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*Death After Life* by Peter David

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created by Rick Berman & Michael Piller,  
and STAR TREK: VOYAGER®  
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**NEW  FRONTIER**

**DEATH AFTER LIFE**

*Peter David*

Mackenzie Calhoun, captain of the *Excalibur*, was so cold that it took his body long minutes to realize that he was once again in warmth.

It didn't happen immediately, or all at once. Instead it occurred in stages. First his fingers and toes, frozen nearly to frostbite stage, began to flex. Then his lungs, which had been so chilled that Calhoun had practically forgotten what it was like to breathe without a thousand needles jabbing in his chest, began to expand to their normal size. There was pain at first when they did, but that started to subside. He gave out a series of violent coughs that racked his body, and it was only then that his brain processed the information that the rest of his body was providing him.

He was so dazed, so confounded, that he had to make the effort to reorder events in his mind so that he could recall how he'd come to this pass.

The cold . . . the cold was so overwhelming that, for what seemed an endless period of time, he couldn't think of anything beyond that. There had been cold, and blistering winds that would have flayed the skin from his body if he'd been out there much longer. Cold, and bodies . . . two bodies . . .

Yes. The Iconians. A male, and a female, both named Smyt. Both dead. Lying there, faceup in the snow, mere feet away from the great gateway. And words . . . words etched in the snow by the male, just before he died, carved in the snow with a hand so frozen and useless

that it was not much more than an iced club of meat. The words had been: *Giant Lied*. What the hell did that mean? What giant? What had he lied about? Why had the male Iconian felt so strongly about this that he had used his final moments of life to report this transgression? The Iconians . . . *grozit*, they had . . . they had caused trouble . . . so much trouble, for two races . . . for himself . . . for Shelby . . .

Shelby . . .

Calhoun lay there, flat on his back, arms and legs splayed, trying to put together the pieces of his body and the pieces of his life, the ground hard and gritty beneath him, the heat of an unknown sun pounding down upon him, his extremities starting to tingle with the resurgence of blood circulating to them. And that was when he remembered Shelby.

Elizabeth Paula Shelby, captain of the good ship *Trident*, who had been swept away along with him to the frozen world that had—for a time, at least—promised to be their final resting place. She had been there . . . with another man. Yes, yes, it was starting to come back to him. A man named Ebozay, leader of a people called . . . called . . . what? The . . .

“Markanians.” The word was barely a whisper between cracked and bleeding lips, and the voice was hardly recognizable as his own. Indeed, he almost thought it was someone else for a moment before he realized with vague dismay that, yes, it was he who had spoken.

Yes, that was right. Ebozay of the Markanians. He had wound up on the wasted, frozen world along with Shelby. Then they had fallen into a crevasse, and Shelby survived, but Ebozay didn’t. Simple as that.

“Shelby” was the next word Calhoun managed to get out, obviously one that was nearer and dearer to his heart than “Markanians” had been. He said it again, a bit louder this time, and had no idea whether anyone was going to respond. It was at that point that he realized he was blind.

No . . . no, not blind. But his eyes were closed, and absurd as it sounded, he didn’t have the strength to open them. He was trembling, his body seizing up, and he coughed once more. Shelby . . . Shelby had been unconscious in his arms. He had cradled her, like a groom delicately transporting his bride over the threshold on their wedding night, but there had been nothing remotely romantic about it. She had been unconscious, freezing in his arms, injured from her fall and the

frostbite, and he had held her as if he could will his own body heat into her in order to save her.

It hadn't worked. Naturally it hadn't worked; it was a ridiculous notion. And yet that was all he could think of to do, as exposed and relatively naked to the elements as they were, with the snow and wind pounding at them as if angry that they had the temerity not to roll over and die instantly upon being faced with their predicament.

Calhoun had spat out curse after curse, cried out against the unfairness of their circumstances, had simply refused to believe that it was going to end there, on some nameless ice world who-knew-where. Certainly after everything they'd been through, that couldn't be anything approaching an equitable finale for their lives.

"It's . . . not fair," Calhoun grunted.

And a voice from nearby, rough and hard and disinterested in hearing any sort of griping of any sort, said, "Life isn't fair. Deal with it."

It had been so long since he had heard that voice that, at first, he didn't recognize it, except in the way that one does when one thinks, *Damn, that voice is familiar, I should really know it.* And then it came to him, roared toward him with the ferocity of a star exploding in fiery nova.

"Father . . . ?" he whispered, and that was it, the shock was too much, because Mackenzie Calhoun realized that he was dead, that was all, just dead, because his murdered father was speaking to him, and he'd never really made it through the planet of ice at all. It had all been some sort of cruel joke, and at that moment, he and Elizabeth were lying on the planet's surface becoming crusted over with sleet and snow. And at that dismal image, that final miserable end that had been inflicted upon them . . . the mighty, fighting heart of Mackenzie Calhoun gave out. It wasn't for himself so much; Calhoun had no fear of death. In many respects, he couldn't quite believe that he'd lived as long as he had. No, the despair that broke him was the thought that he had let down Shelby. That he had carried his wife in his arms, whispered to her frozen ear that he would make things better, that he would save them somehow, and he'd failed. He'd let *her* down.

Even as he was half sitting up, the physical and mental stress all caught up with him at once, and Calhoun fell back without ever having

opened his eyes. He struck his head hard on the barren and crusty ground beneath him, but never felt it.

And so died Mackenzie Calhoun, without ever having a chance to see the sun set.

Mackenzie Calhoun, captain of the *Excalibur*, was so cold that it took his body long minutes to realize that he was once again in warmth.

It didn't happen immediately, or all at once. Instead it occurred in stages. First his fingers and toes, frozen nearly to frostbite stage, began to flex. Then his lungs, which had been so chilled that Calhoun had practically forgotten what it was like to breathe without a thousand needles jabbing in his chest, began to expand to their normal size. There was pain at first when they did, but that began to subside. He gave out a series of violent coughs that racked his body, and it was only then that his brain processed the information that the rest of his body was providing him.

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"Eppy . . ." he whispered, his concern for her pushing away anything else that could possibly be going through his mind. "Eppy," he said, revolted by how weak and whispery his voice sounded.

It was at that point that he realized he was blind.

No . . . no, not blind. But his eyes were closed, and absurd as it sounded, he didn't have the strength to open them. He was trembling, his body seizing up, and he coughed once more. For a moment he wanted to surrender to despair, to dwell upon how unfair all of this

was. But then he thought, *Unfair? Unfair? And who ever claimed life was fair in the first place? Certainly not Calhoun. Certainly not his father, the man from whom he'd learned so much. The man who had died, broken in body but not in spirit by soldiers representing an oppressive race whom young Calhoun had eventually driven off his world. If he were here right now, Calhoun realized, he'd be telling his son to stop lying about and dwelling upon his unfair lot in life. He was still alive, after all, and that was all that was important. Now get up.* The voice of his own, which so echoed that of his father, chided him yet again, and said even more sternly, *Get up! Your wife needs you. On your feet, damn you, if you be a man . . .*

Why was he thinking about his father? It had been years since he had dwelt on him . . . so long, in fact, that he would have thought he'd forgotten the very sound of the man's voice. But for some reason, there it was, clear as anything in his head, as if he'd heard it just yesterday.

Oddest feeling of *deja vu* . . . no . . . more than that . . . as if he'd already experienced all of it during some sort of . . . of odd dream . . .

