

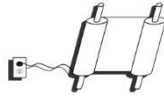
RIFT WATCHER:
THE
LAST EDENITE



C R SIMPER

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THE LAST EDENITE

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the fans who asked about it often enough to keep me going.

BOOKS BY C R SIMPER

Rift Watcher
Into the Rift
The Last Edenite

RIFT WATCHER:

THE LAST EDENITE

ONE

A tense conversation infiltrated my dreams.

“Could you hurry, Doctor?” The bite of Lieutenant Eris Rhuick’s impatience sounded sharp enough to leave marks. “I don’t want Tamas to know.”

“Unless I’ve misunderstood the nature of your relationship with the Captain, he is going to notice.” Dr. Darragh Conally countered the lieutenant’s impatience with cynical diplomacy. “But Onnie doesn’t need to see this.”

Hearing Darragh speak my name drew me abruptly back into a firm reality: I was Onnie Nayir and *what* didn’t I need to see?

As I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, I met my own reflection. I’d chosen to sleep on a pull-out bed along the Medical Bay wall. My dad, Captain Tamas Nayir, slept on the bunk below, snoring softly so I knew he was still okay after his injury yesterday.

Focusing beyond my own image, the window revealed stars distorted by the faster-than-light speed of BJ – *The Blackjack* – our luxurious spacecraft Darragh had won from a transport captain in a game of chance.

I stealthily turned over. Lieutenant Rhuick sat on the patient bed at one end of the narrow, crescent-shaped Med-

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Bay, facing away from me. Brutal cuts crisscrossed the cragged milk-white skin of her back; her pinkish blood had dried in streaks beneath.

“You won’t be able to hide the scars?” she asked.

“I will do my best.” Darragh wrinkled his brow, focused on treating the lieutenant's front side. His neon purple hair left over from yesterday's disguise, combined with the bruise on his chin, made him seem pale. “However, Galadiran skin is rigid and prone to scarring, and rushing me won't help.”

Eris sighed. “If I was from Earth...?”

“No need to speculate.” Darragh nearly fumbled the medical device in his hand so I wondered how many worst-case-scenario speculations had just gone through his head, but he’d decided to spare her the details. “You simply aren’t.”

“You have a talent for stating the obvious,” she spat back. “Couldn’t you attempt a little consideration instead?”

“Okay, sure.” Darragh shot her an icy glance. “Let's pretend the genius teenager with no social skills can resolve the compatibility issues in your cross-cultural relationship.”

Eris stiffened. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Isn't it?”

“No. You're not listening.”

“That is entirely possible.” He grimaced without looking up. “I am trained to focus on my job and ignore a patient’s verbal hostility.”

“I’m not being hostile,” the lieutenant hissed.

“Are you sure?” he replied, flustered. “Eighty-eight percent of everything you’ve said to me since the day we met was, in fact, *hostile*.”

She set her jaw. I hoped she might realize he was

perfectly serious and trying to understand, and maybe she'd take it down a notch since they were both misunderstanding each other.

But no.

"West was right about you from the start," she grumbled. "You're an arrogant juvenile with authority issues."

"I am well aware." Darragh dodged her personal attack by agreeing easily. I hoped he'd stop himself there, but no. "And you are an arrogant Galladiran expatriate with authority issues. One of us is old enough to know better."

I winced. I'd been interpreting Darragh's idiosyncrasies for weeks and knew he usually made accidental insults, not direct ones. My instant assumption was he didn't feel well, or hadn't slept, or was under stress.

But Eris didn't know him as well. "Do you *want* me to punch you in the face again, is that it?"

"If you need to hit me as part of your healing process, go right ahead," he challenged. Setting down his medical instrument, he squared off, awaiting her blow. "With the headache I already have, I'd hardly notice."

To her credit, Lieutenant Rhuick's attitude softened. "Doctor Conally, if you're in pain, why haven't you addressed it?"

"Because I have been too busy addressing other issues." Darragh looked towards me, or *past* me, at the fleeting stars beyond the window. "And because pain can be a useful tool to keep me anchored in the present, rather than dwelling on past mistakes or analyzing future risks."

"You use pain as a tool?" Eris sounded impressed.

"Today, yes." Darragh broke his gaze away from the window and picked up his medical instrument. "Lieutenant,

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neither of us seems to be in a right state of mind for conversation. Could we maybe not talk anymore unless it's necessary?"

I rejoiced that he'd finally recognized their discord and ended it, relieved he'd put the blame on both of them and not just himself.

"I can agree to that." Eris looked around the room instead of watching Darragh work. I closed my eyes as she glanced over her shoulder, presumably to make sure my dad was still soundly asleep.

I kept my eyes closed for about a minute before I peeked and found her looking the other way. I wondered if the silence would last, and who would give in first.

