

Ring Sledder

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6641 words

"You can't do this to me!"

A uniformed officer dragged Renegade Aris out of her apartment, cuffed and screaming. He wore the uniform of the Interplanetary Marshal, Saturn Division. The officer known as Julian Nace held his captive in a vise-like grip about her upper arm, refusing to let go as she struggled furiously for escape.

"I have my rights!" Aris shouted at him. Violently, she jerked away from him and managed to free herself momentarily. She ran from him, but only clumsily, her balance thrown off by the restraints binding her wrists.

Nace caught her by the mahogany braid that hung down her back and pulled her roughly to his side. "Running will only make your time with us more unpleasant," he assured her.

"You can't do this!" she seemed almost to beg. "I have a race in two days! They won't let me compete if I'm out on bond!"

"That's your problem, miss," Nace told her. "If only you had been a good citizen and stayed out of trouble, you wouldn't be in this mess now, now would you?"

Nace made no effort to camouflage her arrest as he led her down the long passageways to the docking bay. Indeed, the red she wore contrasted sharply with the black uniform and carbon black hair of her captor, making them a striking and obvious pair.

The docking bay he led her to thronged with people at all hours of the Titan day or night for this was the main docking bay of the capital at Rhea City, the largest colonial city in the Saturn system. All eyes turned to watch their progress across the brightly lit floor.

Unknowingly, Nace led her past the docking area for her own racing sled as he headed toward the government vehicle.

Aris saw it though and called to her crew leader. "Ben! Please--" She

fought his grasp again then desperately turned back to her crew. "Let go! Ben!"

Aris voice echoed in the vast chamber hauntingly, and Ben at first did not know from where the sound came. Soon though he focused on the receding source and came with half her crew as if to their racer's rescue. His blue eyes blazed with a cold fire's light.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, approaching them. When he got no answer, he took Nace's arm and drew him to a halt.

"Ben--"

"What's going on here?"

"Renegade Aris is under arrest for aiding the rebellion, sir. If you wish to post bail, it'll have to wait until after she's been processed at the station."

Nace turned away and again headed toward the shuttle.

Angrily, and slightly bewildered, Ben put himself between Nace and the shuttle and again questioned him.

"Arrest? There's no rebellion on Titan."

"Quite true. I was referring to the rebellion on Europa, however."

"Europa?! That's preposterous! Europa's not even in this system. It's hundred of millions of miles away. Billions! How could she be involved?"

In annoyance, Nace withdrew from his jacket a handful of paper pamphlets. The words printed on its face cried for the readers to rebel against the "tyranny" that controlled them. "We found these in her possession. She's being taken in for questioning."

"Ben, don't let them do this to me!" Aris cried to him desperately. "They'll kill me, just like they killed Tri! Please! Don't let them kill me, too!"

"That's enough, missy," Nace growled. "Come along now." The officer

turned, again heading toward the shuttle. Already they could here the engines beginning to fire, preparing to disembark with their prisoner.

"Stop!" Ben called to them once more.

Nace turned back to him impatiently. "What now?" he asked almost under his breath.

"Those can't be hers. I know Aris too well. She wouldn't be involved in something like this. Have you even asked her? Tell him, Aris. Tell them they aren't yours. They'll believe you. Tell them!"

Aris' face was a mask, unreadable. At last, she could only gaze at her crew leader sadly.

"Tell them!"

"I can't, Ben. It'd serve no purpose now. Lying would not get me free."

Ben was stunned by her words. He stared at her uncomprehending. "Why?"

Disgusted, Nace turned back to the still waiting shuttle. This time Ben did not try to stop them.

Ben did not have to this time. Another officer returned from Aris' apartment, carrying in his arms a boxful of the rebel papers. He wore an expectant, excited look on his face. "We found more in there, sir. What should we do with it all?"

"Gather everything up and bring it back to the station on the next shuttle. If there's more, we'll never fit it all on here."

"Right."

"Ben?" Aris called to him again, green eyes pleading.

