

Leona Bestolie Saying Goodby to Caline

(continued from Galaxy Dancer)

I. Christie

Chapter 1

Amant

Leona Bestolie glanced up from her travel brochure to the monitor attached to her seat. They were far enough from Portia's Space Station above the planet Avan that *Earl Gray*, a passenger space cruise liner she had called home for over ten years, could no longer be distinguished from the other docked ships. Not wanting to think of what she was leaving behind she switched the channel to a galaxy news station, then tucked the brochure into her travel pack in the seat next to her. She had originally placed her pack on the seat to prevent any passenger looking for chatty companionship from sitting next to her. The seats across from her were far enough away she could ignore the passengers, unless their legs were too long.

I might as well get a dose of reality since I'm going to be just one among all the other civilians.

The newscast was showing scenes of a recent bombing and endless interviews of the victims' families, and people that knew them. It became a tragic drama that kept being replayed with no new input. Disgusted, she tuned the station to a music channel, and leaned back to think while music played softly. She closed her eyes to focus on inside matters.

So, why does Caline want to see me? "Heard you were retiring. Stop by and say hello. CCC" is not giving a hint at what she wants. So like her.

Lonnie brushed at whatever it was that was tickling her forehead. Her eyes remained closed as she tried to picture what Caline would look like these days. Annoyed she brushed her face again and this time caught a hand as it drew away.

Sitting up startled, she held tightly to the captured hand, her finger resting on a spot that would paralyze the owner's offending appendage if such action was needed.

Kudhitea Muto grinned at her. After his hand was released, he took the seat across from her, tossing his own kit onto the seat next to him. Lonnie merely nodded, not trusting the strangers around them.

Muto gestured at the other passengers. "Part of the family," he informed her.

Lonnie looked around. Glancing back at him she could see a smirk on his face. Curious but not ready yet to get involved in outside matters she let the silence between them lengthen.

Inwardly she sighed at her curiosity. "So, where are you heading off to?" She was hoping it was neutral enough to get a short answer.

"Amant. We're all going there." His grin grew wider. "There's some serious whispers going around that it will be the next big terrorist hit. We're heading out there to blend in with the locals and see if we can prevent a slaughter."

"None of you are going to blend in with the natives." *That explains why I was able to catch a shuttle so quickly to Amant. But Amant is a closed society except for a few cities they've opened for intergalactic trade.*

He looked at her surprised. "You ask why and you yourself are headed there?"

"I'm visiting a friend, not to join some crazy army."

If her expression was not so serious he would have laughed at her. She really looked like she had no intention of involving herself in the capture of a person that had a contract out on her. He leaned forward to mock her. "You're visiting a contact."

She let out an exasperated sigh. "It could be for a friendly chat, Muto. I'm not a soldier. All I do is observe and report what I see. I was lucky I didn't get killed on *Earl Gray* or cause anyone else harm in that raid."

He decided to ignore her disparaging remarks about herself. For a civilian, she did very well. "She'll probably ask you to dance. Once someone's seen you dance, it's hard to resist not asking. She has seen you dance, right?" He watched her eyes as she rolled them dramatically.

Lonnie resisted crossing her arms in annoyance. "Then I'll dance. I like dancing. The only thing new is that I don't have to worry about an agent telling me I'm costing lost revenue by giving away my talents."

Muto rested his head on the headrest, almost closing his eyes.

"Why *are* you going?" Lonnie asked.

"I'm your bodyguard. You still have a contract out on you." He opened his eyes. "I can't imagine what he has against you."

"Who?" she asked bewildered.

"Br'Mon."

"Oh." She sighed and shrugged her shoulders irritably. "I heard myself referred to as a pebble in his shoe he wished to get rid of."

Both were quiet for a while and then Lonnie resumed. "His personal attacks against me have been nil for the last four years."

"Uncle said you were attacked by a catperson on UrBoka," Muto disagreed.

Lonnie shook her head. "That attack was to disfigure me, not kill me." Lonnie frowned. "I don't want to think about who could be behind that. I would rather just move on with my life."

"What if whoever is responsible does it again?"

"I'm not a threat to anyone. I left the entertainment business."

"You think your agent is responsible for the attempts on your life?" Muto asked surprised.

"*Someone* was hired to make sure I did as I was told — to quit the business and disappear. It could be anyone interested in forwarding Kali's career or nothing to do with her at all." She gave a small disappointed sigh. "Who would have known that by my meeting with the great Diva Kali Maxine it would change my whole life?" Her voice had a touch of sarcasm, but her dark eyes were sad.

Having nothing more to say, Muto napped.

Lonnie flipped through the channels, her thoughts elsewhere. She went over possible scenarios of why Caline could be asking her to visit. It had to have something to do with why her fellow passengers were headed to Amant. She could refuse participating, but she didn't want to. That scared her about herself. It was one thing to play at dangerous sports and another thing all together to face terrorists, as she found with the pirate takeover of the *Earl Gray*. So, what was so different about then and now? Was it because she was so intent on saving Kali?

Reviewing her motives and what she was willing to admit about herself, she decided that was not the only reason. She had practiced the stealth drills hundreds of times physically and mentally for the last ten years, trying to overcome an elusive fear she had of either being chased

by bad guys or being captured. What made her handle the pirates boarding different from the catperson's attack on her?

Now that was a harder one. What was the difference? Maybe it was because the catperson attack was personal and the pirate take over involved the whole ship, as well as kidnapping Kali for a drug hoodlum.

So why was she interested in this mess on another planet? Midlife crisis? Maybe it would be less stressful if she waited to see just what Caline wished to speak to her about. It may have little or nothing to do with the other passengers traveling to Amant.

Or, was she depressed about parting with someone she knew she was in love with and may never see again? There was no doubt that that was affecting her mood. But was that making her suicidal?

Well, maybe that was being over dramatic.

She blinked her eyes a few times at that thought, using her fingertip to flick away a stray tear from the corner of her eye, annoyed.

The music channel had switched to Entertainment news. Diva Kali Maxine appeared on stage with a young man. De Erich Bettelheim, her agent didn't waste time in getting her to a multi-channel simulcast performance, not even an hour after they disembarked from their ten-month tour. Kali must have been whisked off the ship minutes after they parted.

Lonnie glanced at the clock. Three hours ago, they had said goodbye.

"She's beautiful," a voice chirped. Lonnie glanced over to the row of seats across from her. Two women were watching their monitors.

"If I were given the chance to spend the night with her, I would take it," her companion said.

The other laughed. "You? You like guys too much. I hear she leaves her lovers wrung out to dry. But for a one-night romantic tussle with her, I wouldn't mind," her friend admitted. "The way she dances I know she's passionate in bed." The two women hummed in agreement.

Another passenger snorted. "She needs a good man. You two would never be able to give her what she needs."

"What's that, Tlac?" one of the women asked smirking.

"A firm hand?" the other asked giggling.

"Firm everywhere. You two are too wimpy."

The three laughed.

The Diva was dancing a tango with her partner, and he looked like he knew what he was doing, but Kali still out shined him. Lonnie switched the channel, not wanting to see anymore.

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"Lonnie. Time to get going." A hand touched her gently on the shoulder.

Lonnie woke quickly, looking about her. The other passengers were beginning to prepare to disembark.

"I'll be keeping my eyes on you." His finger brushed Lonnie's hand, and Lonnie used the same hand to scratch her throat, moving the small chip that would track her.

"I hope you have a boring job," she returned.

Lonnie took her guitar case that he had pulled from the baggage loft for her. She moved her pack to her back and held the guitar case to her chest as they shuffled out the shuttle. Stepping through the lock she looked around at the enormity of space in the landing bay. Small bots were moving along and either pushing or tugging containers to an allotted space. Huge cranes hung overhead and stacks of containers forming high walls sat waiting for their next journey. Smells mingled from manufactured scented air, the smell of working machinery, and the odor of workers reminded her of many spaceports she had visited.

Fellow passengers quickly disembarked and disappeared into the shadows leaving her alone. A thin figure wearing a Rudian uniform for law enforcement was studying the people as they passed by him with interest. He looked like he was expecting someone. As Lonnie neared the officer, his eyes caught hers. Lonnie instantly recognized the likeness he bore to Cornol Caline.

Lonnie angled her walk towards him.

He reached for her bag with a wide smile. "Dama Bestrolie. It's my honor and pleasure to meet you. I'm Betrad Mafun. Commander Cornol's brother...the youngest," he added when Lonnie's brow wrinkled trying to compare his youth to Caline's age. "My sister is the eldest of eleven."

"Pleased to meet you, Betrad Mafun." Lonnie easily relinquished her guitar case and then her backpack. She was tired of having to carry her bags already. Traveling was no problem with her. Luggage made it cumbersome.

Mafun easily lifted her two pieces of luggage and moved quickly to another waiting uniformed officer, also a Rudian. Since it was their planet and they were particular where nonnatives visited, she assumed all their official positions on the spaceport would be Rudians. That was an unusual practice since most space stations welcomed visitors and their businesses and tried to give some semblance of an intergalactic community among the spaceport employees.

