

# Dead Beckoning By Christina Engela

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## Dedication

To my wife Wendy, who loves dark, twisted stories as much as I do.

## Dead Beckoning

Imagine, if you will:

*Meradinis!*

The stuff of myths and legends! The Turtle Island of the stars – home planet to the fearsome and once legendary Corsairs – the terrors of the black, the monsters in Human form who killed innocents and waged a campaign of terror against the colonies for decades! *Meradinis!* The reputation of that place – that terrible place, a place of death and destruction that beckoned to adventurers, killers, profiteers and fortune seekers! *Meradinis...* The very name of this world grabbed the imaginations of young boys and girls, and universally mesmerized dreamers and romantics alike.

The truth was far less romantic – and as reality so often demonstrates in real life – rather ugly and brutal. The Corsairs who raided nearly every single Human colony over the span of a century, sowing terror, death and misery as they went, were not the corn-ball comics from old Earth tales that hopped about on peg-legs, with parrots on their shoulders, saying ‘*Arr!*’ to everything in general. They were anything *but*.

Behind the Corsairs and their sinister culture of plunder and violence lay a history fraught with a desperate, brutal struggle to survive, a vengefulness and a cruelty – and a drive to survive by any means necessary – chiefly of which was their predation upon other worlds... And it was their predatory nature that struck fear into the hearts of neighboring fringe worlds – and, some whispered – in the hallowed halls of the Terran Congress itself.

These marauders had started out as refugees who fled the dying planet Earth more than a century earlier, in the turmoil that followed a final great World War between archaic Human nation-states. The ancestors of what would become the Corsairs fled the turmoil and left the ruined Earth behind. Legends and myths told of these rough, tough survivors who made a home for themselves in uncharted, unclaimed space far outside the Empire's territory. Of course, there wasn't a Terran Empire then – only a divided Earth that had only just survived the devastating war.

The proto-Corsairs began to run out of supplies as they traveled, and became scavengers as they kept moving deeper and deeper into the black... until they found *this* world, this pristine beautiful blue-green planet, and thought it far away enough from Earth to start over. That was what they'd wanted – to start over – at least that had been the plan all along, and since they hadn't bothered to maintain communications with Earth, it was easy to sever all ties and to pretend there would be no one else to answer to for their actions.

Out there in the black, they found a kind of 'splendid isolation' – only more splendid, and more isolated, than any other. In the blackout of their isolation, however, they missed out completely on all subsequent news and developments from Earth. They never knew that Earth recovered from the turmoil of the 'Big One', or about its miraculous unification and advancement – or about the ravages of the Gimp War just a few years after that – followed in turn by Earth's amazing rebirth at the center of its own young interstellar empire. Over the next few decades though, that policy of isolation was to change, slowly.

The band of refugees had settled somewhere in what would eventually be called the Omegan Quadrant, and soon their scavenging became a mainstream way for the fledgling Corsair civilization to rise from merely eking out a bare living, to a thriving criminal enterprise founded on violence, plunder and fear. It was far easier for them to take what they needed than to actually produce it themselves, leading to the development of a culture based entirely on piracy. At the end of the Gimp War, the victorious planet Earth had beaten off the alien invaders, and Earth emerged as the new power in that part of space, and as might be expected – as new powers do – they began to expand and to exert their control over the surrounding systems. The Terran Empire's rapidly growing chain of colonies began the inevitable process of pushing back the boundaries of unknown space – and with them, *their* boundaries. The Terran Empire and its Commonwealth of member colonies became a beacon of peace and prosperity – unknowingly right on the doorstep of a violent aggressor.

In the Omegan Quadrant, Corsair descendants looked back at the distant home of their ancestors and the vast treasury of resources being plied into its space travel, colonization and commerce. These new Terran colonies had the very resources the Corsairs found hard to come by out in deep space. Taking the benefits of the labors of others seemed a logical, convenient – and altogether cheaper – alternative to developing entire infrastructures from the ground up.

