

Cot of the MacDiarmid Clan on Maridoileag

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Chapter 1

Alliances and Favors

Newly promoted Squad Leader, Lt. Colonel Colleen 'Cot' of Consortium of Four Sectors Space Fleet came to a snappy turn with a quarter heel spin directly in front of Eimhir of Lothene, Dean of Facility and Provost for the Premier Officers Advanced Training Academy, POATA. Cot's eyes front and center, peripherally picked up Vice Academic Dean of Facility Holfer, hand Dean Eimhir the school's coveted medallion each graduate received. The dean neatly laid the medallion to rest just below Cot's throat. The dean's eyes tracked to the fourragère on her right shoulder then to the scores of medals that covered Cot's tunic, earned in her decade of military service. The dean looked up at Cot, giving her a slight nod of acknowledgement.

"May the space tides be your friend, Lt. Colonel Colleen from Maridoileag, Clan MacDiarmid. Those that recommended you for POATA will be proud of your achievements and outstanding performance all around."

"Thank you, Dean Eimhir."

Cot squared her shoulders, nodded back with a more pronounced bend of her neck, stepped back, neatly drew her saber, saluted the collection of flags representing the planets that sent their officers to POATA, slipped the saber back into its sheath, gave a sharp left quarter turn, and marched down the stairs without mishap.

Relief at finishing a grueling twelve months of communal living with too many different types of personalities and species was like dropping a heavy weight physically and mentally from her. Adapting to a symbiotic-type of relationship with a spacecraft was nowhere near as difficult as having to learn that fine distinction between personalities and biological predispositions to so many different species while working on disaster recoveries, diplomatic failures, engineered snafus, miss communicated intentions with

military overtones, as well as planned and unplanned harassment thrown in to confuse issues.

Ducking through a side door, she exited near the outskirts of the graduation revelers to distance herself from their mixed energy of excitement and anticipation at their next posting. New posting meant starting over in a military complex with a new set of political hierarchies and loyalties, and as a graduate of POATA, more will be expected of their performance. That cloud of nervousness put her nerves on edge.

Passing through the first security gate to the ship hangers, she barely registered the now familiar buzz the scan gave her.

Her eyes took on a luminescent glow from the anticipation of what her squad guessed they would be doing. They dubbed it "remapping and rediscovering realities" with the newest equipment out of research laboratories to date. What else could they be doing with their sentient ships, storage bays full of monitoring equipment, and no intentioned combat encounters?

As she entered the hanger she could feel her ship *Star Chaser's* anticipation for departure. SMSgt Mack was standing next to her Caronda Star Fighter, *Star Chaser*, studying a scanner. It would be so like Mack to give *Star* one last checkup. The other SID-ships were gone. *Star Chaser* had informed her when each left academy space. None of them said where they were going. Was she still squad leader?

SMSgt Mack became aware of her and looked up. Grinning broadly at her, he made a sweeping motion with his arm to salute her. It was difficult not to return an equally wide smile with her returned salute.

"Is that a new pip? Lieutenant Colonel, is it? And look at that medallion. A blue wreath for top score in overall achievement. I heard only one other person came close and won the green. This was a good year for graduates." Then his eyes darkened. "The only disgrace this year were those fools in that club. I hope their commanding officers that recommended then to POATA are embarrassed they didn't see them for what they are. It serves them right for getting the heave ho from POATA with black marks in their official records."

Cot nodded, thinking of her part in revealing a group of officers that abused their power of authority. According to their official records they were model officers, which

was why they made it to POATA; however, they were spies meant to lower the school's ratings among the planets.

At the first formation of all new students, Cot noted each soldier with a dark cloud around them. Considering how many species attending the school used telepathy rather than speech, she was surprised they passed school muster. To give *Star Chaser* something to do she had her do a background check on them.

Like magnets the officers she marked as problems connected with each other, forming a club whose purpose was to undermine the careers of people they didn't like. It became her mission to flush the entire group out without involving anyone else, in case her plan backfired.

For every incident they caused Cot left a clue that led back to the club members. The school's reputation was on the line and POATA's investigations behind the incidents were secret and thorough. *Star Chaser* kept tabs on the members, while Cot, keeping a low profile, assisted the people the group was targeting.

SMSgt Mack took a breath and laughed at himself. "Enough of that old stuff. Congratulations on your promotion," he said. His six eyes made an elaborate scan of her in her dress uniform. "I've never seen you dressed in full regalia. Very impressive. Bet you had a lot of jealous looks from the pack." Picking up on her embarrassment he went on, "I'm going to miss *Star Chaser*. She kept us all on our toes. No uppity mechanics tolerated around this SID-ship!" His thick pouty lips made a sucking noise that was a hearty laugh for his species.

Cot laughed along with him. It was an interesting year of tests for everyone. *Star Chaser* embraced POATA's culture of challenging stagnant practices with innovative alternatives, and still keeping her and the other SID-ships presence secret. Besides meddling unabashedly in Cot's studies, *Star Chaser* and the other SID-ships taught the CF mechanics and engineers that the intelligence running the CFs knew their own potential and shortcomings better than the engineers. There was a lot of redesigning the ships in what could be done without shipyard involvement.

The original three designers that pushed their concept of a sentient ship, nicknamed SID, would be astonished how fast and far the partnership had progressed. SID was a combination of the three designers' initials, and reworked to Sentient

Intelligent Design, by the ships themselves. The pilots referred to themselves as SID-pilots and their ships as SID-ships, as did the techs that worked on them.

Cot's squad of twelve veteran Muland pilots assigned to fly the SID-ships were singled out to create a new type of partnership between pilot and a sentient ship, and a civilian sentient at that. They were told after years of research, their species was found ideal for the sentient project. After a year of hard work ships and pilots were sent to the esteemed training academy for another year to further hone the relationship.

"You're the last to leave, Colonel. The others left like it was their first leave after boot camp."

"It was boot camp, SMSgt. Mack. May you always have the right tool for the job," she said. "We both think you did a commendable job."

"Thank you, Colonel. It makes me feel like I got a reward too with a compliment coming from *Star Chaser*."

Cot grinned as she hurried up the ramp before SMSgt. Mack discovered what *Star* had left for him. Once up the ramp, she slapped the button to retract the ramp and seal all exits.

"Greetings, *Star Chaser*."

"Greetings, Cot," *Star Chaser* said.

Cot paused for a moment, taking a deep breath to get her bearings. This was just another life changing event so why did she feel different? In her first semester off planet she was grateful that she was one of the few dozen females from the planet Maridoileag that left of her own free will and not indentured. When she earned her first medal as a star fighter, she got past the wonder of going from sheep herder to decorated star fighter. By the time she was accepted into the SID program she was taking the life changes in stride. So why did she feel completion of this lesson was something more than the others?

"It's the journey that you focus on, Colleen, and it will get you to *a* destination," her aunt would say. A grin creased her face at the memory of her aunt, Ambassador Keli.

Well, I'll just have to wait and see, she thought. It certainly was a strange journey to get where she was now. She started out in the diplomatic academy before transferring to the galaxy space and military officer's academy. Who would have known she had the desire to be a star fighter officer and for that matter the talent?

"Lt. Colonel Cot on board, captain of the Caronda Star Fighter *Star Chaser*, assuming command," she said aloud.

"Identity has been confirmed. Lt. Colonel Cot, Captain of *Star Chaser*, is taking command," *Star Chaser* acknowledged. "I have transmitted we are ready for our new orders, Cot."

She resumed her walk up the passageway enjoying the holograph that gave her the impression she was walking through a forest to a hut under a large red trunked tree that was in reality, the bridge to her Star Fighter. The air was scented as if she were in a forest. The only thing lacking was the sounds, but if she wanted, they could be added. Right now, she wasn't interested in being entertained with wild animal roars or chattering wildlife as she walked to her bridge.

Abruptly she ran into a security barrier, bouncing her back into the enclosure of a soft energy envelope. When she didn't fight the restraint, it lessened so she could move her arms. Suspicious of the school's medallion, the only new thing on her, Cot dropped it into the security canister.

An alarm light blinked with a message of why it failed the security scan.

"It's tagged," she said.

Her medallion was distinctive with the only awarded blue flower wreath lying above the school's emblem; so, there was no mistake at who the tag was meant for.

"Rescan me," Cot ordered.

The scan was clean and the security envelope was disengaged.

"And the games go on," she said.

"Knowing who is playing would increase our odds of getting in a significant hit for the next move," *Star* said.

"It would. Personal or political, it deserves a reply," Cot said, then added on a mental level they shared. "*Destroy the tag, Star. Don't dump it. It might be a regenerator model. And check with the others to see if they also were tagged.*"

At the beginning of their partnership *Star* kept everything that intrigued her. Cot had no doubt *Star* would do as she had ordered and destroy the tag, but the question was when. Master Sergeant Rach, Cot's mentor for this integration program, had explained to

her she was the cautious partner and *Star Chaser* was the daring one. He assured her that because of this, they would make a good team. Cot had her misgivings then and still did.

Cot thought of the internal changes that she had been undergoing for the last two years of moving from using deadly force when necessary to not including it in her combat plans. If a death occurred, it did, but not because she had it in mind.

Was she still competitive? The thought of chasing a lawbreaker brought a familiar feeling of anticipation for the hunt - speeding through space, looking for a specific particle in the vastness of space that belonged to her prey- but she lacked the familiar anger that kept her tirelessly focused on the target.

Had she lost her edge? She didn't believe so. She no longer focused solely on the hunt and didn't feel completely drained afterward. So far, at POATA, she had a perfect score for tracking and apprehending the target, and none of it was done in *Star Chaser*.

They would be out in space with her instincts and experience primary tools for survival...and her ship. That brought a grin. The thought of leaving *Star Chaser* out of the survival equation was not possible. Besides amassing large stores of information, *Star* could perform many tasks at once without needing rest, an advantage *Star* was not diffident about bringing up. *Star Chaser* didn't hold much value to instincts, though. To counterbalance her pilot's actual inexperience in military matters, she relied on her stored knowledge.

I feel sorry for whoever planted the tag on us. Star can be very creative in delivering embarrassing paybacks.

Her cloak and saber were dropped on the seldom used astrogator's seat, or to her way of thinking, a visitor's seat. Later she would change into her flight uniform after they were out of E-mass Settlements space.

Aloud she continued, "I have the conn, *Star Chaser*."

"Cot has the conn," *Star* replied.

"Prepare for flight, *Star*."

"Ship shape and ready for flight," *Star* responded immediately. "We haven't received orders on our new destination yet."

"I'm not waiting here for them. We can receive orders just as well in space. Communication on. Broadcast to tower," she commanded crisply. "Lt. Col Cot in *Star Chaser* to tower, requesting a track out and clear to lift off."

"Request received by Tower, Lt. Colonel Cot piloting *Star Chaser*," was the automated reply. "You are number twenty-four in line."

"It's not surprising that air traffic is busy with graduates not wanting to celebrate on campus. They'll be grabbing whatever ride they can off station for leave, before reporting to their next duty station," Cot said.

Seated in her custom chair, a thin tube arched toward her and transformed into a screen. It came active with a check list for her to verify all systems tested "good for go."

Finished with her part in pre-flight preparation, Cot took the time to look around her bridge, pleased with the changes she made while learning hands-on ship repair. The original design plan was military orientated, designed for functionality and not much in mind for comfort. It was to carry four crewmembers for long periods of time with as few servicing stops as necessary; however, when the CF was morphed into a sentient ship with one pilot, no one thought to change the interior – until she was assigned to the ship.

The bridge was made roomier by removing two of the four permanent seats. They were like most unused furniture in ships, recessed into the bulkhead until needed. Cot never had this much space around her since she left her planet, Maridoileag. She or *Star* could program nebulae, forests, or city scenes on the ship's interior hull. The bridge interior could mirror space by activating the transparent cover, giving her a sense that she was flying through space in a see-through bubble.

"Your bio readings indicate you are low in the proper nutrients to operate at top performance level," *Star* informed her.

"These last few days of preparations I missed a meal or two as well as sleep," she admitted. "But I don't feel tired; probably later when the excitement of being on our own wears into the tedium of filing daily reports I'll feel tired." That was said to be for *Star Chaser's* benefit to remind her that they still had routine reports and tests to perform.

A SE arrived with refreshment. The service bots, SEs, were a new model that did everything: ship repair, cleaning, valet service, medical care, military functions and whatever else came up where Cot or *Star Chaser* would need assistance. They had them

already for a year and a half to evaluate. *Star's* way of handling it was to integrate the SEs into her system and make improvements where she could. Technically, it was tinkering and upgrading, though Cot privately thought it was more like a mother teaching her young how to better themselves. This ability was what she used to give SMSgt Mack a going away gift. She had upgraded his equipment that could be upgraded. Mechanics were very touchy about their tools. Cot wasn't sure how he was going to take it that *Star Chaser*, though well intentioned, messed with his tools. The good thing was, they weren't going to be there when he did find out.

It had disturbed her when it first occurred to her that *Star Chaser* could be likened to a person in a ship, but she had been assured it was not like that at all...yet the Caronda Fighters were still referred to as sentient ships. Her question was, just how sentient was the ship and what was sentience to the creators of this ship design. Rather than the designers answering her questions, they asked the pilots if they thought they could try out this new type of ship for a number of years before making a judgment. They all agreed, each with doubts, though for different reasons. At the time Cot primarily saw it as a way to get out of the business of war.

A beep had her glancing at her monitor. A message from CFS HQ, marked urgent. This had to be her next assignment. The encryption program ran and was authenticated as from HQ, Admiral of the Fleet's Office but the main attachment was from Star Force Command, an organization entirely of its own.

Cot recalled when she first heard of the organization Star Force Command. It was 15 years ago at her interview for the diplomat academy. A list of ten organizations with their descriptions was presented and the candidate was asked to put the organizations she would like to join in the order that she would like to see herself in. Cot chuckled to herself. What she had done was put Star Force down as her ten year marker, thinking that was the natural development of a career diplomat. Ironically enough, she had not considered the military, but in her second summer she had switched her training from the diplomatic corps to the military academy.

Once her identification was verified a scrolling message downloaded. She waded through the usual salutations and name of the Admiral of the Fleet signing off on her transfer.

"We've been transferred. No surprise there." Her eyes moved down the message. It was from her new commander. It had an audio with no images.

"On audio."

Greetings, Lt. Col Cot, captain of star ship Star Chaser. I'm High Commander Er of Star Force.

Your squad has been under my command for the last two years - training. You have all passed testing and are officially now a part of Star Force.

Welcome.

Your promotion to Lieutenant Colonel was made by the recommendation of Star Force Command Review Staff.

Congratulations.

All ribbons and any other honors gained with your previous service hold true in Star Force. As a wearer of the Gideon Medal, in SF it is held in great esteem and recognized by a gold splash on the right sleeve of formal, working and leisure uniforms. Your group medal of valor, the fourragère, will change colors. When awarded in another military force SF uniforms will show it in dark green with red woven through it. When won in an SF operation it will be light green with red woven through it.

Your new uniform requirements have been downloaded to your ship and teammate, Star Chaser.

Study up on what is expected of you as a member of Star Force, then familiarize yourself on the unit called Chameleon of which your squad will become permanent members in three months' time.

On your way to your new station, you and your squad are to observe, gather information, and replace old monitoring equipment with new. In areas you think are important and they have no monitors, leave one.

Your squad has been assigned the following sectors:

Captains Goudie Grant flying Melodie, Hallie Drummond flying Gallant Soldier with Allison Macalister flying Space Cat, will cover Borik Sector. Travel gates for reaching this sector quickly have been downloaded to their ships.

Captains Feah Lamont flying Caointiorn, Maciver Campbell in Gormal and Moodie Stewart in Brianag, will cover the interior of Tuead, where your new base is. They will be giving a close examination of the planets and borders in this sector since this will be your home base. Travel gates and points of interest have been downloaded to their ships.

Captains Barron Rose in Galaxy Traveler, Fionnaghal Hay in Penumbra, and Mòr McGillivray in Flash will cover Codic sector. Travel gates and areas of special interest have been downloaded.

Captains Wimsey Macnab flying Quiet Quest along with Aysen Macfarlane flying Quiet Storm, will be picking up assignments at various kiosks. Your recommendations that they be promoted have been noted and the assignments will test their qualifications. You will be kept in the loop of their assignments. You are still squad leader and should receive updates of their progress as well as Star Force Headquarters. If at any time you feel you need to offer them assistance, do so.

For your information only Lt. Col. Cot, I have given you and Star Chaser a larger area to cover due to sensitive travel gates not open to public travel and unexplored sections of space that we would like communication monitors set up.

You have been given a larger job due to Star Chaser's proven ability to upgrade gizmos and your ability to get a sense of a situation and clean it up without a fuss.

As a member of Star Force, you have the authority to intervene in situations when you feel it is necessary. Should you need any assistance don't hesitate to notify Star Force Headquarters. We support our forces. In brief, Star Force agent's work behind the scenes and without the need for public recognition and if it's necessary to bring more Star Force agents in to keep a private face, then it will be done. Should you need to expedite a matter, you have authority over all other military or law enforcement agencies in the known galaxies and sectors, no matter rank. Use this privilege with prudence as well as wisdom.

There are information buoys as well as public kiosks throughout space that are on FSO frequency. Star Chaser has been given the pass codes. Prepare

daily reports as you have always done and dispatch to the buoys and kiosks that have the proper frequency.

L'Gsta Outpost, located near Appins Rim is your destination. You have three months to reach your post, Lt. Col Cot. Use that time well.

Your squad will reform up at L'Gsta under Commander Or.

Another thing I want to mention, Lt. Col.

It didn't escape our notice on how you identified problem officers at POATA and dealt with them in a lawful manner, without calling attention to yourself. You performed as an experienced Star Force agent.

Welcome to Star Force Corps, Lt. Col. Cot.

Carry on.

The message ended on an abrupt note.

"Star, verify the authenticity of that message," she ordered excited. *Star Force! They're the most secretive and powerful force in the galaxies. They're also known to be arbitrators to messy situations.*

She forced her racing heart to a calmer pace. A new world was opening up to her.

Minutes passed slowly before three sources sent an authentication to the message. The names of who authenticated impressed Cot: two admirals with the Joint Planetary High Command and a president of a federation. Admiral L had been the one to award her the Gideon; a wearer of Incursion War medals himself.

"You have a hail from Major Ara," *Star* notified her.

"She's going to ask for a ride," Cot said, impatient with the interruption. Sighing at her rush to brush off people that she had gone through a year of training with, she took a few measured breaths to refocus on patience and courtesy. There would be plenty of time to think more of her change of command.

"This is Cot, Ara."

"Cot! We've got some celebrating to do. Just about everyone is here. Matt and Leu said they tried to catch up with you but lost you in the crowd."

Cot could feel *Star's* interest in what Ara was calling her for. *Star* was interested in Ara because she was trained to operate a gizmo that was as classified as the sentient Caronda Fighters. That was another bonus to attending POATA; new technology was

tested by some of the privileged students and most were still classified when they graduated and moved to their next posts.

"I'm not into partying these days. I..."

"What happened to that Lieutenant I knew that wouldn't pass up a party?" she interrupted impatiently.

Those days of needing to socialize to know what those around me were about are past. "That 2nd Lieut had been promoted with orders to be elsewhere, Ara."

"Well, then can you give me a lift to Blinks Station? We can spend some time unwinding before we head to our next assignments."

"You know I can't give you a ride." *So like Ara to try to get information on someone else's classified toy.*

"Kar has a seat available, and is going in the direction she wishes," Star informed Cot mentally. *"He does owe us a favor. He has a month off before he has to be to his next posting."*

Star Chaser was doing her usual multitasking and nosing around the star base. Cot suspected and with good reason, that *Star Chaser* knew everyone's business and was in a good position to make travel arrangements for anyone that was at POATA. In times like these it was an advantage.

"Kar has a seat available on his private yacht," Cot informed Ara. "I can let him know you want a ride if you wish."

"I do."

Cot was surprised to hear relief in her voice. She wondered why Ara was in a hurry to get off the base when she tried to get her to remain and party.

"The arrangement has been made. He leaves in ten minutes when he anticipates Uri to arrive," Star mentally informed her. *"He is happy you are asking for the favor now."*

"He said he'll give you a lift. He's waiting for Uri. His yacht is *Golden Bough* at docking bay, G22A4."

"I know that yacht and its location. Tell him I'm on my way. I'll be there under five minutes...and thanks, Cot." The click let her know that Ara was on her way to her ride.

"She's in a hurry. I wonder why," Cot mused. "Of course Kar's happy it's now and not later, *Star*. No one wants a favor hanging over their heads when it was gained over a gambling debt no matter how wealthy and influential his family is."

"We did get him at his own game," *Star* said smugly. "There is a use for collecting favors and data to use to our advantage."

"If we have too many favors in our possession we may have hunting parties out to wipe their slates clean by eliminating the debit collector."

Cot could feel *Star's* disappointment that she turned Ara down.

"Perhaps another time we'll give her a ride," Cot said, though she knew that by then *Star* would know about Ara's gizmo.

"It would have been more expedient to have her on board to find out what she is testing," *Star* said.

Cot smiled at how she had guessed right about *Star's* motives. "But then she would have learned about you."

"Not entirely. I would make it a fair trade."

"*Star*, you and her gizmo are still classified. It's not for sharing unless HQ gives specific orders about who can know."

"If headquarters really did not want to share they would have not brought so many people together in close proximity to us."

"Are you saying our fellow SIDs are also delving into other people's secrets, including the classified kind?"

"They are not as interested so they only access the easier encrypted folders."

The other SID-pilots had not mentioned that their SID-ships were perusing documents not for public viewing. Or did they know? It was bad enough that it had become *Star's* second hobby, but then she had to tell Cot some of the private information she found. It was her fault since she started her on investigating the officers she thought should not be at POATA or officers at all.

Star found that Ara was in CFS Special Forces and it wasn't public knowledge nor was it something Ara had shared with her, which there was no reason to. Cot had no intention of getting caught between *Star's* curiosity and Ara's. No matter who Ara is,

there was no order to allow her to board a CF and no one in HQ letting her know that Ara was in special forces.

"Tower is signaling," *Star* reported.

"Cot, here, Tower. Go ahead."

"What's wrong with you graduating pilots that you can't stay on the ground long enough to celebrate?" Sgt. Omod griped good-naturedly. *"You're cleared for Out Way seven. I wanted to wish you good sailing, Cot. Keep your ship and you safe. Tower out."*

"Tower, I read you. OW7. Cot and *Star Chaser* out and about. And good luck to you, Sgt. Omod."

Cot checked *Star Chaser's* scans to be sure they were clear of traffic. With *Star Chaser*, checking up on her wasn't routine because *Star* either left off information or added something unusual to keep her on her toes. *Star Chaser* didn't like to be ignored by those that figured prominently in her daily routine.

"*Star*, get us out of here by regulation."

Star Chaser lifted, hovered while turning to face their exit, and then flew along OW-7 until they reached the safe zone to lift. With the acceleration of her ship came the exhilaration of power and knowledge *Star's* connection provided her. Everything was momentarily forgotten as her senses expanded beyond the hull of her ship, and at the same time, instant knowledge on whatever subject she asked of *Star*, though it didn't mean she would understand it. Cot had learned that the expansiveness on her part could only be endured for an hour otherwise it would take at least two hours to reconnect with her physical self.

The planet receded to a small dot after ten minutes.

An hour later they passed the outer perimeter buoys of E-mass Settlements space. Cot dropped her connection with *Star* and they went into hyper drive at the precise moment it was safe to do so.

"SOP. Notify me when you drop out of hyperspace. I want to see the plot with your breakout point, the distance allotted for your speed, and scan range from where a ship your size would normally exit in RT."

"Standard Operating Procedures have been followed. The exit point has been recalculated," *Star Chaser* acknowledged. "The plot will be completed when the maneuver is completed in real time."

"*Star Chaser*, you have the conn."

"*Star Chaser*, space explorer, has the conn," *Star* said.

Cot laughed. "That is what we shall do, *Star*. Explore space and whatever else comes our way."

"First monitor has been deployed before we left E-mass Settlements Space."

"Why?"

"It falls under the guidelines for where a monitor should be left. It's a well-traveled corridor and there were no SF monitors."

"Carry on. I wonder how long it will take someone to locate the monitor and take issue with SF for leaving one."

"There are thirty-three monitors from organizations inside and outside of four sectors in E-mass space, Cot. Mine will not be detected."

"You didn't leave a Clev R16 did you?" she asked worried.

"An independent mobile tactical sniffer that I have upgraded so it can disable monitors or small objects that are identified as a threat," *Star Chaser* said. "No. I left a Clev R4 which monitors but does not operate on its previous wave length that was easily detected and used too much energy."

"Star Force shall be pleased to have their monitor added to the collection," Cot said dryly.

Chapter 2

Tests on Various Fronts

Rising from her seat, she scooped up her belongings and headed to her quarters to change into a more comfortable flight suit. She felt giddy with excitement, like an ensign on her first deployment.

Ensign Cot, junior officer.

That memory came back with all the emotional and physical weight of her naivety, fears, nervousness, and most of all -- excitement. It was an emotional roller coaster ride in the dark.

Freshly from CFS Space Academy XXI she had lucked out in being able to snag a ride aboard a courier ship with a diplomat who remembered her with favor from her two years at the CFS Diplomatic College. It was preferable than squeezing onboard one of the shuttles filled with graduates and students on semester breaks from the surrounding academies, and piles of luggage. To make the ride especially dodgy was a group she overheard planning on taking the celebratory mood to levels of conduct not condoned by the military. A bad conduct mark in one's personnel file was not how Cot wanted to start her military career. She passed a warning to a few fellow graduates and went to look for a safer ride, finding a diplomat waiting for his ship to be ready. He would stop at Raj Star Base where she could pick up another ship to take her to her destination, Base004.

At Raj Star Base she had a six hour wait over, which was not without excitement. As a base that never sleeps, entertainment, gangs, thieves, and hustlers were a constant presence. She stayed alert and attentive to reduce the risk of being incapacitated, robbed, and abandoned in a vulnerable state. Engaging a sleep cubicle for the wait over was not something she felt comfortable with, not knowing how safe they were.

