

BETRAYED

HIDDEN WORLDS BOOK ONE



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-491-1
Print ISBN: 978-1-61258-506-2

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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CHAPTER 1



"Do you mind?"

I looked at the woman standing next to my table holding her meal tray expectantly. A patch over her left breast bore the insignia of navigator along with the name "MacCleod." Agreeably, I nodded my head towards the empty seat opposite mine. We hadn't met; MacCleod was part of the ship's crew and I was on the professional research staff, but I recognized her from preflight, primarily because she was the only other woman on board our small deep space Drakkon.

"Marin, isn't it?"

I swallowed my egg sandwich and stuck out my hand. "Yes... Jen Marin."

"I'm Christy." Deftly, she moved her food carriers from the tray to the table. "Is this your first time out?"

I shook my head. "Oh, no. You have to be system-certified before they let you go inter."

"Of course," she nodded, a chagrined look on her face. "Guess I never paid much attention to the regs in Exploratory." She took a bite of her food. "Are you Anthro?"

"No. Linguistics."

Christy furrowed her forehead. "I thought this planet was English-speaking." I looked up sharply and she shrugged with a half-apologetic smile. "Bed-time reading."

"I'm impressed. The flight crews I've worked with in the past couldn't care less..." I groped for a polite way of phrasing the thought, "...about the research parameters." It was true. Most flight crew members were nothing but dumb space jocks, who'd joined the service because they thought it would give them adventure. When they found out that, from the inside of a transport, space travel looked about the same as it did from the inside of a simulator, boredom set in quickly, and they resigned themselves to taking the professionals where they wanted to go, playing cards and grumbling about delays until it was time to go back. I'd never met a crew member yet who'd evinced any interest whatsoever in the social parameters of the destination.

She shrugged, seemingly oblivious to my perusal. "I thought about Anthro at upper, but my Dad was Unit..."

"Unit!" My hand shook and coffee I'd been sipping sloshed everywhere.

She gave me a glance as if I'd just hatched out of a fetal unit. "Of course. Didn't you know this was a military transport?"

"No!" I felt embarrassed, but I was so astonished at the information that there was no way I could hide my ignorance. From Christy's knowing comment about the planet being English-speaking, and now this, it seemed she knew a lot more about what was going on than I did. "Why is this a military transport?"

"Gamma Rigel 2 is an unsecured planet." She paused, scratching her nose. "A ten. I can't believe you don't know this."

I sighed, hardly knowing where to start. "Well, actually, I was slotted into this flight twenty-four hours prior to depart. I really haven't had time to look over the data."

Christy set her cup down and licked her lips. "I was slotted

in twelve hours prior," she said. "Guess we both got a surprise." She paused, then looked at me curiously. "I've talked to the other crew, you know. This mission's been on the schedule logs for six months. Doesn't it seem strange that we both were added to the roster so close to depart?"

"I don't know. Not really. Exploratory seems pretty disorganized, on the whole." I reached for my fork, then set it down. "But I'll tell you what is odd. This may be an unsecured planet, but what do we need a military crew for... if we're not setting down?"

Her fork halted mid-way to her mouth. "Not setting down? Where did you get that idea?"

"I was told this mission was remotes only."

Christy MacCleod shook her head somberly. "Not as far as I know. Like you said, why would you need military if you weren't going to land?"



WHY INDEED? The question came back to me later, as I sat in my cabin tapping through files of data on my reader screen. I was a linguist, a junior faculty member at Uneversity Segment 9 on the European continent. Although I was space-certified and had done some research off-Earth, my field was historical English. Most linguists felt that by documenting forward changes in a language, much could be learned about historical changes as well. Gamma Rigel had been both entirely English-speaking *and* completely isolated for over three centuries. It met the criteria perfectly and I had jumped at the chance to collect field data.

Gamma Rigel had been a prison colony. Like the majority of the colonies that Earth had developed in the twenty second, it had not been set up as a scientific venture. The colonies been developed to hold two groups of people: the bulk of Earth's

population from the third world nations and the entire under-class from the developed countries. About 90% of Earth's population had been moved off-Earth through either coerced or forced emigration during that century, to save the mother planet which was on the verge of ecological and political collapse.

In order to protect Earth militarily, the colonists had been denied the technology that had placed them on the planets to begin with. With little more than domestic animals, seeds, a few crude tools, and the clothing on their backs, they'd been abandoned. Denied all support from Earth, the colonists on every planet had been reduced to subsistence living. It was felt to be crucial that no planet could develop, ever, the means for space travel. This would protect Earth forever.

Many of the colonies had been monitored carelessly, if at all, and the only thing the monitoring crews were trained to look for was evidence of developing technology. As long as the planets stayed primitive, that was all anyone cared about. The prevailing attitude on the Earth through the twenty third and the twenty fourth had been "Good riddance;" What these people actually *did*, how they fared, even if they lived or died, was of no interest whatsoever.