As time went by, the Corsairs made regular forays into Imperial space – hijacking and stealing small ships and loderunners, attacking small settlements and under-defended outposts – but their own base remained a mystery. Rumors, myths and legends grew around them. The Corsairs' home was known only as Turtle Island, named so after the mythical island colonized by Earth

buccaneers in the 17th century. At first, the Corsairs were really only bothersome, merely poking and prodding at the outskirts of the outermost colonies. Later, they became bolder and bolder still until each passing year marked increased incidence of pirate attack. Eventually however, they would rise to become the single biggest threat the Terran Empire had faced since the Ruminarii.

It had always been a point of interest to astro-anthropologists and stellar economists how such 'vampire economies' developed, subsisting off detached, larger, more conventional economies. In this case, trade agreements would've been impractical because the very notion implied the Corsairs had something to actually trade in exchange for goods and services, which was untrue.

The Corsair economy was outwardly only a one way street – from outside, *in*. Piracy was their commerce. This form of replenishment and acquisition created among the Corsairs a mindset of '*there's plenty more where that came from*', encouraging among the orphaned colonists the consumerist mindset, but combining it with a philosophy if you will, of entitlement. It became *theirs* because they *could* take it – and because they *did*. The Corsairs resented the Terrans because to them, the Terrans were the '*haves*' – and they were the '*have-nots*'. The Corsairs had a need and were smart enough and strong enough to take what they wanted – and of course, were prepared to fight for it. The Corsairs also no longer viewed themselves as being beholden to Earth or to other people from Earth, but as a separate society, a *predator* society free to take whatever they needed without having to answer for their actions to those outside their culture. For that reason, they scoffed at Terran laws, Terran courts, and Terran threats of retribution – and kept the location of their home world a closely-guarded secret.

The very first Corsair raids first affected the outer colonies of the young Terran Empire. More vulnerable and open to attack, they were easy prey for the daring and enterprising new space pirates – who plundered and murdered their way into the next century. They knew very well that Earth would not tolerate such brigandage if they knew where to strike – but in the end their secret, as most secrets do eventually, came out and with it, their doom.

Which brings us to more recent events.

One day, not too long ago, a Terran star base near Tremaine – one of Earth's oldest colonies, fell mysteriously silent... The Terrans sent a ship to investigate, only to discover the star base had been attacked by a large fleet of Corsair raiders, and virtually destroyed. Everything of value had been looted and plundered from the station, with great loss of life. The psychological shock was far more significant however, because it implied that the Corsairs had reached a level of strength where they no longer saw the Terran's military response as a threat... Action had to be taken.

A few hours later, while the ship that had been sent to investigate – the I.S.S. Antares – was on its way to Tremaine, they encountered a Corsair ship that had been left behind to spy on the ruined star base, and captured it – with the location of the Corsair home world still intact inside its nav-computer! Following a successful scouting operation, in which agents of the Terran Imperial Space Fleet infiltrated the planet Meradinis' defenses, the Terrans sent a large heavily armed fleet to settle the score with their long lost cousins, putting an end to nearly a century and a half of interstellar terror.

Traditionally, Corsair ships were converted loderunners and other old spacers toughened up and armed with improvised weapons. For the most part, the Corsairs fought using heavy industrial lasers, electro-magnetic rail guns that fired everything from iron-rich meteorites to warheads made from mining explosives. They had put up a fierce fight, but though they fought fiercely, they did so at the receiving end of state-of-the-art energy weapons and potent high yield slam-torpedoes – with predictable results.

After nearly two days of fierce fighting in the skies around Meradinis, the fighting was finally over and the Terran Space Fleet had taken the field. The Terrans had won, and had finally cornered their venomous, defeated foe in its own den. In orbit, where the battle of Turtle Island was fought, the remnants of the once feared predatory Black Fleet drifted, blazing, while the Corsair civilization below breathed its last. Too many of the black ships were destroyed to count, but it was later estimated that they numbered around five hundred, all types included. The Black Fleet had been decimated, with all but few ships destroyed, scattered to space. The shattered marauders hung suspended in the night sky, burning bright and telling a sinister tale that was not quite... yet... over.

The ships of Earth paused, holding orbit over the planet. On Meradinis, the populace held its breath and prepared to meet the expected airborne invasion. The Corsair's strength had been their fleet, and the scant ground forces would offer little noteworthy resistance to a well-disciplined landing force of Star Marines, as Imperial troop-landers delivered them to the surface, while fighter squadrons provided total air-cover.

