



Supreme Commander Laurie Book Two

THE BENIGN INCURSION

MICHAEL D. SMITH

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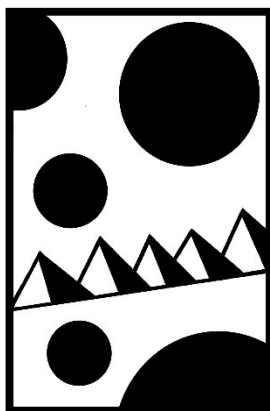
Book Two of the
Supreme Commander Laurie Series

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For my wife Nancy
who has steadfastly supported my writing over the years

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CHAPTER ONE

The Corridor

Monday, November 9, 2076, 0800 hours

Supreme Commander Laurie Lachrer climbed the ladder to Level One's bright brassy light. *Pegasus I*'s main computer consoles hugged the left side of the forty-foot circle, and three silver brigs took up most of the opposite curve to her right. She'd never been sure why robot 283 had considered three cells necessary, but they'd certainly come in handy back in May. She shuddered at the thought of the hand-to-hand combat in darkness and zero-gravity, the curses and the screams. The deaths that had unfolded right where she now stood.

Physician/engineer Rod Morgan descended the rungs from Level Two in his light-blue USSF flight uniform. "Hey, Laurie, good you got here early. I was thinking the glitch was upstairs, but I traced it back to a panel in the service corridor here."

"Great. I told the rest of the crew to show up at 1000. There isn't much for them to do until we get this fixed. But I figure if anybody can sort this mess out, it has to be you." Laurie was irked that her state-of-the-art flagship was still humbled by a software glitch that the ship's own algorithms should've easily been able to chase down.

Morgan grinned, tall and slender, with prematurely gray hair and deep-set, gray-blue eyes. His face was slightly lopsided but with a well-defined jaw. "McNarri sure picked a good time for his software upgrade. I'm sure he'd have straightened this out in a second."

Laurie shrugged. "Maybe. I'm just glad you volunteered. Or else I'd be tearing my hair out trying to mess with this myself."

"Oh, c'mon, you were the foremost P/E in the fleet."

"No, I think that baton has passed to you, Commander," Laurie teased. "At least everyone says so."

"Huh." Rod went for the maintenance hatch by Brig One. "I still think you know more about this ship than anyone except maybe 283."

"Well, I really haven't had time to go into all the new tech. Still learning SCUSSF and all." Yesterday she'd restrained herself from launching into a twenty-hour troubleshooting marathon she knew would lead nowhere. Better to just ask Rod if he was available.

She had to admit she was a little frazzled. Hell, she was wiped out, overextended in all directions. These first six months had been crazy. She was stretched enough taking on *Pegasus I* pilot duties. Was the supreme commander supposed to do everything? Didn't she have to learn to delegate?

In any case, Rod was the best and she enjoyed his company. She'd even broached trading her physician/engineer McNarri for him. But Captain Wheeler had protested that Rod was fully integrated into her own crew, and that the exchange would leave *Pegasus I* without robots, yet place two on *Pegasus II*.

Laurie had relented. Balance between the two saucers was essential. Promoting Mavis Wheeler to captain of *Pegasus II* had been a no-brainer; so was keeping her happy. Mavis had certainly saved everyone's skin at the Battle of Norcay six months ago. She struck Laurie as supreme commander material herself.

Laurie certainly wasn't dissatisfied with Harry McNarri 1399, a recreation of the USSF's greatest physician/engineer. Today he was at Luna completing his software upgrades, and since *Pegasus* wasn't scheduled for flight until this idiotic glitch got fixed, his presence wasn't vital. But Rod had volunteered to meet her, and Laurie was eager to get out of the office.

The office with more paperwork than she'd ever thought possible. And in this fully digital age paperwork was really a metaphor for *hassle*. She'd decided early that big changes had to come fast.

That was when she found that being supreme commander didn't mean that whatever came out of her mouth was obeyed. Her first order mandated that robots of intelligence level A-366 and above could now serve as USSF officers. This had produced more outrage than she'd expected, especially among junior officers who now found themselves competing against perfect AI software for scarce positions. It certainly hadn't helped when the United System Council president appointed Laurie's robotic twin Laurie 283 as deputy supreme commander.

Well, the robots were sentient and they were here to stay. Laurie trusted these machines because she understood them. For now, it was wise to limit them to just one per ship. In any case, she felt her detractors ought to consider that a robot might well save a ship in the event of life-support failure.

She bent to follow Commander Morgan into the service corridor, allowing an eyeful of his striding, well-muscled tush. Damn, she was definitely blown. A supreme commander did *not* ogle her subordinates. And by definition that included every man in the USSF. How many times had she scolded herself about this? She was at the top and couldn't afford to slip.

But her energies had been down for weeks. She was stretched thin. The days of Trans-Simultaneity, of feeling uncanny connections with the entire universe, faded day by day. She'd built two *Typhoon* spaceships by *thought alone* in May, but six months later she was having trouble with *Pegasus* saucer specs.

She'd virtually forgotten her duties as ambassador to the Fools of the Fire; apparently so had *Pegasus II* copilot Ywer. Neither had heard from Mickey Mal Michaels, Edward, or any of the Fools since May. Laurie had never digested that entire episode; what on earth did being such an ambassador entail?

