
THE LOST PLANET

HENRY VOGEL



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THE DOUBLE CROSS

Glen

Thirty minutes after landing on Virug, I was ready to leave. Regency security agents were all over the Alien Sector, busily taking humans into custody. Watching from the shadows, I'd seen agents remove a handful of humans from three ships and two work crews. Once I realized Regency agents were sweeping the entire sector and picking up every human they found, I gave up delivering smuggled goods to my master's client and headed back to the ship.

Twenty minutes later, I dropped to the ground and rolled behind a stack of freight pallets. Two towering Virug agents of Regency security stood with their meaty hands clasped behind their curved backs, waiting as a diminutive, pear shaped Glyfan emerged from the *Starwind's* hatch. Cuvalt, my master, descended the gangway in the stubby legged rolling gait typical of all Glyfans. My lungs were starved for air after the long run back to the ship but I controlled my ragged breathing. Typical dock noises made listening hard enough without adding my gasping to the mix.

In the high pitched voice I found so out of place among

the hulking Virug race, one said, “We seek the human Glen Susa.”

Cuvalt, who only came up to the Virugs’ chests, craned his neck and met the gaze of the security agent. “I sent the human on an errand. What has he done now?”

I felt a surge of irritation at Cuvalt. Just because I’d been a bit wild as a kid the Glyfan automatically assumed I’d keep getting in trouble now that I’m grown. I mean, I’m twenty-one and hardly a kid anymore. A human we ran into at a hidden artist colony told me that made me an adult under Terran Republic law.

He was the first human I’d spoken to since my father sold me and the *Starwind* to Cuvalt nine years ago. I had more questions for the man—a lot more questions—but my master ordered me back to the ship as soon as he realized who I was talking to.

I pushed those thoughts aside as the Virug spoke again, “Where did you send the human?”

“He is delivering Glyfandy merchandise to one of your race—Azkaloth, an importer of alien goods.”

The Virug’s voice lowered an octave in disapproval, “We are familiar with that one.”

Catching the shift in tone, Cuvalt said, “Did my human include prohibited or untaxed goods in his delivery? I assure you all my business dealings adhere to the letter of Virugian law.”

Cuvalt was even telling the truth. Technically. He made me do all the illegal stuff, claiming I showed such a talent for deception that it would be a shame to let it go to waste. Since I haven’t been caught yet, I suppose he’s right, but I also know he’s happy having someone else taking all the risks.

“We do not seek the human in connection with any of your business dealings. A Regency Guardian wishes to speak with him.”

I knew all Cuvalt's tells, and *that* announcement scared the hell out of him. Fear loosened the Glyfan's tongue, "I will, of course, do all in my power to accommodate a Guardian, including transferring ownership of the human to the Guardian."

"The human is your property?"

What kind of crazy question was that? Did these dim Virugs think I stayed with Cuvalt by choice?

"Yes," Cuvalt claimed. "I bought him when I bought this ship. I was forced to increase my payment considerably to get the boy, too. The controls were designed for a human, and I needed someone who could pilot the ship. Despite the boy's youth, his father taught him well."

"Terran law forbids human chattel."

"I am aware of that Terran peculiarity, sir, which is why I am listed as the boy's legal custodian within the Terran Republic. Terran records also list the boy as the owner of this ship."

I almost jumped to my feet in surprise at that announcement. I never knew the *Starwind* was registered in my name within the Terran Republic and was positive Cuvalt wouldn't have admitted it if he'd known I was listening.

The Virug considered Cuvalt's words for a moment and then asked, "Terran law specifically forbids the sale of hyper-drive technology to non-humans. Is that how you circumvented the restriction?"

"Yes. I did not think the ploy would work but..." Cuvalt shrugged, "Unlike fine Regency officials such as yourselves, officials in the Terran Republic are easily corrupted."

"You gave the official a bribe," the Virug stated.

"Technically, I paid the boy's father more than his asking price and *he* bribed the official."

"You admit to flouting the law?" the Virug asked, incredulity seeping into his voice.

“I admit to flouting *Terran* law,” Cuvalt replied. “Upon my return to the Regency, I complied with all the applicable Regency laws. After they examined the ship, Regency officials let me go on my way.”