Stoically, Ben refused to give up on his sledder. Whatever she'd done, he knew there had to be a reason. A damn good one. "What gives you the right to do this to her? She's a champion ring sledder. You can't just treat her like any common criminal. Where's your warrant? I want to see it now."

"We don't need a warrant now that we have proof," Nace told him haughtily,

and deliberately incorrectly. "As I said before, you'll have to go through the proper channels if you want to see your sledder free. I'll accept no more delays!"

Ben watched as the officer dragged Aris up the stairs roughly, and thrust her inside and out of sight, the airlock clicking softly into place behind them. Angrily, he shouted at any who would listen. "They can't do this! You have rights! Don't worry, Sledder!" His words were drowned out by the strengthening roar of the shuttle's engines as it lifted off the bay and floated out into the waiting darkness.

Inside, Nace removed Aris' cuffs as she sank gratefully into a chair behind the pilot, still well out of sight of anyone in the bay.

"You played that well, Sledder."

"You gave me little choice in the matter," she shot back. "You better make sure I come out of this venture alive. I'm going to leave your full name and everything I know about you in my journals so everyone will know who got me killed." She laughed. "My fans may riot!"

"If you play it right, it won't fail. But next time," he cautioned, "try not to be so over-dramatic."

"I didn't think I was being over-dramatic. Besides, Ben believed me . . ."

Aris rubbed the soreness out of her wrists when Ben saw her walk free at the Marshal headquarters. When his eyes fell upon her he could hardly believe she had only been there for six hours. Her face was ashen, and she clutched one arm protectively around her rib cage. And there was a limp he had never noticed before.

She watched the man behind the counter warily as he led her through the motions of her release. Her eyes seemed less alive than before as they darted fearfully to anything that moved. She trembled, hardly able to write her own

name recognizably.

"Bout time," she growled recklessly at the officer when he pushed her personal effects to her over the countertop. "When do I get the rest of the stuff from my room back?"

"When they're no longer of any use to us."

"When will that be?"

The officer measured her coldly. "Maybe never."

Angrily, Aris jerked her chronograph away from the clerk, immediately regretting it. Ben was at her side in an instant, painfully holding her on her feet. With a last angry glance at the officer, "Take me out of here. I want to go home."

Ben nodded and led her to the craft he had brought with him, her now retired champion sled.

Aris smiled softly when she saw it. "Thank you," she murmured.

"I thought it might make you feel better, and serve to remind everyone just who you are."

Normally, a sled could carry only one person, but after its final competition, Aris had had this sled modified to carry an additional passenger, as the powerful engines she used in competition were no longer necessary. Aris climbed painfully into the passenger seat and waited for Ben to join her inside.

"You aren't going to pilot it yourself?"

Aris shook her head gingerly. "Fly it, Ben."

Ben sighed and climbed in front of her and took the controls, setting the door mechanism to close and seal.

"Sled Alpha Romeo Two requesting clearance for departure. Sled Alpha Romeo Two clearance for departure, over."

There was a crackling pause over the comm while Aris and Ben strapped

themselves securely in their seats. Then, "Sled Alpha Romeo Two, clearance for departure granted through bay door One. Vector 1-6-2 mark 2-3 clear for 30,000 kilometers then clear for Titan, over."

"We copy that, Control," Ben responded formally, firing up the engines and signaling for departure. "Alpha Romeo Two departing Bay Door One, setting vector 1-6-2 mark 2-3 for 30,000 k-m." Ben fired the first stage thrusters until the sled hovered several feet off the floor of the bay. The secondary thrusters guided them at 20 kph until they had cleared the bay. Only then did he fire the main thrusters, shooting them off into open space.

Aris sat silently a long while, blankly watching the glowing lights on the sleds' control panel.

"You're going the wrong way," she observed.

"I know."

"Why?" She tore her eyes from the panel and looked at him almost suspiciously.

"We aren't going back until you talk to me. You know something about what's going on. And I want to know about it."

"If I'd known you were going to interrogate me, too, I'd have stayed at the station. At least I was beginning to get used to their methods."

Ben was silent for a long moment, then, "Are you going to be alright?"

