



She opened her eyes. She didn't want to be awake. Her whole body ached from overwork, stress, and good, old-fashioned drinking too much. Outside, the wind still blew, pretending to be a storm. A storm without rain, just wind to stir the dust; it wasn't natural. The electronic red of the alarm read four-o-eight. Almost two hours before it was due to go off. She turned over. The windowpanes rattled.

She joined the service to find adventure and romance--join LASKAPE see the universe. At least, unlike her predecessors, she didn't end up swabbing decks. But it was seventeen different planets in half as many years. Kelly O'Dell, communications expert extraordinary, requested by friend and foe to set up communications between opposing parties. It was a natural talent she had, being able to find the right frequency that brought about true translations between species. The Diplomatic Division had tried to recruit her after Sanada VI but being around them made her head throb. They never said what they meant or meant what they said. That's why she liked the so-called sub-species. They were honest and uncomplicated.

The Empire called the planet Quasney 3, after its discoverer James Quasney. It must have been a rude surprise for the inhabitants to learn they had been lost for centuries. John claimed it for LASKAPE Empire--every resource, animal, vegetable, and person, including unfortunately a virus that the med-techs hadn't been able to cure. Three hundred colonists had already died. Which is why she was brought here. The natives spoke of a feline species in the hills, which cured all their sickness. They called themselves

Dithy'ramb, meaning "Blessed People" in the local tongue. She was to breach the communication barrier so the med-techs could discover the cure.

Only she blew it. It was all her fault. She shifted again, trying to find a comfortable position. The wind blew. The window rattled. Frustrated, she sat up, cupping her chin in her palms and resting her elbows on her knees. She hated this. She wasn't used to not being able to sleep. Then again she had never killed before.

She crawled from between the sheets and walked to the window. Peeking around the blinds, she looked at the other shelters. The interiors were dark, but the metal structures gleamed in the fading moonlight. The two remaining guides had reluctantly slept inside one, but only after the first raid, which killed six of their party and most of the horses. The raids continued nightly; however, the clear diadacymum windows in conjunction with the titanium shells were impenetrable to their primitive arrows and spears. They were safe inside, but the felines were still out there, waiting for a mistake.

She released the blind and sat on the corner of the bed. The blind swayed, tapping against the wall. The interior was impersonal and emotionally cold. When one travels frequently, one travels light. She had her clothes, mostly uniforms. A family group photo, taken just before her older brother was killed. Behind it, she stashed her just-in-case emergency credit disks. She didn't know what the "just in case" would be, but there was a small fortune hidden between the picture and the backing. Her computer was used primarily to write reports, with only an occasional letter to her family. She thought of writing her mother. There was time. And say what? Dear Mom. Hi from the outer reaches of the universe. Accidentally killed several of the species I need to communicate with to stop an epidemic. Because of me hundreds, maybe thousands more will die. Oops!

It had been an accident. Nothing like it had ever happened before. It shouldn't have happened. Kelly didn't understand why it did.

The first night they had finished setting up camp. The others were around the campfire, talking and laughing. She had envied their casual manor. She was going to join them after she finished identifying and blocking out their brain wave impulses to prevent them from showing up on the morning scans. There had been several strange blips while she had been adjusting the frequencies, but those were quickly eliminated.

For a few moments, she eavesdropped on David's lusty thoughts about one of the female guides. His creative ideas of sex, made her decide to take another look in his direction. She had been sitting in the communication building, watching the shadows the fire cast, when the animals began to fuss. One of the guides had gotten up to check them. She only ran a few steps before the arrow struck her in the chest.

All Kelly remembered of the next few hours was the screaming, the war cries, and the blood oozing out of her companions. Frustrated the felines beat on the outside of the shelters until the sun peeked over the horizon, forcing them back into the forest. David had died in her arms, as another med-tech tried to stop the bleeding. She'd never know if he'd been actually able to perform those sexual feats or if it had just been a fantasy. The next morning, they realized the transmitter no longer functioned. They couldn't find a reason for it not to work. Dennalla, one of the three remaining guides, rode the last horse down the mountain.

Kelly had bathed in the lake, the water turning pink with David's and others' blood. She watched it float on the surface until the currents diluted it, leaving only the blue sky reflecting on the water. She wanted to cry. A little voice inside said it was her fault. But her rational mind said, "No." She dove beneath the surface to drown the dialogue, surfacing only when her body begged for air. On top of her clothes lay the lifeless body of one of the felines. She screamed and ran naked back to the camp. When she returned with the guides, the body had disappeared. They treated her as if she was crazy until the body was left on her doorstep the next morning. The med-tech said the brains looked like they had been imploded. She remembered the blips and how she carelessly eliminated them. She said nothing.

