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SPACE, TIME AND THE INCURABLE ROMANTIC

J. Michael Straczynski

Much to his own surprise, Marcus Cole breathed deeply.

His first conscious thought was *I'm alive*, followed closely by *Why am I alive?*

He blinked open his eyes. Bright white light stabbed at him, and he closed them again.

"Dim the lights," someone said.

He tried a second time, and managed to keep his eyes open. He was in an operating theater, of that much he was certain. Several Minbari doctors stood over him. At least one of them wore the cloak and pin that identified him as a Ranger, same as Marcus, serving in the shadows, serving the Alliance.

He struggled to recall how he had gotten here. The last thing he remembered was learning that Commander Susan Ivanova had been mortally wounded during the Earth civil war, and was dying. Against orders, he had rushed to her side and used the alien device found by Dr. Stephen Franklin -- an instrument of capital punishment designed to transfer the life-force from one person to another -- to use his own life-force to bring her back from the edge. He did so even knowing the cost he would pay for his actions.

I love you, he had said.

And there, in her arms, he had died.

So where, and *why*, the hell was he?

He struggled to sit up, but his arms shuddered and collapsed beneath him.

"Try not to move," the head Minbari physician said.

"Why can't I sit up?" Marcus asked. "My arms --"

"Atrophied. You haven't used them in...well, in a very long time."

"How long?"

"We'll begin rehabilitation at once, artificially stimulating them around the clock, and that should help get you on your feet soon, but --"

"*How long?*"

The physician hesitated, looked to the Ranger behind him. "Tell him, Tranall," the other Minbari said. "He has been

trained as *anla-shok*, he is a Ranger. He can bear the burden."

The physician nodded, and turned back to Marcus. "You have been in cryonic suspension," he said. "Commander Ivanova ordered your body frozen in case one day science might find a way to restore you to life."

"Presumptuous, I suppose, but that's always been her way," Marcus said. "It's getting so a man can't even die heroically without someone spoiling all the fun. I'll have words with her about this, just you wait."

The two Minbari exchanged a curious look.

"Speaking of Ivanova," Marcus said, "where is she? I can't imagine she'd miss this."

"I'm afraid she is dead," the Ranger said.

Marcus struggled for words. "I don't understand, I mean, I saved her... I mean, I *did* save her, didn't I? The device *did* work, didn't it?"

"It did," the Ranger said. "That is a historical fact. But you must understand: by the Earth calendar, the event you are describing took place nearly three hundred years ago."

Over the coming weeks, as Marcus recovered, he learned all that had happened in the days and years following his cryonic suspension. The information was given out piecemeal, when and as the doctors felt he could handle each new piece of information.

Susan Ivanova had become captain, then continued up the ranks, becoming an Earthforce general and then, finally, *Anla-shok na*, head of the Rangers under the leadership of Interstellar Alliance President Delenn of Minbar. She had served in that capacity for the rest of her life, expanding the roster of membership in the *anla-shok* to include representatives of every member world, and instituting a system of honor and self-sacrifice that was unparalleled to this day. He was told that there were over half a dozen statues and memorials to her work in this one city alone.

She had eventually arranged for his cryotube to be shipped here, and from time to time, visited him in his long sleep. According to Tranall, those visits were still whispered about among the medical staff, some saying that she used to talk to him as if he were still alive. "But there are no records, anywhere, of what she said," Tranall added.

Her orders, and those of Delenn, were that his body was to be kept intact and in cryonic suspension for however long it took to find a way to restore him to life.

It had only happened now, three hundred years after the fact, because a recent expedition to the Rim had found the ruins of the alien civilization that had produced the energy transfer device. In among the ancient documents and records, they had at last found the information they had been searching for.

"And what am I supposed to do now?" Marcus had asked at the end of his final briefing.

"What they had all wanted for you," Tranall said. "Go on living."

"What about everybody else?"

