the station a day, but he'd already heard rumors of a space-born parasite that caused men to go mad, and other rumors of a disease so subtle that it affected the primitive response areas of the brain. He knew, because he'd seen the charts, that Houk had been tested for such things and the tests had come up negative.

No. Houk had done this of his own volition.

Alnot hugged that information to himself. People in the far reaches of space believed that such behavior couldn't happen. Anyone who lived on a space station or routinely flew in spacecraft had to suffer through a

thousand psychological batteries, testing everything from ability to handle stress to reactions to extreme solitude.

No one wanted to believe that someone who had failed those tests had been allowed on a vessel. Alnot didn't want to believe it either, but he had to start somewhere.

And he needed help. All sort of expert help, so that this case was conducted by the book --or at least, by his book. The ship was registered in Moon Colony Armstrong, and that colony's laws would apply. Houk would send for assistance from there --which would take some considerable time to arrive here -and, in the meantime, he would work the case according to Ares law. He had no other

choice.

-----*Three*

"We have a problem," Eden Frazier said. She stood in front of Hugh McCaron's desk, wishing she could sit down. She was over six feet, and Hugh McCaron, Prosecutor for the Colony of Armstrong, had short man's disease. He hated to be reminded of his lack of stature --in anything. Instead of focusing on his face, Frazier stared at the domed colony of Armstrong through McCaron's floor to ceiling windows. When Armstrong had been founded almost a century ago, the dome had been five times larger than the city built beneath it. Now the colonial government was going through the International Tribunal to find

ways to buy outlying land and expand the dome.

"I don't like problems," McCaron said, leaning back in the leather chair he'd ordered directly from Earth. That chair, more than anything else about McCaron, made Frazier nervous. They were both public servants and his salary, while double hers, was still only three steps above subsistence. That chair probably cost one year's pay.

"I know that, sir, but you have to hear this." Frazier threaded her hands together. She knew McCaron would dislike this next part of what she had to say even more than her opening. "It's about the Houk case."

"Houk?" He stared at her blankly. She

had expected that. The murders had occurred only the week before. She had received the assignment because the reports were already coming in, but the prisoner and the evidence in the form of Skimmer 4 wouldn't be here for more than a year.

"The crew murders on the Pribox ship," she said, to clarify. Anyone who lived on the Moon knew the name Pribox. It was the biggest employer in all three domes, and had even built a private dome for its employees who couldn't travel back to a colony during the work week. McCaron pursed his lips. "I knew the moment we got this case, it would be trouble. The timeline and the publicity both are enough to taint

the jury pool. Add to that an off-Moon investigation, and we've got more problems than I want to consider."

Frazier remained silent. She'd already heard that speech from him. It had ended with the reasons he wanted her on the case --all flattery and emptiness. They both knew the only reason she got the Pribox murders was because she was the newest member of the prosecutor's staff. Her five year contract guaranteed she'd be in the offices long enough to handle this case from start to finish.

"What's the new wrinkle?" he asked as he pushed a button. One of the chairs that had been leaning against the wall unfolded itself and zoomed along a planned path on the carpeted floor. The

chair stopped near her. The first time she'd seen McCaron's moving chairs, they'd startled her --more Earth gadgetry --but after a year in the office, she was used to them.

"The psychological reports," she said. "Two are in so far, but I have a hunch the others are going to be the same."

McCaron squinted at her. "If this guy was legally insane, how the hell did he get on board that vessel?" She shook her head. "It's a little more complicated than that. How's your space history?"

"Weaker than it should be." McCaron folded his hands over his flat stomach. He kept himself in shape by walking all over the colony.

Frazier sighed. She had been afraid of

that. McCaron was current on the politics of Armstrong, the way that the criminal laws worked, and the skeletons in every closet of every lawyer he'd ever come across. With that much information rattling around his brain, he had little room for anything else.

"In the latter half of the Twentieth Century," she said, "only two Earth countries had viable space programs."

"The United States and whatever Russia had been under the communists. I know that," McCaron said. He sounded annoyed.

Frazier continued as if McCaron hadn't spoken. "In the course of their independent work, they discovered the same thing. Long term missions were

dangerous."

"No kidding," Frazier said. "The equipment alone --"

"I wasn't talking about the equipment, sir," Frazier said, struggling to keep her tone level. "I was talking about the psychological health of the space traveler."

McCaron's eyebrows narrowed, creating a slight crease in his forehead. Finally, Frazier had his full attention.

"Remember, these early space travelers were incredible individuals. They were strong, resourceful, and balanced. They managed to survive confinement in spaceships smaller than this office."

"But?" McCaron said, that momentary

interest already fleeing.

"But they shared an experience, no matter what their personality type. On missions that lasted months, their emotional stability weakened. After thirty days, they developed an intense dislike for each other and a strong desire to go home."

"I take it this applies to the Pribox case?"

Frazier nodded. "The early space travelers dealt with the emotional deterioration as best they could, and nothing happened. But the various space agencies studied this problem and realized that most of the effects could be alleviated by making certain that ship's crews had enough personal space that

they could spend time alone. They also needed entertainment and windows -- lots of windows --even if those windows only showed the vastness of space."