The air of his surroundings was warm in his chest as he drew in great lungfuls of it. It was the breath of life; he'd never been so fundamentally grateful for the simple act of breathing. Slowly he sat up, his back stiff, the circulation only now hesitantly returning to his feet, his arms. He let out a low groan, felt the dampness of his clothes sticking to him as the ice and snow that had coated them melted. It was a most uncomfortable sensation.

He opened his eyes and immediately squinted against the brightness of the sun. He put up an arm and winced at the motion, feeling a stiffness in the joint that made him wonder whether he'd injured the arm in its socket. But his only vocal acknowledgment of the pain was a low, annoyed growl, even as he continued to shield his eyes against the sun. There was more pain, racing down his back, and in his elbows and knees, but he was beginning not to mind it so much. It was, after all, a reminder that he was alive.

"Eppy," he said again, and there she was, miraculously, sitting up a few feet away from him on the parched ground. She looked as utterly disheveled as he imagined he did, with her uniform just as wet, and her strawberry blond hair hanging down in sodden ringlets. But the



way she was looking at him, with those eyes that seemed to own his entire soul, spoke of both gratitude and appreciation of the purely miraculous, because obviously she had never expected to see him again. She had probably never looked quite as awful in her entire life, and she had never looked quite as good to Calhoun as she did at that moment. When she smiled at him, it lit up her entire face.

“Hey, Mac,” she got out, and her voice sounded as cracked and strained as did his. But none of that mattered, none of it at all . . .

Because he wasn’t looking at her. He was looking through her, around her. For all the attention he was paying her, she might as well not have been there at all. Apparently she was aware of it, for her face fell and her lips thinned as she reflexively shoved her hair out of her face. “Mac,” she said, making no effort to keep the annoyed disapproval out of her voice and failing spectacularly. “Mac . . . I’m right here.”

Calhoun still wasn’t listening. Instead he was getting to his feet, and astoundingly all the pain, all the hurt, all the stress that his body had been through was instantly forgotten. His legs were strong and firm again, blood pumping through them as if they were the legs of a twenty-year-old. And although there was a look of utter incredulity upon his face, there was also calm certainty, as if he was convinced that what he was looking upon couldn’t possibly be there . . . but if it was, it wasn’t going to daunt him. As if, upon seeing this, he could handle pretty much anything.

“Mac,” she said again, but this time her tone of voice had changed, for clearly she was aware that not only was it odd that they were alive, but odder still that her environment had changed so radically. It only made sense, Calhoun realized; she had not, after all, been conscious when they went through the gateway. The last thing she had known was that they were upon a nameless ice world with death imminent. “Mac . . . Mac, what’s wrong? Where are we?” She glanced over her shoulder and an instant later she was squinting as well. “God, it’s bright here!”

“And dry,” he said.

“Where . . . are we?” she asked in wonderment. She had staggered to her feet, and was pulling on the bottom of her uniform shirt, wringing it out as best she could. Enough water to boil up a nice cup of tea

poured out of the cloth as she twisted it. “It . . . seems familiar . . . but I . . . I’m not sure . . .”

“You’ve been here . . . but you haven’t been here. Neither have I.”

“What . . . ?”

In the near distance, Calhoun studied the castle-like structures that dotted the horizon. The towers were tall, powerfully built, gleaming defiantly in the scorching sun . . . so strong, so new, that Calhoun didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. They were not freestanding; instead they had been carved right out of cliffs of solid rock. Calhoun had looked upon similar structures in his youth, but they had always been silent and empty . . . a mute testimony to more ancient times when such fortresses provided great measures of security. Back before invaders from another world had shown up with mighty weapons that were capable of reducing such places to shattered shadows of their former selves. Never had Calhoun looked upon such a fortress—“keeps,” they were called—in such pristine condition. Not only that, but even at this distance he could see people moving through it, walking the parapets, going from one carved entrance to the next with confidence and casual athleticism. It was like watching history come to life. Along the bottom ridge of the fortress wall was an array of tents, private accommodations for some of the privileged higher-ups.

It took him a moment to realize that Shelby was speaking to him, and he focused his attention on her with effort. “What did you say, Eppy . . . ?”

“Mac . . . where are we?” she asked with genuine concern. He saw how she was looking at him, as if worried that he’d somehow taken leave of his senses . . . or, at the very least, lost track of his priorities.

“Xenex.” He couldn’t quite believe it until he actually said it. It was as if the spoken name of the place lent it reality that it didn’t have moments before.

“Xenex,” she repeated tonelessly. “Your homeworld. Xenex.”

He nodded. “I . . . think so, yes.”

“How the hell did we get to Xenex?”

“A gateway,” he said. “There was a huge one on the ice world . . . much bigger than either of those transportable devices that the Iconians had. It was activated, and I took us through there to here . . .”

“ ‘Here’ being Xenex.” She adopted a professional, clinical attitude, sizing up the sky, the sun. “It . . . could be,” she said slowly. “I was only there the one time, but—”

“It is, Eppy, trust me. I was there a hell of a lot longer than one time,” Calhoun told her. He stayed rooted to the spot, unwilling to move, worried in some absurd fashion that if he did, what he was seeing would simply vanish like a passing soap bubble. His nostrils flared slightly, and he frowned. He looked for some hint of smoke or damage or signs of battle from the Keep, but there was nothing, which certainly seemed at odds with what his other senses were telling him.

He was so focused on his environment that he started slightly when Shelby stepped right in front of him. “Mac,” she said firmly, “what’s happening? I know you. I know your body language better than I do my own. You’re tense . . .”

“We just stepped through a gateway onto Xenex, Eppy. Isn’t that enough reason for tension?”

It was a sign of how dire their situation was that Shelby didn’t tell him to dispense with the annoying nickname of “Eppy” that he favored. “There’s even more going on here than that,” she said. “It’s as if you’re in full battle mode. Like you’re detecting an immediate threat. What’s going on? I have a right to know, a right to be as prepared as you.”

“You couldn’t possibly be,” he said, and then instantly regretted the harshness of his phrasing.

Shelby, however, did not appear to take offense. Instead she simply inclined her head slightly, and said, “If you mean I can’t be the fighter you are, considering your background, fine, point taken. But my mind’s as sharp as yours, Mac, and information will help me as much as it will you.”

He drew in a deep breath of air to confirm that which he’d already surmised. “There’s been fighting,” he said.

“How do you know? I don’t see any sign of it.”

“Nor do I,” he admitted. “But . . . I can smell it.”

“What do you smell?”

His instinct was to protect her from the situation, but it was an instinct that he had to override. He knew she deserved better than to be

coddled and sheltered, and besides, if he was right, she was going to find out sooner or later anyway. “Blood. There’s blood in the air. Blood and death.”

“Really? What does that smell like?”

He was annoyed by the flippancy in her voice. “It smells like chicken. What do you *think* it smells like?”

“I don’t know, Mac!” she said with a frustrated wave of her arms. “I never noticed blood having a particular scent, and death is more concept to me than something definable by one’s nose.”

He took a step toward her, looking down at her, and he felt a looming darkness behind his eyes. “That, Eppy, is because you’ve never been up to your elbows in it.”

“Screw you, Calhoun,” she shot back. She faced him, her hands on her hips. “Maybe I wasn’t a teenage warlord, hacking my way through corpses stacked five feet high, but I had a starship and crew dying around me when I fought the Borg, so don’t tell me what I know and don’t know, all right?”

