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NEW YEAR'S WAKE

A Terran Empire Story

by Ann Wilson

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Isle of Skye, 1 Jan 2149 CE

It was just past midnight when the woman in wet, torn forest green saw what had to be the light from windows of a small house. She stumbled toward it gratefully, hoping for warmth and some sort of communications. Dammit, equipment failure and a plane crash were no way to start New Year's Day!

As she neared the house, she heard party sounds, and grinned. It seemed that someone, at least, was having fun here on—if she remembered her charts right—the Isle of Skye. The North Sea in winter ... yes, she was lucky to be alive.

When she knocked on the door, the party sounds got louder—until the door opened, and someone saw her.

"Och, we have a soaked lass out here!" the young man exclaimed. He turned back into the house, called for blankets and a hot drink, then put his arm around the woman, led her inside, and saw her settled into a comfortable seat beside the fireplace.

"Our first visitor, with no coal or whiskey," an old man said ruefully. "No good omen for the New Year, no warmth for heart or hearth."

"Och, uncle, 'tis no fault of hers," the young man said. "It's cold and wet she is, in need of help." He held a glass of whiskey to the woman's lips, nodded as she sipped. "That's a good lass," he said approvingly. "I'm Geordie MacGregor, and who may you be?"

The woman hesitated, hiding it with another sip of whiskey. They hadn't identified her from her uniform; should she ... no. See what they were really like, first. "Lindner ... Sue Lindner. My plane went down, and when I made it ashore, I saw your lights." She turned to the old man Geordie had called Uncle. "I'm sorry to be a bad omen, sir, but it may be I won't be that bad."

"Ach, lass, I'm the one to be sorry," Geordie's uncle replied. "'Tis superstition, I know, but 'tis tradition as well. It's rest you should be getting."

"I would like to warm up a bit, then if you have a phone, I should call and let the people expecting me know where I am. I'll pay for the call, of course; it's long distance."

"You'll do no such thing," the old man retorted. "I'll not have it bruited about that Donal MacGregor's lacking in proper hospitality. A plane crash, you say, and your clothes half gone ... are you hurt? Will the Rescue Service not be looking for you?"

"I doubt it; my flight wasn't scheduled. And I'm not hurt, except for a few scratches and bruises. There's no need to disturb your party." She'd discarded her boots and equipment belt for the swim ashore, and sometime during that swim or her

wandering—probably coming ashore over those rocks—she'd lost her badge and pretty well shredded her uniform. It was no wonder they didn't recognize her; she doubted she'd be able to recognize herself, huddled under a blanket with her hair plastered down by salt water.

Another knock on the door brought laughter, especially from the woman who opened it to admit a kilt-clad man bearing a piece of coal and a bottle of whiskey.

"Tis a few minutes late you are, Angus," Donal MacGregor called. "Our first guest of the year is this poor cold lass here."

"And half drowned, by the look of her," Angus replied. He scowled ferociously—a half-grin betraying his apparent ferocity—at the woman tending Sue. "Tara, you know she needs something hot, not whiskey."

"Bridget's making cocoa, as you should be able to smell," Tara retorted.

"It's made," the young woman entering the room said, going straight to Sue and handing her the steaming mug.

Sue traded her whiskey glass for it, wrapping her hands around the mug to warm them and taking a deep breath of the chocolatey steam, while her hosts gave Angus the story.

When they were done, he looked at her curiously, with a half-grin. "Your name's a familiar one, lass."

Sue returned his smile. He knew who she was, but he didn't seem inclined to spread his knowledge, if she chose not to reveal herself; he got points for discretion. "It's a common enough name, sir. I don't believe we've met before."

"No; I'd remember if we had. It's an honor now, though, and I'd be pleased if you'd call me Angus."

"The honor is mine, Angus." Sue smiled at him again, briefly. "Perhaps, under more formal circumstances, things would be different. At the moment, though, I'm just an unlucky pilot."

"And so you are, lass." Angus nodded once, then turned to their hosts. "Well, now, this is supposed to be a party. Tara, may I have the next dance?"

"Indeed you may!" Tara—Sue guessed her to be Donal's wife—called across the room. "Geordie, some music!"

Sue felt herself relaxing as warmth crept back into her, and she automatically evaluated her surroundings. They were nothing like what she was used to: a small living room, festively decorated but obviously not rich—more homey, she thought, than anything else. Bookshelves lined one wall almost completely, their ranks broken only by two small windows and a holoset—on, but being ignored; she couldn't tell what the program was. A five- or six-person table held food and drinks; it looked too heavy to move easily, so this was probably the dining room, as well. Wall decorations were mostly stitchery, though a crucifix held a place of honor above the mantel.