What the hell was Cuvalt talking about? What Regency laws?

“And you can prove that?”

In response, Cuvalt pulled out his datapad, tapped on the screen for a few seconds, and then handed it to the Virug who’d done all the talking. The security agent studied the pad, tapping through several views, before handing it back to Cuvalt.

“Everything is in order. You will alert Regency Security when the human returns.”

“Of course,” Cuvalt oozed.

Cuvalt waddled back into the *Starwind* as the two Virug walked away. I watched the security agents, half expecting one of them to conceal himself and keep watch on the ship. That’s what I’d have done, but the Virugs weren’t the most imaginative race in the galaxy. That’s true for most of the Children, though not the Glyfans. In that respect, Cuvalt’s people were anomalies among the Regency’s Child races.

I wondered if I could simply enter the *Starwind* through the main hatch, but I decided caution was called for. Sticking to the shadows, I worked my way to an emergency hatch in the ship’s belly and tapped in an entrance code I’d programmed into the ship’s computer long ago. The code overrode the open hatch alert, something extremely useful if you need to dump illegal cargo when Regency Customs makes a surprise inspection. I quietly slipped into the *Starwind* unannounced.

A minute later I crept out of the cargo bay and into the *Starwind*’s living area. I gave a quick glance into the pilot’s compartment. Cuvalt rarely entered it and he wasn’t in there

now. A humorless smile spread across my face as I quietly tapped a few controls, putting the ship in lockdown. Then I went in search of my master.

It was time for a little chat with Cuvalt.

I found him quickly enough. Cuvalt sat in front of the airlock watching the hatch. He had a Glyfan blaster cradled in his lap, one hand curled around the grip so he could raise it quickly. It looked as if my caution had been warranted.

That still left me wondering what was running through Cuvalt's devious little brain. I'd planned on demanding an explanation for the claims he'd made to the security agents—especially the bit where the *Starwind* was registered under my name—and assumed Cuvalt's explanation would reveal some new con or smuggling job. He'd tell me it was all a lie to get rid of the Virug agents, make his usual vague promises about freeing me sometime soon, and then we'd get off planet as fast as possible.

The blaster changed things.

Thanking the stars my long vanished father taught me how to move silently—a skill Cuvalt encouraged and exploited—I snuck up behind the being who owned me. My hand shot out and took the blaster from Cuvalt's loose grip before the little Glyfan even knew I was there.

"Wha—?" he cried, so startled he jumped out of his chair.

"Hello, Cuvalt," I said.

"By the Progenitors, Glen, you gave me quite a scare!" His ears rose and his eyes widened in the Glyfan version of a smile. He shook a finger, a human gesture he used with me, "You are too old to play such pranks, and I am far too old to have them played on me."

"Why were you holding your blaster?"

Cuvalt spread his arms, "I was merely inspecting it, Glen. We never know when pirates or rebels or other such crimi-

nals will attack. The moment you need a weapon is the wrong time to discover it is faulty.”

I gave a slight nod, acknowledging his explanation without accepting it. “And you moved your chair over here, facing the airlock because...?”

“I was concerned for you,” Cuvalt replied. “Agents from Regency Security were looking for you.”

I let my own eyes widen, feigning surprise, “They were? What for?”

“They have questions concerning a theft in the Alien Sector marketplace. I assured them you were on an errand for me, one that took you far from the market.”

“That convinced them?”

“Not entirely, but I told them I would call them when you returned.”

I pretended to examine the blaster, turning it over in my hands, “And will you?”

“Do not be foolish, boy. We will leave this planet. You should begin preparing the *Starwind* for liftoff.”

“Right,” I said. “I’m sorry about sneaking aboard. But when I saw security agents walking away from the *Starwind*... Well, I guess I panicked.”

“I understand.” Cuvalt held out his hand, an obvious request for the return of his blaster. “We will say no more about it.”

I handed the weapon to Cuvalt. To my complete lack of surprise, he immediately pointed it at me.

“You are far too trusting, Glen. A human failing that will cost your species dearly. Be a good boy and place a call to Regency Security.”

“How dare you issue orders to me on *my* ship?” I demanded.