"We have kept your revival a secret. We thought it would be better that way. It will give you time to adjust without the press of others demanding your time. The chance to talk with someone who actually knew President Sheridan, and Delenn, and *Anla-shok na* Ivanova is..." Tranall's eyes fixed at a distant point, then finally returned to Marcus. "There are no words. But we shall respect your convalescence. After that, of course, we will have enough questions to fill an ocean."

"And you need not worry about your future or your livelihood from this point on," he continued. "A trust fund was set up two hundred years ago. There are enough credits in that account to serve the needs of several thousand men for the rest of their lives. You will have everything you need."

Marcus nodded, didn't say *No, not quite everything*.

When he was strong enough, Marcus left the hospital and walked out into the Minbari capital city of Yedor. Little had changed in the three hundred years since he had last walked these streets. The crystalline spires and towers were as coldly impressive as they had always been. There were more humans and other aliens out on the streets than he had ever seen before, but that was understandable since Minbar was now the seat of the Alliance. The Rangers had become an interstellar legend of their own, their honesty and objectivity heralded on hundreds of worlds. If a Ranger was called in to arbitrate a dispute, their decisions were utterly unimpeachable.

And when force was needed to resolve a dispute, they were a feared power. A power that was applied only when absolutely necessary, and never for political or personal gain.

I guess it was all worth it after all, he thought, but found himself distant from it all, feeling like a reverse historian, seeing things that proceeded from events he knew, but with which he had little personal involvement.

Everyone I knew is dead. So where am I supposed to fit in with all this? He supposed he could rejoin the Rangers, catch up with all the latest training, but somehow it just wasn't the same anymore. When he'd first joined up, it was a new thing, the revival of an ancient tradition for purposes of fighting an impossible war. Now it had become status quo, had become everyday. The great war was long over, it was ancient history.

As was he, Marcus ruefully decided.

After several hours, his wanderings had taken him to the Memorial Park, where the bodies of heroes, dignitaries, rangers and former Alliance presidents (at least those that hadn't mysteriously vanished) had been interred.

Yeah, like this was an accident, he thought. He checked the directory and found what he knew he had been searching for without ever saying it aloud, even to himself.

Susan Ivanova's memorial rose up before him in a tower of crystal and stone whose layers wove together in delicate patterns that caught the cool white light of an ordinary day and broke it into a million brightly colored pieces. *How utterly appropriate a metaphor*, he decided.

He entered the memorial, and his breath caught in his chest as he saw her face floating in the air above the quartz-like crypt that contained her body. *Just a memorial holo-image*, he told himself, but it was her face from the days he had known her, and he could not look at it without pain.

He stepped closer, the gaze of her face following his movement. "Hello, Susan."

There was no reply.

"Why'd you do it?" he asked, sitting on a bench beside the crypt. "I mean, if you hadn't done it, we'd be together by now, in whatever passes for an afterlife these days."

"Of course, I don't believe in an afterlife, and you know that -- *knew* that -- so I suppose that could've had something to do with it." He shook his head. "You always thought you knew better than everybody else. Well, fine. First you were alive and I was dead, and that wasn't right at all, so now *I'm* alive and *you're* dead. Yes, this is *such* a better solution, isn't it? You ask me, I think you did it for revenge. If you had to go through those years by yourself, then by god you were going to make sure I did the same even if that meant hiring people to chase my body clear across infinity."

He looked up at her face. It hadn't changed.

On the other hand, maybe you actually loved me, he thought, but could not bring himself to say. It felt presumptuous.

He wondered what she had said to him, all those years when he was in frozen sleep. Was she telling him that she missed him? Or rebuking him for being stupid? He would never know.

He thought of her, sitting alone for all those years. *Did you do it for me? Because you missed me or because you felt guilty because of me? It's not fair. I knew I was on a fast track to a bad death ever since my brother died; how could I go on knowing that I'd failed him? I couldn't fail someone again. Especially not you. I wanted you to have one more chance to find happiness. And you didn't. You had the work, but you always had the work, that's not the point. It's not right that you were alone. It's not right, it's --*

"Hello?"

