

DAVID DRAKE

THE ROAD OF DANGER



The Road of Danger—ARC

David Drake

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The Road of Danger

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To Scott Van Name

Who was much younger than I was when he learned to appreciate Gaudi.

Acknowledgments

Dan Breen continues as my first reader. Thank goodness.

Dan, Dorothy Day, and my webmaster Karen Zimmerman archive my texts. I copy them to three machines of my own, but given my track record with computers I feel a lot happier having the texts spread around.

Though for a wonder, I didn't kill (or even badly bruise) any computers on this book. The last time that happened, I lost two computers and a separate keyboard in the course of writing the next one. I am prepared!

Dorothy, Karen, and Evan Ladouceur help with research and continuity problems. Basically, I say "What was the name of...?" or "Where the dickens did X take place?" and an answer appears in my in-box. My focus is on story, not continuity, and I'm sure it shows; but the situation would be much worse without the help of my friends.

Indeed, life would be much worse without the help of my friends. That's another matter, but it seems proper to make public acknowledgment of that too.

The reason the RCN series has great covers is that Toni Weisskopf, the publisher, hires Steve Hickman to do the art. Steve consistently paints a lovely and evocative image; whereupon Jennifer Faries, Baen's designer, does all the considerable range of things that turn the raw materials into a cover.

Sure, they're all doing their jobs, but heaven knows that there are a lot of people doing those jobs professionally who aren't any good. There are very few who are better than those working on my books, and I appreciate them.

My wife Jo continues to run the house and coddle me while I'm writing. Which I do most of my waking life, so it isn't a small or an easy task.

I could not write as I do without the help of those named and of many others. Thank you all. I know how lucky I am.

Dave Drake

Author's Note

I use both English and Metric weights and measures in the RCN series to suggest the range of diversity which I believe would exist in a galaxy-spanning civilization. I do not, however, expect either actual system to be in use in three thousand years. Kilogram and inch (*et cetera*) should be taken as translations of future measurement systems, just as I've translated the spoken language.

Occasionally I think that I don't really have to say that in every RCN book. It's obvious, after all, isn't it? But there's a certain number of people to whom it isn't obvious. They'll write to "correct me, and that gets on my nerves.

The plots of my RCN novels often come from classical history. Ordinarily that means something I've found in a Greek historian whom I've been reading in translation. In the present case, however, I resumed reading the Roman historian Livy in the original. I found my situation in the disruption which followed the Battle of Zama and the surrender of Carthage to end the 2nd Punic War.

One of the advantages in going back to primary—or at least ancient—sources is that the ancient historians mention things which modern histories ignore as trivial. They weren't trivial to the people living them, and to me they often do more to illuminate the life of the times than do ambassadorial speeches and the movements of armies.

Northern Italy at the end of the 3d century ad was a patchwork of Roman colonies and allies; Celtic tribes recently conquered by Rome; and independent tribes, mostly Celtic. A man calling himself Hamilcar and claiming to be a Carthaginian raised a rebellion against Rome. In the course of it he sacked cities and destroyed a Roman army sent against him.

Nobody was really sure where Hamilcar came from. Supposedly he was a straggler from one of the Carthaginian armies which passed through the region, but there was no agreement as to which army.

There are two perfectly believable accounts of his defeat and death. They can't both be true, which leads to the possibility that neither is true. All we know for certain is that Hamilcar disappears from the record and from history more generally.

The point that particularly interested me was that the Roman Senate reacted by sending an embassy to Carthage, demanding that the Carthaginians withdraw their citizen under terms of the peace treaty. This makes perfect legal sense, though appears absurd in any practical fashion.

Livy's account got me thinking about the problems that the envoys would have had. The Roman envoys were going to Carthage with demands which weren't going to be greeted by their listeners with any enthusiasm.

They had it easier, however, than the Carthaginians who were presumably tasked to proceed to the chaos in Northern Italy and corral Hamilcar. Whatever the Carthaginian people thought of the situation, they were in no position in 200 bc to blow off a Roman ultimatum. There's no record of the Carthaginian response, but I believe they made at least some attempt to comply. Otherwise the *would* be more in the record.

I decided that I could find a story in that. This is the story I found.

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But if you come to a road where danger
Or guilt or anguish or shame's to share,
Be good to the lad that loves you true
And the soul that was born to die for you,
And whistle and I'll be there.

A E Housman
More Poems, XXX

CHAPTER 1: Holm on Kronstadt

Captain Daniel Leary whistled cheerfully as he and Adele Mundy turned from Dock Street on Harbor Esplanade, walking from the *Princess Cecile's* berth toward the three-story pile of Macotta Regional Headquarters. Daniel had every right to be cheerful: he and his crew had brought the *Sissie* from Zenobia to Cinnabar in seventeen Standard days, a run which would have stretched a dedicated courier vessel. They had then—with the necessary orders and authorizations—made the run from Cinnabar to Kronstadt in eleven days more.

The *Sissie's* fast sailing meant that Admiral Cox could get his battleships to Tattersall in plenty of time to prevent the invasion which would otherwise lead to renewed war between Cinnabar and the Alliance. Neither superpower could resume the conflict without collapse: forty years of near-constant warfare had strained both societies to the breaking point. In a very real sense, preventing war over Tattersall meant preventing the end of galactic civilization.

Not a bad job for a fighting corvette. Pretty bloody good, in fact.

“That’s ‘The Handsome Cabin Boy,’ isn’t it?” asked Officer Adele Mundy. “The tune, I mean.”

“Ah!” said Daniel with a touch of embarrassment; he hadn’t been paying attention to what he was whistling. “Not really the thing to bring into an admiral’s office, you mean? And quite right, too.”

“If I had meant that…” Adele said. She didn’t sound angry, but she was perhaps a trifle more tactful than she would have been with a friend if they hadn’t just completed a brutally hard run through the Matrix. “I would have said that. I was simply checking my recollection.”

She pursed her lips as she considered, then added, “I don’t think anyone who could identify that music would be seriously offended by the lyrics. Although the record suggests that Admiral Cox doesn’t need much reason to lose his temper. No reason at all, in fact.”