In the capital city of Tortuga below, in the Black Palace, the man known as the Patron – Martel the Mighty, ruler of this dark world – had packed his coffers and was now also, presumably, making good his escape. For the Corsair elite and ruling class – those whose hands were literally dripping with blood and who had profited from the bloodshed and violence that had terrorized dozens of worlds – escape was the only option left, and he would not be the only one to mount an escape attempt, nor be the only one to succeed. For years to come there would be countless bounties offered on missing prominent Corsairs that had slipped through the net, with the occasional report of so-and-so being spotted on some or other rim world, presumably sporting a new beard and a pair of sunglasses – which might have raised a few eyebrows in the case of the many female Corsairs.

*Meradinis! Turtle Island! ...It was a little corner of chaos!*

The speeding black ship had left behind Meradinis, Tortuga and home three days ago, fleeing in crushing, humiliating shame – and all three days had been a constant running battle to survive! For three days the accursed Imperial warship *Indomitable* had followed, firing on them at every opportunity. Death or imprisonment now awaited those who called themselves Corsairs – and though this death sentence was now more a certainty rather than just a possibility, Sona Kilroy, or “*The Hammer*” as he was called by his men, was not prepared to give up his freedom so easily.

Piracy was his life and he'd known no other, nor did he seek any alternative. He was tough and cruel, a despicable man, a case in point when academics quoted the barbarism by which the Corsairs had made themselves known and feared across the star systems of the peaceful Terran Empire. At forty two years, Sona Kilroy stood tall and strapping, a powerful figure. Rising to the rank of Admiral in the Corsair fleet had been no easy feat – nor had it ever been so for any predecessor. It took intelligence, skills, determination, resilience, creative thinking, brute force, and sheer cunning to achieve – and perhaps also a large slice of luck. As much as it had cost him to achieve that rank, it took nearly twice as much to hold onto.

Even at his age and rank, Sona Kilroy was still used to roughing it with his men, and this made him a popular, respected leader, even though he was also still greatly feared. In the Corsair culture, the slightest sign of weakness might encourage a mutiny and the election of a replacement, who would undoubtedly be younger and stronger, or perhaps just more popular. As a Corsair leader, Kilroy had to have the respect of those who fought under him, which in itself meant only the toughest survived, ruling by a delicate balance of respect and fear...fear being his favorite.

Terran intelligence reports and local folklore had woven together to perpetuate tales of his bloody adventures across the rim worlds and badlands of Terran space – tales of bloody infamy! That was his trademark, and often over the last two decades, history had proclaimed in large bloody letters that '*Kilroy woz 'ere.*'

Kilroy's flagship shook around him as another Terran slam-torpedo struck home. The shields – improvised and based on an upgraded civilian system – had failed, and the *Black Reaper* had already sustained heavy damage. Her number was up – and so it seemed, was Kilroy's. The small launch bay was littered with debris. A powerful breeze tore at his black silk shirt as Kilroy strode his way across it to the waiting shuttle, evoking a feeling like the fingers of fate were caressing his body. "*The Hammer*" stepped over the body of one of his fallen crew without a trace of care or concern. The air rushed past him, like a wind, out into space through the wounds in the side of his ship. Fatigued and desperate, *the Hammer* was running out of options. His ship was a mess, holed in a dozen places, the life support systems failing. Weakened hull sections were collapsing in pressure bursts. The vibrations that shook the deck beneath him now were not from the engines that once drove her forward, but now from the explosions down below, tearing her apart.

His loyal crew had suffered many casualties, his ship had nothing left to give – he'd used up ship and crew in this last desperate bid for their freedom – and if he didn't hurry, he would perish along with the rest or risk capture at the hands of the accursed Terran ship that was still firing on them, pounding his flagship into a shambles. Internal chain explosions were ripping out the guts of his ship now, sending tremors through the deck and into his black heart. A betting man would say he was finished. Only, not *quite*. He still hung on, by a thread. It wasn't over yet.

The shuttle was just meters away now. As he climbed the short landing ramp, his shirt still flapping noisily, a haggard unshaven face appeared at the doorway, and urged him to hasten. As desperate as their situation was, they wouldn't dare try to leave without him – not even to save their own miserable skins.