Marcus sat up, startled at the voice that echoed in the memorial. A Minbari stood in the doorway, clutching a handful of flowers.

"I'm sorry if I alarmed you," he continued. "Do you mind if I -"

"No, please, go right ahead."

The Minbari nodded and moved to the front of the crypt, where he placed the flowers in a waiting receptacle.

"Who sent them?" Marcus asked.

"Sent?" The Minbari shook his head. "You are a Ranger by your clothes, yes? I thought you would know."

"I've been out of town a while."

"Long ago, President Delenn ordered these placed here every day. The words of Delenn are still followed, and will always be followed." He arranged them carefully, then stepped back. "Do you know much of Ivanova?"

"A bit," Marcus said.

"Then you are a follower of her ideas?"

"You could say that."

"That's good," the Minbari said. "Then may I assume you have been to the Voice?"

Marcus studied him. "The what?"

"The Voice. Shortly before Ivanova passed away, a picture was taken of her mind. Well, it's not really her mind, not technically...it's a full study of all the neural pathways and memories and information she held at the time, encoded and preserved for future historians, physicians and scientists. I think the nearest human equivalent would be a life mask, but this is an impression, a picture, taken of a person's mind.

"It can't create new thoughts, obviously, because a mind needs a soul for creative life to exist, but it's a wonderful resource. I've only been there once myself, but I found the experience most...exhilarating."

Marcus paused for a long moment before asking the one question he knew was about to change the rest of his life.

"Where can I find her Voice?"

When Tralann had said that all his monetary needs would be met many times over by the trust fund, Marcus had not been paying a great deal of attention. Now he had a reason to find out just how much was there.

He was, even by his standards, suitably impressed.

Next came the purchase of a jump-capable private ship. He was surprised at how small they had gotten. In the years

before, the White Star had been the smallest ship capable of jumping into hyperspace without the assistance of a jump gate, and that still required a fairly substantial crew. Now they came in one- or two-person flyers that were a fraction of the size of a White Star.

Ivanova's Voice was stored with the Voices of several hundred other historical figures at the Sirius Nine Neural Archives, operated jointly by the Earth Alliance Historical Society and PsyMed, a pharmaceutical megacorp based on Centauri Prime.

The Archive had been set up there twenty years ago as a tax writeoff by PsyMed. Sirius Nine was a little traveled colony with even less to offer tourists or businessmen. It needed something with prestige to invite travelers, and the Neural Archives brought academics from dozens of worlds.

Marcus knew the place well. Long ago -- two years ago by Marcus' counting, much longer in the real world -- it had boasted a significant underground commerce. Anything could be had, if the price was right, and you knew which people to ask.

The people were long gone to dust, but as Marcus programmed his flyer for Sirius Nine, he knew that even if the old rat-holes had been paved over or cleaned up, new rat holes always appeared to replace them.

And Marcus was an expert at finding rat holes.

"You were looking for me?"

The Drazi who sat across from Marcus glared at him from deep set eyes set in a dark green face that betrayed his race's reptilian origins. They were a short-tempered people and far from the brightest. But Farn came highly recommended. For a Drazi, at any rate.

Marcus nodded. "I understand that you and some of your associates have achieved...well, let's call it unauthorized access in most of the colony buildings."

"Hurm."

And he's such an astonishing conversationalist, Marcus thought.

"So, what can you tell me about the Neural Archives?"

The Drazi snorted. Unfortunately, when Drazi snorted, it came out their cheek flaps and sounded utterly disagreeable. "Nothing of value there. Old papers. Old voices. Nothing to steal. Nothing to sell."

"And how's security in there?"

The Drazi's gaze didn't waver. "Nothing to steal," he repeated. "Nothing to sell."

"Is that Drazi for *In my professional view they have very little security because the archives are of only technical and academic interest?*"

"Hurm," the Drazi said.