She wasn't up for new adventures anyway. She was still struggling with the blowback on her second order, the standardization of all USSF ranks to Navy terminology. She hadn't understood the howls of Army colonels exasperated to find themselves Navy captains, or Marine majors resenting lieutenant commander designation. She finally sympathized with Jack's reluctance to make the necessary change, even though the USSF had combined all the services decades ago and naval ranks had predominated for a long time. A smattering of promotions to especially aggrieved officers had helped a little.

Would she ever recover from the unreal stress of this past year? The SolGrid Rebellion in April seemed like a hundred years ago. Then she'd chased Jack's renegade son out to the Large Magellanic Cloud in May, where mind-shattering doses of Trans-Simultaneity had her building spaceships out of *ideas*.

Then the Easterling insurrection came even as she was being transported against all logic to Jack's doomed *Typhoon VIII*. That insurrection had ended with the hand-to-hand combat aboard *Pegasus I*. The same day came her appointment as SCUSSF. Now came politicking with the United System Council and the Anti-Spacers, and finding what *supreme commander* was really all about. She'd only managed a dozen short saucer flights to take a bit of the edge off.

So wasn't it okay to observe this lovely Morgan guy as he crawled ahead in the low service corridor? It was great to just be in his presence. She'd never abuse her position, but it was acceptable to appreciate a good-looking guy, right? God knew she'd had nothing for so long anyway. It had to be okay to relax and flirt, enjoy male company. That wasn't taking advantage, was it? No sexual harassment, right?

Everyone knew Morgan was irresistible. What woman wouldn't appreciate this stunning male in his tight flight uniform showcasing well-defined pectorals, strong forearms and biceps? That ass was scarcely believable; Laurie had overheard Sandra Markham and Pam Jonson snickering about it. Morgan's solid jaw, and those intense gray-blue eyes beneath wondrous fluffy gray hair, were intoxicating.

To top it he approached everything with marvelous ease and quick humor, though right below that lay an obvious sexual curiosity he probably assumed he was concealing. Laurie had noted him eyeing dozens of women and assumed he had several rotating girlfriends. Still, he was a pleasure to work with, and she was glad Harri McNarri 1399 was off-world and she had an excuse to request Rod's help.

Rod was the upcoming new genius P/E, the kind who popped up sporadically in the USSF and so often led to technological breakthroughs. He generously assisted with other *Pegasus I* issues as the crews of the two saucers coordinated their software, weaponry, and navigational systems. *Pegasus II* had been built between July and September; *III* and *IV* were in planning stages, and Laurie hoped to have at least ten *Pegasus*-class saucers by the end of '77. Ywritt tech was speeding things up, but Laurie wanted more human participation and expertise. She didn't want to be dependent on Ywritt technology, or Martian Amplified Thought for that matter.

She sighed as they made their way down the dark curving corridor, Morgan's flashlight leading the way. Rod turned. "Problem?" he said.

"No, I'm just a bit overwhelmed. This supreme commander stuff is weirder than I thought, if you want to know the truth. I don't know how Jack managed it sometimes." Wow, that was something to confess to a subordinate.

Rod laughed. "The way I've heard it, Jack mostly had a bunch of staff retreats and let things slide. You've been making some real changes. It's gotta be tough."

She nodded. This gorgeous guy probably couldn't figure out the simple truth that as a male Jack naturally had authority handed to him. Laurie was having to yank it from greedy fingers however she could. Assholes challenged her daily. Even when these same twerps tested Jack, they'd done so warily, assuming he could hit back. Laurie had no such luxuries. After all these decades of apparent sexual equality, damn if the same old struggles didn't continue in ever subtler ways.

Rod made his way to an auxiliary control panel on the curving saucer wall and shone his light. "I'd been thinking this one might be the problem. This is the one that Suzette Borman messed with in May, isn't it?"

"Wow, you're right. When she was hiding back here and tried to sabotage Carla and Easterling."

"She was lucky she didn't fry herself. But that did fire up MATS to unlock the brigs and get you and Dar out of those neutralization chambers."

"Y-yeah." Laurie shivered.

"Huh?"

"I'm just remembering the rest of all that. The stupid battle. Right on this ship." She couldn't bring herself to add: *Wolfduy, just floating there, eyes frozen wide, knife in his gut, red droplets spewing*. She pushed back long red hair and bent to the circuitry Rod pointed to. Why wasn't she thinking straight? Why was Trans-Sim so diminished? Had it finished all its ungodly purposes last May? Would it appear again if needed? Who or what determined that? She needed it right now to straighten out all these organizational messes, to calm her goddamn nerves, nerves she hadn't even known she had before this supreme commander business.

Had Jack promoted her only on account of this Trans-Simultaneity crap? Maybe he thought she could call it up any time to *wish* everything into cosmic order. What about now, when she'd lost the Trans-Sim gift?

The gift. What dreary nonsense. They needed less reliance on such magic. They had a lot of hard human work in front of them. The Martians were wonderful, and the Ywritt, though emotionally distant, were on their side, but she was responsible for the difficult work ahead. She was only six months in and she was so tired.

Why did she seek refuge in this cramped corridor in the very close presence of the most excellent Rod Morgan? Why was she always so eager to get him over here on any pretext? He'd certainly laugh if he knew the supreme commander's fantasies about him. What about the endless flirting between them since he joined the *Pegasus* team in August? What sort of judgment was coming due?

Flirting was basically all Laurie had known for over forty years. But she always managed to shut down *that* line of inquiry before it could get started.