“Hurry! Hurry!” The man shouted, his voice almost lost in the maelstrom of the booming explosions, the rising thunder of the shuttle engines and the howling chaos of escaping air.

Inside the shuttle, the anti-grav motors hummed loudly as the pilot gunned the throttle. The small craft rose off the deck. Just as the small airlock door closed and the ramp retracted behind him, the huge doors of the launch bay finally gave in without warning, and blew outward. Kilroy grimaced, looking over the shoulder of the pilot through the viewports on the cramped flight deck, holding on to supports and metal ribs of the structure. The universe lay open before him. *Freedom!* ...But it wasn't just simply there for the taking – he would have to fight for it. Tooth and claw.

The small craft blasted clear of the debris as the last internal detonations tore his old ship apart. Pieces of hull plating and sections of the disintegrating hulk spiraled away, trailing plumes of flame and fading atmosphere as minor explosions became major ones. Flames engulfed the festering carcass in a purifying ball of flame as they shot clear of it! The shuttle accelerated, the pilot hoping the destruction of the ship would mask their escape. In two minutes it was already close to light speed – but swift and fleet as it was, it could not outrun the *Indomitable* or hide from her sensors.

A tractor beam from the Imperial ship locked onto the shuttle and in seconds it became apparent they were being hauled in. The tractor was inescapable, and they knew it. The shuttle's small yet potent engines struggled vainly against the irresistible pull. Inside, *the Hammer* and his men prepared to meet their fate.

With the engines shut down, the captive shuttle was drawn into the waiting hangar deck of the *Indomitable*, steadily positioned until it was gently lowered onto the landing surface. Kilroy eyed the huge doors of the Terran ship's shuttle deck coldly as they began to roll shut, cutting off their escape. Through the side viewports, his crewmates alerted him to the arrival of a platoon of security marines as they came running from the entrance of the main airlock, in full body armor, weapons bristling. Kilroy eyed them on his external monitors as they took up strategic positions behind a stack of containers and a small yellow hover-tractor. Twenty Terran security marines had their weapons aimed at the shuttle. Moments later, a brisk command came over the com channel.

*“Attention, aboard the shuttle!”* A male voice said crisply. *“You are under arrest! Surrender immediately! Shut down all systems! Come out slowly, in single file, with your hands behind your heads! Leave all weapons behind. Comply and your lives will be spared!”*

*“Comply and your lives will be spared!”* One of his crewmates mimicked sardonically in a shrill falsetto. This was followed by a run of tense and slightly nervous giggles from the others, suggesting their captors might as well have pursed their lips and said *“resistance is useless”*.

Kilroy was a hard man, a smart man too, and he took pride in always having a plan 'b'. For those troubling occasions when plan 'b' didn't work, he would strive to also have a plan 'c' in place. In

short, he was the kind of man who always had something up his sleeve besides his funny bone. The pilot, his trusted second man, gave him a worried look.

“What do we do now, Admiral?”

Kilroy grinned before giving his number two a tired, desperate yet meaningful look. A few minutes later, the airlock door of the shuttle began to open, and the boarding ramp began extending to the deck of the Terran ship.

“*Ok, look sharp!*” The security marine team leader warned over his headset. “They’re coming out!”

Four figures dressed in tattered black clothing, some with long hair or braids and bandanas, came out cautiously with their hands behind their heads. Some sported bloodied bandages here and there, as if to back up the argument that they were real tough guys. They walked down the landing ramp slowly, eyeballing their captors in a guarded fashion.

The marines had moved closer and deployed around the shuttle entrance, twenty well-armed and armored soldiers stood covering them from a short distance with fast-firing energy weapons. Suddenly, one of the black-clad figures casually lowered an arm and tossed something away just as he reached the foot of the ramp – and the others followed after him. Without pausing, the would-be Corsair prisoners dove to the ground, and began crawling quickly, making for behind the ramp. At that, some of the marines opened fire, setting off a sudden flurry of activity.

“*Grenade! Take cover!*” The sergeant barked.

