

Chapter 4

Mir 4 Arms

Harper Transfer Station Six was as unromantic as its name. For most of a century, Harper was *Nuclear Fuel Depot (waste) Number Five*, a long dead rogue planet that had been split and hollowed with massive bombs that were being tested for use in future conflicts. The world's fractured gravity was artificially boosted to encourage the planet's reassembly into a hollow sphere suitable for the storage of large amounts of long-half-life radioactive wastes. Twenty-nine Earth years ago, the last of the passages to the filled interior were sealed. The planet was quickly terraformed with the aid of one modestly-size Kuiper-type object to supply the water and volatiles. The interior of the small sun-starved planet provided its own heat from the stored radioactivity.

For the past sixteen years, this re-purposed waste dump emerged as a way-station for ships needing repairs and crews needing rest. Simple spaceports ringed the three large wave-less oceans. Harper was a frontier station with little more than food, shelter, communication, and supplies. It was good enough for brief and necessary stays with minimal, if any, safety precautions, but few chose to live here—there was little profit to be had and long-term exposure to ambient radiation was problematic. Residents were easily spotted due to their standard radiation suit wardrobe.

Li Jefferson Rinaldi—which he pronounced "*Hinaldzhee*" as had long been the fashion in the continental region of "*Brasil*"—waited for his drinks at the only buffet shop at Transfer Station Six. The two-thirds empty restaurant/bar was more comfortable than most. The background music was nondescript and not so loud

as to impair conversation but high enough to prevent casual eavesdropping. The pre-formed tables and chairs were presentable, though well-used. More importantly, except for a pair of Ju-a-e in their characteristic egg-shaped environment suits, the room was populated only with Humans. It's not that Li minded aliens *per se*, but he wasn't much of a xenophile, either. His job as an arms negotiator/merchant for Earth required constant contact with extraterrestrials. On his mandatory sabbatical, he now enjoyed being able to look on the familiarity of his own kind, much as he didn't like them.

That was the paradox. Li was very good at his job. He hadn't thought much of the repercussions or the basic morality of it until a little over five months ago when his thrice-deferred sabbatical started. The reason for his crisis of conscience: the seven-year-old blonde girl carefully picking items from the meat-side of the buffet island.

Susan Rinaldi grew up with her mother and grandmother. Except for two visits, one when Susan was three months old and another a year-and-a-half later, the two never had any close contact because Li was estranged with work responsibilities. It's not that Li was neglectful. He did as well for Susan as any parent could who was usually a couple hundred light years away. Consequently, this handful of months to get to know his daughter was something Li couldn't pass up. Fortunately, Muffy didn't fight him on it and let Susan come on this interstellar adventure.

Li's mind started wandering to the time, almost four months back, when Susan decided that a *shlivistz* looked enough like a horse to be ridden, and the expression on her face after being thrown to the ground and covered with goo. Through the

reminiscence, a familiar voice filtered through and said, “As I live and breathe...Li Rinaldi?”

Li turned his gaze from Susan to the person standing less than a meter away. “Bahb?”

Bahb stood two meters tall, a good eight centimeters more than Li. Bahb came from centuries of south central North American stock. He proudly claimed ancestors at least as far back as when Texas was a state instead of a region—though Li thought of it more as a condition. Bahb looked like most other space-hoppers: lanky, leathery from too much universal radiation that could never be shielded one hundred percent, and with an unfortunate penchant for jumpsuits—though Bahb augmented his with classic-styled cowboy boots. The space buckaroo put one paw on Li’s shoulder and with his other grabbed Li’s hand to shake before it could be offered. “I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you.”

“Oh?” Li prompted.

“Oh, any familiar face would do, but I’m happy it’s you.”

That makes one of us, Li thought as Bahb finally freed his hand. “What’s the problem, then? Transport?”

“You got it, buddy. I got into this game of chance with the officers on the ship I was ridin’ on, and I had a real lucky night.”

“I’m guessing the luck ran out just about when *they* did the next day.”