"Good," Marcus said. "In that case, I have a business proposition for you."

The Neural archives used the very latest holographic crystal storage technology. Three hundred years ago, a standard sized data crystal could hold enough information to fill several libraries. Now, with pulse-burst enhancement and tachyon dual-layering it was possible to store the accumulated memories, thought patterns, neural data and synaptic pattern relays of a human being, from birth to the point of recording, on just seven crystals.

The problem was that there were several thousand such crystals arranged in neat, tidy rows in the room beyond the holographic display screen that pulsed softly in front of Marcus.

The Drazi had gotten him into the maintenance room through a service entrance whose night access codes had not been updated in some time. The next security patrol would come this way in less than twenty minutes.

All the data crystal groups had been numbered in sequence on the control panel in front of him. But without a key to connect the numbers with the names involved, it could take hours or even days to find the right seven crystals.

The Drazi who had accompanied him this far nodded at the rows of crystals. "Take and go," he said. Marcus had managed to convince Farn that there was some small value to the minerals that went into making the data crystals. The Drazi thought it was a great deal of effort for very little reward, but it was simpler than explaining what Marcus was actually after, and why.

After all, there were moments he didn't quite believe it himself.

How do I find her in all this? he wondered, desperately aware of how little time they had. There was no way he could do it going through them one at a time.

Then let's hear all of them, he decided.

He touched the master control, which activated all the data crystals in the archive. Instantly, the room was filled with the sound of a thousand voices, all talking at once.

I am Shadralla of Narn unless the equation calls for my political expertise was in have good no to sing achieved the ending of --

The Drazi covered his ears. "Insane!" he said. "They will hear and they will come!"

"Just give me a minute," Marcus pleaded. "Be quiet!"

He listened. He closed his eyes and focused everything he had learned as anla-shok, all the discipline, all the rigor, all the pain he had endured, into the task at hand: picking one voice out of one thousand.

Without opening his eyes, he passed a hand over the controls. Several hundred voices went away. He strained to hear.

"Guard coming soon," the Drazi said. "Go now."

"Not yet," Marcus said.

And listened.

-- farther than under the rule of domestication of combat losses were my name is --

His heart suddenly pounded so loudly that he thought for a moment he might lose her. It was barely audible, but her voice cut through the rest because it was familiar, and because it was *hers*. He would recognize it even if it were drowned in a million voices.

My name is Susan Ivanova, daughter of Petrov and Sophie Ivanov --

There was just one set of seven data crystals still glowing in the room beyond where they stood, only one voice still remaining.

I am Death incarnate, and the last living thing you are ever going to see.

"We take? We go now?" the Drazi asked.

God sent me.

"Yes," Marcus said, softly. "We take, and we go now."

The Drazi didn't have a lead on where Marcus could find his next target, but he knew someone who knew someone who might know someone.

More money went into other hands. When enough of it had gone out, as Marcus had expected, someone who knew someone *did* know someone.

More credits were deposited into the account of the colony's head of security, who looked the other way as Marcus took off in his personal flyer, now programmed for a small research station in Brakiri space.

He checked his finances en route. He was reasonably sure that he had just enough left to finish the job, but he couldn't be absolutely sure, since none of the contemporary interstellar guide books indicated how much it cost these days to grow a human being on the black market.

Marcus looked at the figure handed him by the man in the white lab coat. He was a human, operating in Brakiri space because he had been drummed out of every human medical association on record. Some of those expulsions had come for negligence or malpractice, which concerned Marcus, and most of the rest had resulted from illegal and almost certainly immoral experimentation. Everything in his record said this was someone who liked challenges, someone who dared.

All of which made him just the right person for what Marcus had in mind, and the facilities he'd been able to construct out here with Brakiri funding were more than sufficient to the cause at hand. But the figure in Marcus' hand was still a shock. He could only hope that there would be enough at the end of the day to finish the job.

"Let me see it."