He accepted the bags and had them secured by the time Mafun and her were seated in the police shuttle.

The ship took off with a tremendous kick and quickly flew out of the hanger and around to the left of the space station. The chair restraints held her firmly in place, so she didn't feel batted around or any ill effects from the gravity.

"Sister Caline asked that we pass the abandoned station to give you a glimpse of it. She thought you might like to see it," Mafun explained. "It's quite impressive."

It only took them twenty minutes to arch around the planet and find the once bustling spaceport and shopping mall hanging in space. It was gutted and ready for the final dismantling of its ribbed structure.

"Do you have curious people stopping to explore?" Lonnie asked.

"All the time. We have extra security bots that we've had to arm with something stronger than verbal warn-offs."

They watched the screen as the ship circled around the structure. It was eerie staring at a huge arrangement of rib joints in the middle of space with tiny lights and energy beams forming a protective shield around it to prevent anyone from entering into the remains.

Lonnie idly wondered how the terrorists could use something like this. Even if they blew it up, by the time the metal reached the atmosphere of the nearest planet, it would be melted from reentry. Lonnie leaned closer to her monitor, clicking the controls to get a better view of a portion of the structure.

"Looks like it's not entirely deserted," she mentioned.

"There's a five-person garrison maintained to keep the curious out. One small cell was left intact until the last of the structure is hauled away; however, a last-minute reprieve has everything on hold. There's a bidder for what's left so the dismantling has been halted."

"Looks dangerous to haul around," Lonnie said.

"With today's technology, anything is possible. But whoever buys it won't expect it to reach its destination overnight. I would image with the new alloy for building bulkheads, they can take the bare bones of what's left and start a new city."

"That makes sense. That way they didn't have to pay for the deconstruction costs and removal."

The pilot sent a hail to the guard station.

"Sometimes when we go by, we can see them playing tag along the inside rails. I just hope they don't do something stupid and go to the outside beams without tethers," Mafun said.

Another ten minutes passed before the pilot let them know they were approaching their destination.

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From the screen, Lonnie could see a shuttle landing before them on a private landing pad near an irregular shaped lake. Housing structures surrounded the lake, set apart by the same distance from the lake, and each other. Around the lake was a pale color of what Lonnie thought was grass, then a path, then a darker color of ground cover.

"Looks like we've arrived right on time," Mafun commented. Their ship came to a rest alongside of *Faulun*, a small shuttle with a police emblem on the side.

"Welcome Little Brother," Caline signed to her kin.

"Honor to you and your family, Elder Sister. All is quiet at the graveyard."

"Good. Welcome Lonnie to my family home. Did Little Brother's flying keep you pressed in your seat?" The way she tossed her head in his direction, she knew it was meant as a tease.

"Elder Sister," he began with mock dignity, "I have a pilot that does all the work. At my rank, I have no need to pilot a craft."

Caline shook her head. "Some of these young ones, when you promote them too soon, it goes to their head and they do nothing, delegating their work to everyone else. But you're lucky he wasn't flying."

Caline was handed Lonnie's backpack, by the pilot who grinned at the exchange.

"This young officer that he has blamed for the flying, is a cousin from my father's side. Provided he isn't spoiled by Little Brother, he will become a good officer."

Lonnie accepted her guitar case. Little brother and cousin gave Caline a salute and Lonnie a wave and then departed. Once they cleared the tree line a grand display of aerobatics was performed.

"That's Little Brother flying. He transferred out of the Air Academy to Planet Security a few years ago and every now and then has to prove even a shuttle can be put through some impressive paces."

The two women exchanged smiles.

"I'm glad you took me up on my offer for a visit, Lonnie," Caline said. She looked at the guitar case with interest. "A new career? I would like to hear you play."

"A hobby. Later tonight if we aren't too tired, I'll play a few pieces if you'll join me."

Caline nodded. She did feel tired. With the terrorist threat level raised, she was working longer hours, going over every weak area in Amant's security, and not feeling she had enough time or people to protect their fragile ecosystems.

"This is your primary home?" Lonnie looked around the area as they walked up the winding path to a three-story building on stilts.

"Yes."

"I see you have a path around the lake. Do you still run?" Lonnie asked.

"Yes. But I suggest you don't go out without one of us accompanying you. There are beasties in the lake that would find you a tasty meal."

"Why do you live here if it's so dangerous?" Lonnie followed her up the stairs and onto a wide deck where they paused so Lonnie could admire the view. She noticed there were no docks or watercraft in the lake.

"We're too bitter for them and not much to eat, even as a snack. Now you, you've got enough juice and meat to keep one of them quiet for a season."

"Is there a reason you asked me to visit?" Lonnie asked.

"It's not to feed the beasties of the lake," she laughed. "You're a guest and guests aren't fed to any of the wildlife, at least not in this day and age."

"Thanks for the assurance. Do they climb stairs?"

"No. They don't go far from their water source and they can't wiggle upstairs." She turned to grin at her guest and then confessed, "Notice the light-colored grass between the lake and path. That's poisonous to them. It gets stronger with the darker shade around the homes. It's a reminder that the land is ours and the water theirs."

"So, they're an intelligent species."

"Depends what you measure intelligence with. They don't build cities, they don't overpopulate, they're territorial even amongst their own, and have a sweet tooth for the lake urchins that would otherwise over populate the lake and wipe out the lake's ecological balance."

"You pick a strange place to have your home."

"It's not the wilderness, Lonnie. Civilization is just over that slope," she teased.

"I hope I don't have nightmares of something I'm not friendly with, wiggling into my bed," Lonnie said.

"Won't happen here."

"If I remember right, your people sleep close to the ceiling, while folks like me, a few feet above the floor."

Caline laughed as she pulled open a door that led into a hallway. Doors were on either side of the corridor. Lonnie was shown into her room that had a see-thru door onto the balcony overlooking the lake. Caline pushed open the door so fresh air could enter.

Even if there were not any boats sailing on the lake, the sounds from creatures Lonnie couldn't see lend to it a peaceful atmosphere.

"We have an exercise room downstairs that has all the latest gadgets that can give you the best workout. My eldest can show you how it works if you can't figure it out yourself."

Lonnie nodded. *Well, for whatever reason she asked me here, it's not going to be a one nighter.*

"Get yourself settled and come up the stairs at the end of the hall to the kitchen. I'll fix us something to eat. I can tell you're hungry. Your eyes get pale."

"I always thought you could tell because my stomach rumbled."

"That too."

Lonnie unpacked her guitar to see if it traveled well. She also unpacked her few days of clothing, shaking them out and putting them through the clothes press. Looking around her room she knew it was a guest room and not for a Rudian. It had a thick mattress and the bed was only knee high off the floor. Rudian beds levitated close to the ceiling and were made of something that was only inches wider than they.

Lonnie closed the closet where she tucked away her guitar case and headed to the winding stairs that would take her to another level of the house. She could hear music above her.

"Hungry?" Caline asked as she caught sight of her entering the dining area. Caline added another platter of food to the table.

Lonnie's eyes opened wide at all the food. For the size of a Rudian, it always was surprising to others that they consumed so much food, but even what was on the table was a lot for two people.

"My husband, Os, will be on time for dinner tonight. A first. And he did say it's only because he's afraid he won't be able to see you again. He thinks you're going to leave tomorrow."

"And I won't?" Lonnie sat where Caline indicated.

Caline gave that bemused smile that first got Lonnie curious about who Caline was, over twenty years ago.

"I guess I won't." She placed her hands flat on the table, a custom with Rudians.

Caline said her blessing over the food and for both their health and then pointed to a platter. "That's your favorite. Better help yourself now because Os loves them too. He'll eat the whole thing if you don't get to it first. I don't know where he developed the taste for something so unRudian."

Rudians did not wait for everyone to arrive to a meal. If you were not present when the meal was ready, you had to be satisfied with the leftovers. They both heard a ding and then a sound of movement. A taller copy of Caline stepped into the dining area.

"Jemp! What are you doing home from school?" Caline sounded more disturbed than happy to see one of her children.

Jemp bowed toward Lonnie respectfully. "Dama Bestrolie, I'm Jemp, number two son, and so honored and pleased to meet you." He glanced at his mother smiling. "I heard who your

guest for dinner was." His eyes shone brightly as he gestured to the table. "May I join your supper, Mother?"

"Of course! Lonnie, this is number two son, Jemp. Jemp, this Dama Leona Bestrolie. You had better be on your best behavior with me or else. No more cracks about my manners. Like I'm going to starve my children because they don't write their mother from college regularly and don't call home to say how they're doing?" she huffed. "How did you hear so quickly?" she asked suddenly.

"Father. I stopped at his office." Jemp grinned at his mother and then nodded to the seat next to Lonnie.