"Sure, oh, sure!" she laughed bitterly. "After my ribs heal. When I forget that I will have to miss the greatest race of my life. After I find out exactly who killed Dimitri and make them pay. Sure, I'll be alright eventually."

"It's not my fault, Aris."

She was quiet. "I know. I'm sorry. I've trained all my life for this race, Ben. And now . . ." She shook her head in bewilderment. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"But why, Aris? Why get involved with the rebels now? I don't understand--"

"I have a duty, Ben. This corrupt government killed my brother, because he stood up for what he believed in. I can do no less than continue what he started."

"But, Aris, you didn't--"

"I don't want to talk about it anymore, Ben!"

They were both silent until they were in orbit around Titan and preparing to enter the atmosphere. "There's something I want you to do for me, Ben." She noticed his hesitation, so she added, "And don't worry, its nothing illegal."

He relaxed visibly. "Anything, Aris."

"I want all my sleds under guard. I want someone watching them at all hours of the day. And I want them searched, for bugs, bombs, or anything unfriendly. And if anyone besides the crew goes near it, I want their names and I want the sleds searched again for anything at all untoward."

"Okay, Aris. If that's what you want."

"It is."

Ben fell silent then. Once on Titan, Aris hung around only long enough to see her sled safely ensconced in its hanger. Alone and free, she returned gratefully to her apartment.

The magnetic strip on her identi-tag clipped to her jacket pocket opened the door to her room. Darkness greeted her coldly, nearby objects lit dimly by the light from the passageway.

Aris paused uncomfortably in the doorway, silhouetted against the brightness without. Then, the sensation seemed to pass and she let the door slide shut behind her. Concealed in darkness, she withdrew from her jacket a small pistol, a classic, heirloom piece her father had left her, and pointed it



where she knew the intruder to be.

"Lights."

It was barely a whisper, but the lights came up, revealing a young man slouched leisurely on her couch. He opened his eyes when the lights came up, but he didn't move.

"Greetings, Sledder."

Aris relaxed and finally put the pistol back inside her jacket.

"What would they do to you if they knew you had that thing?"

"Nothing," she told him curtly. "It's registered and legal, even with my present status.

After all, I'm not accused of killing anyone.

"Still, it seems unlikely that they didn't keep it."

"I kept a spare in my sled. Apparently for good reason."

She paused, then, "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

"Sledders don't see each other before a race."

"Ah, but you are disqualified."

Aris went into her kitchen area and poured herself a drink. "Have you come for sledding secrets then? Do you think I'll never use them again?"

"Hardly. Even I must admit that you're too good a sledder to give up on so easily."

"Hmmm."

He watched her take a sip of her drink, noticing that she did not offer him any. "So, I suppose you're thinking, 'What does Jeff Summers want with Renegade Aris if it isn't sledding secrets?'"

"No, I wasn't really thinking that. I was asking myself what right you had to, shall I say, invite yourself in?"

"I have a proposition for you, Aris."

"Do you?"

"Are you willing to hear me out?"

"Tell me first what this 'proposition' will do for me."

His grey eyes danced. "It will get the charges against you dropped so you can sled in this race."

"Really? A rival sledder is going to help his competition get back in the race! What's in it for you?"

"Nothing for me personally, but for the Cause."

Aris sank into a chair and studied him over the rim of her glass. Mouse blonde hair hung over one eye, giving him a boyish, piratical look about him. Finally, she tilted her head in consideration and spoke aloud, "Security, identify Aris, Renegade, code Alpha Romeo Delta 3-7-14-5 Omega. Voice verification."

"Aris, Renegade, code and voice recognized."

"This conversation is to be erased, from the time I entered the apartment until the time that Jeff Summers leaves. No back-up files are to be kept, and no part of it may be transmitted to any other location, for storage or pick-up. Alter code in the pre-specified pattern for future use. Verify."

The computer paused briefly. "Verified."

Aris turned back to her "guest." She narrowed her eyes. "Tell me more about this Cause of yours, and what it is you want me to do for it."