Daniel laughed, but he waited to respond until a pair of heavy trucks had passed, their ducted fans howling. The vehicles carried small arms which had been stored in the base armory while the ships of the Macotta Squadron were in harbor.

As soon as the *Sissie* reached Kronstadt orbit, Daniel—through the agency of Signals Officer Mundy—had transmitted the orders he carried to the regional headquarters. Admiral Cox wasn’t waiting for the chip copy to arrive before he began preparing to lift his squadron off.

“Cox does have a reputation for being, ah, testy,” Daniel said. “That probably has something to do with why he’s here in the Macotta Region when his record would justify a much more central command.”

Navy House politics weren’t the sort of things a captain would normally discuss with a junior warrant officer, but Adele’s rank and position were more or less accidental. She was a trained librarian with—in Daniel’s opinion—an unequalled ability to sort and correlate information. If necessary, Daniel would have classed her as a supernumerary clerk, but because Adele could handle ordinary communications duties, she was Signals Officer of the *Princess Cecile* according to the records of the Republic of Cinnabar Navy.

Three blue-and-white vans stencilled SHORE PATROL over broad vertical stripes tore past; the middle vehicle was even ringing its alarm bell. Adele followed them with her eyes, frowning slightly. “What are they doing?” she asked.

“Carrying spacers picked up on the Strip to their vessels,” Daniel said. “I’m sure that the wording of the recall order justifies it, but there’s no operational reason for that—”

He nodded after the speeding vans.

~~“—since it’s going to be 48 hours minimum before the majority of the squadron can lift off.”~~

Coughing slightly, Daniel added, “I’ve found that people who enlist in the Shore Patrol like to drive fast. And also to club real spacers who may have had a little to drink.”

He kept his voice neutral, but the situation irritated him. The Shore Patrol performed a necessary function, but fighting spacers—which Daniel Leary was by any standard—tended to hold the members of the base permanent parties in contempt. That contempt was doubled for members of the Shore Patrol, the portion of the permanent party whom spacers on liberty were most likely to meet.

“I see,” said Adele. From her tone, she probably did.

Daniel shivered in a gust of wind. In part to change the subject, he said, “If I’d appreciated just how strong a breeze came off the water at this time of day, I’d have worn something over my Whites. I don’t have anything aboard the *Sissie* that’s suitable for greeting admirals, but I guess I could’ve dumped my watch coat onto his secretary’s desk before I went through to his office.”

He’d noticed the local temperature from the bridge when the *Sissie* landed, but it hadn’t struck him as a matter of concern. While he was growing up on the Bantry estate, he’d thought nothing of standing on the sea wall during a winter storm. *I’d have been wearing a lizardskin jacket, though, or at least a poncho over my shirt.*

Today Daniel wore his 1st Class dress uniform, since he was reporting to the Macotta Regional Commandant. Anything less would be viewed as an insult, even though technically his 2nd Class uniform—his Grays—would be proper. As he had said, Admiral Cox had the reputation of not needing an excuse to tear a strip off a subordinate.

“We’ve been aboard the *Sissie* so long,” Adele said, “that I’d forgotten how the wind cuts, too. At least it’s not sleeting, and we don’t have to sleep in it.”

She glanced toward him with a raised eyebrow. “At least I hope we won’t have to sleep in it,” she said. “Poverty provided me with many experiences which I would prefer not to revisit.”

Daniel hoped Adele was being ironic, but it was just as easy to treat the comment as serious—as it might be. He said, “I don’t think we’ll be sleeping in a doorway tonight, but I may have Hogg bring my heavy coats before we walk back to the *Sissie*.”

They’d reached the line of bollards that protected the front of the regional headquarters. The two guards at the main entrance wore battledress, and today their sub-machine guns weren’t for show. Unsmilingly, they watched Daniel and Adele approach; the alert must have made everyone on the base a little more jumpy than normal.

Adele shrugged. “I did think that Admiral Cox might have sent a vehicle for us,” she said. “Or had the Operations Section, at any rate, but perhaps they’re too busy dealing with their new orders to worry about courtesy toward the officer who brought those orders.”

Adele *did* wear her Grays. They weren’t tailored as closely to her trim body as they might have been, so that the personal data unit along her right thigh and the pistol in the left pocket of her tunic were less obtrusive. There wouldn’t be a problem about that: formally, Signals Officer Mundy was a junior warrant officer on the corvette *Princess Cecile*, accompanying her commanding officer. As such she was beneath the notice of an admiral in the Republic of Cinnabar Navy. Informally...

Daniel wasn’t sure that his friend even owned a set of Whites. When Adele deemed that a situation required formality, she wore civilian garments of the highest quality. By birth Adele was Lady Mundy of Chatsworth, head of one of the oldest and once most powerful families in the Republic. When she chose to make a point of it, no one doubted that the Mundys retained a great deal of power.

The headquarters building was of yellow stone, not brick as Daniel had thought when he started down the esplanade. The corners, and the cornices above the windows on each of the three floors, were of a slightly darker stone than the walls. In all, very skilled workmanship had gone into a building

which nonetheless had no more grace than a prison.

Three officers wearing utilities but saucer hats with gold braid came out of the door in a hurry; one clutched a briefcase to her chest. A light truck with six seats in back pulled up beyond the bollard. They got into the vehicle and rode off. The tires of spun beryllium netting sang on the pavement.

"Captain Daniel Leary, just landed in the *Princess Cecile*," Daniel said to the Marine sergeant who seemed the senior man; both guards had relaxed when the strangers sauntered close enough to be seen as harmless by even the most paranoid observer. "Here to report to the regional commander."

"It's to the right just inside the door," the sergeant said, gesturing. "But we got a flap on here, so don't be surprised if some clerk checks you in."

Daniel nodded pleasantly. It wasn't the proper way to address a senior officer, but Marines weren't in the same chain of command as spacers until you got up to the Navy Board—which was a very long distance from Kronstadt. The other guard pulled open the door for them, though the gesture was marred when two more officers came out, talking in excitement and taking only as much notice of Daniel and Adele as they did the line of bollards.