“You overheard my discussion with the security agents?” At my brief nod, he continued, “Yet you still trusted me

enough to return my weapon. I thought I taught you better, boy.”

“You did.”

I showed Cuvalt the charge pack I'd taken from the gun while pretending to examine it. Cuvalt's ears quivered in astonishment and he pulled the blaster's trigger twice to no effect. Once again I took the gun from him, inserted the charge pack, and leveled the gun at the Glyfan.

“You and I are going to talk, Cuvalt, though not right now.” I stepped aside and pointed towards the *Starwind's* galley with my free hand. “Get in the pantry.”

“What?” Cuvalt sputtered. “Why should I do that?”

“Because I'll blow your foot off if you don't.”

I guess my expression convinced Cuvalt I was serious. He trudged down the short corridor to the galley. “But why the pantry? Why not simply lock me in my quarters?”

“Where you have access to communications equipment and the Progenitors only know what else? No.”

The little alien curled himself up on the floor of the pantry. I shut and locked the door, taking an extra minute to change the access code. I doubted Cuvalt could get to the control panel from inside, but I was leaving nothing to chance—a lesson both my father and Cuvalt drilled into me.

In the pilot's compartment, I checked the Guardian battleship's location. One was stationed at every planet in the Regency, where it served as a visible reminder of the Guardians' power. The local warship was in its usual position near the system's lone wormhole. I began the startup procedure and plotted a course that took me as far from the battleship as possible.

The *Starwind* is Terran built and her original owner was Terran. So she has a hyperdrive. There were plenty of other Terran built ships docked and in Virugi space, but they'd been sold directly to Children—aliens from the Regency. By

Terran law, none of them had a hyperdrive. Then I remembered Cuvalt telling the security agents that he had let Regency officials examine the ship when he registered it. That meant they'd had access to the hyperdrive, *and* they'd released the ship to Cuvalt.

Everyone knew the Regency desperately wanted hyperdrive technology. And everyone knew the Terran Republic desperately wanted to keep it to themselves. So, why would the Regency simply release the *Starwind* with its hyperdrive intact? Unless...

The conclusion was inescapable—the Regency already had hyperdrive technology.

With that thought echoing inside my head, I took a few shortcuts in the startup procedure and lifted off. As expected, Virugi flight control contacted me in less than a minute.

“*Starwind*, this is Virugi Control. Your ship is not scheduled for departure.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly before responding, “Virugi Control, this is the *Starwind* acknowledging an unscheduled launch.”

“*Starwind*, please return to the docks. The Regency has filed a no-fly order against your ship.”

That announcement shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. I temporized, “Understood, Control, but I've just completed some ship repairs and am putting the *Starwind* through a few maneuvers to test them.”

“Your request is denied, *Starwind*. By Regency law, I demand you land and prepare to receive Regency security agents.”

“I respectfully decline, Control,” I said, pushing the *Starwind's* throttle as high as the atmospheric governor allowed.

“What do you think you're doing, *Starwind*? Your orders are clear and are backed by the full authority of the Regency.”

“And I’m ignoring those orders, Control.”

“You leave us no choice but to alert the Regency Guardians, *Starwind*.”

“You do that, Control. *Starwind* out.”

A moment later, the *Starwind* broke atmo, the governor released, and I gave the ship full throttle. I put her on a heading that took us as far from the wormhole as possible and checked the scanner displays. There was little traffic at the moment, and nothing that worried me. The scanner did pick up a squadron of Virugi fighters lifting off from the planet, plus a squadron of Regency interceptors launching from the battleship. The interceptors were just for show, since they’d never reach me in time. The fighters were a different matter, but they weren’t an immediate concern. I got the nav computer working on jump coordinates, and then engaged the autopilot. It was past time for my alien master to answer some questions.

When I opened the door, Cuvalt rolled out of the pantry and stretched his joints. “I am too old for such treatment, Glen.”

“Stop complaining. You were going to turn me over to Regency Security. Why?”

“Do not ask such foolish questions, young human. I must assume your...transaction...with Azkaloth went awry and Regency Security was simply—”

“I never even got to Azkaloth’s shop. The docks were full of security agents. I thought it was just one of their periodic sweeps for contraband, but that wasn’t it. The agents were looking for humans. I gave up on the delivery and came back to the *Starwind*. I got back just as you descended the ramp, and heard everything you said to the agents.”