"Go ahead and sit there," his mother told him. "It's not like you have to fight anyone else for the seat." She turned to Lonnie, "His father teaches at the University so Os is the one that has to give me updates on our children, otherwise I only hear from them on holidays, and it's to say they're busy and won't be home."

"Mother's exaggerating," Jemp informed Lonnie. "We invite her to our holiday trips, but she and father think they're too old for our crowd."

Caline made a face and then laughed with Jemp.

Jemp's happy face turned serious. "I have seven shows of yours," he said. "That's all I could get a hold of on the Galaxy Net, at a reasonable price anyway. You don't happen to know where I can get the rest, do you?"

Lonnie looked at him surprised. Jol Hrorian the Chief Purser of Entertainment on the liner *Earl Gray* that she had worked on for ten years had made a habit of recording his entertainers and selling copies to the passengers with the performers getting a percentage of the profit. Lonnie had not cashed out of the account since CPE Hrorian had told her her recordings were popular and people were still ordering copies of her shows. She imagined it was the last season when the Diva Maxine Kali danced with her that were selling so well. Since each day the show varied, she imagined that Jol Hrorian was busy with his recordings.

"I'll give you CPE Jol Hrorian's mail addy and you can ask him. He handles the recordings."

"I would appreciate it." He gave his mother a triumphant look.

"Well, how was I to know?" she asked. "It's not like I know her business." She turned to the door for a moment and then beamed a smile at them. "I hear my heart's arrival."

Lonnie smiled. Rudian's referred to their mates as 'heart'. It certainly did not have the same meaning as to other species.

Three other Rudian's entered the room.

"Everyone comes home on the cook's day off. Good thing I've made enough. Everyone go wash up...you too Jemp. I didn't hear you wash your hands."

Caline gestured to the platter again. "For sure we need to help ourselves now. There will be nothing left with the likes of those four."

Dinner was filled with sounds of people eating and questions being asked of Lonnie about what it was like to travel on a space cruise liner and visit various spaceports. After dinner, they went down to the lake for a walk.

"Walk on the inside," Caline instructed Lonnie. "The children will walk near the water to prevent any misunderstandings with our water neighbors."

Lonnie glanced at the placid lake, noticing that not even insects hovered near the surface.

"Can you feel anything?" Os asked her, gesturing to the lake.

"It doesn't seem to have..." The sudden change from placid to churning had Lonnie stopping in her tracks. Yet her sight showed that the lake surface was calm.

Os nodded pleased. "Most off-worlders don't feel that disturbance."

"There are city dwellers that don't feel it," Jemp mentioned.

"When the beastie's come out of the water, though it usually will not bother a native, it will scare an off-worlder if they see it." Caline pointed at a dark apparition that caused no disturbance over the surface of the lake.

"Why doesn't it move the water?" Lonnie asked.

"It's still below the surface. It sends out a feeler to see what is walking along it's boundary. The beasties won't bother to move unless it's worth their effort."

"That's scary enough," Jemp laughed.

"What do you see?" Os asked Lonnie.

"A dark cloud but I can see through it. It's like a spirit only dark."

Caline nodded. "We see something different."

"What's that?" Lonnie asked.

"A tentacle," Jemp said.

"Small lights," Os said.

"A cloaked figure," Caline said.

"Everyone sees it differently," Os explained. "It's not a visual sense so it's more of how your brain interrupts the signals or waves of energy the beasties put out."

"I'm not sure I get what you mean," Lonnie said.

"Wave lengths," Jemp chimed in. "Like ultraviolet, x-ray, electromagnetic, or cadmarine."

"Cadmarine is a wavelength Rudian's see," Os said, "but still everyone witnesses the beings different from others."

"It's like interpreting a musical piece," Jemp said.

When they returned from their walk, everyone produced a musical instrument and settled in the front room that was on the top floor. The jam session didn't last long since Caline and Lonnie were tired, but it was well worth the experience for Lonnie.

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The next morning Caline stayed home from work and showed Lonnie around town. For lunch, they sat at an outside table to avoid stares by some Rudians that took offense that an off-worlder was in one of their eating establishments.

"So, what have you planned for the next few months of your life?" Caline asked.

"I'm going to visit a few friends before I settle on some property I purchased."

"That's really nice to hear. Everyone should have a home."

Lonnie looked embarrassed. "Well, it's not built yet. I have this idea of what I would like and I'm still conversing with my builder via telecast. So far, he and his family haven't walked the property yet. It's..." Lonnie shrugged her shoulders.

"Meaning you're going to be traveling about until you actually get used to not having to travel."

Lonnie smiled ruefully. "Something like that. So, why am I really here?"

"For a few reasons. One was that I wanted to make sure you were okay with me getting you involved in the Service."

"You aren't serious, are you? Why would I be upset with you? You recruited me, yes, but I willingly signed on, and had a far better life than if I had returned to my family."

"Yes, you did, but you know, you never really retire out of something like the Service. You can go onto the inactive list, but once an operative, you'll always have that on your record that someone will pick up on, no matter how classified the information is."

"I know."

"Have you thought about going in for further training?"

"What would I need it for if I'm on the inactive list?"

"To protect yourself. There's always new techniques and technology to keep up with. It'll keep you sharp for if you should have to fend for yourself in that outback you're settling on."

"Was that a guess at where I'm settling?"

"It's a no brainer, Lonnie. You've always been private, letting in only a few that have proved their worth and you have more fun at the property of that outback doctor friend of yours than anywhere else."

"You make me sound like one of those book characters."

"So, what are you going to do about the bad guys?" Caline persisted.

"There's always going to be bad guys," Lonnie agreed. "But living far from crowds, I'm planning on keeping a low profile."

"You're still on a hit list."

"Br'Mon," Lonnie said. "That's a curse if ever there was one on me."

"Yes." Caline gestured her to walk back to their transportation.

When she settled in her vehicle, she held her scanner out to see if it found any listening devices. "This went off when you mentioned his name," Caline explained.

"So, what's my role here?"

"You're visiting a friend. Just be yourself."

"You're not expecting trouble, are you?"

"I'm head of space security for the planet; surely you jest."

Lonnie sighed. "I'm going to trust that you'll let me know if my life is in danger."

"You're with me. What kind of trouble can touch you?"

"Caline, that's a challenge to the Ladies of Fates."

Caline grinned. "To a Rudian, it's boring to not have adventure in one's life."

"Can't you wait until I leave?"

"It wouldn't be polite to leave you out of the fun."

"Gods, but I wish you would just tell me."

"Don't *plan* on anything happening. Rumors aren't always dependable. Besides, you have me to protect you. Which reminds me, you got some good marks with your work on *Earl Gray's* pirate boarding. Are you looking for another job?"

"No," she said firmly. "And I want you to know, I was so scared I trusted no one. Not even my teammates, well, maybe Muto."

"But of course! You had spies on board. Lonnie, you're too worried someone is going to draft you into a job you don't want to do. Relax. I'm not drafting you or asking you to engage in anything. This is just a visit to a friend."

Lonnie gave a heavy sigh at the smirk she could have sworn flashed on Caline's face briefly.

"You're scaring me."

Chapter 2

Family Business is Deadly Business

The old terminal slowly orbited around Amant, no longer spinning to maintain artificial gravity. The passing unmanned guardbot noted the expected light flashing from the guard station was not given and immediately sent a report to base then proceeded to its next position to do a deeper investigation.

Ensign Petri was running tests to stay alert. An alarm went off on one of the consoles. Turning to see which guardbot was sending in a message he quickly hit the yellow alert and tapped a code to his CO.

"BCSE calling in a disturbance on Scare Crow." He paused as he read more of the G-bot readings. "I suggest a closer inspection, Captain. We have a secondary alarm from Scare Crow."

"I'll notify the commander. Stay on comm."

Commander Cornol Caline was having supper with Lonnie and hated the idea of being interrupted. Reluctantly she rose to answer the hailing. They had been discussing the latest terrorist attacks around the galaxy without having her husband or kids around to interrupt with *their* opinions. She was hoping Lonnie had heard more since she traveled throughout the galaxy and noticed more than the average citizen. Lonnie didn't believe Br'Mon would create problems in this part of space because Amant only had four cities on the planet open for intergalactic visitors.

Caline and the Service HQ disagreed. She was still deciding whether to tell her why when a call came in.

"Commander, BCSE, Ensign Petri picked up an alarm from a G-bot. No bioreadings."

"Sounds like RD. If it's a remote deployment there's an anomaly within a short radius to boost the signal. Find it. Scramble the fighters. I'll be joining the mother ship. Out."

"I read you, Commander. An armored shuttle is on the way to pick you up."

Caline turned to Lonnie. "I'm inviting you on a ride-along."

Lonnie rose to her feet quickly. "What's happening?" If it was terrorists, she would much rather be in a spaceship than on land. Spaceships moved faster out of harm's way and if it were a law enforcement ship, it had more power and protection than a civilian ship had. Also, if the ship

took a hit, it would be over immediately whereas on land, one could linger with those around you insisting on trying to save you.