"We've been shipping supplies through the games. Some of the events are really useless to us, but the ring sledding, that is the most useful of all. Hardly anyone notices one more ring particle appearing and disappearing, not even with the new tracking systems. We've been shipping deuterium through there for months now, using any ship we can that travels through the ring plane. We want you to help us."

"Me?"

"Yes. We need the best pilots in this system on our side. We want this to

be your first assignment."

She considered him thoughtfully. "How would this effect my company profits. We mine deuterium, you know."

"We know all about your late father's company, and we buy most of our deuterium from your mines. Without the standard shipping fees, we can even improve your profits."

"What about the race?"

Jeff laughed. "A sledder to the last! It won't interfere with the race. You won't even have to slow down to drop the shipment. This is the only way we've found to get the deuterium safely off Titan. And without the Titan mines, we'd have to man our own station on the Uranian moons. All the accessible deuterium has already been mined from the Jovian moons. In 400 years, the Saturnian system will have the same problem."

"What about the weight?"

"The race places constraints on the size of the shipments we can transport, so the weight will be minimal, easily compensated for. We will provide you with the exact information later, closer to raceday. That's if you accept our offer?"

Aris paused as if to consider him, then nodded. "You have yourself another sledder."

Jeff smiled triumphantly. "I'd best be going, before someone gets suspicious." He patted her on the arm causing her to wince.

"Sorry."

Then she was alone.

Aris relaxed, relieved that she was finally, truly by herself. Then she stretched luxuriously, her sigh of contentment becoming one of exhaustion. "Now what have you gotten yourself into, Renegade?" she asked of herself aloud.

"Computer, send a message to Julian Nace at the Saturn Station. Tell him

I'll challenge him to a game of chess whenever he feels up to it. Tell him my first move is the queen's knight . . ."

Titan dawn rose coldly over the horizon two days later as racers scurried about the bay making the final preparations for their sleds and themselves. A dozen ships like metal wedges littered the bay floor, swarming specks climbed in and out and over each one.

Aris worked near her own sled, polishing the outer surface, rubbing away the mangled scratches so characteristic of ring sledding. Aris paid no attention at first to the flash of color she saw out of the corner of her eye, a flash of her crew's working color. The voice, though, brought her attention to him.

"I've been waiting to hear from you. Your last message was rather cryptic."

Aris ran her hands over the sled's finish to test for smoothness, trying not to look surprised by the other's presence. She was glad he was well disguised. She had hardly recognized him. "You took your time in answering it."

"I'd have contacted you sooner, but you were being watched. This was the first time I was able to get close to you."

Nace took the polish from her and bent himself to his work as he had seen her do it. He wore the blue of a crewteam member, the red insignia on the collar marking him as a member of her crew.

Aris watched his handiwork silently for a while. Then she pointed to a rough spot and spoke again. "My message was cryptic with good reason, as you've discovered."

"How are your bruises healing?"

She laughed. "Only a little soreness left in my ribs," she joked. "I

really hated making Ben think I'd been hurt like that, he's always so concerned-- But what's done is done. He'll forgive me eventually."

"So the shipment is on?" Nace continued when she nodded. "Who else is involved?"

"Jeff Summers for one, and most of his crew as far as I can tell. He's implicated some of the other sledders, though none by name. It's clear that Summers is in charge of this stage of the operation. They don't completely trust me yet, though, so I have to watch my step."

"Might they give you a bum load to test your loyalty?"

"I don't think so. The deuterium they're shipping is needed far too much for them to waste a good run on. They're only giving me a small load so, in case I turn, the rebels can still survive without it, but they're pretty convinced that they can outrun any police vehicle."

"They may be right."

Aris shook her head, and directed him to move to another spot on the sled. "Their sleds aren't nearly as fast as many of the ones I've seen. The only reason they're here is because they're reckless enough to risk the higher speeds in the ring plane. They can't go nearly as fast as mine, designed as it is to make up the difference in plane-time in open space."

"Catching them won't be a problem then?"

"Even if they could outrun you, they'd run out of deuterium for their own engines before they got very far. No, catching them won't be a problem, not the sledders at least. The transfer ship may be a little more difficult, but not impossible."

