

Chapter 1

HAIL AND FAREWELL

Chenda Frost sat perfectly still. She balanced, immobile, between a desire to run in panic and the urge to vomit that accompanies the shock of desperate grief. As the short line of cars followed the hearse into the churchyard, Chenda steeled herself for her first, and last, public appearance with her husband. She realized that this was the first time she had been to town with Edison, but she couldn't find the strength to contemplate the irony that this would also be the last time she would travel to Coal City with him. After today, she would never see him again. Forever. She couldn't pull her eyes away from the car carrying his casket, tried not to even blink for fear of losing any part of her last few moments with him. Chenda's driver opened her door, and she stepped out into the misty morning to the sound of flashbulbs and the shout of rabid newspapermen. She raised her dark eyes to focus on the front door of the church, her goal. More flashes sent sparkles across her vision. She ignored what she could of the shouted questions and kept her pale face as placid and unmoving as possible. As quickly as her legs would carry her, she escaped into the cool darkness of the ancient church.

Her eyes anxiously searched the interior of the sanctuary, and she relaxed slightly as she saw

Edison's casket arriving through a side door. He was there. She was, at least for a few minutes more, with him again. Even in death, his presence calmed her. Chenda followed the funeral director as he wheeled Edison to the head of the aisle and opened the casket. The assembled visitors hushed for a moment as they gandered at the deceased, then the hurried whispers began again. Chenda found herself cringing away from the stares, positioning herself at the end of Edison's casket, partially hiding herself behind the extravagantly carved lid.

Chenda glanced around at several of the assembled guests. She recognized very few. For the most part, it looked to her just a faceless sea of dark suits and military uniforms. The people to which she could place names were either dignitaries she had seen in the newspapers, or a smattering of her former teachers or companions – all hand-picked by Edison – none of whom had she seen in years.

Chenda listened as two of her former tutors gossiped about a delicately built blond woman in the second pew, a woman Chenda had never seen before.

"Fancy *her* coming here. I'd never would have taken Professor Candice Mortimer as a curiosity seeker like these other gawkers," the first said.

"Perhaps she reads the tabloids for fun," the other said. "There's not a front page in the city that doesn't say 'Death of the Recluse Hero' in the headlines. Besides, she's such a serious person. She has to get her kicks somehow. Perhaps funeral crashing is her thing."

The gossiping women wandered away, having quickly lost interest in the professor, who simply sat gazing remorsefully at Edison in his casket.

Candice Mortimer wasn't sure why she had come to Edison's funeral. Truly, sadness filled her as she looked at Edison's scarred face, coldly encircled with pale flowers in the casket. He had changed so drastically from the handsome young officer in her memory. Candice counted the years back to the last time she had seen Edison. Twenty-one years felt like yesterday in some ways. He'd been so

dashing then in his Republic Airship Service uniform. *All* the R.A.S. men were dapper to some extent. Strong and brave, each was ready to defend the Republic's coast against Tugrulian attackers. A generation of handsome young men volunteered. Thousands never came back. Too many came home like Edison, broken, disfigured and aged well beyond the intervening 12 years of the war.

Candice cried when Edison's airship, the *Valiant Eagle*, was reported lost. She rejoiced when she heard he had miraculously returned alive. More than once, she tried to see him, but he never accepted visitors and refused all correspondence. Each of her letters returned unopened. Rumors swirled that he was a spy, or had been on a secret mission to corrupt the Tugrulian Empire. Edison never spoke publicly about any of it.

As she waited for the ceremony to start, Candice's sadness turned into disgust. All of those strangers staring stupidly into Edison's casket. How rude! True, she must look as much like voyeur to them as they did to her, but Candice knew who she was, and what Edison had meant to her all those years ago, so she felt no reason to explain herself to anyone. She turned her gaze to the shy woman at the end of Edison's casket, The Widow Frost as all the papers were calling her. Candice's first thought was this girl couldn't possibly be his *wife*. She was young enough be his daughter. Candice bristled and focused on Edison's unmoving form.

Chenda, a receiving line of one, found the assembled crowd respectful and solemn as they filed by, but not particularly grieved. She could feel their eyes on her, judging her, and she heard all the whispered remarks.

"... lucky, I guess. She's the richest widow in the whole Republic."

