

BITTER HEART

MARY GRIGGS

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#### *PUBLISHER'S NOTE*

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# CHAPTER ONE

The corridors of the spaceport were a seething mass of people. Striding through the crowd, Julian Mont'criff danced around a woman struggling with several pieces of luggage and three crying children. One of her bodyguards was not so lucky. After a sharp glance from her, he spared a moment to set the child he had knocked over back on its feet before rushing to resume his position guarding her back.

With the planet less than fifty cycles from invasion, everyone was trying to escape. So many desperate people were shouting, crying and pleading for passage to safety to any who would listen. The swirling chaos battered against Julian's psyche, and the bitter tang of fear was sharp in her nose.

Julian and her entourage were heading for the section of the spaceport that held one of two remaining luxury liners. As the youngest daughter of the system's ruling family, she had a secure berth on a ship that would not leave orbit without her. Her stomach churned with the knowledge that her privileged status was affording her an opportunity few others had. The fact

her parents and two older siblings were staying on the planet did nothing but add to the acid in her gut.

Julian glanced up as they passed by a wall of monitors that usually displayed arrival and departure information for the busiest spaceport on the planet. Instead, they all displayed the same satellite telemetry of the outer reaches of their system. Approaching rapidly was a fleet of over a thousand ships. The armada was so numerous it appeared to be a solid wall of doom. The largest of the blips on the screen were battle cruisers, but even the smallest had more firepower than the ring of far-orbital defenses they had eradicated on their destructive swath toward the capital planet.

She shook her head in disbelief. Just seven days ago the Imperial Republic of Atropos had sat serene at the center of a six-planet system and she had been happy in her work as a healer on an isolated isthmus, far away from the political machinations of the capital. Surrounded now by the fetid odor of hopelessness, she longed for cold, clear air beneath the cloudless cerulean sky of her home.

The contrasts between the life she had left behind and her current race to safety was as stark as when the militaristic Babwe had swept aside the outposts along the border of their system like so many pieces of plas-film. After five hundred years of peace, the Atropos military was only suited for pageantry and the personal security of the royal family, not planetary defense.

In fact, all of the Atropian strategic alliances over the past century had been made for trade, not for mutual protection. The only real hope for the planet was for someone to make an appeal before the Universal Trade Conclave to condemn the Babwe invasion and to demand they relinquish control of the ground they had already seized.

This plan rested entirely on her politically unsavvy shoulders. She glanced at the four members of Royal Security Force assigned to escort her safely to the Unity home world of Helios where the headquarters of the Conclave Committee of Nations was located. They probably had forgotten more about diplomacy than she ever knew.

Julian adjusted the shoulder strap of the heavy valise containing the documents supporting her upcoming appearance and fought against an overwhelming sense of despair. Some of the feelings were residue from the people around her but more came from the knowledge that even her success would do nothing to bring back the dead. Her father had told her she was the survivors' only hope, and his words echoed in her ears.

She tried to hide her fear beneath the large hood of her cape. Despite their panic, the fleeing citizens responded to the distinctive scarlet cape of an empath and tried to get out of her way. They did not extend the same courtesy to the members of her retinue. The members of her newly appointed staff had quite a bit of trouble keeping up with her and her bodyguards through the crush.

Julian felt a stabbing pain in her abdomen and abruptly stopped. It caused a cascade reaction as the rest of retinue stumbled to a halt around her. "Sorry," she said absently as she pulled back her hood.

The commander of her bodyguards, Mikhail, stepped forward and pivoted to put his back to the wall so he could see both her and the crowd. Glaring out at the congested walkway, he growled, "We don't have time for this."

"There is something wrong here," Julian replied as she extended her hand toward the solid-seeming metallic surface.

"Leave it."

"You know I can't do that."

"We must get you on board the ship. It will not stay in orbit once the Babwe clear the last of the asteroid defenses, no matter who your parents are."

Julian smiled at him. He was quite distinguished in his dress uniform and with his short-cropped salt-and-pepper hair. She remembered him claiming to have earned every gray hair on his head watching over her as she grew up. "You should have left with your wife instead of trying to keep me out of trouble."

"And leave you to these youngsters? My hand weapon is older than they are."

"They must be pretty good to have been chosen for this assignment."

“Oh, there’s no doubt of that. I checked them over myself.”

“Then why don’t you trust me with them?”