Marcus produced a strand of hair from a plasticine pouch, a long hair that he had found on his uniform the day he had been revived. It was long and it was black and it was unquestionably hers. He'd found it on his shoulder, shortly after being revived, just where he had rested her head against his during the energy transfer. With the one-time-only exception of Delenn, the bone-crested Minbari didn't have hair like that. "Can you extract the DNA you need from this?"

The doctor -- he had introduced himself only as Quijana -- took the strand of hair and considered it. "That's all? Just the one strand?"

"That's it."

Quijana *hmmm'd* for a moment. "Maybe. I won't know for sure until I get inside. If there's been any kind of deterioration, I may need to fill out some missing sequences. Nothing major, she might have a freckle or two she didn't have before, but it probably won't be anything significant."

"Probably? For the money you're charging I expect better than probably."

"I'm limited by the math and the available sequences and what I can guess concerning what's missing, if anything. And that fee is for delivering a fully grown human being. You don't just pop those things out overnight, the body takes the time it takes to grow and mature. We still don't have any way to overcome that. And thirty two years is a long, long time. You're talking long-term maintenance along with the actual cloning process. That means nutrients, electrostimulation for muscle and nerve development, round the clock monitoring, it adds up. Now, if you just wanted an infant, or better yet a fetus, you could save considerably on the overall cost."

"I don't think that would exactly serve my intent," Marcus said.

"Suit yourself.What else?"

Marcus handed over the seven holocrystals."These are the neural maps I mentioned earlier," he said."You're *sure* you can link them into the system?"

"It's risky, but it can be done.We'll have to set up a trickle-flow, so that the memories and thought patterns are transferred in as close to a chronological fashion as we can handle.Now, you have to understand that there may be some lapses, a few points where she won't be able to remember something from her early life, and may remember a shadow of something from her later life.She'll probably write it off to a faulty memory in the case of the former, and the memory of a bad dream in the case of the latter."

"I suppose it'll have to do," Marcus said."I've arranged to have the funds transferred into your account every six months.The transfer will be key-coded to her DNA sequence and brainwave signature once she gets to that point.If either one of them stops, or shows any sign of damage...the payments stop."

"Understood," Quijana said.He folded the plasticine bag and placing it in his jacket pocket, then studied Marcus for a moment."You do realize that what you are asking me to do is patently illegal.To clone a new person with all the memories of the original person."

Marcus smiled."Spoken like a man who has heard that same warning himself, from time to time.Just remember, I don't want her to have all the memories.Just the memories up to and including a particular year, month and day.No more than that."

"That kind of precision is impossible," Quijana said."I can give you an approximation of that, but it may be off by a bit.How far, I don't know, but I'll do the best I can,"

The doctor stood, and extended his hand."Just to make sure my work doesn't fall into the wrong hands, who will be taking custody of the body in thirty two years?"

Marcus smiled.

"That'll be one thousand four hundred and twenty credits."

Marcus inserted his credit-chit into the scanner, and watched as most of his remaining funds were extracted.*A lifetime of funds, times several hundred people, gone in just a few months*, he thought.I must remember to get on a budget sometime soon.

But with any luck, the small amount remaining would gather a fair amount of interest in the coming thirty two years and four months.

"Here you go," the technician said."Right this way."

Marcus followed the technician down the long white corridor that led down the center of EverDream Enterprises, a cryosuspension service located in Syria Planum on Mars.

"We get all kinds here," the technician said.That way over there is where we keep the near-death cases.You ever been cryo'd before?"

"Once," Marcus said.

"Well, the process ain't changed much.You go in, you close your eyes, and you open 'em again and poof, you're in the future.We get a lot of folks like that.We have to make sure we don't get fugitives from the law, of course, trying to escape the statute of limitations, though that's a lot harder now that they passed the Chrono Fugitive Laws back home.Most folks just want to see the future.We got whole families in here who want to see the future.They think it's gonna be different somehow, maybe better.What they don't understand is, the future's always just like the present, just moreso."