The shout of alarm brought sudden action to the already tense situation. Marines scattered, energy bolts whined across the deck space and struck the shuttle around the Corsairs, who now began to return fire with light hand weapons. Just then, four explosions boomed in short succession. Shrapnel from the grenades thrown by the Corsairs tore into unlucky marines who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Bits of metal rattled and pinged as they struck objects around them. In the midst of the chaos, a few more men came running down the ramp from the shuttle entrance, bristling with what could only have been portable heavy artillery! They advanced quickly down the ramp, firing continuously, offering no respite to the beleaguered marines. As the Corsair reinforcements passed, they tossed their lighter armed comrades better weapons and moved forward to capture the hangar deck. Smoke billowed, obscuring the view. The din on the hangar deck was deafening.

The security marine sergeant saw the potential for disaster looming ahead of him, like the lights on an oncoming tube train. It was clear these Corsairs were used to hard fighting – in fact, they had all but cut their teeth on it. The marines were scattered, pinned down and too thinned out to be effective. They’d been taken completely by surprise! Cover was minimal here! He looked back towards the entrance to the flight deck, standing wide open, like an invitation.

“Secure the exit!” He ordered any of his marines who might have been listening. “Shut the doors! Don’t let any of them through!”

One of his juniors nodded, turned, and ran for the exit, just as the sergeant took two hits in the shoulder pad and lower back armor. The force knocked him to his knees. He collapsed, blood spraying from a wound in his neck, eyes opened wide. The last thing he saw was the burst of fire from a nearby Corsair that took that marine down as well.

Sona Kilroy, strode towards the open doorway, and stepped over the sergeant's body. With an old auto-rifle in his left hand, he gave his favorite sword a twirl in his right. The sharp melodic din of bolts and bullets rang in his ears like an old favorite tune he knew so well. Sona Kilroy, 'the Hammer', grinned an evil grin to himself, well pleased. He wished he could've seen the look on the face of *Indomitable's* Captain when he realized the tables had just been turned on him! The thought amused him. It was bloody *hilarious!* Kilroy cackled, reveling in this complete reversal of fortune! He paused to unleash a short burst of fire into a security marine, and waited for the man to crumple to his knees before disconnecting his head at the shoulders with one swing of his sword. Then he stalked onward with conviction, a grim smile on his lips – intent on taking the ship for himself.

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Bernardus was the mother of five worlds, three stillborn – lifeless and uninhabitable, and two bright, young and thriving Terran colonies, Tremaine and Andronicus. Tremaine was one of Earth's oldest extrasolar colonies, well-established colonial worlds, and typical of the older colonies of the Terran Empire. Andronicus was somewhat less developed than Tremaine – and more industrial, while Tremaine was by now almost on a social par with the mother world itself.

Clear blue skies framed pristine natural landscapes. Tremaine was most often described in the *Interstellar Tourist Guide* using the word 'lovely'. Indigenous wildlife lived alongside imported Terran species in a carefully planned biosphere. Its cities, although slightly smaller and further apart than Earth's, and its population only about a quarter that of Earth itself, left much open, unspoiled space, and gave the impression of very careful planning and fastidious regulation.

People over-regulated things here – living on Tremaine was like living in a big, gated complex – the size and number of pets one could keep, the number and type of private vehicles one could own – you couldn't even paint your mailbox in a color of your choice unless it was one of the approved colors specified in the regulations! People in the streets walked about with vacant, meaningless smiles displayed on their faces as they went about their business in a city that looked like something from one of those awful 1950's color brochures for 'the modern kitchen' brought to grotesque, nightmarish life!

It was all very 'lovely', and Joe Lofflin couldn't take it for much longer.

The faint light of the early dawn began to shine through the window of his hotel room. The curtains were drawn, but they were thin and almost transparent, and only served to slightly obscure the awful, hideous clarity of the green, perfectly manicured, trimmed and manipulated gardens outside. He'd walked outside in those gardens – not alone, but holding hands, and marveled at the various insects – local and imported. He'd '*oohed*' at the dancing honey bees and

'*ahed*' at the foot-long stick insects and caterpillars and all manner of beasties that munched their way through the flowerbeds. The sunrises and sunsets were breathtaking, but he found he could only stomach watching so many of them on a daily basis. Oh, it was all very *lovely*, of course – but Lofflin had grown tired of it. He'd had enough. He was a spacer, and he longed to get back to what he knew best – space. Running a starship. Making a difference.

