

HIS FATHER'S SON

By Raina James
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Michael's feet hit the floor with a soft thud. His toes curled away from the cool, smooth surface, bare soles squeaking lightly across the polished wooden planks as he scurried from his room to the one across the hall. His mother murmured sleepily as he jumped onto her bed and burrowed beneath the hand-stitched quilt. Her arm wrapped around his waist, settling him into the familiar curve of her body.

“Michael? What are you doing up, sweetie?”

“Can't sleep.” He slipped his arm around her neck and nuzzled the warm space between her throat and shoulder, giggling when she shivered at the press of his cold nose.

“When can we leave for Gramma's?”

She wasn't fooled. “Michael, Daddy's not coming down for two more days. We don't have to leave until tomorrow.” He sighed glumly. Two days? That was forever.

“But ...” The smile he heard in his mother's voice made his heart jump with excited hope. “I suppose Gramma won't mind if we go to her house tonight instead. Then we can have a nice visit—” She broke off as Michael whooped. His kiss, aimed at her cheek, landed on the corner of her eye. Then he was up, bouncing on the bed. Normally, she would have told him to stop, that beds weren't for jumping on, and to get down before he fell and cracked his head open. Laughing, she made only a half-hearted attempt to stop him.

“Michael. Michael, come on now—” He didn't hear the phone ringing in the living room, but she did. He didn't hear the sudden tension in her voice as she said, in her I'm-serious voice, “Settle down, Michael.” He stopped jumping, but only for as long as it took her to leave the room to answer the phone. Yes! They'd go to Gramma's house, then they'd go to the 'port where the shuttles were, and then Daddy'd be there ...

The scream hit him like a sudden slap. Michael jerked, his terror instant and instinctive. “M-Mommy?” He scrambled off the bed, moving too fast for his short legs, crying out when the clumsy jump sent him falling to the floor. Ignoring the pain of skinned knees, he raced to the door, yelling for his mother. The sound of her screams, throbbing and pain-filled, washed over him. He wanted to lift his hands to his ears, but knew it wouldn't help. It only got louder, and louder, until he was screaming too.

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Commander Michael Hatfield's eyelids opened. He could feel the scream, trapped in his throat, trying to get out. He could still hear it. No. That wasn't a scream. The automatic alarm.

Conditioning kept him unmoving in his berth as every muscle tensed in primitive response to the threat to his ship, *The Mirage*.

Battling instinct with intellect, Michael used a controlled movement to turn his head to the eye-level panel mounted in the bulkhead beside him.

Oh, shit. His lips formed the words before his mind fully grasped what his eyes were seeing. Then, as it registered, “Oh, *shit*.”

Moving with restrained urgency in the null gravity, Michael touched the belt at his waist. The sleeping harness retracted with a soft snick. He grabbed the rails to either side before his body could raise more than a few centimetres off the mattress and curled his knees to his chest. Using only the muscles of his upper arms, he spun to orient himself toward the closed hatch. A single flex sent him floating across the cabin to the lock's controls. His fingers danced over the pad, undogging the hatch from its emergency lock-down position.

The old nightmare – *memory* – forgotten, Michael's heart pounded in time with the ship's warning klaxon, urging him to a reckless hurry he couldn't give in to. Still, he pushed past the hatch as soon as it opened enough to let him through.

The dark, metallic passageway in front of him ended in a dim circle of light. The distance between his cabin and that circle of light seemed to grow with each rigidly controlled breath he took. Ladders ringed the black tunnel, their rungs providing convenient handholds on all sides; there was no up or down in space, no floor, no ceiling.

Michael reached for the nearest rung and, hand-over-hand, sent his body hurtling down the corridor, his eyes locked on the full moon of light at the other end. It waxed bigger in his vision as he bulletted toward it, far exceeding the Service's null-gravity speed regulations. His right hand scrabbled ahead, then caught the smooth metal rim that circled the portal. His arm felt as though it would rip from its socket, but his fingers clenched. He used the forward momentum to pivot through the doorway and around the lip to land, flat-footed, on the bulkhead, knees bent, hands braced, ready to move again in an instant.