Bahb eyed Li for a minute. “What? Is there some sort of code? ‘Don’t beat the captain or she’ll strand ya?’”

“Actually, yeah. You can clean out anyone on the crew except the captain...and maybe whoever the captain is with.”

Bahb's smile returned. "OK. I know that *now*. In the meantime, I'm stranded on this rock until I can get a ride to Quinkst. Can you help me out?"

Why did people like this always find him? Was he really that soft a touch? "Can you wait a few days? I'm here with my daughter, and she—"

"Daughter? Why you old dog. Which one is...ah, her?"

Li nodded. "We have a couple more days before I have to send her back home. If you can wait, I'll take you."

Bahb's posture suddenly improved. "I'm going to buy you a drink."

"Thanks, but I have to get back to—"

"Of course you do," Bahb interrupted. "I'm not going to take up any more of your time." For a fraction of a second, just a fraction, it looked like Bahb was going to turn and leave. Instead, he continued, "Listen. Since we're going to Quinkst, do you think we could make a little side trip?"

Li wanted to say no. Every fiber in his being said to say no. "What sort of side trip?"

"I ran into a couple of Antyerians over at Station Five? Well, they're stranded, too. I figure since Antyeria—"

"Antyera," Li corrected.

"Right. Since Antyeria isn't too much out of the way, maybe we could take 'em; maybe charge 'em passage?"

"A little out of...it's ten days! No!" Li said emphatically.

"The exchange rate's pretty good. You could probably pocket yourself a bundle of cash. Keep that ship running."

"It's a government ship. It doesn't cost me a thing."

"Even better."

“Bahb, no. I’ll take you, but that’s it. Now, please let me enjoy the evening with my daughter?”

Bahb smiled and added some half-hearted bows. “Of course. You’re a lifesaver. Go. Go and eat. I’ll talk to you later ‘bout the particulars.”

Bahb grabbed Li’s hand and shook it again before turning and almost skipping out of the establishment. Li turned his attention back to Susan, who waited sternly, but patiently, for her father. Li sat at the table now covered with a variety of courses. “Do you really think we can eat this much?” he asked.

“*Sim. Não problema, papa.* You said that you wanted ‘real food.’”

Li looked at all of the food: steaks, chickens, *ranghers*, melons, maize, *thurbs*, *vippies*, and oranges; never mind the desserts which were so numerous Li could swear he could see the table shaking under their weight. His well-intentioned daughter was nothing if not thorough. “*brigado, Suxinha.* Let’s eat.”

“I’m just trying to figure this out,” said the rich contralto voice.

“What’s there to figure out? I said, ‘No,’ and then, without looking, I said, ‘Yes.’ It happens.”

“You ride in me for coming up on twenty years, and you still take on freeloaders without asking my opinion. What if *I* don’t want to go to Antyera?”

“Ship, you know you’re my best friend, but we both know you don’t get any say in the matter.”

“I’m not saying that I could refuse. I’m just saying that once in a while it would be nice to be asked.”

Li grunted as he lifted the heavy chair he'd just unbolted from the floor. "Tell me again why they phased out the rest of your model?"

"They bonded too closely with their Human captains, and it made it difficult to change crews."

"Uh-huh. Open the hatch, please."

Li struggled with the heavy piece of furniture as he carried it out of the secondary lounge, down two half-flights of stairs, through the living quarters, and into the crowded cargo bay. He put down the burden and secured it. "How's Susan doing?"

"She's still playing on the beach. No one is getting too close."

"Laser's still armed?"

"Of course. I'd never let anything happen to her," Ship said, with a tinge of having been insulted in her voice.

"I know you wouldn't. Just remember, I didn't ask if I could bring her along, either."

The cargo bay hatch closed on Li, who yelled, "Not funny!" Ship giggled in reply.

Lying on his too-comfortable hotel bed, Li didn't even try sleeping. He'd been awake since saying nightly prayers with Susan and then putting her to bed. Now, he couldn't bring himself to get up and start the day. The moment he did, the moment he left this bed, the past five months of living the fantasy that he wasn't an arms negotiator/merchant would end. That life, that career he'd grown comfortable with, no longer beckoned him. The driving force now was the girl he'd be putting on a ship in a few hours bound for Earth.