Except now.

Was her last real romance really four decades ago? Maybe all her sexual force had been extinguished when her soulmate John Commer died at Mercury. That was June 2034. So *forty-two years* of no real sex. Plus the fact that Will had never really counted.

It was astonishing how fast she'd written off the year-and-a half thing with Will Connors. They'd probably only had intercourse seven or eight times in their first three months last year, and none afterwards. So much of the tremendous female giving she'd poured all over him had really just been pity, as she tried to patch up his endless self-esteem and trauma hassles with concerned counseling and faked orgasms. During the crisis with the Wounded at Iota Persei, she'd watched in disbelief as he climbed into a shuttle and blew it into a Star Drive Irregularity. She'd thought he'd committed suicide, yet he'd inexplicably gone to *Garr/thahg*, the Alpha Centaurian afterlife, and, even more unaccountably, returned as something like a god.

Her relief at seeing him healed and confident soon evaporated. His sharpened mind, overrevving with concepts from billions of *Garr/thahg* years, left him too exhausted for physical contact, and he postponed lovemaking again and again until she finally realized he'd postponed it forever.

She'd known Will for three months as a whining victim and another month as an omnipotent, distant, intellectual divinity. For reasons she still didn't grasp, she stuck around for another ten months of his slide into enfeebled burnout.

True, he and the others of the Four who'd walked in *Garr/thahg* were finally recovering, but Laurie knew Will had never been any sort of match. Becoming supreme commander finally jolted her into telling him it was over. Via superspace radio to his hideout on Venus, of course. He'd tried to minimize it, saying it was probably good to take a break, but they both knew they were through. And he didn't seem to care.

Yet all the while, for decades, she'd known that John Commer had been everything. They'd met at a party in December '33; she'd immediately taken him to her new Marsport condo and made sure the sex was fantastic. She'd worried she'd come across as a slut, but John had assured her that the Evacuation was making everyone unhinged, that life was too short and scary not to grab what they needed right that second. Full communion with this marvelous boy-man unfolded.

Yes, life was certainly unhinged. John was still flying evacuations on *Typhoon I* with his brothers, and she'd been pressed into service on six of them in her technician role. After returning to orbit around the ruined Earth six horrible times, to her relief she'd gotten permanent spaceport

duty servicing *Typhoon I* at Marsport. Since she and John gloried in each other every day, she had fantasies of erasing all that evacuation stress with marriage and erotic comradeship in a new life on the fourth planet.

Then John flew *Typhoon I* into Mercury, vaporizing himself and five other USSF officers.

She'd only been nineteen. How had all this time just slipped by? What had happened to her all these years? She'd striven, she'd organized, she'd innovated and developed and consolidated, and ... so what?

Sure, aside from Will and the scanty meat-and-potatoes intercourse she'd coaxed from him, there'd been something approximating sex since then. A few dates, some petting and kissing that went nowhere. And the infamous Draka Sortie had gotten her tunic open in the alley. Three years ago. How had she managed such a disgusting crush on the flabby know-it-all? On the son of a bitch who'd turned out to be *the topmost Wounded spy in Sol*? God, that alone was grounds for a treason arrest. It didn't seem likely but all the same she'd worried.

Of course idiot Laurie would have a hero-worship fantasy about that genius bastard. She'd rebuked herself mercilessly after finding out about him last year. Had she been polluted by the Wounded after all? Did she still harbor remnants of the obvious closeness she'd had with those beasts?

She shuddered. All along she must've feared contamination. Was Trans-Sim really a Wounded phenomenon, as many theorized, or was it something unrelated, something purer? She'd never sorted that out. She'd been given a gift she'd never been able to understand.

She was isolated. There'd been nobody close for years. Aside from the infantile robot Mickey Michaels' lusty come-ons back in May, Draka was the last man who'd offered any praise of her physical qualities. "God, I want these fantastic boobs of yours, babe!"

None of these men came close to John. Nobody had been so beautiful. She certainly didn't want to relive the awful experience of trying to interact with a Heroes and Villains of the Thirties robot of John Commer years after his death. God, that had been pathetic. The damn thing had even offered to unzip itself to show its exact replica of John Commer's genitals, but at that point Laurie had turned and fled.

Most USSF personnel had disparaged John Commer as a dreamy flake. So small and pretty, so scattered and harmless. But *they'd* never unzipped him, had they? Because John Commer had an immense thick penis she'd never considered possible. One night they'd gotten a tape measure out; it truly was nine-and-a-quarter inches from base to tightly-outlined, well-circumcised head. It was an inch and three-quarters wide and of such generous circumference that it took a lot of lubricant to have sex with the guy. She was always amused by how everyone disparaged John Commer even years after his death as being the cute fourth Commer brother, without ever having known what he really was.

Had the HAVOTT designers duplicated that penis? Though disgusted by her first John robot, she'd often fantasized about finding another. And this time finding out. Finally opening up to sex with a robot.

But that would be so wrong. There was no way she'd ever do that.

On the other hand, might not that be the only viable solution for the supreme commander of the USSF?

No man could ever measure up to John. She had no illusions that flirtation master Rod Morgan could either. He was gorgeous in a way John wasn't. Laurie considered herself a connoisseur of male beauty and rated Morgan a nine or ten, but she'd remain content with flirting. She didn't want to think of one more strained conversation about things not working out and can we just be friends.