"... bet it was suicide. Who lives that way? Apart from the world for all those years...."

"... I hear she is a bubble-headed fashion monger, I mean look at her, I've never seen so much expensive silk and satin on *one* dress...."

“... good grief, she’s just a child! I guess Frost liked ‘em young....”

“... Gee, if he never left his estate, I wonder if *any* of these people ever actually knew him?”

No, Chenda thought, *just me and the house staff*.

The funeral went on as so many do: prayers to all the gods, kind but generic words from a gray haired priest who laments the death of a man he has never *actually* met, poetry about salvation and songs that move too slowly. Finally, the time came for Edison’s casket to be closed for the last time. Chenda stood by herself for one long moment, her hands resting on Edison’s casket. She felt fractured and wondered, when she exhaled next, what it would be like never to breathe back in again. She wanted to die, too. The center of her world had vanished, and she now drifted alone, frightened to her core.

Where do I go from here, Edison?

With her emotions momentarily paralyzed, she mindlessly followed the congregants out of the weathered stone church and into a dim, drizzling afternoon. Dozens of flashbulbs again blinded Chenda as she appeared on the church steps. In her turmoil, she had forgotten to prepare herself for the gauntlet of reporters in the churchyard. People pressed in on her, trying to sneak a peek at The Widow Frost. The shoving and clamor kept her unsteady. Her field of vision was clogged with a jostling crowd of reporters and spectators, and, losing her footing on the slippery steps, Chenda started to fall. Suddenly, someone caught her by her elbow and she felt another hand reach around her waist, pulling her back to standing but also maneuvering her sideways, out of the heart of the crowd.

Chenda looked up into the plain, young face of her driver, Daniel Frent. He kept pulling her along, using his hip and shoulder to part the throng of people. When they reached the car, he quickly pushed her up and into the raised passenger area, snapping the door closed behind her. Daniel vaulted himself into the driver’s compartment. The motor whizzed to life, and the clutch of reporters and

onlookers, sensing the show was over, retreated slightly. Daniel pulled away from the churchyard and they were gone in an instant.

Daniel opened the small window between the driver and passenger compartments. "I'm sorry to have placed hands on you so, Ma'am. You're not harmed, are you?"

"I'm fine," she said limply. "Thank you for catching me." She turned her face to the gray window and watched the droplets run together and roll down the pane. She sighed.

Daniel coughed politely, and quietly added, "I can see this is a trial for you, Ma'am. I'm sorry for that."

"It's kind of you to say," she replied.

Daniel went on, "Did you know, ma'am, that my old man served with Mr. Frost on *the Valiant Eagle*?"

"No," Chenda said. She truly knew very little about Daniel, as he was the most recent edition to the estate staff and had been Chenda's driver for a few scant weeks. "Was he amongst the crew when *The Eagle* was lost?" she asked, unable to think of anything to say.

"Sadly, yes, Ma'am" he answered, and then said nothing more.

Chenda bore this new layer of loss in silence. The car traveled quickly through the heart of Coal City, past so many of Chenda's favorite shops and museums. For years, Chenda held out hope that some day Edison would have acquiesced and journeyed into town with her. He never did, and now it was too late. The pattern had developed between them early on that she would go into town and explore, bringing back trinkets and gifts for her husband, and they would spend hours talking and what she had seen and done. As money was no object, the sky was the limit as far as Edison was concerned. Chenda happily brought the world home to him. Now, as the car entered the Frost Estate and gently stopped at the grand house's front door, Chenda had nothing to share, and no one to share it with.

Daniel helped Chenda out of the car and opened an umbrella over her, sheltering her from the rain until she stepped into the foyer. Throwing her damp coat into the waiting arm of the housekeeper, she walked into Edison's study, closed the thick paneled doors behind her and collapsed on the floor, weeping. Finally, hidden away from the prying eyes of Coal City and the house staff, she unfurled her grief.

Edison's study seemed the perfect place for her collapse. This room, this intimate space where this unlikely couple shared their stories, was now both a sacred memory and a crime scene. Detectives had long since finished investigating here. They found little evidence besides the unusual knife that was buried deep into Edison's chest, a knife with two points like the forked tongue of a snake. There were no other clues, they said.

"Had Commander Frost been depressed?" they asked.