From Raj Star base she flew to Base004, a weeklong trip in a converted troop carrier that was filled mostly with troops flying to their next assignment. Her kit was her pillow, and she did have a roomy seat; but she felt exhausted on arrival at Base004, where she would pick up a shuttle to her new ship, *CFS Everm*. Anticipation of sleeping in her own bunk, even if it was to be for eight hours, the required rest time for new arrivals, kept her moving. Commander Ri and seven other female officers were on the troop carrier with her. From an overheard conversation she learned that Commander Ri

was to be the Exec on the *CFS Everm* and was to prepare the crew for war against the followers of the Gepaks. Cot had heard rumors at the academy of an impending war but not many in the academy wanted to believe it true, so not much was spoken about it, as if ignoring it would make the reality go away.

It was standing room only in the dangerously overcrowded supply shuttle, *CFS Qu*, with women of different ranks and species, squeezed in. The pilot explained that Captain Wot only allowed one shuttle to ferry *the* females over and there were no return trips to pick up overflow, so those not on the shuttle were left at Base004. Cot wished she had remained behind with Commander Ri and the others, but Commander Ri indicated to her that she was to be in the shuttle.

The shuttle had not quite settled in its docking station aboard *CFS Everm* when the battleship was underway, leaving her dock. Any pilot would tell you how dangerous that was. Cot believed the captain's intention was to insult the Admiralty that ordered him to integrate into his crew. Those loyal to Wot called him a genius in war tactics but by Cot's observation for the short time she was aboard, he was past that and was senile with his staff for their own reasons, propping him up. She endured two weeks of humiliation and harassment, learning about herself and those that abused others. They could be likened to the Gepaks' followers, and Cot knowing of the impending war, was disturbed by this.

Gepaks were a species more advanced than some, that traveled space and enslaved planets as well as destroyed them at will. They genetically manufactured races to have at their disposal something they could play with. For species that were weak minded, they encouraged them to demean others in whatever manner suited their dispositions. Gepaks were in no way more powerful than most of the space traveling species, but they did use others as fodder to prevent their arrest by the Planetary Law Enforcement Corps.

The Fleet Admiral's letter caught up with the *CFS Everm* with the help of the faster and deadly *CFS Portsmouth*. The defiant bridge officers and their captain's bubble of arrogance burst when their ship was disabled, and they were boarded with heavily armored and serious soldiers. Under armed escort, Wot was relieved of command along with his faithful staff. It should be the ultimate death of a military career but when planets

became members of the coalition and their military officers refused to assimilate with the new force, they usually became important planet officials.

Captain Regla was Captain Wot's replacement. Over the ship's comm Captain Regla read their new orders and from then on, a new type of energy drove the crew to prepare for battle. Captain Regla, with Commander Ri were to take the *CFS Everm* into the heart of the armies of the Gepaks. In the three weeks that it would take them to reach the border, that was the time Captain Regla had to get her crew into a cohesive fighting force, and she worked them harder than the bullies of Captain Wot.

Four months into the war, Cot had become leader of her flight squad, who under her leadership earned the Fourragère, the single braided cord that distinguished a group for their efficiency and duty in combat; rose to the rank of lieutenant; and garnered her first of many Incursion War Medals which eventually led to her award of the Gideon Medal. A fighter pilot was not something she had envisioned for herself when she left her home planet.

More importantly, she became a member of Commander Ri's select group that practiced QuaDom, fulfilling her aunt's assurance, that she will always have a teacher to guide her through the ways of the peaceful warrior.

"We're in a new element, Star. Dig up as much information on General Or, L'Gsta Outpost, and surrounding planets. Politics is an important component in our new line of business. And find out whatever information you can on you and I. We need to know what sort of information there is on us."

The colorful dress uniform she detested was dumped in the recycler and from her closet she pulled out her new flight uniform. With species requirements in mind, all flight uniforms were basically the same design with a hidden pocket or a dozen. Job determined the coloring of the uniform from bright orange for repair techs to light gray for pilots. Standing in front of the mirror, she looked over her new uniform. The gold splash on the right sleeve marked her as the bearer of the Gideon Medal of Valor, and the pip showing her rank on the collar.

Her eyes rose to look at the face of the person staring back at her. Startled, her thoughts went drifting for a moment, not finding anything familiar in the face before her.

Had she changed that much since the last time she really looked at herself and not the uniform? Cot tugged at the uniform sleeves as if they needed adjusting, not ready to admit to when she last dared to ask herself who she was in respect to what she wanted to be doing with her life.

Come to think of it...the last time I asked that was when a squad leader let his group of greenies chase down a couple of pirates right into a trap and I had the honor of sifting through the debris looking for survivors.

Cot shook her head to clear the memory of scattered bodies in space with blank staring eyes. It reminded her of why she favored to work alone, inconsistent with her military training that preferred its members to working within squad support. Turning her attention back to her new affiliation she realized that SF in all probability knew more about her than she knew of them. Not as naïve as she once was, whatever organization she worked for she would investigate. Using *Star's* resources was one way, but *Star Chaser* was their tool. There were other methods of gaining information on a secretive organization without having to resort completely to sneaky tactics. Direct contact with fellow agents was the most telling. After one year of learning to separate personality from species traits it should be easy enough to figure out an organization's character via how its agents acted. Cot smiled at her reflection in the mirror. It was about separating facts from myth and rumor.

"It's time to start that new schedule I've promised myself," she said to her smiling image.

In the cargo bay she had set up her sacred space and workout area. *Reflected Light*, *Star Chaser's* shuttle, took up half the cargo bay. The rest of the area was for supplies, her sacred space, and a workout area that allowed enough room for her physical training.

Sitting on a pad, on another mental level that *Star* was not privy too, she imagined a white light filling her space, to cleanse it, then she drew a circle around her and her altar starting deasil . After a few moments of deep cleansing breaths, she called her guardians to the seven points and then welcomed her ancestors.

Her thoughts turned to her concern for the others in her squad.

According to *Star*, Captain Wimsey Macnab flying *Quiet Quest* was deployed with Captain Aysen Macfarlane flying *Quiet Storm* to cover the Hibri, Borik, and Codic Sectors. They all were to remap their assigned areas of space with new equipment and leave buoys with advanced capabilities behind, then head to their new home base, L'Gsta Outpost along Appins' Rim.

Captains Goudie Grant flying *Melodie*, Hallie Drummond flying *Gallant Soldier* with Allison Macalister flying *Space Cat*, were stretched out along Borik Sector, close to Durant's Rim where their unidentified space sector neighbor was unfriendly.

Captains Feah Lamont flying *Caointiorn*, Maciver Campbell in *Gormal* and Moodie Stewart in *Brianag*, covered the interior, with orders to travel through areas that most ships would not want to travel through and leave off spy bots that would also act as backup, should a SF agent need it.

Captains Barron Rose in *Galaxy Traveler*, Fionnaghal Hay in *Penumbra*, and Mòr McGillivray in *Flash* covered the boundary along Tuead and Codic border, with the same orders as the others, with their ending point at L'Gsta Outpost, their new base.

She was especially pleased that her recommendations for Wimsey and Aysen to be promoted were finally being acted on. Her entire squad was the best she could remember working with and she often-times wondered if it was because they were the same species, Mulands. She was hoping after they reached L'Gsta she could add the others to a promotion list. CFS had suggested she pick two out of the twelve and they would reconsider her recommendations. Now she understood why they weren't interested in her reviews.

They all had three months to report to their new outpost, and a lot could happen to them in that time over that amount of space without the backup they were used to providing for each other.

However, she smiled, it is good fortune that came our way for the last two years. Now it's time for us to put the training and our fortunes to test. So, relax, breathe and focus on breath.

Taking a slow breath in, she stilled her thoughts and focused first on her breath and then nothing.

When meditation time came to an end, prayers of thanksgiving to her guardians and ancestors, and protection prayers for her squad were said. The circle was opened widdershins. Rising, she stretched slowly, relishing the idea that there was no hurry to do anything, and then headed for the bridge for a quick walk, interested in what there was to see. The passageway's bulkhead was a hologram of rolling fields with a deck a yellow brick road leading into a castle keep. Cot chuckled at *Star's* humor.

"I have the conn, *Star*." When she sat in her chair her console snaked toward her, then unfurled to a flat screen.

"Cot has the conn," *Star* said. "We are coming out of hyperspace at the first intersection," *Star* reported.

Due to *Star Chaser's* new improved sensors, it would allow them to pick up anything in the vicinity of where they would have been predicted to appear had they hyper spaced out where ships her size would normally program to.

"Anything of interest in the neighborhood?"

"I am sending what my sensors are picking up to your screen," *Star* said.

"This is a list of chemical compounds. Can you be less specific?" She chuckled.

The listing changed to something more solid; evidence of ships passing in the busy travel corridor, which was why traveling at hyperspace speeds through busy travel corridors, was not done. At first reading there was nothing in the area that would be interpreted as suspicious activity or appearance.

"Report on ship to our starboard," Cot said.

"It is the *Eavator*. A Sigrid class ship. My readings show it powered up four hours ago but has remained in place."

Sigrid class ships were from Teai Sector designed specifically for the species Sier that lived primarily in space rocks in Besum's rings in the Teai Sector. To be invited to dine with a Sier was participating in dropping down on terrified creatures and injecting them with a paralyzing agent and then eating them. Not even for diplomatic reasons would she accept an invitation to dine with a Sier.

Teai Sector was a year's travel from their present position, unless they knew of private gateways, or had learned the art of teleporting ship and crew to known points in space, then the travel time was an unknown.

"I expected more than one interested party to appear before we reach our first travel gate."

"They are interested in my performance which is beyond my original specs," *Star* said, justifiably proud of her upgrades.

"They've had two years to study you - us, *Star*. Now that we're out and about and with no backup anyone with issues about us has three months to do something about it."

"Our purpose is not aggressive, and our first response is nonviolent," *Star Chaser* said.

"Your original design out of the shipyards was a long distance star fighter. Anyone looking at you now would see that you don't have the canon mounts or weapon bays the original design had, but the difference between the two designs leads to the question, where are you hiding your weapons now."

"They will not be able to scan me with accuracy," *Star* said. "You guessed that they would be waiting for us," *Star* said.

"It wasn't a guess. I felt it in my bones," she joked.

Star was silent for a few seconds. "I have scanned your bone structure. You do not have anything that would alert you to the ship waiting there."

"There's a lot about me that can't be learned through scans. I used my intuition."

"Intuition is not a reliable tool for our protection."

"So, you keep telling me. How long has that ship been there?"

"My scans show that *Eavator* has been waiting three days," *Star* said.

"The area is most probably saturated with sensors. We'll go around. How wide do we need to pass to avoid their detection of us?"

"I am scanning for various grades of sensors, starting at the highest level," *Star* informed her.

"You do have the latest technology at your disposal so you should be able to sneak right by," *Cot* teased.

"What was given me was performing below potential. I have improved both performance and expanded 90% of the equipment beyond its makers' specifications."

"You certainly have the ability to turn out upgrades faster than the manufacturer or HQ, *Star*. Give me details on *Eavator* -- the entire crew and passengers if there are any, and anything else you think warrants notice."

The shipyard schematics of each deck including, cabins, weapons bays, and contents of the cargo bay were supplied before she finished asking.

"Ship schematics down to the emergency breakout boxes," Cot murmured, still impressed with her ship's ability to reveal with depth another ship's schematics. Breakout boxes were rescue pods for some species. Some ships used them for storing contraband, ejecting them when their stash was threatened to be retrieved later, using the homing device each rescue pod had on it.

"Their security is substandard and easy to circumvent," *Star* said.

Details about the captain were displayed on a screen positioned behind the ship's diagram. *Star* provided her with who and what was precisely on each deck.

"You have again surprised me *Star* with your speed and efficiency at breaking through a ship's security and into the logs, and I trust without leaving a trace?" she said with mock seriousness. "We don't want to get anyone upset."

"I have left no trace. It was a simple code to break."

She wondered if that was *Star's* ego talking or was it intentionally easy to get in? "Something that's easy to enter may have been meant to be entered. Have you taken action to prevent feedback or retaliation through your connection?"

"An open vault tempts even the most honest," *Star* quoted, then added, "Without practice a skill languishes."

"*Star*, you fit right in with SF Special Ops but run a scan on yourself to make sure you didn't pick up anything that can compromise your systems. You're skillful and well-practiced, but don't be fooled into folly by your cleverness. For a captain of his years, he would know to leave more than one level of security to protect his ship. SOP."

Cot tapped through the schematics of each deck.

"*Eavator* has enough weaponry to be the type that doesn't tag along to just take notes. I wonder why its status as a nonmilitary vessel hasn't been challenged. Send this to SFHQ and our SID-mates. I think this is a setup, though I'm not certain for who or what."

"Why do you think a setup, Cot?"

"When a private yacht is carrying armaments found on warships and pirate ships it's safe to assume they're up to something that will attract nasty business. From any of the kiosks we've passed have you picked up any warning messages of private yachts being attacked or having to be this armed?"

"No warnings to travelers or to CFS patrols," *Star* said.

"What is the average for a ship with these readings to travel the distance they have without anyone doing a deep hull scan to tip off the authorities that this is a ship to be wary of?"

"Without knowing their flight plan it would be difficult to give an average," *Star* said.

"What does the captain's travel log show?" Cot asked.

"I have not scanned the captain's personal log yet. However, *Eavator's* crew's personal logs report she set sail from her home port six months ago and has initiated contact with fifty kiosks for communication packets. Each kiosk is listed and the time spent at each."

"So, what does that tell you, *Star*?"

"That I am able to break personal codes to read other people's mail. Most people think if they prevent their crewmates from getting into their logs than security is sufficient."

A new set of scan results showed on Cot's screen.

"I am picking up ghost signals that go out as far as my scan range can reach," *Star* said.

"These might be the new Halb sensors I read about. Very good, *Star*. The manufacture guarantees that they're tamper proof and could be mistaken as ghost signals, reflections of space anomalies."

"It is an overuse of sensors. Any ship passing would run into one. Are we going to take out the *Eavator*?" *Star* asked.

"No." She was surprised that *Star* would ask a question an aggressor would ask.

"Do you have any evidence that they've attacked anyone or that they intend to?"

"No," *Star* answered.

"All we know is that the area is saturated with passive sensors," Cot said. "They could just be out here testing their new equipment. I can only *suspect* it's more than that. Is there a reason you asked me that?"

"I am reviewing my rules of engagement and the parameters that I am expected to act on my own and under your command."

"Has anything happened for you to feel you need to change the rules that were set for you originally?" Cot asked.

"We are Star Force Agents."

"Yes. That does change the rules of engagement. Has SF headquarters sent you any change in your protocols?" Cot said.

"No."

"I'll send a message to SFHQ and ask them if your basic rules of engagement have changed. Meanwhile..." Cot tapped through star charts. There were two known public gates a day's travel in different directions. Alba Gate and Detra Gate. Anyone interested in them would have both gates staked out as well as the normal places ships with their destination would hyperspace out. "Instead of using known gates, there's an old one right here. It's two hours from Detra Gate."

"Is there a story with this information?" *Star* asked.

"It's in the story of *Raven's Flight*. I'm not sure why it's fallen into disuse, but we're going to find out if it can take us to the Hege Space Province like the story says."

Cot reviewed *Star's* scans, keeping an eye on passing ships and communication traffic as they changed headings.

"I have reports ready for your viewing," *Star* said.

"Send to my screen."

The background check on *Star Chaser's* registry and her personnel files came through. *Star Chaser's* shipyard plans and her original fittings gave Cot a start. She had not realized so much had changed on *Star Chaser's* external frame and interior and software upgrades that shipyards didn't keep up with. In two years, she had more changes done to her than a high profile starship owner could possibly get done.

"These are listed as your official plans, a star fighter. It hasn't been updated to show your true intent. That's an advantage to us."

"My purpose is peaceful."

"*Our* purpose *is* peaceful. Your original design was with a crew of four. I would imagine there are actual star fighters built to the original plans."

It was not uncommon to see similar ship designs produced in other space sector shipyards. All that the manufacturers or designers had to do was change something significant on the copied design and sell it to another. She knew that a sentient ship was not a popular idea. If it were, all space sectors would have their shipyards mass producing them. If a group was interested in ending the use of sentient ships, one method would be to have a replica so that the ships vulnerabilities would be studied and used to an attacker's advantage.

Cot leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes to think. Star Force would know this...and they would know that many changes on the ships had taken place over two years by the ships themselves giving input in what to add or remove. Of all the CFs, *Star Chaser* was the most innovative and stubborn in her application for changes in her architecture and software. They were also the only CF in their group sent out on their own. Was Star Force testing *Star Chaser's* ability to adapt, interested in seeing what she would create to advance their agenda? Was their agenda the same as their mission statement? How much could she trust Star Force with as little as she knew of them?

"Do a bare bones search for anything you're not in control of." She paused a moment, rethinking the order. "On second thought, the CBIS can scan your structure and systems."

"I have not integrated that object into my systems," *Star* said.

She caught the peeved tone, indicating *Star Chaser* found something that she could not easily break into.

"That's good. We want something independent to check you out."

Star began to list reasons on her screen as to why a scan from the CBIS would not be as effective as her own scan, but Cot ignored it and got up. As she headed to the cargo bay to activate the CBIS, rather than a conversation, *Star* continued the objections in thought. It was an indication to her that *Star* was upset.

"The CBIS is the only gizmo we have that didn't come from the labs that produced your body and all the other equipment we have. Wouldn't you want to know if someone has equipment on you that you not only can't identify but don't know about?"

"There is nothing on me that I do not know about," *Star* said.

"Then CBIS should not come up with anything you don't know about. CBIS is a passive scan, *Star*. It's not a weapon nor can it shut anything down on you."

CBIS came active immediately and requested a recognition scan of her. Once given, she programmed her request, a deep scan of *Star*. It would take a long time for each component of her structure and programming to be certified.

The CBIS was produced by a small company trying to break into the ship security and repair business. To keep financially solvent, they sold some of their inventions before they were mass marketed so they would not sacrifice their independence and be merged into a larger company. One of the scientists was an acquaintance. It cleaned out her account but after two years her account was back in the plus.

"What about the tag in my school medallion?"

"I am studying it. What I am finding can be disturbing."

"What is that?" she asked.

"It was made on a prison planet," *Star* said. "My inquiries into who designed it and who it was sold to have not come up with answers. The intentions of the manufacturer are suspect."

When she was assigned to the war zone, she never paid attention to the people whose capture she was responsible for. For all the ships she destroyed that didn't want capture, her capture rate was higher. It had a lot to do with her finding a way to the pirate, smuggler or other crime groups' hideouts, and then leaving other departments to clean up, like the hoplites and FTS troop ships whose purpose was to secure and make the actual arrests.

It would be too great a jump in logic to find this a coincidence, but it did warrant looking into.

"Have you destroyed the physical element of the tag yet?" she asked.

"No."

"Do you need it for further study?"

"No," *Star* said.

"Send your information on the tag to HQ on your next update and destroy the tag, *Star*. The longer you keep its parts the longer we can be tracked."

"There is no signal being emitted from this tag. It has been disabled," *Star* said.

She decided not to remark on *Star's* continued resistance to do as she ordered *when* ordered. Sometimes arguing over little things was a waste of energy. She moved to her files to see what *Star* was able to find on Lieutenant Colonel Colleen, clan MacDiarmid. Skipping past the parts she already knew about she found the newest notations. *I've been moved into special operations. No surprise there since I'm flying an experimental ship, but I see it's not named so it's been left to assume it's into CFS Special Ops.* She closed the file.

"Is there anything else I need to read?" she asked.

"You have not read your orientation from Star Force," *Star* said.

The information appeared on her screen.

"This is a lot of reading. Play the recording, *Star*."

She leaned back and closed her eyes, relaxing just enough not to be droned to sleep. Somewhere in the recitation of how Star Force came into being was a forceful delivery of an important note:

"No member is above Star Force law. Loyalty to the force and members is primary and that means reporting a member that violates a Star Force rule or code of conduct that leaves SF in a bad light. Above all else Star Force must maintain a higher moral and ethical set of standards than any of the other organizations Star Force deals with. It's because of our practice of moral and ethical standards that Star Force was granted jurisdiction over other military, semi-military and political governments for the duration of a situation.

"Our laws are as follows....

It finally came to an end.

"This new job is sounding more and more interesting. If we run into an agent in trouble, it's our duty to assist as *discreetly* and as much as possible. Is there a secret sign or something we have to know to recognize a fellow agent?" she asked.

Star provided holographic examples of one person, two people, and in groups. The images were of species that had no resemblance to a Muland.

"Anything a Muland can use?"

A holograph popped out with a Muland interacting with various species, including a Sien.

"That's funny, *Star*. I'll be too busy worrying that one of those long appendages is reaching to drag me in to be dinner. I don't know who agreed to let them in the open league to travel space because they're too predatory to be peacekeepers. I'll grant you that they were great allies in the fight against Gepack agents, but what other use are they?"

"I have researched their species. They are not the hunters they were when they first entered space travel - that is, looking for other biologicals for food. They are now hunters of relics from lost or ancient civilizations," *Star* said.

"That gives them a ready excuse for having heavily armored ships and for being found in sectors of space far from their home planet. I'll bet they know a lot of hidden gates that can take them to different parts of space faster than a public corridor. But in regards to *Eavator*, it wasn't hunting for a relic or artifact. It was hunting for a new Caronda Fighter."

"Is that based on your intuition?" *Star* asked.

She ignored the dig. "That captain was not just sitting picket duty to monitor traffic. He meant to take some type of action as soon as his sensors picked up what he was looking for."

"Your reasons are not provable, Cot."

"Nor are they disprovable, *Star*. It would not be difficult for someone to find out our posting is L'Gsta Outpost and plot possible courses we could take. Had *Eavator* not been active you would have missed spotting her."

"I can send out a probe to study *Eavator*."

"No. I don't want to spend any more time in this part of space." She leaned back in her seat smiling.

"I think Cot, you are anticipating adventure; therefore, you interpret events around you in your anticipation."

"You don't find it suspicious that a ship waiting for days, suddenly goes active hours before we arrive?"

"Statics will show you how many times that has occurred and it did not come to the conclusion you believe," *Star* remarked.

"I want to see the odds, *Star*. Show me with a civilian captain with no military experience, civilian captains with military experience and military captains. You can give me the results later. I'll be in my quarters getting some sleep. You have the conn, *Star*."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

Chapter 3

A Viper's Venom

Ten hours later Cot was back at the helm. She was provided with *Stars* research results that were not standing up to *Star's* supposition. She left her comments unsaid, pleased that *Star* wasn't so ego-centered that she could not show studies that disapproved her own conclusions. With the transparent hull engaged, she enjoyed being surrounded by the expansive views of deep space. It was a different experience than connecting with *Star* and all her sensors or astral projecting. *Star's* perspective was filtered through her mechanical sensors that were limited to only known things and when she astral projected it was a point to point journey with the scenery going by too fast for her to note anything but blurs.

Suddenly, before Cot, amid the views of spiraling galaxies and black holes, a portion of space wavered as if a curtain moved with a breeze, and a squadron of CFS ships appeared out of hyperspace. The transparency view surrounding her vanished and she was surrounded by *Star's* solid bulkhead and her console showing a less spectacular view of their visitors. Twenty-four CFS warhawks spread out on their portside, sending out seekers that formed a semicircle around Detra Gate and lighting up her alarm board.

"I wonder who they're looking for," Cot mocked, suspecting it was her and more notably, *Star Chaser*.

"They are looking for a Caronda Fighter," *Star* said and supplied her with a copy of the transmission of one of the ships received.

"Star, send out a Wringer to extract all the information that lead ship has on you."

"Including the security officer's files?" Star asked.

"Yes, including what's in the security officer's files. I want to know why they're looking for us." *Why would CFS ships be looking for us? I can understand pirate interests but not our old comrades.*

"Orders are to seek and destroy. The message is from CFS Command Central."

"Look deeper, Star. That doesn't make sense - unless this is some type of test for us." *Adversity is the path to awakening, but awakening to what?* She frowned at her console that showed devices spread around the public gate sending out signals to each other as they set themselves into a blanket barrier that would spot anything that moved in the area covered.

"I could send a dozen SEs out to deactivate them," Star offered. "It would appear to be a malfunction."

"Not the SEs." She hesitated and then added, "We have plenty of new gadgets you've been fine tuning that need testing in RT. Let's see what we've got for messing with their plans...without anything being traced back to us." *Am I justified in ruining their equipment because they're planning something unpleasant for us? If they weren't so aggressive in planting sensors all over this area, I would have decided to just quietly pass...* She chuckled as she tapped her screen to look over their supplies.

It will do their training good to differentiate equipment failures from natural space events and sabotage.

"A for arsenal," she hummed to herself. "Now this looks promising."

The Acoustic Mine was designed specifically to take out areas infested with sensors. Star added a virus that would use the link from the sensors to the ship monitoring them that would short out navigational systems. The virus would pass to other systems the ships were communicating with. By Star's design, it would be as if the ship ran into an electoplasmic storm that got past the ships' shields.

"If all goes as your tests show, they'll be down about a day taking into consideration the panic factor. If no panic - half a day. Where's Wringer?"

"Two clips from the warhawk *Alfre*," Star reported. "My tests are conclusive. It will not be traced to us. Why would they think it would be us?"

"A good question and that's the way we want to keep it. How long for Wringer to get the needed information?"

"Wringer is in their system and downloading now. Five minutes to return," *Star* said confidently.

"Once Wringer is back safe, set off two AMs, one on each side of that meteor to put a touch of doubt to their belief that it was intentional. You do have counter measures in both to be sure our little spies aren't going to get traced back to us, right?"

Star lit up a portion of the star map on her screen and then brought up a holographic image of a creature jumping out at her from the screen.

"Oh, that will scare them." She swatted at it, and it dissipated. "I'm just trying to point out that the hunter always expects the prey to have traps and other nasty things to snap at them should they get too close, so be extra careful about moving in this area. I'm sure we're not the only ones that think that meteor a great place to plant a trap. And if this is a test, which is the only thing that all this would make sense about, then don't trust any information you pull from their logs without getting outside corroboration."

Cutting her power, *Star* glided through the meteor's trailing debris. Cot linked in with *Star* and felt space matter bump against her outer-buffer. Only a part of her attention was on her monitor and almost too late she recognized a pattern to the debris.

"Roll to port!"

"We will be seen," *Star* said but did change direction.

Their link dropped at the same time as her realization. "Don't touch the netting anywhere, including with a scan. It will send a virus back on your return signal."

Relinking with *Star* she could feel the movement of space less powerful against the bow. She felt *Star* cut most of her power to not register with the warhawks sensors and their satellites. Mentally she sent a "well done" to *Star*.

On their portside was the usual feel of space when caught in a meteor's trail of debris. Starboard was a different type of energy pushing against *Stars* buffer, aggressive and alert. She dropped her link from the suddenness of the attack from the net. It was a predator waiting for its prey.