A thoughtful expression crossed Cuvalt’s face, “So, at long last it has begun.”

“What has begun?” The little alien didn’t respond, so I

tapped a finger on his head. "Are you still in there, Cuvalt? What has begun?"

"The Regents are finally ready to bring the Terran worlds into the Regency."

"I don't think that's going to work, Cuvalt. I don't know much about the Terran Republic but I do know they've refused every invitation to join the Regency."

Cuvalt chuckled, "They will not refuse this invitation, Glen."

Something in the alien's laugh sent a shiver up my spine. "What makes you so sure?"

"Because the invitation will be delivered by a fleet of Regency warships, each of them equipped with a hyperdrive," he replied. "If the Terrans are wise, they will bow to the inevitable and submit. If they are foolish—and I believe they will be—the Terrans will fight. Many millions will die and, in the end, the Terrans will still bow in submission."

A part of me insisted the coming invasion had nothing to do with me. I was born in Regency space, and never set foot on a Terran world. Even when my father sold the *Starwind* to Cuvalt, I was confined to the ship the whole time. Despite that, I still felt loyalty to the Republic. I liked the audacity my people showed by thumbing their noses at the all powerful Regents. I especially liked their creativity and drive to discover new things. And I always promised myself I'd eventually go to the Republic if I ever won my freedom. Then I could finally learn what it meant to be human. And, by the Progenitors, it was time to honor that promise.

I grabbed Cuvalt by the arm and dragged him aft.

"Unhand me, Glen!" Cuvalt protested. When I kept dragging him down the corridor, he asked, "What are you doing?"

"Getting you off my ship."

The color drained from Cuvalt's ears, a certain sign of fear. "Now, Glen, do not act in such haste. You will regret—"

"I'm not throwing you out the airlock," I snapped.

Before Cuvalt could ask what I was doing, I stopped at a small hatch in the corridor. With my free hand, I opened it and shoved Cuvalt into the waiting lifepod. "Don't worry, I'll tell Virugi Control to send a Space Guard ship for you."

I slammed and sealed the hatch. Without a second thought, I launched the pod. Returning to the pilot's compartment, I sent Cuvalt's location to Virugi Control. A quick check of the scanner showed the fighters closing quickly. I glanced at the nav computer, and it told me they wouldn't reach the *Starwind* in time. It already displayed coordinates for the first jump in the long trip to Terran space. An hour later, I passed the Virugi system's hyperlimit and activated the hyperdrive.

The stars stretched to lines before vanishing entirely as the *Starwind* entered hyperspace. I was on my way to warn the Republic of the coming invasion. Only the Progenitors knew if I'd get there in time.

THE GUARDIAN

Elise

Night fell as Father and I returned our passes to the Ta'Bethan security guard and re-entered the Alien Sector. Nans—a female Stroul—was right behind us, just as she had been the previous four nights. Like all her race, Nans was as wide as she was tall. She was close to my five foot six inch height yet she managed to move easily through crowds of beings. That's how she always ended up right behind us in line at the gate, positioned so she could interrogate me on human customs. Okay, interrogate is too strong a word. Nans is unfailingly polite, so much so that I found myself answering her questions even when I didn't feel like talking. Like tonight.

As always, Father ambled toward our lodgings, mulling over the day's discoveries. A brisk pace would have denied Nans the opportunity to catch up with us, and I had tried setting one earlier in the week. Father hadn't matched my stride, forcing me to slow down and stay by his side. Our planetary visa was in his name so I couldn't simply leave him behind. The Regency could restrict us to the Alien Sector if a security agent found me wandering alone. Father's research

required access to the Library of the Progenitors, and I would never do anything to jeopardize that—even if it meant responding to Nans’ daily interrogations. I mean questions.

The big, rotund Stroul sidled up to me, “I greet you, Elise Daughter First of Lineage Rollins.”

“I receive your greetings and reciprocate, Nans Daughter Third of Lineage Blouq,” I replied, matching her formal greeting with a politeness ingrained from years of traveling the Regency with Father.

