

Kyrie Eleison by John G. Henry

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“The best-laid plans....” applies to *everybody*.

Frost rimmed the large, thick windows looking out over a cliff and down to dark water flecked by whitecaps. Sleet rattled against heavy stone walls as an erratic wind swept by. Low on the horizon, a reddish sun glowed through a rare small rent in the clouds that otherwise covered the sky, casting long shadows across the room where Garvis Skein lay abed, snoring heavily under the pile of blankets he favored for warmth.

Francesa walked quietly into the room, her uncovered feet making almost no sound, ignoring with the stoicism of years of experience the searing cold on the soles of her feet whenever she had to leave the comparative comfort of a rug’s surface and cross bare stone. Working silently and swiftly, she pulled tinder and coal from the bag she carried and, kneeling in front of the stone fireplace in one corner, got a fire going with efficiency born of long practice.

Garvis stirred under his covers. Francesa froze, her breathing as shallow and quiet as possible. The fire popped, and Garvis’ eyes opened, frowning at the ornate designs carved into the ceiling. The eyes slowly pivoted, coming to rest on Francesa. The man’s eyes narrowed in annoyance. “You have broken a rule,” he muttered. “Noisemaking during sleep period. Inform the duty Officer so he may order the appropriate punishment.”

Francesa bowed her head silently, then brought her right hand up to touch her forehead. “Aye.”

“Go away.” Garvis turned to settle under his blankets.

Francesa snarled at his back, knowing the man wouldn’t move again until the fire had warmed the room. Then she left as silently as possible.

Officer Varasan was lingering over breakfast when Francesa found him. One look at her expression and he sighed heavily. “Now what?”

Francesa stood before him, trying not to notice the crumbs on the shirt that stretched over his belly. Her stomach threatened to rumble, something she tried to silence with every fiber of her being. On those few occasions when she and her like were granted good bread, their sunken stomachs offered no purchase for any crumb. “I made a sound, Officer,” she stated tonelessly. “Before call to work.”

Varasan sighed again. As Officers went, he wasn’t so bad, Francesa thought. But he was an Officer. “Where?”

“The chamber of the First Officer.”

This time Officer Varasan flinched. “Stars, girl, couldn’t you have picked a less important place?” He let out a long breath of air, a gust the warmth of which actually brushed against Francesca. “Though as you well know every place is less important than that.” He toyed with a remnant of pastry, oblivious to the way Francesca couldn’t avoid staring toward it. “Two lashes. After the morning Report.”

Francesca’s body tensed, then she nodded, once again bringing her right hand to her brow. “Two lashes. After the morning Report.”

Varasan flipped his own hand into the general vicinity of his brow in response, then went back to his meal, ignoring her as she left.

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She veered through the kitchen, coming to a halt near one of the cooks. The cook glanced down at her and smiled. “Francesca. What brings you here?”

“Are there any leftovers?” she asked, trying to keep the neediness from her voice.

The cook’s smile turned rueful. “Before most of the Officers and Crew have even eaten? Not likely.” He turned away, hesitated, then shoved something toward her. “This bit was ruined by a new apprentice. Get rid of it, will you?”

Francesca took the roll, her hands shaking. “Aye.”

The cook glanced at her for a moment. “The harvest isn’t too good, I hear.”

Francesca nodded. “My friend Ivry works the fields.” As bad as working around the Officers and Crew could be, at least most of the time Francesca was sheltered inside. Those in the fields took the brunt of the weather for their entire work shifts. “She says the weather went cold too early.”

“The weather’s always cold,” the cook remarked gloomily, his eyes straying toward a high slit window where a small patch of pale sky could be seen. “Though it seems colder now, in truth. Will there be enough food this year?”

“I...” Francesca looked down at the roll in her hand. “I don’t know.”

“Not enough, maybe,” the cook murmured. “Third year in a row. Not that there’s ever been enough, not since I was younger than you, but it’s worse lately. The Officers say the Captain’s angry with us. And the Officers and Crew must be fed before workers like us. Captain’s orders.” He touched his brow with his right

hand.

Francesca kept her face calm despite the anger that surged inside. Nodding politely, she hastened from the kitchen and wolfed down half the roll. She managed to pause after that, staring down at the bread and thinking of a little brother with a belly as thin as her own. Biting her lip, she wrapped the other half carefully in a scrap of rag and stuffed it into a nearby hiding place where it would be safe until her work shift finished.