"There are breaks in it. Since it's still active it must be of use to someone that is interested in the path of this meteor. See if you can also find out where the breaks occur. That will give us an idea of the size and when..."

"I know the protocol, Cot," *Star* said, sounding offended.

"Of course you know, but I do have to say it, *Star*. This is still a military ship, and this is a military maneuver so we need to be sure we're working on the same strategy. We'll disable it if it's used for illegal activities."

"It has not attacked us nor threatened to do so," *Star* pointed out. "It is merely reacting because we nearly ran into it."

"It's a Net, *Star*, designed to have ships run into it so it can disable a ship's security buffer. By your answer I'm guessing you've communicated with it."

"Yes."

"What is its purpose?"

She linked with *Star* to see what the connection between *Star* and the net's operating system was like. *Star* made an overture to the Net's OS. A welcome was returned, too quickly for her cautious nature, but this was *Star's* operation. She knew the moment of its touch that it was a malicious predator and before she could warn *Star*, withdraw or blink, she was lifted out of her seat and thrown across the bridge, where she hit the bulkhead and dropped to the deck unconscious.

* * *

Blinking her eyes open, the first thing she saw was the medbot hovering near her. For a long moment she laid there reviewing what she remembered happened. Her summation was as captain of her ship, she got sloppy. Moving her head she grimaced at the headache. Sighing, she moved into a sitting position.

"You have a touchy friend," Cot whispered.

"Net is not a friend," *Star* said firmly.

The bot supplied her with a liquid which she drank thirstily, then leaned back. Waiting for the meds to take effect, she closed her eyes, wanting her stomachache and headache to recede. The meds were not making her feel better. Using the bulkhead as support, she stood up and on wobbly legs made it back to her seat.

"What transpired from the time I tried to link with you and Net?" she thought to Star.

"It thought too much of itself. That was its mistake. I have left an explosive in one of its dead sections," Star said.

They were now out of Net's area drifting with little power outside of the CFS squad's search pattern. Wringer was back in *Star's* bay and *Star* was waiting for her to give the order to activate the AMs.

"Detonate when you're ready, *Star*," she said hoarsely, and coughed. She was provided with a warm beverage. The warmth from the herb drink loosened the tightness in her throat.

"Signal sent," *Star* said.

The majority of blips on her screen went out as systems failed on the CFS ships.

"Switch to..." it was done as she thought it. Blips reappeared. Her external viewer showed some of the warhawks drifting. Those unaffected went on evasive maneuvers until a firm hand had them moving into a defensive grid to protect those unable to steer.

Their scans of the area would find the burst of electromagnetism that scrambled their systems from colliding space debris. How it managed to leak through their shields was for them to worry over.

She wondered what happened to Net in the blast. *Star* had the same idea and was scanning for traces. Nothing.

"Let's get out of here. Leave one of the new monitors to see what they do and have it return when the ships leave this space. Rerun everything from the moment we ran into Net on my screen. I want to know everywhere that thing touched your hull, then we'll inspect the areas carefully for any weaknesses. We'll wait a distance from the gate for the monitor's arrival."

"That may be days," *Star* said.

"There's no immediate hurry. We can make a thorough inspection of your hull while we wait."

When she completed her report to HQ on their recent action, she signed it and decided it was time *Star* took a more official part in the reports.

"*Star*, add your assessment of our encounter with Net and about the AMs performance to this report, then send it off to HQ."

Hours later a ding notified Cot that they reached the general area the gate was in.

"Hold position here. We'll wait for the monitor."

She reviewed her calculations, checking them against what *Star Chaser* presented on her screen. "Never assume the information you're given is correct if you're going to gamble on it," she always warned her students and kept repeating to *Star Chaser*, who so far, was too confident in her own abilities to distrust her results.

"You have the conn, *Star*. Let me know if anything comes up and-or when the monitor returns."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

She changed to a lighter workout suit and then went into the cargo bay. A stop at the CBIS to see what progress was let her know that it was working.

She spent the next hour not thinking about anything but evading the bruising hits a holographic fighter got on her when her thoughts strayed. Her opponent was intentionally made to look silly by *Star* who thought she knew how to create a better self-defense course than what she had been through so far. *Star* varied the situations and adversaries from downright scary to outrageously funny, and *Star* loaded the lessons with sensory stimuli so she would have more than one trigger to remember the lesson. In the many space sectors, there were more than enough species to pick whose odor if not body size overwhelmed her. It added to the challenge of neutralizing her opponent.

A buzz sounded letting her know that her practice time was over. The next hour she worked on running, hopping and climbing over obstacles used to build up her endurance, should she ever have to go planet side for a military operation. The atmosphere for exercising was heavier than what she was accustomed to, but it was part of the training. After a shower and change of clothes, she stopped at the galley for a light meal before returning to the bridge.

"I have the conn, *Star*. Give me a system report. Anyone in this vicinity?"

"Cot has the conn. No ships close enough to detect us. Normal space traffic. All systems have been checked, and all systems are functioning Above Shipyard Standards, ASYS."

"ASYS report received. Send out feelers to make sure our tail doesn't have a tail."

"I have gone over the Sub474 device and tinkered with it to improve its factory specs. It has not detected any scanning device in its vicinity."

"Tinker" was a new phrase *Star* picked up from her mechanics at POATA which could mean a complete overhaul.

"You are keeping me up on what you improve, yes?"

"Sub474 has longer range scan and can emit a frequency that will confuse readings on ship sensors. I will flag all equipment I have upgraded with the new functions."

"Thank you. What will set off the emitter?"

"A passing ship that sends out any signal will be investigated and verified."

An indicator on her monitor showed the arrival of Sub474.

She reviewed *Star's* scanning results. There was nothing following them.

"On my mark transmit the code...mark."

The doorway into a travel corridor shimmered open.

"SOP, *Star*, send in a monitor to clear the tunnel as safe for *me* to enter."

"Standard Operating Procedures, SE7 sent in advance," *Star* said.

Fifteen minutes later SE7 came back, reporting the corridor was stable.

"All ahead, quarter cruise speed. We'll let the energy current carry us. As we move through the gate, download to my console who last passed through and encrypt this location in your files."

Many of the gates were created before most known species were traveling in space. Since all the gates were in working order, it was often discussed who maintained them with no one feeling they had an answer.

"Pass in Peace" was the message sent to *Star Chaser* as she moved through the gate.

"It's not a very busy gate of late. The last passage was two months ago. The *Abaral* passed through. That's a large sized yacht owned by the Bodos family. They're not into trade so I wonder why they would be way out here," Cot observed.

"A vacation," *Star* said.

She calculated the time it would take for the yacht to travel from their home planet to the gate, then ran calculations on other public gates nearby. Months and weeks.

"That's too long for most working class vacationers and for the idle rich that want immediate gratification. There has to be a purpose for this yacht other than a whim to have passed through here. If I were still on patrol I would find this suspicious enough to look into," she said.

"Why?" *Star* asked.

"Because kidnapping and hijacking is a lucrative business for pirates, so this ship being so far off its normal course is worth noting. Keep watch for this yacht, *Star*. Send messages to the others also, and update them on our progress. And *Star*, send them what information you have on Net as soon as you can." She rubbed her temples, realizing she had a slight headache that was working its way to be annoying. She went on to read the reports on the warhawks they had left disabled.

"They were lucky that the *Wesley* was passing. She's a light ship repair freighter. There's not too many of those around."

"Is Captain O'Rourke of the *Wesley* an interest to look into, Cot?"

"Yes, and her ship. Add them to our reference library, *Star*."

Immediately information began to scroll across her screen. Cot knew *Star* was playing with her by asking.

"*Caointiorn* and *Gormal* have been accumulating data since they were enabled to start downloads on their own," *Star* informed her.

"Yes. Captains Feah and Maciver have issued an indirect challenge to us SID-mates that they can gather more worthwhile information than the rest of us on this trek across galaxies."

"Worthwhile is subjective that no one can win or lose," *Star* said.

"O'Rourke is ex-military? That's not unusual for a freighter captain to have military in their background but an O'Rourke in the military is. They usually stick to the merchant ships or space trade business. When a member breaks out of the mold it's someone worth watching. See if she's related to the O'Rourke merchant clan."

"You are an unusual person too, Cot."

She snorted without humor at *Stars* observation on her relationship with her clan.

"And check out how many repair freighters there are in that area," she said, to change the subject. "See if any of them repair nets." *I wonder if this O'Rourke owns that net. It wouldn't be the first time a merchant causes accidents to get business.*

Star listed herself first.

"You're not a repair ship, *Star*."

"I have the capacity to repair ships."

"You can do ship repairs but I'm talking about... Alright, add yourself and then break down all ships that can repair others by speed, efficiency, size, quality, and location."

"There are other notable categories."

"Okay and whatever other category you think we'll need to get a complete picture of the private spaceship repair business."

After a few hours of studying the Sub474 scans, she couldn't find any evidence that Net survived, but it didn't totally rule out the possibility that it wasn't destroyed entirely or that the ships that were spread out to look for something didn't find it. Depending upon its complexity, if one joint survived, it could latch onto a passing ship and cause damage in the ship's defense grid. She hoped the CFS ships found it and disabled it.

She added a notation in her report to HQ of her recommendation that a sweeper troll the area and for ships passing through to be on the lookout for any ship that may be suffering from a power failure. Net was too sophisticated in its attack in targeting her and not *Star* to succumb to an explosive.

Yawning, she stretched to become more alert. Drowsiness was an occupational hazard that she kept at bay by taking breaks. It was time for another.

"*Star*, you have the conn."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

Rising, she stepped into the passageway that appeared as a forest in autumn. Inhaling deeply, the scent of forest filled her lungs, even down to the humus.

Changing into workout clothes, she mentally began to prepare herself for a good physical practice session. Stepping into the cargo bay, she looked around for an attack

that *Star*, her trainer, may have planned for her. Surprises were her favorite way to keep her on her toes.

An old Roja master sat naked under a shosa tree. She knew it was a Roja master because *Star* informed her. For a moment she wanted to tell *Star* to bring up a physical workout lesson but hesitated. Would she let *Star*, a ship, run her life?

The Roja master had a bowl of cracka nuts in his lap and he was sucking the hard shell instead of cracking the shell open for its meat. He looked up at her and gestured to a mat in front of him.

She sat.

The cracka meat was a potent hallucinogen for some species, if it didn't kill the consumer first. If the consumer survived, then for a few hours or days, prophetic dreams were experienced. With a good interpreter, the myriads of images could be put to good use.

She watched him suck on the nut noisily, smiling and nodding to himself as if he were participating in a dialogue. He made a sign in the air and seemed to fall asleep. His image faded away, her practice time was over. Rising to her feet, she wondered what the lesson was.

The attack was sudden, one of the six warriors that surrounded her hit her solidly, sending her skidding across the deck and rolling to her feet. The scene was a wharf. It was dark.

How did she know there were six?

Star told her.

She flattened herself on the deck, willing herself into another form. One of *Star's* lessons was for her to morph into other creatures so she could learn how they fought from inside out. Morphing was not part of this program. *Star* never told her what tools were available for her. Rolling onto her back she caught her first attacker behind the knob and kicked out the other knob. Three knobs per leg, with four legs to work on a Huark. Avoiding their spit was essential since it was acid to her skin. While she fought with the other five there was a feeling that another was lurking out of sight. A shadow that did not belong in a corner was the giveaway. When the fifth was rendered powerless, she whirled

around looking for the unseen. Slowly she turned looking hard at the bulkhead, her hearing straining for movement.

There! The sound was from above her and she dived forward, her legs scissoring and breaking a leg. Her arm was numbed and legs pined with two of her attacker's four. It had one broken leg, unbalancing the Huark, but she was unable to use that to any advantage. She was effectively immobilized. Bubbles from the lips of the Huark warned her she was going to be burned.

"I surrender," she said.

The program ended.

She rolled to a sitting position resting her head in her hands feeling the bruises and aches in her muscles. "Loss is enlightenment, as auntie would say."

Her soaking tub was filled when she returned to her quarters. While the herbed water soaked out her muscle fatigue her thoughts wandered over the exercises. What had the message of that ridiculous image of some Roja master to do with her workout? *Star* was a collector of cultural tales, so what did she mean by having a spiritual master sitting naked under a nut tree, getting high on a drug?

It was easier to make sense of her aunt's sayings, such as "Work with what you get," or "Whatever you ignore or don't see, will come back and bite you." As a fighter pilot those made sense.

Her mind finally shut off as the heat and herbs did their job. When the timer dinged, she felt ready to get back to work. There were things to do and one of them was to do some research. Roja masters, cracka nuts, a tree, and whatever else was in the lesson she would look up.

Chapter 4

A Straight Stick is Crooked in the Water

"Exit point confirmed," Cot acknowledged. She looked up from her console to see what the corridor looked like when they were moving at a slower speed. It still appeared as a tunnel with blurred lights all around them. They arrived at their exit point; the outer region of Hege Space Province and sensors detected no ships or monitor buoys nearby.

"Send out Sub474 to see what we're exiting to, then give the exit code when ready. Continue drifting without thrust. We don't want to suddenly appear on someone's screens."

Minutes later they passed through the exit gate. The ship was jerked into a fast moving space current created from a passing meteor. They were on the other side of the Tuead sector, maybe a day from Captain Goudie Grant and *Melodie*, but she didn't want to interrupt her feeling of solitude just yet. If *Star* wanted to get chatty with *Melodie* she imagined she would do it unless she asked her not to. It was one of the glaring differences between her personality and *Star Chasers*. *Star* loved to socialize. She contacted things that communicated just for curiosity's sake. Thankfully, she also liked to conceal who she really was. *Star* loved the game of being the mystery woman and sometimes a man. As far as she knew, *Star's* games were with other computers, which allowed her to practice her techniques in breaking into ships' logs. Who would have ever thought a ship computer could charm another to give up its secrets. She pursed her lips in thought, wondering how *Star* felt about handling Net. Egos must have clashed. Should she press *Star* for more detail on her handling of Net? When *Star* updated her report on the incident, she would read it.

"Increase energy by four to the entire shield. Let's see how your energy buffer holds up."

They were at the edge of a main travel corridor. Readings from the recent passage of a convoy scrolled down her console.

"How does a gate next to a busy lane remain a secret? Not even a passing meteor altered the gate positioning," she marveled at the technology.

"There has been no measurable movement in its positioning." *Star* sounded impressed also. "It has been well constructed."

"It goes to show you that there are still a lot of things we can learn."

"Wisdom is not passed on through birthright or ethnicity," *Star Chaser* quoted from one of her collected stories.

"That it isn't. Everyone perceives things from their own perspective." She had a flash of insight; however, whatever deep understanding it imparted escaped her.

"It is amazing how any agreement can be made with so many differing perspectives," *Star* commented. "What makes a color blue does not translate across all species' receptors."

"Hm," she hummed preoccupied. Her thoughts already moved on to reviewing *Star's* passive scans of what was behind them. Peripherally, she saw the bar rise on her screen, indicating *Star Chaser* added more energy to protect the outer hull as radiation increased from some of the meteor debris.

An alarm light on her console showed six unidentified ships appearing out of hyperspace then disappeared.

"Inadequate time to make a useful search," *Star* said.

"You're right. Chances are they dropped something off to monitor the area. Send out something new to see what they left behind. Space is not for people leaving off weapons."

A passive anti-spy satellite, nicknamed Storm Trooper1 was released. They waited thirty minutes before ST1 had completed its sweep. A signal was sent which lit up a dozen or more potential spy readings and ST1 began taking them out. For every successful shot to the spy bots, one was sent to where the shot was originated, however, by the continued destruction of the spy bots left behind, ST1 was still functioning. The shots continued as ST1 moved around undetected and cleaned out the area.

"Good catch, *Star*. All were armed. Either ST1 got them all or there's one out there that has been programmed as the failsafe. Send out ST2 to assist ST1 in another sweep. When it's clear, bring up your systems. We'll play bait just to be sure we have them all."

"You want me to get shot at?" *Star* asked.

"You said you've improved your defense shield and tested it. Now we need an RT test."

She leaned back in her seat, stretching her legs out, having confidence in *Star's* programming skills. Suddenly the two STs fired at *Star*. Her training had her bringing up weapons hot and looking for a target.

"Foreign invaders have attached to my outer hull," *Star* explained.

"Didn't you program your weapons to not shoot at you?"

"They were not shooting at me. They have disabled the object, but it remains attached. I will send out..."

"I will go out."

Images of fighters that played dead only to shoot down the overly confident hunter who came in too close to gloat over his or her kill, played in her mind. "Bring my AVEC suit. I want to see this thing. And *Star*, for it to have attached itself to your hull means it was able to get past your barrier. Find out what failed." A sudden thought occurred to her. It was the same side Net had attached itself to. What if Net still was attached to *Star's* hull?

Star should know if anything on her was compromised, and she had not reported anything amiss. Would *Star's* pride keep her from reporting a weakness? She took a deep breath to slow her worry down. She needed to see with her own eyes if *Star's* hull was compromised.

Two SEs accompanied her as she exited *Star*. Rather than walk across *Star's* hull she used the suit jets to move her to view the intruder from what she was hoping was a safe distance. As the portside came into view something streaked toward her then disappeared in a flash. The light was so bright, some of its brightness penetrated through the helmet's protective shielding over the faceplate.

"What was that?" She demanded, panting at the closeness.

"The invader has been detached and is no longer a threat," *Star* said.

Blinking a few times to clear the white spots in her field of vision, she realized when they didn't clear that it was not her eyes that were spotted.

"My faceplate is compromised," she said. The SEs grabbed her at each elbow and guided her to the closest hatch.

In the equipment closet she exchanged helmets quickly, feeling there was something that needed closer scrutiny on the ship's hull. Back out with six SEs assisting, they went over the entire hull looking for any breach or sign of something that did not belong on *Star*.

Hours later she was exhausted from slowly moving over the hull looking for a tiny speck out of place. Nothing aside from marks on the hull the invader made were found.

"*Star*, I want you to go over the recordings of your exterior hull the SEs made and be able to identify everything on your hull."

"I will start now. Shall I resume course?" *Star* asked.

"Give the hull one more inspection before moving on. Pay special attention to the vents and arrays. Destroy immediately what you find. No more taking things on board for further study. We'll resume course when you're certain there is nothing foreign attached to any part of you."

"Does that mean I can destroy any foreign agent..."

"Not the CBIS," she interrupted quickly, making a shrewd guess that *Star's* need to control everything on her would eventually cross over to CBIS. "If for any reason you feel CBIS is a detriment to you...us, tell me."

"The CBIS is a detriment to me...us."

"How's that?" She was taken off-guard with *Star's* strong objection.

"It interferes with our trust in each other," *Star* said.

"*Star*, do you believe you are perfect and need no further updating?"

There was a pause and at this length it was a long one for *Star*.

"I will think on this."

"*Star*, you have the conn."

"*Star* has the conn."

In the galley she ate a small snack and then retired.

In two hours, she was up. In her dreams she was being pursued by tiny beings too small for her to see or for *Star* to register.

Clothing for a workout was the first thing she reached for in the closet. Though not in the mood for a physical confrontation she did want movement. Entering her

workout area she took a few moments to do the ritual greeting of the six corners then moved into her breathing exercises. After an hour, she ended it and headed to the galley to pick up a beverage. Sitting on the bridge, watching the galaxy pass by she sipped her drink.

"Cot, can you tell me a story?" *Star* asked.

Taking a sip from her POATA cup she rolled the tasty beverage over her tongue and thought of what story to tell.

"This tale begins late one evening, during Dark Night, that's when no moons are seen in the evening sky. Evenings such as these, families stay in and honor the event around their family hearth, leaving the night to the Wanders. Who and where the Wanders are from, no one knows with certainty. In fact no one can actually say they've seen one, but it was always someone they knew that had...and that should tell you that maybe there is no such thing as a Wander, but tradition is difficult to fade out when everyone practices it.

"That Dark Night on Elder's Mound a poor babe was left to wail her bitter plight of abandonment. It was a tiny pitiful wail."

"Why was it left?" *Star* asked.

"Well give me a chance. These stories take a while to get to the bone. Where was I...oh...Far, far away, a darkly dressed form moved her old head to listen closer to what was disturbing her ritual on this moonless night that was set aside for her guild's rituals. Not being able to concentrate, the old woman pulled her night cloak over her shoulders, grabbed her cane and went out to search for the creature that was crying. The old woman's familiar bounded along beside her..."

"What is familiar?"

"What's *a* familiar? It's a companion of a Brounder, a person that makes magic."

"Magic. As in the supernatural, unexplained, enchanted?"

"That is how some would define it. It can be complex in explanation, and the senses can be hoodwinked, but the end result is usually something remarkable. The audience in magic making is as important as the magician."

"I can do complex things and fool sensors, as well as do remarkable things. I am a magician. You are my familiar."

She laughed. "A lot of what you do could be seen as magic. We are companions. Let me go on with the tale and you can decide more of what a familiar is..."

She continued the tale, remembering when she had first heard the tale.

The competing smells of a stuffy room filled with people, rotting wood from the woodpile that breezed in from one window, and baking cookies were nearly overwhelming for a young Cot, more used to the wide open spaces of pastures. The room was lit by the fireplace because it added atmosphere and everyone wanted a try at telling the scariest story. Her aunt was there watching the audience as they tried not to be frightened of things they couldn't see but knew on some level that they existed.

When she finished her tale *Star* had plenty of questions and she was not in the mood to answer them. It had been a long time that memories of her aunt felt as if there was a big presence missing in her life.

"Can we continue with it later? I would like to catch up on what we've been passing."

After going over the reports she rose from her seat. She needed to shake the empty feeling that was settling in her and she needed to sleep.

"You have the conn, *Star*."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

Six months into the submersion training with *Star Chaser* her handler notified her that she was permanently assigned to the program. Once she knew, it took her days to prepare a sacred space in her new home, with herbs, incense, prayers and offerings to her ancestors, and then a welcoming to her guardians to join her on a sentient ship. She had no idea if any would accept the offer and then there was *Star Chaser*, who could one moment be cooperative and the next petulant. But it happened and surprisingly enough, *Star* was more interested in the stories she knew than in spirits and energy she couldn't detect. Though she wasn't a Lore Recorder, all clan members started to hear about their mother and father's lineage through stories while in their cradle. Stories were also her aunt's way of passing on her Brounder heritage to her without her parents' interference, and from there enable her to transition smoothly into the Way of a Peaceful Warrior, known as QuaDom.

In the cargo bay following her casting a circle, she sat Āsanās. She breathed in slowly, feeling the breath move down into the pit of her stomach, and then out, picturing it leaving through the top of her head. Breathing in again, she pulled sound from her lower belly. It vibrated in her throat and tickled her lips as the chant expanded out into the cargo bay, through the ship's hull into space. Awareness of something greater than herself filled her until she felt she was about to burst, then it dissipated through her pores, out the ship's hull and into space.

Focus, she breathed. And with this, she vibrated, acting as a turning fork and sending the energy out, knowing that whoever needed it, it would be received. For an hour she chanted until *Star* sounded a bell, grounding her back into conscious awareness.

At one time she thought meditating out in space she would need something to ground her so she would not lose herself in the vastness of space, but even planet bound, dimensions and molecules were plentiful to get lost in the travel, but there was always the lifeline back to the physical body for both types of travel.

The oval shaped porous stone that she had in her sacred space became more prominent in her sight as she reacquainted herself to the feel of her body weight. Taking a deep breath, enjoying the floral scent *Star* added to the environment, she expelled it with a loud whoosh.

"The meaning of the path is found in the experience," she whispered. She rubbed her arms to further her connection with physical matter.

"*Star*, anything to report?"

"Everything clear," *Star* reported.

"No tails? No ships hailing us? No satellites collecting information of our passing? I'm relieved. Anything to report on your hull reexamination?"

"A break in the original security grid has been found. My entire hull is now protected with my own program. I have completed my first set of tests. Would you like to go over them?"

"I am going to sleep. After I wake up, we'll go over them. Don't run any physical tests that require running into things or shots fired without me. You still have the conn, *Star*."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn. Sleep well and deep, Cot."

Chapter 5

Knowing How to Retreat

"Report!" Cot demanded reflexively, not fully awake but instinctively knowing something was wrong. "Lights."

It's too still but it doesn't have the feel of a dream.

It was a curious sensation of missing something but not knowing exactly what it was.

"Star?"

Nothing.

Now fully awake she noted the familiar vibration in the hull was absent and no lights came up when she moved. The glowing stars around the hatch cover that represented a dark hole in the nebula mural was all she could make out in the dark.

"Star! *Report!*" she called mentally.

There wasn't any connection with *Star*. She dropped to the deck barefooted, relieved that there were no surprises or changes in this movement. Touching the sides of the bulkhead she located the closet with her emergency suit. Dressing in the dark under stress was a well-practiced routine for spacers so that it was second nature for her to find by touch what she needed. Once her helmet was engaged it activated multiple readings on the visor, but they were only of her bios and of her immediate surroundings. No connection to the ship's helm.

It took an emergency override on the exit hatch to leave her quarters. She relied on her intuitive feelings that there wasn't anything life threatening outside of her quarters. There was no breathable air in the passageway but there was still gravity. Thumping her way to the bridge she glanced along the passageway noticing the maintenance panels and exits that the holographic program usually hid. The hatch to her bridge was locked down as if her ship was under attack. She cracked the hatch open with just enough space to grasp the edge and pull it open for her to pass. Her helmet light intensity increased as it swept the darkened helm's interior. The two monitors were active with the screens blinking on and off. If the passenger's seat monitor was on it meant the ship system had

crashed and came back up, waiting for the alarms to be cleared and systems tests ran by a person.

Where was *Star Chaser*?

When the screen blinked on, she could see messages scrolling too fast to read.

Leaning over her console she tapped in her access code.

Nothing.

The system was trying to restart itself and was in a loop back. Another attempt to logon was made but the scrolling continued.

"Come on, *Star*, don't shut me out," she coaxed.

Silence.

A soft long beep let her know the console was crashing, and then all lights on the console went out. Pulling out panels she began her inspection, taking an inventory of what she would need. Once her list was completed, she went into the cargo bay and broke out the hauler. In the basket she loaded enough supplies to rebuild at least one console. She returned to her disabled bridge. Every segment was scanned, the connections, and the cards behind each panel. What was damaged she replaced. Done with the repair, she pulled out the panel on her console. Rotating a small cylinder she initiated a restart. She peered at her monitor.

Nothing.