The guides were confused. They didn't understand why the Dithy'ramb attacked. They had always been a very peaceful, honorable people. Kelly kept silent as the discussions continued throughout the day, not quite listening but unable to avoid the endless theories. Many times throughout the day, she quietly slipped into her shelter to swallow the amber liquid; it deadened the guilt pains. That night, the felines set up wooden altars in the middle of the camp and burned their dead.

Kelly had spent the night with her equipment, trying to find a frequency to reach them. For a moment, she thought she had succeeded. One walked to the communication building and stared at her through the window. His dark eyes reflected the colors of the flames as he turned and pointed toward the pyres. She heard the voice in her head again, accusing her of murder. The machine shorted out. He walked away. It had taken the rest of the night to fix it.

The alarm went off, startling her back to the present. She turned the switch off. Six am. Time to get up. Another frustrating day of waiting for help. Already tempers were getting short. If they knew, Kelly thought; what would they do to me? Once LASKAPE learns of her failure, her career would be over--heroine to villain with one mistake.

Dennalla had been due back two days before. She was more of a symbolic rescue than the real one. The Empire would send a team to investigate their silence and they would all be airlifted out. But what if the disease had spread and they were all dead? There would be no rescue. Stop it! She thought. They had enough food and water. The shelters kept them safe. Even if the rumor was right and the felines had killed Dennalla, a rescue party would still be sent. Their mission was too important. Nothing to worry about, except the truth. She killed the Empire's best possible chance of saving the colonists and the body in cold storage was proof. Her career, maybe her life, was over. But if she could make the felines understand that she had made a mistake. A terrible, terrible mistake. She quickly dressed and opened the door.

The sun was only just contemplating rising for the day. The arrow hit inches above her left shoulder. Angrily, she slammed the door. Running to the window, she snapped up the blinds.

He was standing just outside the forest line, bow in one hand; the other pointed at her accusingly. The wind ruffled his fur. His mouth was moving, but the low growling they made did not travel the distance between them.

The door of the guides' shelter opened enough for Marsella's crossbow. The arrow creased the fur on the right side of his head and the feline disappeared into the bush. With her bow reloaded, she slowly opened the door further and quickly crossed to Kelly's shelter.

Kelly met her at the door, unlocking and opening the door as Marsella reached it.

The guide pushed past and slammed the door. "What be you thinking?"

"I-I couldn't sleep. I thought I'd get some work done."

"Get you dead more likely!"

"I thought it was light enough to be safe."

Marsella unloaded the crossbow and leaned it against the wall. "More likely you trying to get yourself dead the quick way. Instead of the slow you been doing."

Kelly swallowed the rising bile. "I don't know what you mean."

"You quiet even before. No laugh. Not much talk. Only work. Twisting dials. All the time. I saw you look at your men. But never touch. I thought that strange. But that your way."

"I have a job to do."

"I see you. The light-haired one, who died, aroused you. Even though he thought of my sister. I saw you watching."

"David's dead. It doesn't matter."

"So my sister. She mattered! Her children matter! We let any more of you die, we not paid. How we care for our children?"

Kelly felt her stomach bunch. She swallowed and turned away. She hadn't considered the now motherless children. More damage she was responsible for--accidentally or on purpose, it was all the same; damage is damage. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I'll be more careful."

Spinning around Marsella looked down at her and snapped Kelly's chin up so their eyes met. Anger swirled in the violet. "What you hiding?"

Kelly shivered and pulled away.

The guide grabbed her and pulled her closer, forcing her to meet her gaze

"Nothing!" Kelly snapped.

"Blessed Ones never harm before. We honor them with food and respect. They heal us."

"I didn't do anything!" The panic rose. She fought to hide the truth that seemed to flash from her soul--Murderer! Murderer! She screamed and fought to free herself.

"You lie!" Marsella hissed, tightening her grip and lifting the smaller woman off the floor until their eyes met. "You cause! What you do to make Dithy'ramb kill?"

Kelly kneed her in the stomach; Marsella released her and dropped to her knees, gasping for air. Kelly landed on her feet and ran across the room, instinctively snatching up the empty crossbow and holding it before her.

"Stay away from me!"

"Or you do what?" Running her hand up the arm to the top of the chair, Marsella used it for support as she stood.