The morning bells sounded, calling them to Report. Francesca joined a slowly growing column of workers like herself as they shuffled toward the Bridge. Once inside, she shoved her way toward the back, finally leaning against the cold stone and looking upward. Carvings rioted across the stone above, telling the story of the Wreck and the Survival, the Ordeal and the prophesized Rescue. Francesca felt the cold reaching through the thin cloth of her shirt, sinking into her back, and forced herself to stand away from the stone wall. She'd have to do it soon, anyway.

The lower area filled with workers, some of them casting wary eyes on the members of the Watch who also entered to stand lining one side of the room, while other workers steadfastly pretended to ignore the Watch's presence. With security assured by the Watch, the members of the Crew filed in, proceeding to their seats on long benches set on a platform raised a few feet higher than the floor on which Francesca and her peers stood. Francesca rested her eyes on the seated backsides of the Crew and remembered for a moment that she'd once been able to find humor in that view.

After the Crew came most of the Officers, going to individual chairs placed in front of the Crew benches.

Then the Third Officer entered, standing and looking around to ensure everyone was ready. "Attention!" he yelled.

The Officers and Crew came to their feet, standing rigid, while the workers around Francesca shuffled into more erect postures.

First Officer Garvis Skein entered and walked slowly to the third level of the Bridge, set a few feet higher than that on which the Officers' chairs and Crew's benches rested. The third level was much smaller than the other two, bounded along the back by a semicircular shelf of stone. On the stone shelf, which had been polished smooth and shiny, were set many polished stones of various sizes and colors, their settings forming patterns on the slab of stone.

Garvis stood before the small shelf of stone, waiting until the Third Officer handed a lighted lamp to him. He waved his light over the shelf, making the flame dance and causing the polished stones to wink rhythmically in time. "All systems report errors," he intoned, then paused.

His audience chorused the reply, the Officers and Crew loudly and enthusiastically while the workers spoke the words with varying degrees of emotion. “Corrective action required.”

“All systems failing!”

“Corrective action required,” the reply came again.

“Our actions have failed! The Captain orders us to leave the ship!” Garvis thundered.

“Show mercy, Captain!” the audience cried.

“Rescue will come!”

This time the chorus held the note of finality. “For those who trust in the Captain!”

Garvis sat down the lamp, turning to face the crowd full on. “Those who trust in the Captain will be rescued! They will be taken up to the stars from whence we came and live in a place of plenty with the Captain just as our ancestors did. Those who do not follow will be left behind to toil in this world of pain to which our ancestors were banished for their failures to serve the Captain well.”

Francesca had heard it all so many times she could have recited it in her sleep. She tuned out the droning voice of First Officer Garvis, thinking of the cold, the poor harvest, and the thin bodies of those in her family. When the call to duty was made and everyone bowed their heads as Garvis intoned thanks to the Captain along with promises of obedience in all things, Francesca couldn’t help wishing the Captain would send them something better than a promise of eventual rescue. After well over two hundred “standard” years, as carefully measured and recorded by the Second Officer, she didn’t see rescue coming with nearly the certainty of hunger and cold.

But she didn’t say such thoughts out loud. Two lashes today would be bad enough.

First Officer Garvis eventually finished his instructions, holding up a copy of the writings with reverence. “Here are the rules, set forth by the Captain. Heed them. Always ask your Officers for what the rules say and what they mean. Do not attempt to read them yourself and spurn those who offer what they claim to be true copies. They are only seeking to mislead you. Only the copies of the rules kept on the Bridge are the true words of the Captain, and only the Officers may read those rules, by order of the Captain.”

Once again everyone touched their brows, Francesca thinking as she did so of

her father's disdain over the claim that no one but an Officer should read the writings. Tattered copies still existed among the workers, treasured and read by any who asked. Francesa had read them herself, finding comfort in the old words and their firm advice on how life should be lived.

The First Officer left, followed by the other Officers, then the Crew. Even as the last of the Crew left the Bridge, stern members of the Watch left their posts against the wall and began herding the workers out. "Back to your labors! Earn the mercy of the Captain by your sweat!" The workers openly grumbled before the Watch, but went as ordered.

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The Report had eaten up more than an hour, granting a tedious but welcome respite from work. Unfortunately, the remaining hours of the morning saw Francesa scrubbing the stone walls of the Crew's lodgings. After a short mid-day break and a too-small food ration, Francesa was ordered to tend fires again.