"Come on, come on, initialize."

For a brief moment a startup message flashed then it went black.

"Full system recovery is not possible," a faint voice from the original system's program informed her. "Major damage to outside hull has caused a break in my system recovery. Immediate attention is needed. Automated systems are down. Life support is down. All power will be diverted to sustain gravity for ten minutes. Power for this messaging unit is no longer available."

Cot rapped the console in irritation. No repair bots could be activated. That would have to change when she got *Star* back online. For now, she was on her own. At least she had gravity. She felt a stirring from her ship.

A faint mental connection.

"*Star*, what do I need to do to get us up and running?" It surprised her how affected she was with losing connection with *Star*. Firmly she put the discomfort out of her thoughts. This was just a ship that she needed to get started. All her years as a pilot she had run through drills on what to do if her ship suddenly lost power; however, they were not as large as the CF nor did they have equipment on board for her to do her own repairs which she had on *Star Chaser*-- so this should be easy.

She stood up suddenly. "We're drifting too fast. We're caught in something's pull."

They could very well end up somewhere they would not want to go or crushed if *Star Chaser* could not maintain the energy envelope around her. Did *Star's* tinkering with her systems cause something to break through the shield to the hull? What could she have used to test her shield? Did the Net cause this?

She headed to the Emergency Bell in the cargo bay. She would be able to remove her emergency suit and exchange it for something heavier and bulkier, the AVEC suit. The EB had its own life support.

She stepped into the EB, initiated breathable air and once cleared, removed her emergency suit. She yanked the locker open to get her AVEC suit just as gravity went offline and the ship began to tumble. Making a frantic grab for something to hold onto she hit a bar with her left elbow, numbing everything below the elbow, then hit her head as a bar began to descend. Her vision blurred as she leaned against the bell wall trying to stay out of the way of an unfamiliar apparatus as it settled.

"Naturally this has to be a challenge," she said to *Star*. Not waiting for her sight to clear and her numb arm to come alive, she pushed her useless arm behind a bar to anchor herself, untangled her legs from the suit, and stuffed the emergency suit in the locker. Twisting around, she studied her AVEC suit that was held rigidly in place by a new dressing bar.

"When was this installed?" She was pleased but also annoyed that *Star Chaser* didn't tell her about the change. "Yes, it's a nice surprise but I told you to let me know of what you upgraded.... Oh, this doesn't count because it was done while we were at POATA?"

Star was being humorous, she recognized. Pulling the AVEC suit closer to her, she dropped into the lower half. Her injured arm floating where movement took it was

throwing her off-balance. She tucked that arm into the suit first, and then finished dressing. She wiggled the fingers on her left hand in the gloves. The AVEC suit operated as if she had no injury to the arm.

"What other surprises do you have for me?... Wait and see? Uh, huh. Two can play that game." She clamped the seals and activated the helmet. "I can tell you stories in parts, not in order, for starters."

Pushing the button to activate the medical pac on the suit resulted in the administration of a stimulant. Her vision cleared. The air pack and flexibility of her joints was tested by rotating her ankles, wrists, bending her elbows, and rotating her shoulders to make sure she had a secure seal. The Bell's scanner went over the suit, checking for any leaks or weaknesses. She got a clear light in her helmet. Her boots locked onto the deck, and she released the suit from its anchor.

The ship continued to turn with her walking upside down and then sideways. Retracting the EB shell, she began her progress to a repair locker and secured a general purpose repair harness.

In one of the alcobas, the recessed space on the hull for one person to gain outside access, she locked her boots onto the platform. Cranking the hatch release was harder as she rotated around than if she were stationary and standing right side up, she decided. She had not done too many of these types of emergency drills. It was something to add to her daily routine so next time she could do it comfortably.

When the hatch cleared her head, she cranked out the platform until it was fully extended beyond the solid security of the ship and into space. She noted the energy shield only extended a yard from the hull of the ship with ripples and lights discharging, warning it was not stable.

In mid-worries, all thoughts halted as her gaze took in her surroundings. She stood with the vastness of space, dust particles, stars, suns, moons and planets rotating on three sides of her. Only the belief that there was a solid ship behind her with a tether kept her presence of mind. A dark nebula was to her left; a black space with bright stars and purple dust inviting an adventurous traveler to visit.

To her right was a reflection nebula, another awe inspiring sight.

It was easy to become overwhelmed with the expansiveness. Sometimes the fear of getting lost in it would hit her. It was one thing to meditate or astral travel in infinite space and another to be faced with the conscious physical presence. The conflicting feelings between awe and fear grounded her and brought her thoughts back to the present – and her immediate task.

Fear was a reminder that she needed to follow protocol and not cut corners as some cocky hotshots were prone to do. Using the grab bars, she pulled herself along the hull looking for the damage. Under the light from her helmet, she studied the gash that was as long as her arm. Strafing from weapon's fire cut through the first hull sheet covering and into sensitive connections.

Why would anyone not create a thicker layer hull where a ship was vulnerable? And who shot at them and why? Or was this an example of *Star* testing her shield? She mentally shook her head. *Star* would not act like this without her being alerted and aware, monitoring at her console.

"Time expired?" Cot asked her suit.

Twenty minutes flashed on her helmet faceplate. Too much time worrying about something better left for later. Securing her lines and boots to the hull, she began the repair. Finished she secured her tools.

"Time expired?"

An hour.

That was a long time to be this vulnerable. Turing around, she pulled herself back to the entrance, clamped her boots on the platform, and reentered her ship.

This doesn't make sense. We took a shot that disabled us and here we are vulnerable and no follow up from our attacker. Did Star do this to herself when testing her security?

She would review the ship's logs after this situation was handled.

From the ship's locker she selected another set of tools and a sheet for the patch, managing to not bash herself on the helmet with the equipment as the ship continued its slow roll. Once outside, she began securing the patch to tethers then dragged it to the damaged area, careful that it did not drift with her along with it.

The chemicals from her torch activated another chemical at the edges of the plate to mold itself to the ship's outer hull, fusing into the original outer skin and becoming part of the ship's hull. While she finished the third side she was suddenly shaken as the ship shuddered from an impact.

"Aieeee!"

She dropped the torch and grabbed onto her tethers to stabilize her sudden knock off balance. Another jolt to the ship was felt through her boots, nearly disconnecting her from the ship's hull. The ship's outer shield was holding but not if the shots kept leeching energy.

She grabbed for the line to pull the torch back to her. It floated just out of reach. Mentally she thanked her teacher who insisted on a cross tether so if a sudden jolt like this occurred, she would not be whipped around like a tin can behind a runaway cart on a winding path.

Flicking the torch back on, she began the last side. Another jolt to the ship nearly shook her boots loose again. Done, she slid the tool back into her pouch and began her journey back to the hatch. The next jolt sent her spinning from *Star Chaser* as ship and her went tumbling into a space tide that pulled them quickly along in its flow. As she rolled, she caught sight of a white streak that missed her and *Star* by inches. If the tide had not been pulling them along, they would have been hit again. It was a pulse cannon. Just the kind that would put holes the size she found in the side of her ship, provided the shot could get inside a ship's shield.

She unhooked one of the tethers and pulled herself back into the protection of her ship. The next shot sent *Star* tumbling in another direction. With effort she grabbed the two bars along the hatch and pulled herself onto the platform and locked her boots. She could feel *Star Chaser's* systems coming back online. Until her pilot was back inside, any evasive maneuvers by *Star Chaser* were out of the question. Her heart was pounding with the knowledge that they were under attack, and she was outside with no communication to her ship.

The moment she was on the platform it began to retract, and the hatch cover began its descent. Nearly full power was restored. Her helmet showed the ship's jump sequence in progress.

"We can't jump into hyperspace without bringing up more energy to our shields and you haven't full power yet. Star, disengage the jump sequence!"

Struggling to move quickly in the suit, she clomped her way to the bridge. Her mental orders were being ignored.

"Star Chaser I have the conn. Disengage the jump sequence now! Go to Beta-Red-Dog, on my mark." Two breaths to calm her were followed with, "Mark."

A sudden swerve to the left bounced her against the bulkhead. Her body parts were protected in her suit; however, her wits weren't. Pushing herself off in the direction of the bridge she locked her boots so she would not lose her footing with the next maneuver.

At last, she was on the bridge. *"Star, give me visuals on what's going on out there."*

She wrapped her arms around the seat back as the ship accelerated into the next maneuver. With difficulty she pulled and pushed against the acceleration to get before her console. Her fingers moved over her station, tapping commands to get as much information as she could about their present status and who was shooting at them.

"Good. Good. All systems are back up including battery weapons. I see your shield up and you have pushed it out further. Oh, how tempting to light up a shot across that fool's bow. The coward! Alright, let's go see who's that sorry soul, because that fool's name is meteor dust," she said.

Two years of practicing how not to jump into attack mode did not get rid of her reflexes to raise battle shields and ready her weapons when attacked. Her compromise was to not fire any shots at the targeted ship.

Star Chaser flipped around to chase down their attacker.

"A scout ship. That explains the cannon shots, but not how the shot got through our defenses."

The scout ship realized the tables were turned and veered off and headed back to where it came from.

"Stand down, Star. We're not chasing babies when mama is out there somewhere with perhaps the tribe. Give me our location and plot three possible routes to... here."

Her finger poked at a spot on the star chart showing on her console, just to the left of a black hole. That would give *Star* a charge. She loved to explore the mysterious.

She started to remove her AVEC suit with the assistance of two SEs. A change of uniforms was provided. It felt odd to change on the bridge instead of her quarters, but she could not bring herself to leave the bridge even for a few moments to change into something more comfortable.

While *Star* worked on possible routes, she settled in her seat and studied the space around them, not wanting any more surprises. Satisfied there were no kiosks or other ships around, she called up *Star's* logs intending on finding where the small ship could have picked them up, hoping that would tell her why it was shooting at them.

"Did your shield fail?"

"My shield was not activated."

"Why?" she asked in surprise. With a system failure *Star's* duty was to notify her, without hesitation. Those were two things *Star* failed to do according to protocol.

"I was doing maintenance. There was no one in the area at the time."

"You have monitors and you can multitask, *Star*. How did that ship come into your space and you do not notice it?"

"I will run tests."

She rubbed her eyes in irritation. *Star* was not telling her what happened. She tapped the screen that gave her the name of the mother ship the scout ship was assigned to. "*CFS Vardak*. Bird of prey, is it? I wonder how he spotted us when we've been running below scanners detection. We're being hunted *Star*. You have to be more careful."

"I am reading ships coming out of hyperspace," *Star* said.

She stared at blips beginning to fill her screen.

"It's only a flight. Six fighters and a scout ship mean we're probably dealing with one battle cruiser. We're still too far out for them to register our presence so let's disappear."

"I have tapped into their communication by passing their encrypted security," *Star* said.

Cot's lips curved into a smug smile. *Star Chaser* took full advantage of their time spent at POATA where the students sent many coded messages to their friends, commanding officers and family, picking up how various military establishments created codes.

"Good work. Let's see just how chatty they are."

"... five body shots. So sweet and easy! Bigger than a Warhawk, it was just sitting there with defenses down while making repairs. It's an experimental ship for sure."

"Yeah, yeah, Ensign. So, you keep telling us. So where is this ship?"

"It can't be far. I got a good shot right to the dorsal," the ensign continued excited. "Just follow its trail or mine."

"It's not one of ours, or we would have heard about tests being run out here," another bored voice said.

"And everybody would be out here with their spy satellites wanting to check her out, Lieutenant Merek," the ensign said.

"And, like you, Ensign, taking pot shots at it so they can claim it as a prize," Merek replied dryly.

"Then they should be paying us to keep the place cleared," another voice said. "You've done your bit, Ensign, now clear out and let us professionals bring her in. Or if it's a trap, we'll trip it and see what we get."

"Hey, don't forget I get part of the purse! I'm the one that slowed her down," the ensign said.

"Ensign Warner, clear the channel and report for a debriefing," a more authoritative voice broke in.

"Yes, Captain Heran."

"You find that ship and burn her, Simmons," the voice ordered after Ensign Warner cleared the air.

"On your orders, Captain."

"You want anything from this hit, Captain?" Merek asked.

"No evidence. No souvenirs. Clean your recordings when this is completed. There will be a debriefing on your return."

"Yes, Captain. What about Ensign Warner?"

"He'll be taken care of."

"Right, Captain."

"*Star* we need to get out of here. Leave a trail that's not so obvious, but away from the gate. Do a background on Captain Heran. And send all the information on this to the others. Find out if they're being hunted also."

She had never heard of CFS ships charging to secure an area for testing equipment, but it could be possible. However, it would mean everyone involved in protecting the area would know about the ship and its specs. From her own experience scuttlebutt among the ranks below decks was a resource spies relied on; it would be known in all the popular spacer bars once they hit port.

When SID-pilots tested their Caronda Fighters they had spy bots that were saturated in the area so that their home base always knew who and what was in the area. It was also part of the testing not to be noticed. If Captain Heran was running a protection ring under the flag of the CFS fleet, then they would worry about *Star* escaping with that information.

Cot rested her palms over her tired eyes. The how was: *Star* let her shields down so the SEs could study something *Star* found interesting. The CF ship was defenseless and did not pose any threat to CFS interests. She sent a letter of protest to Star Force Headquarters.

"Star, you have the conn."

"Star Chaser has the conn."

She rose from her seat and went into the cargo bay to work off her aggravation. It would be a waste of her breath to tell *Star Chaser* she made a mistake since *Star* already knew that. She spent two hours sweating through each of the levels of kata, finishing off at 8th level in one form that emphasized kicking and punching.

Next were her breath exercises, and after that, she was looking forward to a pummeling from a massage bot, then onto a light meal. She would finish off her watch reading a good story or taking a nap, not caring which order it was in.

Chapter 6

Knowledge Isn't Everything

Clamped at four points, Cot unlocked one handgrip and leaned forward, slowly reaching for the next place to lock her handgrip to. A flare blinded her just as the ship lurched from beneath her. Blindly her hands and feet sought a reconnection to the ship. She was surprised she was not in a panic when there was nothing to touch. Her body floated until her sight returned. Blinking until her sight cleared, there was no ship within sight. The tether was unwound like a piece of string, extended out into space with no end in sight. Her spin speed increased, and she was sucked into a dust bowl that formed a vortex. There was a geometric pattern on the sides of the vortex that squeezed into the funnel at the center. Toward this center she whirled, giving her no time to decode the message. Down the funnel she went through and in a blink she was reduced to a collection of tiny atoms, yet she knew who she was and that though scattered, it was her connected by some fantastic link that was indestructible.

A buzz crashed through her dream.

"I'm awake," she groggily informed her alarm. She took a few deep breaths for further mental clearing. "Greetings, *Star*. Anything needing my immediate attention?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary or needing your immediate attention," *Star* replied.

Slipping into workout clothes she moved to the cargo area to begin her day with meditation, breathing, and then a physical workout. Intention, action and balance, she kept repeating to herself.

Three hours later she was sitting relaxed on the bridge, surrounded by space and its glory of nebulas, dust clouds, stars and suns. The sought for formation of planets slid into view. *Star* came to a stop and her environment changed to a desert oasis with trees surrounding a group of tents. Her console gave her two views, one of space and the other lines of information scrolling quickly from *Star's* scan results. After two years, she was used to the sudden change of realities.

The code to open the gate went out and the distinctive distortion in space appeared where the doorway to the travel corridor was.

"Dispatch two SU010 to clear the corridor for safe passage, with the spacing dependent on ESD," Cot directed.

"Explosive Scatter Damage is unknown with the upgrades and within any travel tunnel."

The two SU010s were ejected out of a tube and disappeared behind the distortion.

"That is true about the travel tunnels, but couldn't you calculate by what you know of the chemical composition of the tunnel and what you know of the gizmos parts?"

"My calculations are based on a hypothesis and not from repeated tests to prove my calculations," *Star* said.

Cot waited for her to add that a hypothesis could be likened to her intuition but instead *Star* asked, "Doesn't a senior officer feel a loss when she dispatches her soldiers to their death?"

"I did. But I can't speak for the others. Are you concerned about destroying the SU010s for testing?"

"They have limited potential and serve as a weak backup for other multifunctional equipment," *Star* said.

"Yet, they were given to us to test their capability and report on it. Some gizmos are specialized and not intended to be multifunctional. Buyers may find the specialized gizmo just what they want. Before we go through the corridor, how safe is our outer shielding?"

"Operating at 100%. I have removed all of the original programming that proved to be flawed and have notified the others in our squad of a problem in the program and my solution. My shielding will prevent further harm."

"Good work, *Star*. By the time we reach L'Gsta Outpost, we'll have everything tested and redesigned." She grinned as she waited for *Star* to make her characteristic comment that it was not a "we" but "her" that did the testing and redesign; however, *Star* made no comment. Perhaps *Star* was beginning to see that they did work together.

Her eyes rested on her beverage mug from the academy. "Have you destroyed the tag that was in my medallion?"

"Yes, Cot."

"All parts."

"Including your medallion?" *Star* asked.

"Did you find something else in the medallion that could be a tag?" She recognized this line of *Star's* questions as toying with her.

"No. But I have found nothing in the original tag that is sending out signals since I disabled it."

"Are you keeping any parts?"

"Just what is interesting," *Star* said.

"Can you produce one of your own?"

"I have."

"Destroy everything that made up that tag without any further delay, *Star* and whatever you reproduced. You can recreate another when we've reached L'Gsta and we're in a more secured area." She was dismayed that *Star* insisted on keeping things that had the potential to harm them. "Let me know when you have done so."

The return of the probes from the corridor interrupted whatever *Star* may have wanted to say.

"The monitors report that the corridor is stable," *Star* said.

"Leave a permanent monitor about two hours from the gate. One that doesn't beacon or sends messages."

"What is the use of a monitor if it does not pass information?" *Star* asked.

"Clev R4's are passive so the only way they can be found is if a ship runs them over. After a year of monitoring, it becomes active and heads for the nearest public kiosk to wait for an official SF courier agent to download its information." She knew that *Star* knew this. "So, what have you done to Clev R4?"

"I have modified it so that when a SF ship passes it will download its information instead of leaving its post to deliver its report," *Star* reported.

"In order for Clev R4 to know what ship is Star Force it has to send out a signal. A predator will catch it, then all the information it had been gathering is lost and its location known. That risk is what the Clev R16 undertakes with its security programming to prevent it being discovered. It's specific for the high traffic areas where it can mask its signal. We have 100 of each Clev model."

There was silence.

"What have you done with Clev R16?" Cot asked while tapping her console to review their inventory.

"Nothing."

"Return CR4 back to a passive monitor, *Star*."

"You are requesting Clev R4s to go back to a lower version."

"How can you protect CR4s of being attacked if a predator passes and catches its signal?"

"I have no passive Clev R4s to deploy," *Star* admitted.

"Send a CR4 then and make it 6 hours from the gate. As part of its defense, *Star*, it can't reveal the gate, not even to SF agents."

"I will reprogram the Clev R4 to record only. When it has recorded two thirds of its data bin it will begin its journey to a kiosk a week from here. That would be ten minutes if it goes through the gate using the tunnel currents."

It was typical of *Star* not willing to give a point without gaining another. This was *Star's* compromise. Thoughtfully, she tapped down the list of equipment Star Force wanted them to test out. "What changes have you made to the Simms?"

"They will not destroy themselves as a first line of defense."

"Will Simms protect CR4 as its primary duty?" she asked.

"It will if a Star Force agent's life or ship is not in danger."

"I'm sure the agent will be grateful. What happens if a pirate ship takes on the identity of an SF ship and CR4 and the Simms think it's an SF agent?"

"I have devised many cross checks to draw a composite of the object before it reaches the target area a common monitor begins to collect information in."

"Then send out CR4 and two Simms and let's see how they perform. Inform SFHQ so they can do some of their own testing."

Star Force was getting more than they could have bargained for with *Star Chaser*, Cot thought humorously - she certainly was. She learned to adjust and work with what she had when it came to *Star Chaser*, but she wondered how much initiative SFHQ was willing to allow *Star Chaser*.

"We'll continue through the gate when you have the three in position."

She reviewed the log of recent ships that moved through the gate. Four ships were listed within the month and none with names she could readily identify. "All these ships are foreign registry, and they're moving through our section of space; doing what, I wonder. Find out species and planet, *Star*."

The energy changed as they moved further into the corridor, giving her an unpleasant chilly feeling. If the energy penetrated the hull of the ship, then it was an energy the designers of the CF had not anticipated.

How do we learn something new if we have to have a previous anchor point or frame of reference?

"Before waking up, you must realize you're asleep," she whispered. That was the flash of insight she had had earlier. In her mind's eye the image of her aunt as plain as if she were with her stood before her. Twelve-year-old Cot again was surprised that what seemed to her unbelievable to do, was easily repeated by her aunt and then taught to her. Cot smiled at the memory.

"You are not asleep, Cot. And I am always awake," *Star* said.

"What makes you want to find out more about something?" she asked *Star*.

"To see if I can use it to upgrade my systems."

"What about the stories you like to hear?"

"They have information I can use."

"Would you like to develop intuition?"

"It is not reliable, Cot."

"Instrumentation isn't reliable, *Star*. It breaks down. Its programming gets corrupted and parts fail, and instruments only report or record what it's programmer knows."

"I am composed of instrumentation, and I can always upgrade my software and hardware... There is a possibility that I will no longer be able to be contained in this shell. Is that a possibility with intuition?"

"Yes. All living entities can expand beyond their physical shell." The response came so quickly to her lips. It gave her pause, as again she wondered what the possibilities were for the entity within *Star Chaser* to expand beyond anyone's comprehension due to all the technology she had at her disposal and that she created to

see, hear, and translate beyond most species' theories. But then, *Star* only used technology to understand. She is still an entity; she reminded herself with more intensity than she intended. She had spent months before being accepted into the SID project, going over any prejudices she may have or didn't realize she had about living entities being intermixed with mechanical things. Weren't they creating a strange race of beings, she had asked. She was told to think of the mix like the ghost of a being haunting an object. That she could work with and had been since, but now and then she wondered if that was all there was to this sentient experiment.

Less than an hour later *Star's* forward scans showed their exit had a problem.

"A freighter powered down is in front of our exit point," *Star* reported.

She was looking at the image on her screen. If they had been powering through, they would have ran right into her. *Star* was not using the usual wave bands for scanning and that was what saved them a bruising experience.

"Nice job of spotting it, *Star*."

"If we go through slowly," *Star* said, "we can exit on the left of her without disturbing her position."

"Take us through."

As they circled the abandoned freighter, she couldn't see any evidence of damage to the exterior hull.

"This is one big prize to command and a suspicious find outside of a little used gate. One cargo bay wide open with stacked cargo boxes for anyone to see is tempting to anyone curious. What's the ship's name and who is it registered to?"

Her eyes widened in disbelief as she read the information scrolling on her screen. "That's...well, not impossible, but the *Murdelie* has a regular trading business on the other side of Tuead sector."

"The gates we are using make it possible to be almost anywhere in an unknown amount of time," *Star* said.

Tapping the screen, she sent an inquiry to the gate's logs. "The *Murdelie* exited the gate three days ago."

She thought about things that could be wrong with no backup if she should decide to inspect the ship's interior, and that this could become something bigger than one pilot

and ship to investigate; however, the feeling to board her increased as she stared at the ship's cargo bay.

"This is an enticing invitation to board her and more so if we were thieves," she said. "A normal person would call the nearest military outpost and perhaps look about while waiting. Of course, the finder would have to keep an eye out for the local pirate or other criminal groups which would know instantly of our transmission on this find. They would be out here faster than the military to plunder it."

"We could protect it against unauthorized visitors until the authorities arrive," *Star* said.

She laughed. "We wouldn't last a week even with all our gizmos against an attack by any band of looters. A couple of days, maybe...unless we bring up *Murdelie's* security so she can protect herself."

That was a legitimate excuse for why she was going to board the freighter and bring up its power, before calling for the proper authorities. Frowning she stared at the freighter filling her screen. "For a ship not showing any systems running, why is it not drifting?"

Star offered no additional information but she could feel her searching for an explanation.

"We need to move the ship away from the gate just in case there's someone without good sense to follow standard guidelines for exiting a travel corridor," she said.

Information on the ship's owners didn't tell her anything new. The ship was registered to a clan of Enas whose business catered to the unusual. They normally did business along the Codiad and Tuead borders, though she had seen a few of their smaller ships along Durant's Rim.

"Who's the captain?" she asked.

"It is registered to the Third Triup of Evenssort," *Star* said.

"I've heard of him."

"It is a female," *Star* said.

"Now that *is* interesting. The Third Triup of Evenssort was male a few years ago. Usually when there's a change in leadership on a ship this large the word is out to all potential customers...including CFS captains."

She scanned the information *Star* provided to her screen but didn't see any personal information on the captain. Once a title is granted, the singular name of the individual is no longer used.

"Find out what port this ship last stopped at. Notify SFHQ of our find in double encrypt and to High Commander Er only."

She read the basic cultural information on Enas while *Star* ran another set of scans over the ship, looking for traps. No one liked an outsider in their business no matter how well they meant the intention.

"*Star*, locate the nearest public gate to this location and where we could have entered it to..."

"All possibilities will be sought on how we arrived at this point in this amount of time, to conceal the existence of this gate," *Star* said.

"Good and don't offer any explanations unless asked. When you can, let me know what type of shutdown occurred on *Murdellie*."

She leaned forward, her eyes slitting in concentration. It just occurred to her that within the ships logs would be mention of gates that the Enas had knowledge of for eons of their space travel. "I would love to be able to get a peek at the ships logs and check out the gates they know of." She sighed, "But it would be stealing and there isn't a ship's captain worth their years who doesn't keep their secrets locked up tight with nasty traps for the thief."

"Perhaps we have something they consider worthy of trading for," *Star* said.

"My trading skills with an Ena trader would leave me with only my space boots," she said wryly. "What planets in this area can support an Ena bios with or without suits? And do a scan further out in space for any traps... Also check for the last time someone was in the area. See if there are any reports of a missing freighter or any news of unusual smuggler or pirate activity in this area or any area, for that matter. Make another pass around her belly. I want another look."

There were information buoys or kiosks throughout space along the well-traveled corridors that acted as libraries, newscasts, and mailboxes so that everyone passing was kept updated with information that space travelers would be interested in. *Star* was

especially interested in the libraries considering the number of species that utilized its services. After ten minutes a drone *Star* had sent out to the nearest kiosk returned.