“I have my duty, Your Highness. I am grateful for the arrangements you made to get my family off-planet. I have enough to handle with you, and I am just glad that I don’t have to worry about my wife as well.” He tapped his timepiece. “Please, we need to keep moving.”

“Just a minute. I can’t ignore the call,” she said, laying her hand on the smooth metal wall. Or at least what should have been solid metal. Her hand went right through the wall and, shaking her head, she stepped through what should have been a solid surface.

She found herself in a disused vendor alcove that had been disguised by the camouflaging. It was completely filled with a mass of boxes, equipment and four startled off-worlders. For a moment they stood in a frozen tableau, staring at Julian as she stared back at them.

The only woman of the group looked from Julian to her companions. Her blond hair was pulled severely back from her face, and her piercing gaze reminded Julian of the eagles that flew among the pristine white mountain peaks of her home.

“Did the concealment shielding fail?” the woman barked to her associates.

“No way.” The dark-skinned, heavysset man tapped on his handheld tablet. “No one can see through that.”

Wide-eyed, Julian gazed around the small space and smiled at the thought of all these people hiding in practically plain sight. The smile left her face as someone moaned from the floor. She looked down and saw an older man lying on a pallet. His eyes were closed and deep lines of pain were etched on his face. She pulled off her gloves and walked over to him.

“Hold it right there.” A young man with skin and hair the color of late-season honey stepped between her and the wounded man. “What do you think you’re...?”

His voice trailed off as two of Julian’s retainers joined them in the space. At the sight of the three people around their charge, her guards drew their weapons. Julian used the

distraction to evade the blond woman's outstretched arms and the young man's feeble attempts to stop her. Shrugging off her cape, she knelt beside the injured man, laid a hand on his forehead and centered her awareness. After a brief moment, she closed her eyes and reached blindly toward his hands, which were clenched tight against his belly. As she concentrated on the injury, gradually, almost imperceptibly, the tense form beneath her hands relaxed.

Julian shook out her hands and expelled the breath she had been holding. She then opened her eyes and looked down into the eyes of the now-conscious and quite surprised man. "How do you feel now?" she asked.

"I don't think I have ever felt better. What did you do?" He laughed and touched his belly. "Never mind, I don't think I want to know." Shaking his head, he asked, "Can I get up?"

"You certainly can't stay here with the Babwe heading into the system," she answered.

He moved gingerly, slowly rising until he apparently realized the pain that had been incapacitating him was well and truly gone.

She waved off the hand he extended to help her up. When she made it upright on her own, she swayed slightly.

Mikhail stepped close to her and handed her a flask filled with caramel-colored liquid. It was a mix of herbs and tree bark steeped for a span in the sun, and it tasted vile. She grimaced as the pungent tincture coated her tongue. She only forced it down because it replenished the energy she expended in healing.

Taking the flask back and sliding it into his jacket, he whispered, "I really must insist we get to the ship."

Julian patted his arm. "I have a better idea. I will go with them instead."

The room exploded in deafening shouting as her retainers and the foreigners all argued against the idea.

Finally, the recently healed man roared, "Silence." When they quieted down, he focused on Julian. "Two questions." At her nod, he continued, "Why do you want to go with us, and why should we take you anywhere?"



She laughed. "How did you get on-planet and hide yourselves?"

The small group of foreigners exchanged glances. At their puzzled expressions, Julian laughed again. "You're smugglers. I stand a better chance getting off this planet and to my destination in your ship than in anything else." She looked around the room at their astonished faces and then returned her attention to the tall man. "And I saved your life."

"You'd blackmail us?" the woman spat.

"No," Julian said. "If I were intent on blackmail, I would have demanded passage before healing him. I just want to bring your attention to the debt. Besides, I will pay you what I would have paid for passage on the *Queen Beatrice*."

"You can't possibly consider this," Mikhail pleaded.

"I can and I will," Julian responded icily before looking back at the leader of the group. "You should take me with you because I will pay you and not hinder you." She waved a hand at the half-packed containers that surrounded them. "And I am sure you would be happy to skip our customs inspectors. Even in this time of panic, I doubt what you have in there can stand scrutiny. I can ensure you get away cleanly."

Once again the group exchanged glances. Finally, the much-older man nodded at the man she had recently healed. He had a manner of quiet dignity that went with his neat and tailored clothes and sculpted beard. "It sounds like a good deal."