"How will we know when to move in? Seeing as how we haven't been able to pick-up the shipments before?"

"I programmed the beacons to send you a position on my sled at all times. The polish you're putting on is specially designed to be picked up by the

beacon's new search signal and be sent only to you. You'll know when it's time to move in when I stop acting like I'm in a real race."

Nace opened his mouth to speak, but when his eyes strayed behind her, he stopped and looked away.

Perplexed, Aris turned around only to find Jeff Summers watching her. She turned back to Nace. "Get another of those polishes and someone to help you. I need this sled done today, not next week."

Nace nodded humbly and went off in search of more polish and assistance.

Aris turned her attention back to Jeff Summers. "What can I do for you?"

"I find it strange that you would spend so much time talking with one of your crew. Is something amiss?"

"I don't find it strange at all. After all, I win. Perhaps you ought to consider that it's because my crew has a stake in my victory, too. Whereas, your crew is little better than--" she paused in consideration, "--hired thugs!"

"There's no need to insult me, Aris. I was only concerned for your welfare . . ."

"Well, as you can see, there's no need--"

"But he looks so familiar. I've seen him around here before."

"He's a long-standing member of my crew, of course you've seen him before--"

"No, not in this setting. I can't place him, though."

"It will come to you when you least expect it, I'm sure. Now, what was it you wanted?"

"Whatever members of your crew can't be trusted, get them out of the bay. I'll have my people load your sled, and then you can return to your preparations."

Aris nodded reluctantly. Then she called over her shoulder, "Ben!"

Ben joined her somewhat reluctantly. "Jeff here has something he wants to store on my sled for a little while before the race. I want you to stay and help."

"Aris, are you sure that's such a good idea?"

"Of course. Do whatever he asks within reasonable bounds. You know what to do if things get, shall I say, carried away. Come with me and I'll get someone to help you."

They walked back to the bay doorway where she knew Nace would be waiting. "Ben, I want you to take this man back with you to help out. If anyone asks, his name is--well, John--and he's been a member of my crew for years. He's trustworthy but don't let him do a lot of talking." She turned to Nace. "John, Ben. I know you'll both get along famously. Later."

And then Aris was gone, leaving both men staring at each other in puzzlement.

Aris returned to the bay an hour later, to find it nearly deserted. Sled hatches hung open, their pilots inside making final adjustments to sensitive equipment. The sled crews had gone to find good seats to watch the race. Most of them would have nothing more to do until their racers' sleds were brought back on a salvage ship.

Aris spotted Nace and Ben waiting for her by her sled's control area. She joined them there.

"Well?"

"Taken care of, Aris," Nace assured her. "After everyone left, we switched the load. You now have an empty, lightweight container on board."

"The shipment?"

"In safe keeping."

"Aris, what's going on here?"

Aris glanced at Ben. "I'll have to explain it later, after the race. Ben, is my sled loaded on the transfer ship?"

"Of course."

"Good. I guess you can find yourself a good seat to watch all this on. I'll see you after the race then."

Ben nodded and paused, as if waiting for "John," then he half-shrugged and left the bay.

When he had gone, Aris turned to Nace. "You ought to go, too. If you aren't in position for this, it won't matter how good a job I do."

Nace nodded and turned to leave. "Are you ready?"

"Sure, now go."

He left, and Aris turned on her heel and walked to the transfer ship. The airlock hung open. Just inside the door, a man waited.

"You're the last on board, Ms. Aris. We'll be lifting off in five minutes now."

"Thank you," she responded pleasantly.

Inside, she passed the passengers' seating area and went first to inspect her sled. It hung securely in place, and would strike nothing if it moved in liftoff. Satisfied, she returned to the seating area with the others and strapped herself in. She was aware, as was everyone else of cameras and monitors that followed their every move, artificially masking the voices behind them that analyzed the most innocent of gestures.

Jeff leaned over to her when she was in place for the journey. "Ready?"