Especially with someone she worked with on the *Pegasus* project.

Thank God Mavis had talked her out of demanding Rod for her own physician/engineer. What a disaster that would have been.

There was vital work to be done in the USSF. Organization. Management. Laurie was sixty-one and long past the age of caring about relationships. Except that all along there'd been this nagging feeling that her rejuvenation treatments were restoring ancient hormonal balances. That underneath all her denials loomed a vast sadness that there would never be any more sex, even though deep down she had to recognize sex as an absolute necessity. Yes, she'd been rejuvenated and she now looked thirty-five, but what was the point of pretending she hadn't suffered through all these decades of bitter experience?

So here was Rod Morgan, thirty-five years old himself, so cocksure, oozing testosterone and good humor and brilliance and God knew what else. He trained his flashlight on the faulty *Pegasus* circuitry. "I think we'll have to replace this entire panel," he said. "It looks brand-new, but I can tell from the installation that it was rebuilt. I'm sure they did a good job, but it looks as if it never integrated properly. Like it's more or less remembering its previous status as damaged and can't integrate with the rest of the system."

"Huh," Laurie whispered.

"Wow, you sure do look down," Rod said. "You seem tired today."

How could Rod affect such familiarity with the supreme commander? Like Jack, Laurie had cultivated first-name relationships with everyone under her command, and so Rod was allowed this. Yet his tone kept veering sharply towards the personal, and she wasn't sure what it meant.

She was certainly aware that her right shoulder had been brushing his left forearm for quite a while, and that neither was making a move to change positions to get a better look at the panel. Surely this was all right. Didn't she deserve a little real contact now and then? "Well, I'm still not sure if I reacted appropriately."

"Appropriately?"

"About Wolfdy. I mean, did I really need to *do* that?"

"Wow. Do you really think the civil suit can go through? Is that what's getting to you?"

She nodded miserably, and this gave her leave to push her shoulder tighter against him. "Can I really command now? Is anyone taking me seriously? With his *mother* coming after me?"

Then came the rueful smile that always thrilled her. "You did the right thing. You had no choice."

"Mavis was the one who saved us, not me."

"She intervened at the right time, but you still needed to deal with Wolfdy. From everything everyone said, the situation was out of control and Mavis might have found the whole bunch of you up there dead."

She drilled into his bicep. "Maybe. Legal Services keeps offering to represent me. I keep putting them off, but I probably should contact them. All I know is his stupid mother would never have brought charges against *Jack*."

"Don't ever say that. You've got command now. You're doing great things. Wonderful things. Jack's out of the picture and you're doing fine."

Was he just saying all this to bed her?

Really? Where had that thought come from? Such a dangerous thought: *bed*. She'd never had *that* thought before. Hell, sure she had, she just wasn't about to admit it. Anyway, this had to be Rod Morgan's standard method of hypnotizing females. Captivating them with understanding and wit and those devastating eyes she couldn't bring herself to meet. But he had to be more than just

a seducer? He cared for her; she was sure of it. She might be the supreme commander, but Rod Morgan saw beyond that and dared to probe for the inner Laurie nobody had ever known but John.

She pressed hard against him and found her hand on his forearm. Then her head was on his shoulder. "T-thanks ... I ... I need this ..." After all, she was twice as old as he and could trust him to gracefully accept this gesture of gratitude from an old lady, couldn't she?

But then they were kissing. She was in his arms and his lips were glorious. God, he was an *expert*.

"I've wanted this ... I've wanted this for so long ..." he murmured, kissing his way down her neck, kissing her breasts through her blue uniform as she found herself on her back on the hard service corridor floor with Rod fumbling at the buttons on her tunic, finally parting it.

"Yes ... me too ... I've wanted it too ..."

Rod was having a hard time getting her bra clasp undone. Of course she'd chosen the front clasp for him. It was endearing that a genius engineer was so out of his mind that he couldn't deal with such a simple device, but he abandoned the vexing problem, his eager lips drifting down her tummy, down to her tight pants, his strong hands seizing and kneading her thighs. How had her boots come off? How had he practiced that? Why was he pulling her trousers off? Why was she twisting so he could slide down her panties? The transparent ones she'd worn just for him?

"I can't *believe* this ..." she groaned as his lips came to her vagina. For the next twenty minutes he proceeded to kiss and tongue her in a way John Commer, despite his immense organ, had never figured out. It went on forever and she accepted every bit of it. She was writhing, coming--

How could such zealous lips ever pull away? But there was naked Rod above her, erect penis positioned for ... everything. She yanked bra over breasts because Rod Morgan really should have full access to her nipples at this moment. She met his delighted blue eyes and all the months of yearning between them were fully answered. Rod slipped in and opened up full bore.

Forty-two years since anything real.

She had no further sense of time. At some point they were pulling up their underwear and yanking on their boots, and Laurie was sobbing: "I'll resign SCUSSF, 283 can have it, I can't do this anymore," and Rod was replying: "She doesn't want it, maybe you could convince Bobby Athens to take it," and Laurie was crying: "No, Bobby's already made it clear he doesn't want to rise, all he wants is a new *Pegasus*," and Rod was saying: "Well, I can understand that, I guess, I mean, he's really a great guy."

Then a shadow fell from the open service door twenty feet down and a head poked in.

"Oh my God!" Laurie moaned. "It's Cad!"

"What's *he* doing here? I mean, now?"

"He *works* here!"