The lobby must have been larger originally. A splendid crystal chandelier hung in line with the door, but a waist-high counter now stood a full ten feet out from where the right-hand wall must have been.

A clerk under the eye of a senior warrant officer acted as gatekeeper to the several officers who wanted to get through. Beyond the counter were six consoles occupied by clerks.

Across the bullpen was a closed door marked Admiral Aaron J Cox in raised gold letters. The door of the office beside it was open; the commander seated at the desk there wore utilities. It was unlikely that a regional headquarters operated on a combat footing normally, so she must have changed out of her dress uniform as a result of the signal from the *Princess Cecile*.

The commander got up when she saw Daniel enter and approach the counter. Instead of greeting him, she tapped on the admiral's door and stuck her head in. After what must have been a few words she turned and called across the room, "You're Captain Leary?"

Yes, which makes me your superior officer, Daniel thought. Aloud he said pleasantly, "Yes, commander. My aide and I are bringing orders from Navy House."

Adele held the thin document case in her right hand; she didn't gesture to call attention to it. Her face was absolutely expressionless, but Daniel could feel anger beat off her like heat from an oven.

With luck, Admiral Cox would ignore Adele during the coming interview. With even greater luck, neither Cox nor his aide would manage to push her farther. Daniel had the greatest respect for his friend's self-control, but he knew very well what she was controlling.

"Come on through, then," the commander said. "The admiral has decided he can give you a minute. Casseli, let them both in."

The warrant officer lifted the flap. The three officers on this side of the counter watched the visitors with greater or lesser irritation.

Adele smiled slightly to Daniel as she stepped through. "I'm reminding myself that there are fewer than twenty present," she said in her quiet, cultured voice. "So there's really no problem I can surmount, is there?"

Daniel guffawed. The commander—the name on her tunic was Ruffin—glared at him.

I wonder what she'd say, Daniel thought, *if she knew that Adele meant she had only twenty rounds in her pistol's magazine? Of course, she normally double-taps each target....*

Admiral Cox's office had high windows with mythological figures—Daniel wasn't sure which mythology—molded onto the columns separating them; the pattern continued, though at reduced scale, along the frieze just below the coffered ceiling. The furniture was equally sumptuous, which made the admiral's mottled gray-on-gray utilities seem even more out of place. The region

command seemed to beat pains to demonstrate how fully alert they were, but changing uniforms wouldn't have been one of Daniel's operational priorities.

Daniel took two paces into the room and saluted—badly. He was stiff with chill, and he'd never been any good at ceremony. "Captain Leary reporting with dispatches from Navy House, sir!" he said.

The admiral's return salute was perfunctory to the point of being insulting. He said, "They're the same as what you signalled down, I take it?"

"Yes sir," Daniel said. Adele was offering the case—to him, not to Admiral Cox. "I had been warned that time was of the essence, so we took that shortcut to save the hour or so before we could get the *Sissie*—the ship, that is, down and open her up."

"Navy House was quite right," Cox said, as though the decision had been made on Cinnabar instead of on the *Sissie*'s bridge. He was a squat man whose hair was cut so short that it was almost shaved; he looked pointedly fit. "Hand them to Ruffin, then, and I'll give you *your* orders."

"Sir!" Daniel said. He took the chip carrier from Adele, who hadn't moved, and gave it to the smirking Commander Ruffin.

"Indeed I will, Captain," the admiral said. His smile was that of a man who is looking at the opponent he has just knocked to the floor, judging just where to put the boot in.

Adele Mundy liked information—"lived for information" might be a better description of her attitude—but she had learned early that she preferred to get her information second-hand. Life didn't always give her what she wanted, but she had tricks for dealing with uncomfortable realities.

At present, for example, she was imagining that, while seated at her console on the bridge of the *Princess Cecile*, she was viewing the admiral's office in hologram. That way she could treat what was being said simply as data, as information with no emotional weight.

For Adele to display emotion here would compromise her mission and would—more importantly—embarrass her friend Daniel. She therefore avoided emotion.

"Maybe you think I don't know why your noble friends at Navy House sent the information by your yacht instead of a proper courier ship?" Cox said. His face was growing red and he gripped the edge of his desk hard enough to mottle his knuckles. "Is that it, Leary?"

The phrase "noble friends" settled Adele's data into a self-consistent whole. Cox's father had been a power room technician and a member of a craft association which provided education for the qualified children of associates. Cox had excelled in astrogation training; then, at a time of great need during the Landsmarck War thirty years ago, he had transferred from merchant service to the RCN.

That Cox had risen from those beginnings to the rank of admiral was wholly due to his own efforts and abilities. It wasn't surprising that he felt hostile to a highly regarded captain who was also the son of Speaker Leary—one of the most powerful and most feared members of the Senate. Cox had no way of knowing that Daniel had at age sixteen broken permanently with his father by enlisting in the Navy Academy.

"Sir..." Daniel said carefully. He would have probably preferred to remain silent—there was nothing useful he could say, after all—but Cox's phrasing didn't permit him that option. "I believe the Board may have taken into account that the *Princess Cecile* was fully worked up, having just made a run from Zenobia. I honestly don't believe that a courier—the *Themis* was on call—which hadn't been in the Matrix for thirty days could have bettered our time from Xenos."

Adele wondered if commissioned officers could be charged with Dumb Insolence or if the offense was only applied to enlisted spacers. She would like to look up the answer with her personal data unit.

She would like *very* much to escape into her personal data unit.

"I'm supposed to believe that it was all for practical reasons?" Cox said in a hectoring voice. The design inlaid on his wooden desktop showed men with spears—and one woman—fighting a giant boar.

It was very nice work. “That your father didn’t have dinner with Admiral Hartsfield and say that his son should be sent to the Macotta Region to burnish his hero image?”

“Sir,” said Daniel stiffly. His eyes were focused out the window over the admiral’s shoulder. “I truly don’t believe that my father has any connection with the Navy Board. I myself haven’t spoken with him for years.”