Aris glanced around at the others, well aware by their stares who was involved with the rebel shipments, and who was not, and taking mental notes. "Our talking here this close to the race seems a little suspicious," she told him loud enough for the others to hear. "We will have to continue this discussion later, when everything is over. Okay?"



Jeff nodded and leaned back into his seat.

Aris endured the journey silently, preferring her sled to other forms of travel. It seemed to be forever before the engines roared softly behind them, and the jerking motions that accompanied liftoffs. She despised the choppiness of liftoff in larger ships, they had never known the grace of having full control of every part of a vehicle.

She sighed heavily in frustration.

Once out of the bulk of the atmosphere, the transfer ship settled calmly into orbit. The crew onboard ship began to stir and prepare to unload the sleds from the hanger.

Aris activated the magnetic strips in her boots before unstrapping herself from her seat. She rose with the others, walking noisily to her sled. She watched the ship's crew unload it and secured the sled to the bay floor with magnetic strips on the sled's underside similar to the strips on her boots. She thanked the crew and climbed into the sled through the open hatch to make her last preparations before the race.

A single switch lit the control panel, bathing Aris in a soft red glow. Aris pulled her log book from under the seat and began checking the status of each system, highlighting each item as she came to it with the lightpen. The routine check was completed quickly, and even the weight measure checked out with acceptable limits, something that mildly surprised Aris.

The notebook was returned to its place under her seat, and Aris fired up the initial thrusters. She addressed the comm, "Sled Alpha Romeo Three, Race Number 1-7, requesting permission for takeoff, over."

"Alpha Romeo Three, you have permission for takeoff. Please exit through the main bay door, over."

"Copy that, Control. Alpha Romeo Three firing thrusters for takeoff." Aris lifted the sled gently off the bay floor and eased it out of the

transfer's bay. "Alpha Romeo Three clear of the bay, Control."

"We copy that, Aris. May the best sledder win."

"I really would have thought you'd be rooting for one of the gentlemen, Control."

Aris laughed, but didn't wait for an answer. She guided her sled into the starting orbit, five hundred kilometers further out from Titan. There she maintained position and awaited the other racers.

In truth, Aris could not truly see the other sleds leave the transfer's bay and join her in orbit. She could only watch their movements, beamed to her from the watch beacons set up all over the Saturn system, on the video screen before her. Each speck, one by one, emerged from the larger bulk of the transfer ship. Once all the sleds had appeared and began to take their place in starting position, the transfer ship fired thrusters and moved away to watch the spectacle.

A lone white light lit on the control panel, simultaneously a near deafening whine cut through her tranquil silence, signaling the start of the contest.

Aris punched her main thrusters into use, flying out of the starting orbit almost before the others had time to register that it had begun. Even once moving, they could not hope to catch up to her in open space.

The mass of Saturn loomed ahead of her. On her panel she narrowed in on the ring plane, her tiny onboard computer found three acceptable avenues of travel. Each ring lane was clear of most large debris, but the outer lane seemed less populated by the chip size debris that could punch a hole right through her sled's skin. With her headstart and more powerful engines, even the extra distance could be made up. Already, she could tell from the monitor that the other sleds had made their decisions and were heading for the nearer lanes.

A short noisy signal indicated she had entered the ring plane. One orbit was all she needed and, she had already covered several thousand miles of orbit before the others entered the plane. Behind her, one sled, then a second, were crippled by orbital debris.

"Careless," she murmured to herself.

"So, the Renegade lives after all!" Nace's voice echoed in the hollow shell of her sled, startling her.

"You'll get me killed," she told him, only half in jest. "You're dividing my concentration."

"You'll live," he laughed. "I have utter confidence in your ability to stay alive."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. I'll remember that in my next life, so I can come back and haunt you."

"Anything happening?"

"I'm not seeing anything that you aren't. Are you sure you ought to be doing this?"

"What?"

"Don't be obtuse. Are you sure we should be talking now? Won't the others hear?"

"No. Marvellous new technology. You're far enough away, the beam we're chatting on is too focused for them to receive."

"Great. Now I've run out of excuses to get rid of you."