Life on Earth was peaceful, wonderful, idyllic. With a population reduced to less than three hundred million, about the same as twenty first America, food was plentiful, air and water pristine. There were strict population controls; no couple was permitted more than three children and most chose to have only one or two. Since many people had no children at all, the population was barely holding steady.

However, late in the twenty fourth, scientific curiosity was rekindled. Many of the colonies had developed unique social systems. Intellectuals on Earth realized that the study of the colony planets could be fascinating, living labs of anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. Throughout the twenty-fifth, it

became ever more fashionable to join a research unit. It was dangerous work at times, for often the research involved visiting the surfaces of hostile planets in local guise. However, as the decades passed, the government on Earth had been able quietly to "plant" leaders on most of the planet, on-site monitors who guided the societies, helped make them safe for Earth researchers, and also quietly ferreted out any colonial scientist who might be moving too quickly towards developing sophisticated technology.

I knew that Gamma Rigel, one of the most distant colonies, had been monitored only very sketchily, and as I tapped through the data, it became obvious to me that only the barest outlines of information were known. General population numbers, where towns and cities were located, what sort of agriculture was practiced... that sort of physical data was available, but not much else. The last monitoring mission had been six years earlier and had utilized remotes only. Gamma Rigel's ranking as a "ten" meant that it was completely unsecured. We had no secret, on-site observers whatsoever.

Nevertheless, Gamma Rigel was one of the most socially advanced colonies. It had been colonized by criminals, to be sure, but mostly non-violent offenders. Here apparently, Earth had sent men and women convicted of fraud, embezzlement, political crimes, et cetera, as opposed to violent crimes. Such criminals, it seemed to follow, had been better educated to begin with. In addition, the original group had been tiny, only around 1000. Apparently, Gamma Rigel's colonization had begun at the very tail-end of the transport programs, and through some bureaucratic foul-up, a large convoy of colonists designated for Gamma Rigel had inexplicably been sent somewhere else. By the time the mistake was discovered, there really were no more colonists to send out. Gamma Rigel was left with only its very small, trial group. Given the small numbers, the education level of the colonists, as well as the fact that they all

shared a single language, and it made sense that Gamma Rigel, in three hundred years, would develop into a very interesting place.

I'd seen vids of some of the other colonies, places where half-clothed savages were still coshing each other over the head with stone hatchets. By contrast, Gamma Rigel, at least physically, resembled Europe in mid-second millennium. From the vids, I could see that the architecture and town construction on the part of the planet that was inhabited was reminiscent of that era, and, in addition, there seemed to be much small-scale warfare, again similar to medieval Europe.

I squinted on my data screen at a rather poorly enhanced vid, but its content was clear enough. Two groups of men, perhaps sixty in all, were engaged in a battle. A few were on horseback, and all wore a linked leather and metal armor. Swords flailed and arrows flew, and in spite of its poor quality, the spectacle was riveting. The men all appeared very powerful, and as I had that thought, I remembered another brief fact that I'd seen somewhere in the data. Turning off the vid, I flipped through... and found it.

For some reason, it appeared that over the three-hundred and fifty years of Gamma Rigel's colonization, human stature had increased substantially, six percent, if evidence gathered from the vids was to be believed. That translated into an average increase of four inches for men and three for women. No one knew why. Such a thing was not without precedent. On Earth, cultures that began eating a great deal of meat and other protein foods had experienced an even larger increase... about eight percent, during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth. But preliminary evidence from Gamma Rigel was that their diet was not particularly heavy in meat... they ate mostly grains and vegetables. Something in the water or air, perhaps? It certainly was curious.

I found myself torn between being fascinated with this

colony and very glad I'd come along on the mission yet still quite concerned that something was just not right about my presence. Initially, I'd been told that I'd been selected for the trip to Gamma Rigel at the last minute because someone else had opted out, and I'd never hesitated about accepting; something unusual like this only increased my chances for tenure. However, I wasn't certified for a landing crew when the planet was ranked above a six. Unit had their own research staff, trained for potentially hostile encounters, that went along for initial forays into unsecured nines and tens.

I had thought that I would be supervising the collection of the data via the remotes, tiny cameras and recorders that were dropped down to the surface to record the sights and sounds of the planet. There was no reason, of course, why I could not still do that, but the presence of the Unit Landing Crew was very mysterious indeed. At the beginning of the flight we'd been put into suspended for sixteen days, and I now had just two more days before we would arrive at Gamma Rigel. Not a lot of time, but certainly enough to do a more thorough review of the data *and* talk to both Christy MacCleod and the ship's Primo a few more times.