For a ship to make a quick passage between stars, it had to remain in the Matrix and take advantage of variations in time-space constants varied from one bubble universe to the next. Most vessels returned to the sidereal universe frequently, in part to check their astrogation by star sightings but also because humans do not *belong* outside the sidereal universe. The pressure of alienness weighed on crews, affecting some people more than others but affecting everyone to a degree.

Daniel had spent nearly all the past month in the Matrix, and most of that time out on the *Sissie* hull. That had allowed him to judge every nuance of energy gradients and adjust his course to make the quickest possible passage.

It was discourteous for Cox to abuse a man who had just undergone that strain. It was dangerous to do so in front of the man’s friend, who had undergone the same strain and who had killed more people in the past few years than even her own fine mind could remember.

Admiral Cox drew his head back slightly and pursed his lips. The new expression wasn’t welcoming, but Adele found it an improvement on the angry glare which he had worn until now.

“Well, that doesn’t matter,” Cox said gruffly. “The orders say that you’re to put yourself and your ship under my command during the operation. That’s correct, isn’t it?”

Perhaps he had recognized how unjust he had been. And perhaps he had considered some of the stories he’d heard about Officer Mundy.

Daniel took a needed breath. “Yes sir!” he said brightly. “If I may say so, I believe Officer Mundy—”

He nodded toward Adele with a smile.

“—information gathering skills—”

“That’s enough, Leary,” Cox snapped, returning the atmosphere in the office to the icy rage of moments before. “I’ve heard about your tame spy—”

He made a dismissive gesture toward Adele. His eyes followed his hand for a moment but quickly slid away from Adele’s still expression. She had been sure that her face was expressionless but apparently she had been wrong about that.

Where did he get the idea that I’m tame?

“Anyway, I’ve heard about her,” Cox said more quietly, looking at Daniel and then to the holographic display skewed toward him from the right side of his desk. “In my judgment, my region’s Naval Intelligence Detachment is quite capable of sweeping up these supposed plotters on Tattersall without help from outside. I’m therefore—”

Commander Ruffin was grinning.

“—going to assign you and your corvette to a matter of great diplomatic concern, Leary. I’m sending you to Sunbright in the Funnel Cluster to remove the Cinnabar citizen who’s reported to be leading a revolt there. Ruffin will give you the details.”

“Sir?” said Daniel in more surprise than protest. “Sunbright is an Alliance base, isn’t it? Why—”

Cox slammed his left palm down on the desk. Papers and small objects jumped; Adele noticed that the display became an unfocused blur for a moment. *Even a ground installation should be better insulated against shock than that.*

“I said, Ruffin will take care of you!” Cox said. Less harshly he continued, “Ruffin, brief them in your office and then get back here. We’ve got a lot of work to do on this Tattersall business.”

“Sir,” said Daniel. He saluted and turned to the door, reaching it before Commander Ruffin did.

Adele followed. She decided to feel amused, though she didn't allow the smile to reach her lips.

~~She had started to pull out her data unit when Cox referred to Sunbright. That would have been not only discourteous but even an offense against discipline, likely to cause trouble for Daniel as well as herself. She had therefore controlled her reflex.~~

But that restraint made it all the harder to avoid using the other tool which Adele used to keep the universe at bay. It would have been even more troublesome to have drawn her pistol to shoot dead the Regional Commandant and his aide.

CHAPTER 2: Holm on Kronstadt

Daniel supposed that he should have waited for Commander Ruffin to usher them into her office, but she was behind Adele and Daniel *really* wanted to get his friend out of the admiral's presence before something happened. He was thinking tactically, not what he'd expected when they entered the headquarters building.

An RCN officer must always be ready to deal with a crisis. Daniel grinned.

He swung Ruffin's door back and waved Adele through with a flourish. Ruffin, close behind Adele, stiffened with irritated surprise.

Daniel's grin broadened and he repeated the gesture. "After you, please, Commander," he said.

Ruffin paused, then stepped through without looking at Daniel until she had reached her desk and sat down behind it. He closed the door behind him, standing with his back against the jamb. Adele was already seated at one of the severely functional chairs in front of the desk. The data unit was live on her lap.

Adele served Cinnabar not only in uniform but also as an agent of the Republic's intelligence service. Daniel knew of the association and had even met—socially—Mistress Bernis Sand, who directed those operations.

Daniel was a patriot as well as an RCN officer, and he would help his friend Adele in any fashion that she requested. That said, the whole idea of spying struck him as grubby and unpleasant. He accepted that it was necessary, and he had used information which Adele provided without looking too closely at how she had come by it; but the admiral's reference to "your tame spy," had filled Daniel with as much disgust as anger.

He could only guess how Adele had reacted to the gibe. That guess, however, was the reason Daniel had been in such a hurry to get his friend out of the admiral's office.

Ruffin's desk and console were RCN standard, no different from the units in the outer office; the three chairs and the filing cabinet for hardcopy were equally utilitarian. The multi-paned window, however, was framed by pillars of gorgeous wood which had been turned in spiral patterns.

Daniel had to restrain himself from walking over to examine the orange and black grain more closely. *Is the wood local?*

Instead of speaking immediately, Ruffin brought her console display live and began sorting information with a touchpad. It wasn't clear whether she was being deliberately insulting or was just flustered.

Cheerfully, Daniel said, "I wonder, Commander? Did you originate the plan to send us to Sunbright or did Admiral Cox devise it on his own?"

Cox looked up with a furious expression. "Your arrival allows the Macotta Squadron to concentrate on the crisis on Tattersall!" she said. "Instead of sending elements off to the Funnel Region on which isn't properly an RCN matter anyway."

She cleared her throat. "Now if you'll sit down," she said, "we'll proceed with the briefing."

"I believe I'll stand, Commander," Daniel said. There were advantages to being fobbed off on an aide of lower rank. "I think I'll absorb information better this way."