"An alarm where there shouldn't be one. It's what we refer to as an Extraneous Security Breach, ESB. No logistical reason for an unidentified to enter this section of our space."

Caline opened a closet next to the door. "I'm glad to say that it doesn't matter your size for these space suits, otherwise, you'd be out of luck, though I doubt you'll need it."

It was like a gray cloak with an automatic fastener, and the helmet was recessed into the neckline. Lonnie was three times the size of a Rudian, and her head five times. The makers of the suits were from Orion Star System who specialized in products that adapted to the wearer, including species differences, if the wearer was not too different.

A shuttle was breaking through the protective bubble that surrounded the commander's property by the time they were dressed. They ran out to the landing pad with Caline running up the ramp before it was completely extended. She turned to secure the door behind Lonnie.

Lonnie dropped into the seat behind Caline and quickly strapped in. Sitting in the small pilot's area Lonnie could read the screens as they fed visual information to the pilot and Caline. Lonnie only half understood what it meant. She added another thing to her list of things she was going to learn, piloting all civilian crafts, including those designed for the Orilzi, who used thoughts to power their ships.

"This scan is showing the G-bot — that's guardbot to you civilians." Caline pointed to the screen in front of her that Lonnie was peering at. "It spotted an unrecognizable object. That's here."

Lonnie nodded.

"It's too small for taking out a cruise ship but not for damaging a tourist bus. We get, now and then, some influential tourists that want to see the structure up close and their guide will take them past the official line."

Lonnie shuddered at what could happen if it were a sonic bomb. It would dismantle smaller ships outer energy protection, and if they didn't have a redundant system recovery in place, it would then disengage all safeties on the exit hatches, causing them to open. It would be something a terrorist would use because terrorist liked to prey on the civilian population. Civilians were the easiest to overcome with fear and suppression; however, when riled, they

were like a tidal wave, crashing with so much force on everything in its path, not taking time to differentiate friend or foe.

After a few more minutes a new reading came up. "There do you think?" Lonnie pointed to a small dot that turned yellow.

"Too many active marshals and police drones in that area." She glanced at Lonnie. "I can feel a lot of crazy energy going on around here. It has that same feel when we met. Can you remember?" she asked softly. "Your curse is near," she said with certainty.

"Why do you think he's interested in your planet? You're not close enough to the trade routes. You're not a political power within the Union of Planets which he despises, and you don't even have what would be called a token number of non-natives residing on the planet surface to get him righteously angry."

"What do you know about him personally?"

"He doesn't offer any ultimatums, Caline. He contracts thugs to do the bloody work and sends out his soldiers to verify it was done. I don't think he has that many faithful Biaols to send out to die a martyr's death these days. Recruitment isn't easy when the youth are gainfully employed, there's a healthy middle class, seniors aren't left on a hillside to expire, but are cared for by their families or their communities until they die a natural death."

A soft beep caused Caline to glance at her pilot annoyed. "Lt. Hebner, why haven't you hailed the *Brazen* yet? They're asking for us to identify ourselves. And we're coming in to their aft too fast."

Something familiar buzzed in Lonnie's ears. "Bomb armed!" Detaching herself quickly from the harness, she scrambled from her seat, looking around frantically to see where the buzz was coming from, unconcerned about Caline who also moved into action.

Caline's upward movement caused the pilot's weapon's fire to hit the chair and panel next to her, sending out smoke and a burnt smell of singed bulkhead. Caline, proud of her reflexes, chopped the surprised pilot in the throat, rendering him unconscious if not dead. His weapon dropped to the floor.

Caline quickly secured him while keeping an eye on the screens. "At this speed we're going to bounce off their shields and get a quite a jolt, provided the shields... Oh, cretins. No shields, no communications ... did you find the bomb?"

"No!" Lonnie shouted back. Lonnie fumbled with another clasp holding police equipment, however when she had it opened, nothing was in the storage area. "Are you sure this is a police vehicle? I can't find anything in these storage racks...not even the bomb." *Blast! Where would it be that I can hear it so clearly.* "Speakers! It's under the console...I think!"

"The autopilot is locked. I can't override it. I find it hard to believe he was planning a suicidal flight," Caline said. "Rudian's aren't into suicide missions. There's got to be a safety somewhere!" She slammed her hand against a panel to break it open. It held fast.

Caline opened a repair panel and pulled out boards to interrupt their collusion course. Without warning, both women were thrown to the side as something physically changed their shuttle's direction.

"If you two want a lift off that shuttle, you better make it quick to the aft exit. We don't have much time," Muto's voice from the comm channel warned them.

Lonnie ran forward to Caline, grabbed her elbow, pulling her to the back exit.

"Who's that? It might be a trap," Caline objected.

"I'll take my chances," Lonnie told her, finding the exit portal to be locked. "Well," she gestured to the portal.

Caline tapped her code in. The portal didn't open, then all power went off, leaving both women grappling for a handhold as gravity left. The exit hatch slid open to the open hatch of another ship, and Lonnie pushed an off balance Caline through.

"Muto, get us out of here! There's a bomb on board!" Lonnie yelled as she slapped the hatch lock on the rescue craft when they were both safely aboard.

The smaller ship suddenly veered off, causing both women to hit the bulkhead with bruising impact; however, Lonnie was cushioned against Caline. It surprised Lonnie that Caline was like a firm but soft surface. They were pinned there from the acceleration until the atmosphere stabilized. Lonnie struggled to her feet and helped Caline to hers. Both women ran as best they could up the passageway toward the control pit.

"Sit down and strap yourselves in! You're in for a bumpy ride."

Muto had not finished the sentence when the ship lurched to the side and began to ride like a land vehicle on a slippery and bumpy road. Neither had strapped in and were clinging to the hand holds in the corridor too far away from the pilot's pit for Caline's comfort.

The ride could have been only a few moments but to both women it was too long. When the craft leveled off the two resumed their way to the pit.

"Hold on! You're in for another big one!"

"Did they get the *Brazen*?" Caline asked as the ship bucked as if something had exploded against its bulkheads. Lonnie quickly turned to her friend, grabbing her before she fell unconscious. A cut was oozing liquid from her scalp.

"Activate medical," Lonnie ordered, hoping it had a voice activated medical bot. The ship continued to move as if it had seizures while Lonnie held on. The medbot was not affected by the ship's movement and diagnosed and then applied its prescription to an unconscious Caline.

"Bed rest and quiet for the next four days," the bot recommended. The medbot had activated a force field over Caline holding her safe and immobile; however, Lonnie didn't benefit from it. Hand over fist, Lonnie pulled herself forward, along the handrails.

She pushed open the hatch to the pilot's pit and found it devoid of life. Lonnie dropped into one of the seats with the safety restraints immediately becoming active. She looked for something that said it was on autopilot.

"Just strap in! Let me guide her back to the planet," Muto instructed. *"Someone mined the area around the security ship and started shooting the mines. Idiots blew themselves up and the debris is what you're running into."*

"Just where are we headed?"

"The other side of the planet where it's quiet. Hold on! Looks like you have a tail...and then some."

Lonnie looked for anything on the console that would let her see what Muto was talking about.

"Pilot classes has just moved up to the top of my list. Muto, I want to see what's going on. Where's..."

The console came up with a panoramic view around the ship.

"Oh, great," she murmured. "Where's a gunners' turret when I need one."

"That's not going to happen. You don't even know what an on/off button is on a ship. Just sit tight," Muto replied.

Just beyond the flying debris something was on fire. It was unusual for any fire to exist in the vacuum of space, so Lonnie supposed oxygen from something was feeding it. Then suddenly it went out.

The ship began to slow down and veer to the left in an arc. At the same time, she felt a change of energy in the ship. It made her skin itch.

"Why are we heading towards the abandoned space port?" she asked Muto in surprise.

As the shuttle continued its change of direction a large blip appeared. It was a freighter, hiding in the darkness of the shell of the dismantled space city. All lights on their rescue ship's console went out. Lonnie felt blind without any information on the ship's screens.

"Talk to me Muto! What's going on?"

Not getting an answer, Lonnie ran to the back of the shuttle, touching the button to the side of her collar to engage the helmet, not knowing what she was going to do should whoever it was force open the ship's hatch. The itchy feeling stopped just as the ship clunked inside what Lonnie believed was inside a ship's cargo bay.

The hatch door slowly moved open as if it were being forced to open against its will.

Lonnie hooked the feet out from under the nearest person to the hatch opening then fought in panic as others poured in and overpowered her. A stun stick knocked the breath out of her, and she went down. She was beaten as she lay helpless and then dragged off the shuttle and dropped onto the freighter's deck. The helmet protected her from scraping her face but not the bruise on her forehead when her head slammed against the faceplate. Though the suit protected her from the effects of the beatings, it didn't do anything about her fear of being captured by those that meant to do her harm.