The afternoon was well along before that task was handed off to another weary worker. Francesa peered through a high window at the light, judging the time left in the work day, then reluctantly headed for the quarters of the Watch. If she didn't get her lashes soon she might not get them today. She didn't particularly care if that displeased the Captain who had already banished them to this cold hell, but the displeasure of First Officer Garvis could be an ugly thing to bear. If he found out she'd avoided being punished two lashes would seem like a mercy compared to the First Officer's righteous wrath.

Francesa went across a cold passage and down the slope slightly to the dwellings of the Watch. Two members stood at their station, waiting for whatever task either Officer or Crew might demand.

Francesa walked toward the Watch station, already feeling her back muscles tensing in anticipation of the bite of the lash. As she stood before the Watch members, ready to report, something distracted them. Both turned to look further down the hill, their mouths dropping open and their eyes staring. Francesa couldn't help looking in the same direction.

She wondered if her own mouth had fallen agape. Something very large, larger even than the Bridge, was dropping gently down from the sky, shining even in the dim light of the red sun which managed its way through the ever-present cloud cover. The great object, moving silently, came to rest in the big courtyard which separated the homes of the Officers and Crew from the houses, farms, and workshops of the workers.

"The Captain has come," one of the Watch members gasped. He turned to Francesa, smiling like a drunkard. "He's come to take us up!"

Francesa was still staring when the man turned and started running, down through the upper quarters and toward the round shining object as it settled onto the stone of the courtyard. Even from here, Francesa could see the heavy paving stones buckling around the edges of the huge craft.

But she didn't smile and she didn't run. Her mind full of a strange haze, Francesa veered off to recover the half-roll which she'd hidden that morning, then walked slowly toward the courtyard. There seemed no reason to run. If the Captain had truly returned, he certainly hadn't done so for her.

Most of the other workers seemed to feel the same way. As a column of Officers and Crew hurled themselves toward the strange object, crying out devotions to the Captain, the workers followed behind, moving with a sort of quiet resignation.

By the time Francesa reached a point near enough the thing to see and hear what was happening, it seemed the entire town had gathered around it. Closest were the Officers and Crew, most with faces beaming in anticipation. The Watch stood behind them, their faces both hopeful and worried. In the outermost ring stood the workers, shivering in the cold, their numbers far larger than the others, craning their necks or climbing on anything that might offer a view. Francesa scrambled up on a column marking one corner of the courtyard, putting her toward the very back, but giving her a fairly clear look over the heads of most of the crowd.

Garvis Skein stood closest to the strange object. Francesa narrowed her eyes, but couldn't tell if Garvis was really shaking with either fear or excitement.

With absolutely no warning or fanfare an opening appeared low in the side of the object. The rectangle seemed large enough to hold several people, but only two stood there. A low moan swept across the crowd as the two stepped down to the stones of the courtyard. Francesa squinted again, trying to make out details, then as the two walked forward was able to tell one was a man and the other a woman, though both were garbed in outfits which seemed impossibly wonderful to her eyes.

The two stopped before Garvis Skein, standing side by side.

Garvis raised his right hand to his brow. "The First Officer greets you in the name of the Captain!" he cried. Then, his voice holding the first note of humility Francesa had ever heard from Garvis, a humility she was sure was totally false, he spoke more quietly to the man. "Are you the Captain's image upon this world?"

The woman cleared her throat. Garvis gave her an annoyed look before focusing back on the man. "We are obedient followers of the Captain. As you know, of course," Garvis added hastily.

The man spoke with apparent care, his voice oddly accented, his eyes looking

toward the woman. “If you want the captain, I can introduce you.”

“He’s not here?” one of the other Officers blurted.

Garvis shot an ugly glare toward the offender before smiling at the man again. “But if you are the Captain’s image, or ... or representative...”

The woman finally spoke, her crisp voice carrying clearly to Francesa. “If you want the captain—”

“Excuse me,” Garvis interrupted with a frown. “I know you accompany the Captain’s representative, but I am the Captain’s First Officer. I speak to Him and to his other Officers.” Garvis ended with a smile toward the man.

“The Captain’s a man?” the woman asked, sounding not the least abashed by Garvis’ rebuke.

A shocked murmur ran through the crowd of Officers and Crew. Garvis frowned again, deeper this time, his face reddening in a way Francesa knew all too well. “Of course the Captain is a man. It is clear that only a man can be the Captain. How could it be otherwise? The Captain we knew was a man, every First Officer chosen to speak for Him on this world has been a man, and it has been foretold that He will return. Is this a test?”