"How is Wyn?" Eris asked suddenly.

The unconscious Galladiran lay on a wall-bed across the room. When I'd laid down to rest, Wyn had still been inside the surgical unit.

"His condition is stable," Darragh replied, still cynical, but not directed at her this time. "What they did to you is superficial. What they did to him would have been the slow, agonizing sort of fatal. Did you see what happened?"

"Once he saw they were splitting us up Wyn tried to reason with them." Eris' tone turned dark. "If I'd had the chance I would have told him to shut up and stay with the children, but that monster ran him through."

"Katapas," Darragh said quietly. "That's what Topeka called him."

"I don't care to know his name; he's a monster. But I suppose after what they did to Anje Marin, it could have been worse."

"Worse, yeah, there's an understatement." Darragh's

focus failed and he winced with struck-in-the-gut alarm. He'd hidden the recorded images of Anje Marin's death from the rest of us. What he'd seen had affected him deeply. "It was a nightmare."

"It's ironic, isn't it?" Eris shook her head. "Marin sets out to punish Tamas for the death of his sister and causes the death of his own child – Are you *crying*?"

"No. Yes. *Ugh*." Darragh stepped back away from the bed to catch his breath, tears reflecting in the overhead light. He brought up both hands to wipe them away. "Ignore me, please. I am clearly over-tired."

Eris somberly studied his reaction, instead of mocking it further. "You saw her body?"

"Yes," Darragh whispered hoarsely, still battling against his own despair. "And then I had to tell Captain Nayir I'd found a deceased Galladiran female who I couldn't identify because she had been *torn apart*."

"You couldn't tell she wasn't me?" Eris sounded haunted. She hadn't seen my dad's reaction, but she could probably imagine it well enough.

"They had taken her head. I think I know why now, after our little trip through Putaktik's less-than-enchanted victory corridor." Darragh shook off a little tremble of rage and returned to the bedside, still wiping tears. "When Commander Murdock showed up, he knew it wasn't you."

"How?"

"Slip-on shoes."

"Oh, of course."

"You should be grateful to her." Darragh resumed his work on the lieutenant's injuries. "Her death is the reason the Shapida treated you with caution, if you can call this

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caution.”

“This happened later,” she replied.

“Do you—?”

“No, I don't want to talk about it,” Eris interrupted sharply.

Neither of them said anything for a long moment. The tension remained high.

“Am I hurting you?” Darragh broke the silence with a valid question as Lieutenant Rhuick brought a hand up to hide her face.

“No,” she replied, but her skin flushed pink with rising emotion.

“Is there anything I'm not already doing that I can do for you?”

“No!” Eris snapped at his attempted kindness. “Stop talking. Your idea, remember?”

Darragh's already precipitous patience became a sudden avalanche of anger. “I gave you permission to punch me in the face again. Shall I hand you a knife?”

“Oh, don't get overdramatic on me,” Eris spat, then remembered to check her volume. “You can see what happened, and I'm sure you can guess why. I don't have to tell you how I *feel* about it. You couldn't possibly understand.”

“I couldn't—?” He brought a hand to his lower abdomen at the memory of pain. “No, of course not, it's not the same. Never mind.” He tried to resume his work, but his hands were shaking so he stepped back and turned away. I knew all about the horror he'd been through, and maybe it wasn't the same, but he'd been so young.

Eris hadn't missed it. “So, you aren't just spouting off nonsense to prove you empathize?”

“You do know what ‘*never mind*’ means?” Darragh snapped.

“Yes, it means you’re lying to me.” Eris narrowed her gaze as Darragh touched a row of buttons on the computer console, several times in succession. Maybe it looked a little mental-breakdownish to her, but I recognized the tactic as a calming one. “Something terrible happened to you.”

“You have no idea,” Darragh scoffed darkly. He turned back to resume treating her wounds as abruptly as he’d left.

“Tell me, then.” She didn’t touch him but indicated to his abdomen with her open palm. “Tell me this one. I mean it. Tamas says I need to see past your arrogant act and try to understand you, so give me something to work with here.”

“Why should I?” Darragh continued his work with forced focus. “Just because you’d rather hear me talk about me than have to talk to me about you?”

“Yes.” Eris touched the device to get his attention. “Please.”

Darragh’s distressed countenance softened at her urgency. I wondered if he would tell her. He’d kept his past a secret from everyone until recently. And yet, I knew Darragh would do almost anything to help someone else in need, including placing their needs above his own. It only took a few moments.

“The Kyvan attacked a transport ship I’d stowed away on. Everyone on board was either killed or. . .worse.” He sucked in a breath and redirected. “A Kyvan warrior stabbed me with a probe to find out if my DNA might be suitable for initiating Kyvan regeneration protocol.”