McCaron closed his eyes. "I'm not going to like what you're going to say next, am I?" He was quick. She would give him that. That was how he'd held onto his position for this long.

"Pribox designed their own cargo ships for the run from the Moon to Europa. Those ships can carry more cargo than any other ship that currently exists."

McCaron rubbed his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "At the expense of crew quarters."

"No, sir." Frazier waited until he opened his eyes to continue. "At the expense of all areas designed for human use only. Skimmer 4 has one-tenth the crew space of any ship her size."

"One-tenth?" McCaron's voice shook.

"There was only one recreational area which was large enough to allow for some exercise equipment, but not nearly as much as the regulated minimum on government ships. The entertainment programming was limited, net access only went to the pilot and co-pilot, and the only windows on the entire ship were in the cockpit, which was restricted."

"How'd Pribox manage that?" McCaron asked.

"The vessel is private. So long as it met safety specs, it could fly."

"Aren't these safety specs?"

Frazier shook her head. "They're recommendations for private vessels, laws for public ships."

"Wonderful," McCaron said.

"It gets worse," Frazier said. "The only law that Pribox had to abide by was crew size. Five members are mandatory for a vessel of that class."

McCaron scratched his chin, then leaned back in his chair. Frazier recognized the look. He was already building a case, trying it in his mind, testing the angles and searching for an out.

"How do we know all this had an

effect on Houk?"

"It doesn't matter whether they did or not," Frazier said.

"It matters," McCaron said, as if she were a first-year law student. "No matter how it seems, the defense still has to show a causal link."

"They have it," Frazier said. "Houk's first words to the ISS3's security team."

"Which were?"

"Did you come to take me home?"

"Jesus," McCaron said, "the stupidest defense attorney on the Moon could get him off."

"No kidding," Frazier said, dryly repeating the words he had used earlier. McCaron stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. "We got psychological

testing history on this guy?"

"No," Frazier said. "Pribox isn't releasing it."

"Isn't...?" McCaron turned, then cursed. "They didn't do any."

"Or if they did, it's not up to standard."

McCaron shook his head. "I don't have the money or the resources for this case. If it were Earth, maybe. But Pribox is our largest employer."

Frazier waited. She'd already gone through these arguments in her own mind.

"I need air-tight for Criminally Negligent Homicide. Hell," he said, "I need perfect for Murder." Frazier's heart was pounding. He already used the word

"I." That was what she wanted to hear. She didn't have the skill to go after Pribox. He did.

"We might be able to manage airtight," she said.

He snorted. "I can already tell you how they'll argue this. Flawed design. Ship company's fault. The company'll blame the designer and the designer'll spend the rest of his life appealing either extradition or execution."

Frazier nodded. She was already wise to the ways of Moon law. At first, she'd thought the colonies would be a second chance, a place to make new rules, to throw out the old. But she'd learned the mistakes in that thinking her second week on the job. _You want a place

where the rules don't apply, you go to Europa_, McCaron had said to her. _Armstrong's been here for a century. It's too late for us._

"So what are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'll need some time on this one." McCaron walked to the window. "Got any suggestions?" Frazier stood and joined him at the window. For the first time, she didn't mind towering over him. "As a matter of fact," she said, "I do."

-----*Four*

"Scare tactics," said Brian Pagoda. "They're just trying to see if we'll give in." Nadia Shelmet glared at him. Pagoda was a heavy set man whose thinning hair revealed a flaky scalp. She

suffered Pagoda's presence in this meeting because he was the project manager for Pribox's Europa Division, and she needed his expertise. But his expertise didn't cover legal matters, particularly those that had to do with the conglomerate.

Those were her problems, just like this damn ship was her problem. She'd been on notice since word came in from ISS3, sending Legal out to discover their liabilities, and to try to anticipate all the negatives this particular crisis would cause.

She, Pagoda, the Chief Financial Officer, and all the important people from Legal sat around a real oak table in the conference room. The room was the

largest in Pribox's original building in the very center of Armstrong's downtown. From the windows, she could see the courthouse, its white-washed spire reflecting the sunlight that filtered through the dome.

Ten scientists from various divisions waited in the lobby outside. She'd already spoken to them, and hadn't liked what she heard.

"I think McCaron's office has a point." Nadia's voice carried. It didn't have to. Everyone in the room was trained to listen closely to anything the CEO had to say. "Those scientists out there tell me if we continue to run the Europa operation like this, we can expect incidents like this one almost annually. Imagine what

that publicity will do for us."

Pagoda frowned. "Do you know the capital outlay we've put into this?"

Nadia frowned. She'd had enough.

"You're excused, Mr. Pagoda."

"What?"

"Excused. Welcome to leave. We have other things to discuss here."

"But I'm the one who knows the Europa operation. I'm the one..." His voice trailed off. His cheeks flushed as he understood his new role. "You can't blame me for this. I never heard of this guy Houk before he went nuts. I --"

"There's plenty of blame to go around." Nadia glanced at Legal. They were watching the interchange with interest. "I'm sure any press releases we

issue will make certain the blame is well distributed."

"You're going to give in?"