Far from appearing intimidated, the woman smiled tightly. “Perhaps it is a test.” The man with her started to speak. “Oh, no, Kayl. Let this *man* tell you what he wants to say.”

The man addressed as Kayl nodded at the woman’s words. Francesa watched, her puzzlement growing. The man Kayl actually seemed to be deferring to the woman, though if he was an Officer or even Crew, she couldn’t possibly have any authority over him. And surely Kayl was an Officer. Who else could have come in such an amazing craft?

But First Officer Garvis seemed oblivious to the by-play between the man and woman. He faced the man called Kayl, his arms spread wide. “We are ready to depart with you.”

Kayl’s face grew wary. “You’re descended from survivors from the *Verio*, right?” A murmur arose from the crowd and everyone, Francesa included, brought their right hands to their brows at the mention of the ship’s Name. Kayl seemed startled, then nodded. “This is a pretty empty area of space. Ships very rarely traverse it. We’re only here because the *Bellegrange* was chartered to make some observations that required the properties of this part of space. That brought us close enough to detect the distress beacon the *Verio* left orbiting your sun. But even after we report on survivors here it may be a long time before anyone comes back again,

since you do appear to be able to survive on this world independently.”

Garvis smiled and nodded, even though Francesa doubted he really understood what the man had said. “You have come and that is all that matters.”

Kayl shook his head. “I have to explain. That’s important because even though our ship is much bigger than the one your ancestors came here on, the *Bellegrange* still has limits on internal space and life support. As much as we’d like to, we can’t take everyone,” he stated with the air of someone declaring an unpleasant but unchangeable truth.

Francesa felt her heart sink as the little hope there vanished. All around her, other workers slumped in resignation, but she could see Garvis and the other Officers and Crew smiling, and see how Kayl seemed surprised by the happy reaction among that group.

Garvis spread his arms again. “It has long been known that all would not be Rescued. That only those deemed worthy would be taken up to the stars again. The worthy stand before you, those who have accepted the authority of the Captain without reservation, who believed He would return for his chosen and obedient followers.”

Kayl looked around, his expression wary, then at the woman with him as if, Francesa thought, he was seeking guidance, absurd as that seemed. The woman murmured something so low that even Garvis frowned over not being able to hear. But Kayl obviously did. He gave Garvis a confident look. “We’ll need whatever census data you have. Information on everyone here.”

The Officers and Crew shuffled their feet, looking at each other in open surprise. Garvis also seemed to wonder at the request. “Everyone? But—”

“Everyone,” Kayl repeated firmly.

Garvis couldn’t hide the puzzlement he felt, then an Officer behind him said something and the First Officer’s face cleared. “Another test. Of course. Whatever you ask we shall provide.” He nodded, his smile fading into the first traces of uncertainty. “And then we shall be taken up?”

“Once we’ve reviewed your information we’ll be able to proceed.” Kayl smiled reassuringly. “It’ll take a little while.”

Garvis managed another smile in return. “We have waited long already and can surely wait longer if that is the Captain’s pleasure. We are obedient to Him.” Once again Garvis touched his brow, a gesture mimicked first by the Officers and Crew, and then in a more ragged fashion by the workers watching from a greater distance. Then he waved his hand vigorously at the Second Officer, who ran off

toward the Bridge.

Francesa watched the Second Officer go, knowing he was after the population records meticulously kept up to date and stored for safekeeping in the Bridge. Then her eyes returned to Garvis as the First Officer swept his hand around again, this time from the tone and volume of his voice addressing everyone in the courtyard. “The day of Rescue has come. The obedient faithful shall be rewarded. Members of the Watch! Pray you have enough obedience in your hearts to be among the faithful, and send the unworthy back to their labors.”

The people making up the Watch turned and began shoving back the workers, yelling out commands. Francesa, far enough back to avoid their attentions for a few moments, gazed at the woman and the man Kayl, who were speaking together again. Both of those individuals seemed troubled, though by what Francesa couldn't guess. Perhaps they'd expected more worthies among the people who lived here.

An arm swept toward her as a member of the Watch aimed to dislodge Francesa from her perch. She dodged with the ease of someone who'd avoided blows all her life, scrambling down and joining the other workers as they hastened to their homes, occasionally looking back to the ship that sat like an impossible vision in the courtyard, forever out of their reach.

But once the workers had cleared the courtyard, heading down the slope toward their homes, the Watch turned back, forming a guard around the ship. Francesa joined up with some friends, but aside from the briefest of greetings, none of them talked. What was there to say? Finally Francesa grinned into the silence. “At least once the First Officer leaves, I'll never have to build his fires again.”