“Fair enough,” he said mildly. “In that case, the smell in the air should be slightly familiar to you.”

She took a deep breath, then admitted slowly, “It is. Slightly.”

“Come on.”

“Where?”

He pointed to the Keep. “There.”

“Why there?”

Shrugging, Calhoun asked, “Do you have a better idea?”

“Good point,” she said.

They started walking. Somewhere along the way, Calhoun reached over and took Shelby’s hand. It felt warm and comforting, and not only that, but he couldn’t believe how quickly and thoroughly he’d recovered from near death. All the discomfort was forgotten, the paralysis gone from his feet and fingers. Even more remarkable was Shelby’s recovery. It had seemed to Calhoun that she’d been perhaps a few heartbeats away from death, and yet now here she was, as hale and hearty as he was, walking at a brisk distance-eating stride that easily matched his.

They crossed the plain, approaching the mountainous area where

the Keep was ensconced. Little clouds of dust were kicked up under their feet, and the dirt crunched beneath their boot soles. “The sun’s setting,” he said abruptly.

She blinked, apparently surprised by the gravity of his pronouncement. “So? Suns do that. At least once a day, as I recall.”

But Calhoun shook his head, racking his brain, trying to remember. “There’s . . . more to it, though. I . . . remember the sun starting to set . . . I think . . . didn’t see it through, though. And . . . I know I didn’t I see it rise . . . so how . . . ?”

“I don’t know, Mac. I don’t know why a gateway would drop us on Xenex, I don’t know why I’m feeling so completely recovered in such a short period of time . . .”

*So she had noticed . . .*

“. . . but what I do know,” and she squeezed his hand, “is that I’m with you. And that’s the most important thing. Together we can handle just about anything.”

He smiled at that. The vote of confidence seemed ever-so-slightly naïve on her part, but he certainly wasn’t going to say that. Instead he appreciated the sentiment for what it was.

Calhoun was about to reply to her when a sudden explosion tore the air.

It froze Shelby and Calhoun in their tracks and they looked ahead to the Keep, eyes wide, as one of the lower sections suddenly erupted in flames. People were running, screaming, shouting defiance. Another section of the Keep exploded, and people fell off the parapets, arms pinwheeling in futility as if they were hoping they could grab handholds from the very air.

“Come on!” shouted Calhoun, yanking on Shelby’s hand.

She stayed where she was, looking at him incredulously. “You want to head *toward that?!?*” she demanded. “You’re crazy!”

“We have to!” he told her.

“Forget it!” she said. “We’re not budging from—!”

Calhoun heard it, smelled it before he actually saw it: a giant, flaming mass of burning slag, descending from overhead, a misfire from a catapult that was falling well short of its target—namely the Keep. It was, however, descending right toward the two Starfleet officers, and

it was too large, nowhere to run, and even as Calhoun yanked on Shelby's arm to try and get clear of it, he knew in his heart that it was too late.

The slag struck them, crushing their bodies and obliterating them, leaving no trace that they had ever been there.

And so died Mackenzie Calhoun and Elizabeth Shelby, without ever having a chance to see the sun set.

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“We have to!” he told her.

Shelby knew beyond any question that it was madness. Despite the fact that Calhoun insisted this was Xenex, there was still some vague doubt in her mind. But if there was one thing she wasn't doubting, it was that running toward some major battle was the height of folly. Far better to turn around and put as much distance between themselves and it as possible.

But even as that thought went through her mind, something told her that it was the wrong move. That they were in an insane situation, and it would be far better to surrender to that insanity and just . . . just go along with it, even though it didn't seem to make much sense.

“All right, fine!” she said, and allowed Calhoun to haul her forward.

Abruptly the air behind them was superheated, and seconds later Shelby was knocked off her feet by the impact of some sort of flaming mass of . . . she had no idea what. All she did know was that it had crashed to the ground right where they’d been standing.

Her blood thudded in her temples as she realized just how close a call that had been, but Calhoun gave her no time to dwell on it. “Let’s go!” he said, yanking on her arm once more, and Shelby had no choice but to follow.

Death. Death in the air. Yes, she could smell it now, just as Calhoun had been saying yesterday—

*“Yesterday?”* The word hung in her mind even as it tumbled out of her mouth for no reason she could determine.

Calhoun glanced at her, clearly not understanding what she was referring to. “What about it?”

“Nothing. Nothing.” She didn’t fully comprehend herself what had prompted her to say that, and she certainly didn’t have the time to dwell upon it. “That was . . . that was just a close call, that’s all.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” he said dryly. “Come on.”

They pounded across the plains, and Shelby was amazed at how easily she was keeping up with Calhoun. She didn’t think he was running particularly slowly, but nevertheless she was pacing him with no difficulty. He wasn’t even pulling on her arm anymore since she was able to maintain an equal speed with him. Calhoun obviously was becoming aware of it as he cast an appraising glance in her direction, even as they kept moving.

*“Why are we running . . . toward the site . . . of the battle?”* she shouted over the sounds of explosions as her arms pumped furiously.

*“Because it’s better than being out in the open! And the Keep is returning fire! See?”*

And he was right. From the upper reaches, a catapult-like device had appeared, and they were dispatching giant flaming wads of whatever at their still-unseen aggressors. Men and women were crawling along the upper reaches of the Keep like so many spiders, and what had at first seemed like disordered panic to Shelby now came across as a clearly organized response to the assault.

There were outcroppings of rock ringing the outer edge of the Keep, only a few feet high. "These aren't enough to keep anyone out!" Shelby said.

"It's enough to prevent wheeled war vehicles from drawing too close," Calhoun responded, even as he clambered up the ridge. Shelby immediately followed suit. "That's why it was so useful in the old days. In the new days, when we were attacked by flying ships and such, well . . ." He let his voice trail off.

"You sound . . . almost nostalgic . . . for ground combat," she grunted as she hauled herself over, scraping herself rather thoroughly as she did so.

"When a man's trying to kill you, you should be able to look him in the eye."

"How sweet."

They tumbled up and over, Shelby throwing her arms over her head to shield it on the roll down. She bounded to her feet, feeling more invigorated, more alive than she'd ever been. It was as if the danger that surrounded her had flipped some sort of switch within her brain, making her savor all the more every breath she took in the face of danger.

"*Come—!*" Calhoun started to say, but with a sharp gesture she silenced him and snapped, "If you say 'Come on' to me one more time, I break your neck."

He laughed at that, but it seemed to her a laugh of sheer joy, as if he was thrilled to be sharing this . . . this demented escapade with her. She had no real idea what the hell was going on, or whether they were really in Xenex's past somehow, or any of it. But the one thing she did know, beyond any doubt, was that she was absolutely loving every minute of it. Was this what it was like, she wondered, to see the world through the eyes of Mackenzie Calhoun? To savor danger, to thrive on personal risk? It frightened her a little, but only a little. The rest of it made her nearly giddy over the jeopardy.

They ran toward the Keep, and although a couple of the flaming masses of whatever-the-hell-they-were landed near them, nothing came as close as that earlier one had. They were drawing within close range of the defenders in the upper reaches of the Keep, and the de-



fenders were pointing at them now, shouting to one another. For an instant Shelby was extremely concerned. What if these people took Calhoun to be an enemy and opened fire on him?