"Looks like you're stuck with me."

On her monitor, a spray of large ring debris appeared out of nowhere. Aris jerked her sled out of danger, only just in time to avoid being turned into the proverbial Swiss cheese.

"I hope you like sandwiches."

Thankfully, Nace stayed quiet for the most part after that. Even before

they had passed the sunlit limb of Saturn, five sleds had been lost, four to ring debris, and one presumably to equipment malfunction. Two of the sleds had shipments on them.

Aris managed to stay relatively out of danger, but she knew that some of the sleds relied heavily on visual imagining and they would be lost behind Saturn. She wondered how long it would take these simulation-trained sledders to grasp the concept of no light. They were in the wrong system for visual manoeuvring.

Suddenly, all the visual monitors went black. "Darkside," she said aloud for the benefit of her listener. "Shutting down visual monitors, initiating radio booster. Get ready to clean up."

Aris watched the radio monitors closely, two more sleds vanished in the mire almost as soon as they crossed to darkside. The others were beginning to catch up to her lead. She much preferred the radio boosters to any visual mechanism, but the current rules forbade their use anywhere but on the darkside deep in the rings.

Knowing the nature of ring sledding, probably better than anyone alive, she saw the movement of Jeff Summers' sled as it coasted out of the ring lane he had chosen, and veered off into the lanes of more massive ring debris. Others followed him.

Reluctantly, Aris abandoned the race. "Nace, get my image off the common beacon signal and initiate radio silence. I'll be too close to them for us to continue talking without them overhearing."

"Understood, Sledder. Initiating radio silence."

Aris switched channels to the broadcast of the sledding event. ". . . -stand it! She just disappeared off the screen! The sled of Renegade Aris has disappeared off the screen. The beacons can find no trace of her. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a truly historic moment!"

Disgusted, Aris changed the channel back to the police channel in case she needed to communicate with those who watched her position. She approached the other sleds carefully so as not to be discovered by any motion sensors they might have onboard.

Aris floated unobserved in a nearby ring lane watching the conspirators closely.

On the Saturn System's Marshal Station, Nace watched the monitors in concern. Aris was moving ever closer to the rebels, the special equipment on board the ship giving those at the station a fine vantage point to watch the drop-off of the smuggled goods.

The station's monitors detected a new threat long before the beacon's system could hope to pick it up. A larger, but still well-disguised ship headed toward a position just above Saturn's ring plane. Obviously the smugglers' real transport ship.

"She can't see it!"

"What do you mean?"

"She picking up the transmissions from the beacons, just like the others. When we stopped transmitting to her, she lost her own position, too. She doesn't have the sensors onboard to pick up the image we're getting!"

"Resume communications." The commander's words pierced through the drone of machines and the conversation around him.

Like a dream or a psychedelic movie, all his movements seemed to be in slow motion as the world around him lived at whirlwind speed. Only a silent scream of "No" could form in his mind before the link with Aris' sled had been reestablished. No time even for the single word to form before Aris had been discovered by the conspirators.

Particle cannon fire from the transport ship lit the screens, shattering a

huge ring boulder and jamming pieces of itself irretrievably into the outer shell of the hiding sled.

Nace could only stare in horror. "They've discovered her."

"Contact the sled," the commander ordered.

"No! You'll further give away her position. You've already signed her death sentence."

"Commander, we can't make contact. She seems to be receiving us, but can't respond."

"Take no further action," Nace ordered. "Don't listen to him," he insisted furiously when the Commander would have objected. "Unless you want the death of a civilian on your head, take no further action!"

In the sled, Aris huddled to one side of the tiny pilots compartment. The left control panel lit with sparks, heavily damaged from the outside by the shards of ring debris. She cursed the incompetents who had shattered her radio silence and sacrificed her safety. She liked danger, but with better odds than these.

Gingerly, she adjusted her remaining radio receivers until she could pick-up the conspirators' transmissions between each other.

"Where is she?"

"Is she even alive?"

"She must be in there. She's still not registering on the monitors."