A hand fell upon her shoulder, momentarily shocking her with fright, but then her father's voice came. “There's that, little lady. No stars for us, eh? Except the relief that'll come from being free of the 'worthy.'” A chuckle spread among the crowd, but it held little real humor.

Francesa's father used his hand to steer her to one side. “It'll be dark soon, and there's little sense in laboring more today. Come along. You're old enough to sit while we talk of this.” They wended through the narrow byways of the workers' area until they reached a place where a cave mouth in a hill had been covered with roughly hewn stone. The door, formed of small boards hacked from the local vegetation, didn't fit its frame tightly, but was better than nothing at keeping out the weather. A moment later they were within the meeting hall, out of the bitter wind and seeking seats on the rough benches.

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The room filled rapidly. Francesa ignored the smells of so many bodies, instead enjoying the warmth the crowd generated. Talking began almost at once, but

after a while Francesca realized the conversations around her were going nowhere. What, really, was there to say? The judgment had come and here they sat downcast, while the Officers and Crew were doubtless dancing in the halls of the buildings around the Bridge.

Some length of time had certainly passed, for the gaps around the door showed nothing but darkness, when the aimless conversations ceased abruptly as the door opened and a woman stepped inside. Francesca watched her like the rest, able to tell even under the rough worker's cloak that she was too well fed to actually be a worker. Then the woman raised her head to return the stares and Francesca felt a shock of recognition. "The man Kayl's companion," she gasped.

Others had obviously identified the woman as well. A roar of talk arose, then faded into silence once more as the woman stepped away from the door. Francesca's father stood and walked forward to meet her, his nervousness plain to all. "You are, of course, welcome here."

The woman halted and eyed the roomful of workers. "Thank you. It wasn't too hard to manufacture a copy of your cloaks, though I see that didn't mislead anyone."

"The Watch is not here with you?" someone asked nervously.

"The Watch," the woman answered dryly, "doesn't know I walked through their ranks. My stealth gear isn't state of the art, but it's more than good enough for dealing with them." She eyed the group. "I wanted to talk to someone else. Someone besides that group that kept everyone else away after we landed. You seem frightened. Why?" To Francesca, the woman's voice held the same assumption of obedience that she'd always heard in First Officer Garvis, yet without the arrogance Garvis always carried around him like a second cloak.

Francesca's father looked around helplessly, saw that no one else wanted to answer, then spoke heavily. "We know you're here to judge. I suppose you've already judged. And every one of us knows we're not worthy."

The woman from the ship cocked one questioning eyebrow at him. "You're not?"

"Please do not mock us. We are here, we are workers, because we lacked the same wholehearted obedience to the Captain that the Officers and Crew claim. We know that."

"And how does this make you unworthy?" the woman pressed.

A woman worker finally stood. "You know this! You know that all that matters is a person's acceptance of the Captain as the only true leader in

everything!”

“Interesting.” The woman from the ship seemed to be looking inward for a moment. “What do you base this belief on?”

The silence stretched this time, then Francesca’s father beckoned to an old man. “Give her the writings you carry. I don’t know the meaning of all this, but we’ve nothing to lose by doing as she says.”

As the old man approached the woman from the ship, he touched his brow, then offered the tattered pages. The woman from the ship frowned as she took the writings, then began reading them, at first slowly, then with greater speed until she seemed to be flipping through the papers as fast as their brittleness would allow. Finally, she looked up and around the room. “These are survival rules. Guidance for people whose ships have been wrecked.” The workers exchanged worried glances. “Are you telling me you’ve created a religion out of these?”

The old man’s face worked with a series of emotions, as if he couldn’t decide how he should react. “We ... we created nothing. These are the writings. The Captain told us to follow them. *He* followed them.”

The woman’s frown relaxed into solemnity. “They’re good rules. They haven’t changed significantly since the *Verio* was lost here. But your ancestors seem to have combined them with the existing religious beliefs the survivors already had. I have no doubt Captain Santere—” The crowd gasped at the open speaking of the name, causing her to pause for just a moment. “Captain Santere,” she repeated sternly, “followed the rules laid out in these documents. But he wasn’t a god. Some ship captains *think* they’re gods, but that’s as far as it goes,” she added.

Francesca’s father gazed at her in open wonder. “Why haven’t you been punished for speaking His name? How can you say such things? Are you truly in the favor of the Captain?”