There was barely enough room on the bridge for Michael's station amid all the panels, gauges, screens, keyboards and levers. But this was the heart that pumped life into *The Mirage*, the mind that controlled the ship's ears, eyes and limbs.

Gone were the quiet, steady patterns that had filled the screens since he'd left base. The strobing warning lights lit the small cabin like a chaotic rainbow gone wild, pulsing to the siren's shrill beat.

Michael stared at the main display in numb comprehension.

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The Technicolor lightshow flashed on the dance floor, catching the clubbers in a kaleidoscope of snapshot-like poses of frenetic movement.

The illusion wasn't as obvious at the collection of tables they'd commandeered, but it was enough to make Michael squint as Kev leaned forward to yell, "Hey, Mike! You know you're a hero, right?" Masculine hoots and guffaws erupted around the table, briefly overpowering the pounding bass that was as heavy inside the Miami nightclub as the humidity was outside.

Michael grinned and saluted his friend with his bottle of water. "Just doing my duty, guys." The self-deprecating comment was greeted with good-natured insults and opinions. Michael's grin faded a bit around the edges as he looked at Laura. Her own smile didn't reach her eyes; they were as sad and scared as they'd been since his orders had come down. But she was trying. As if she knew what he was thinking, she glanced down, hiding her expression behind a swing of smooth brown hair.

After that, it wasn't long before he was accepting rough slaps on the back and the odd, awkward hug. Then he gathered Laura to his side and took her home.

She didn't look at him as he held the door open for her, concentrated instead on putting her tiny clutch purse and light wrap away in the closet. Silently, Michael closed and locked the front door.

“Laura. Honey.” He couldn't stop himself from running his palm over her hair, smoothing it down her back to her waist. It was never easy for the wives and husbands left behind, especially in cases like his. Scouts were always under communications silence while on a mission. What hurt Laura the most was that he'd chosen this. “You know I have to do this. My Dad—”

She turned, caught his hand, and brought it to her lips. “I know, Michael.” Her words were a whispered caress against his palm. Then she pressed up against him, dragged him down, fed from his mouth as if she was starving and he was her life.

In their room, she rose above him, beautiful. Wild. Powerful. “You will come back to me, Michael.”

“Yes, I will.” He was just as fierce when he rolled, taking her down into the fire with him.

Later, when he thought she slept, he held her slender body close, tracing his fingertips over her delicate skin. “I will.” And he stared at the glowing red numbers of the clock on his night table as the minutes to dawn flickered away.

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Michael's eyes skimmed over the bridge, mind assessing the information scrolling across the main display screen and flashing urgently from others. With a practiced manoeuvre, he kicked off from the bulkhead, caught the handhold on the back of his chair and spun into the seat. While the fingers of one hand worked at fastening the chair's restraints over his shoulders and hips, the others flew over the controls set in the armrest. The klaxon died mid-cry, making the silence seem like an alarm all its own. Michael focused on the numbers and images *The Mirage* threw at him.

His heart lurched and his fingers paused as the message flashed onto the screen's impersonal face – and stayed there. Michael drew a ragged breath in through his nose. Eyes never leaving the damning screen, his hand lifted, as though in slow motion, to flick the hard, plastic cover on his armrest up and away. Freed from its blinder, the red button gleamed like a demon's eye.

Regulations were stringent on exactly what situations – and only those situations – the emergency override was to be used. It would wipe the ship's computer and, for as long as *The Mirage* had so much as a trickle of power, send a continuous transmission back to base. If the hull or any of the docks were breached, the self-destruct sequence would initiate. Only a transmission from a senior intelligence officer at control could stop it, but he knew it wouldn't reach him, not here, not in time.

Michael extended his index finger, touching the red button with the same tenderness he'd used to trace Laura's brow, her cheekbones, her lips. Closing his eyes, Michael breathed a few words no one but he could hear – and pushed the button.