At first it was like a reflection in the faceplate, but after a few moments she realized she was watching what was going on around her with the assistance of a camera. Her capturers seemed to be waiting. There was a cheer going up as those around her parted. It was not a big crowd, her analytical side noted.

A small wizened Biall was holding tightly onto a thin stick that Lonnie knew gave painful shocks to whoever it was applied to. She had seen it used. He was shaking the stick at her and at the same time trying to remain standing. His squeals would put a human female to shame. She couldn't hear what he was saying, and by the looks of his followers, *they* couldn't understand

him either. She was thinking that was good for her, especially when two Biaols on each side of him led him away.

Oh, gods, but I think that's Br'Mon. I should have listened to Caline when she insisted Br'Mon was here. I hope he's having a heart attack.

Lonnie was rolled onto something flat and four people carried her to a cage not far from the shuttle. A prick on her neck sent her into oblivion.

Voices from close by were the first thing she was aware of. Her second awareness was that her arms and head were immobilized. Fortunately, her panic froze any movement from her until she could get her breathing controlled, and her thoughts brought to a more disciplined view on her situation.

Don't move, don't show I'm awake until I take assessment of my environment. Okay. My arms, head, legs...I can't move them. Is it from a nerve paralyzer or because I'm bound?

With effort, she willed movement to her fingers, toes, and her head, not knowing if, they did move. Consciously, she used her other senses to see what was around her.

Two different voices droned a chant. She recognized the language. It was a rough dialect of the nomad herders of Menzo. That brought a colorful memory back of Sr'Reba.

"It isn't enough to learn a language, you need to live in the atmosphere, and feel the pulse of the people that speak it," Sr'Reba had said many times to her foreign-born students. Many of the couriers were reluctant to attend the required classes. Lonnie loved the classes. She found two of the languages difficult, therefore a challenge. With Sr'Reba's assistance, she found a room to rent just outside of the Foreign Ambassadors Village. There wasn't much else that interested her on Menzo and being away from the gossip of the residents of the FA village was a relief. She was intrigued with the village's mixture of cultures. Sometimes there was a clash between Menzo's the various native cultures as well as with the foreigners.

The guards shifted their reciting, one speaking and then the other. She was not able to hear exactly what it was they were studying.

As she became more aware of how her body was feeling, she realized she was wearing a restraint collar, which in some subcultures was referred to as a slave collar.

Where are you Muto and Caline?

She began to panic again and spent long moments getting herself under control. Concentrating on her breath, she counted exhales and inhales until her heart was beating at a more normal rhythm.

Okay. I've heard about slave collars.

Oh, yeah, she heard about them all right. But it wasn't from a law enforcement source. This brought some humor to her situation. Vocal as well as physical movement was rewarded with pain. It was a fad among some of the BDSM crowd to have their slaves wear them. She had a friend who swore by them and bragged about how she kept her girlfriend in a quandary because she always found a way to get out of them. She passed the secret on to Lonnie.

The key to release it is set for a specific tone. When purchased they're all set to the universal key C minor. I wonder if these thugs know how to reset it or even that these are set in musical scales? Probably. It's their business.

Quick footsteps in her direction had her forcing her muscles and face to relax. She hoped they didn't expect her to be awake.

"Yo, there!" a voice demanded.

"Aie, Section Leader!" two voices chorused.

"Is she still out?"

There was a pause, "Yes, Section Leader."

"How is the Master?" another voice asked concerned.

"Resting. The excitement and disappointment have tired him."

"He shouldn't have trusted that sheet woman," one hissed.

"No woman should be trusted," the other spat.

"When she comes to, give her another shock. Keep her out until the Master Br'Mon calls for her."

"Section Leader, with the collar, she can't even move." His laugh didn't give any comfort to Lonnie. She was worried he wanted her awake so he could torment her until his master called for her.

Stop with the scary thoughts, Lonnie. You have enough on your plate without adding to them.

"Keep her unconscious." His voice was stiff with authority. "What have you done about that sheet aboard the shuttle?"

"The energy field around her is not penetrable, unless we kill her."

"Why not get rid of her? We have what Master Br'Mon came for."

"No. She's our bartering chip with the other sheets to get out of their space. Master Br'Mon is no fool to go rushing out there when a civil war is about to break without a guarantee of our safe passage."

The footsteps turned and walked away. Lonnie was hoping the one that liked to challenge authority was not going to practice anything on her.

Their droning continued.

Lonnie tried three notes, letting the vibration rumble against the collar. Each note sent a sharp unpleasant sensation into her spine, nearly causing her to cry out. Taking slow and careful breaths between each try, she braced herself for the next note, G.

No pain. She took a deep breath expanding her neck muscles, thinking something loosened.

Alright, now the shackles.

Rotating her numb wrists slowly she tested the tightness of the cuff but failed to come to any conclusion since she couldn't feel anything. All it told her was that the cuffs were tight. Opening her eyes a crack she studied her guards and then listened to what else was around her.

The two guards would occasionally look around them, but Lonnie noticed they didn't look in her direction. She supposed there were cameras. There were always security cameras in public areas and especially in cargo bays where loading and unloading was carefully monitored. She strained her ears to hear the soft buzz of the airborne security bugs, the ASBs, but the only other sounds were from the freighter.

She flexed her muscles, forcing herself not to flinch as she worked out the numbness that was spreading from her fingers, up her arms and to her back. Her shoulders were rotated without visible movement, then her fingers, then each leg. In her mind's eye, she was running along a wilderness trail at Cora's ranch.

"You awake?" a soft voice came from behind her.

Lonnie could barely move her head.

"The collar is unlocked. I've unlocked the cage. I'll unlock the shackles. When I get you out, don't leave without me."

Lonnie gave a slight nod.

The shackles came loose. Lonnie left her arms in the same position. She would have liked to rub them to restore circulation.

A shadow moved along the cage and paused.

Suddenly, alarms went off. At that moment, the shadow moved to the front of the cage and the door swung open. The two guards were looking around them for what could have set off the alarm not even glancing at the cage.

"We are under attack." A voice boomed over the ship comm. "Get to your stations and brace yourselves!"

The two guards ran from their present post and joined a line of others as they moved to their war stations.

"Come on," the dark shadow urged.

Lonnie tried to get her legs to a standing position, but they would not, so she crawled until she could find something to help her stand up.

The shuttle door opened with Caline weakly leaning against the opening.

Lonnie collapsed inside of the doors and Caline, barely able to stand herself, slid to the deck. The shadow dissolved into Caline.

"Is that your alter ego?"

"Yeah. One of those things we can do. But I don't think I'll be much more help."

"Medbot," Lonnie called.

It paused next to Lonnie and gave her a shot of something which had her feeling like she had a shot of adrenaline. Feeling stronger, she moved past Caline who was now being attended by the medbot.

Sitting at the controls, she tried to figure out how to get them out of where they were. She pressed what looked like the universal key for startup.

"Hey," a soft voice spoke near her. Caline dropped into the seat next to her. "You don't want to push that one if the engines are on."

"You scared the bajebes out of me," Lonnie informed her. "Can you work this? I'm not familiar with this model."

The helm's lights came on.

"How are we going to get those doors open?" Lonnie asked.

"They open automatically," Caline said. "This is a freighter. Everything is automatic. Just pray to whoever your gods are that they haven't disengaged those settings."

"I'll do more than that, I'll leave an offering on the first altar I come across for one year."

The moment the ship lifted and began moving toward the cargo bay doors, they slid open. Before them was a swarm of ships surrounding the freighter.

"What are we rushing into?" Caline wondered. "Those are drone ships. Remote controlled." She tapped the screen she was staring at. "See that slight quiver on the reading? That's an indication what we're seeing isn't real."

"Maybe I should consider more than one altar."

"Careful what you promise under duress," Caline laughed softly. "The altar or altars may be to one that asks for more than burnt offerings. You're not in your part of the galaxy."

"Just what kind of altars or gods do you have around here?"

"The kind that ask for more than what you can give."

"Let's just get out of here. The hairs at the back of my neck are standing up," Lonnie shuddered. "I'll retract my offer and just say I'm grateful."

"Much smarter. I'd trust your danger barometer better. Nice to know it's sharpened since we first met."

Lonnie snorted in amusement. "It was just fine then as it is now. I just have a larger repertoire of responses to pull from, and I'm a lot wiser on what to choose."

Caline hummed in agreement as the ship surged forward pushing both back into their seats.

"Don't pass out on me," Lonnie whispered to a sagging Caline, feeling ill from the affects herself.

"I'm...okay," her faint voice reassured her.

The ship veered sharply to the right and then dived downward.

Lonnie gulped a few times then suddenly the pressure eased.

"Hey! You two all right? Let me take you in," Muto's voice directed.

"No way," muttered Caline. "You had your chance, mystery man." Firmly she kept the ship on her course. Caline leaned back in her chair, giving a faint smile to Lonnie and then closed her eyes. "This is not entirely bad news," she whispered.

"I hope you'll tell me just what is good about all this."