The woman looked cross. “This little joke has gone on far enough. I’m not in the favor of the captain. My name is Janis Balestra. I *am* the captain of the *Bellegrange*.”

Silence fell across the room. Finally, Francesca’s father spoke tentatively. “But ... we’ve always been told ... the Captain is a man.”

“That’s true. Captain Santere was a man.”

“And all of his Officers were men. Only a man can be Captain and only a man can be First Officer and only men can be Officers.”

This time the woman stared for a moment, then laughed. “Our records show

that the First Officer on the *Verio* was Francesca Nalus. She was very definitely a woman.”

Quiet fell again, then Francesca’s father shook his head, not in denial but in obvious disbelief. “We’ve been told that Francesca Nalus was one of the Crew, but an unimportant one. We’ve been told that the First Officer was Radick Junis.”

“Radick Junis?” the woman questioned, then seemed to be talking to herself for a moment. She laughed again. “Junis was Fourth Officer on the *Verio*. Not even the third in line to command. The fourth. Yet somehow he managed to get the real First Officer written out of her place in history and stuck himself in there. Apparently he was a much better politician than he was an officer. The Fifth Officer was a woman, too. I guess she got written out of history as well.” She folded her arms, staring around the room defiantly. “As I told you, I’m Captain Balestra of the *Bellegrange*.”

Francesca couldn’t help herself. Her whisper sounded clearly in the once-again silent room. “Then *you* decide who goes and who stays.”

Captain Balestra frowned down at her, then slowly smiled. “Yes. As Mr. Kayl told your, uh, ‘First Officer’ back at the landing shuttle, we can’t take everyone.” A sigh seemed to pass over the group. “I don’t know what your expectations are, but as Mr. Kayl stated, the *Bellegrange* is much larger than the *Verio* was. We can carry most of the people in this accidental colony. But not everyone.”

“Most?” the old man questioned. “Not a few? Not some? Most?”

“Yes. Mr. Kayl is going over the lists provided right now to determine your current population and match that to our capacity.”

The worker woman’s face reflected a sudden hope. “Then, after you’ve taken the Officers and Crew, it may be that some of us will also be taken up with you?”

Captain Balestra scowled. “Why does everyone assume these so-called Officers and Crew will get any priority? The criteria used to choose who goes are up to me. I’m not supposed to make value judgments, but that’s my call.”

The old man shook his head. “But they are obedient. They have accepted the authority of the Captain without reservation. The writings say—”

“These writings,” Captain Balestra snapped, her anger clear, “say due respect should be given to those in legitimate positions of authority and their orders should be obeyed as long as those orders are lawful. Have you actually *read* these survival rules? They’re not about just being obedient. These rules tell you to look out for each other, to share resources, to work for the mutual good so as many as possible can survive.”

Francesa's father, with a courage Francesca would never have suspected, stepped between Captain Balestra and the old man. "Please. Don't harm him. We know the writings say that. That's why we're here instead of being among the chosen. Because we didn't think giving obedience to the Captain was all that mattered, or even the most important thing in the writings. Because we'd help a sick neighbor even on the Day of Rest, or break the rules if following them seemed to lead to an injustice. The First Officer—all of the Officers and Crew—say such things are wrong because the Captain demands our obedience no matter what. If you mean to punish us for our actions, then so be it. We've only lived as seemed right, by the words in the writings. But don't harm this one. He says only what he was taught by those who live on the hill."

Captain Balestra stared at Francesca's father, her anger visibly fading. "I see. You have nothing to fear from me, sir. Not you and not this man, nor anyone here." She gestured. "You're thin. You're all thin."

"Yes. The harvests have not been good. Not for years."

"You're to be credited for getting any harvests out of this land." Balestra jerked her head toward the door, indicating the outside. "This is a lousy planet. The best option you had in this system, but only an equatorial location like this has a chance of livable temperatures on a world suffering through a centuries-long winter caused by meteor impact. Do you ever see the stars or are the clouds always in the way? And I assume there's no large animal or marine life to speak of?" A few workers nodded. "Died in the immediate aftermath, no doubt. And now, after a slight warming cycle caused by this world's slow axial variation, it's going to get a little colder. If my ship hadn't come by, I'd guess half of the people here would've starved to death in the next several years." A scowl appeared on her face again. "That First Officer didn't appear to have lacked for food."

"They get all they want," Francesca said. Alarmed faces turned her way, but she kept talking, long-held resentment causing the words to pour out of her. "Because they're worthy. Because the Captain says the Officers and Crew have to get priority in everything. Food. And houses. And coal for their heaters and the best clothing. And we have to serve them."