And Calhoun was slowing down, looking at the defenders in wonderment. “Mac . . . Mac, what is it?” Shelby asked, shaking his arm when she got no immediate response. “Mac . . . ?”

“It . . . can’t be . . .” he breathed.

“Mac . . . ?”

Suddenly there was a howl of fury behind them, a hundred voices shouting as one, and Shelby spun just in time to see a horde of Xenexians pouring over the ridge that they had just climbed over. They were armed to the teeth, swords in their hands, rage in their eyes, charging full-bore toward the Keep. Their armor was of the most primitive sort, brown and black leathers that would turn away only the most glancing of blows. But they were heavily muscled, with bristling beards and wild purple eyes like Mac’s. There were women as well, appearing no less vicious than the men, although their hair was shorn near to baldness. Their collective goal was clear: to assail the Keep. The defenders of the Keep responded in kind, cascading down the wall toward their attackers.

*Xenexians . . . both sides . . .* thought Shelby in confusion, remembering that Calhoun had once told her that—although certainly there had been disagreements, disputes, fragmentations (usually along family lines)—throughout the course of his world, there had never been any sort of civil war among his people. But what else could one possibly call this? No quarter being asked, none given, as two sides fueled by murderous rage pounded toward one another.

“*Mac! We’ve gotta get out of here!*” shouted Shelby, but even as she said it she realized there was nowhere to go. Furthermore, she doubted at that moment that Calhoun had even heard her. The two sides were converging, with Shelby and Calhoun right in the middle, and there was no escape.

Calhoun didn’t even try.

Instead, with a roar as loud and primal as anything torn from the throats of the attackers, Calhoun charged the men coming in behind them. As Shelby watched, stunned, Calhoun dropped to his hands and knees at the last second, and one of the foremost attackers slammed

into him, upending, feet flying high over his head. He hit the ground directly in front of Calhoun, and with a roar Calhoun was upon him. Calhoun grabbed his head with both hands, twisted once, and snapped his neck.

*My God . . . so easily . . .*

For years, Shelby had always known that deep inside—perhaps not so deep at that—Calhoun was a warrior born, a savage, cloaked in the appearance of a civilized man. She had convinced herself that, over the years, Calhoun had become more comfortable with that civility. She now realized, though, that it had been the thinnest of veneers, for he had tossed it aside in a heartbeat. Moreover, when he had done so, she was sure that it had been with a sense of relief on his part. *My God . . . he reverted so, so easily . . .*

Calhoun was not taking the time to dwell upon matters of civilized and uncivilized behavior. “*Behind me!*” he screamed at Shelby, and this time there was no hesitation as she darted behind. He had already grabbed up the sword of his fallen opponent, and howling a battle cry in a voice barely recognizable as his, Calhoun fought back. There was no artistry to his tactics, no style, no elegant form as one would see in fencing. This was nothing short of mere butchery as Calhoun hacked and slashed like a bladed windmill.

Everything seemed to be moving around her in a hazy, dreamlike manner. In moments Calhoun was covered in blood, as was she. Their clothes were soaked through with it, and she thought at first that it belonged solely to other people, but then she saw cuts and slashes piling up on Calhoun. There were too many swords, too many men, and however many he managed to hack away from him, more came. She wanted to scream *Enough! Enough!* But none would have heard her, or cared.

At the last second, she saw that someone had worked his way behind Calhoun, and was coming at them. She lashed out with a side kick, and felt the satisfying crunch of bone and ligaments as the kick connected perfectly with his knee. He went down, writhing, clutching at his leg, and Shelby tried to pick up his sword, but it might as well have weighed half a ton. She couldn’t budge it. Instead she settled for snatching a dagger off his belt, wielding it as best she could, slashing

away as others came near. But they were laughing at her derisively, sneering at the dagger, almost daring her to come at them.

Then she heard a scream, and the tip of a blade brushed against her back, causing her to jump away. That was when she realized, with a deep horror, that the blade had actually come right through Calhoun's body, driven through from the other side.

She whirled just as Calhoun fell against her, coughing up blood. "Eppy," he managed to croak out as she sank to her knees, cradling him.

She saw the massive redness spreading across his chest, and she knew that he was dying even as she said, "It's all right . . . you'll be okay . . . you're going to be fine . . ." He looked up at her and it was hard to tell whether he was annoyed at her pathetic attempts to lie, or amused because she was so wretchedly bad at it.

Then she felt a pinch at her back, a pain, and suddenly it felt worse, and that was when she saw a blade protruding from between her breasts. *Just missed the heart . . . that was lucky*, she thought, amazingly lucid even as her upper body jerked when the blade was yanked clear. She felt her lungs start to fill with fluid, felt the world blurring around her, and—although she was sure she was imagining it—heard the sounds of battle receding. For some reason she thought about when she was seven and rode a pony for the first time. Then she'd had ice cream until she'd gotten sick. That was a good day. A lot better than this one.

She wasn't imagining it. The fighting had stopped. Instead everyone seemed to be grouped around, staring at the two of them with interest, as if surprised to see them. Calhoun was returning the stare, and his mouth moved for some moments before he finally managed to get out the strangest words: "You're all dead . . ."

At first she thought he meant it literally. That, even in his dying moments, Calhoun was threatening them with a fearful vengeance that he would take upon them. Then he coughed, and said again, "You're all dead . . . how can you be here . . . when you're all dead . . . ?" and that was certainly enough to confuse the hell out of her.

Then the crowd of warriors seemed to separate, making way for someone. He was a burly man, with a strong chin evident even though he had a beard, and wild black hair tinged with gray. Aside from some glistening metal armbands, he was naked from the waist up, his torso

rippling with power, but scars, also. Deep, livid, angry scars that looked as if they'd just been made yesterday, but not by swords, no. They were too blunt, too rounded. Whip marks, perhaps, or some kind of rod . . .

Her chest was on fire, and she realized with a distant sort of interest that the pain had been increasing for some time. They were all staring down at her impassively now, and as her lifeblood mingled with that of Calhoun, she managed to say, "You . . . you murdering bastards . . . why . . . why . . .?"

The burly man, the one she took to be their leader, chuckled at her pain, which angered her all the more. He sounded condescending until he spoke, at which point he sounded . . . familiar.

"He knows why," he growled, pointing a sword at Calhoun. "Don't you, son?"

Calhoun, his face horribly sallow and pasty, managed a nod.

But Shelby didn't understand at all. All she knew at that moment was that her one wish was not to die in ignorance.

"Welcome," said Calhoun's father, "to Kaz'hera."

Shelby didn't get her wish.

The last thing she saw, just before she died, was the sun setting. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, and she hoped that Calhoun, at least, had had a chance to see it as well.

Calhoun awoke to sunlight on his face. It wasn't direct sunlight; rather, it was filtered through the cloth of a tent. Calhoun wondered where in the world a tent had come from, and then he remembered that there had been tents lining the bottom of the Keep. The ground was bumpy beneath him, although he was lying on some rough-hewn blankets which provided at least some measure of cushion. Nearby outside, he heard swords clanging, and for a moment he thought that there was another battle in the offing. But then he realized that it was just two people, and there was a distinct absence of shouting or panicked running about. So it was probably some sort of training session or private lesson.

The tent flaps were pushed aside, allowing more sunlight to flood in, and Calhoun blinked against it. His father's frame filled the door.

“It’s a fine, Xenexian sun. Never used to bother you. Have you gone soft?” he asked, his voice slightly challenging.