She heard what could pass for a laugh. "Lonnie, don't you trust me with your life?"

"I trust myself with my life."

"All right. Who's the guy that sent us this ship?"

"My bodyguard."

"Some bodyguard."

"He works for HQ," Lonnie informed her dryly.

"Ah. I heard we were getting a regiment of spotters to help out. I'm glad I wasn't the only one looking out for you."

Lonnie let that comment pass for now to be taken up later. "This doesn't feel like it's entirely Br'Mon's operation here. What do you think?" Lonnie asked to keep Caline from passing out.

"I think," she swallowed with difficulty. "Something stinks. Officers with financial difficulties suddenly are free from debt; odd happenings around our security grid like someone testing it out...and there's more," she said tiredly. "Too many things that when lumped together mean something is going to be happening in my neck of space. To see if it had anything to do with that nutcase that is after you HQ arranged for you to stop by. Messages started flying back and forth which alerted HQ that Br'Mon was interested."

"In four days' time? That's some organizing. And here I was suspicious that his group was responsible for *Earl Gray* being boarded and instead it was another group. There's all sorts of crooks coming out of the shadows." Lonnie pursed her lips in aggravation.

"You could have said no," Caline said.

"And miss the adventure?" Though she said it mockingly, she was frightened and promised herself not to attract the attention of another fanatical group that would spend decades chasing her down.

"See. You were bored and interested in an adventure after all." Caline paused for a few moments and then laughed softly. "This mess had two purposes. One was to see who would sell Amant out and two was to see if Br'Mon himself would show up." Caline touched her head where the bot had sutured it. "People I would have not thought would sell out Amant began sending information like they were selling hot commodities on the stock market. Idiots. They work for security and should know their sudden increase of wealth would be seen as suspicious. We needed to cull the ranks of law enforcement and this is going to do the job nicely." A beep on the console had both women looking to see what was coming up.

Caline sighed in relief. "Home. Heillla enuma ma um," she prayed.

Lonnie's attention was split between the monitor and Caline as she slowly moved her hands over the controls.

"Caline, you don't look good at all."

"Don't worry. All ships can land themselves," she informed her faintly.

"I know. But are you going to...medical!" she yelled. She could hear the buzz of the bot as she moved quickly to Caline's side. "Caline, hang on."

Caline slumped against her. The medbot began working on her as the ship settled in the police station's landing bay. Military personnel entered the ship through the emergency exits and normal exit hatch. It was crowded even if they were thin.

Hours later after she completed her report of what happened she was flown to the hospital to sit at Caline's bedside. Caline had a concussion. Her immediate family was gone but a uniformed officer was sitting outside of her room.

Caline's room was not what she expected in a hospital for a Rudian, but it was in a metropolitan city that served many species from the galactic space station that was above their planet. The bed was knee high from the ground and the colors were too bright. Before stepping into the room, she tapped on the door. Lonnie grinned at hearing Caline mumbling to herself.

"Are you talking to yourself, Caline?"

"Don't humor me, Lonnie. I want out of here, and my family won't get me out. I cleared the lot out since they weren't helping."

"You passed out two times."

"I'm fine now," she grumbled.

"I'm here to keep you company, since you scared everyone else away. I see you have plenty of books here. And in a language I can read. Do you want me to read to you?"

Caline glared at her for a few heart beats and then slowly smiled. "How about playing some music instead?"

Lonnie looked at her surprised. "It's late at night and we're in a hospital, Caline. It'll disturb the other patients." *Do Rudian's play music in their hospitals? I would imagine they do. It's so important in their private life.*

Caline pressed the service button.

What now? Lonnie could feel an undercurrent from somewhere and it was the feeling she got when trouble was not far away. As an observer, she would normally head that way, looking innocent and unconcerned, and if she was lucky, she would get out before trouble struck but with enough information to pass on. This was not where she wanted to feel trouble.

A nurse with a uniformed guard came in.

"See if anyone has a musical instrument, preferably a guitar," Caline ordered.

The nurse looked surprised. "Commander, H'lema has her sitar in her office, but no guitar. We have tabla, flute, yoman, gluta...but no guitar."

"Well, there you go," Lonnie told her.

"Can you ask if we can borrow the sitar?"

"Okay. How about a tabla to accompany? ErCo usually partners with H'lema and both of them are here."

"Good."

Lonnie smiled faintly at Caline, thinking she didn't want to look too triumphant that Caline's insistence that she play would not happen. No one, especially a Rudian, lends their musical instruments to strangers.

Caline smiled back at Lonnie, reminding herself not to smile too broadly or Lonnie may guess she had one over her. H'lema was her sister's eldest daughter. All Rudian's played a musical instrument. They were sensitive to sound waves, making music a primary focus to relax and entertain themselves with.

"Bonhoie! I just heard you were here," a young dark-haired woman dressed as a doctor came rushing in holding a sitar in one hand.

"Bonhoie? This is your niece?" Lonnie asked in an undertone.

"Not all of us went into law enforcement," Caline admonished her in a whisper. "It would be unthinkable for one family to be invested in one service." "Of course," Lonnie responded dryly.

"H'le, will you let Lonnie Bestrolie play your sitar?"

"This is Lonnie Bestrolie? The dancer?" Her dark eyes lit up and with it a big smile, much like the one on her aunt's face. She handed over the heavy instrument without hesitation. It was not what Lonnie was expecting. "I am honored to meet you, Dama Bestrolie. Bonhoie always speaks of you as one of the greatest dancers of today who wants no one to recognize her. Is that strange or what?"

Lonnie gave Caline a glare.

"You play the sitar?" H'lema asked curious.

"I play a guitar."

"She took lessons with Gaholi for six months, H'Le. It was during that time he took a sabbatical to tour the Caolin Rim," Caline said.

"Yes. The cruise he enjoyed so much he extended his trip," H'le filled in, nodding with enthusiasm. "He refused interviews during that time." Any fan of the late Gaholi knew his life in embarrassingly minute detail. He was one of the greatest sitar players that present day stars have not been able to challenge in popularity and love.

Lonnie's face turned bright red. Caline only knew about it because she was her handler in covert operations at the time and had her befriend the young man to find out if his tabla player was a spy for a certain group HQ was interested in learning more about. Lucky for Lonnie, Gaholi was not interested in any woman but his wife. He liked Lonnie enough to not only teach her the instrument but extended his stay on board *Earl Gray* to learn the joys of hang gliding from Lonnie.

"Oh, how wonderful," H'le breathed reverently.

"You know, I just may not remember how to use this," Lonnie warned them all.

The arrival of the musical instrument attracted a crowd and not all of them were thin Rudians. It was stifling for Lonnie.

At her warning of not playing well, everyone in the room made disbelieving noises in their throats, sounding so much alike. They also understood Lonnie's nervousness and moved to give her more room.

"All right. Let's see just how much I do remember."

Lonnie sat on the pillow H'le threw down on the floor. H'le gestured to another young woman who entered with her two tablas to take a seat next to Lonnie.

Lonnie tuned the instrument, pulling from her memory the feel of the sitar and the music she once knew by heart. Her own sitar was at home with Shari Sing, her partner in business ventures. The only time she played it was during the two-month vacation she took from touring.

Closing her eyes, Lonnie did finger exercises and after ten minutes of getting comfortable, she began a raga that was simple. The alap, the beginning of the raga, was slow and set the tone of the music. In the jor, the second part of the raga, the tabla player joined her, and the rhythm increased. By the jhala both were playing a fast rhythm and finished the musical piece with a flourish.

Those gathered clapped appreciatively.

"Thank you," Lonnie nodded to those that were listening in. "However, I happen to know I was not all that good. H'le, if you don't mind. Would you play for me? The way I heard it, you and ErCo are very good at this."

H'le smiled and glided over to Lonnie like royalty. Lonnie gave up her pillow seat and sat next to Caline on her bed, still not comfortable with the crowd. The uniformed officer didn't seem to be bothered by the crowd.

While H'le played, and much better than Lonnie, Lonnie studied those that were gathered in the room. Her eyes moved past Muto to a young man dressed in hospital garb. He was standing on the inside of the room with hands in his pockets, staring at her. Lonnie returned the stare.

Now who is this guy?

Lonnie's ears became filled with the sitar sounds and increased tempo from the tabla, drawing her eyes away from the man. He was not the type of person she thought that would join a terrorist group, but then she didn't think she was the type of person an organization she had never learned the name of, would hire her as an observer. She frowned, reminding herself that

she also allowed herself to be bait for Br'Mon — if he were involved. It was because of his obsession with her that she agreed. Before she settled down she wanted to be sure there would be no lethal or otherwise surprises waiting for her in an unguarded moment. Or was she just using that to justify her involvement in an operation that may require more than observing?

She needed to go hang gliding. That always cleared her mind.

Out of her peripheral vision she noticed that the man left and so did two others. Her eyes again swept the room, noting Muto was still present. He was focused on a young nurse who was moving closer to Caline's bed.