Captain Balestra looked at Francesca for a moment before speaking. "The Captain says this, does he?"

"Yes." Francesca felt something else swell up inside and blurted it out. "That's what the First Officer *claims*."

The silence in the room somehow conveyed shock. Captain Balestra gazed around, then focused back on Francesca. "That big building up the hill, the one with all the carving on it. Is that where the Officers live?"

Francesca nodded. "I work there."

"And you, and everyone here, lives in places like this?"

The old man's voice sounded ragged, as if the blasphemies being uttered were overwhelming him. "The Captain and His servants need places whose glory reflects His own glory, places where His works are seen—"

Captain Balestra slammed a palm onto the nearest table, causing everyone to jerk and the old man's words to cease as if they'd been cut off. "If you truly believe this Captain is some sort of deity then he wouldn't need anything from you to make him more glorious. As for his works, look around you! Every single one of you is a greater wonder and monument than any building could ever hope to be! Have you forgotten that?" She calmed herself, shaking her head. "It wouldn't be the first time, I guess. And it won't be the last, I'm sure."

Francesca's father was shaking his head as well. "I don't understand."

Captain Balestra nodded. "I'm sure it's hard for you all to grasp. Let's keep it simple. By rough estimate, I can take about three quarters of the population here back to civilization. Maybe a little more. As captain of the *Bellegrange* I am required to make the decision as to who goes and who stays. I need you to tell me everything that might help me make those decisions." She smiled down at Francesca. "This one at least isn't afraid to speak truth to power. And she doesn't seem upset to see me."

Francesca couldn't help smiling back. "Your arrival meant the Watch forgot to give me the two lashes Officer Varasan ordered this morning."

"Lashes?" Captain Balestra's smile slowly went away and she looked at Francesca's father, who nodded.

"For breaking rules," he explained.

"I see." Captain Balestra's voice seemed colder than the wind outside. "Do the Officers and Crew ever get lashes?"

"No." Francesca's father spat out his reply. "Everything they do is what the Captain orders, they say. So they can't break any rule or regulation unless the Captain has told them to do so. They can't be lashed for being obedient to the Captain, can they?"

"No, of course not," Captain Balestra agreed in a tone which belied her words. "I need some representatives to talk to. Five of you. You're one," she announced, pointing to Francesca's father. "The rest of you pick four more and make it quick. I have a lot more questions I need answered."

Her father turned to Francesca. “Go home. Tell your mother what’s happening. She had to stay with your brother. All of you wait there for me.”

“But—” Francesca started to argue.

The woman from the ship held up one hand to silence her. “This is your father? Listen to him. Captain’s orders,” she added dryly.

Francesca was out the door before she realized the lady captain might have been making a joke with her last statement.

Despite her excitement, once Francesca had described events to her mother and given the half-roll to her brother the fatigue of the day began overwhelming her. She wedged herself in an upright sitting position, determined to stay awake until her father got home, somehow sure he would be home, but at some point simply passed out from weariness.

* * * *

She was awakened by a familiar hand on her shoulder. “Come,” her father urged. Francesca blinked, trying to come fully awake, barely making out in the dimness of the room her mother already standing and holding her brother. “Your cloak. Anything you don’t want to leave. Get it quickly.”

Francesca wobbled to her feet, hesitated, then pulled her old ragged doll from the thin blanket that served as her bed. She swept on the cloak, then looked at her father, unable to read his expression in the dark. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” Her father hustled them out and they began hastening up the slope. As they went, other workers and families joined them, until they were part of a column of people.

As they entered the courtyard Francesca gasped to see members of the Watch sprawled around the edge of the space. Her father made a shushing noise. “Don’t worry. Captain Balestra said she would put them to sleep. They haven’t been harmed.”

Francesca kept staring at the Watch members’ bodies as they walked on, wanting to see the movements that would mark them as sleeping and not dead. When she finally felt sure of that and looked forward again, the star craft loomed over them. Her mind suddenly numb, Francesca kept walking, following her mother into the rectangle she’d seen earlier, stepping over the high edge and into a room where colored lights winked at points on one of the walls just as the polished stones did on the altar in the Bridge.

Her father said something to her mother, urging her onward through another, smaller opening, then took Francesca's arm. "The lady wants me here. You should stay as well."