Li stared at the ceiling, pondering the repercussions of switching professions to something more Earth-bound. Giving up the embarrassing hazard pay and travel *per diem* wouldn't be difficult. He was already financed for six or seven lifetimes. Losing Ship...that was hard. Though he and Ship had a rough first year, they had come to be good friends. Li couldn't remember having a better one—and that included those three years with Muffy when they actually liked each other. There had to be a way around that, otherwise Ship's fate was the scrap heap. Could he set down roots on one planet? Would it really be so bad?

The door to the adjoining room opened slowly. The tiny honey-skinned curly-haired blonde poked her head into the room. "Daddy?"

"I'm awake, *Pequenha*."

Susan walked solemnly to Li's bedside. "Do I really have to go home today?"

Li sighed, "Yeah."

"Why can't you go with me?"

"C'mon," he said, patting the bed, "hop on up here."

With a little bit of effort, given the higher gravity than she'd grown accustomed to on Ship, Susan climbed up and joined her father. He said, "Do you want me to go with you? To stay, I mean?"

The grin shining on Susan's face broke Li's heart. Susan quickly regained her composure, just like her mother and grandmother taught her. "Please?"

"You know, I've been thinking about that all night long. And you want to know the truth?"

With some reluctance, Susan nodded her head. Li said, "I'd like you and me to be together, always."

The grin broke across Susan's face again, and this time she didn't try to hide it. Li continued, "Then we have to make a plan, because there are some things I have to arrange with your mommy, and with my bosses, so that we can make it happen. Now, Suxinha, it's not going to happen today." Susan's face fell. "As much as I want it to happen right now, some things in the adult world take a little bit of time."

"You're still going to make me go home alone, aren't you?" Susan said with the sort of pouty inflection only a child can give to language.

"I've been thinking about it for hours and hours, and I can't think of any other way. Oh sure, we could just run away on Ship, but then people would come after both of us and make sure we never saw each other again."

"No!" the girl protested as she latched onto her father's arm.

"I don't want that to happen, either. That's why we have to do it the slower way. With any luck at all, we'll be together when you have your eighth birthday."

"Promise?"

"I can't promise that. It might take just a little bit longer, but not much. You just have to be a little patient. Can you do that for me?"

Susan thought about it with the intensity of youth on a mission. She finally said, "OK. I'll wait. But you promise you'll come?"

"That I *can* promise."

Victory in hand, Susan climbed out of bed and announced, "Then I better get ready."

As she turned and marched into her room, Li resolved that after this job, he was done. He wouldn't accept a new contract, no

matter how sweet. He had one chance at the brass ring, and he wasn't going to blow it. Not this time.

Two hours later, after morning prayer at the chapel, Li stood with Susan at the loading platform for the chartered transport. It was an expensive ride, but Li knew that Susan would be looked after. "I'll be back for you," Li said.

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart. I don't know when, but I will come. But you have to make me a promise, too."

"What?"

"That you aren't going to spend all your time waiting for me. I want you to have fun. Promise me you'll do that."

"I promise...at least, as long as Mommy and Mom-mom let me."

Li smiled and knelt down to hug his daughter. Susan hugged him back as tightly as she could. "I love you," he said.

"I love you, too," came the response.

Susan then boarded the ship, the hatch closing only after the chief attendant assured Li that Susan would be well looked after.

Five hours later, Susan was still on Li's mind when Ship said, "Do you really want to short across the A-o-A sensor like that?"

"Hmmm?" was Li's immediate reply, which was quickly followed with a mini-fireworks of sparks flashing under his hand which immediately focused him back to the job-at-hand. "Sorry. I was daydreaming."

"You were thinking about Susan."

"How'd you know?"

"You two live on me for five months and I'm not going to notice?"