"There is no information on the *Murdelie's* disappearance. The kiosk's log does not show anyone accessing information for a month," *Star* reported. "According to the kiosk library, since the twenty-four water bearing planets in this area had been destroyed one thousand 4 hundred and 3 of your years, it is no longer an active travel way."

"What destroyed them?" Cot asked.

"Debris from the orbiting planet, Sig4. It passes in this area every 2,342.3 standard years. Two wobbled out of their normal orbit around their suns changing their climate drastically. One was destroyed from explosions on its surface and its debris impacted it's surrounding neighbors."

"That's interesting the gate exit wasn't affected. I would think that the blast of energy from the changes would carry out this far."

"This far out I show no change in the surrounding planets. Whatever life forms maybe on them I am unable to read."

She took a deep breath at the sudden thought. "What if this exit was designed just for the purpose of rescuing the life forms from the doomed planets?"

"There is no information on the level of intelligence on any of the planets in this area, but to remove one planet of its life forms worthy of saving would take many years even with over two hundred ships assisting."

The two hundred ships were the amount given by research at how many ships could pass within a month through a given section of a corridor without destabilizing it; thus, all public gates had counters and sensors that monitored the health of the travel corridors.

"And who would make the determination of who to save?" Cot asked softly. "Wouldn't that be interesting if the creators of these gates were their own populations they were saving and all the travel corridors, we've been finding were to other space sectors where they were looking for suitable planets to resettle on? But if they were that advanced, why didn't they use dimensional travel?"

"It is an interesting idea, Cot."

"What's our lead time for knowing anyone is coming out of the gate?"

"Twenty standard minutes," *Star* said.

"How much can you extend that time?"

"Are you intending to go aboard the *Murdelie*?"

"Yes."

"How much time do you need?"

She frowned as she ran through probable problems and the time it would take to resolve them or leave them in order to restart the ship, supervise the move from the gate exit – and maybe get in a quick look around. "An hour lead time." That wasn't a long time to do a recon on a dissented ship by one person, but for a squad trained for that it would be.

"I will work on extending the time."

"Dispatch three SEs for recon."

"I can power her up without you risking yourself, Cot."

"I'm sure you can, but I wish to look around...just to see what we're powering up. We need to be sure that's not a contagious ship."

"All the more reason why you should not go aboard," *Star* said.

"You upgraded my AVEC suits?"

"They surpass the manufacture's specifications," *Star* said.

"This is a good place to test one of the suits out. If there's a contaminant on board, or a threat of some kind, this will be a good test."

"You will bring the contaminant here." *Star* sounded alarmed to her ear. "As for a threat...I did not add any weapons to your suits."

"SEs would bring a contaminant here, too. With all the different planets and species that we'll be visiting, you'll need to see if your protections are adequate within your ship as well as on my AVEC suits."

She felt *Star's* anxiety at the possibility of bringing a contaminant on board. It could well be the reason the ship was left looking abandoned, but she doubted it...or was she deluding herself just because of the anticipation of an adventure.

"Every time you tap into another ship's computer, you risk bringing over something that could infect your systems, yet you still do it. As sure as you are that you'll

not pick up anything in your connections, is as sure as I am that whatever we run into on the *Murdelie*, we'll be able to handle."

"That is not meant as an assurance," *Star* rightly pointed out. "You are always warning me about something. You suspect I will not perform 100%."

"If you believe that you have all the answers, then you won't find anything new. A program is only as good as its programmer, and in your case, *Star*, you've become your own programmer. I will keep reminding you to look beyond your programming. That is what partners do for each other, *Star*. They help each other grow beyond what they were the previous day."

Before *Star* could come up with something else, she added, "So, what is our recon team finding?"

Information began to show on her screen. The SEs picked up a vibration in the structure when they entered the cargo bay.

"Where is this energy coming from? It's not enough to prevent drift. There has to be something else powered on that they're not picking up."

"We are investigating the source," *Star* said. Her tone was more confident. "When that is found, the reason why the *Murdele* is not drifting will be also be found."

Suddenly the information stopped scrolling on her screen.

"They must have hit a dead spot."

"I have not heard of a dead spot on a ship, nor have I scanned one," *Star* objected.

"And here you are," she said. "Some ships have areas on board where security doesn't allow any signal to pass. It's not practical to neutralize the entire ship, because how can a captain monitor her crew. Show me *Murdele's* deck plans."

There were no markers showing the position of the SEs. She drew a finger along the line that outlined a space almost in the center of the ship that had no information on measurements or exits/entrances. "This could be the incubation compartment. Enas would not leave a ship if there was a chrysalis, but then again, they wouldn't leave a ship with cargo."

Star was anxious to send other SEs onboard the *Murdelie* to reclaim her missing three...and continue *her* exploration of the ship.

After making another inspection circle around the freighter, to verify nothing had changed with the SEs entering the ship, *Star Chaser* stopped alongside the open cargo bay that her three missing SEs disappeared into. Her lights revealed the cargo bay's interior full. It was a horrible temptation for even an honorable person to not try to steal the ship, except the practical matter is, where would one hide something this big without the most notorious of pirates cutting your head off and stealing it from you? So how did the *Murdelie* manage to stay unreported for days?

"Stay concealed, *Star*. You would be easy to recognize. If anyone is around send out the shuttle to collect me."

"From the *Murdelie's* bridge you can access the ship's logs," *Star* said.

"Good idea but with no power the time it will take to access the bridge, one of the most protected areas of a ship whether it has power or no, could be better spent locating the one area that has power. From there, *you* can access the ship's logs while powering it up. It's important once the power is initiated that the ship has its security fully engaged. *Murdelie* will be spotted by other ships with her power back on."

Dressed in an AVEC suit she stood on the rim of the umbilical, holding onto the handles to keep from spinning from the weightless atmosphere as the umbilicus snaked over to the ship. The stop was not sudden, but in this environment, it was like being spit out of a hose. She forced her limbs to move in front of her so she would not look like a flung doll that would hit the security buffer faceplate first. However, there was nothing to prevent her from entering the cargo bay, so she sailed unimpeded until she engaged her stabilizers, landing gently on the deck. Her space boots clamped once her forward motion ceased. The SEs attached to her suit scattered, inspecting the cargo bay. Turning her head, the helmet light flashed over neatly stacked cargo containers with space enough for someone her size to walk between each row. A hatch cover was plainly marked in the back.

She turned slowly, watching the display on her visor. It should have been easy to pick up life energy in a place that once had been humming with activity, but there was nothing. Not even from a machine which gave off a different sort of energy signature.

The information that the SEs that arrived with her were picking up was the content of the containers, not the whereabouts of the missing SEs. She laughed in

disbelief. *Star Chaser* was inventorying the cargo. If the captain of the *Murdelie* found out there would be more than an outraged complaint lodged against her. She would be looking over her shoulders for a mortleige to deliver a warning not to do that again. Though a mortleige was a messenger, they were not simple messengers. Some of the messages were fatal to the receiver.

There were no other sounds other than her breathing and footfalls as her boots locked onto the deck and released with each step. Belatedly, sensible thoughts of maybe she could be moving into a trap or what could become her tomb came to her. Firmly, she focused her thoughts on three goals, to power up the ship to move it to a safer position, make sure no one was on board that needed assistance, and to find the three missing SEs. Her curiosity added to another list, why the ship was here, how it got here, and how it could stay anchored in one place without power.

Pushing the emergency hatch cover release it cracked just enough for her to grip the edge and pull it so there was enough space for her to fit through. Pausing to catch her breath from the effort, she spotted an SE near the door. Suddenly it zipped up and then down, then eye level to her. It happened within seconds. Her heart was beating from the explosive movement.

"*Star*, we found one of the missing SEs. Recall it for maintenance check."

"Cot, I read SE4 as functioning adequately for this mission."

"Report from SE4?" Cot asked.

"SE4 has nothing to report."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

Cot pulled out the emergency bar to prevent the hatch cover to slide shut. She let out an irritated snort that sounded flat in her ear. "The emergency bar won't work unless the hatch cover is completely opened. It's part of a ship's protection from being boarded by pirates or other unwelcomed visitors. That means, once I pass through it closes. SE4, find something to prevent this hatch cover from closing." While waiting, Cot shined her light down the passageway. The light cut a sharp swath into the pitch darkness. Bare bulkheads, smooth overhead, and a clear deck was all there was to see.

The other two missing SEs were not in sight.

"*Star*, does SE4 know where the others were before they were cut off?" she asked.

"SE4 has no information, Cot."

"The memory has been wiped?"

"I am investigating."

The SE moved a cargo box that fits comfortably the width of the opening. Climbing over it, she dropped into the passageway, quieting her anxiety at the strangeness she was feeling around her...or the fact that she was not picking up anything. Lifting her hand scanner she noted, like her helmet sensors, nothing was registering.

"This is like a dead ship."

"I am reading that you are the only biological on board, Cot," *Star* said.

"It's more than that, *Star*. It feels lifeless as if it were cleaned of all energy readings."

Who would want to wash out past and present thoughts and feelings of the previous inhabitants? A new resident that is sensitive to others energy, she thought. That covered a lot of species. But usually when an energy cleansing took place, known as an EC, as the energy of the previous tenants was removed, another type of energy replaced it that was soothing for the new occupants.

"On ISS."

There was a shift in her visor changing her perception and her audio reception. Her bio-indicator let her know her breath was shallow. Her beating heart was too loud in her ears, and the walls seemed to be too close.

"Everyone gets jitters before a mission so shake it off," she whispered to herself. Firming her resolve to get to the bottom of the ship's abandonment no matter how eerie it felt, she took two deep breaths and nosily let out the air, then let her breath go back to a normal rhythm. The bio-indicator gave better readings.

"Show access to deck 6."

Her helmet's visual map appeared on her faceplate. There were clear directions on how to get to a transport shaft. "Off map, off ISS."

As she walked through the passageway her light swept across closed hatchways to crews' quarters and storage rooms, until midway down.

A body.

Her helmet gave no reading on what was before her. She glanced at her hand scanner. No reading from the HS. Approaching the body, she kept her light moving over the area, not wanting to be surprised by any attacks.

HS still picked up nothing. Not even the chemical makeup of the AVEC suit the body was dressed in. The body was wedged in a partially opened hatch cover.

"Record visual information on the body and extrapolate what information you can." She checked to see if the recorder was working. To her it was.

"*Star*, are you picking up the visual recordings?"

"Yes, Cot."

She couldn't tell if the body was intended to keep the hatch open or if it caught when the power went off.

"SE, investigate interior." While the bot zipped into the room for inspection, she ran a series of scans over the suited form, changing the settings as each scan for particulars picked up nothing.

"There's some kind of damper running through the ship that isn't allowing me to read data," she said for the benefit of the recorder. "For all I know this person could be in self-imposed hibernation until someone rescued him."

Kneeling for a closer look, she studied the body, ready to move should the person suddenly awaken, or should the body be rigged to a trap.

"Evidence of damage to the Life Pac's regulator." She zoomed in her camera to examine the damage closer. "Looks like a deflection from weapon's fire."

Shining her light further down the passageway she didn't see any damage from a weapon discharge. Satisfied, the SE had taken enough of a recording of the body she pushed the hatch further open. With one hand she held the door open so it not shut on her and with the other guided the freed body that arose out of the doorway. A gold coin floated clear of the body. She plucked the coin out of the air and studied the stamp on each side.

It was from the Eugenic Province and was worth a month's pay for her. Most people used coins from EP because the coins were made from a mineral whose value did not go down.

Passing her light across the nearly bare interior the couch jumped out at her from the blackness with its multicolored brightness. In most mid-sized to large ships, cabin furniture was made to recess into the bulkhead until needed, allowing occupants in small living spaces to entertain themselves in something other than their sleeping quarters without taking up more space. The compartment was no larger than what an ensign would occupy on CFS ships this size.

She pulled out the emergency bar and anchored it in place to keep the door opened. There was no power to close the door, but with *Star* working on getting the ship's systems back online, there was no telling what would happen.

Moving closer to the couch she spotted a dark colored string. Leaning in for a closer inspection, she followed it to a purse that was lodged between the couch cushions. Verifying that it was not a trap she picked up the purse and opened it. Gold flashed in her light, as more coins from the Eugenic Province floated out of the bag. She collected them and secured them back in the purse, then tucked the purse back where she had found it. The rest of the cushions were checked under to see if there was anything else that may have been lodged out of sight. Desperate people hid things in obvious places, as well as clever people planted evidence in the same places. Nothing more was found. For whatever reason the bag was placed here, it was not her evidence to gather or to move so it was left as she had found it.

Turning to the rest of the room, her helmet light slid around the room. She stopped at where she felt the closet would be. No outlines, pictures, or Icons to verify the presence of a storage area.

"Access the closet, SE. Right there." She touched where she wanted the SE to force an opening.

SE sent out a fine line that on contact with the hull, spread out as a thin liquid, seeping into any breaks in the solid surface. An outline began to appear. The compartment door slid open, and a dark object fell out in slow motion. Her arm went up in a defensive block as an unoccupied AVEC suit floated out to be captured by a SE. Cot watched the SE scan the suit as her heart returned to a normal rhythm. It seemed a waste to scan the suit when so far, their equipment was not picking up anything.

She patted down all the utility pockets. They were empty. There was no wear markings on the suit or a patch showing the status of the wearer, or even family affiliation. How would they know who was in the suit without an identification?

Enas are telepathic, she remembered.

The Life Pac indicated it had five standard hours of air left. Turning back to the closet, it was empty, and if there were a false panel the SE didn't find it.

Moving back to the body hovering on the overhead in the room, she pulled it down to get a closer look at something she had missed earlier. There on the thigh was the symbol for ship security. Security officers always carried weapons hidden in all sorts of places on their clothing. Another pat down still found no weapons. Were Enas' different on their own ship?

"Time?"

Forty-five minutes had passed, and she still had not made it to the center of the ship.

"System startup has been initiated," *Star* reported. "Ship's log shows a standard shutdown was supervised by the captain at Station Subterrian."

"Subterrian is a major space station for passenger and freight business, and it's a week from here if they didn't take a gate. Thank you, *Star*. Have you located the missing SEs?"

"SE9 is no longer transmitting information." *Star* sounded troubled.

"Where was your last reading on SE9?"

"Deck 4."

"For any SE that goes off to investigate keep a streaming connection, *Star*. Do you know if anything besides a chrysalis can be in an incubation chamber?"

"I have not found any further information on chrysalises from the kiosk library. I will expand my search to the ship's library when I am able."

"SE 4 and 6 secure the body and move it to medical." While the SEs scooted out of the room with the body, Cot took one more look around to see if she had missed anything. A sound from behind her had her regretting there was no rear view. Turning was in short steps as her feet needed to unclamp, otherwise a twisted ankle or wrenched knee could result.

An irritated hiss escaped her lips. The door was closed.

"Star?"

Her voice came back to her as if she were speaking in an enclosed space. The closed door cut off her communication.

"Star?" she thought.

Not even her mental speech felt the same. Did the Enas ensure their privacy through an insulated bulkhead?

"Up magnification 50x."

Nothing happened.

There had to be an emergency exit. She turned around as quickly as she was able, feeling something brush up against her. Holding up her scanner that had so far not been of much use, she could not pick up any life signs. She ran the scanner over herself to test it. It didn't pick up her life signs.

"What have they got running in this bulkhead that causes a scanner to malfunction?" Pressing the self-test, it came back calibrated and ready, then the scanner went dead along with her helmet. It was dark and all senses were limited to the inside of the AVEC suit. Tentively, she took a breath to see if her life support was still functioning. By the sounds and rich breathable air, it was. Surrounded in pitch darkness with not even her helmet giving her any guidance, she was on her own.

She slowly moved forward with her hands extended, feeling for the solid bulkhead. Her forward progress was halted as she suddenly stumbled over something knee high. There had not been anything but the couch on her entrance.

An inquiring voice called from behind her. Looking to where she thought the voice came from, a shape stood in the doorway. It was impossible to see clearly due to the bright backlight.

Again, she was asked if she was alright. The tone was light and familiar, giving her a tingling feeling all over. There would be no sharing the bed while she was inebriated, that was their rule. The couch would be her place for the night.

She found herself on the couch. Someone brushed up against her. Turning to where the pressure was, she found herself lying prone. Leaning above her was a dark menacing shadow. If you cannot keep your private affairs private, then people taking

offense should not be unexpected. It was the fact that this person took the offense to a violent act surprised her.

The scene changed and no longer was she in the room. A thin tentacle reached out for her and attached to her faceplate. A cnidocyte seeped out a liquid that spread over the entire faceplate, blocking any view she had. A dot like a small dent appeared, then spidery lines shot out in all directions. Her faceplate exploded, sending out pieces of her in globes of liquid and other bio-matter.

She took a slow deep breath. The fact that she could feel the breath move through her lungs and clear her sluggish thoughts was proof that what she had witnessed didn't mean *she* was dead.

Dead? As in physical death? Of course that's what she meant.

The sudden hiss of a door near her startled her, and at the same time she was blasted with sensory input as her AVEC suit came back online. Taking deep breaths to steady her nerves, her attention shifted to the change of sound in her helmet. She had an open comm channel.

"Star, *what happened?*" she asked mentally rather than via their comm link.

"Closed doors blocks most forms of communication from passing through the ships bulkhead," Star reported.

She quickly moved out of the room. "What closed the door?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't either SE feel a concern that I was no longer in contact with them?"

"Your life was not in danger, Cot.

Star's dismissal of their loss of connection as a trivial matter had her wondering if their training for the last two years had taken a complete memory dump from *Star*. When this job was over, there was going to be some reevaluating of priorities.

She stopped in her tracks and shined her light along the passageway. Here were scorch marks running along the bulkhead and overhead. The pattern was what it would look like if there was no atmosphere in the passageway and small arm fire took place. If the ship was operational, the repair bots would have cleaned up the evidence.

Pirates and smugglers who were into stealing ships were careful about what they damaged, but those that were only interested in stealing what was on the ship, small time

thieves, did not care to what extent of damage they did, including to passengers and crew. She would have to wait until she returned to *Star* where she could run her own programs to analyze what could have occurred here. Certainly, *Star* would be curious since there was a story to discover.

Moving toward the transport shaft, she dropped into it, activating her stabilizers to stop on deck 6.

An environmental barrier was engaged with an alarm light on deck 6. Her helmet scan finally gave her a reading. It showed the environment was breathable for Enas but would be difficult for her, though not impossible. The HS showed nothing. The SEs sent ahead of her located the Medical Bay and the Incubation Room. All other rooms along the passageway were secured. The body of the security officer was lying near the entrance to the medical facilities.

Moving through the barrier her light widened to cover both sides of the passageway. Her feeling of something amiss was rising, sending shivers along her arms. Both rooms had alarm lights flickering; however, Med's alarm would occasionally hold steady, blinking out, then flicker back on.

Was it a code?

"Can you see if there are any cocoons in the incubation compartments?"

"A scan's energy would disrupt chrysalis' development," *Star* said.

"If you're able to scan the ship and it's decks, why aren't any of my scans or the SEs picking up anything?"

"I show all scans are working."

"My helmet and the HS are not picking up anything."

"I will run tests on your equipment," *Star* said.

Shinning her light further down the passageway she picked up shadows on the bulkhead. Moving closer the marks looked like flashbacks from weapons fire. Her light shined further up the hall. The charred remains of a rifle lay on the deck. Any scans from her equipment gave her no readings. She would have to do her own work. Standing over the remains, she identified it as a standard CFS military issue. This particular weapon was used for boarding a hostile ship. Any damage to anything on the other side of a bulkhead was minimized as the rifle was designed to neutralize biomaterial. For the rifle to have

been damaged, it would have had to overheat. She had seen many soldiers on their first hostile boarding keep the trigger activated which caused the barrel to overheat and backfire.

Turning her attention back to the incubation room she wondered how she could check for occupants. According to *Star's* information, anyone not protected by a special suit, including Ena adults, would experience a cellular change if they passed the barrier. The barrier was to protect the chrysalis from outside disturbances. Enas in space knew not to enter an incubation compartment without preparation. When the chrysalis was completed, an adult stepped out of the cocoon with species knowledge and memories of its clan. In a year's time the young adult would know what she or he had an inclination for and would complete their internship in that group or join an outside school for further specialized training.

She attempted to access the control panel to the Medical Bay. The panel wouldn't open. She would have to wait for *Star* to figure out the code.

She turned her head for a better view of something that moved in her peripheral vision. "What is that?" She leaned closer to peer through the transparent bulkhead into the Medical Bay. Whatever it was, she could only see it from her peripheral vision. A scan of the room could not detect anything amiss.

"There's something in there that if I don't look at it directly, I can see it. Create the wavelength that my peripheral vision uses in this helmet and send the information to my scanner."

Whatever it had come from the far end of the Medical bay and reached nearly to the bulkhead along the passageway.

"If this were in space I would say it's a space anomaly and record it, but this is inside the ship. It's not a time warp or space displacement because I've seen those and I could look at them face on. I've never seen or heard of anything like this."

Her scanner vibrated when the download of information from *Star* was completed.

Swinging her light and scanner into the Medical Bay, she could now pick up a cylinder of chaotic energy running across the medical bay toward the bulkhead. The incubation room was in its path if it were advancing.

"Are your scans reading this *Star*?"

"I cannot identify what it is," *Star* reported.

Running her light as far back inside of Med as she could she spotted something dark in a corner.

"Someone is in there," she said softly. "Forget about codes, SE6 open Med."

SE6 touched the panel with a thin tube. Liquid seeped into the control box and the door slid open. The bot darted in before her to secure the area; however, she followed without waiting for a clear signal. Kneeling next to the person in an AVEC suit, she looked for any sign of life. The faceplate showed breathing. Here was someone that could tell her what happened. The figure was lying beside the life pod storage rack. The life pods were locked down as if the ship had been secured for a port visit.

"*Star*, is there enough energy right now to activate the medical facilities?"

"I am bringing up Medical facilities online, now."

Cot lifted the woman into a life pod she was next to, and retracted the woman's helmet, ready to reverse her action should the woman show signs of distress. Her color began to change but she had no way of knowing if this was a good sign. She had never met an Ena personally and holographic images for general information were not meant for medical based comparisons.

Luminescent eyes opened. Both women studied each other, then the Ena weakly raised her hand and wrapped her three fingers around her armored wrist, giving it a squeeze.

"I found your ship abandoned in space," Cot explained. "I'm powering up the systems so there's enough energy for life support and outer shield protection. I found another person on deck 4. He or she is unarmed, wearing an AVEC suit with a security emblem on the hip. I don't know what this person's life status is. My sensors aren't functioning properly on your ship."

"They are not meant to on this trip," she whispered. "Unreliable...if you do pick up anything."

Cot leaned closer to hear her.

"Is there something I should be aware of?" Cot asked.

The Enas' lips barely moved as her strength faded. "Power....fluctuations... Unknown cause.... Nothing seems right," she sighed, sounding perplexed.

The medical tube cover began to descend over the Ena not giving Cot time for any more questions. She glanced at the control panel to the medical bed. Nothing that she could understand.

Turning to leave Med she could hear a warning beep from the incubation room and a blue light above its door was blinking.

She moved to a side panel for a reading on the compartment's status. Why would the support for the incubation compartment be running if it were unoccupied? Was the two left on board giving it a last inspection before turning it over to the port authorities and they ran into thieves? Or were they supposed to remain on board to be sure that no thieves boarded her? A good captain would not fill her cargo bays and then let the dockworkers clear her ship for cleaning... unless someone reported a virus after the ship was loaded.

"*Star*, do they have a backup?"

"They are running on their backup, Cot."

"How long before ship's systems are fully up?"

"Taking in consideration all systems check, two hours for completing all decks. I have activated full system restoration. Their security is complicated and may take longer than the few hours."

"I'm not asking you to decipher their security, *Star*. My being here should set alarms off when the power is back up. What about shuttles? They have Life Pacs aboard that we can use here. Any still on board?"

"The manifest on Deck 4 shows Deck 5."

"How many?"

"Twenty-two new and fully charged and ready for the new owners."

"I'm on my way."

SE6 pulled the hatch cover open to the cargo bay and gave her a clear. Unlike the hatch cover on deck 4, this one opened wide. As she stepped into the mammoth cargo bay she increased the light intensity on her helmet. Her light passed over the shuttles with

their shipping orders stamped on their exterior. The SEs scouted above the cargo, giving her an overview of the contents.

"No captain would leave her ship fully loaded without at least a troop of her own security guarding the goods," she said with certainty. "Something unexpected and well-planned happened here, and we need to get our business quickly done here and leave."

A shadow that looked like a person had her focusing her light on it. JabaKu E, leader of the Peace Movement during the early formation of what is now the Consortium, posed under her light. It was a life sized likeness of him. Other notable figures were around his statue. Moving past the shuttles to get a better look at the statues she found more recognizable peace figures safely encased in transparent packing gels.

"The captain must have picked up the contract to move the statues to the new Garden of Peace on Er105." Mentally she went over the distance and when the actual ceremonies would be taking place. Two weeks. The *Murdelie's* captain must have connections and knows the right corridors to get there on time without rivals threatening her delivery time...which may explain why the ship was out this far from any known public gate without crew, she thought. A rival did get to the ship. It could also explain why the ship was cleaned of energy. If a mixture of species were to transport with the statues, many would be able to read the Enas business just by placing a hand on the bulkhead.

Unconsciously she sought out a familiar figure among the statues. Tears filled her eyes as she spotted a statue of Ambassador Keli standing between two longtime friends who were both still alive, as far as she knew. So, it was not a memorial for just those that crossed over.

She squeezed between statues to stand before her aunt's likeness. The artist had captured a younger version of her. The smile that she remembered as part of her persona invoked an automatic returned smile from her. Touching the control to the gel pac it peeled back giving her a better view of Ambassador Keli.

Her eyes moved over the details of her dress, arranged from where the cord was knotted to how; revealing to those in the know that she was a master of QuaDom.

"Auntie," she whispered tenderly, "they have done a very good job on your likeness." Leaning forward she studied the medallion that hung around her neck. Her aunt

never wore her talisman openly and from what she understood, not everyone could see it. It was to have been hers at her aunt's passing. She had wondered what had happened to it. It was a powerful talisman and if it were meant to be hers then it would find its way to her, she was taught.

Her hand scooped around the medallion, holding it to get a closer look. She was startled when energy traveled up her arm. Respectfully, with both hands, she lifted it from the statue's neck.

"This is real, *Star*."

"So is the deadline to collect Life Pacs," *Star* reminded her. "I have more information on Enas young. Shall I play it for you?"