In the wake of that fruitless investigation, and not knowing what else to do, the staff quietly returned the space to its ordered beauty. Not a drop of Edison's blood remained on the fine Mahogany desk, or the Tugrulian carpet beneath. Every soiled paper, every hint of the police, even the smell of the newsmen's flashbulbs had been carefully removed. Clean and proper. Restored.

Shock stopped her tears when she discovered Edison's body, and numbness covered her as she awaited the funeral. Chenda hadn't cried once. She had held her tears in for seven days, and there, in the very room in which Edison had been murdered, it overflowed from her. Chenda kicked her feet violently under her long black satin skirts while she wailed. Her thoughts, barely formed enough to hardly be called thoughts, exploded out of her in rage and sorrow. *Why... Why?* the words bubbled through her mind, rising from her chest finally as a screech, "WHY!!!?!?!?!?"

Chenda lay there, frightened and completely lost. She sobbed again and again, fighting against her sorrow, willing herself to pull the pain back in, willing herself to become again the dignified wife of

Edison Frost. Chenda allowed herself one final sob as she crawled over to the side of Edison's desk. She rested a moment on her knees there, pressing her face to the smooth desktop, her arms wrapping the dark wood in a weak embrace. She said a small prayer for comfort to any god that could hear her. *Please, she prayed, please guide me. What do I do now?*

A thought appeared in her head. *Edison would pull himself together and get off the floor.*

Chenda fought her sorrow and searched her soul for a bit of strength. She wrapped her fingers around the wood beneath her hands and squeezed each side of the desk, pulling herself to her feet. When she let go, she heard a small click. A raised panel on the side of the desk swung open.

What's this?

Chenda's fingers pressed the panel back to discover a narrow slot, like a small shelf that was covered by the secret door. An envelope made of fine peach tinted paper fell to the rug. **Chenda** was printed on the front in Edison's tiny handwriting. She carefully opened the letter.

My dearest Chenda,

Pretty paper for an ugly message.

I know that finding this letter means that you are again alone in the world, and for that I am so very sorry. You have been such a blessing to me in my life, and I have loved you always. But, I now have to ask you to forgive me. Your father and I have kept a dangerous secret from you. Chenda, you have a destiny. I wish I could explain here in this letter, but I am not sure you would believe. You will have to find out for yourself.

Somehow, you need to find a way across the sea to Kotal, and connect with the Tugrulian Resistance. They can take you to a

Mystic, Pranav Erato. He will help you fulfill your destiny.

Also, I want you to contact a professor at Kite's Republic University, Dr. Candice Mortimer. Her expertise can help you, and I believe you can trust her.

Go now, and take the bag with you. Waste no time.

All my love,

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Chenda read the letter again. *Destiny? The Tugrulian Empire?*

Stunned, Chenda swept her hand into the hidden slot and felt a small velvet bag. With shaking fingers, she loosened the knotted silk cord and tipped the contents into her hand. Out fell a gold necklace with a rather dull, deep-red stone pendent. Two other, larger stones also fell into her hand. One was a pale and uninteresting yellow, and the other, blue, the color of an old robin's egg.

At that moment, Chenda thought she heard someone in the hall outside Edison's Study. She quickly scooped the stones back into the bag along with her husband's note and snapped the desk panel shut. She pocketed the velvet bag, patted her hair into place, wiped her eyes and smoothed the wrinkles from her long dress. A moment later, Chenda opened the door to find her housekeeper, Alme, raising her hand to knock.

"Oh, good evening, Ma'am, I just wanted to see if you were feeling up to any supper this evening?" Alme's eyes were wide with sympathy.

Chenda frowned. *I probably should eat something, Chenda thought. But I just can't sit alone in the dining room tonight, not without Edison. I feel him in every corner of this house now.*

"Yes," Alme sighed, as if she has heard Chenda's thoughts. "Perhaps I could bring you some soup and toast up to your personal study?"

“A very good idea,” Chenda agreed as she turned away from Edison’s office and climbed the stairs. By the time Chenda reached her suite of rooms, her mind had set on several things:

First, she was sure of Edison’s letter. She recognized his writing, and had never known him to lie. Of that she was entirely sure. Edison had cared for her, educated her, and loved her. If he wanted her to follow his instructions, then she would.