Daniel had very little personal experience of bullying. As a boy he'd grown up with his mother on Bantry, the family estate on the west coast, while his father spent his time in Xenos, ruthlessly pursuing money, power and bimbos. Hogg, now Captain Leary's personal servant, had been the child

minder and male role model.

Daniel thought back to those days with a wry grin. He had been what his mother described as a high spirited boy; others had found harsher terms. Nobody was going to bully the young squire, but neither were the sons of freeborn tenants going to be pushed around by a pipsqueak kid.

Therefore Daniel had had the living daylights whaled out of him more than once. He gained respect on the estate because he kept getting up; but he kept getting knocked down again too, until Hogg decided it was time to end each fight by hauling his charge off to be cleaned up to the degree possible.

Goodness knows how Hogg explained the damage to Mistress Leary, but fortunately she spent more of her life in a gentle reverie. She probably hadn't paid much attention to her son's cuts and bruises.

At the Academy, the system itself was designed to crush cadets into RCN discipline. That, like the give-and-take of Bantry, was simply part of life. Occasionally someone would be singled out for personal attention, but not Daniel: he didn't behave like a victim; his father, estranged or not, was powerful and famously ruthless; and Hogg, while his deportment lacked a good deal of what was expected of an officer's servant, projected the cheerful air of a man who had garroted rabbits and was more than willing to garrote men who tried to harm his master.

Cox and his flunky, however, were using RCN authority to display their pique rather than to serve the Republic. Daniel would obey the lawful orders of a superior officer—but when the superior officer was a prick abusing his authority, a Leary of Bantry didn't roll onto his back and wave his legs in the air. And as for the prick's lower-ranking toady—

Daniel grinned. His native good humor made the expression a great deal more cheerful than it might have been on another man's face. *Let alone on Adele's...*

Ruffin flushed angrily to see the smile, though the gods alone knew how she was interpreting it. She said, "Sunbright is an Alliance world in the Funnel Group, which to the Alliance is a separate administrative unit from the Forty Stars. They're both part of the Macotta Region to us, to Cinnabar, so that's why Xenos has handed this nonsense to us. The External Bureau has! This has *nothing* properly to do with the RCN."

The outburst proved Commander Ruffin was capable of umbrage at someone other than the captain and the signals officer of the *Princess Cecile*. As for who properly should have been handling a given duty, however... The External Bureau was the Republic's diplomatic hand, and the RCN was the sword which gave point to the Republic's diplomacy. If the diplomats chose to offer a job to the armed service, Daniel's feeling was, "So much the better!"

A starship vented steam in a shriek that only slowly tapered back to silence. Daniel instinctively glanced out the window behind Ruffin, but the back of the building here faced away from the harbor. Chances were that one of the squadron had built up calcium in a cooling line, and the pre-lift-off test had nearly burst the tubing before a technician managed to open a valve.

"Four years ago," Ruffin said, "a rebellion broke out on Sunbright. They grow rice on the planet, a fancy variety and quite valuable, but the planet hadn't attracted much attention. Five years ago, however, Fleet Central on Pleasaunce decided it was a good location for a staging base in case we tried to threaten Alliance holdings in the Funnel."

"Was there any chance of that?" Daniel said, drawn back into professional speculation as his personal irritation cooled.

Ruffin's snort showed that what Daniel remembered of the region was correct. "Bugger all!" the commander said. "Xenos keeps us starved for parts and crews here in the Macotta, and as for the ship—"

She threw up her hands. "The *Warhol* is old, and the *Schelling* was launched when my grandfather was in service. I don't think there's an older battleship in the RCN. *We're* no threat to the Funnel."

She cleared her throat and added, "Though we can see off that cruiser squadron from Madison easily."

enough. They're Marie Class and haven't been first-line ships for a generation."

"How does a rebellion on Sunbright become an RCN problem, then?" Daniel prodded gently. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the flickering of the control wands which Adele preferred to other input methods. She had doubtless called up all the available information on the situation and could have briefed Daniel with a few quick, crisp sentences.

Though it would be informative to see how Ruffin framed the data. Often you learned as much from how people told you things as you did from the content.

"Well..." said Ruffin, glaring at her own display. "Well, the rebel leader uses the name Freedom but he claims to be a Cinnabar citizen and to have backing from the Republic. This was fine during the war, of course, but since the Truce of Amiens..."

Ruffin grimaced and cupped her empty hands upward.

"Anyway, Pleasaunce complained to Xenos," she said, "and Xenos handed the whole business here to the Macotta Regional Headquarters. Without any extra resources, I might add!"

Brightening, she added, "Until you arrived, that is. You let us get on with the real crisis and still satisfy those pansies in the External Bureau."

"I see," said Daniel. He expected he would see a great deal more as soon as he and Adele could talk freely outside Macotta Headquarters. Her wands had continued to flicker without slowing since the moment she had seated herself in a corner of Ruffin's office. "Do you here in the region have any suggestions about how to carry out the task?"

"Any way you please, captain!" Ruffin said. She stabbed an index finger into her virtual keyboard and straightened with an air of accomplishment. "According to your reputation, you're quite the miracle worker; perhaps you can work another one here. Whether you do or not, that reputation is just the sort of window dressing that we need to get Xenos off our backs while we fix Tattersall."

She gestured to her display; from Daniel's side of the desk, the hologram was a blur of color which averaged to gray. "I've sent all the information we have to your ship, the *Princess*. You can access it at your leisure. I don't have anything else to add."

"Then we'll leave you to your business," Daniel said. Out of common politeness, he tried to keep the disgust out of his voice.

He nodded, then turned and opened the office door; Adele had put her data unit away in the thigh pocket a tailor had added to her 2nd Class uniform.

Adele will certainly have something to add.

"I'd like to sit for a moment before we return to the *Princess Cecile*," Adele said as she and Daniel left the outer office. "The benches around the fountain in front of the building should do."

In her own ears the words sounded like those of a prissy academic. Which of course she was, but the fact didn't usually irritate her so much.

"Right," said Daniel, with a smile and a nod. "You know, it seemed nippy as we were walking up the avenue, but now the breeze feels like a good thing. Our reception warmed me considerably."