"I'm rather hoping that's true," Marcus said.

"Well, either way, don't you worry about a thing. We've been in business for nearly a hundred years, and we'll be in business for a long time to come. Not like SleepWorld, back on Earth. You heard about that, right? They went bankrupt, and on the sly sold off the bodies of all the sleepers anybody'd want to buy, then dumped the rest. It was a huge scandal. That'd never happen here."

"I'm sure that's true," Marcus said, and glanced at his name tag. It read D. GARIBALDI.

"Garibaldi?" Marcus said aloud.

"Yeah?"

"Any relation to Michael Garibaldi?"

"Yeah, back about five, six generations. Course, in a tight knit community like you get here in Marsdome, hell, everybody's related to just about everybody else after a while. You a history buff or something?"

"Something," Marcus said. He wasn't quite sure why, but he found the synchronicity both reassuring and vaguely amusing. "I should've realized. You sound just like him."

He shrugged. "I ain't got much time for history vids," he said. "Life's too short, you know?"

"I'm surprised you would say that, given your line of work."

"We just extend the range of years you cover," Garibaldi said. "But a human lifespan is still a human lifespan. It's almost a hundred and seventy years now, but if you ask me, it's still too short."

They stopped in front of a small glass door. Inside, Marcus could see the front panels of several dozen small tubes. One of them was open. Waiting.

"You ready?" Garibaldi said.

"I suppose so," Marcus said.

Here we go again, he thought, and opened the door to the cryo unit.

He closed his eyes.

He opened his eyes.

"How you feeling?"

Marcus sat up, supported by the hands that reached out to help him. The room was impossibly cold.

"You got a bit of epidermal burn," someone said. "Slight accident with the freeze units about ten years ago. It'll pass."

Marcus looked up. It was Garibaldi, plus thirty two years. He caught Marcus' look. "You got lucky. I retire next week. I'm vice president of Mars operations now. I don't usually do the hands-on stuff anymore, but I remembered you, so I thought, what the hell. Might be nice to see a familiar face when you wake up."

"Seeing a familiar face...is exactly what I have in mind," Marcus said. "Where are my clothes?"

She floated in the nutro tank, eyes closed, her long black hair floating like a veil around her face. She was also naked. Marcus hadn't considered that part of it, and found himself turning away to protect her modesty. *When it happens, it will happen because she chooses to, not like this.*

"Something wrong?" The speaker was Quijana's son, William. "Does she look okay?"

"Yes...yes, she looks...magnificent."

"Good. Took a lot of work, you know. I think we got her memory to right where you wanted." He produced a release form. "Sign here."

Marcus signed where indicated.

"Bring your ship around back, we'll pop her and load her up for you."

"I'd like her dressed first," Marcus said. "I've brought some clothes."

Quijana Junior shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, and went off to comply. Marcus waited until he was gone, then looked again at her face. God, how he loved her.

Hello, Susan, he thought.

It's been a long time.

Marcus finished unloading the last of their supplies, hesitated briefly, then pushed the button that detonated the explosives he'd placed strategically in and around the small flyer. It pained him to see the old ship go, knowing it had waited patiently in storage for his return, but it was necessary. It had to look as if they had been shot down.

As the smoke rose into the clear blue sky, Marcus surveyed the area around him. He had stumbled across Chryn III while he and his brother had been on a survey job, years -- he corrected himself -- centuries ago. It was unpopulated, well off the trade routes, and offered little in the way of precious minerals, certainly nothing worth the time and effort to dig it out.

But it was the most lovely world he had ever visited. In the temperate zone, lush fruit trees bent low under the weight of delicacies that contained a thousand different tastes. The air was generally close to skin temperature in this region, and the water was untainted by chemicals. The nearest Earth comparison would be Maui.

Space contained any number of such planetary gemstones, places where sentient life had not evolved, but which did not offer sufficient incentive for corporations or tourists to exploit it.