Aris tried not to move. She could not even move to avoid the ring debris that slammed into her sled, jarring the ruptured wires and sending sparks flying. Instincts jerked her arm from the burning points of light, knocking the controls that guided the sled's thrusters. The sled struck debris on the other side of her, revealing her location.

Fortunately for Aris, the conspirators misinterpreted her movement and

turned and fled.

Over the comm Aris heard them, "For the clouds. They won't find us there."

It was several moments before Aris regained enough attitudinal control of her sled to get her proper bearings. On the off chance that the station could hear her she radioed them. "My ship is damaged. I'm not sure how badly yet, but the main thrusters may be partially crippled. They're heading for the clouds of Saturn itself. I have to go in after them. It's the only way to chase them out where you can get at them. Get ready to pick them up when they come out."

Aris turned her sled then and followed the other sleds into the Indian yellow mists.

The station was abuzz with the news of the sleds' descent into Saturn's cloud layer. Nace still tried to coordinate the movements of the police vehicles over the objections of his superiors.

"Restore the visual on Aris. They already know she's there, it won't do her any good any longer to leave her concealed."

A visual image of Aris returned to the screen only momentarily, before she, like the others, vanished into the obscuring mists. "What is she doing? She may not be able to escape Saturn's gravity!"

"Where is she? Can you get me a bearing on her direction?"

"Filtering out cloud interference now, Officer."

A blurred and fuzzy image of six ships appeared on the screen, intermittently shrouded by static.

"Can you get it any clearer?"

"No, sir. It's not the clouds that are causing the interference."

"Where's that other ship?"

"In custody, sir. It's been intercepted and boarded."

"Sir, the rebel sleds are leaving the atmosphere-- Correction, only four of the original five appear to be getting free. The last appears to be unable to escape the Saturnian gravity."

"What about the sixth sled?"

"I don't know, sir. I can't find it."

The atmosphere dragged at the sled and pulled it further into the gravity of the massive body. Aris tried unsuccessfully to initiate the thrusters that could pull her out of the planet's grasp, but the onboard lights continued to fail and the frayed wires to sparkle electrically.

The heat of descent burned through Aris' sled, loosening the shards of ring debris that now protected the inner shell from friction's fury. She no longer knew which direction she faced as gravity drew her closer to death. A last hope of desperation drove her to plunge her hand into the mass of stinging wires to search for the main engine ignitor.

A lost brother's voice echoed in her mind. "There is a price one must pay to be a hero."

I'm not a hero, brother.

A waiting darkness greeted her.

"The media is having a field day, Aris. Everyone except the Europeans are praising your courage and guts."

Aris scowled at Nace's suggestion of the impossible. "I really don't care what they think. Fifty years from now, people won't be crediting me with saving the "United Planets," no, they'll be saying I was a reckless, do-nothing whose only concern was to win at the ring sledding event. And they will be right. I just want to go home, recuperate, and get back to racing. That's all."



"That doesn't sound like the Renegade I know."

Aris stopped dead in her tracks, unwilling to even credit what she thought she'd heard.

"What have you been doing to yourself?"

Aris glanced uncomprehending at the bandage on her arm, then spun around, searching for the source of the words.

A man watched her, grinning from ear to ear, with such a look of smug satisfaction, that Aris just wanted to-- well, quit making him look so smug.

"It really isn't polite to stare, my dear."

"Dimitri!"

Once he had caught his breath and recovered from her fierce embrace, "I'm glad I'm so popular."

"You! Where have you been? How could you let me think you were dead?"

"I was in hiding, sister dear. Orders are orders. Disobeying is not good for job security."

"Are you going to stay and see me race?"

"Is that all you think about?"

"Of course not, but I know how you hate it, so after this! you better stick around."

"If I don't?"

"I'll have someone follow you around for ten years with every video ever made of my races and make you watch them all!"

"I give up," he laughed. "You always were very persuasive."

"Come," Aris insisted, drawing Dimitri with her. "I want you to meet everyone."

"Better luck next time," Dimitri called back to Nace as he was dragged away.

Nace only shrugged his shoulders and returned to the station.