“I have found our conversations illuminating, Elise Daughter First. May we continue at this time?”

That was not simple politeness on Nans’ part. Well, it was politeness but there was nothing simple about it. The Stroul place inordinate value on polite social intercourse. If I replied in the negative Nans would thank me and leave me alone until our next meeting.

A part of me wanted to do just that but, like Father, Nans was a scholar. While Father’s field was the history and mystery of the Progenitors, Nans’ field was alien cultures. I was the first female human Nans had met and she couldn’t waste the opportunity to expand her knowledge. As the daughter of a dedicated scholar, I couldn’t bring myself to thwart her quest for knowledge.

“I am honored, Nans Daughter Third, and pray the Progenitors grant me the knowledge you seek.”

“I am in your debt,” Nans replied.

That was a first. Nans must have found our talks illuminating in the extreme for she was not speaking a meaningless platitude. A Stroul proclamation of debt was not given lightly. Furthermore, Nans would do everything in her power to discharge her debt.

I had not realized how deeply Nans appreciated our talks. The irritation that had grown over the previous several days faded. “Of what shall we converse, Nans Daughter Third?”

“Are human mating customs taboo?”

“No, not in general. Many questions of a specific nature are also within the bounds of propriety.”

“Please accept my apology in advance if my next question is beyond those boundaries, Elise Daughter First. What specific questions should I avoid?”

“Questions associated with the physical relationship between a specific man and a specific woman should be avoided.”

“I believe I understand. Would questions concerning the brief color alteration in your face be inappropriate?” When I shook my head—a human gesture I taught Nans during our first discussion—she asked, “Is the coloration part of the human mating ritual, something that makes you more attractive to a human male?”

“The change in color is a blush, and it is indicative of embarrassment rather than...um...sexual availability.”

“I humbly beg your forgiveness, Elise Daughter First. Embarrassment was never my intention.”

“There is no need to apologize, Nans Daughter Third. I blushed because I lack experience in the...physical...aspects of human mating.”

Nans’ nostrils widened—a Stroul expression of surprise—and she said, “I beg your pardon once again. I was of the opinion you were of mating age.”

“Your opinion is correct. I am twenty Terran years old, and have been physically capable of bearing young for several years. Many women my age have such experience. I, um...”

As I floundered for a diplomatic way of blaming my father for my lack of experience with men, he said, “I fear Elise has had little opportunity to spend time with humans her own age, male or female. She’s spent most of her life traveling the Regency with me. The life of an itinerant scholar, I fear.”

“I see,” Nans said. “You must rectify this situation, Alexander Father of Lineage Rollins, or Elise Daughter First may never birth a line of her own.”

“You are correct,” Father sighed. “I had planned on taking Elise to Earth so she could go to college, then I stumbled across a tantalizing clue to the mysterious disappearance of the Progenitors. I feel certain the Library of the Progenitors holds the answer, if only the Regency would grant access to their restricted section.”

“Alexander Father, you must put the needs of your line before your personal needs.” I got the idea Nans would be shaking a finger at Father if she had known of the gesture, “The Progenitors disappeared several millennia ago. Their mystery will exist for millennia to come. Elise Daughter First will not. You must—”

A commanding voice issued from a deep shadow, “Dr. Alexander Rollins?”

Nans bristled at the impolite interruption, “You dare intrude—”

The speaker stepped from the shadows, revealing an Elder wearing the uniform of a Regency Guardian. Behind him came a squad of Ta’Bethan Regency Security Agents. This was our eighteenth trip to Ta’Beth, and I still found the natives fascinating. They reminded most humans of the centaurs from ancient mythology, except Ta’Bethans resemble a cross between a wolf and an elf rather than a horse and a human.

Nans fell silent at the sight of the Elder. He was like all of their race—a gaunt humanoid with spindly arms and legs, no neck, a too large head that otherwise looked human, and light gray skin. This Elder wore the same serious expression you see on *every* Elder. I’m not kidding, either. No human has ever seen an Elder smile, much less heard one laugh.

Father, his face pale in the artificial light, said, "I'm Rollins. May I help you?"