He really did seem to be in a good humor, though how that could be after the interviews with Corbin and Ruffin was beyond Adele's imagination. Daniel saw the world just as clearly as she did, but somehow he managed to put a positive gloss on the same bleak expanse of arrogance, incompetence and greed.

Adele walked around the fountain and settled, facing back toward the headquarters building. The statue of the cherub in the center would spout water straight up in the air through its trumpet when the fountain was operating, but the pool had been drained for the winter.

The circular bench was cracked, seriously enough that Adele moved the width of her buttocks to the right. That in turn meant that the line from her to the cherub no longer extended through the building

main door. The lack of symmetry made her momentarily furious.

She smiled suddenly. Daniel said, "Adele?"

"Admiral Cox made me angrier than I realized," Adele said, looking at her friend. She felt the smile still quivering on her lips; it wasn't a feeling she was familiar with. "I'm still angry, it appears. That's reasonable, but planning to shoot the head off a statue because it's in the wrong place—"

She indicated the cherub, deliberately using her left hand; her gun hand.

"—is as foolish as the admiral himself."

Daniel looked from Adele to the statue—it was dull gray metal, probably lead—and then back to the tunic pocket where Adele kept her pistol. "I suggest you use a heavier weapon," he said. "Or I suppose we could move closer?"

Adele kept silent for a moment. Then she said, her voice as dry as Daniel's own, "Thank you. I'll continue to review my options."

She cleared her throat and went on, "The Macotta Region remained quiet during most of the war. The regional squadrons are small compared to the volume for which they're responsible, and both Cox and his opposite numbers are more concerned about being out of position if the enemy attacked than they were of attacking the enemy. But seven years ago, Captain Baines swept through the Funnel with a fast cruiser squadron drawn from the Cinnabar Home Fleet."

"Right," said Daniel. "A stunt, really. Baines did quite a lot of damage to shipping, but it wasn't significant because *nothing* in the Funnel is significant. He stressed all his ships and lost the *Grey* in a landing accident because her thrusters had limed up."

He shrugged. "I gather it was good for morale, though," he said. "On Cinnabar itself, that is. I don't think there was a single regional commander who didn't think he had a better use for a couple of Baines' eight cruisers than to send them off to the back of beyond."

"Yes," said Adele. "In any case, there's a rumor that Freedom is an officer from Baines' squadron left behind either by accident or deliberately to rouse a rebellion. *That* is why the Alliance demanded that we repatriate our citizen and probably why Xenos tasked the RCN rather than the Governor's office."

She remembered Daniel's raid on the Pleasaunce Home System in the ancient *Ladouceur*. Because of Adele's training, she had initially believed in factors she could tabulate: tonnage, missiles, cannon, date of construction. Experience had taught her that personnel, not hardware, won battles.

"I don't recall Commander Ruffin mentioning that this rebel is an RCN officer," Daniel said thoughtfully.

"It's possible that she considers the possibility as ridiculous as I do," Adele said. She saw no need to keep the contempt out of her voice. Besides, she supposed she would have been just as tart if the commander were part of the discussion. "More likely, she's as clueless as the people on Pleasaunce and Xenos who accepted the unfounded rumor to begin with. Other than the fact that Captain Baines passed within approximately thirty light-years of Sunbright some three years before the rebellion started, there's no connection."

"Then there's no way to track the fellow?" Daniel said. "I thought that if he really were one of Baines' officers, you could...well, I've seen what you can do with a database. And Sunbright's population is probably under a million, isn't it?"

"Eight hundred and ninety-three thousand," Adele replied absently—from memory; she didn't have to break into the stream of data crossing her display. "Though I'd expect that figure to be low. Sunbright didn't really have a central government until the Alliance imposed one while the base was under construction, and most of the existing population regards the new officials as an occupying force."

She looked up from her display and met Daniel's eyes. She realized that she felt *good*. "Daniel," she

said, "I think this will really be a challenge. I'm rather excited about the prospect. Shall we get back the *Sissie*? I'd like to talk this over with Cory and Cazelet. That is—if you don't mind?"

Strictly speaking, Adele had no authority over commissioned officers—Cory was a lieutenant—even a midshipman like Cazelet. Both men had an instinct for information gathering which on-the-job training with Adele had honed to a fine edge.

As a practical matter, everyone aboard the *Princess Cecile* jumped when Adele forgot herself and said, "Jump!" She tried to hold to RCN proprieties, though—when that didn't interfere with her accomplishing the task before her.

"Yes, of course," said Daniel, rising. While at rest he looked pudgy, but he didn't need to use his arms to help lift him from the uncomfortably deep bench. "Ah—I realize it isn't properly our concern any more, but do you think the local Naval Intelligence section will be able to handle the business of Tattersall?"

"Yes, of course," Adele said—more curtly than she intended. Her mind was on the next several stages in the process of locating Freedom and getting him off Sunbright. "When two RCN battleships appear over the planet, the plotters will fall all over themselves to inform on their friends before the friends inform on them. That's what happened when the Three Circles Conspiracy unravelled, you'll remember."

That's what happened when your father unravelled the Three Circles Conspiracy, she thought. And in the process of doing so wiped out the Mundy family—with the exception of the elder daughter Adele, who was studying off-planet.

"I bow to your expertise," Daniel said, mildly.

Adele felt her lips form a tight smile again. Hunting down Freedom was a proper task for a person of her skills, so she would do it. But she hadn't forgotten Admiral Cox and his aide, either. They had behaved discourteously to fellow RCN officers.

And one of those officers was Mundy of Chatsworth, who was no longer a helpless orphan.

CHAPTER 3: Holm on Kronstadt

The vehicle Hogg had found for them was a surface car with friction drive—a roller on a single central strut—but an air cushion suspension. Adele, in the back seat with Daniel, didn't know what the advantage or claimed advantage was over vectored thrust like the armored personnel carriers which had become familiar to her, but no doubt there was one.

"It rides very smoothly," Daniel said, approvingly but perhaps with a touch of wonder.