Realizing the emptiness of the threat, Kelly leaped for the quiver. Marsella half jumped, half fell on top of it. Kelly stumbled. Quickly regaining her balance, Kelly raised the crossbow as a club, bringing it downward, only to arc it across the room smashing the alarm clock against the wall. Slowly Kelly shook her head. Stepping over the prone woman, she walked to the bed and sat down. "I can't do it. Not deliberately." The other woman stared.

"I killed the Dithy'ramb. I didn't mean to." The confession tumbled out of her. "It shouldn't have happened."

"How? You never leave shelter." The shock in Marsella's voice turned to disbelief. "You just sit and turn dials. All night we have fun."

"I made the blips go away. I didn't think twice about them. Four blips--four Dithy'ramb. I suspected when they kept singling me out. Then the med-tech said its brains had been imploded. Then I knew. It's a life for a life. The Dithy'ramb. David and your sister. The others. All the colonists that the epidemic will kill. How do I atone for all that?"

Marsella sat up. One of the arrows had punctured the quiver and scratched her arm. The blood ran down into her palm and dripped on the floor. She didn't seem to notice. Instead, she stared at Kelly.

"Say something." Kelly whispered, unable to stand the silence. "Call me a murderer."

"They are mated at birth. For life. Each pair has two children. A male and a female. It is their way. They have no other. Can do no other." Marsella noticed her injury. She wrapped it in a scarf that had held back her hair and returned her gaze to Kelly. "All that burned were male. The one left here is Chieftain's son, Mothra. The others I did not know."

"And I suppose once one dies, so does the mate." Kelly hadn't intended to be sarcastic, but the words came out biting the air between them.

"No."

"At least that's something. The females can find new mates."

Her voice was calm, but it had an edge to it as if she was speaking to a small child, who refused to understand. "There can be no others. They mate at birth. Their energies will only come together to make children with their mates. Why? I do not know. It is their way."

"Our med-techs could help them change. They would know how." Hope sprung up within her. She jumped from the bed and started toward the door. "I'll apologize and tell them how we can help. Everything will be all right."

Marsella grabbed her ankle, tripping her to the floor. Getting to her knees, Marsella pushed down on Kelly's ankle, twisting her entire leg against its axis. Kelly screamed.

"You do hurt. Good. I not sure."

Kelly didn't understand. She was going to make up for her mistake. It was logical. She accidentally took the lives of the felines' children, but the med-techs could help them make more. It was more than a fair trade. The feline population would grow and prosper. All because of her mistake. They'll gladly help the colonists just out of gratitude. She could get a medal and an increase in her credit account. Kelly tried to stand. Marsella held her down.

"What are you doing? I have to get back to work."

"I should let you go. Should let them kill you. But my children not starve for you. I make sure you go back and explain to your leaders why your people still die." Her lips curled into an evil smirk. "My mate was one of your people. They took him into the sky and drop him. They kill him for being our children's father. I enjoy what they do to you."

A cold shiver ran through her. She was right; sometimes her own people were beyond cruel. She'd be better off dying quickly at the hands of the felines--No! This can still be fixed, her mind screamed in denial. "Marsella, please I need to make up for my mistake."

"Your pretty words mean nothing. They not bring back children."

"I know."

"Children not toys. You break. Here another to replace. We love our children. The Dithy'ramb love theirs. Just like your people love yours."

"I wouldn't know." Kelly massaged her aching hip and thigh, carefully edging her leg from Marsella's grasp. "I don't have children. Never wanted them."

"Everyone needs to have children. That why we born. To give life. Why else live?"

Mother would love you, Kelly thought, procreate without regard to environmental balance, economics, or if the person is stable enough to be a good parent--just pump out those offspring. "Even if I was physically capable of having them, it would be stupid of me to do so."

Marsella looked as if she had been suddenly slapped. "You hate children?"

"No. I respect my limitations."

"How can you honor those who came before...the ones who gave you life...to let their blood die.." Her voice trailed off.

"My parents," Kelly leaned forward, moving her leg out of Marsella's reach, "had five children. All of us they loved dearly. Except when we came between them and their work. Yes, it's true. My family is dysfunctional. A cliché in the modern universe. One brother, my sister, and I are workaholics. She has children, who she ignores just as our parents ignored us. One brother pretends we don't exist. The last, the eldest and brightest--son above sons, died a hero for the Empire. Leaving us all to live palely in his afterimage. Some bloodline!"

"They gave you life!" Marsella snapped.

"And I save lives. Stopped wars and made peace between peoples that saved millions.