The silence was deafening, he realized as he lay there in the twilight of his early morning session of woe. He could almost hear his heart pumping in his ears. No, he *could* hear it! He shifted his pillow, and continued to recount his grievances to the universe, as if it were actually listening.

For nearly two months now, he and his crew had been on a seemingly endless stint of shore leave, and he couldn't wait for it to be over. Not that he or his crew could just leave, even if they wanted to – their ship was still in space dock undergoing repairs. The Mordrake had taken a lot of damage in their previous encounter with a Corsair raider, when they were out patrolling the border along the treacherous Omegan Quadrant. The Mordrake had, until then, been three months at space, and had had no contacts with any Corsairs until the one it ran into near Horner's World – and that had very nearly been the end of the intrepid crew. The ship's former Captain, Philip Wainwright Blaine, had been eager to score at least one kill before the end of their patrol, when he reluctantly agreed to bring the Mordrake back to Tremaine for some incidental engine repairs... and it was while they were returning that they ran into a Corsair raider! Blaine took them into battle and engaged the Corsair raider against fair warnings from the Chief Entech that the ship was in no condition to do so. In the heat of battle, a cataclysmic failure of the Mordrake's systems caused the ship to suffer a string of direct hits, sustaining critical damage to the very systems that kept her crew alive.

Right after the battle, when the lights came back on and damage control teams were crawling all over the place, Captain Blaine retreated into a bottle inside his quarters for the shame of what his arrogant pride had cost them. After drifting for several days, while running on emergency power, and with the entechs doing their level best to repair the engines, the crew – or at least, the survivors – had to be told that there was nothing to be done, and that they were going to die. And it had been *he* – Joe Lofflin, the then Exo of the Mordrake, who had been forced through circumstance to take on the role of acting-Captain. In the meantime, Blaine had been murdered by their erstwhile Chief Entech – Lt. Commander Ralph Billingham, who was something of a disgruntled employee, who blamed Blaine for the situation they were in.

As luck would have it, their paths crossed with a derelict alien vessel which they were able to cannibalize for spare parts to get their own engines working again. They were saved! Of course, it hadn't been quite that simple, but here they were, a week or so later, in civilized space again – at Tremaine, safe! Lofflin groaned at the thought. That had been almost two months ago!

They'd expected something of a hero's welcome on returning to Tremaine, after what they'd been through, and their arrival shortly after the Corsair attack on Starbase 91 hardly went unnoticed. Tension among the locals was high at the time because the Space Fleet had only just sent a small squadron of ships to patrol the area, and the colony remained exposed to Corsair attack. Even though the badly damaged Mordrake had made it back this far, it had taken the better part of two months to fix the mess at the local space dock.

For Lofflin, the highlight of their arrival at Tremaine's orbital docking facility hadn't been the hero's welcome at the Official Residence of the Planetary Governor, his subsequent promotion to Captain of the Mordrake, or the news that the Corsair home world had been located and a Fleet task force had been sent to wipe it off the star-maps... no, it was watching the former Chief Entech, Ralph Billingham being frog-marched down the umbilical docking corridor off his ship by a pair of hefty-looking Military Policemen!

The crew had two months shore leave on Tremaine Colony during the repairs. Whereas the I.S.S. Mordrake's activities had been concerned with the business of staying alive, their activities now had been to have a good time, live it up, and make the most of it. Joe Lofflin had done just that. ...But he could only watch so many movies at the Metroplex, eat so many candle-lit dinners, walk so many gardens and shopping malls, or sleep late so many mornings in a row... before it became... well, tedious.

A movement and a rustle in the sheets beside him in the darkness derailed his train of thought. A warm, naked young body pressed up against him, and he smiled. Of course, it *was* lovely here.

"Good morning, Captain." Dellon smiled at him in the slightly brighter light of morning. It was so quiet that Lofflin even heard his companion blink.

"Good morning." He smiled back. "Ensign Bennett."

"What time's it?"

"Time you started calling me Joe." Lofflin sighed jokingly. "At least when we're not on duty."

"Yes, sir!" Bennett snapped back mockingly, and giggled. "Sorry, sir! Please don't hang, draw and quarter me!"

"We haven't been on duty for months!" Lofflin mock-reprimanded.

"Yes, sir! Please don't keelhaul me!" Bennett giggled again, coyly adding "Not again!"