Calhoun didn’t respond at first. Instead he stood slowly, unsteady on his legs, but determined not to fall over. Even though the evidence of his own eyes was right before him, he still couldn’t help but ask, in a tone of utter disbelief, “Father . . . ?”

Gr’zy of Calhoun, father of M’k’n’zy of Calhoun, sized up his son and did not seem to be especially approving of what he saw. “Look at you,” he said in annoyance, stepping forward and gripping Calhoun by the chin, turning his face from side to side. “You call this a beard?”

“I . . . I haven’t been growing it for that long, sir,” Calhoun managed to say.

“Well . . . it will have to do, I suppose. And your muscles!” As if sizing up an unworthy slab of meat, Gr’zy squeezed Calhoun’s biceps and shook his head. “Nothing to them! By this age, they should be hard as rock by now! Too busy surrounding yourself with weapons and security men to stay as fit as you should be! Well? What do you have to say for yourself!” he fairly thundered.

“I . . . I’m sorry, sir,” said Calhoun.

“Sorry! You’re sorry! Well . . .” and then Gr’zy’s face broke in a wide smile. “It will have to do, then! Hah!” And he smacked Calhoun on the back so hard that Calhoun was almost positive Gr’zy had broken his back.

Calhoun had always wondered, in the back of his mind, whether in the intervening years since his father had died—beaten to death by Danteri soldiers—Calhoun had somehow built his father up in his recollections. He remembered Gr’zy as being big, powerful, indomitable. It was a pleasure to see that his recollections had not been misleading. That Gr’zy was everything Calhoun recalled him to be.

“You lasted long enough to see a sunset!” Gr’zy told him approvingly, taking a step back. His voice was so boisterous as to be deafening, and his breath smelled like burnt animal flesh, since Gr’zy usually preferred his meat thoroughly charred. “That’s good! That’s good! And that, as you know, entitles you to an eternity of sunrises!”

“Father, I . . .” Suddenly overwhelmed by emotion, Calhoun took a

step toward Gr'zy, his arms wide. But immediately his father retreated, his face darkening. "Father, what . . . ?"

"Are you insane?" his father demanded.

"What? I don't . . ."

"Look at you," and this time there was no jest or gentle jibe in his father's voice. "About to embrace me? *Me*? Has this Federation of yours made you softer than I thought?"

For a moment, Calhoun felt anger bubbling within him, but he suppressed it. "No, sir," he said firmly.

The clanging of swords outside was getting faster and faster. Gr'zy ignored it. "Good. Because this is Kaz'hera, my son. Such . . . delicate emotions are inappropriate here. Softness of body and spirit are not rewarded, as you well know. For that matter," and he took a step toward Calhoun, his voice low and confidential, "I am concerned about the female you came with."

"Shelby?"

"If that is her name, aye. The simple fact is that she may not fit in here, M'k'n'zy. She may not fit in here at all."

"I . . . I don't understand. She's a warrior at heart, Father . . . you just have to see that—"

Suddenly from outside, Calhoun heard metal slide against metal, and an abrupt female shriek which Calhoun recognized instantly. "Eppy!" he shouted, and immediately pushed past his father.

The blinding brilliance of the sun didn't bother him. Instead he skidded to a halt and focused, to his horror, on the body of Elizabeth Shelby. She was lying flat, her arms and legs flopping about like a stringless puppet, her head to the side with a face of permanent surprise etched into it. There was a sword lying near her, having just slipped out of her lifeless hand. Standing over her was a burly master-at-arms, gripping a sword still dripping with blood. He was looking down at Shelby with mild frustration and, even as her blood pooled around her, turned to Calhoun and said—with amused annoyance in his voice—"Slow learner, but she'll get the hang of it."

Calhoun did not hesitate. He strode quickly across the ground to Shelby. He gave her no outward sign of affection, did not kneel over her, shut her sightless eyes, cry out, beat his chest, rend his garment, or

in any other way, mourn her. Instead he simply picked up her fallen sword, turned it around, and ran himself through with it.

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For a moment, Calhoun felt anger bubbling within him, but he suppressed it. “No, sir,” he said firmly.

The clanging of swords outside was getting faster and faster. Gr’zy ignored it. For some reason, though, it caught Calhoun’s attention. He wasn’t sure why, but he was quite positive that it was . . . important somehow. “Good,” said Gr’zy. “Because this is Kaz’hera, my son. Such . . . delicate emotions are inappropriate here. Softness of body and spirit are not rewarded, as you well know. For that matter,” and he took a step toward Calhoun, his voice low and confidential, “I am concerned about the female you came with.”

“Shelby?” He hadn’t been thinking about Shelby for the past moments, but now that her name was mentioned, it hit him with such force that he wondered why she wasn’t uppermost in his mind.

“If that is her name, aye. The simple fact is that she may not fit in here, M’k’n’zy. She may not fit in here at all.”

“I . . . I don’t understand. She—”

All at once Calhoun stopped talking. And he wasn’t sure why, but he suddenly knew, beyond any question, as sure as he had ever known anything, that Shelby was in mortal danger. With a cry of warning—although he didn’t know what he was warning against—Calhoun

charged toward the tent flap just as a high-pitched scream came from outside the tent.

Calhoun dashed outside . . . and skidded to a halt.

Shelby was standing there with a bloody sword clenched in her hands and a look of pure fury on her face. She was breathing hard, and was covered with sweat. Facing her was the master-at-arms, minus one of those arms. It was lying on the ground next to him, the hand still clutching its sword, and blood was pouring from the ruined arm.

“Then again,” said Calhoun’s father appraisingly, “perhaps she’ll fit right in.”

Shelby’s wolfish grin of pleasure lasted for as long as it took to fully register upon her what had just happened. Then, slowly, her eyes widened as she focused upon the master-at-arms. He had dropped to his knees and was rather comically, and absurdly, trying to reattach his fallen arm by shoving it against the shoulder from which it had been severed. He was having about as much success with the endeavor as one would expect. The only thing he was managing to accomplish was to amuse the other Xenexians who were pointing and laughing at his hapless antics. Shelby gasped, unsure of what to say or do, at which point Calhoun walked to her quickly and pulled her away. The laughter of the Xenexians followed them as Calhoun distanced himself from them. Within moments they had left the encampment behind.

Shelby’s face was turning the color of paste, and her eyes were wide with confusion and horror. “Mac . . . Mac, what’s happening, what’s . . .”

“We’re in Kaz’hera,” he told her matter-of-factly.

“Of *course!*” she said as if that explained everything. “We’re in Kaz’hera! I mean, up until now, I was confused because I was operating under the mistaken belief that we were in Tuscaloosa, but it turns out we’re in Kaz’hera—!”

“Eppy . . .”

She whirled and gripped him by the shoulders with such force that he was sure he was going to have a permanent imprint of her fingernails in his flesh. “*Where the hell is Kaz’hera!*”

“Eppy . . .” he started again.

“Why did I wake up in some *tent*, only to have some bruiser drag me out into the morning air and start giving me *sword lessons?! And*



why, when I chopped his arm off like it was a piece of *goddamn mutton*, was I *happy about it!?!?*” She was trembling with agitation. “Where . . . what is . . . how . . .”

“Are you going to let me tell you?”

“*No!*” she said, trembling, and then she put her hands to her face, breathing in deeply to steady herself. “Okay . . . go . . . tell. Now. Hurry. Before I crack up.”