"Hey, you get that glitch yet?" sandy-haired *Pegasus I* copilot Cadagasgar Wirlmann called into their darkness. "Sensors told me you'd be here. Thought I'd get in a little early."

"Uh, sure. We, uh, just figured out the ... problem," quavered the supreme commander of the USSF.

CHAPTER TWO

Wirlmann Assesses

Lieutenant Commander Cadagasgar Wirlmann paused at the service corridor hatch as Laurie and Rod squinted into bright Level One light.

“What time is it?” Laurie muttered. Cad was taken aback at the untucked tunic and mussed hair.

“Panel 334A,” Rod blurted. “Back there. We’ll have to replace it.”

Cad chose to respond to the supreme commander. “Well, it’s 0845. Know I’m early.”

“Amazing we found the issue so fast,” Laurie gulped. “Really.”

“Yeah, really. We were lucky,” Rod said. He also looked ruffled. Well, it was cramped back there for two people. Apparently it took two of the finest engineers in the fleet to track that glitch down. *Pegasus* had been grounded since Friday.

“Uh, right,” Laurie added, eyes to the floor, breathing hard. Was she ill?

“Sralk and Jason said they’d be in around 0930,” Cad said. “Pam’s right behind me.”

Laurie nodded. “R-right.” She pushed past him, her tunic flapping above her ass, and climbed the ladder to Level Two. Rod bent over a computer console.

“Hope that takes care of *that* puppy,” Cad said. “Glad you could come over today and get us going again.”

“Yeah, I think this should do it once we get a new panel,” Rod replied, studying his display. “Ywer can probably AT one today.”

“Don’t doubt that for a second.” *Pegasus II*’s copilot could certainly Amplify Thought a replacement 334A in a few minutes. The guy was astonishing; Cad still didn’t understand why a Martian who’d been chosen as an ambassador to the Fools of the Fire was content to remain a mere USSF copilot. That was Cad’s neophyte job on *Pegasus I*, after all. In any case his crewmate Sralk revered her fellow Martian. She knew her telepathic outradiance about him was embarrassingly worshipful, and had vowed she’d soon master Outradiance Block as only Ywer and five others had.

“Uh, yeah,” Rod said. “Yeah, I see matrices 1200-1680 disrupted. That’d confirm it was 334A messing with ’em.”

“Great. I can’t wait to get in some more flight hours on this thing. Laurie let me land it Friday even though the glitch was messing with things.”

Cad watched Rod stiffen at the mention of Laurie. Could *that* be why she’d run off like that, why they both looked so disheveled? If so, it was crazy they’d chance it like that. Did they really think nobody had noticed their outrageous bantering the past few weeks? Cad had only been on the *Pegasus* project a month, but Pam Jonson had assured him this had been going on long before.

Everyone knew Rod had gone through several girlfriends. Maybe he hungered for a new conquest. But to risk it with the new supreme commander? The guy was certainly charming, always checking out the ladies. Maybe he thought he could pull it off. Everyone knew Morgan was the super-brilliant upcoming savior of the USSF with his genius physician/engineer touch. That premature gray hair, so silvery and shiny, probably added to his allure.

Cad had made it a point to be cool with Rod and not challenge the guy’s ego about P/E work or any sort of tech. Or about the women, for that matter. He really didn’t get Morgan at all; the guy seemed weirdly anxious beneath all that charisma.

Cad had no need to flirt with his pilot and supreme commander, for God’s sake. She’d bailed him out of a nasty situation last month and he still couldn’t believe his luck to be flying the next

generation of USSF spaceships.

He didn't flirt with the exceedingly cute Pam either. The navigation officer was just a buddy, and she already had a boyfriend. As for Sralk, Pam had kidded him that the female Martian, still young at 523, might be husband-hunting.

But of course there were laws forbidding Martian-human dalliance, and in any case, Cad and Sralk were also friends. Cad made sure to be friends with everyone except the supreme commander. He'd had quite enough experience to bypass these sorts of games. He could address Laurie by first name, but that was about as far as he was about to go. Yet the sight of her mussed tunic had been a sort of mathematical proof that you just never knew anyone. He'd just have to incorporate this unsettling new facet of Laurie Lachrer.

Below came boots on the ladder rungs, then Pam Jonson's short dark hair. "Hey, guys."

"Rod and Laurie figured the glitch," Cad said. "She's probably up on Three now."

"Great, I'm ready to get this thing off the ground," Pam said, poking Rod. "Did Cad tell you how he almost crashed us landing last Friday?"

"I did not," Cad protested. "As Rod will no doubt explain, the 334A panel in the corridor was malfunctioning."

"If we swap it out everything'll be fine," Rod said. "I'm gonna see if Laurie can confirm the matrix sequence." He climbed the ladder to the next level, his shirt hanging over his light blue flight pants.

"What's that all about?" Pam said.

"What's what about?"

"He seems weird today. Kinda abrupt. Jittery. Does he know how to tuck his tunic in?"

Cad wanted to say something like *you should've seen Laurie*, with a subtle nod at the open service corridor panel, but thought better of it. Laurie had saved him. He wasn't about to gossip about her. "Don't know. Maybe he's pissed at having to come over here with Harri out."

"Huh." She secured the service panel. "So they figured it out back there *together*, did they?"

Was Pam really that sharp? Cad was learning more and more about his crewmates every day. "Yeah, I guess."