"Too good a deal," the woman muttered.

The newly recovered man smiled at that. "It's a risk I think we should take." He stuck out his hand. "All right. I'm Captain Phillip Tices, and I welcome you aboard."

Julian drew her gloves back on before shaking his hand. "My name is Julian, and these are my men."

"We hardly have the space to take you; we certainly can't take them," the woman interjected.

"Clarice is right," Phillip said. "We can only take you."

Julian put a hand out to silence Mikhail's immediate disagreement. "I can agree with that." She turned to Mikhail. "Look at it this way. If our invaders hear of you three and the

rest of my staff getting on the *Queen B*, they will naturally assume I am on it with you. If we all disappear, they might start searching or destroying every vessel in the quadrant.”

He nodded reluctantly. “That’s why we tried to get you on a less populous vessel.”

“These people have got ways of getting into places undetected. I’d be a fool not to take advantage of the opportunity.”

“Please,” Mikhail beseeched her. “Your mother will have my head if anything happens to you.”

Julian reached out a hand, and they clasped forearms. “You have been on my heart’s side since my Naming. Neither I nor anyone else questions your loyalty. This is a question of survival and me reaching my final destination. You know this could work.”

“But can they get you where you need to go?”

“I think they’ve made a career out of avoiding official attention and can more easily get me where I must go.”

“This plan is crazy,” he answered, “but it just might work.” Mikhail turned to the smugglers. “How long before your group is ready to leave the planet?”

Phillip shrugged and turned to the oldest male. “I’ve been out of it for a bit. Petric, where are we?”

“Four cycles at the earliest, counting getting all this stuff stowed on board and getting approval for takeoff.”

“Where is your ship berthed?” Mikhail asked.

“At level nine, alpha five, dock six-twelve,” Petric replied.

“Promise that you will take her on board and deliver her safely to her final destination.”

Phillip cupped his right hand over his heart and then extended his arm. “You have my word and my pledge. May my heart be ripped from my chest and fed to the beasts if I fail.”

Feeling a little queasy at the wording of the oath, Julian shook his hand.

Mikhail pulled out a handful of silver bars from the satchel at his waist and held them out to Phillip. “This is equal to the fare we paid on the *Queen*. I trust it will be sufficient.” Barely waiting for Phillip to take the funds, Mikhail continued, “We

will meet with you at your ship in two cycles.” He motioned for Julian and the other guards to go back toward the corridor. “After you.” Glancing meaningfully at his charge, he whispered, “You and I have things to talk about.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Julian stepped out and smiled to see that, in this time of turmoil, her sudden reappearance had barely caused a ripple in the crowds moving past them. The retainers gathered around her, exclaiming about their abrupt disappearance and return.

“Enough,” Mikhail said. “Follow me. Quickly!” He herded the entire group around the next corridor and into a maintenance alcove, where he commanded two of the guards to stand in the entryway to ensure their privacy. “I don’t think this is what your parents had in mind when they gave you this assignment.”

“But you see my point.”

“Only too well.” He removed his jacket. “Take these,” he said as he pulled off his sidearm and holster. He then jerked up his tunic and unbuckled a money belt.

She took the weapon and funds from his hands. He pulled off his shirt and removed the knife sheath from his right arm, then removed his shirt and took off his neck sheath. “You have spent enough time on the drilling field to handle both of these. Wear them at all times.”

She held them awkwardly. "Mikhail, that was on the range."

"You will need to call on your training to separate yourself from the pain you inflict."

"I don't think—"

"It is better not to when defending yourself." He touched her shoulder. "You must be prepared to do whatever it takes to reach Helios."

"No one will know where I am. What danger will I be in?"

"The Babwe will spare no resources when they discover what your destination is. They will use any means necessary to stop you."

"I'll be aboard one tiny ship in the vastness of space. I'll be safe."

"Your shipmates are criminals, and you should not drop your guard around them."

"My well-being is in their best interest. I doubt any harm will come to me."

"You cannot trust your new companions to protect you." He stared directly into her eyes. "Don't take foolish risks because you fear giving offense."

"I'll try." She shook her head.

"You must make it to Free Space. The fate of the entire system is in your hands."

"I won't fail."

"I believe in you. I'm just distraught that I will not be beside you during this dangerous time."

"Thank you. I will miss you all."