"It's the cat o' nine tails for you this time, m'lad! *Arrr!*" Lofflin joked, grabbing Dellon Bennett fast in a pseudo wrestling hold, the bed covers becoming intertwined with their lover's tryst as he did so.

Yes, it was indeed *lovely* here.

\* \* \*

It was another week – a round two months since the Mordrake arrived at Tremaine – before Lofflin was informed that his ship was finally ready to be handed back to her crew. It was on a bright sunny Friday morning that Lofflin left his hotel room, dressed in his uniform, brand new Captain's bars shining in the sun – and hailed a taxi. It'd been two months since the last time he'd worn a uniform, and the feel of it against his skin made him feel good and strange at the same time. The taxi took him through the bustling streets of Charlotton – Tremaine's '*lovely*' capital city, to the nearby spaceport. There, he took a small public shuttle to the Orbital Docking Station – a central hub of travel from orbit to the surface above Tremaine.

The Mordrake had been moved by space tugs from the nearby orbiting jetty – the industrial one with all the loading docks and the spacedock repair facility – to the main O.D.S. station, which

was reserved for big starships and cruise liners and so on. From orbit, the picture could only be called *'lovely'*. Tremaine was just over a century old, as a colony world, and started out as a farming colony, before becoming a trade-world for newer colonies in neighboring systems. Its prime exports were medicinal substances derived from indigenous equatorial forests, which brought in major investments from all the biggest pharmaceutical companies. Beautiful, rich, sprawling lush green forests and equatorial jungles covered the globe below.

Lofflin passed through the throng of bustling commuters in the great hall of the O.D.S. itself, before reaching the tunnel that connected to the Mordrake. A small rededication ceremony was to be held onboard, hosted by the Yard Master, who turned out to be a graying middle-aged man who wore a yellow hard hat, even though he wore a suit. Most of those in attendance looked to be workers and techs at the yard, who'd probably been pressured into attending.

After having been an Exo aboard this very starship for well over six years, Lofflin had already tasted command in all its bitterness and glory. The Executive Officer on a starship was the Captain's right hand, and in many ways, a trainee Captain. Exo's usually transferred off their ships, and went on to command other ships for the Space Fleet, and sometimes, as in his case, the Captain retired – or died... If an Exo was viewed as having a good enough standing, they were promoted up to fill the gap, and a new Exo would be either promoted up – or transferred in.

That's how Commander Josh Carlson, aged thirty, came to be invited to this little shindig too. The tall, spindly blond haired man, freshly promoted – just like his Captain – was to be his Exo. With a horribly surreal suddenness, Joe Lofflin realized that he'd reached the top of the food chain on the Mordrake – and there was now nowhere to run, or hide! All of the last seven years as Exo on the Mordrake, he'd known Blaine as the Captain, his superior officer, the supreme authority on ship – and although the man had died, and he'd been promoted two months ago, it still hadn't felt *real*. His role wasn't to enforce the Captain's decisions anymore, but to make them – as he'd done while they'd been marooned in space, and after Blaine's death... And Carson was taking his old place.

The man looked so young for the job – even though Lofflin had been about the same age when he moved up the promotional ladder seven years previously. Joe was thirty-seven now, approaching forty, and at the moment he felt his age pressing down on him again.

Lofflin spent most of the ceremony watching the Yard Master absentmindedly fiddling with the name-plate on his suit jacket, as though someone would have something to say about it if it weren't pinned on exactly straight. Frank Myburgh was his name. The ceremony was a pleasant touch, but totally unnecessary, Lofflin felt, and he'd had basically attended only as an invited guest. It was, he reflected, more of a political statement on the part of the local government than anything else. After a few quite dull speeches from the Planetary Governor, the Mayor of Tremaine's capital city, the Chief Administrator of Tremaine's Orbital Docking Station – and Mr. Myburgh, a snack table laden with assorted salty and sweet items presented a pleasant distraction for Joe.

A few people approached him as he stood at the buffet table – holding a paper plate of snacks, to make small talk – but Lofflin restricted himself to one or two word answers, which usually

helped to keep people he didn't feel comfortable around, at a distance. It didn't work on Commander Carlson though – the younger officer approached him and stopped to attention to report to his new Captain.