He'd been stunned to find that it was his petite crewmate who'd karate-chopped him from behind after he shot down the shuttle *K'sla* with an EOS rifle at Norcaj prison last May. He still didn't know why he'd run right toward the crashing shuttle, but Pam's blow stopped him cold and surely saved his life; a lot of Detention Services guys had bought the farm during that night's insanity. Cad woke in the infirmary to find he'd actually been one of the May 23rd villains. It turned out that DS Director Posttner and self-declared President Easterling had usurped power. Robot John Commer piloting *K'sla* had just been trying to set things right.

Cad had been following orders as a docile DS airman, just as he had since last December, unsure of his future and not caring. He'd even gotten the USSF Award of Valor for surviving the senseless May skirmish. But being on the wrong side of that revolt had revitalized him.

Lieutenant Wirlmann had graduated top of his class at the USSF Academy in December, excelling in Ywritt Technology Studies and rated top pilot of his class despite the dreary administrator Plasdon, who created so many obstacles that most of the class of '75 had their graduations pushed to December. Cad was now required to attach a Ywritt Exemption Interface to his thesis and have it signed by Ca'lij, his Ywritt sponsor thirty-four light-years away at Iota Persei, along with everyone up to Jack Commer, supreme commander at the time.

He'd gotten through it all. But everything collapsed at the Christmas party. Sure, he'd been tipsy on the champagne, but Plasdon was thoroughly plastered. Cad could stand Plasdon's sneers

about Commer; hell, people always mouthed off about top administration. But when Plasdon suggested that Ca'lij had actually written Cad's thesis, and that Cad himself was therefore a traitor to the USSF, Cad forgot his creed of getting along with everyone, and his fist launched with a will of its own. Too bad the son of a bitch had a concussion and spent four weeks recovering, but really, all Cad had intended was to cave in the bastard's face.

USSF Detention Services Court had not appreciated Cad's honest self-expression, busting him to airman and posting him to the lowest grade of guard at Norcaj prison.

But after nearly snuffing it in service to these DS thugs in May, Cad came to his senses and filed fresh grievances to claim his right to pilot the newest USSF ships. He even suffered in silence the indignity of being assigned his corresponding naval rank. "Seaman Apprentice Wirlmann" sure looked snazzy on those grievance forms.

Cad hoped he might someday return to flight training school. Instead, Supreme Commander Lachrer pounced on his grievances, noting his Ywritt studies and his class rank, and flipped the switch on his destiny. To his astonishment Cad had been promoted to lieutenant commander last month. He'd been *Pegasus I's* copilot for five weeks.

Cadagasgar Wirlmann was exactly where he needed to be, ensconced in the right-hand seat next to his supreme commander pilot. Laurie had been superb all the way through, and whatever might have happened here today, he'd always have her back. Her intelligence and persistence were exactly what the USSF needed; like Jack Commer, she remained a command pilot as she performed her SCUSSF duties.

The anti-Commer crowd accused her of being Commer's pet, promoted to admiral and SCUSSF on Jack's whim, not really up for the job. And there were social pressures outside her control she was nevertheless blamed for. Humans had probably never adjusted to the stunning discoveries of this century. Maybe encountering Martian culture, the Alpha Centaurians, and the Wounded, along with Ywritt technology and these Fools of the Fire no one understood, had whipsawed the human psyche more than anyone cared to admit.

After all, the Anti-Spacers Foundation demanded that every single Sol spaceship hurl itself into the sun. Fun, right?

Cad looked up the ladder. There was no way he could hear anything coming from Three, but he wanted his command pilot centered for whatever was coming.

But whatever was coming suddenly looked damn problematic this morning. What kind of wacky bullshit had he gotten himself into?

CHAPTER THREE

Is Everything Ruined?

Laurie held her head in her hands at the pilot console. Screens running graphs and numbers made no sense. If Rod would show some decency and not traipse up here, if he'd just get off the ship, maybe she'd survive.

Rungs reverberated at the rear of the saucer dome. Please, God, just not him.

A shadow behind her. "Hey. Laurie."

She shook her head. "Not now, Rod, please, just not now."

Morgan took the copilot seat. "Yeah, but I suppose we need to talk."

Laurie shuddered. "I don't know. You know I've been sitting here thinking and ... this just can't be. I think we both know that."

"Well, I mean, I don't know what came over us," Rod added with a pathetic chuckle.

Laurie ignored it. "I think you'd better get over to *II* for the preflight. Mavis is boosting at 1100. We got a request for assistance from Jack's idiot son at Xi Scorpii A."

"Really? That far? They've given us clearance to do some exploring?"

"I'm *making* the clearance. Jonathan James isn't on any official mission. It's just his stupid ongoing cruise. He didn't go into a lot of detail, but we may have some sort of emergency situation there. So you'd better get over to the *II* now."

Rod checked his watch. "But that gives us almost two hours. We've got some time. I mean, we can't really just forget what happened, right?"

Laurie examined the pulsing screens. "We'll just be associates, I guess. On a friendly basis, you know."

"I think we should talk all this out. I mean, for the good of everybody."

Laurie took a deep breath and she sensed where his eyes lit without glancing his way. "Okay. I've figured it out. It's all simple. I'm resigning as of this moment. I'm sick of this whole mess. I thought I could handle it but I'm not cut out for it. The past six months have been hell. I just lost control. I'm out as of now." She thought to stand as supreme commander to finalize this conversation with a subordinate, then realized she was no longer supreme commander, so maybe she should just blob here like the coward she was.