"I've negotiated between worlds that brought medicine and food."

"Why you so empty inside?"

"Empty?" Kelly stood and leaned over, placing her hands on her knees. "I've filled my life with knowledge and experience from around the universe. Not dirty diapers and vomit."

"Children more than that." Standing Marsella pointed around the room. "Look. Empty. Cold. My home overflows with love. My children make it so. Their laughter. Their tears. Everything about them made risks worth it. They dragged him away. Our children cried. I cried. He only screamed how much he loved us!" The tears welled up.

"I wondered about that. All of us were sterilized. How did you change that?"

Marsella wiped away the tear, which had slipped down her cheek. "The Dithy'ramb thought it unlawful. It was very painful for him. Took much time. When Shan'ta born, we both wept with joy. He brought our peoples together. Our love will always be alive in our children and our children's children. Long past the time when we are no more."

"How Rockwell."

"I do not understand your word. But I know your meaning. You laugh at what you do not understand. You not know what it is to love--to sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" Kelly felt the anger rising within her. "There are all kinds of it. You said how cold my home was. The laugh is I don't have a home or hearth or a permanent place to hang up my undies. I'm here. I'm there. All at a moment's notice. War breaks out. Send in Kelly. She'll fix it. It doesn't matter if she's on R & R. The first since she joined. I hammer out a compromise and prepare to go back to sand, surf, and casual sex--and another conflict, another battle, another misunderstanding. I fix it like always. Lives saved. Damage undone. Peace rules until next time."

"If you hate it so. Quit. You not the only one who stop wars."

"No. But I'm the best. Or I was." Kelly hesitated for a moment. She collected her thoughts, not only for the other woman but also for herself. Never before had she tried to explain how she felt about her job, to tell another just how big a part of her it really was. Kelly turned and looked upward. "I love what I do. It fills me. Just like your children do you. It is the way I love. To say I have millions of children is not an exaggeration. I wasn't at the conceptions or the births, but the parents wouldn't have been there either if it weren't for me. I've risked my life many times. It's what I do. And until here-now, I've never failed an assignment."

"You never made a mistake?" Marsella's doubt was intertwined with the sarcasm of her tone.

"Not like this. Not in my work. My personal life has been a disaster. I always find the one jerk in a crowd of a thousand. You were lucky enough to find someone who loves you. That's no small feat."

Marsella shifted her weight onto her backmost foot and folded her arms across her chest. "Neither is stopping war."

"You're not convinced. I don't blame you. You don't know me. Just what I represent. The death of your husband, your security, and your way of life." Kelly spoke slowly, as she walked around the room toward

the door. "There is no reason to trust me. You would like to kill me. But you love your children more than you hate me."

Marsella pivoted on her toes, keeping Kelly in full view at all times. Her arms dropped from her chest into a casual, yet ready stance. "My children are most important part of my life. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for them."

"I'm sure." Slowly the corners of Kelly's lips lifted into a smile as she straightened her posture. Lifting her chin into a higher, prouder stance, she knew what she had to do. "As is my career to me. But even so, I always keep financial insurance. Just in case. LASKAPE is fickle. You'll never know when you'll need extra credit disks. No one else knows I have them. I keep it in the last place anyone would look. Behind my family picture. I never told anyone else." Kelly watched the confusion grow in Marsella. It was just a matter of time before the curiosity took hold and she would make her move. It would be over one way or the other.

Marsella glanced at the picture. Kelly shoved the chair into her, knocking her off balance, and twisted the doorknob. She wasn't prepared for how fast Marsella regained her balance. Marsella leaped at the door. Kelly slammed it into her. She heard the hard metal squish into her flesh, but she didn't care. Not anymore. She was going to fix what she broke or die trying. The first arrow whizzed by her ear. She ran faster toward the Communication Shelter. The second one hit her left shoulder, knocking her off her stride. The third hit dead center in her chest, stunning her to a stop. She looked at the hill. He stood at the crest, bow in hand. She dropped to her knees. For a moment, she stared at the shaft, thinking there should be more blood. It was increasingly harder to breathe. She looked up and pointed at him for as long as she had the strength to do so. He looked at the empty bow and smashed it into the tall grass at his feet. An arrow flew from behind her, forcing him to dodge back into the forest.

Marsella crouched beside her, lowering her on her back. She called to someone.

Kelly heard doors open and voices. They seemed so far away. She felt cold and tired. She hoped Marsella understood about the picture. There was enough there to feed her and her sister's children for a very long time. It was the last debt she had to pay.