Mikhail smiled. "I will be back at your side once you reach Helios. Leave these people at the second place they stop and find legitimate transportation to the Unity home world."

"The second?" Julian questioned.

"Yes, the Babwe might track a ship through all this mess, but unless those smugglers are incompetent, you should have enough of a head start to make it to Helios." He picked up the shoulder bag and held it out to her. "Guard these with your life. You will need them to present the case to the Conclave for justice."

Julian struggled to attach the various weapons to her body without baring too much of her skin to public view, then, solemnly, she took the satchel from Mikhail's hands.

He shook his head before kneeling. Touching his heart, his lips, then his forehead with his fingertips, he said, "I wish you luck, Your Highness, and will pray you receive guidance on your voyage."

Julian placed her right hand on his forehead. "I commend you, Mikhail Bratislava, for your service to me. I expect to see you again soon." She glanced at the rest of the retainers, who stood around them in confusion.

"Listen to me, please. You will continue on your journey without me." She retrieved her scarlet robe from one of her bodyguards and offered it to her cousin. The young woman was the only child of her father's only sister, and this was her first diplomatic posting and first trip off-world. "You get to play me, Harkin. Try not to overdo it."

Her cousin curtsied quickly and drew the cape around herself. "I always wanted to wear this."

"You wouldn't want to do what it takes to get it, believe me," Julian answered. "Off-worlders don't know what it means, but any of our people might approach you for aid. I'd put it in storage after boarding, just to be safe."

"All right."

Julian clapped her hands. "We need to repack my clothes into a single bag."

Her people bent to the task of reducing four suitcases filled with clothes for every possible occasion into one small carrying bag. Julian ruthlessly refused to take more than one set of state attire. "Listen to me," she begged. "I have to fit into a small ship and in the sort of places those smugglers would go."

Harkin nodded. "Besides, I must have something appropriate to wear for formal dining and dancing." She batted her eyes theatrically and tossed her long hair. The small group laughed as the tension broke.

The retainers eventually filled the smallest bag with clothes and a few of her personal effects. "Well, they certainly can't complain about me taking up too much room," Julian joked.

Mikhail scowled at his watch. "We have to leave now if we are going to make our ship." He called one of the bodyguards over. "Ament, you will accompany the princess to the dock and return to the palace after the ship has achieved orbit. Inform her parents of the change of plans." He took hold of the young man's arm and said, "Tell only them. Do not speak of this to anyone else."

"Yes sir," snapped the young sergeant as he straightened to attention.

"Good." Mikhail stared at his royal charge for a long moment before saluting her. At her nod, he rounded up the remainder of the group and led them out of the alcove. They headed toward the waiting liner without a backward glance.

For a long moment Julian watched as her friends and retainers walked down the passage. She wondered if she would ever set eyes on them again. At length, she shook her head to clear it of the negative thoughts.

"Come on," she said to the young man remaining at her side. "I need to get a jacket to cover this gun."

"There is a store that will have everything you need two levels up. There you can get a jacket and other clothes which will work better on board their ship."

Julian pretended to shudder. "You think they will put me to work?" She pointed at a portrait of the royal couple hanging on the corridor wall. "What do you think my father will think of me learning that particular trade?"

The young man blushed and indicated the way to the nearest lift. They were forced to move much slower now that people no longer reflexively made way for her. The crush of beings in the corridors was worsening with every cycle that drew the Babwe fleet nearer.

The shopping concourse was usually a place of bustling commerce. Stalls abounded with exotic products and gifts from across the galaxy. Now, however, most of the shops were sealed as the customers and proprietors had fled.

The travelers' shop Ament led her to was part of the Devadian department store chain. In nearly every civilized

system, this chain provided customers with all sorts of supplies from food and clothes to recorders and weapons. The store was popular in part because it did not only sell goods but offered much of its stock for rent as well as purchase. It even paid cash or offered credit for used goods.

The two of them waited impatiently for the full scan that checked customers for the presence of weapons and credit worthiness before allowing them to enter the shop floor. The store filled a massive space, and they hesitated in the foyer, overwhelmed by the selection.

A floating security robot approached them. "A scan has determined that you possess several weapons. We request that you store them until you are ready to leave the premises. Lockers designed for this use have been provided."

The young bodyguard flashed his wrist unit. "We are authorized to keep our weapons."