Not a rich place, no. And the party talk around her, gathered in fragments from the twenty or so who crowded the room, didn't contradict that impression. This seemed to be a subsistence-farming culture . . . here on Terra? Well, it was possible; talk of farm animals, equipment, and markets, and canning, yes. Nothing of politics, or the Empire, or the nobility, as was so common in the circles she was used to, but the warmth and friendship here had value of their own. These people might not have much money, but they couldn't be called poor.

Sue found herself pleased by that. It was people like these, after all, who were the Empire's substance, its reason for being. It was good to be reminded of that, from time to time. Imperial nobles and officers had the trappings of rank, yes, but the underlying purpose of that rank was to insure that Imperial citizens like these could live freely and without fear. And she was one of those officers . . . Sue smiled to herself, and kept listening as carefully as Bridget kept her chocolate cup full and hot.

The MacGregor farm, she found, wasn't a particularly prosperous one even by this island's standards. Donal's tractor was unreliable at best, Geordie couldn't seem to find a sponsor who'd get him even as far as being tested for the Military Academy—well. It had been a long time since she'd had an opportunity to indulge herself.

About an hour after she'd been helped inside, Sue stood and attracted Tara's attention. "Mrs. MacGregor, may I use your phone now?"

"Of course, lass. Back this way."

"Thank you." Sue looked around, gestured to Geordie and Donal. "Would you come, too?"

The two men exchanged glances, then Donal shrugged and smiled. "If you wish, lass."

The MacGregors did have a phone in the kitchen, Sue found, but it was clear that they seldom used it; Tara had to move half a dozen jars of canned tomatoes before she could take the phone out of the cabinet. And it was basic: small 20-cm screen, push buttons instead of voice activation—probably black and white, too, Sue thought as she activated it.

No, it was color. The screen lit up in pale green, reading 'Dial.' As Sue entered the various access codes, the readout changed. Intercontinental . . . Antarctica . . . Imperial Palace. That got murmurs of surprise, which grew louder as she punched in the last numbers and the Imperial Seal appeared on the screen.

"Voiceprint ID required," a flat voice said. "Speak."

"Ranger Susan M. Lindner, ident code RSR-0651-0173."

"Ident confirmed. To whom do you wish to speak?"

"Castellan Gordon, please."

"One moment, sir."

Within seconds, the Seal disappeared, to be replaced by the face of a gray-haired, tired-looking man. "What can I do for you . . . ah ..." He hesitated, frowning. "You haven't heard— No, Comm Central said you weren't answering—"

"Heard what, Robert? My plane went down three or four hours ago, and these people have spent the last hour drying me off and warming me with hot cocoa." But from the Castellan's expression, she was afraid she knew. The Emperor's health hadn't been good of late, and she really shouldn't have been half a world away . . . "When did it happen?"

"Apparently about the time you crashed," Gordon said. "I believe he heard the New Year in. I hope he did ..." The Castellan was silent for a moment, then he went on. "He didn't seem to be in any pain, and Doctor Warren says it was simple heart failure. I've delayed making the public announcement until I could speak to you, get authorization to call a Conclave at the same time." He bowed as deeply as he could and still remain on-screen. "By Your Majesty's leave?"

"You have authorization," Ranger—now Empress—Susan Lindner said. She had known this was inevitable since her own election as Crown Princess at the first Conclave; establishing a precedent of peaceful, orderly transfer of Imperial power was absolutely vital. "I'll need transport, and from the terrain I crossed, it'd better be something on the order of a lander. I'm at the MacGregor farmstead, Isle of Skye; you should be able to pinpoint me from this call."

"Done, Majesty," Gordon said after a couple of seconds. "A lander will be on its way as soon as I'm dismissed, with Ranger Grissom and a squad of Palace Guards. Naturally, I'll give them a head start before I inform the news media. Is there anything else?"

The Empress glanced around at the people near her, the ones who'd shared her surprise—and, in varying degrees, shock—at the news of Emperor Chang's death. "I think so. A squad—no, better make it a platoon—of Security Division Marines. The MacGregors can't be used to publicity, especially the kind my accession is going to bring."

"Of course, Majesty."

"Thank you, Castellan. Dismissed."

Gordon bowed again. His image disappeared, was replaced momentarily by the Imperial Seal before Susan hung up and turned to the three with her. They looked as stunned as she felt, and uncertain as well. She could understand that; it would be unsettling enough to have an Imperial Ranger turn up on your doorstep, without having her turn into the Empress on you. At least they knew enough about Imperial protocol not to kneel to her, though Donal looked tempted.

"This wasn't what I'd planned, you know," Susan said. "I was only calling to arrange a pickup, then later I'd have seen that you got the reward you're entitled to for aiding a Ranger."

Donal shook his head. "Nay, lass—I mean, Majesty. A man needs no reward for helping as the Good Book says."