He breathed in the sweet air, and remembered again a late night conversation they'd had, just after the end of the Shadow war. He'd been celebrating, along with Sheridan and Garibaldi and Ivanova and Franklin, and they had come to a quiet moment, as conversations sometimes did. It was Franklin who had said, "Did you ever think about what you'd like to do after the war?"

Ivanova had hesitated, then said, "I've always had this dream of retiring to a beach somewhere. Somewhere where no one could find me. Not the bureaucrats, not the sales guys, not anybody. I think I could plant myself by a river, or a beach, and look out over the water, and never, ever want to leave." Then she had looked up, and found Marcus watching her. She smiled almost sheepishly. "Well, anyway, it's just a dream I have. Truth is there's always too much to do, and in the end, how many of our dreams come true, right?"

How many indeed, he wondered.

He looked over to where she stirred. She wore a uniform identical to the black resistance uniform she had worn during the Earth civil war.

"Marcus?"

He had waited three hundred and thirty two years to hear that voice say that name. But he could never tell her that. Not ever.

"Yes?"

"What...what happened?"

"What do you remember?"

"I'm not sure," she said, standing slowly. "I was on the White Star, and we were hit. I was wounded pretty badly..."

"That was weeks ago, Susan," Marcus said. "That must've been a bigger bump to the head than I thought. I mean, you're alive, and well, and fine."

"Yes, I suppose so." She looked around. "What happened? Where are we?"

"Well, we were en route to Babylon 5 to celebrate the end of the war -- you do remember that bit, don't you, the war ending, Sheridan being made President and all that?"

"I think so...it's all kind of fuzzy...."

"Yes, I should think so, we all had quite a lot to drink. Anyway, we were on our way back to B5 when we ran into engine trouble. We jumped to normal space and I barely managed to get us down in one piece. Got you and the gear out just before the ship exploded."

"I see." She faced into the sunlight and blinked against the light. "Any sign of life?"

"Dunno," he said. "I suppose we should have a look around."

"Communications?"

"We weren't able to get out a distress signal before we hit, and the ship...well, you can see for yourself we're not getting word out anytime soon. No, the best thing for now is for us to build some shelter with the gear, and settle in. We'll start exploring tomorrow. At least they don't need us for anything for a while, what with the war being over and all that."

"Maybe," she said, still looking around. "Well, if we're going to be stuck somewhere, this is the place for it."

"Yes. Pretty, isn't it?"

She nodded. "It's almost like this place I always used to see in my head, the kind of place...." Her voice trailed off.

"Yes?" *A place where you said you could be happy, he thought. And you deserve happiness. Maybe we both do. And maybe this time we can find it.*

"Nothing," she said. "We should get to work."

"Absolutely, Commander. Then I think I may be able to find something here to eat, I'm quite a chef when I want to be, you know."

She smiled, and shook her head. "I'm sure," she said, then stopped, frowning.

"What is it?" Marcus asked.

"It's strange...I can't shake this feeling...a memory of me going somewhere, sitting and talking to you, and you not listening."

"Yeah, well, I get that a lot from you," he said. *Please god let her not remember. It's all I've ever asked of you, leave her alone and let her have a little peace.*

She looked at him, and laughed, and the moment passed. "Maybe so." She studied him for a moment. "But one thing I do remember is you carrying me off the White Star after we were hit. You saved my life."

He nodded. Looked away.

She touched his shoulder gently. "Did I ever say thank you?"

"Unnecessary," he said. "It was no trouble at all."

"Good, because I wouldn't want you to extend yourself on my behalf."

"Me? Bestir myself from my reverie all on your behalf? Wouldn't dream of it," he said, and enjoyed the sound of her laugh. He realized just how much he'd missed it.

"Well," he said, turning toward the horizon, "shall we go inspect our new home?"

"Lead on," she said.

Marcus smiled, and took the first steps in the long sunny walk that he knew they would share for a very, very long time to come.

End