“All right.” He let out a slow breath, tried to figure out the best way to explain what was essentially inexplicable. “Does the name ‘Valhalla’ mean anything to you?”

“Uhm . . .” She ran her fingers through her hair. “It’s, uh . . . a starship. Excelsior-class. Named after a famous American Revolution battle centuries ago, I think . . .”

“What? What’re you . . . ? *No!*” he moaned. “Eppy, that’s the *Valley Forge*, for crying out loud. I’m talking about Valhalla, the literary reference . . .”

“*Dammit, Mac, I’m a captain, not a librarian!* How am I supposed to . . . wait . . . wait . . .” She frowned, racking her brain. “It’s, uhm . . . that place. Norse mythology . . .”

“Right . . .”

She was flipping her hand around as if trying to swat an annoying insect. “Where the warrior women lived . . . the Valkyries . . . and they’d come and bring fallen warriors to this place, this hall of dead heroes, and that was Valhalla . . .”

“Exactly, yes. Well, the, uhm,” he cleared his throat, “the interesting thing about myths, Eppy, is how entirely different civilizations, even worlds, have different versions of the same thing. Flood myths, for instance, are prevalent in many—”

She looked around at the forbidding landscape, cutting him off before he could continue. “Are you telling me we’re in the Xenexian version of Valhalla?”

“More or less, yes.”

She took that in for a moment, and then threw her arms wide as if blocking a football pass and cried out, “*Are you insane?!?*”

“I don’t *think* so,” he said, trying to sound reasonable.

“Mac, the gateways take people through space and, occa-

sionally, time! They don't transport you to mythical places! Places like . . ."

"Tuscaloosa?" he suggested.

She moaned. "No, that's a real place," she said, sagging back against a boulder.

"Really? Where?"

"Arizona, or maybe Alabama . . . some damned state. I don't remember."

"The point is, Eppy, that this place is Kaz'hera. The big guy who came out of the tent I was in . . . that's my father."

She was silent for a moment when he told her that. Then, very softly, she said, "Mac . . . I know your losing your father at a young age was traumatic for you . . . but . . ."

"But what? What are you implying? That I'm imagining it? I'm having a dream, and you're in it with me?"

"Believe it or not, Mac," she said, folding her arms, "I find that easier to believe than what you're suggesting."

"Eppy . . . Kaz'hera is where Xenexian heroes, cut down in battle, go to die. When you first arrive," he said, as if reciting a beloved bedtime story, "you have to survive to see your first sunset in Kaz'hera. If you don't, you keep going back to the point where you left off. And once you've done that, you awaken every morning to a day of warfare and battle. And it doesn't matter if you get hurt, or if you die, because come the sunset, the day ends and the next morning you wake up and it's a new day. And the only thing you remember from the day before is anything that you've learned that's of immediate use. Otherwise you continually, blissfully spend every day for the rest of eternity engaged in pleasant and endless mayhem."

"I see. I see." She smiled in a way that looked, to Calhoun, like it was just shy of patronizing. "And why—just out of curiosity—did all those men attack you? I mean, you were their warlord once upon a time, right? Of at least some of them, I mean. And you obtained freedom for their world. So one would think they'd have some loyalty to you."

"Taking a guess," he said ruefully, scratching his chin, "they're probably carrying grudges. I mean, yes, I led Xenex to freedom, ulti-

mately. But I also led a lot of men to their deaths. They may take pride in the manner of their death, but no one is going to be enthused about the actuality of dying. After all, that means they didn't get to enjoy the fruits of their labor. I recognized a good number of the men there, in that crowd. They looked angry with me. So I suppose they took the opportunity to avenge themselves on me. But I doubt they'll carry grudges. Carrying a grudge for eternity is simply too much work."

Having said that, he waited for her reaction, and found it to be exactly what he suspected it was going to be: an amused shaking of her head. She was dismissing it out of hand. He supposed he couldn't entirely blame her. "Mac, it's ridiculous. We can't be someplace that's *not real*."

"I agree with you. Which leads us to one conclusion . . ."

She stared at him, the amused smile slowly vanishing from her face. "You're saying that this . . . this . . ."

"Kaz'hera."

"This Kaz'hera . . . that it's real."

"As real as Tuscaloosa."

"And . . . we're dead, is what you're saying."

"I'm not sure about that one," he admitted. "I mean, it's possible that we simply froze to death . . . but if that's the case, then I'm not sure why you'd be here, since you're not Xenexian. So far more likely that we came through the gateway—"

"Straight to the eternal playground of your youth. And what's next, Mac? Hmmm?" She put her hands on her hips and gave him a defiant look. "Maybe we'll find our way back to the gateway, jump through, and find ourselves in heaven, face-to-face with God."

"Is that what this is about, Eppy?" he demanded. "You have trouble believing in higher powers, and as a consequence, all this is too much for you to cope with?"

"I cope with being your wife, Calhoun. That's enough coping for one lifetime."

He stepped in close to her and said tightly, "How about an eternity of lifetimes, Eppy? Because that's what we've got here. And you can spend eternity arguing about it, and refusing to accept what's right before you . . . or you can start taking things on faith."

And he stomped away, so incensed over Shelby's refusal to accept what he was telling her that he didn't notice the freshly dug ambush pit until it was a millisecond too late. As he plunged, with the jagged, sharpened stones rushing to meet him, he cursed Eppy with his dying breath and wondered how many times he'd made *that* curse . . .

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He started to stomp away, and at that moment, Shelby felt a sudden warning in her head. She had no idea why, no clue as to what could or would happen, but it was enough to make her cry out, as if his life depended on it, "Mac!"

He stopped, but remained with his back to her. She walked quickly to him, boots crunching against the dry ground, and she wondered if it ever rained in paradise. Taking him by the elbow, she turned him around to face her. "What's going on here, Mac?"

"What do you mean, 'What's going on here'?" he said, looking and sounding defensive. "I've already explained the—"

"No," she shook her head. "I mean what's going on here, with you. I've never seen you like this."

He looked at her uncomprehendingly. "I don't know what you mean—"

"Yes, you do, Mac." She took a deep breath. "Actually . . . I don't think you have to tell me. I think I know what's going through your mind."

"Do you?"

In the distance she saw the Xenexians going through training maneuvers. For all she knew, another wave of opponents—she couldn't call them "enemies," really—would come charging from across the way at any time. And why not? That's what it was all about, after all,

wasn't it? Endless strife? Endless battle? She let out the breath she'd taken and told him, "I think you want to stay."

"That's ridiculous."

"No. No, it's not. I think it's damned attractive to you. No rules, because they don't matter. What you do by the book one day, you throw out the next day, and none of it makes any difference for as long as the sun rises and sets. But this place, Mac . . . this place . . . it can't be. There's nothing that says the gateways can actually take us to . . . to otherworldly spheres. We're having a . . . a mutual delusion or something, trapped in some sort of other-dimensional limbo perhaps. It's a spacial equivalent of a holodeck. There have been cases, documented cases, of sections of space where the mind makes reality out of fantasy . . ."

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded, and she saw that he was getting angry, really angry. "Why is it so damned impossible for you to believe? I've been hearing stories of Kaz'hera, believed in it, since as . . . as early as I can remember . . ."

"And I heard about the Hundred Acre Woods, Mac, but I'm not going in search of Winnie-the-Pooh. This, all of this . . . it's not real. It's what we said before, a sort of . . . of mutual delusion. But it's not real . . ."