"No," Susan said, smiling slightly. "I know you're taught that your reward comes later. But the Empire tries for justice in this life, as much as we can; we punish actions that hurt it, and reward ones that help." She held out her hands to the old man. "Will you help me again, Donal, you and your family? Join me in mourning a dear friend before I have to officially take up a job no sane person would want? And keep calling me Sue, or lass, please? At least until Robert makes the announcement?"

Donal saw the entreaty in her eyes, and nodded. Empress or no, she was a woman, a crashed pilot, who had just lost a friend. "As you wish, lass. We've enough good whiskey for a proper wake, and a hangover cure for the morrow."

Susan smiled in real gratitude. "Thank you, Donal. Now I think we'd best rejoin the others."

"Aye, lass."

When they went back to the party and Donal explained that their guest had just been told about the death of a close friend, Susan was surrounded by suddenly-commiserating people, one of whom pressed a drink into her hand. She took a swallow, appreciating the gesture and unquestioning sympathy, so unlike the official condolences she'd be receiving soon.

A gentle, grandmotherly woman urged her to a seat. "Tell us about your friend, lass. What kind of man was he?"

Susan gave that a moment's thought, then smiled. She couldn't reveal his identity without ruining the party, which she didn't want to do, but that shouldn't be necessary. "He was a good man, Miz. One of the most intelligent, caring people I've ever had the privilege of knowing—and I liked him, even if he did make those of us who worked most closely with him knock ourselves out trying to keep up."

She chuckled. "I think one of the reasons we did work so hard for him was that he demanded even more of himself than he asked of us. I can't imagine taking on some of the assignments I did for anyone else."

"He sounds like a leader anyone could respect," Angus said. "But have you nothing more ... ah ... human to share?"

"Well, yes," Susan said, and knew her voice showed amusement. "He had a weakness for twentieth-century space opera. It showed up in some places you wouldn't expect unless you shared his fondness for it, and for awhile we made a game out of tracing down anything that seemed to have any sort of connection."

She glanced at Angus, saw his matching amusement, and was certain he'd made at least some of the same connections. There was no denying that His Majesty had had excellent reasons for his actions, from establishing the Empire on; even the Solar Federation Congress had been able to understand that a democracy that was struggling to hold a single system together couldn't possibly cope with what promised to rapidly become thousands of systems. Aristocracy had worked, more or less, in one form or another, for thousands of years, so an Empire was a natural solution—but it was also a classic idea in space opera. And one of her own favorite touches was the Anthem; every government seemed to need one, so why not do as Emperor Chang had, and take an instrumental piece already titled "Imperial Anthem" from a classic late-twentieth-century entertainment tape? "Oh," she went on, "he never let it interfere with serious business—but why not take what enjoyment you can, after all?"

"No reason," Angus said with a grin. "And did your friend also like American cowboy stories?"

"When he was a boy, yes. Until he got interested in space opera, anyway." Susan returned his grin. "I've always thought he should have been born a Texan."

The reminiscences continued as she was kept supplied with smoothly-potent whiskey, and she was fully aware that she was well on the way to being thoroughly drunk. That was all right; the Palace Guards, who would be the first to arrive, knew their Sovereign was quite human. And, being Marines, their medikits held sober pills she could use if she had to.

Roughly two hours after her phone call, Susan and the rest of the partiers were startled by the sound of a lander's null-grav engines, then by the first notes of the Imperial Anthem sounding from the almost-forgotten holoset. As Gordon announced Chang's death and her accession, Susan found Angus looking at her understandingly. She nodded to him, smiling, then concealed a sigh. Her brief crash-caused leave was over; it was time to take on her new duties.

The scream of null-grav engines interrupted Tara MacGregor's housework. She ran outside, to see a brilliant scarlet lander settling to earth barely ten meters from the front door. When its hatch opened and a scarlet-tunicked man emerged, she caught her breath. This was an Imperial Messenger!

"Tara MacGregor?" the man asked.

She nodded silently, and the Messenger bowed to her, extending a large green envelope. "I am instructed to deliver this with Her Majesty's compliments, Mrs. MacGregor. She asks that you contact Castellan Gordon with your reply." He bowed again, and left as swiftly as he'd arrived.

Tara watched him go before she opened the envelope with hands that were shaking slightly. It held three items: a bill of sale for a new tractor, an authorization form for Geordie to take the Academy entrance examinations, and a smaller envelope with a handwritten note: "You gave a crashed pilot hospitality, and a grieving woman sympathy. I would like to return at least the hospitality; will you all be my guests for Coronation Week?" It was initialed S.M.L.

As Tara started to go back into the house, she heard shouted questions, and stopped to wait for Donal and Geordie, who were approaching at a run. She didn't bother saying anything; the papers she held out spoke for themselves.

Both men looked them over with the same mixture of amazement and pleasure Tara was sure she'd had. It was Donal who finally spoke, looking south toward the Antarctic palace none of them had ever thought to see. "Aye, lass," he said softly. "Aye, we'll accept your hospitality."

END

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