“Captain Lofflin,” The man said, “I'm Commander Carlson, your new Exo.”

“Good to meet you at last,” Lofflin nodded conversationally, wiping his fingers on a paper serviette before extending a hand in welcome. “At ease. Commander.”

The man had a firm grip and an honest look about his eyes. He liked that.

“When did you get in?” Lofflin asked him.

“Tuesday, sir.” Carlson said. “I came on the Churchill.”

“Your previous ship?” Lofflin asked. Carlson nodded.

“Yes, sir.”

“How long were you on the Churchill?” He asked.

“Four years, seven months, sir.” Carlson replied. “Ever since I made Lt.”

Lofflin nodded. Four years was a stretch. Crewmen made friends during their various postings – he always found it difficult to leave them behind and start over somewhere else, on a new ship with new faces. Although... sometimes it was a good thing.

“Are you sad to leave?”

“Er...” Carlson hesitated.

“Relax. Don't worry; it's not a trick question, Commander.” Lofflin smiled, trying to put his new Exo at ease.

“Mixed feelings, sir.”

“Well, I hope you'll be happy aboard the Mordrake.” Joe replied. “There'll be plenty of time to get to know each other in a few days.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Carlson hung back after that, no doubt sticking around for the guided tour of the Mordrake. Lofflin knew the I.S.S. Churchill by its reputation – being a Ningan class battlespringer, he knew she was rather small compared to the cruisers, and how daunting the prospect of managing a crew of three to four hundred members compared to just seventy-five or a hundred must seem.

After that, he enjoyed the conducted tour of his ship, being made to walk up front with the other invited guests, which included a few journalists from local news media. He was rather impressed with the result – it hadn't been a refit, just a repair job – but the ship looked as good as new again, inside and out! Even the carpets smelled fresh. Of all the traces of battle damage that had marked her hull, and on the inside, no sign remained. The techs at the yard certainly seemed to know their jobs!

After a few very brief recorded interviews held on the bridge of the Mordrake – which also consisted largely of one or two word replies – with journalists who seemed more interested in the tale of the Mordrake and her encounter with a) a Corsair raider and b) the ancient alien derelict, than anything Mr. Myburgh had to say, Lofflin bade his farewells and disembarked again. After rubbing elbows with so many shallow people, Lofflin was happy to return to the hotel room he shared with Ensign Bennett.

It wasn't that Joe Lofflin was overly secretive about his sexuality, or his choice of relationship partner – he just felt it was nobody's business. As long as he maintained the proper amount of decorum appropriate to the rank and position of Captain, and the chain of command remained intact, he was free to pursue any relationship with any crewmember, as pleased him.

Blaine never had anything to say on the matter, even though he and the old man had sometimes butted heads over work issues – and sometimes, when personal disputes got heated, a person's sexuality could become a convenient target. To his credit, Blaine had never taken a swipe at him for being gay, and despite the man being an insufferable – though mostly fair martinet – Lofflin was grateful to him for that.

Dellon was there to welcome him back. His *lover* – Lofflin detested that word, it made their relationship sound so cheap and transient – was twenty-four years old, and an Ensign on the Mordrake. He was one of the helmsmen, as a matter of fact. He was definitely quite handsome in a slightly effeminate sort of way, just the sort of look that appealed to Lofflin. They'd been dating since just before arriving at Tremaine, so that made it two months... shouldn't they look at a better term to describe each other?

Their ship was ready, shore leave was drawing to a close, and their little holiday was all over now, bar the packing. In three days' time, the crew would return to the ship, and he would await his first assignment.

\* \* \*

The three days passed all too quickly, and by the time Lofflin and Bennett returned to the ship, at least half the crew was back already.

The I.S.S. Mordrake was back in the game. Lofflin knew that they'd missed the action on Meradinis, which was something he was partly thankful for, and hoped for a routine first assignment as Captain, so he could ease into the role properly. Admiral Hobbs contacted him several hours later, to realize that wish. The Mordrake's first assignment under him as Captain was to reconnoiter an assigned sector of the Omegan Quadrant – and Lofflin was relieved... you couldn't wish for anything more routine than that!

The final boarding message sounded around the O.D.S. station, and a few last crewmen hurriedly made their way across the airlocks to board the Mordrake.

END OF PREVIEW