"I am Dubok of the Regency Guardians, stationed on Ta'Beth," the Elder replied as if we could not tell as much from his uniform. He held out his hand, "I have revoked your visa. Give it to me and accompany my squad."

Father's eyes widened in surprise, "Why has my visa—"

The Guardian interrupted again, "I will explain all once you and your daughter join the others in the holding facility."

To my surprise, Nans said, "Elise Daughter First holds me in her debt. Take me in her place."

The Guardian kept his eyes on Father but said, "The Guardians have no interest in a Stroul scholar. You may leave."

"She holds my debt," Nans said, enunciating each word with care.

Before I ascertained Nans' intent, she whispered, "Lineage Blouq always repays their debts, Elise Daughter First. Flee with your father."

Moving surprisingly quickly for such a bulky being, Nans barreled through the Guardian and into the Ta'Bethan squad behind him. Without another thought, I grabbed Father's hand, and we ran for the docks and a ship off Ta'Beth.

Within seconds the sound of Nans' scuffle with the Guardian and his Ta'Bethan squad disappeared into the general background noise of the Alien Sector. I had no idea how much time we had before our pursuers came after us but couldn't imagine it was more than a few seconds.

"This way," Father said, his tone low and desperate as he pulled me into a narrow opening between shipping crates.

We dodged randomly through the containers awaiting shipment, and I quickly lost all sense of direction. That would make us harder to find. If we didn't know where we

were, how could the Ta'Bethan agents find us? Just when I decided that made sense, Father ruined it.

"The Ta'Bethans will be on our trail soon, so we need a plan." He flashed a grin at me, "Don't worry, I have one."

"What makes you think the agents will find our trail so easily?"

"The Progenitors raised the Ta'Bethans up from a species of pack hunters. Think of them as smaller versions of the Terran wolves they resemble, smart and all but tireless when running down their prey." My face must have shown disappointment that Father never shared this information with me because he added, "I just discovered that today, Elise, and would have told you if I hadn't discovered something far more important."

What could be more important than discovering the seed species for one of the Progenitors' upraised races? Usually, Father cannot contain his excitement at such discoveries.

He dug a data stick out of his pocket and handed it to me. "I believe this is why the Guardian came for us personally. It is a copy of all my research, including everything I discovered today."

"Then let us give it to the Guardian, Father! Why take such risks when—"

"The Guardian won't simply take the data stick, honey. Remember the holding facility the Guardian mentioned?" At my nod, he continued, "That's part of what I found in my research today. The Regency only uses holding facilities prior to an invasion. I have no doubt agents are combing the Alien Sector for other humans as we speak."

"That is ridiculous. The Regency doesn't have hyperdrives and none of the planets of the Terran Republic have wormholes. An invasion is quite literally impossible."

Father shook his head, "Humanity discovered the Regency over a hundred years ago, Elise. Do you honestly

believe a government that rules a thousand Child species couldn't get their hands on a working hyperdrive during that time? Once they had one, even given the Regency's strictly enforced technological stasis, they could reverse engineer a hyperdrive within a few years. After that—"

A Ta'Bethan voice called from nearby and several more answered. The squad was closing in on our position faster than I'd imagined possible.

Once again, I grabbed Father's hand and tried dragging him away from the pursuit. This time he didn't budge.

"Father," I hissed, "we've got to run!"

He shook his head, "No, Elise, *you* have to run. I will take advantage of the Ta'Bethans' pack hunting instinct and lead them away from you."

I gave an emphatic shake of my head, "No, we—"

"Someone needs to get away and warn the Terran Republic, honey. I'm the one who's been doing the research. I'm the one the agents will pursue. That might give you a chance to reach the docks and find a ship away from here."

"But—"

"I love you, honey," Father said. He dropped the data stick in my pocket and shoving me away from him. "Now, run!"

He turned and ran in the opposite direction. Unwilling to waste my father's sacrifice, I blinked back tears and made my way to the docks.

For two years I had negotiated our ship passage when we left a world, and knew how to tell the law abiding ships from those open to under the table negotiations. I passed up three of the latter ships because they just didn't feel right. The least shady of that trio seemed my only choice until I spotted the *Far Roamer*. Dad and I flew on Ship Commander Tyurt's ship several times in the past, and I knew I could trust her. She even smuggled me aboard before negotiating passage. Still, I

didn't breathe easily until we entered the wormhole and left Ta'Beth behind.