"It's as real as we want it to be," said Calhoun forcefully. Then his eyes widened as he realized, "Xyon . . ."

"Your son? What about him?"

"I . . . I thought he was dead. But I haven't seen Xyon here. Maybe . . . maybe he's alive. Maybe . . ."

She took him by the shoulders and said firmly, "Mac . . . we have to leave."

He looked at her defiantly. "If this is being formed by our mutual delusion, why is it only someplace that I'm familiar with?" he demanded. "Why aren't we in whatever you picture as heaven?"

And with all the sincerity that she was capable of mustering, she said, "Because I believe in you more than I believe in anything in this world . . . or the next. But now," and her voice dropped to barely a whisper, filled with urgency and pleading, "you've got to believe in me . . . or, at the very least, believe me when I tell you that I'm leaving here. This place isn't for me. It's not for you, either. You've grown beyond this. You know that in your heart."

“Grown beyond it? What are you talking about?”

“Mac . . . think. Think about where we just came from, how we got here.” He was looking at her blankly, and she thought, *Oh, my God, he really doesn't remember . . . he's got amnesia or something. It's this place, it's done it to him.* Speaking faster, she said, “Two races, the Aerons and the Markanians, who were engaged in a centuries-long battle. Battling over their own version of paradise, a planet called Sinqay, and their battle of mutual extermination was aided by two Iconians, each with their own gateway devices. We all wound up on Sinqay, only to discover the planet was a desolate wasteland thanks to generations of fighting that had gone on previously . . .”

“Yes,” Calhoun said briskly, “and then both Smyts turned on their gateways, and it created some sort of force whirlpool that sucked us into the ice planet, where that gigantic gateway was waiting for us, and why are you telling me all this when I already know it?”

“Oh.” She felt a bit stupid for a moment. “I . . . I thought you'd, uhm . . . forgotten.”

“How could I forget?” he asked, as if she'd lost her mind. “It didn't happen last century.”

“*You're missing the point, Mac!*”

“Well, what the hell was the point?!”

“The point is that you can't stay here!”

“Because you say it's not real, and so I'd be wasting my time,” he said, and there was such bitterness and anger in his voice that she was taken aback by it. “Because it's something that *you* can't believe in, and therefore there's something wrong with me for contemplating—even for a moment—embracing it. Because you have trouble believing in anything greater than yourself, and since that's the case, you'd deny me the opportunity as well.”

She stepped away from him and, because she couldn't look him in the eye, looked around at the vast plain instead. Rocks and craggy areas nearby them, and the endless vista of . . . of nothingness. In the distance she could hear the shouts and laughter of the Xenexians in the Keep, and even as far away as she was, she was able to pick up words here and there, all of them in anticipation of the next battle, and the one after that, and the one after that. Xenexian paradise.

Death without permanence, the thrill of battle without the threat of long-term damage.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said softly. “Maybe . . . I’m afraid to believe in the reality of this place . . . because then it implies that other things . . . things I’m not . . . comfortable with . . . might also be real . . .”

He looked at her with confusion. “Why . . . ‘not comfortable’?”

“Because, Mac,” sighed Shelby, “things like heaven . . . or angels . . . or God . . . these are things that are, by definition, unknowable. I don’t . . . *accept* . . . the concept of ‘unknowable.’ Anything that is . . . I should be able to explore. To touch. To face. It’s right in the Starfleet credo, Mac. If it exists . . . I want to be able to boldly go there, even if no one has before. I don’t want anyone, or anything, putting up signs and saying, ‘This far and no further.’ If mankind can’t discover it, learn from it . . . what’s the point of it?”

To her surprise, he laughed gently at that. “Humanity is a very ego-centric species,” he observed.

“Well, I guess we haven’t come all that far from a time when we believed the sun orbited us.” She’d been leaning against another rock, and she pushed off it and stood in front of Calhoun, taking one hand in each of hers. Not for the first time, she noticed how rough his hands were, and the corded strength in each of his fingers. “Mac . . . what I was saying before about the Aeron and Markanians . . . I was trying to make you realize that endless fighting is a useless way to spend one’s life. It doesn’t matter whether you’re Markanian or Xenexian. Even if this is all real . . . even if we’re in Xenexian Valhalla . . . *you deserve better than this*. Useless remains useless, and it’s a tremendous waste of the man you’ve become and the man you could be! Okay? Do you get that now, Mac? Do you get what I’m saying?” His face was inscrutable. She could get no read off him at all, and she knew it was time to draw the line. “Tell me now, because whether you get it or not, I’m leaving.”

“Leaving? Leaving for what?” he asked skeptically. “Even if we manage to retrace our steps, even if we find the gateway . . . all it’ll do is put us right back out onto the ice world.”

“Maybe we’ll be rescued.”

“Not a lot of time to be rescued in, Eppy. More likely we’ll die.”

“Well then,” she shrugged, “maybe I’ll get to explore the whole heaven thing after all.”

For a long, long moment he was silent, and in that moment, she was absolutely positive that she had lost him. That she was going to wander around, on her own, trying to find—perhaps unto eternity—the gateway. Hell, the damned thing probably wouldn’t even be open.

He wasn’t moving. Well . . . that was that.

She stood on her toes, kissed him lightly on the cheek, and she wasn’t sure what prompted her to say it, but she whispered, “Godspeed” into his ear. Then she turned and started to walk away, and found—to her surprise—that she was praying for Mac to come with her.

From behind her, he called, “You’re asking me to give up everything I believe in, in order to be with you. And if we go back and we die together . . . I’d likely wind up back here, and you would be . . . wherever . . .”

She stopped, turned and smiled. “I guess that’s what ‘till death do us part’ is all about, isn’t it, Mac?”

They faced each other then, a seeming gulf between them, and she wondered whether they’d ever faced each other like this before. Whether they were, in fact, replaying a moment over and over and over again, coming this far together and no further.

Calhoun let out a heavy sigh, then, and it seemed to Shelby at that moment that a very, very small part of him died just a little bit when he did so.

“‘Till death do us part,’ ” he agreed, and walked toward her. And with a cry of joy that was slightly choked, Shelby ran to him and threw herself into his arms, holding him so tightly that she found it hard to believe, at that moment, that there had ever been a time when they weren’t embracing one another.

That was when, from behind them, a gruff voice growled, “Is this what you’ve come to, then?”

They turned and Gr’zy was standing there, the mustache under his nose bristling, his purple eyes dark and furious as the sea. His hand was twitching near the great sword that hung from his hip, but he did not draw it. “Is this what you’ve come to?” his father said again. “A chance



to be with me . . . to be with your own kind . . . and you throw it all away to run off with . . .” He could barely get the word out. “. . . *her*? You would place love above the glory of battle? Have you no priorities?”

“I have mine, you have yours,” said Calhoun. Shelby had no idea what that pronouncement was costing him, but he said it with conviction and certainty. His mind was made up, and for that she felt abundant relief, because there was nothing in the universe more stubborn, more determined, and more implacable than a Mackenzie Calhoun with his mind made up.

“You’re no son of mine,” said his father angrily, turning away.

“*No son of yours?*” Calhoun repeated the phrase with obvious incredulity. But when he spoke, it was not in a pleading or whining tone, the voice of a child imploring a parent for approval. It was the voice of a man who knew his mind, knew in his heart that he was right, and was setting the record straight for someone too dense to see it. “Everything I did, I did in your memory. Every Danteri bastard I cut down with my sword, I did so avenging your death. I freed a planet on your behalf and if that isn’t good enough to earn your approval in the afterlife, then to hell with you.”