Next, she needed to write to Professor Mortimer and arrange a meeting. After a few moments, Chenda had prepared a note inviting Dr. Candice Mortimer to tea the following afternoon and placed it in a silver tray on her desk.

And lastly, Chenda decided she needed to grow up. The time for shopping in town for trinkets and living in her small world was over. Those whispered voices at the funeral may just have been right. Money and fine things were all around her, but what she needed was the ability to take care of herself. To know herself. Chenda looked at her pale, tear stained face in the mirror. *Who are you now? Can you be more than the Widow Frost? Is there more to you than this?*

Alme politely knocked on the door, breaking Chenda’s gaze from her reflection. The housekeeper quietly placed a tray of food onto a side table and retrieved the letter from Chenda’s desk tray.

“Please see that letter delivered tonight, Alme. And I believe I will be just fine here for the rest of the evening. I’d rather not be disturbed.” Chenda looked again at the mirror as Alme silently swept out the door.

The next morning, a reply from Candice Mortimer was waiting. Chenda’s invitation to tea had been accepted. She smiled as she read the letter, and then bit her lip uncertainly. Deciding to follow Edison’s instructions was the first major decision of her life, and she wasn’t entirely sure she had made the right choice.

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Later that day, Chenda stood outside the Terminal Tearoom and chewed on her lip while she considered her options. There weren't but two: go in, or go home. Opening the door meant starting her life anew, but going back to the estate, and forgetting the whole thing, was smarter. Chenda hesitated. The warm and brightly lit tearoom invited, and she could clearly see her intended teatime companion, one Dr. Candice Mortimer, Senior Professor of Geology at Kite's Republic University. There was no need to wait, but Chenda could not seem to find the will to go forward. She let herself become distracted for a few seconds, watching the light spill though the spotless plate glass window and onto her beautiful and, as Edison would have teased, impractical shoes. The rhinestones across her toes caught the falling light and splashed it upward in the form of glittery rainbows that danced across the complicated folds of her long brocade dress.

She felt so strange, standing there in the fog as people jostled past her, rushing from taxis and trolleys to the station's various trains and airships. Chenda listened to the familiar sounds of people on the go: the hard clack of a man's leather shoes on the pavement, the soft swish of several layers of silk skirts brushing over petticoats and the whine of small children, exhausted from being dragged through the streets. Chenda, herself, stood perfectly still.

She looked up again to see the professor shifting uncomfortably in the delicate cafe chair. Chenda stopped trying to force her feet to carry her through the elegantly decorated and polished brass doors. She let go of her indecision for a moment, and suddenly, thoughtlessly, effortlessly, she found herself inside the cheery shop. Chenda looked toward the corner table where the tiny woman in a sand colored pantsuit waited, her back turned to the whole of the shop. Chenda's momentum failed her, and she froze again. The Terminal Tearoom bustled around her, the rushing waiters swirling the smells of teas and pastries all around her.

It was safe to say that Professor Mortimer was not accustomed to the afternoon clatter of the tearoom. The fashionable and luxuriant shop was beyond the means of the average a university professor, to be sure. Furthermore, the whole facade of the place just wasn't Candice's style.

She preferred the musty stacks of the university's great library and curling maps and boxes of geological samples scattered all around her small office. Candice often said to herself as she worked late into the night that she had the whole world at her fingertips, well, at least little scrapings of it.

Candice kept mostly to herself at the university, spending her days teaching in labs and classrooms, and arguing with various committees, jostling to put her research projects closer to the top of the funding lists. Her nights were spent criss-crossing the great library, making connections. Her theories always put forth the notion that, in a very hidden way, all of the world's culture and society was tied to Geology. Geology dictated a region's topography, which influences weather, the crops that can be grown, and the animals that appear. That all leads directly to the cultures that develop and everything else that defines a society: language, rituals, philosophy -even art. *It's all rooted in Geology*, Candice thought, and she had been single-mindedly unraveling those theories for nearly 20 years.

She was a woman of science, a woman of focus and dignity, but she wasn't entirely sure why she was sitting in a pompous pastry shop waiting for the widow of *her* beloved, Edison Frost.

At that moment, Candice Mortimer, awash in sadness and annoyance, heard the quiet clack of approaching shoes on the marble behind her.

She turned, glared into the eyes of Chenda Frost and said, "Missy, that funeral was a circus. You should have kept the lid to that casket closed."