"No ..." Rod gasped, reaching for her. She shrank away, leaving Rod's hand hanging. "You can't do that. It's *my* fault."

"No, it's *my* fault. I've betrayed my crew. Everybody looked up to me and I've failed them. I've even failed you in that regard."

"No, not *me*."

"C'mon, isn't it obvious I'm leaving SCUSSF a total shambles? That I've fucked it through the goddamn ass?" There, shock the kid subordinate, show him what a jerk she really was. "Dammit, didn't we all think *Pegasus* would solve everything? I was so damn naïve. But these saucers are going *nowhere*. We have all these idiot glitches, *II* needs a new name, I was supposed to have crews for *III* and *IV* last week, everyone's pissed about the goddamn ranks--"

"C'mon, this is all shakedown stuff, just getting started."

"No, I'm *resigning*. Just need to find the right goddamn form on the goddamn computer. Hell, nobody wants this stupid job. Bobby doesn't want it, 283 sure doesn't. Jack sure as hell wouldn't want it back. How the hell did he put up with all this shit, anyway?"

"You can't resign! You're one of the ambassadors to the Fools! Dammit, Laurie, we need your leadership!"

“Yeah, right. I’ve screwed that royally. Just fuck it all. I’m done with this shit.”

“Wow, Laurie, I’ve got to say I can’t believe this is coming from you of all people.”

She was about to snap his head off for referring to the supreme commander by her first name, but then remembered again that she was out. She finally met his tormented eyes and realized her own were raw and wet. “Dammit, I’m almost twice as old as you! Don’t you think everyone suspects? What about Cad down there?”

“Well, no, of course he--he--”

“*Is everything ruined?* I can’t believe this. I just can’t *believe* this.”

“Look, if anyone’s going to resign, it’ll be me. I’ll go into some branch of medical research or something. I can be gone by the end of the day.”

“Bullshit. You’ll say anything to get into my pants again!”

“*What?* That’s--that’s--”

“Forget it. I’m sorry I ever took this position. Jack forced it on me. He thought I had all these Trans-Sim powers, but they’re *gone*. Little Laurie Lachrer can’t handle it by herself. My whole career just *evaporated*. It was just a lie. Forty-four goddamn years down the tubes!”

“C’mon, Laurie, it doesn’t have to be that way.”

“Don’t call me Laurie!”

“Okay, okay, but we gotta keep it down because of the others--”

“Fuck the others! Just like you fucked me!” Now they locked eyes. She broke it with difficulty. “Look, I’m sorry, but being with you simply has shown me that I’m out of control. I thought I was always in control, but all the time I’ve been a *lie*. I’m no *good*.”

“Wow ... really?”

“Just shut up. Don’t say another word. It’s finally time to admit it.”

Rod complied. Laurie wondered why she still occupied the pilot seat. She was seething. She’d been outwardly polite all her life but inwardly she’d spent her entire USSF career *seething*. Got the technician job straight out of high school in ’32. The asteroids were dropping into the sun, the outer planets were vaporizing, so why would any sane person think of college? She became the best damn airport maintenance tech anyone had ever seen. Sure, she had to pick herself up after John died, and she went through the Academy, but she lay low, refining her tech skills. No way was she good enough to rise in rank.

Then came the end of the time war with the Alpha Centaurians in ’53 and everyone was so deliriously happy. Laurie went back for the exalted physician/engineer certification, and boy, did she excel at that. She became the best. Why? What was driving her? It was all *illusion*. Jack mentored her, but to what end?

She’d thought she had all sorts of cool tech tricks she could apply to supreme commander, but not one had remotely prepared her for this reeking top command *bullshit*.

“Well ...” Rod finally intruded, “maybe you’re really upset over this Wolfdy woman, and it’s just hitting you hard right now.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think the bitch really has the guts to go for her stupid civil trial. She’s just been in the media a lot, whining. She thinks she’s getting three million out of this? She’s an asshole like everyone. Fuck ’em all.” She didn’t care she was besmirching her exalted command status with this language. Let it all come out. Why shouldn’t he know what a total asshole she was? He’d rammed his goddamn dick in her, after all. Her panties were drenched. Crammed into her seat, spine twisted, she dreaded to find whether all that sperm had soaked all the way through. Her back ached. Her neck ached.

“*Is everything ruined?*” she cried again. “Oh my God, I still can’t believe it!”

"No, it's not. Really, you'll see." She felt his hand on her shoulder. All she could think was that Cad Wirlmann could hurtle through that hatch any second.

Her console beeped. She threw Rod's hand off and scowled. Text scrolled from the Know-How Task Force--some shithead leaving a voicemail about renaming the stupid software MATS-HOW. She cut into the call. "*Wait* on that shit, goddammit. Call it whatever the fuck you want, I don't care. MATS is just a fucking *sublayer* now, so why's everybody so fucking jacked about it? No reason to shit me around about some asshole new name! Dammit, I have *issues* here!"

She hung up and caught Rod's bulging eyes. Now he knew what an insane bitch he'd gotten his Know-How prick into. Let him stew in it. "Fuck it. MATS-HOW! Who are they kidding?"

"Listen, Laurie, what we need to do is *talk*."

"Enough, Commander," Laurie snapped. "Mavis is launching at 1100 as I believe I told you."