Adele sniffed. Hogg had a remarkable facility for finding vehicles, but they never rode smoothly when he drove them. This car had the logo of the Macotta Regional Authority on its front doors. She doubted that Hogg had simply stolen it, but anything was possible with that old poacher.

"And just in case you was wondering how this happened to show up—" Hogg said, patting the fascio plate with his left hand; they swerved toward but not quite into a heavy truck speeding along the other lane of Dock Street with a load of frozen sheep carcasses "—we're testing her for the repair depot and it's all open and above-board."

"I'm glad to hear that, Hogg," Daniel said, smiling but definitely sounding as though he meant the words. "And I'm also glad not to have to walk back from headquarters."

We were apparently all thinking the same thing, Adele realized. *Well, by now we know one another well enough to be able to predict certain responses.*

"Ah..." said Hogg, this time without turning his head toward his master in the back seat. "Your liquor cabinet's short of a couple bottles of that apple brandy you picked up on Armagnac. There wasn't time enough to get into a poker game, but I can find something to replace the booze by tomorrow morning, I figure."

Adele's personal data unit balanced on her lap while she sorted the information which she had controlled in squadron headquarters. She shifted to a cultural database with her control wands, then said "The local liquor is plum brandy. There appear to be better brands and worse ones, but from commentaries I've found, I think absolute alcohol from the Power Room would be a better choice than the low end of the spectrum."

She scrolled further down and added, "In fact, I think paint stripper would be a better choice than the low end."

"Perhaps Hogg and I could arrange a taste test," said Tovera, the first words she had spoken since she arrived beside Hogg. "I'm sure there's paint stripper we could requisition from Squadron Store Or—"

She paused. Tovera was short, slim and colorless, a less memorable person to look at than even her mistress.

"—perhaps I could get it by killing the supply clerk and everyone else in the warehouse."

Hogg guffawed. "Spoiled for choice, aren't we?" he said.

Daniel grinned also, but Adele noticed that the humor had taken a moment to replace a perfectly blank expression. Tovera was an intelligent sociopath. She had neither conscience nor emotions, but a strong sense of self-preservation made up for those absences.

Tovera had learned to make jokes by studying how normal human beings created humor. Similarly, she functioned in society generally by copying the behavior of those whose judgment she trusted.

Tovera trusted Adele. If Adele told her to slaughter everyone in a warehouse—or anywhere else—the only question Tovera might ask was whether her mistress had any preference for the method she

used.

“I’m sure,” Adele said in the present silence, “that if I *do* ask Tovera to wipe out a nursery school I’ll have a very good reason for it.”

The men laughed, and Tovera smiled with appreciation.

Hogg thrust the steering yoke hard to the left, sliding neatly between the tail and nose of a pair of heavy trucks in the oncoming lane. Adele blinked. A stranger might have thought that it was a skilled though dangerous maneuver; she had enough experience of Hogg’s driving to know that he’d simply ignored other traffic.

They had pulled onto the quay separating the last two slips—31 and 32—in the Kronstadt Naval Basin. They sped past a squadron repair ship—which was undergoing repair herself; all twelve of her High Drive motors were lined up beside her on the concrete—and pulled to a halt beside the corvette—and sometimes private yacht—*Princess Cecile*.

“Welcome home, boys and girls!” Hogg said. He gestured toward the ship with the air of a conjurer.

The *Sissie* lay on her side like a fat, twelve-hundred tonne cigar. Within the corvette had five decks parallel to her axis; the bridge was on A—the topmost—Level in the bow, and the Battle Direction Center with its parallel controls and personnel was at the stern end of the corridor.

At present the dorsal turret, near the bow with two 4-inch plasma cannon, was raised to provide more internal volume. The ventral turret, offset toward the stern, was under water and therefore out of sight.

Adele put her personal data unit away and got out. Instead of going to the catwalk immediately, she stood for a moment looking toward the *Princess Cecile* over the car’s roof.

Adele had first seen the corvette cruising slowly above Kostroma City, launching skyrocket and Roman candles from her open hatches as part of the Founder’s Day festivities. Then the vessel was merely an object: large, noisy, and unpleasantly bright to look at. Adele now knew that to save spectators’ eyesight, the *Sissie*’s thruster nozzles had been flared to reduce the intensity of her plasma exhaust, but at the time the light had seemed to stab through her slitted eyelids.

Since then, Adele had spent almost as much time on or about the corvette as she had away from it. With Daniel as captain, they had fought battleships, entered enemy bases, and travelled to the edges of the human universe.

At various times the ship’s rigging had been burned off; it had lost the outriggers on which it floated following a water landing; and portions of its hull had been melted, dented, or holed. After each battle the rebuilt *Princess Cecile* had arisen as solid as before, ready to take her captain and crew to the next crisis.

Hogg was joking, but the *Princess Cecile* really was more of a home than Adele had ever had on land.

“Hey Six?” called Power Room tech, one of the four spacers in the guard detail at the head of the boarding bridge. “They’ve got a real flap on here. Every bloody ship in the harbor’s working up her thrusters and taking stores aboard.”

Adele instinctively reached for her data unit to check the name of the speaker, a squat, androgynous woman who was cradling a sub-machine gun. Her face was familiar, but Adele didn’t connect names and faces very well.

Daniel grinned and said, “As well they should be, Damion. Thanks to the fast run that you on the Ship Side and the riggers both made possible, the Macotta Squadron is able to lift in time to prevent another war.”

Adele’s lips twisted wryly. Though she wasn’t good with flesh-and-blood people, she’d never had a problem keeping authors and their respective documents straight.

The boarding bridge was a twenty-foot aluminum catwalk extending from the concrete quay to the

Princess Cecile's starboard outrigger. There it met the ship's boarding ramp—the main entry hatch in its fully lowered position.

Three pontoons supported the catwalk. It was wide enough for two people to walk abreast, but Adele knew that Daniel in the lead and Tovera following closely behind were both ready to grab her if she started to topple into the water.