Lonnie wondered if the nurse was interested in hurting her or Caline. Every planet had their complex issues and there were always extremist groups that took a passage out of a holy book and turned it into a crusade. Even within the so-called passive movement of the Briar Redemption group, founded by an old man who preached a nonviolent return to reinstating the old cultural taboos, there were members that used violence to have their presence noted. Their justification was nonmembers were inconsequential and legitimate to eliminate.

Lonnie felt Caline's hand on her arm. Another nurse entered the room. She held a tray that contained what Lonnie guessed were meds for Caline. Lonnie's gaze returned to the niece catching a strange look she gave the nurse entering the room and then a darting of her eyes to the nurse that was now checking the equipment monitoring Caline's vital life signs. Lonnie glanced at what was attached to Caline wondering why if she was only here for overnight observation, she needed meds and equipment hooked up to her. She stared at the tube that was attached to her and the nurse that was preparing to inject something into the tube.

Lonnie slid off the bed and quickly seized both hands of the nurse, only to feel someone behind her punch her in the kidneys, bringing her to her knees. By then the room broke into pandemonium and Lonnie found herself lying paralyzed on the floor fading into darkness.

Chapter 3

Not All Is As It Seems

Lonnie's eyes blinked open. Above her was a ceiling covered in a fresco of planets, nebulas and spaceships. She was back at Caline's home.

"It's about time," Caline informed her.

Lonnie moved her eyes to the thin figure leaning against the wall. Her mind cast back to the first time she had met Caline. She had been a recruiter for an organization that even to this day had no other name than HQ or the Service.

"You're looking better," Lonnie informed her.

"So are you. We had everything under control, Lonnie. I should have told you that. You again risked your life for me, and I really appreciate that."

"Your niece..." she started.

"My sister Li and her family. We've suspected for a long time that they belonged to an underground group that has been fomenting violence against the present regime. My sister believed she should be the ruler of Saguan Continent, not our brother, Prince Kertick for some demented reason. However, she didn't pass the tests, Prince Kertick did." Caline was quiet for a few moments. "She used your presence to make a bargain with Br'Mon. His group was given your location and while his people came to collect you, causing everyone monitoring them to focus on them, the *Libah*, my sister's group, planned on killing key political figures and exact calculated damage in places that would allow Li to take over the government. She would be the one to restore order and stopping the violent terrorist attacks."

"A national hero," Lonnie interjected.

"Exactly."

"How much damage did she do?"

"Considerable but repairable. We have more than two thirds of her group, records and documents, the capture of Br'Mon's ship with him, and a nice bit of reward credits that the Galaxy Counsel had put up for the capture of Br'Mon. How are you feeling?"

Lonnie shifted again, testing to see if her back hurt. "I feel okay. Can I get up?"

"Certainly. Your clothes are in the closet. Shower facilities are that way. Cook has a big meal prepared for you. You must be famished."

"I'm also curious and have questions."

"You always do. What did you want to ask?"

"The shadow in your pond and the one I saw melt into you, what's the difference?"

Caline's expression was not a smile, but it also was not a grimace. When facial expressions were difficult to translate, Lonnie relied on her other senses, and in this case, she picked up nothing. Caline stared out at the lake.

"You're very observant, Lonnie. When I first interviewed you, I knew that you had an unusual ability to pick out the small things that make a difference."

"And when I first met you, I wondered if it was because of your species or if it was an individual trait, of not answering my question, but moving on to another subject."

"It's a subject not spoken of even amongst us." Caline sat in the chair by the door, giving the impression that this question she would not sidestep.

"How do you learn about it then?"

"Observation. I think, and it's just my opinion, that those beneath the water are souls that lost their physical body. I believe we are made up of two bodies that we need in order to be present in this dimension or physical world that we're in right now."

"That's why your shadow asked me not to leave her behind."

Caline looked surprised. "I wasn't aware of that, but I wasn't all that aware of most of what was going on. I just knew you were in trouble and I had to get you out. After all, I did say I would give you adventure but keep you safe."

Lonnie shuddered. Her insides suddenly went cold, and her thoughts remembered what it was like to be helpless.

"You weren't hurt physically, Lonnie, or not so much that the medical bot wasn't able to heal. You handled yourself well." Caline gave her a lopsided smile, which on a thin face looked weird from the angle Lonnie was at.

"You're not trying to recruit me, are you?"

"After something like that, you need to be debriefed."

"I was. I gave my..."

Caline was shaking her head. "You need to emotionally debrief. In my career, Lonnie, I've been to some scary places and some that I didn't think I would come back from. But I chose that type of adventure and it takes a special type of person to be able to do that type of work and still return home to a family life without being in tatters. My shadow side is what helps me...but that's not why I'm talking about this. I want you to know that it's all right to be scared witless and not want to be in that position again. It's all right to be scared for a while or a long time about being chased by nut cases, dangerous nutcases, like Br'Mon. What is not good is to not talk about it to someone that is trained to help you work out the night terrors. Friends may be okay in the beginning, but they wear out and while you go through it every night or every once in a while, they can't bear your pain any longer, and you lose your friends. Find a trained therapist, Lonnie. HQ has plenty and they're good. Don't keep it locked inside of you. It'll make you obsessive about the little things and you'll forget the big things."

Lonnie was staring at her hands. They were lying relaxed over her stomach. How deceiving, because there was something different that when she first arrived, she assumed it was because she was alien to the culture and energy of the planet. Whatever veil had been in place to prevent her from picking up on changes in the atmosphere was gone and the energy was like a warning clang to her senses.

"This is the most you've ever talked to me."

Caline watched her for a few moments and then left. She could feel that Lonnie wanted to ask more questions but not one's she would answer. Left alone she was sure Lonnie's sense of balance and quick mindedness would get her the answers she wanted after she left Ament.

..*

Days later, Lonnie stood on the balcony looking out over the wide lake, spotting Caline's jogging figure as it rounded the final turn. Lonnie missed her own workouts. Though the exercise equipment on the first floor had her feeling like she was running through the mountains or along the beach, it wasn't the same.

Caline's thin gray hand rose to acknowledge Lonnie as she neared. Lonnie returned to her room to pack her bags. She had intended on visiting some friends on another planet, but HQ

wanted to send her to another school. Caline had told her she was getting to be a regular magnet for trouble and needed to be taught a few more handy tricks of the trade.

A light tapping on her door interrupted her thoughts.

"Enter," she allowed.

"Hey, looks like you're about ready," Daline, Caline's youngest son grinned at her.

"What are you hiding there?" Lonnie asked suspiciously. The ten-year-old was the youngest and everyone's favorite. Whatever he wanted, he got. His room was overflowing with projects he started and though finished, were not taken up after completing. Whatever skill he sought to learn, as soon as he mastered it, he left it to learn something else.

"A goodbye present and," he blushed, pausing to gain some control over his darkening face, "a thank you for saving mother's life."

Lonnie's face reddened from the unwanted attention. "Well..." she left off anything else. It would be an insult to belittle his feelings and she was leaving soon so she wouldn't have to be reminded. It was the second time in her life that she felt she was being rewarded for something that chance dictated. She didn't feel she did anything special. Now, if it required great sacrifice and had a lot of emotional and physical labor to it...that was different.

Lonnie instead leaned around him and saw the case sitting against the wall. A sitar case.

"You're kidding me," she whispered. She knew which one it was too. Days earlier she had gone shopping with Caline's family and had passed a music store that had a sitar displayed. It was made with a fine sounding wood and inlaid with other wood. By the pattern of the inlaid wood the sounds from the sitar would change. The family trooped into the shop to Lonnie's embarrassment, and had the salesperson demonstrate the various sitars he had on display. It turned out that the one in the window was the finest. The cost was more than Lonnie was willing to pay, considering she would be lugging it around with her guitar case and clothing bag, increasing the probability of damaging it. She liked to travel light. What she could not carry on her back should be left behind, she had firmly set down.

She reverently opened the case and there was the sitar she suspected. Picking it up she ran her fingers over the strings. Reluctantly she placed it back in its case. Her flight was too soon to be sidetracked. She stood up and gave the thin figure a hug. "This is so, nice," she whispered in his ear.

Embarrassed he shrugged his shoulders. "Will you write?"

Lonnie could not understand why he had formed such a close attachment to her but she accepted his shy interest and during the days she spent with the family taught him how to dance a particular dance he wanted to learn to win over someone.

"I don't do much of that, but I will send you messages of the ports I stop at. Will that do? One day, you'll have to come out and try scaling some cliffs with me or hang glide."

He laughed.

Lonnie smiled. It was an on-going joke they had since their first meet. His species body weight was disadvantageous in some of the sports Lonnie liked to participate in, so the young boy loved to listen to her stories of doing it.

He grabbed her bag, which was heavy for Lonnie, and carried it out as if it were nothing. It amazed Lonnie how a thin species could be so strong.