"Yes." *I don't know how you did it auntie but thank you.* She secured the medallion in one of her pockets, aware of the steady beat of its power against her. Her hand rested over the pocket, recognizing a calling from the talisman. *Soon, we will call together the ancestors,* she thought to the medallion.

Moving back to the shuttles she watched the SEs at their task while she listened to *Star's* information on Enas. The SEs made quick work of testing and then disconnecting the Life Pacs, and she remembered to recharge her own. It took an hour to test the twelve pacs, detach, and deliver to deck 6. The switch was without a problem.

Back at the medical bay the distortion was no longer visible.

"Have you been able to find any more readings on this distortion?"

"I have not. In the time you have allotted for inspecting the ship, we must now retrieve the missing SEs," *Star* said.

"Yes. If we left them behind SF would have my pip and your tail. What orders did you give them?"

"To inspect each deck, starting with deck 1."

"That's the VIP deck. What kind of energy and security do they have on this ship? We could use it should you ever be boarded. My visor and HR went dead again."

"I am looking into it."

It was not something she thought *Star* could find the answer to, but she was curious how *Star* would handle a task she could not complete. As she moved quickly through the corridors and up the transport shaft to deck one, she kept expecting

something to challenge her presence aboard the ship. Surely within three days someone besides her had to have stumbled on this ship.

For a moment she froze, listening for a repeat of the sound.

Murmuring?

The next thing she knew, she was lifted off her feet and flung down the passageway. She slammed into the hull and slid down stunned. Though her vision was blurred, she thought the SEs that accompanied her were lying on the deck. A pale gray cloud rushed toward her. Just as suddenly, the energy vaped and disappeared. Her pulse beat rapidly in her throat and her breath was in shallow gulps. There was no communication with *Star*.

This is where that energy is coming from. I can feel it.

She cupped her hand over the pocket that had the medallion to make sure she still had it, though by the warmth it radiated she should have been reassured it was still there. On wobbly legs she rose to her feet. Along the passageway she could see the SEs that accompanied her, the original missing two and SE9. Walking slowly past them all a grayish barrier blocked her passage to the guest quarters. Reaching out to touch it, it flexed under her push. Should she just push past it? Keeping in mind that this was not her ship and she didn't know what was going on, she didn't want to damage anything.

So just what was she doing here?

"I sure wish I knew. But I'm here, so get on with it," she encouraged herself. "Take with you the feeling of wellbeing," she quoted her aunt. Humming ara kara she moved past the barrier, coming to a stop in front of the entrance to the last door in the passageway. By the label on the door, it was quarters to someone important. The hatch cover slid open.

It was a luxurious suite with plenty of pillows and low platforms for reclining. It took a few moments before she could feel comfortable in the room. Set on a table in the middle of the room amid a clutter of odd, shaped objects, a box the size of her palm caught her attention.

She reached to pick it up for a closer view. "Magnify 200xs," she directed her helmet. "It looks like a miniature house. Magnify again by same power."

It was amazing but the box had four sides carved with elaborate decorations. Why so small? Carefully she laid it back on the table. A change in the room had her looking behind her. A gray cloud formed up and before she could react encircled her.

"I'm here to secure the ship. "I intend no harm," she said quickly.

Minutes passed before the gray cloud slowly faded to nothing.

Moving back to the table she studied the small shapes. "Up magnification, 600xs."

What she had first thought were scattered odd shapes on the table were now elaborate carvings. Was it a city?

Backing away from the table she went back to her inspection of the room, looking for the passageway that led to the incubation room that the ships schematics showed to be connected to this room. She found it hidden behind an elaborate cloth mural. She parted the silky drapery, getting a lightheaded feeling as her glove touched the drapes.

Though the life support for an Ena was not up in this area, the passageway was not lifeless. She could feel emotions from many. Her own telepathy was average except with *Star*, so the impact of the fear mixed with anticipation from so many was surprising; and underneath all that was a sound that stirred up unpleasant feelings.

This was where she was being directed to go. Her steps faltered as it became clearer that she was being directed.

"Alright, I got the message. Now what?"

The sound underneath the emotions had a malicious intent. It didn't belong here.

Cot began her mantra, ara kara, while she continued down the passageway. She could feel a stutter in the negative waves of sound. Gradually the malevolent sound faded out. Continuing with her mantra she had stopped in the passageway as the ripple of change began to be reflected back at her from the walls.

It is done.

Turning back, she stepped past the silky cover and out of the room as quickly as she could.

"Time?"

Over two hours had passed since she came aboard. Life support and security should be up now. There was still no mental or physical connection to *Star*, and the SEs

were littered in the passageway. She began collecting them and fastening them to her suit as she moved down the passageway and to the exit. Stepping into the transport shaft she dropped as if stepping off a high rise into space.

"On stabilizers!" she hollered. As she bounced against the walls of the tube the secured SEs were knocked loose. Her suit jets failed to activate. Suddenly the SEs came active and the suit's stabilizers righted her and slowed her free fall.

"Life support for Enas is back online," *Star* reported calmly. "Security is up with *Murdelie's* on board security bots beginning their security checks."

"What happened to our connection?"

"You entered a dead zone," *Star* informed her simply.

She wanted to check on the two in Medical Bay before security was fully up. There were questions she wanted answers to and if not both up than at least one should be revived by now.

She met no resistance to her return to deck 6. Both rooms were fully operational. Resting both palms against the bulkhead of the incubation room, she could feel the energy was chaotic. Was this how the strange energy in the medical bay would feel? She closed her eyes and willed her spirit to see if there was a chrysalis in the incubation chamber.

She looked around her, searching for something she could recognize. As spirit, colors were sounds and the discordant sounds surrounded her. Thinking of the chant "ara kara," she took four steps to a shapeless form that looked as if it were having problems solidifying. There were brief reprieves from the sounds, and during that time the spirit would try to form, but the next sound had it loose what form it had developed. She stood before the form and chanted ara kara, then wrapped energy around the undeveloped spirit, sending love and protection, while the vibrations from the chant vibrated through both of them. The destructive sound stopped from outside of them and more soothing sounds began. The spirit quickly formed into an unrecognizable, but less distressed shape.

She returned to her body. She inspected what had been done by the SEs.

"That's my scanner. Couldn't you find some of their equipment to give the right tones?"

"I use what is readily available," *Star* said.

"We can't leave any of our equipment here."

"I am programming the same tones you gave to the computer so it will not go back to the off key vibration."

Things started to happen rapidly and simultaneously, with the deck vibrating as if something stronger than the ship's normal power was turned on.

"Six ships identified as belonging to a pirate's group have hyperspaced off *Murdelie's* bow," *Star* notified her.

"Well, it's about time though I can do without them. Does the *Murdelie* have an anti-boarding defense *Star*? Activate it if so and continue to stay out of sight. Bring up the schematic of the ship. Where is the engine room? I should be able to monitor the ship and set up a defense of some type. Has SFHQ responded yet?"

"No."

Deck 2 would put her just above the engine room and let her see what the area looked like. She ran into a security field.

"*Murdelie's* self-protection has been activated. Everything has been locked down. I will see if I can allow you to pass as part of the crew of the *Murdelie*," *Star* said.

A SE opened an emergency exit panel and darted into it with three others following. Two remained with her waiting for an all clear. The moment the all clear was received she climbed into the maintenance shaft and let go. The tube swayed gently as they rapidly dropped past decks.

Several cannon shots at the ship could be felt as it rocked.

The shields are holding, she thought relieved.

She tumbled out on a deck against a crate. She was on Deck 4 where she had entered. Using the cargo to conceal her she moved to where she could see the pirate ships.

"Gods! It's like a news flash went out to all pirates in the vicinity. There's a dozen out there!"

Murdelie's shield shimmered as it absorbed the shots.

"They have to have weapons somewhere on this deck."

An image flashed of where on Deck 4 there a gunner's turret was.

"Now that's something I can handle." Moving through the rows of cargo she caught her balance as a cannon from the freighter went off. Hesitating for a moment, Cot resumed her progress.

Pulling open the door to the gun pit she looked over the interior. It was not made for her species, but she could manage. It just meant she would have to remember it was a faster automatic reload. Sliding into the chair she strapped in, feeling the difference of stature with the tightness of the safety harness.

From the control panel that was lit up, she could read other weapons on the ship and their rate of fire. All were hot. Someone was controlling most remotely. She released hers from remote control and hit the button to locate the target.

The seat smoothly moved to the ships swooping in for shots on her side. "This is where side swipes have an advantage. Just to heat up the air."

Resting her fingers on the load and fire buttons, she began sending out shots that would cause enough concussion between the ships for them to back off. Maybe she would get lucky and one would explode causing a few others to be damaged.

A shot directed right at her was shot down with the antimissiles that most gun turrets had to protect their occupants. The connection of the two hit the turret and if she had not been dressed in an AVEC suit, she would have died from the charge.

After an hour of preventing the pirates from getting an opening to the freighter, she could see that they were taking another approach. Dressed in AVEC suits and holding onto rifles dozens of pirates were heading over to board the Murdelie. They must think they had a hole in the freighter's shell.

"Cot, I have deployed our net so that it is between Murdelie and the pirates. The woman you rescued has taken charge on the bridge and is bringing up the ship's defenses. Will the net be counterproductive to the developing Ena?"

"I think the time has passed for influencing the Ena's development. Your deployment of the net is excellent, Star."

Redialing the type of shot she sent out an electromagnetic charge that would hit the netting and arc out, shorting anything within a yard. Each of the pirates would act as a carrier of the charge as their suits would become disabled. Hopefully, it would arc over to their ships.

"We have more company," Star informed her. "A CFS troop carrier. It is thirty minutes away in the tunnel."

"I need to get out of here before that ship arrives." She released the harness and was jumping out of the gunner's turret when a boom from behind her sent her flying into the stacked cargo. Half unconscious, two SEs carried her through a tube. She rolled out and landed on another deck. Dimly, she could hear a message from the ship's PA system. The AVEC medical pac sent a shot of meds into her system, bringing her focus sharp and clear almost immediately.

"SE6 show me what's going on and stay out of sight," she ordered. Rolling on her back she tried to forget about the headache, focusing on the overhead. She knew she was on a cargo deck. On her faceplate the image of the *CFS Powder Keg*, a CFS troop carrier was sitting on deck with its bay door wide open. Beyond that, three disabled pirate ships were leaning off kilter. The SE expanded the view of a squad of Enas in armor at attention outside of the carrier. Two gunner turrets were manned on either side of the opened doors. She figured the woman wearing a uniform as bright as the dress uniform she recently discarded for a more somber Star Force uniform was the leader. Standing at a respectable distance, indicating a wait-and-see attitude was a captain of the CFS army and a first lieutenant. By the looks of the uniform of the first lieutenant, this was his first deployment. He was too tense, too alert, and no ribbons yet from active duty.

The length of time it would take to untangle out of this diplomatic mess was more time than what she wanted to expend. The CFS captain would use her as a training tool for his first lieutenant and not telling what the Enas would do. And then, she would have to ruin it for everyone and flash her new association, which was a last resort. Relying on the two Enas she had rescued to put in a good word for her was not something she wanted to do.

The group moved out of the cargo bay with the Ena captain, the CFS captain and lieutenant following. No guards remained on deck.

"SE9, check out the interior of *CFS Powder Keg*."

A few minutes later she was given a view of the interior. A CFS hoplite squad fully armored was watching the inside of the cargo bay and another group watching the

disabled pirate ships. Two NCOs were discussing something, and she guessed they wanted to take a trip over to the damaged pirate ships and declare them captured booty.

She needed to get off the ship as soon as possible. Her presence must be setting off alarms somewhere on the *Murdelie*.

She remembered that the troop carriers had a small two person pod attached. It served a dual purpose; for the captain and lieutenant to monitor their troops above the battle fray planet side, and as the captain's emergency escape pod in space. If a platoon, while in space had to make an emergency escape in AVEC suits the captain in the emergency pod would be able to keep the survivors together, offer added air, repair, and nourish until help arrived. The disadvantage in war situations was that the captain's pod was the first thing pirates, smugglers and other outlaws shot at, and then attacked the survivors. Depending on the captain, small armaments were added limited only by the imagination of who added safety. It didn't matter to her. She didn't want to be stuck in one in the middle of a battle. Her squad had to protect too many of them during the Incursion Wars to give her any confidence that they had a useful purpose to anyone but the enemy.

It was memories like this that interfered with her concentration. Refocusing, she stared at the SE image of the troop carrier from the backside. She could access the pod from outside the ship that maintenance workers used instead of through the hatch that would drop her into the pilot seat that was normally accessed from inside the troop ship. How was she going to avoid being shot down by the *Murdelie* once she activated the pod?

"Star, *I hope you identified me to the Murdelie's security system as friendly,*" she thought.

"*You have been given protection by the Enas you rescued,*" Star replied.

She checked her life support settings on her suit. She had ten hours if she didn't do any heavy physical activity. Sliding along the stacked crates, she moved to the open cargo bay doors, keeping an eye out for any monitoring equipment. Dropping to the deck she crawled around the *CFS Powder Keg's* nose, depending on the SEs to interfere with anything that may locate her as a threat. Hardly noticed was the expanse of space behind her as she looked for where she could reach. The shuttle had settled right on the edge of

the docking platform, leaving no space to walk to the pod nestled like an implanted ball on the side of the ship. She would be dangling in space. Would it be tempting for a gunner in the disabled pirate ships to make that one last daring shot?

There were recessed loops looking like small knobs on the exterior that tow lines could be connected to, where the troops in their AVEC suits would be attached to the pod. Grabbing onto one she tested how well she could hold on. Dragging herself along the hull, she took great care not to let her feet attach to the side of the hull. It would make noise that everyone in the shuttle would hear.

SE9 sent images of the soldiers in the ship. They looked relaxed, but she had witnessed the quickness of hoplites. Their fast muscle twitch enabled them to move into action in the blink of an eye.

The *Murdelie* suddenly began to move, swinging around in a defensive position. She lost one hand hold as the environment around her created suction, pulling at her. Her hand grabbed the communication array and held on. The buffer didn't protect her from the flow that was like a tunnel of air blowing by her. The suit's readings told her it was hot. Out of the corner of her eye she could see a SE work the maintenance hatch cover that would put her between the hull and deck of the pod. Pulling herself forward, a SE latched onto the side of the pod while keeping a tight hold on her. The hatch was opened and as she moved in the SEs followed her. The moment she closed the pod's maintenance hatch, she could feel the pod detach.

Star had to be flying it. She wasted no time opening the deck cover and climbing out to strap in the pilot's seat. Only one seat was engaged so she had enough space to move.

Her visor showed that life support was set to another species. Not wanting to clue anyone in on who stole the pod she left it as it was. She was not going to be long.

"Where are we going?"

The voice in her head was not like *Star's* communication nor was the presence that accompanied it. It was a species presence, like Jobahians, Kiomatians and Dilitians. She looked around for the body that would go with the voice. Movement on the overhead had her looking into a shaded green visor.

Her eyes spotted a royal emblem on the shoulder pad but not of a house she knew of.

"Not far." She activated the second seat. "You need to drop down here and strap in for our safety." *Royalty? What is he doing here without a guard?*

"You were the one in the birthing room," he stated verbally. He dropped into the seat in a slow twist and turn as if he were in free space. She wondered if he had been practicing that while he was here alone.

"In a sense," she said slowly, studying as much as she could of the young Ena for her own information. "SE1 will assist you to strap in."

The young Ena watched the SE with curiosity as it detached from her shoulder and engaged a seat restraint that dropped over him.

She returned her attention to the console where a comm channel blinked at a steady rhythm. They were being hailed.

"Does anyone know you are in this pod?"

"Just those that need to know."

"Why are you in the pod?"

"They do not wish me to mingle with the soldiers."

"It looks like they are frantic to get you back," she said. "What is your family name?" she asked for future reference.

"We have not decided. We are a new consciousness."

Not knowing enough of Enas politics to make an educated guess as to why a royal chrysalis was awakened on board the freighter, or for that matter on a freighter that was cleaned and shipping statues to a peace garden that was sure to be carrying the dignitaries that would appear at the dedication ceremony.... That was too complicated for the moment.

"Why was the ship moved here and without crew?" she asked.

"We moved it here. It is in neutral territory. We sought you to help save sister. We are now helping you to escape."

She was thinking *Star* would not like her part in the rescue diminished. Suddenly she remembered the one coin she still had. Feeling around in her pocket she didn't find it. Her hand brushed against the medallion.

"Bringing you to the talisman of your kin is our thank you for helping us."

She stared at him but his attention had moved to the view of space, with its swirls, black holes, and planet bodies that vibrated at a wavelength that if not seen visually, then picked up with ship instrumentation.

"Does this end?" he asked.

"Not that I'm aware of."

A ding had her moving her interest back to the console. *Star* was changing their course. Predictably, they were being pursued. Ghost signals were sent out by *Star* to confuse the rescuers.

"Why was the *Murdelie* cleaned of energy?" she asked.

"To prevent a distraction to our formation and imprinting. We are grateful for your willing contribution."

She could feel his appreciation. "I'm glad I was in the area to be able to help," she said. "You said you are a new family, why is a new family being brought into existence?"

"It is the collective desire of the species for a new direction. A direction that is less devoted to aggression against others, yet not weak that they perish under another's will. We are moving to a higher spiritual density once we have settled."

"Why did sister have to be saved by someone other than an Ena?"

"There is always some residue of resistance to change in the most ardent of agents and to insure the direction does not become altered it requires an outside agent to make an important contribution...and not always will it appear to be a favorable intersession. In this situation energies were manipulated to the advantage of both our needs."

She felt an understanding on a deeper level that brought her world to a standstill in wonderment. It was like being in a cosmic tornado funnel with worlds, words, species, and all sorts of things, spun around so rapidly that there was no separation in their existence. A new species had been added to the galaxies.

"Your medallion is expressive," the Ena said. His head turned slightly as he watched SE1 move to his shoulder. He reached out and touched it. It was strange to see the bot stick to his finger as if to a magnet.

She took a deep breath to ground herself so she could focus on her immediate need, to reach her ship before their pursuers reached them. Pods were not built for speed

and *Star's* interference with their pursuers could not be extended long since telepathy was an Ena's tool.

"If you need any assistance and I'm nearby, call me." Her voice sounded far away yet she could feel the sounds she made in speech vibrate through her whole body, radiating out into the space around them, and pass through the pod's shell. It was as if she had uttered an oath with all its trappings of power.

On another level, it occurred to her that her unplanned offer to help would affect a lot of people.

"We appreciate the offer and accept. In return, we extend ours to you."

She was in a daze from what she was experiencing. It was the strangest vibration that had her eyes watering. A buzz in her connection with *Star* brought her back to present worries.

"Your rescuers should be here in minutes."

He held out his hand with the bot resting in his palm.

"I will leave SE1 with you. SE1 you are to protect this person and obey his orders. This is where I get off. Blessings to you young one. I wish you great wisdom and courage to be who your heart guides you to be."

"Good travel and health," he replied. "Sister wishes you the same." He tucked the bot in a pocket, patting it gently.

She slid out of the hatch, then to the exterior of the pod, holding onto the maintenance grip, as a line shot over to her. If she missed it she knew the SEs would have secured it. She snapped the safety to her belt and pulled herself over as she was reeled in. *Star Chaser's* hatch was open.

Once inside she thumped up to the helm. "*Star*, I have the conn. Send all our information on the Enas to the squad and SFHQ and the offer I made. That is going to be an interesting story to follow. That was a new royal line and from the feel of it, a new species, *Star*."

"What does that mean, Cot?"

"Something that will shake up more than Enas' politics. Collect data from the SEs on our visit to the *Murdelie* and prepare it for my review. I'll need it with my report to HQ."

Cot remembered the medallion. Digging in her pocket she pulled out the medallion by its chain and laid it on her palm.

Nothing happens by chance, Auntie would say.

A quick glance at the console showed they were making good progress and from the trailing monitors covering their tracks, nothing was detected following them, which did not reassure her. They would be catching another gate in seven hours, heading to another part of the galaxy. She ran a diagnostic on her suit and an inventory on the SEs, expecting a quick clear.

"I am missing SE1, Cot," *Star* said.

"It's in the pod with the young one. It will protect him and his sister until they are more mature. *Star*, call in the monitors. We'll pick up speed when they're safely aboard. I want all sensors re calibrated and tested. We'll use your full speed to get out of here."

"I will re-number my SEs."

Rising from her seat to meditate, she added, "Let me know when you're finished translating what you pulled from *Murdelie's* logs. I'll read it after dinner. The conn is yours, *Star*. The same drill; keep me posted if you notice anything *I* want to know about."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

She left the bridge hoping *Star* did not leave too much of herself in SE1's programming.

Why did I leave it with the young one? Don't start second guessing yourself, Cot. I trust it will protect the youth. No mixed loyalty.

She hoped that was the reason and not because she was manipulated to. Enas were the most profitable traders in the known galaxies with good reason.

Chapter 7

Bua

Cot changed into ritual garb. As she dressed, each knot was tied symbolically, chants of blessings and protection were made, then she reached out for her guardian spirits to be present to witness the changing of custody of the medallion. The last part of her dress was a sash that wound around her waist. The same vow repeated over centuries by others was made with intention and reverence.

Before the mirror, she met the eyes of the person reflected back at her. This time she studied herself without avoidance. Her Elfin face, too narrow for some, too full for others, was a pale blue showing she was past marriageable age, but not old enough to make life decisions for others in the clan. Her curly white hair intentionally covered the tops of her ears, so their exact shape was hidden. Her eyes were chameleon-like, taking on the color of her environment, most notably her clothing, provided she was not emotional. If necessary, they could also be masked in slate gray.

She returned her attention to the ceremonial dress that she had worn at her initiation into the 12th level of QuaDom. She smoothed a wrinkle automatically as she thought of who she had called to witness her claiming the medallion as hers. She knew the spirit of her aunt would be present. Though her auntie was not physically on this level of existence, she always felt she was near. She had called all those that had been claimants to the medallion to make peace with them and make sure her claim would not be interfered with.

Next were the ceremonial slippers, symbolically representing a boat that delivered the initiated souls to the sacred island for the Gathering. Lifting the medallion, she marveled at how just holding it changed what she perceived around her. Only for a moment her concern for *Star* who would not be able to observe what she was going through flickered in her consciousness.

Focus on the immediate.

At the edge of her sacred place, she removed her slippers. She cast her circle. Before the oval shaped stone, homage was paid to her Brounder ancestors. She thanked her spirit guides and all those that helped her get this far, then she thanked whatever

power was behind the talisman for it to have found her. Then she invited all those that should be present, to be present.

With some talismans it was necessary to declare ownership so that the power was not stolen by another. Other talismans were formed or chosen for specific purposes. And then, there were talismans that chose who to give their power to, as if they were living entities, and in some respects they were.

She held up her talisman to admire the light as it struck the stone embedded in it. It was the type that chose who was to wield it and how it was to be used. This one was an eorclanstan, what in some clans was called a harkenstone. It assisted the holder on her journey to become a peaceful warrior.

Holding the medallion in her left hand she looked up and found herself standing in front of Keli. Her Aunt held her arms out to her which she didn't hesitate to step into, nestling in her warm energy.

"Auntie, I've missed you so much." She didn't wonder that she was taller than her aunt, while the last time they met Keli's was taller than she.

"How can you say that when I'm always around? I hear all your conversations to me. I do like your new ship, *Star Chaser*."

Keli gave her another squeeze and then held her at arms' length. "You've grown in a lot of ways, Colleen. Not such a quiet one that takes in all that her eyes can see rather than speak of it, and not full of righteous anger for the victimized. You've moved on."

She felt her face heat up from an old wound. "I have learned there are other ways to *be* right action."

Her aunt smiled at her, her palm lifted to cup her chin in her usual gesture of affection. "The talisman has found you, my dear. You have witnessed its power in the events that came before you to lay claim to it. It will bring experiences to you that will give you opportunities to learn. Old friends will be exchanged for new. Enemies will become assistants. Everything will change in meaning and all will not be explainable. Your inner and outer world will no longer be recognizable."

"Star Force isn't likely to be understanding with my sudden change of direction in life."

"And what have you been doing for the last two years?"

"Ouch." She ruefully shrugged her shoulders. "I guess my head was so buried in my books, I wasn't paying attention."

Her aunt took the talisman from her hand and looped the chain over her neck.

"Let all witness the passing of the medallion from me to you. It is now your right to name it, as every holder in the past had called it by name."

She looked down at the stone that sparkled. "A name?"

Keli smiled at her. "People either grow into their names or grow out of them or a name becomes more powerful. One of your responsibilities is to discover the name of this amulet. It has changed since I held it, so the old name no longer fits...just as you change your sacred name as you gain more power."

"I understand."

Keli released it and the moment it rested against her skin Cot felt an expansion of her awareness. It was not the same as when she meditated, astral traveled or linked with *Star*. This was an awareness of subtle energy fields that were around her and in her, each affecting her senses differently and creating sensations in the center of her forehead that radiated out through her heart. It was not an overwhelming and powerful energy that once had knocked her off her feet when her aunt had forced a door of perception open for her.

This was a force that wrapped her in a soft cloak of love and profound understanding of her power. Through tears she watched her thoughts go out, like bolts of energy. Her creations. Unlike her previous encounters with heart filling love, she didn't feel as if she would burst because this energy flowed effortlessly.

When she opened her eyes, she stared at the porous stone, knowing she was in her sacred space in *Star Chaser's* cargo bay. The only things that were detailed on the oval stone were the carved hands with prayer beads draped over them.

Bua is your name.

She opened her circle with prayers of thanksgiving.

Two hours later she sat staring at the bulkhead as she sipped a warm beverage. Her thoughts were on locating the safeguards planted on *Star* against either of them going rouge. It was logical that they would be embedded somewhere neither could easily access. She was sure if they became a direct threat to her she would be able to locate them, but waiting until then would be too late, since she had no doubt other threats would

be occupying her time. The ship was powerful and with a sentient behind its operation it *could* lead to misuse of power. With *Star* making changes to her whole system, they were just as dangerous as the new Enas. She smiled to herself, realizing how alike their situation was.

Rising from her seat she returned to the cargo bay. It was time to see just what CBIS had found.

CBIS recognized her.

No self-destruct had been found as of yet, but the scan was not complete. CBIS was slow and ponderous in its scan. Everything must be accounted for. The slowdown and difficulty was from all the changes *Star* had made to her original structure and operation. *Star* was taking her time in replying to CBIS's inquiries.

"*Star*, update all your documentation on the improvements you've made, please."