“I don’t know what that means.” Lieutenant Rhuick seemed to understand the gravity but not the details. I felt

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the same.

“Kyvan don’t reproduce – not the way most species do.” Darragh lifted Lieutenant Rhuick's arm and rested it on his own shoulder to treat her side. “They inject their regeneration protocol into their victims and, through a process even I have yet to completely understand, rewrite the victim’s base DNA into Kyvan DNA and discard the rest.”

I covered my mouth to hide my gasp. Darragh hadn't mentioned those horrific details before.

“Obviously you weren’t compatible,” Eris said.

“Oh, I’m sure I – Oh, my –” He stopped working for a moment, covered his mouth with his hand. Something had struck him a mental blow, not necessarily in a bad way. “I never considered what the combined result might have been. Thank you for that perspective shift.” He paused, shook off the thought, and resumed. “In any case, I killed the Kyvan before it had the chance to read the probe.”

“Good for you.”

“Yes, I suppose.” He sounded unsure. “That act remains one of the defining moments of my childhood, along with witnessing the murder of my best friend within the same ten-second time span.”

“You’re right, I had no idea.”

He glanced up from his work. “Just because you can’t see my scars doesn’t mean I don’t carry them with me constantly.”

“No one's going to miss seeing mine.” Eris looked down. Her cheeks flushed again. Darragh said nothing, but continued to work on her injuries, and finally she began to talk. “The alien who purchased me, the one who owned the bar, let’s just say he wanted to get to know me better and I

resisted. Due to our lack of communication, I have to assume this was his way of letting me know he didn't appreciate the dents I made in a couple of his body parts."

"Good for you," Darragh repeated her praise with purpose.

"I suppose," she echoed his prior response. "Except I've already been playing catch-up with Tam's first wife. Monifa Nayir was so beautiful. And now look at me."

I hadn't expected such a heart-wrenching confession. My mother had been very beautiful, but Eris was beautiful too, in her own way.

"Lieutenant." Darragh gently lowered her arm and set the healing instrument down. He looked at her, not at her injured body, but at her still-flushed face. "May I call you Eris, just this once?"

"Yes," she replied, with forced patience.

"Eris, *I* can barely contain my anger that Putaktik did this to you, and I don't even like you."

"Oh, thanks," she retorted.

He raised a hand to show he hadn't finished, yet he didn't speak for a moment. "But knowing if you hadn't stepped up back on Rift Watcher it could have been *Onnie* in that prison cell?" Darragh faltered but he forced out the words. "This assault you survived...it would have *killed* her."

I fought tears. That must have been the worst-case-scenario he had hidden from her earlier: if she was Earther, she'd be dead. If she hadn't challenged Marin to take her instead of my brother and me, *I* would be dead. Lieutenant Rhuick had saved my life!

And Darragh was falling apart over it.

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“Oh,” Eris said, subdued. “I see.”

Darragh nodded, still visibly flushed. “Captain Nayir will love you all the more for enduring this for his daughter’s sake.”

I could have hugged Darragh then and there. He’d done it. He’d finally said the right thing.

This time they stayed silent until Darragh had sealed the last of her injuries and set the instrument on the table beside her bed.

“That’s the best I can do for now.”

“Thank you.” She pulled on her shirt and rose. “Sorry to interrupt your work.”

“Oh, it is my pleasure to serve.” Darragh nodded slightly. “Even when it isn’t.”

Eris huffed. It was almost a laugh. “Do you always have to be so unpleasant?”

“It tends to keep me out of lingering social situations,” he replied, adding an exaggerated smirk.

“A useful tool, then. Sounds familiar.” Eris walked to the door but stopped before it opened and turned back. “You know, Doctor, your relationship advice isn’t as bad as you think.”

She didn’t wait for him to respond before she departed the room.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C R Simper was raised seven miles north of a small town, with two sisters, thirteen dogs, and an open sky painted every night with billions of stars. This unharried childhood allowed time for much reading, which led into a desire to create stories of worlds beyond her own.

She is a member of the American Night Writer's Association. She has two published short stories in the Steampunk genre. Besides writing, she works as a receptionist and has a passion for genealogy research.

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Onnie Nayir's quest to find her brother continues with the help of new friends. The *Blackjack's* journey towards a frozen prison planet is fueled by speculation and hope—with the added bonus of new enemies close on their tail.

As Darragh's focus on the rescue details borders on obsessive, Onnie suspects his not-so-secret concern for her happiness could be the reason—but it's not the only one. The long journey has already dredged up several shadows from his past. Are there still more?

The planet ahead could present more questions than answers, including the important one no one's thought to ask: Who is really in charge on this side of The Rift?

“CR Simper delivers again! *The Last Edenite* kept me spellbound and turning pages well into the night.”

Betsy Love, author of the *StarBride Chronicles*.