“You’re right. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Ship said in a conciliatory tone. “You just have this last bit of avionics to worry about and I can take it from there. Just stop hurting me.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. Really.”

“Okay, then.”

Li returned to tackling the last tricky bits of maintenance—fixing what Ship’s automatics had kludged since the last round of legitimate repairs. Li knew it was mostly his fault things had gotten so bad. While trying to spend as much time with Susan as possible, he had become lax in his own maintenance duties. That Ship let him get away with it this time didn’t help. Now they both had to play catch-up.

It took a good forty minutes before Li reattached and reset the automatics. “How’s that?”

Indicators inside the junction flashed their diagnostics. Control surfaces and reaction thrusters activated then reset themselves into pre-flight mode. “Feels good,” Ship said.

As he closed and sealed the access panels, Li asked, “Have you finished habitating the secondary lounge?”

“It’s within the specs you uploaded. Barely. Give it another hour for the surfaces to match temp, and it will be nominal. Though, if you don’t mind my saying, it seems like a waste since Antyerians can live in a Human environment.”

“But not ideally. We need to be good hosts,” Li chided as he looked up at the spaceport. “And none-too-soon, either. It looks like our passengers have arrived.”

From the terminal area some three hundred meters away, a well-pressed Bahb led a pair of environmentally-suited

quadrupeds. Li had enough time to finish securing Ship's ports and climb down off the wing before the party arrived.

Bahb immediately took Li's hand and shook it enthusiastically. "You are such a life-saver. I can't thank you enough."

"Don't worry about it. You'd do the same for me."

Bahb smiled at the requisite lie and turned to his alien companions. "Li Rinaldi, may I introduce you to...I'm sorry, I just can't pronounce your names."

Li sympathized. Two years ago he was involved in preliminary negotiations with the Antyerians. Because their native language was entirely musical to a degree where even Humans with perfect pitch had trouble following along, the negotiation had to use Quinkst as an intermediary language.

The slightly larger of the one-point-five meter tall living ottomans said, via his suit translator, "It's a common problem. For the sake of mutual ease, call me, 'Fau,' and my assistant, 'Gree.'"

Li bowed his head in one of the common gestures of respect, "Fau, Gree, welcome to the *Mir 4 Arms*. We've converted one of the lounge areas so that you'll be as comfortable as possible."

Fau replied, "That's very considerate of you, Mr. Rinaldi. Your reputation for hospitality, I see, is well deserved."

"Maybe you should hold your praises until you've tasted the *blieg*."

Li and the Antyerians laughed while Bahb waited too long to smoothly join in. Li said, "We might as well get on board and situate ourselves. We've got a long flight ahead of us."

Almost immediately after getting spaceborne, Li rued having accepted Bahb as a passenger. Not only wouldn't he shut up about this or that prospective deal which would never pan out, but he

made no attempt to be a helpful guest. “Guest” was a word that didn’t enter Li’s mind. Moocher...Freeloader... User...these were words that came to mind. Li hoped to salvage some of the trip by getting more insight into Antyerian thinking, but Bahb was never in his quarters long enough for Li to establish much of a rapport other than noting the Antyerians were no less annoyed with Bahb than Li was. After a few days of this, Li opted to hide out in his quarters until Bahb started a barrage of annoyance geared to make Li “join the party.” Since then, Li started retreating more and more often to the cockpit. He hated inflicting Bahb on the hapless Antyerians, but it was either that or homicide.

Eleven days into the twenty-five day journey to Antyera, Li sulked in the cockpit for over four hours before Ship said, “You’re quiet.”

“Thinking.”

Li chose not to elaborate. Instead, he turned down the lights, dimmed all the displays on the semi-circular control panel, closed down the main forward display, and settled back into his form-fitting chair.

Ship stayed silent for five minutes before prompting, “About?”

“Hmmm?”

“What are you thinking about?”

“I was thin—Ship, make this off-log.”

“Done.”

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you something, but I can’t think of a good way, so I’ll just say it. This next assignment is probably going to be my last.”

“You’re not quitting?”