"It is not good security practice to reveal my upgrades to an outsider," *Star* objected.

"Are you saying that someone can get through *your* security and look at your files?"

"Nothing is perfect, Cot."

"Please update CBIS with your improvements. CBIS is your failsafe for being taken over, *Star*." She wondered if *Star's* hesitation was coming from a program that did not want to be discovered, or if it was just *Star*.

Back on the bridge she pulled up the file on the *Murdelie*. It was blank as if they had never made the visit. There was, however, an encrypted packet of information from CBIS on the visit.

"*Star*, where are the reports I asked for on our visit to the *Murdelie*?"

"They are encrypted."

"I can't read them if they're encrypted. Please decrypt."

"It will take some time for me to have the entire file ready for your reading. It is a new encryption I have developed."

"You have three standard hours to decrypt your code," she said.

Chapter 8

A Mysterious Guest

The door to the incubation compartment opened. The interior was warm and dry with low lighting. Along the overhead were huge leaves with their stems as wide as her hand. Some of the leaves were wrapped in themselves as a cocoon. The cocoon stems were a different color than the others because of the nutrition it wrapped around the chrysalis. Stepping in further, she could now see clearly the etchings on one cocoon and the chrysalis shining through. The vibrations and sounds in the room were inspiring and sustaining. She knew she was the one responsible for this change of atmosphere. Her heart ached thinking that something would have happened to the beautiful souls within them if she had not intervened.

A noise from behind her had her spinning around drawing out her saber. Holding it firmly before her she approached a darkened corner. A luminous figure appeared. It's intelligence shining in it's eyes nearly blinded her. She felt naked in it's gaze.

"I want to help," Cot said.

"By doing what?"

"I don't know."

"Help without focus can interfere with another's lesson."

"What is needed that I can do?"

"Be present."

"Mindfulness," she whispered. Her eyes fell on her saber and its shining blade. Many proverbs about a sharp blade crossed her mind with one in particular sticking out because of its pretentiousness, "Though the sword of justice is sharp, it will not slay the innocent," she whispered. "By whose definition of justice? It's the same mentality that says Kill them all and let their gods sort them out. They treat collateral damage as inconsequential if a military gain *can* be made."

To her, if a withdrawal was called, a calmer decision could be made, eliminating collateral damage. That thought woke her up. For a few moments she laid in silence letting the last remnants of her dream fade.

She touched the talisman. *Bua*. A warm and tender touch filled her at the thought of the talisman's name. *The hammer when need be*.

Her thoughts returned to the idea of collateral damage. Would she be able to pull back and rethink a solution in the heat of a battle? In the past she would have said yes without hesitation, but that was before she knew as much as she did and had so much power at her disposal both in her ship and *Bua*.

She rolled out of bed ready for the day.

"Greetings, *Star*. What's our status?"

"We are passing outside of the sensor readings of a large number of ships. I detect no trouble."

Dressing quickly, she trotted up the passageway to the bridge.

"I have the conn, *Star*."

"You have the conn, *Cot*."

Once seated her console unfurled before her and information began to scroll across her screen. Ships of different classes were stretched out and moving rapidly into formation.

"*Star*, are they under attack?"

"There is no threat."

Both watched as the ships moved from one formation into another.

"They're running formation drills. It's a flotilla with one capital ship."

An alarm went off on her console.

"Someone thinks they see us. Let's move out of here."

A movement in her peripheral had her glancing to the left of her into small eyes.

"Yeow!"

She leaped out of her seat, backing up as far as she could without leaving the bridge. All her senses were engaged at deciphering whether this was a threat, then she wondered why *Star* was not initiating any security barriers between her and the small robot.

"There is nothing to worry about, *Cot*. It will not harm you," *Star's* amused voice assured her.

The bot dropped on her console. The box shaped body was the size of her fist. It rolled off the console and before it hit the deck four spindly legs extended. It walked up to her and stopped. It was knee high. She was tempted to call up a protection spell around her, but to do so meant she perceived the bot as a threat, and there was no feeling of danger from the small thing. It was embarrassing that a person with her skills and accomplishments would be shaken this way.

"How did it get on board?"

"It came over for a visit while you were on the *Murdelie*."

"A visit? You had a visitor without clearing it with me?" She was alarmed that *Star* was making decisions without consulting her, then she remembered CBIS. Not only had she brought it aboard without asking *Star*, but it was inspecting *Star* down to the most intimate joint and subroutine. "You let it stay on board without telling me? Send it back. We're not a passenger ship."

"Send it back where?" *Star* asked, sounding overly patient. "It is *my* guest. It won't take up much room. You can think of it as a swap for SE1."

"*Star*, let me remind you that it's your very life you're putting on the line..." her eyes followed the small bot as it moved back a few feet, "and mine. Just how much information does SE1 have on you?" Now that she was away from the *Murdelie* it seemed a reckless decision to give one of their SE's away.

"It will do no harm. It has a mission similar to ours. It says SE1 will be well taken care of."

"Have you decrypted the information on my visit to the *Murdelie*?"

"I am working on it. It is a good encryption program." *Star* tone sounded a little too smug.

"Next time you use a new program, try something that's not important, like your communications to others."

"What good would it do to encrypt communication to them if they do not have the code?" *Star* asked, "And before I send them the code, I must be sure it is a secure code."

She stared at the bot, wondering how she was going to get it off the ship without upsetting *Star*.

"*Star*, you have the conn."

Settling in her sacred space, her thoughts kept going around about the bot and the strong feeling she received from *Star* when she questioned her on its presence. Was *Star* lonely? What kind of company was the bot offering her?

Having sentient ships was not a new frontier, but for this side of space it was. An environment conducive to bringing sentient ships into being was the same as what the Enas created for their young, though one was a living being and the other was still a ship. It did mean, though, that *Star* was a vibrant being in her own right and being curious about things she may see as dangerous didn't mean they were necessarily a threat in the physical sense to her.

She rubbed her forehead. There were many experiences that would be coming their way, and she didn't want to set limits on what each of them would allow into their lives otherwise neither would benefit from experiences outside of their knowledge. That was what exploring was about.

Rising from her meditation, she began her work out. Two hours later, she cleaned up and returned to the bridge.

Chapter 9

Lost and Found

"Captain has the conn."

"Captain has the conn."

"Report?"

"An observatory above Reun has been found. Nobody appears to be on board, Captain."

"Send out the robotics to secure for boarding."

"Dispatching robotics to secure observatory for your inspection, Captain."

"I'll be in the shuttle preparing for flight. Transferring the conn back to you." The Captain's motion to rise from her seat had slight hesitation. Something didn't sound right but it was too brief to register anything other than a hesitation.

"Conn has been handed over, Captain."

The shuttle ramp was extended, allowing her to enter without hesitation. At the shuttle's helm she prepared for flight, running systems checks.

"The observatory has been secured," the ship's security reported. "Your presence is awaited, Captain."

The shuttle approached the observatory without challenge and glided into the cargo bay, settling in a well-marked spot. There was no sound when the cargo bays doors closed but the deck under the shuttle did vibrate. The shuttle's exit hatch opened. Standing at the top of the ramp she looked over the interior. Nothing caught her attention or would be recalled because there was nothing important here. Her footsteps down the ramp were solid thumps with no echoing sounding in the cavernous bay.

The hatch cover into the observatory's work area opened soundlessly. The tube from the cargo bay to the next module had just enough lighting to show it was clear. The next modular unit was also empty. It was unnecessary to linger for a closer inspection. In the command center where she needed to be, a quick visual inspection was made. All consoles were dark, and there was no overhead lighting. Sitting at the master console she brought all systems online, and with it the other consoles began to scroll messages of systems coming online. The overhead lights in the command center came on.

The message light blinked incessantly, reminding the captain of a small creature's heart when it was caught in her grasp.

"Messages from the planet Reun are queued up," the computer voice reported, bringing the Captain's attention back to task.

"Read first message," the Captain ordered.

"Translating.....Translation complete," the computer said.

"Members of the research team are ready to return to OBE."

"All messages are a repetition of the same," the computer noted. "Do you want to hear them?"

"No. Who is the sender of the first message?"

"Team Leader Lt. Celese Angul."

"Contact her."

"Contact made. Her message - Her job is completed. She is waiting to be picked up."

"Send the shuttle to bring her aboard. Prepare the operating room. Locate the others."

"Shuttle dispatched. Operating room is online and ready for the transitional operation. Locator devices have been activated. Signals to locate have been sent."

Captain rose from her seat and walked to the shuttle bay to wait for the shuttle's return with Team Leader Lt. Celese Angul.

The shuttle resettled, the ramp came out, and something moved out of the ship. Captain followed it to the observatory's medical lab.

Time must have passed, but it was unnoticed by the Captain. The transitioned agent stood before her. The agent's mission was complete; she was retrieved and transitioned back to her own form successfully.

Team Leader Lt. Celese in a body more suitable for the observatory's habitat, stood before her, and saluted.

"Lt. Celese Angul, Team Leader for the Second Team, reporting back. Mission accomplished."

"Welcome back. Very good. Write up your report, Lieutenant. When you're finished --unless there is something you need to say now," the pause was slight, "then file it and get some rest. The others will be coming up shortly."

"Right, Captain. I have nothing to report out of the ordinary or that needs to be attended to right away. I'm looking forward to greeting the others."

A teeth grinding buzz broke into Cot's dream. It was the type of sound that could not be worked into a dreamscape to let the sleeper dream on.

"Uhhmup." It was hard to interpret what she said and what she meant to say. It was just as difficult to open her eyes and impossible to lift her head. Something stung and her slow moving mind knew it should have been something that would wake her up. It was as if she had been heavily drugged.

"It is difficult to wake you," a familiar voice in her head complained.

"Trying." She grunted as she struggled to sit up. It occurred to her to take deep breaths; however, the thought got no further than a thought. Even the effort to open her eyes got no further than rising her lids to slits.

A jolt had her suddenly sitting up with her eyes opened wide. Reflexively, she took heaving breaths of air, hoping that she would continue her move to wakefulness, thus avoiding another shocking jolt.

The medical bot supplied her with a warm liquid. It loosened the tightness in her throat.

"What happened?" she panted.

"Your brainwave patterns are unusual," *Star* informed her.

She steadied her breathing and gave her heart a few minutes to settle into a normal rhythm. "When did that start?" she asked.

"Eight hours ago. You did not acknowledge me during that time, but you showed no distress; however, now it is time for you to report for duty. Was it an important dream?"

Her hand went to her throat where her medallion was. It was gone.

"Yes, it is."

Bua?

Her legs bowed when she dropped to the deck. Hanging onto the bed frame for support, she stared at her locker—a destination and then moved to it on unsteady legs. The lethargy in thoughts and limbs lessened with movement. The smooth feel of her feet sliding into her boots and the solid heel thump on the deck reassured her she was not in a dream. She made her way to the cargo bay, relying on another sense to take her to her talisman. There in the protection of her sacred space lay the medallion as if it had been carefully placed there. Her fingers wrapped around it as if it was a life saver, and her belief gave her more energy and a clearer mind.

"Gepacks?" She whispered. There was no message from the talisman, but how the message would present itself was something she still had yet to discover. Turning, she hurried up the passageway to the bridge, touching the bulkhead to prevent herself from falling off balance.

"I have the conn, *Star*."

"Cot has the conn," replied *Star*.

"*Star*, where are we located? I want to know everything we've passed since my brainwave pattern changed."

She looped the chain to the talisman around her neck and Bua settled warmly against her skin. That was more than reassuring as her senses flared, with lights and sounds taking on a different texture.

"At the present, we are just out of scan reach of an abandoned university observatory, *IV New Prospects*. The cause of your brainwave pattern disturbance originating from there. I have dispatched four Wringers to gather information."

"On the course I selected there were no space structures reported in the area." She glanced at the star chart, surprised at what she saw. "We haven't gone far from our exit point."

"As Star Force Headquarters suspected, the star charts we are using are not accurate. The disturbance started five minutes after you left the bridge. While I monitored your health, I searched for the cause of the unusual brain wave patterns. Once I identified the cause, I remained near further investigating the why."

"Investigating is what we're about, *Star*. What have you found out about it so far?"

Gepacks. Similarities don't mean this has something to do with them. Focus on the present. I don't need to think about them and bring that energy here.

It had been a long time since she experienced their type of attack. Her practical side "to be prepared for anything" fought the side that wanted to practice "experience everything as if it were for the first time." Her hand moved to cover the medallion, wondering what got her to discard it, and in a safe place. She recalled leaving the bridge to get in a workout before her meditation and then sleep. By *Star's* time account, her brainwave patterns changed when she would have been changing into her workout ghee.

"The observatory eluded my first scans, but using your continued brainwave disturbance I was able to get an approximate area it was coming from. I have adjusted and reset particle recognition patterns. It mimics time displacement. There is also a beam of energy that is disrupting particle flow in its area."

Two schematics of the observatory appeared on her screen; one from the manufacturer and the other what *Star's* scan showed. As with most remote outposts, changes were made over time by convenience and necessity and usually with what was on hand.

"I am seeking further information on its past," *Star* said.

Her eyes fell on *Star's* visitor. She wondered how immune it was to whatever had attacked her. She let out an exasperated sigh.

That wasn't an attack. Shaking her head, she reminded herself it was a message in a dream. *What made me chose the word 'attack'?* The underlying emotions behind the dream. Anger? Betrayal? The only person that could have been angry was Lt. Celese.

But captains could have a lot of suppressed anger too. Duty meant handing down some assignments to the troops that were sullied, while those that thought up the dangerous and sometimes unrealistic deployments were safe in their offices.

"What university does it belong to?"

"University of Chole. At one time it was considered a thriving and innovative campus."

"Where was that information pulled from?"

"From the nearest kiosk's archives. The university no longer exists. The observatory's purpose is unclear due to it not being mentioned in the first or second layer of information on the university. In a separate search I found the observatory's name in a joint project from the University's seven science departments and the Investigation Agency of the now disbanded Union of Planets, IAUP," *Star* said.

"What were they studying?"

"Reun. The third planet below us. The atmosphere would be difficult on your bios."

Star pointed that out, she suspected, to prevent her from making an excuse to take a shuttle down. What did *Star* find that would warrant her to consider that, she wondered?

An image of the sphere as a projected hologram appeared over her console. Its surface had a blotchy and unhealthy appearance.

"Reun had petitioned to become a member of the Union of Planets. Agents were sent to see if the planet's citizenry were species tolerant to be able to interact with its galaxy neighbors," *Star* reported. "The scientists were to observe how this anticipation would affect Reunians. That was in the Amalgamated Year of 200c00265. In the Amalgamated Year of 200c00327 the Union of Planets was dissolved to reform under the

name of Interplanetary Counsel. The petition of Reun is on hold. In the same Amalgamated Year of UPs disbanding, the university declined to further support studies on the observatory and a year later the university closed. There is no mention of why membership has been held up or why the university abruptly closed. There also are no reports filed on Reun from the university research team or the agents from UP for all the time the project was active."

"They just left the observatory in orbit around Reun," she said softly, knowing that every official organization knew the rule not to leave structures unmarked and abandoned in space. Infractions were dealt with harshly, letting the damage and potential damage fit the punishment.

"The particle flows from Reun is pulling the observatory into its atmosphere. It will fall out of orbit in two months, entering the planet's atmosphere with the potential to impact land mass at 60% chance."

"We need to move it out of its declining orbit, so it doesn't crash to the planet below. Move it beyond the pull of the four planets. Have you dispatched any monitors to study the observatory closer?"

"I was waiting for your authorization. It is considered a residence and therefore private property. I have two Clev R16s and Simms ready to activate. All Wringer monitors are behind the Imaginary Line."

The Imaginary Line, the IML was really a joke to space scrapers, who would lay claim to any space object they found even if it had someone's name on it. It was an imaginary line with specific distance around a civilian space residence that images, deep scans, as well as physical intrude could not pass. Military or law enforcement were permitted to infringe on personal rights but with a good reason given in a detailed report.

A scraper was someone that made a living finding lost or abandoned manufactured objects floating in space. Scrapers ran between lucky in finds to the unlawful methods of securing a finding, making the IML not applicable to them. Who would be able to take them quickly before a judiciary committee before the object was scraped? No one. Matters before the judiciary committee that were not life and death were moved on slowly since they had a lot of cases brought before them.

"No one is onboard?"

"No life forms."

"Dispatch four SEs to prepare the observatory so I can board. I want to see what else was left behind before I flag it for a wrecking trawler. You checked the registry?"

"The registry has lapsed, and the university did not sell it with its other assets. It is on the Lost and Found List. The LFL Board does not list the date it went on the list."

"File a Discovery with Star Force as the claimant to the LFL. As a previous residence it allows a challenge, so post the space infractions. That way no one can file a challenge without putting up the credits for the fines. I don't want a deluge of scrapers circling the area and messing up any clues before we get a clear picture of why it was abandoned."

"Shall I update SFHQ now or wait until we have more information?"

"Update now so they can follow up quickly. Include your observations, *Star*. Send out warning buoys to anyone entering this area of space that there is an investigation in progress. Give the demarcation line bells and whistles, *Star*, so when they ignore it, what they get for trespassing will be no surprise. Prepare a grid to defend the parameter outside as well as within. This isn't a busy travel corridor, but I like to be prepared, and it will be good practice for us."

"Would adding six Storm Troopers around the planet be over-doing it?"

She chuckled at *Star's* humor. "Do it, just in case we need to chase someone down."

Star's next holograms were the designs of the observatory from the shipyard and what *Stars* sensors showed it as presently. The shipyard diagram disappeared. It had the characteristics of a small military outpost designed over fifty years ago with additional modular attachments, eventually enclosing the command area between layers of modules.

"The communication dish has been dislodged. It looks like something hit it. It would have to have been something with a lot of mass and weight behind it."

"Most of Reun is damaged with radiation that came from a toxic discharge. By the pattern of first strike, it looks like intentional release from a weapon. The energy from the dish on the observatory did not cause damage," *Star* said.

"Send out seekers to see if there are any disabled ships or debris around the planet. Check public records for insurance collection. And give me an exact map of the planet's radiation damage."

"I am sending out a swarm of SU010 to support the monitors already in place."

"Very well, *Star*. How's our arsenal doing?"

"It leaves us with 25% of what we were supplied with," *Star* reported verbally and gave her a screen list of what they were when she received them and their upgrades, and their performance statistics. Considering how *Star* was reluctant to share the information earlier with CBIS it was surprising how the information was so forthcoming.

"The energy emission has been deactivated," *Star* reported.

"Move into position, *Star*, so we can commence towing *IV New Prospects* to a new position. Put enough distance from her and the planet should someone attack the observatory. We don't want any debris falling onto the surrounding planets or shots fired go wild and discharge in a planet's atmosphere."

Chapter 10

Who Shall Recall the Forgotten?

"It will take two hours to secure *IV New Prospects* in its new position. The SEs on board the observatory have commenced with upgrading what can be upgraded to Star Force specifications in order for you to safely visit. No further message from Star Force."

"All the message said was SA and SBFFO?"

"Secure the Area and Stand By For Further Orders," *Star* confirmed.

"I think we found something important, *Star*. They're looking up all the information they have on this before they tell us there's some unfinished business here."

She stopped pacing and dropped into her chair. There was nothing else she could do about the observatory until it was secured. There were communications from the others she needed to catch up on. All her SID-mates were having adventures, and she needed to keep up with the others, looking for patterns or useful experiences. What one SID-ship discovered, the others soon knew about.

"Hallie ran into pirates that thought she was too close to their hideout," she said to *Star*, though she was sure *Star* had *Gallant Soldier's* version. "They sustained damages that required a visit from a specialized ship repair crew. That's good to know that when I can't fix something on you, I can call HQ for a repair ship. She's on her way to catch up with her teammates."

"*Gallant Soldier* left a dozen upgraded Clev R4s in the area," *Star* mentioned.

"We'll have thorough testing and reporting on the equipment by the time we get to our destination," Cot said. She tabbed down to Wimsey's communication. The opening was an animated holographic image of Wimsey doing a jig. He had not sent that character for a while.

"The only time he can dance," she chuckled.

He brandished the Macnab's clan ceremonial sword and did grand strokes in the air as he hopped around.

"Holographs are so much safer than real life. He would have cut his head off by now. Look at the way he's waving that broadsword. It takes a strong forearm and wrist to do twirls like that. He's got the typical physique of a spacer. He wouldn't be able to hold a broadsword above his head for more than a minute." She laughed at the next maneuver. It was new.

Cot realized she was babbling. The energy that was around her was disturbing. Holding Bua she concentrated on peaceful images that would dissipate the disturbance. The giddy feeling finally left. Wimsey's holograph was still dancing, waiting for her to open up his message.

"Get to the message, Wimsey."

"Greetings Group Leader and Star Chaser," his voice message went. "I ran into a few tails that made my fingers itch to knock out their systems. I don't know what's worse; to run from being shot at or to detail how clever I was able to hide from them. Those years in combat make it difficult to not return fire. Your way of handling it, to find fun in stealth, is not quite ingrained in me. Maybe at the end of three months I'll feel less stressed out about running and or hiding."

"Did you sneak in a program to my Mistress Q while I wasn't looking? I ask because, this bit of information may cheer you up, GL, Mistress Q has taken to remind

me daily to write my reports and send them to HQ. Sadly enough, there isn't enough business out here to give me any excuse not to complete and send them on time.

"May adventure be your companion, Group Leader.

"Wimsey and MQ"

"Wimsey and *Mistress Q* have been busy too," Cot commented.

"*Quiet Quest* was also chased by brigands into another sector," *Star* said. "Our assistance would make a difference in her next encounter."

"Is *Quiet Quest* asking you for assistance?" She found this interesting. Would the SID-ships ask for help from each other independent of their pilot?

"No."

"Knowing when to ask for help is part of our evaluation," she said.

"Would you ask for help, Cot?"

"It would depend on the situation. Would you?" she asked.

"All situations are fluid, and no outcome can be assured."

"You're right. There aren't guarantees of outcome, *Star*. So, would you ask for assistance?"

"Is searching for information outside of my databanks asking for assistance?" *Star* asked.

"Yes." So why didn't I ask for backup when I saw the Murdelie? Was the same subtle manipulation that drew me there responsible for me not asking for backup? It would have taken a lot of manipulation, considering I didn't know what gate I would be taking and that I would end up there...

Was being open to any experience responsible for....

No. And it's not like I ran into anything life threatening. For that bit of foolishness, I came away with treasures...

She smiled as she thought of seeing her aunt again and claiming the medallion. And, if her feelings were right about it, she had a strong liaison with the Ena youths. That, she felt would be important sometime in the future.

And we have taken on a mystery passenger.

She rubbed her forehead in irritation. "Go with the flow," her auntie would say. "Stop trying to make things turn out the way you want it to. You miss out on too much."

Her attention moved to the other communications, and she sent her replies. She was careful not to taint her recounting of her dream with her own fears of who had once used the same method with devastating results.

"Cot, the observatory is secured in its new position and ready for your boarding. A malfunction was in a control board, causing the mid phasing."

"I'll go dress for my visit." She eagerly headed to the cargo bay. From her locker she pulled out her AVEC suit. Rather than use the Bell, an SE assisted in checking for any leaks or potential problems with her suit and then cleared her. She thumped her way to *Reflected Lights* ramp with SEs secured to her suit.

Smoothly *Reflected Light* lifted and soared out of *Star Chaser's* cargo bay. Before her was the observatory with no identifiers or warnings emitting from the structure to warn an approaching ship of its presence. *Reflected Light* headed to the bay the SEs sent out on the first inspection left open.

On the cargo deck two spaces were marked for shuttles with mechanical maintenance gutters located on each side. *Reflected Light* took up less room than the previous shuttles. As she settled maintenance lights came on indicating its space was occupied.

"Did you disengage the maintenance bots for the shuttles, *Star*?"

"I am accessing the observatory's maintenance support now," *Star* reported.

As soon as *Reflected Light* settled, the metal cargo bay doors began to close, giving the observatory structure a shake when the doors closed. Overhead lights came on in the interior bay, leaving no shadows.

From the recon bots, she knew to the left were crew's quarters that could quarter 36/9 in a squeeze, meaning they could rotate sleep assignments on a 9 hour sleep shift, allowing a working crew of 144. However, it wasn't a military outpost staffed during a war. It was a civilian operation so the 4 bunks per cabin were in all probability not rotated in shifts; everyone would have their own bunks. The SEs could not find any of the Emergency Escape Pods that were required by the Space Safety Code at any of the escape hatches. The crew quarters had been searched and scanned by the recon SEs so

she left her own inspection if needed, for later. For now, her priority was the command center and medical laboratory. The medical lab was the newest addition to the observatory.

The shuttle's exit ramp extended and she descended, looking around her. Her helmet visor showed the same readings the SE's recon scans showed. The landing bay had been stripped clean of all equipment; however, she could feel remnants of emotions from the previous residents. There wasn't anything traumatic that she picked up on.

The first hatch silently slid opened. It was eerie to walk through another deserted space structure.

"*Star*, is there anything working in the observatory?"

"I have disabled all robotic maintenance to prevent unnecessary distractions. I am accessing the databanks now for further information," *Star* reported. "After I review all records, I will be able to give you a report and assessment of the observatory's suitability for residency."

"Thank you, *Star*," she said.

The next area was for tool storage. Here there were actually tools in each space. The wear on the handles gave her an idea of what was used more often.

"They secured their tools here rather than the landing bay," she mused. "They must have lost tools in space when the shuttle bay doors were opened."

"I have given you Captain Pernov's clearance, otherwise you would not have been able to enter this area," *Star* explained. "The Emergency Escape Pods have been located in the module after the command module. They are all accounted for."

Cot studied the panels and tubes that ran through the area as she walked through; noting that maintenance was kept up. The next section was the command center. Console screens showed the progress of *Star's* initiating startup for life support.

Only one seat would accommodate her size and from the looks of it, it was recently installed.

"*Star*, is this chair your installation?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

She felt like a giant in a child's play ship. Sitting down she watched several exterior cameras rotate with test results displayed for her to view. Lights on the console let her know which button was responsible for which camera.

"There are messages queued for reading from the planet Reun. They are encoded," *Star* said.

Symbols and distorted faces came up. Several refreshes were made and still the information was not clearing up. The symbols remained coded.

"I will decode and repair as much as possible. Large gaps in the data stream will make translation uncertain," *Star* said. "Do you want me to change the environment so you can disengage your helmet?"

"No. We'll investigate under the former residents' conditions. Maybe there was a virus that necessitated the residents to leave." Since IAs, Intergalactic Agents were involved, she suspected something more sinister.