"Right, I know, but--"

"Look, I don't know what sort of trouble Jonathan James and his silly dog have gotten into this time, but *Pegasus II* is going to check it out and you need to get over there right now."

"But--"

"It's for the best, all things considered. We've never even been to Xi Scorpii A, so it'll be an experience, or something. So get going. I mean it. We're done here." Laurie wondered why she was issuing orders now that she was no longer in the USSF.

Rod stood with hurting eyes. Okay, he was freaked. Well, so was Laurie and she had a right to put her own freakout first. Together they'd ruined everything. This was what she got for pretending to be top command. She hardly registered that he was gone.

Except now she could put her head on the console and shut her eyes against the universe.

God, they'd done it with no precautions or anything. Well, STDs were rare in 2076 and anything Rod might've given her could be cleaned up in a hurry. Besides, the rejuvenation process almost guaranteed full immunity. Laurie's had been progressing well; she was looking and feeling younger week to week, though she doubted she'd ever rival Suzette Borman, who'd gone back to nineteen in one of the rare major reversals.

Suzette had also lucked out because her astonishing transformation to a teenager hadn't regenerated the reproductive system. Some of the major reversals, rare as they were, had actually restarted female reproductive cycles.

No way that could happen to Laurie, right?

Fucking hell, how deluded could she be? Hadn't she been alarmed by the bleeding in late July? She'd been so sure it was just the pressures of the new job. Then late August, then September, then October.

No, this couldn't be happening. How could she have ignored that? She'd been afraid to think the monthly nuisance had returned and figured it had to be temporary. It had to be due to the psychotic SCUSSF hassle.

But if she really was starting all that up again, she was now entering the most fertile part of the cycle. The addled supreme commander hadn't given that a second thought. Rod Morgan certainly hadn't either. She was sure the genius physician/engineer, no doubt sullenly trudging to his doom on *Pegasus II*, was still not giving it a thought.

Was it possible she could get pregnant? At sixty-one, were any eggs still viable as these new rejuvenation cycles kicked in? Would she have to look up her old gynecologist?

All these worries rocked her straight back to Rod Morgan mounting her in the corridor. No, nobody could be as gigantic as John, but Rod was more than big enough and he'd thrust so effortlessly, so it was even better than John in so many ways. No struggle, no worry, no hint of

pain. She took another ragged breath and eyed her comm on the counter. Call him back and lock the control room door? Grab another orgasm and then transfer the mofo to Jupiter when she was done? Was she really such a self-centered harriidan?

Or ... *marry* him? Really? She liked the sound of Laurie Morgan. But no way could that happen. She'd have to send him out on dangerous missions and that just couldn't be. What about Xi Scorpii A? Could there be real trouble there? Was she sending him, Mavis, and *Pegasus II* into danger right now? What was she thinking?

No, Rod Morgan was the very definition of unworkable. Better to resign after all. Do it cleanly. Now.

She heard Cad Wirlmann and Pam Jonson below. How could she betray these wonderful young officers? They'd never understand what a pretense she was. Cad in particular was delightful. The sandy-haired guy she'd rescued from Detention Services was rugged, with a dashing cleft chin and built like a gladiator, but Laurie had never harbored the slightest sense of attraction. He was just an amazingly good guy to have at her back.

Their voices grew louder and there was clumping on the ladders.

"No, you can't just barge in!" Pam cried.

"She's running an important simulation!" Cad yelled. "For the AUX 334A panel!"

Gray figures piled into the control room. Laurie blinked at her old nemesis Commander John Perkins, his gray tunic stretched tightly over straining pectorals, a thin black Sam Browne belt across his chest and a huge black shattergun holster at his hip. He didn't need to draw it because the other three Detention Services louts all had theirs trained on Laurie's nose.

As Laurie considered the same kind of DS assholes she was eventually going to have to figure out how to pink-slip, Perkins waved papers in her face. His cold goofy grin showcased big protruding teeth. Beneath his short balding brown hair his *merde*-colored eyes gleamed behind black-rimmed glasses that coordinated nicely with that fascist belt.

Obviously not saying a word was his way of prolonging his moment of triumph. Laurie never understood how the DS head thought he could fight his new supreme commander. Sure, he'd been pissed when he'd been demoted to that underground transportation facility on Mercury last year, but though Laurie had recommended it, it was Jack who'd issued the order.

She took the papers.

MARSPORT CRIMINAL COURT CASE 4600-65647Y. UNITED SYSTEM V. LACHRER. PRISONER TO BE TRANSFERRED TO USSF DETENTION SERVICES THIS 9TH DAY OF NOVEMBER, 2076.

"You are hereby under arrest," Commander Perkins intoned, "for the murder of Encar Wolfdy on May 23, 2076."

Laurie shot to her feet. "What the *fuck*? Why are *you* here doing this shit? Wolfdy's asshole mother's filing a *civil* case!"

"As you can see, it's no longer a civil case, ma'am. And because you're a USSF officer charged with a criminal offense, USSF Detention Services has been ordered by Criminal Court Thirty-Five to make the arrest. Now come along quietly."

"You--you *bastard*!" The goons closed in and twisted her arms behind her. Forcefield handcuffs buzzed to life. "You assholes! I'm the supreme commander! Go ahead and do your worst, fuckheads! I'll scatter your goddamn Detention Services to the wind, you mark my words!" She didn't care who among the crew heard what, since she was already pre-defined as off her rocker.