Gr’zy took a step toward him, drawing a hand back as if ready to belt his son across the face. Calhoun made no move to stop it; merely stood there, his chin upturned, as if expecting it. Gr’zy froze like that for a long moment, and then turned without another word and strode away.

A feather-light hand on his arm, Shelby whispered, “Mac . . . are you okay?”

He looked at her and, for just a moment, there was infinite pain in his eyes, and then—just like that—it was gone, masked. “I’m fine,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

They moved quickly across the plains, no words exchanged between them. Calhoun led the way, scanning the ground, looking for signs of where they’d been, tracking, using his expertise, missing nothing. “This way,” he said firmly. “I’m reasonably certain that if we follow this path, tracking these clods of dirt, and the chipped-away bits of . . .”

“Or we could just head for the gateway,” she said, her eyes wide, clearly unable to believe her luck as she pointed ahead of them. And there, sure enough, was a glowing in the air. It was a distance away, but it was unmistakable: the gateway.

Suddenly the ground below them began to rumble, and for a moment they both thought that the gateway was about to explode. But then they realized what it was: an army in pursuit. They looked behind themselves to see a horde of angry warriors coming after them, shouting Calhoun's name, shouting fury that he was expressing such disdain for their paradise that he was actually daring to try and leave it.

And the gateway . . . the gateway was fading. Whether they'd come through an hour or an age ago, it was impossible to tell, but whatever it was, it was running out. The gateway was about to cycle shut, and they'd be trapped in Kaz'hera forever.

"Run!" shouted Calhoun, and they tried, but within moments they were overrun, and even though they fought back, they were cut to pieces, and the ground ran red with their blood.

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"Run!" shouted Calhoun, and they tried, but within moments they were overrun, and Calhoun tried to fight a delaying action while Shelby ran, but they were cut to pieces, and the ground ran red with their blood.

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"Run!" shouted Calhoun, and they tried, but within moments they were overrun, and although Calhoun marveled at Shelby's display of sword prowess, they were cut to pieces, and the ground ran red with their blood.

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"Run!" shouted Calhoun, and they tried, but within moments they were surrounded, and that was when a roar like a shattering planet filled the air, and there was a clang of swords, and Calhoun could actually hear bodies being sliced apart.

Unstoppable, Gr'zy cut a path to Calhoun and Shelby, and the others fell back, confused and angry and regrouping, their hesitation lasting only moments. But it was moments enough for a ragged Calhoun to look up at the dark face of his father and say, "I thought you said I wasn't a son of yours."

Gr'zy grumbled, "Yes, well . . . I realized that sometimes you're more your mother's son. And I loved her dearly. But she was no warrior. I miss her terribly . . . as much as I'll miss you. Go."

"Father, I—!"

"*Go, damn you!*" he shouted, and shoved Calhoun as hard as he could. Shelby caught him and they ran, and it was an incredible thing to see. The warriors tried to get past Gr'zy, tried to pursue his son, and it should have been impossible to hold them back, as impossible as a single sand bag keeping back the ocean tide. But Gr'zy was everywhere, as was his sword, and no man passed as Calhoun and Shelby sprinted

the remaining distance. Calhoun gripped Shelby's hand as tightly as he could, and together they leaped through the gateway. And the last thing he heard his father cry out was, "*This has been a good day!*"

And the sun set on Kaz'hera.

Just as before, the transition was instantaneous, except this time it was far more brutal. One moment they were bathed in warmth, and the next the wind and ice were hammering them with the force of a thousand nails.

Calhoun went down, Shelby tumbling on top of him. Almost instantly he was losing feeling in his face, in his hands and feet, and even taking a single breath was agony for him. He clutched Shelby to him, and when he looked at her his heart sank in dismay. While in Kaz'hera, she had healed. But here, back in this marvelous "real world" to which she'd been so anxious to return, she was as banged up and bruised as before they'd gone through the gateway.

There was no place to run to, no place for them to take shelter. Calhoun thought it was a miracle that their hearts hadn't simply stopped from the shock of going from one extreme to another, but then he thought better of it. After all, what kind of miracle was it when all it did was spare them a quick death in exchange for a slower and more agonizing one?

Then he looked down at Shelby, who was gazing up at him, unable to move, barely able to speak, and he understood. It was a miracle because it was giving them a few last moments together, and any time that they were together was miraculous.

As the wind screamed above them, trying to drown out anything they might have said to one another, Calhoun leaned in close to her, put his lips right up against her ears. "Till death do us part," whispered Calhoun. She nodded mutely, and then they kissed passionately, holding each other close, icing over, the gateway silent behind them . . .

And then there was a roar near them, and in his near-death delirium, Calhoun wondered whether Valkyries were descending from Valhalla. They were, after all, freezing to death, and that was certainly evocative of the icy climes that the Norsemen hailed from . . .

He managed to barely roll over just then, and saw with distant astonishment that a long-range shuttlecraft was approaching.

*What do Valkyries need with a shuttlecraft?* Calhoun wondered, right before he passed out.

When Shelby opened her eyes, she saw Calhoun smiling down at her, felt the distinctly unglacial warmth around her, and for just a moment she thought, *You bastard . . . you brought us back through the gateway . . . we're back in your idea of paradise . . . here we go again . . .*

And then a familiar voice, brisk with efficiency, said, “Step aside, please, Captain.” Calhoun did so, and then Dr. Selar was standing over her, guiding a medical tricorder along her and nodding approvingly. “Full circulation has been restored. However, I would advise that you not—”

Shelby immediately sat up. An instant later the world spun around her and she flopped back. The only thing that prevented her from cracking her head badly was Calhoun’s arm catching her as she fell.

“—sit up too quickly,” the Vulcan doctor finished acidly.

It was at that point that Shelby realized they were in a shuttlecraft. She looked up at Calhoun in confusion, her face a question.

Easily reading her mind, Calhoun took her hand and said, “Back on Sinqay, our respective science officers managed to re-create the energy field that hauled us through to the ice world. Once they did that, they sent a shuttlecraft through after us.”

“But . . . but how will we . . . get back from here? Back through the energy field?”

“No.” It was Dr. Selar who spoke up. “We tried. But the field is rather unique in that it appears to be only one way.”

“Then . . . how—?”

“No need to worry,” Calhoun assured her. “McHenry’s helming the shuttlecraft. He has us pegged as three days out of Thallonian space.”

That was immediately enough to assuage Shelby’s worries. Mark McHenry may have struck her as one of the odder crewmen on the *Excalibur*, but if there was one thing that was certain, it was that his ability to know where he was anywhere in the galaxy was unerring, even uncanny. If he said it was going to take them three days to get back home from wherever the ice world had been, then that was quite simply that.

“You were very fortunate,” said Selar.

“You mean that you showed up when you did?” asked Calhoun.

“That too. But I was referring to the fact that I am your doctor.” And with that, she headed toward the front of the craft, leaving Shelby and Calhoun alone in the rear section.

She squeezed his hand tightly. “Any regrets?” whispered Shelby.

He smiled and said, “I’ll tell you after I’m dead.”

And for a moment, just a brief moment . . . she thought that she saw pain and a longing for something he now knew he could never have, or never be happy with. But then, just like that, it was gone once more.