"Scuttle the ships, promise better psych training for the crews, admit some blame without legal liability, and with minimal loss. Donations to specified charities, and some sort of nod to preventing future disasters. Of course I'm taking the deal. It's win-win for all of us."

"Win-win?" Pagoda shook his head. "This'll put Europa back five years. We may strand some of our people there. Not to mention the cost to the operation - -"

"We've already gone over the costs," Nadia said. "It's an acceptable risk. All

of it. Now, Mr. Pagoda, leave us to complete this meeting."

He stood, shaking, although she couldn't tell if it was with anger or terror. He wasn't bright enough to realize that he would keep his job --the last thing she needed was him out of work and blabbing to the net reporters. She'd keep him under control, in much the same way that Houk would be controlled. So easy, really. It had been McCaron's suggestion and it had come to her privately while the overall offer had been made its formal path through Legal.

Assign your best criminal lawyer to Houk, McCaron had told her when they'd passed at the designated place on the street. _Make sure he's declared

incompetent, unable to handle his own case. We'll take guilty by insanity, lock him up for life._

Confine him? She'd asked, mostly because she couldn't resist. _Wasn't that the problem in the first place_?

McCaron had shaken his head and said no more. The retainer she paid him, laundered through more accounts than she cared to think about, had worked to her advantage again. This incident would be a blip, a little notation in the history of private space travel, a cautionary tale for smaller companies who believed they could cut costs by trapping humans on long voyages in spaces too small for comfort.

"Let McCaron know," she said to the

nameless lawyers, "that we're prepared to take his deal." Both deals --the one that had come through channels and the one that hadn't. She'd handle with the fall-out, even out the blame, find the funds to compensate the victims' families so that they didn't sue. She'd also set aside funds for future victims, because she was convinced that Pribox wouldn't just strand their people on Europa. Pribox would abandon them.

Her stomach fluttered --a momentary unease which she quelled with a ruthlessness she'd learned when she was ten, on that private shuttle her family had taken to their new home on the Moon. Halfway there, everything had changed. Life support failed, only a handful of

oxygen masks and even fewer environmental suits for more than a hundred crew and passengers. In her dreams, sometimes, she still saw the haze in the cabin, her mother's worried face, her father's fearful one, and the single yellow mask dropping down between them.

She'd reached for it, her tiny hand straining, and they'd let her. They let her take it because she was the most vulnerable, a child, the only one with a future. They probably thought the everyone on board would die anyway. But she'd been too young to know that, to think in such logical terms. Instead, she had pressed the mask to her face, and huddled in her seat, watching as people

suffocated around her. Nadia shook off the memory.

"We've done all we can here," she said, and made herself believe it.

-----*Five*

Just like that, they shut him down. Darren Alnot stared out the portal in his leased room. The Skimmer 4 listed slightly, the effects of its difficult docking just beginning to show. The ship was off-limits now, the evidence he'd accumulated already bundled up and tucked inside. All of his files had been downloaded and encoded, sent to the prosecuting attorney's office on Armstrong. Something had happened, something he didn't completely understand. One moment, he was trying

to figure out the order of events from the splatter patterns and the next, he was forced out of the ship, told that Houk had been plead guilty by reason of insanity and the case was closed. Other fingers had reached into this pie and contaminated it. If this had been an Ares case, Alnot might have fought it. But he didn't know the powerful on the Moon. He didn't even know the name of the prosecuting attorney. He had no resources, and no time.

Alnot had gotten rid of his files, but he would never forget the case, never forget the emptiness of Houk's face as he stared at the four walls of ISS3's brig.

"Home," he'd say if anyone spoke to him. "Just send me home." Alnot was

going home too, to a world where he understood everything, where he knew exactly what was going on.

He would go home without a complaint, and once he was there, he'd finish the last task connected to, but not a part of, this investigation --a task he knew no one else would complete, not for months, or a year. Or maybe even not at all.

-----*Six*

The house's system was beeping --not the standard you-have-an-important-message beep, but the loud, obnoxious beep of an emergency. Darlene stood on the remains of her lawn, brown in the heat of a West Texas summer, and stared at the horizon.

She knew. She'd known for more than a month, when the news had trickled back to Earth about the Pribox shuttle that had been the scene of all that carnage.

Teresa would have contacted her, somehow. As the news broke, even if she'd been in space, she'd have found a way to get a message home.

There hadn't been a message. Just silence.

Teresa had never been silent. From the moment she was born, Teresa had been a squalling, active bundle of energy.

"Momma," she said after they sent her to pilot school, when she'd come for what they both knew would be her last

visit to Texas. "I'm probably gonna die out there, long before you do. Just remember, I'm doing something I love. I'll go happy."

But she hadn't gone happy. The news accounts said the unnamed pilot had died defending herself. She'd known what was about to come.

Just like Darlene did now.

The sunlight was golden on the abandoned oil fields. Darlene took one last look, then went inside, telling the house's computer to play a message she didn't want to hear, a message that had been routed, and rerouted through the silence of space. A message, the computer told her, from a man named Alnot, a message that would lance

through her like a knife through the skin.

She had had both a moment and a lifetime to prepare --and somehow neither of them had been enough.