I looked through a port as my hired ride settled onto the small landing field. Heat radiated from the landing area as the sun beat down on the bare ground and the ramshackle town nearby. I had never visited this particular illegal settlement, but Father and I had spent time in two others. The inhabitants would be an odd assortment of pirates, smugglers, tinkerers, and artists living together and supporting each other in their criminal activities.

Ship Commander Tyurt waddled out of the pilot's compartment. Her race, the Cluff, reminded me of hairy Terran ducks. She looked up at me and said, "I spied a human built ship during our descent. You are in luck, Miss Rollins. I hailed it and discovered it is of Terran Republic registry."

I felt pent up tension drop away and drew my first deep breath since escaping from Ta'Beth four days ago. Few Terran ships flew very far into Regency space, but most of those who did were welcome at these hidden outposts where the precious few rebellious members of the Regency's myriad races gathered and pursued their illicit trade.

I bobbed my head in acknowledgment, keeping my face impassive, "Indeed, fortune shines as brightly upon me as it did when I found you and your vessel on Ta'Beth."

Tyurt returned my nod, her beak forcing impassivity on her own face, "Your father always treated me with kindness and respect, and I thank the Progenitors you did find me. But you should avoid continued pleasantries and go to the Terran ship. It rests directly between our position and the settlement. Haste, unseemly as my people find it, is necessary in times such as these."

I barely contained a sigh of relief—a far worse breach of manners than haste—and held out both hands, “I thank you, Ship Commander Tyurt, and am in your debt.”

She took my hands in hers, “The pleasure was mine, Miss Rollins. I bid you farewell and good travels.”

“As do I in return.”

Tyurt released my hands and opened the ship’s hatch. I walked down the gangway as if I had all the time in the galaxy. Waiving of the taboo against haste or not, a faster pace would have been insulting to the Ship Commander. As soon as my feet touched the ground—meaning I was no longer bound by Cluff rules of propriety—I broke into a run.

The Terran ship was where Tyurt said it would be, and was far better maintained than I anticipated. Most Terran ships that travel deeply into the Regency look the worse for wear because human crews rarely allow aliens near their ships, much less allow them to work on them. Human crews concentrate on keeping their ship’s inner workings in good repair and the exterior suffered as a result.

It was possible this ship was new to the Regency trade routes. The design was older than me, so I somehow doubted it was freshly arrived from the Republic. I hoped my guess was correct since a newly arrived ship might be unwilling to turn around and head straight back to Terran space.

Father’s fear of an impending invasion was a product of his vast knowledge of the Regency, but I’d scanned his data and it was woefully short on hard evidence. What would I do if it was insufficient to convince the ship’s captain? I had no idea but was about to find out.

A man closer to Father’s age than mine waited for me at the airlock. “I ‘spose yer from Tyurt’s ship? She said a girl would be heading my way.”

“Yes, I’m Elise Rollins and need to hire your ship.”

The man’s eyebrows rose in surprise at that. “I be Jack-

son, Cap'n of the *Wyvern*. What's a young'un like you need with a ship?"

"I must get to the nearest Terran Republic world. Speed is of the essence."

"I ain't exactly inclined ta do that, missy, seein' as we jus' got out here."

"I will make it worth your while, sir. Also, you're not going to find much of a welcome inside the Regency. Guardians are busy rounding up humans. They'll grab you and your crew if you dare land on one of their worlds."

Jackson considered that, came to some conclusion, and asked, "Have you even got enough money to hire my ship, little lady?"

"I don't know, sir. How much would you charge for that trip?" The man named a huge figure, but one I could pay. Barely. "Half now and half on arrival."

Captain Jackson gave a single nod of his head. "Done."

I entered the airlock and paid the man. It pretty much wiped out the money I had on hand, but I could get a lot more once we reached a Republic colony.

The captain took my credit transfer, doffed his cap, and said, "Welcome ta the *Wyvern*, Miss Rollins."

The ship lifted off a few minutes later. At last I was headed for the Terran Republic.

End excerpt.