Caline was downstairs waiting for her along with a nonRudian pilot. "I can see you like your new instrument. Daline wanted you to have something special from us so you don't forget us."

Lonnie shook her head. "Even in my old age of fading memories, I would not forget you or your family," she reassured Caline solemnly.

Caline smiled and took Lonnie's guitar case. She thought Lonnie's grip on the sitar case meant she wanted to keep it close with her for a while. Caline nodded to the civilian pilot who opened the door to the shuttle and quickly made his way into the pilot's seat. Muto was already seated, napping. She wondered if Lonnie's recent display of active participation in operations, stepping out of the observer's role, meant she was willing to move to another level of work for the Service.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Caline. I hope next time we meet it's not for business."

"Me too. But these days, I don't go far from home."

Chapter 4

Leaving Amant Forever

Muto and Lonnie hurried off the shuttle as soon as the exit hatched cleared their heads.

"This place is like a deserted city," Muto said as they passed the security check post that was not staffed. "I couldn't help noticing all nonRudians were being hustled off the space platform and all the shops were selling their stock for almost nothing. The impression I got was whatever was happening Rudian's knew and it was no one else's business."

"It's the energy. I noticed it when I first arrived and it's intensified since," Lonnie said.

The civilian waiting area they moved through was also empty, a stark contrast to when they had first arrived weeks ago. Lonnie caught sight of a symbol painted on many of the bare walls they rushed past to the only ship left in the terminal. The symbol reminded her of something, but their rush put it out of her mind for the moment.

Betrad Mafun stepped out of the shadows of the civilian shuttle as they approached. Muto continued up the ship's ramp as if he didn't see him. Lonnie stopped. For a few moments Betrad stood, saying nothing. Something Lonnie had heard long ago triggered by the symbol had her realizing the likelihood of her seeing Cornol Caline or her family again in her lifetime was nil. Caline would not have mentioned it for many reasons and all of it was related to species loyalty. The transition was not discussed with a nonRudian.

"Good Pass Through to you and your family, Betrad Mafun," she said, trying not to cry or show sadness. It was the safest thing she could think of that would let him know that emotionally she would miss Caline and still not impose familiarity on another's mysticism.

"Good sailing to you, Leona Bestolie." His hands that clasped hers gave a squeeze and through the connection she could feel a trembling. Was it from the impending collective transition or something else? He let her hands go and nodded to her. Lonnie picked up her belongings and followed Muto up the ramp not looking back least she do something that would mar the memory of her visit. Species memory with Rudian's was shared even through a transition.

The AA, Automated Attendant at the ship's entrance hatch checked their passes.

When the two foreigners disappeared inside the ship Betrad walked past signs proclaiming the time of changeover. Nimbly he climbed the tower to watch the last foreign ship leave. When the ship no longer registered in their air space, he picked up the communicator for what he hoped would be the last time in this life.

"Elder sister, they have safely left our sacred space." He listened to his sister's reply and hung up the line. A nod was given to the tower guard and they both descended the tower to join their families. There was no more worry about the transportation space terminal. All physical things Rudian's created would phase out as Amnat's energy changed. In a Rudian's lifetime, provided one remained healthy, a total of ten changeovers would be experienced. Time for a Rudian was not measured in the movement of stars and planets across their planet's surface but in the number of transitions, a crossing into another dimension and back again.

Chapter 5

Goodbye to Caline

Lonnie followed the AA that was leading them to the only available seats at the back of the ship. Passengers were squeezed in their seats with packages that normally an AA would have the passengers store in the luggage area. Lonnie didn't recognize anyone from their trip to Amant; in fact, they looked like just the type of people planets discouraged if not outright refused to allow within their air space. She was curious how they came to be here.

Muto and Lonnie stowed their clothing bags under their seats. Above each seat was space for passengers to put their extra luggage and these Muto opened to store Lonnie's musical instruments and his flute. Someone had appropriated their space.

"Hey!" a passenger nearby said. "Thief! Let my bags be. Attendant! Thief!" He could not get out of his seat due to the number of bags he had on his lap already, but he made enough noise to draw the AA.

Unimpressed with the accusations Muto pulled out the bags and dumped them on top of what he already had on his lap. "Use your own space," Muto told him.

The AA moved quickly to the site of the disturbance. "Is there a problem here?" AA waited for the complaining passenger to make an official complaint.

"No. There's none," he grumbled, glaring at Muto but not able to hold his stare.

"Do you need assistance with stowing your luggage?" AA asked.

"I don't need you to touch my belongings. I can do it myself," he gruffly answered. The AA waited until he admitted he could not store all his belongings in the allotted space a regular fare was charged for. Once he paid the additional fee his bags were stored and the AA moved on, giving the passengers and luggage one more check before take-off time. Additional credits were collected from other passengers with too many possessions on their laps.

Muto settled next to Lonnie and whispered, "These aren't the seats I reserved. But on looking at what's on this flight I rather keep the solid bulkhead at our backs."

"On one hand, these people look like prison releases, yet on the other they look like they were on a shopping spree vacation."

"I recognize a few from wanted posters," Muto told her softly, "Some others I wouldn't trust with my eyes open. I don't see an agent aboard to keep anyone in line except the Auto Attendant."

"I thought with your charm and connections you could have at least gotten us a ship with private rooms," Lonnie teased.

"Thank you for saying charm first. This was the only ship with seats. I don't know if you've been listening to the news, but all foreigners are being expelled. I hope your friends are going to be okay."

"Me too." Lonnie appreciated his restraint to not speak of the event further. "Where are we going?" Lonnie asked to not think about Cornol Caline.

"W12C3. It's a major transportation hub this side of space. We can book our next flight out. Have you thought of a destination?"

"No. Hopefully you don't have too much more time watching over me."

"I don't mind. It hasn't been boring so far. I thought you had a month of additional training."

Connie could hear Caline laughing at her and the echo of what she had said to her. *"To a Rudian, it's boring to not have adventure in one's life."*

"Please, Muto. Don't curse me with an interesting life," she sighed. "Caline told me that to a Rudian, an interesting life is good."

"I wish I had met her. Instead, I was assigned to work with Igor and he had no sense of humor. So, you aren't going for the additional training?"

"Later."

"Everyone please take your seats and prepare to hit hyper. No food or beverages allowed," the AA announced once it finished its final inspection.

The sudden increase of speed on most flyers was not noticeable, but this was a cheap flight so everyone felt some unpleasantness from upset stomachs to headaches. Usually it lasted a short time and passengers accustomed to traveling on such ships carried their drug of choice, but many of the passengers had no such preparation. The AA was busy dispensing aid.

"Why don't you get some sleep," Muto told Lonnie.

"I'm too wound up," she told him. "They have no reading or listening devices."

"No, they don't," Muto told her. "Close your eyes. It'll make the trip go faster."

Lonnie leaned back for a more comfortable fit in her seat. Closing her eyes to disconnect from those around her, her thoughts returned to Caline.

Did Caline feel it was her responsibility to rid Lonnie of Br'Mon's threat? Maybe it was part of a Rudian's preparation for the transition to clear all obligations. Lonnie tried to remember what she heard about this life changing event. It was not something that was written about because most civilizations didn't survive long enough to keep something like that recorded.

Elowanqs. That's where she had heard of it. It was a song a child sang on a planet she and her family had visited. Lonnie was given the care of this child as the adults attended a dance. In the child's innocence, he had told her a story of beings that metamorphosed from water to land without dying. Children's stories were seldom taken seriously by adults and that was how truth was passed on.

But Caline did not owe her anything, she thought impatiently. Risking her planet to pay a debt that Lonnie didn't feel was owed made her uncomfortable because she would never be able to pay Caline and her people back in this lifetime.

You didn't have to do that Caline.

Lonnie fell into a light doze. In her dreamscape she was with Caline standing at the edge of the lake near her house.

"What do you see, Caline?" Lonnie asked worriedly.

"As I stare into the waters I feel something akin to me stir in its depths, Caline said.

Lonnie blinked herself awake, fighting the urge to jump into the water when there was no water.

"There is a quickening that beats like thunder in my skull," Caline whispered in awe.

"Fear is not what arises as I move to what is familiar in the water's darkness. It's like a drum roll through my soul as I slip into the cool liquid. Mystery is not what beckons me to move into the unexplainable. It is what it is."

Lonnie felt a sigh escape her as if it were Caline. It seemed a long time passed before she heard Caline say, *"I feel a disturbance of a thousand ripples from rain falling on me. I surrendered and became transformed from dense to diffuse. There is nothing I don't touch as I'm a part of everything. Only you can break our connection."*

Lonnie blinked a few times as her heart that felt heavy with the loss of Caline and her family lessened with each beat. Taking a deep breath, Lonnie realized the sadness was gone.

Caline.

"Think of me. I will of you."

Lonnie smiled. There was so much strangeness and mystery out in space, so why would she want to settle down before seeing more of what was out there? HQ didn't give her a specific time to attend further training and hopefully debriefed. Besides, she had Muto hanging around.