Francesca came along as her father led her to the side of the room, where Captain Balestra stood watching the stream of workers enter. Balestra acknowledged their presence with a smile to Francesca and a nod to her father, then went back to watching, occasionally directing Francesca's father to keep the column of people moving as briskly as possible.

The line of workers finally stopped as more than a dozen men and women Francesca knew as friends of her father came in. "That's everyone," one announced.

"You're certain?" Captain Balestra questioned, then frowned at something in her hand. "Ship systems logged a number coming aboard that equals the totals given in the census data we were provided."

"We never lied to the census," Francesca's father assured her.

"And my ship systems are reporting no signs of human life down hill from this location. Good. We can take twenty more, if their mass averages the same as your people."

"Watch member Yeli is a good man," one of the others offered.

Francesca's father nodded. "He's not like the others. And Watch member Tenal has a good woman for a wife. For her sake, he and his family could come."

"Fair enough. I need them and anyone else, up to twenty bodies, as fast as possible if they're to come at all," Captain Balestra directed. "Can you bring them here without rousing the rest?"

"I don't know." Francesca's father hesitated. "If the wrong people are awake..."

Instead of directly replying, Captain Balestra seemed to mumble something to herself for a moment. "I've used my lander's security systems to knock out everyone uphill from this spot. Take enough people to drag your friends. Now get going. Fast. And remember: only twenty."

Francesca's father pushed her against the wall with a gesture to stay as he rushed away with the others. Francesca stood there, rigid, still unable to grasp what was happening.

Captain Balestra murmured some more to herself as if she were talking to someone else, then smiled at Francesca. "I see you brought a friend."

Francesa stared down at the doll clutched in one hand, feeling heat in her face, and shoved the doll behind her. “I’m not ... that is...”

“Nothing to be ashamed of, girl. We all need things that bring us comfort.” Balestra stared out the opening at the world beyond. “Especially in places like this. It’s not a bad thing, unless what brings you comfort comes at the cost of other people. You hang on to that friend of yours, so you never forget this place and why you and your family are leaving it while others must stay.”

Francesa gazed up at her. “Why are *we* leaving? I thought—”

“You’re leaving because you were still following the survival rules to the best of your ability. That’s the justification I used. Those who tried to change those rules to benefit themselves, or because they thought themselves better than you, won’t be coming.”

Francesa was still thinking about that when her father returned with the others, dragging or carrying unconscious bodies with them. “Twenty-one,” her father gasped as he entered, three children in his arms. “There was another child—”

Captain Balestra raised that commanding hand, frowning. “Wait.” She paused, as if listening. “The children are small enough. We can take twenty-one. Now, get back from the hatch. The opening, that is.”

Everyone crowded away, then the walls around the opening flowed together and sealed into a solid surface. Captain Balestra murmured to herself some more, then looked up at the workers around her. “We’re lifting. Don’t worry. You won’t feel it. It’ll take about an hour to reach the *Bellegrange*. Accommodations will be tight, and food rationed, but we should be okay until we reach port and the Sanctuary people can take charge of you.”

Francesa’s father laughed. “We’re accustomed to small homes and little food. But hope is something we’ll have to get used to.” He glanced at Francesca, showing surprise at her somber expression. “What’s the matter? Surely you’re not sorry to leave.”

“No,” Francesca protested. “It’s just ... what will they be thinking? The Officers and Crew, who were so sure they would be taken up. Instead, they’re the ones left behind.”

Captain Balestra gave her a grim smile. “You’ve got a good heart to still care about that. I left them what supplies and survival equipment I could spare, and I left them a message to think about. I told them I had an obligation to take those most in need, an obligation they should understand since the writings they revered urged that behavior. I told them those left would have to work hard to survive the coming

colder period, but that since they'd proven very good at looking out for their own interests they should be well suited for the task. And I told them that anyone who believes in a powerful divinity who rules them perhaps shouldn't go around making decisions for that divinity, such as who is worthy and who is not."

Francesca nodded slowly, thinking of how hard life would be for those remaining behind. "But they followed the writings. You told us the writings said good things."

Balestra nodded as well. "The writings, the survival rules, do say many good things. If the so-called chosen ones had spent more time and effort actually following the letter and spirit of those rules, and less time and effort oppressing those who read the rules differently, I would've had a much harder time choosing who to leave."

Francesca's father stared downward. "So, they *were* judged."

"I guess so." Balestra shrugged. "But then, sooner or later we all are, aren't we? The important thing to remember is that we never get to judge ourselves. Come on, girl. I want to show you the stars."

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