Hogg, at the rear of the short procession, swam like a fish. He would drag Adele up from the bottom of the slip if that were required...and would dive down again after her data unit if it somehow had slipped out of its pocket. Every member of the *Sissie's* crew knew that Adele would rather be stripped naked than to lose her data unit.

"I was thinking, master..." Hogg called. "If you weren't going to need the car right away, this might be a good time for me to top off the liquor cabinet."

Daniel turned and stepped aside for Adele as he reached the ramp. "Officer Mundy?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. She hadn't spoken of the course of action she had planned while sorting data from the headquarters computers.

Adele stepped onto the ramp. It was thick steel and seemed as solid as the continent itself after the queasy flexing of the catwalk.

"I'm sorry, Hogg," she said over her shoulder. She spoke loud enough for Daniel to hear, but the question was really the servant's. "Captain Leary and I will be going into town as soon as he has changed out of his Whites and I've briefed Cory and Cazelet. We're going to visit Bernhard Sattler, the merchant who acts as Honorary Consul for the Alliance on Kronstadt. I hope that Sattler will give us information that will help with the mission we've been assigned."

And whether or not Sattler is consciously helpful, I expect that the data I draw from his files will prove useful.

Daniel had changed into a 2nd Class uniform—gray with black piping—because that was the proper garb for visiting a civilian of no particular importance, but it was also a great deal more comfortable than his Dress Whites. At this point Adele was in charge because she had a plan; he was following her orders. He was pleased that she had ordered him to wear his Grays, though.

He wasn't sure why Tovera was driving while Hogg sat beside her in the front seat; presumably it was something the two of them had worked out. Hogg liked to drive, but nobody—his master included—wanted to ride with him a second time. Driving gave Hogg great pleasure, though, and Daniel loved as well as valued the man. Hogg was his servant, certainly; but he was also Daniel's father in the non-biological sense.

"Kronstadt doesn't have formal diplomatic representation with the Alliance," Adele said, her eyes on the display she was manipulating. Daniel didn't imagine that what she was looking at had anything to do with what she was saying: the ride to Sattler's warehouse was simply an opportunity to give him background while she delved much deeper herself. "An honorary consul is a private citizen with an Alliance connection of some sort. He helps Alliance citizens who are having problems. Our External Bureau calls the equivalent official a consular agent."

"He helps spacers who've been rolled and missed their ships?" Daniel said. "That sort of thing?"

Adele shrugged without, Daniel noticed, affecting the way her control wands moved. She claimed the angle and position of the wands provided her with quicker, subtler control of her holographic display than any other form of input device.

Daniel believed her, but the only other people he had seen using wands were Adele's protégés, Cazelet and Cory. From their expressions as they struggled, they didn't get the results Adele did.

"Yes, usually spacers," she said toward the blur of light that coalesced at the point where her own eyes focused, "but it can be any Alliance citizen who's been robbed or has some other kind of leg

problem. From information in the regional computers, I believe I can find a great deal more in Mast Sattler's own files."

Tovera swung the car so wide around dining tables outside a restaurant that Daniel was afraid they would scrape the front of the shop on the opposite side of the street of segmented paving blocks. Buildings in this older section of Holm—along the river, the original starship harbor—were faced with pastel stucco. Enough of the covering had flaked off to show that the walls beneath were brick and stone, definitely not things to drive into with a plastic-bodied vehicle.

About the best thing one could say about Tovera's driving was that her collisions were likely to be at much slower speeds than those of Hogg. She was mechanically overcautious instead displaying Hogg's incompetent verve.

Daniel coughed to clear his throat. Something must have showed in his expression, because Adele glanced toward him and said, "I expected to face danger in the RCN. I hadn't appreciated how much it would involve riding in vehicles which my shipmates were driving."

They had reached a warehouse building with double doors along the front. Tovera pulled the car to halt abruptly enough to tilt the bow forward. The air-cushion suspension damped the jolt better than Daniel had expected when he braced his hands against the seat ahead of him.

Before he could speak, however, the car hopped forward another twenty feet, putting them about a hundred feet far beyond the pedestrian door in the center of the facade as they had been short of it on the first try. Tovera looked as though Tovera was trying to shift into reverse.

"Stop!" Daniel said. "That is, thank you, Tovera, but this is quite good enough."

He slid his door back—it telescoped into the rear body-shell—and got out of the car before Tovera could back up anyway. He was fairly certain that she wouldn't take direct orders from anyone but Adele, and he wouldn't have wanted to bet that even Adele could be sure her order would be obeyed.

Tovera was a pale monster. She was a frequently useful monster, but a monster nonetheless.

The legend painted in bright orange letters above the doors of the building was Bernard Sattler and Company. Tovera had disadvantages as a driver, but her navigation was consistently flawless.

Adele walked around the car to join Daniel. She carried her data unit in her right hand instead of putting it away in its pocket. Tovera followed; Hogg already stood beside the office door.

"Both of you wait in the street," Adele said crisply to the servants. "You'll attract too much attention."

"I—" Tovera said. She held her attaché case before her, closed but unlatched; inside was a small sub-machine gun.

"I won't have you jeopardizing the task by turning this into a procession," Adele said. She didn't raise her voice, but the words snapped out. "Anything beyond Captain Leary and his aide will make them wonder."

She glanced at Daniel, who had been waiting for direction. He noticed to his own amusement that his hands were crossed behind his back as though he were At Ease before a superior officer.

"Captain," Adele said. She nodded to the door.

Daniel, smiling faintly, entered the offices of Bernard Sattler and Company. Rank didn't have to be formal to be real, and *he* had no doubt as to who was in charge here. It wasn't him.

A clerk looked up from her console on the other side of a wide wooden counter. Another female clerk was talking with animation to a pair of warehousemen wearing leather bandoliers from which tools hung. From the door to the left came the sound of a heavy load clattering along an overhead track.

"I'm Captain Leary," Daniel said, pitching his voice to be brusque but short of threatening. "I'm here to speak with the honorary consul on RCN business, and I'm in a hurry."

All four employees were now looking at him—and not at Adele, as he had intended. The clerk at the

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