ASK QUESTIONS I DID, and I got answers. Yes, I was to collect data via remotes, and no, I was not going to go out on surface, even though set-downs were planned. The Mission Primo shook his head in innocent confusion when I mentioned that I'd been told by the Patrol Mission Coordinator who'd first contacted me that no set-down was planned. Where she'd gotten that idea was a complete mystery to him.

In preparation for slowly introducing Earth observers into the culture, one purpose of this mission was to observe an initial contact between a Unit Member, who would be a

"stranger," and a local. Care was taken to hide any outward signs of advanced technology such as weapons, yet the "stranger" was always dressed differently enough from the given culture that he would easily be identified as something "different." From observing several of these initial contacts, Earth strategists hoped to judge just how difficult it would be to introduce our "observers" directly into the society. Societies that greeted strangers openly were obviously much easier to penetrate than a society in which the first reaction was to kill the unknown individual.

I learned that the Unit planned on observing initial contacts with some ten or fifteen different groups on the planet. As I heard this, I found myself becoming quite excited. I'd never thought I'd get a chance to observe such an interaction first-hand. I also relaxed. My initial trepidation about the mission had been explained away perfectly. Everything made complete and logical sense. The Unit was there for a very specific purpose and I was there for mine. My research would be done in and around theirs.

As the planet approached, first as a tiny glowing dot on the monitor, then something we could physically observe through the dropped light shields, I found myself becoming more and more excited. All my research in the past, done as a graduate student, had been on thoroughly "civilized" planets. But this was something new, something only a very few had seen. I spent a lot of time during the last two days of flight with a big smile on my face, picturing how my name would look next session on the list of tenured faculty.

I'd been informed that the initial set-down would be "dry," in other words, without contact with any locals. As it would be in an uninhabited area of the planet, I would not have the opportunity to set up any remotes either. Having totally reviewed my data bases, I was left with little to do. The two other researchers on board, an anthropologist named Doug

Myson and a sociologist named Arn Mensch and I went over a few ideas for some joint projects, but when the sound of the engines changed from the low-pitched deep space hum to the rather loud whine of the descent system, we could not hide our excitement. Even though we hadn't been specifically invited, we wandered up to the bridge to watch the final moments before set-down.

The planet surface came into view, first a dim, bluish haze, then specific land masses, then, almost so quickly that the transition could not be seen, distinct features: rivers, lakes, forests. I was trying to stay back, out of the way, though, and I could catch no glimpse of anything that looked like it had been the product of human hands. Then, only a couple more seconds and... silence. The engines dropped out between one millisecond and the next, leaving a void so absolute it almost, by contrast, hurt one's ears. We were on the surface.

There were grins, and a little back slapping and I watched curiously to see what would happen next. To be honest, I could see little purpose for a "dry" set-down. We were not here to collect plant or animal specimens, and we knew that the atmosphere was breathable. I thought about it for a second, then shrugged it off. It was none of my concern, after all. I had to assume that the Unit Pilots and Mission Leaders knew what they were doing.

Suddenly, I noticed that the Mission Primo, Hal Turner, was eyeing us. He caught my gaze, turned away quickly, then looked back with a smile. I was puzzled by his turning away... the motion had seemed almost... furtive, but at his warm smile, I dismissed the brief impression. Hal walked towards us. "It's rather chilly out there. You're really not dressed warmly enough."

"Warm enough for what?" Arn's voice carried a note of puzzlement.

"Has no one told you?" Hal Turner's voice carried a note of

surprise, but my first impression was that it was false; he knew perfectly well that we hadn't been told whatever it was he was now referring to. In addition, I got the definite feeling that while he was addressing the comment to the whole group, he was actually talking directly to me. "If you want to go out on the surface, now's your opportunity. It's isolated here, with no chance of encounters with locals. I don't know." He shrugged. "Thought you might like to pick up a rock or something. You know. A souvenir." I looked up, trying to catch his eyes, and, inexplicably he looked away... wouldn't hold my gaze.

I opened my mouth then snapped it shut again. The feelings were strong and I felt sure he was hiding something, but what? Was I going to accuse him of lying? *About* what? The fact that we were apparently to be allowed one brief foray out of the ship? Why in the world would he lie about that? I turned away, frustrated, and as rational thought intruded, I tried to shake the negative feeling away. There was no reason that Hal Turner should be nervous, or furtive, or anything else around me; I'd never clapped eyes on the man before preflight and hadn't exchanged anything beyond the most basic greeting with him since.

Arn and Doug looked delighted and quickly announced their intention to change into the crew jumpsuits that we'd been issued, but were not actually required to wear.

Hal looked at me. "What about you, Jen?"

I forced myself to shake off the negative feelings completely, because I knew there was no rational basis for them. "Sure," I smiled. "Sure. I'm coming."