The android processed that information for a moment. "Enjoy your shopping experience at Devadian's. You are responsible for any damage resulting from the discharge of your weapons."

"Thank you. We're looking for clothes. Please direct us," Ament commanded the security robot.

"Aisles twenty-six through forty-nine on the second level."

The shop was filled with people trying to sell whatever possessions they could so they could afford passage out of the system. Julian and Ament had to force their way to the second level, where there were few shoppers.

The variety of outfits was astounding. The racks were filled with clothes ranging from formal eveningwear to full-body armor. Julian shook her head at the selection. "Ament, I only need basic spacer's attire. We need to stick to simple and functional."

"Excellent idea, Your...I mean ma'am." He blushed at his near slip and then pointed to the shelves of black and gray trousers and tunics made from a grime-resistant material. "Would those work?"

"Good eye. Now to find my size." She quickly sorted through the piles until she came up with a set that fit her tall



frame. Without bothering to find a dressing room, she changed into them there in the aisle. With Ament's help, she then made sure the money belt and knives were hidden but accessible.

At her bodyguard's suggestion, she chose a second set and a rucksack into which she transferred her other clothes. She then stuffed the holstered weapon into the bottom of the pack.

"Uh, ma'am? Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I don't really want to wave it in their faces. Better it be my little secret."

"But you need protection."

"I'll keep the blades on me."

"If you insist."

"I do. Now I need something better than these shoes. Do you see boots anywhere?"

The two of them wandered over to another section. They had to search for a while to find ones made to keep out the chill of the metal deck plates that were also available in her size. After lacing them up, she began the search for a coat. Not knowing how cold the ship would be kept or what sort of planet she'd find herself on, she dithered over several different styles. Finally, she decided on one that was warm and waterproof. Her choice was a forest-green jacket woven from *cashusa* fur that covered her to her knees.

"Should you get a hat, Your Highness?" Ament asked.

"No, the coat and gloves should offer enough protection."

Julian turned to look at her reflection in the glass. "I think this should do it. Let's pay and get out of here."

At the counter, Ament slid across a platinum credit chip to pay for the articles. He held out the color-faded card to her. "There is still some credit left, but you should take it. It is untraceable."

Accepting the card, Julian shouldered her bag. "Thank you. What now?" she asked as she followed him out of the store.

"I think you should go on board with a full belly. Who knows if you will be able to get anything edible on their ship."

Julian laughed at his fears. "It will do my waistline good not to have to contend with the *Queen B's* cuisine."

“In any event, with such a small crew they might have tasks to perform well into the night in preparation for getting into hyperspace. You might not be fed tonight.” He led the way to one of the few food stands still open and pointed out several recommendations.

“Good point.” She followed him in and ordered a spicy sauce on flat noodles, then looked for a place to sit.

“There won’t be anyplace,” Ament said, standing at her shoulder. “‘Portable’ at this level on the station means ‘Get away from my store to eat it.’” He gestured toward the wall. “How about we go there?”

She looked dubiously at a sign warning against vagrancy. “Will we be picked up for loitering?”

“I think the security forces have enough to do with managing the crowds. We should be safe.”

She followed him over and leaned against the metal plate, where she slurped up her dinner, mumbling appreciatively. “This is really good.”

“It’s the Riessie spices. My mom can do wonders with them.” He blushed. “I’m sorry, Your Highness, I shouldn’t have said that. You have enough to worry about without hearing about my parents.”

“Nonsense. In fact, someday you’re going to take me someplace where I can try some of those spices.” Julian grinned at him. “In a perfect world, I’d get you to convince your mother to give me some of her recipes, but we shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves.”

Ament swallowed and dropped his head to stare at the floor. In silent understanding, Julian patted his arm. Crumpling up her containers, she stepped away from the wall.

“What now?”

“We should head to their ship. There will be many desperate people between here and there.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

After dumping their trash, they left the shopping concourse and headed to the docks, where masses of stranded families and panicking merchants filled the corridors. As Ament had

imagined, their progress was difficult here. Feeling quite bruised from the jostling crowds, they finally reached the dock area and showed their identification to the officers at the doors. Only ticketed passengers and crew were allowed past that point. Julian gave a relieved sigh as they were waved through. Captain Tices had listed her on the manifest, and they slipped through the barricaded entryway to search for the ship that would take her to safety.