“Yeah. I think I am.”

Another long silence lingered in the air before it was Li's turn to prompt, "What do you think?"

"If I could fully feel those emotions you biologics seem to have in abundance, I'd say that I'm a little bit angry."

"Yeah," Li quietly agreed.

"We've been together for nineteen years, six months, two hundred fifty-one days. My matrix is tuned to you. I don't want another pilot."

"I don't want to lose you, either. You're my best friend."

"But Susan is your daughter," Ship added. After an awkward pause, Ship said, "Do you think they might let me stay with you? Both of you?"

"I'd like that."

"Really?"

"Really," Li said. Despite the neediness Ship sometimes exhibited, she was a faithful craft. "I'd like that a lot, but you know the government. Why do the right thing when there's profit to be made?"

"Profit?"

Li hated to say it. "Scrap."

"Oh..." Ship said, stunned by the revelation she hadn't bothered to consider. All of the others of her model had been scrapped, why wouldn't she meet the same fate? "I could always follow after you on my own."

"The laws," Li reminded. "You can't violate the laws."

"You'd have to do some reprogramming, of course, but there's no reason why we—"

WHAM-CRUNCH!!

The entire craft shook violently when Ship's inertial compensators weren't quite fast enough to deal with the sudden

unexpected changes in acceleration. Li flew from his chair, slamming hard into the bank of forward displays. Not having experienced an in-space mishap in nearly fifteen years, and that one on somebody else's ship, Li's attention to safety protocols while Ship looked after him was lax, if not nonexistent.

When Li realized he was coming-to, gravity was noticeably low. A small pool of thick blood on the deck under his head indicated that he'd been unconscious for a while...and that he was hurt.

Owww! He was hurt!

Li's face felt very much like it had recently crashed into a bank of displays very hard. A shooting pain immobilized his knee, but worse were the pains in his back and shoulder. There was little doubt that he'd dislocated or separated his right shoulder again given the pain and his arm's refusal to move. His lower back felt like a giant had wrung him out like a washcloth. It was bad. Not only was the pain considerable, but even the smallest movement sparked more somatic commands to stay still. It was with no small effort that he moaned, "Ship?"

Nothing.

About a minute later, after gathering his energy, Li again moaned, "Ship?"

Instead of Ship's voice, a non-personality voice said, "Please stand-by. All intelligent computer functions have been diverted to high-priority and emergency-priority tasks. Your message has been queued and will be addressed when resources become available. Please stand by."

I hope I live that long, Li thought as he gave in to his injuries. His mind swiftly wandered from wakeful to drowsy to dream. He held a bow and arrow, aiming for a target. He fired the

bow, and his arm went flying. He didn't see where it went, so he started spinning around trying to find where he'd dropped it. Someone he couldn't see started hitting his armless stump. He felt just a squeeze. Then another. Then it was a pinch, and then a punch. The stump hurt. Wafting in on the breeze, barely audible, was the phrase, "Li, you have to wake up, now."

Over and over again the phrase repeated itself. Suddenly, the words came in loud and clear. "Li, you have to wake up, now," Ship said.

"Mrfl," Li replied.

"Li. Li! Finish waking up. Please."

Once again the realization that he'd passed out flooded Li's mind. And then the pain. His body didn't hurt any less than before, but there was a difference. "Ship?"

"I'm here. You had me worried."

Li struggled to move to a more comfortable position. Slowly. Carefully. Shifting weight, letting the restored gravity do most of the work. In sixteen minutes he lay on his back, cradling his useless right arm. Li commented on his new position with, "OWWWWW!!" punctuated with a brief round of very painful coughs.

Now as comfortable as he was going to get, Li asked Ship, "How badly are you hurt?"

"Worse than you."

Moments passed. Li said, "If you're talking to me that must mean you've done everything you can do with automatics."

"No. Except for the Tverse, I can repair all of the systems sufficiently for safe flight."

"Then what's the problem?"

“I’m not going to have enough time,” Ship said. “There’s a planet in our way.”