While *Star* downloaded the observatory's database to her own system, she continued her exploration. Pausing in the mess hall, she found it more telling about the residents than she had learned so far. Pictures covered both sides of the bulkhead. They were taken in the observatory, in space, and on land. Comments were under them all but the images were all faded, not showing details on facial features.

"Has this been recorded?" she asked *Star*.

"Yes. I would need to know the species to affect any reasonable repair. I will search the universities archives of students."

She thoughtfully tapped the supplement containers wondering why the meal dispensers were still running.

"It is not something you would appreciate," *Star* warned her. "Your digestive tract would have a difficult time breaking it down."

The next module was a large supply bay for laboratory supplies, twenty-five lockers with names only on four of them, and the missing escape pods were neatly and safely secured, making the area difficult for her to move through. She was interested in the names on the lockers. One was the person in her dream, Celese Angul. The other three: Bolent Mo, Cholen Suwette, and Dun Kel. All twenty-five lockers had a few

personal items as if they were still stationed on the observatory. Why were twenty-one without names?

With one boot through the exit hatch to the medical section, she felt a change in the pressure around her foot. Hastily she withdrew, grabbing onto the hatch rim.

"You set off an alarm. I am adding your name and biological trace to this section's security," *Star* said.

"The captain doesn't have security clearance in the laboratory. Find out why, *Star*."

"I will see if there is anything mentioned in private logs. You can try again, Cot," *Star* said. "Do not try to activate anything in this structure. I have not been able to decode the layers of security. The method of protecting the information here is not what I am familiar with."

"I'll be sure to keep my thumbs in my belt," she agreed.

Standing at the hatch opening to the large area in the medical compound, she realized this was the only image that was in detail in her dream. It was as if this was so important to the person that sent her the dream that she had to commit it to memory in the minutest detail.

The laboratory was a fully contained surgical medical center. It had a sterile containment chamber, two healing tubs, six beds, and a separate control center from the observatory's access. The healing tubs, though outdated, were used for deep tissue repair, an expense normally not spent on small space outposts...not even on pirate ships where make-overs and healing would be valuable.

She leaned closer to look at the control console. "Was this on when the SEs inspected it?"

"Yes. By the data I can interpret, the moment one of the names in its database enters, the entire medical area with security becomes active. You would not have been able to enter this area without being in the medical database."

"It looks like they do biological remodeling here." That was the impression she had in her dream. She turned to leave and was startled when *Star's* friend hovered near her shoulder.

"Couldn't stay away, huh? Remember not to touch anything."

It remained in the medical lab as she returned to the control module.

"Star, what is there on Celese Angul in the database?"

"I am working on decoding and repairing the personnel files. Under Star Force Rules of Operation, since this is an Investigation in Progress the details of what is found here are a virtual update," Star said.

"Yes and requires we send HQ information as it's discovered and unaltered. No further communication from HQ?" She was curious at why they had not received word yet. But then again, they didn't say much about her boarding the *Murdelie*.

"No, Cot."

"We need to find out if any of these twenty-five people are on Reun. If so, then we may be looking at a nasty secret. No one leaves their agents or members behind unless they have information that someone wants to suppress. And then, why abandon the observatory with a fully functioning medical lab?" *And if that's true, my publicly registering the find will bring all sorts of people out here. It's going to be a mess to sort the usual scrapers from the people that may have something to hide here. Thank the gods I don't have the Hunters to worry about. Nothing here is old enough to warrant their type of interest.*

"There is a possibility that they are students that went home for a break and did not return," Star suggested.

A small beep sounded from the main console. She read a log Star accessed from the observatory's files.

"This file has one portion intact," Star reported.

"Play what you have on holograph."

She was instantly in the medical center's operating area. Two nervous people and one very confident person stood around the operating table as the surgical bots worked on someone on the table. She studied the people closely, not recognizing the faces, and studied the contents in the compartment. There were anatomical charts on the bulkhead along with detailed pictures of the three Reunian species. It confirmed her suspicion that agents were being altered to fit the species on Reun.

A feeling of disorientation had her grabbing onto her seat when the program released her back into the present.

"I have information on the University's Department Head of the project, Professor M'se," *Star* said. "He died from an unknown cause in his sleep one day after returning to the campus from the observatory, as well as four students that returned with him. Their names are not given. I still have not found any mention of who the lead agent on the observatory for UP was or the captain. One of the four names on the lockers I have traced to a supply space station a month from here. Dun Kel."

"Send a message so see if this is the same person and if he or she is willing to talk about this project."

"The energy from the observatory is affecting your bios. You will need to return for a few hours. Energy is set for the original resident species to be able to live for long periods of time in space."

"Leave one SE to patrol the interior. I'm on my way back."

Chapter 11

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

She meditated before retiring for a few hours of sleep. She didn't suspect, she knew that there were people from the observatory that were left on the planet. The general fear of soldiers or agents of being left behind in a foreign situation motivated comrades and friends to make every effort to bring them home. Her prayers before she closed her circle were for those abandoned on Reun and for those who suffered from damage to the planet.

When Cot went to sleep her thoughts were on what answers would be in her dreams; however, she had none.

Four hours later she woke clear headed and energized.

"Greetings, *Star*. Anything to report?"

"I have reports for you. Nothing that warrants you from breaking your waking rituals."

She moved through her morning exercises and meal, then took her place on the bridge.

"I have the conn, *Star*."

"You have the conn, Cot. You slept very deeply. Did you dream?" *Star* asked.

"Nothing that I remember. Are my brainwave patterns back to normal?"

"Not to what they were when we started out from POATA."

Frowning, she did a quick internal inventory and found nothing that felt off. Whatever the change was about was not something that was clearly affecting her. She expected her brainwave pattern to change in some way due to Bua, but the side effects from the energy the observatory was putting out may have changed something too. "I feel fine. What information do you have for me?"

"Dun Kel has picked up our message, but there is no reply. My search for background on the others is progressing."

While *Star* continued her search, she read what *Star* was able to find.

After an hour *Star* reported, "I have located, Celese Angul on Reun. She is underground and alive. It appears that most of the residents live underground due to the poisons that are making living on the surface nearly impossible."

"Can you get an image of her?" she asked.

The image was distorted then cleared. She couldn't remember how she looked in her dream. Did that mean that Celese Angul couldn't remember what she looked like before the surgery? Did the dream come from Celese Angul or the captain?

"Are you able to send a verbal message to her?"

"On a directed beam. She will be the only one to hear it. You may proceed when you're ready, Cot."

"Greetings, Lt. Celese Angul. I am Lt. Col. Cot of Star Force. Are you part of the team stationed on the observatory *IV New Prospects* above Reun?"

Celese Angul looked startled, and it seemed a long time before she responded.

Over the comm a garbled voice came across. *Star* cleaned it up and then replayed it.

"Yes." the voice quivered.

"Are you in need of assistance?"

"Yes!"

"What can I do to assist you?" she asked.

There was another long pause. "*I know ... to clean ... toxic contamination.*" The voice was distorted, fading in and out, making it difficult to hear everything.

".... *do so.*" She plainly heard a deep breath of relief. "*The last I heard from anyone on OBE..... few weeks..... happened?*" she asked.

"Professor M'se died fifteen years ago, a day after he returned to the campus from unknown causes along with four others from this observatory. When was the last time you heard from anyone from the observatory or your group?"

"Voice modulation stabilized," *Star* announced.

"I've been leaving messages for fifteen years with no replies. Why would they leave?" There was another lengthy pause before Celese continued. "*Maybe they caught a virus the visiting parties brought with them.*"

"What do you mean by visiting parties?" Already she was relieved she had stayed in her AVEC suit.

"Officials from Reun demanded to come aboard the observatory to see for themselves that the observatory was not military. From there they were taken to the UP to present their case for membership. From that group, two remained as guests of the UP to keep Reun's efforts for membership moving along."

"Do you know who they are?"

"No. We were more concerned with Turner Mest, a known intergalactic weapons dealer that turned up and was doing business here."

"Star, red flag that bit of information to SFHQ now."

"How many of you were dispatched to the planet?" Cot asked.

"Twenty-one. I was originally a neutral observer for the project, but Agent C'Rona Dom transitioned me in with a military grade, since it was a military operation." She heard a shift of emotion in her voice but was not sure if it was due to the translation of sounds.

"What was the project?"

"Officially, to escalate the planet into eligibility to become an interplanetary member of the Union of Planets. We all suspected it was for political reasons, but we were just subordinates following our orders. We never knew what the real objective was."

"Do you wish to be removed from the planet?"

"I've been poisoned by toxins released in a tribal war. I don't believe I can be transitioned back. Turner Mest sold both sides the weapons. Surely Agent C'Rona Dom

said something to the administration before he left the project or died. By the rules of our charter, we are responsible for fixing what our presence caused."

There was bitterness, resentment and at the same time resignation in her tone. Celese knew she had been betrayed and was not asking for help for herself.... She was the one that dreamed of being rescued. How many were left behind and still alive, Cot asked herself again.

"How sure are you that Turner Mest was the cause?"

"My leader, Herber Equa, an ex-IP, Intergalactic Police, spotted Turner Mest speaking to the leader of the group that started killing two days later. Herber said he sent Agent C'Rona Dom the information. A few days later I received word from one of my group members that Herber was ambushed and killed when attending a council meeting. That was the same day the mass killings began."

"I was able to track one member that was with this project, Dun Kel. He's working on a space station aweek from here. Do you know who that is?"

"No. I have never heard of that name," Celese Angul said.

"Star, began a comprehensive report on what needs to be done to rebalance this planet. Check university records for any studies done on the consequences of an outsider normalizing a toxic environment if there are so many deformed as a result of it. I'm sure some universities will have a study of that somewhere," she mentally directed Star.

"So, what are you going to do?" Celese Angul asked.

"If what is poisoning the planet was neutralized, what would happen?"

"With a cleaned environment we can plant healthier food for all to survive on. We found in underground radiation proof vaults millions of seeds being stored. We have the means to spread the seeds planet-wide."

Consciously Cot rested her hand over the medallion under her uniform, setting her intention to assist. How desperate were the people? Would they allow the seeds to develop into eatable food? What were they living on now? Was she getting involved in something that was more complicated than saving a planet from becoming a toxic wasteland? She remembered the spider's web that her aunt used as an analogy to teach her about relatedness. The only person she had direct control of was herself. What was right action?

Star signaled she was getting a message. It was from High Commander Er of Star Force. No images...all text.

"Another strand on the web," she thought to Star. Star flashed her a question of what that meant and she pictured a spider web for her.

"I will get back to you, Celese. I will confer with others."

"I hope the delay doesn't run into years, months or even days," Celese Angul said.

"Me too."

Quickly, she scanned the information SFHQ sent. The deaths of the professor and four students were still under investigation. The names of the agents involved were not released from IAUP to the original investigative team, who believed the files were destroyed. At the closure of the university what little information they had gathered had been turned over to Star Force. The new Interplanetary Counsel did not wish to disturb its sitting members with an investigation that was not popular when it was first launched. It was noted that the new head of the Interplanetary Counsel's Investigation Division was an agent of the defunct IAUP, C'Rona Dom.

She frowned at one notation: The location of the university's observatory was unknown until now.

"Why would the location of the observatory be unknown if Reun is the known planet they were studying? And why is the petition for membership on hold?"

"It was not a widely known fact," Star said. "Since the planet is contaminated the two staying as guests of UP would not return. By galactic law, as long as a representative is petitioning, they can remain in local hospices."

"Did you locate them?"

"No. Hospices do not keep records."

She reread the last paragraph.

"You are in immediate danger. A dozen Star Force agents working on this investigation are headed to your location with a fleet that will secure the area for their work. They will be there in four days. Until their arrival, do what you can to secure the area, the observatory, and whoever is involved with the project."

High Commander Er of Star Force

End of Communication.

"Star, secure a wider perimeter around Reun and the observatory. We are now at Security Level 2. Deploy what's needed to shore up any break that may occur in our security grid."

"Deploying additional Wringers, Sub474s and Acoustic Mines. Testing will commence when they are in place," Star responded. "We now have 3% left in our arsenal of what we were given to test."

"Noted. How long will it take us to neutralize the poisonous toxins on Reun?"

"If I start the detoxification now, I will complete the initial detox in 36 hours. It will require heavy rain in the poisoned areas. From there, it will be the forces of nature that will complete the change, but it will take many years for a climatic rhythm planet-wide to settle in."

"It's a start. When the monitors are in place, do a topographical study of the planet and determine what the impact will be on the population. Begin the process as soon as you're ready. I see no reason for the delay. Add something that will cause the first seeds planted rapid growth." She tapped the communication button.

"Celese Angul, this Lt. Col Cot."

"Yes!" In her voice Cot could hear the hope that she was putting in her ability to fix the problems no one had for years.

"We have begun the first stage of detoxifying the planet. Heavy rains will follow in some parts of the planet. Whatever you plant and sow for the first time will be high yield. The rapid growth will only be this once so plant what you can store until your next growth cycle."

"Agriculture, I understand. For climate, we still have some people alive that know."

"I don't know how soon Reun will be back to a regular seasonal pattern," Cot said.

"It's the healing that's important right now."

"I'll be busy for a while, but I'll get back to you," Cot said.

"I'll be waiting. It's not like I can go anywhere."

She focused on how to prepare the observatory for an invasion and concluded it would have to be from without. The laws governing civilian science observatories that

orbited planets said no weapons were to be mounted on the exterior hull. It was to prevent the military from taking over civilian funded structures at their convenience without paying the civilian business for their theft, for it was stealing under the guise of military use.

An alarm on her console warned a ship approaching the same time *Star* sent her a mental image.

"Are they receiving the message being broadcast?"

"The auto reply has signaled it has received the broadcast. It is a private yacht, *Quisental*. Owner is KouMar Red who listed it as being stolen a century ago."

"*Star*, that ship's a newer model."

"It is as it is, Cot." By *Star's* tone she was impressed by the ship that was rapidly approaching their coordinates. "The core has the older model's design, which allows it to be identified as *Quisental*. The updates and modifications give them the present readings it has now. It is an impressive upgrade, though not as impressive as a SID-ship."

"*Star*, is there a possibility that we're being spoofed?"

There was a moment of hesitation and then she felt a more intense curiosity from *Star* for the ship's construction. New readings were scrolled across her screen on the ship along with details on its staffing and possible defensive capabilities. A holograph appeared before her, showing decks and outer hull, then minute details, starting at the bow and moving forward like a wave.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"I have located a dozen people with the name Celese Anguls living on the planet Bocu, two months from Reun. None on the surface appears to fit the profile of Celese Angul that spent time on a science observatory. I also found a Bolent Mo, located on the same planet with a job as a tractor technician. He has a large extended family that owns a lot of farmland; a Cholen Suwette, too young for being eligible to attend college. Dun Kel has returned a reply of not interested in speaking with you. I also have a name and connection on Turner Mest, the one that sold the weapons to Reun citizens. He is related to C'Rona Dom, the investigating agent that was in charge of the observatory and now heading a security agency."

A light activated her console. Her screen switched to mirror the master console on the observatory.

"Our visitor has access to the command console," Cot said. "Security files are being scanned...code found... This is someone that knows the way in."

"All locks to the exit hatches have been deactivated. SE6 has been disabled," *Star* said. "Do you want me to reacquire control? If this person knew what he was doing, he would have only released the exit hatch he needs."

"Let's see what he wants before we lock him up. If this person suspected that there was someone aboard, he would unlock all the exit hatches to make whoever is aboard wonder which hatch was being entered."

"*Quisential* has left a suited man in space and is heading to us – *Quisential* is arming side canons."

The shot that was exiting the aft side cannon exploded a second after it was fired by a Sub474. The impact of the explosion rocked *Quisential*.

"Alarms are going off on *Quisential*. I have entered the computer that controls all its systems," *Star* reported.

"Get out of her systems," Cot warned. "That's what they would expect."

"I am under attack," *Star* announced surprised. "Closing down access...."

"Blast it!" Cot initiated a system shutdown quickly, though chances were *Star* had already initiated locking up all her communication links to prevent anything from entering until she wiped whatever had entered her system. It was amazing how *Star* had eluded something like this on other occasions and this one came where it should have been expected.

"While you shore up your defenses, I'm going to see who this character is," Cot announced.

Dressed in her AVEC suit she used her rockets to blast her way to the observatory that was not far from *Star's* position. In her periphery she could see *Quisential* powering back up.

Her skin itched as an energy beam covered her. *Quisential* had her in a tractor beam, pulling her toward its opened cargo bay. Two armed guards waited in the opening, pointing their weapons directly at her.

"SEs, neutralize whatever they fire my way. Sub474 neutralize *Quisential* again, now."

The tow beam immediately ceased as did the lights from the ship's interior, leaving the two guards hanging on as *Quisential* suddenly veered away.

That ship has a lot of backups for it to keep recovering so quickly. I'm sure Star is keeping track of all their recoveries to improve her tools, but I hope we don't have too many of these attacks.

"I am up and operating at full capacity," *Star* announced. "I was unable to prevent *Quisential* from sending out a coded message. I have disabled her communication so she will not be sending or receiving anything further for a while. I have embedded four viruses in her system. *Quisential* will be indisposed for an undetermined amount of time. I am sending a netting to prevent her from further interfering with Star Force business."

"I'm continuing to the observatory and see where their crewmate is," Cot said.

"He is located in the command module. He has been subdued by the security system of the observatory."

"There wasn't any security when I was there. Did you turn it on?"

"I identified you as the captain of the observatory. The only area you did not have free access to was the medical facilities."

As she drew near the observatory her impact with the barrier bounced her back and into a spin before she could cut her power.

"Why didn't you tell me the barrier was up," Cot muttered, as she struggled to stop her spin. Suddenly, her spinning and movement away from the observatory stopped.

"This is something to add to your training program," *Star* said. "The barrier was just activated by the observatory as a defense."

"What happened to my captain status? Can you disengage the barrier?"

"Four ships are coming out of a hyper jump," *Star* reported. "I will give you an opening in the barrier at the landing bay."

"I hope nothing goes off until I'm inside. *Star*, let Star Force know we're not alone."

She sailed into the bay just as an AM went off. The reflection of lights from the explosion in her visor let her know she had been lucky. The energy spread out in a wave,

moving faster where there was least resistance and had she been in space it would have sent her speeding faster than her jets could have safely slowed her into the observatory's hull.

She ran across the deck as the cargo bay door shut behind her, shaking the deck under her feet. Whoever was on board would know where she entered.

The hatch cover opened without a challenge. She was after all *the* captain again. The SEs went before her through the storage bay and into the command module. When the hatch slid open a Suveto held a weapon in ready position pointed at her. It was not a weapon a veteran spacer would use or be tempted to use in a spacecraft. It would blow a hole in the hull, and everything would be sucked out.

"Put that weapon down," Cot ordered.

"Who are you?" the Suveto hooted.

"I'm Lt. Col Cot of Star Force. You're interfering with an on-going investigation. Who are you?"

"Dunkel."

She knew her surprise showed. "Why are you here?" she asked.

"The observatory was found."

An alarm on the observatory's console flashed that the four ships were closer. The information scrolling down the screen alerted them they had armed weapons.

"Who were those people on board your ship?"

"Interested people."

"The ships that just arrived, did you call for them?"

Dunkel's weapon still pointed at her. The firming of his finger on the grip was all the SEs needed before they neutralized him.

"Now what do I do with him? We don't have holding cells here or on *Star Chaser*. *Star* didn't you say the observatory had a security system that had neutralized him?" She looked around the command area for something to restrain him with and could see nothing.

"He is neutralized," *Star* reported.

"Then who is this?" she asked.

"The same person -- neutralized."

"Of course he is," she said impatiently. "Keep him unconscious," she commanded the SE near her. Leaning down she picked up his weapon and slid it in her AVEC utility leg pocket.

The idea of putting him somewhere out of sight was as disturbing as keeping him in the same compartment unconscious. He was an unknown element and had intended to use lethal force that would have killed them both.

Sitting before the master console she focused on the screen. *Star's* monitors were tracking the four ships' progress as they began encircling the observatory.

"Status on the four ships?"

"I have tapped into their communication. They are scanning the planet's surface and believe that Star Force is responsible for the changes I have initiated. The changes are not to their liking, and they are looking for all the Star Force ships involved. They are not aware of *Quisential*. They are retired agents of UP. I am not sure of their intentions. They will see me in a few moments. If I interrupt my release pattern, it will slow the detox process down."

"What is your progress on the detox, *Star*?"

"I have been able to escalate my efforts with time release pellets. In 45 minutes, I will be finished."

"Is the net you created ready for real time use?"

"It is dispersed and ready."

"Enable it."

"Net has been enabled." The satisfied tone of voice from *Star* had her thinking that she was pleased about turning a tool that had been used on her on someone else.

A noise from where the prisoner was had her reflexively diving to the deck. The console she was sitting on was destroyed with a lot of noise as it disintegrated and a hole in the deck was created, revealing cabling and other vital lifelines a system needed. Lights went out as sparks flew and smoke filled the area. She was sure something from overhead fired at the same time the Suveto fired.

Her visor registered Dunkel was recovering from what hit he had sustained. She jumped up and chopped the arm that came up to fire again. His weapon, another that should not be used on ships, went flying and bounced against the bulkhead. She and

Dunkel wrestled and exchanged hits until a prisoner's neuronet was dropped on him by the two SEs. The console's destruction had shut down the observatory's defense system. Red lights were flashing on the remaining screens. Since neither the ship or the SEs were keeping him unconscious, she was tempted to dump him out into space, but then she would have to worry about where he would turn up next.

"*Star*, what's happening with the other ships?" she asked.

"Three left with some damage that will affect their speed and canon fire. They wish to speak with the Star Force Agent in charge of this investigation. Cot, you must get out of this structure. The discharge of the weapon has released a toxin that will form a cloud in ten minutes that will downgrade your suit's efficiency."

"Can you fix it?"

"The damage is repairable. It would not have been if the observatory's security had not neutralized part of the shot," *Star* said.

Dunkel was stripped of his clothing and deposited into a life pod. The pod was towed behind observatory with a long tow line.

Chapter 12

One Person's Hero is Another's Fiend

Cot was sitting in a comfortable chair within a forest scene on her bridge. Forest creatures were making soft sounds in the background while over the speaker yelling back and forth were a dozen ex-IAUP agents. They were not listening to each other, nor did they care for her or her order for them to leave the area. They were here to destroy the Observatory.

"What if..." she started, when they took a collective breath, "there were agents or students from the observatory still on Reun? Don't you think they deserve to be brought back?"

"You know nothing of what went on here. It was an Operational Command with a need to know, and you don't need to know."

Then everyone began yelling over each other making no sense to her. What she did understand was they intended on destroying the observatory and all records of what it was about.

"None of you own this observatory. It's on the LFL and I filed a Discovery. Until the investigation is finished, Star Force is the sole owner, and you are interfering. How did you know the observatory was found?"

"You filed a Discovery," one of the men said.

"You have one ship with systems down. That leaves 12 of you in three ships. Leave this area before you lose more ships and have to resort to your emergency escape pods," she said.

"We're not leaving this area until our job is done. We have reinforcements on the way," one said contemptuously.

"If you cross the demarcation line, your ships will be disabled." Cot cut the comm link. *Others on their way? "Star, who among our SID-mates is nearby?"*

It was more of a feeling than a thought she received from her ship. *Star Chaser* missed her SID-mates. She smiled at *Star's* anticipation of them joining in this situation.

"Space Cat, and Melody are nearly an hour from here. Gallant Soldier could be here in minutes if given the password and coordinates to Stella Gate."

"Have you been keeping them updated on what's been going on here?"

"Yes."

"Send an ANASAP to Captain Allison Macalister in *Space Cat*, Captain Goudie Grant in *Melody*, and Captain Hallie Drummond in *Gallant Soldier*."

"I will send updates and scramble an Assistance Needed As Soon As Possible. You are asking for help," *Star* said.

"Yes. If we're to keep this place safe until Star Force arrives with its investigative team, we're going to need assistance."

"Incoming on the other side of the planet. A dozen disturbances coming out of hyper space. They are out of normal ships scan range, so they intend on a surprise convergence."

She saw dozens of blips on her screen that suddenly appeared. "They look like small gunships that were scrapped or auctioned off to military enthusiasts. Whoever had the idea to sell off old military vessels to the general public either had a private deal going or was naïve," she grumbled.

"It was a lucrative deal that lasted for a short time," *Star* said, "but when the public auctions stopped due to worries by planet representatives, the secretive selling of military items resumed. The actual misuse of the equipment is not as great as the representatives imagined."

"Where are you getting that information?" Cot asked.

"*The Yard Times*. After researching *Quisential*, I did an investigation of other such overhauls and found that decommissioned military ships are purchased by civilian corporations to protect their important officials and families and go through upgrades to give them the appearance of a civilian ship but with all its armaments intact."

"Trace the ownership of these ships and build a profile. How long before they're close enough to loosen shots at us?"

"Five minutes. They are scanning the entire area...they will not pick up our equipment with their scanners. They may have new equipment, but they have not fine-tuned their equipment to optimum performance levels."

"Where are the other ships that were here?"

"They are out of my scan area."

She pursed her lips in thought. Was this the changing of the guard? "Find them."

Six tiny Wringers were sent out to follow the trail of the ships that left the area.

Caronda Fighters were one of the few larger ships that could move from idle to jump speed in seconds. In the time it took the arriving ships to take aim *Star Chaser* was out of their circle, leaving them to fire at each other.

"They obviously haven't had war experience. You never encircle the enemy and commence firing," she said disgustedly.

"*So does that mean you don't need help, Group Leader?*" Captain Hallie of clan Drummond asked, sounding as cheeky as always.

"Greetings and good tidings, Captain Hallie and *Gallant Soldier*. Did you get a chance to study the situation we have here?" Cot asked.

"*Greetings and good tidings, Group Leader and Star Chaser. It looks like a cover up in a most secretive branch of the business,*" she replied. "*Just the type of organization we now belong to, but they're not ours, right?*"

"We have three days to find out what it's about and make sure that anyone from the observatory that is still on the planet can be retrieved and waiting safely aboard the observatory when Star Forces Investigative Service arrives. They'll unravel the mess that seems to have hit that planet."

"Righty. What about these midget fighters...shall we rattle their nerves?" Hallie asked.

"We'll do the bumble bee maneuver," Cot said.

For twenty minutes the two zipped between the slower moving ships causing sloppy formations and missed cannon fire that hit each other or discharged harmlessly off into space. Nothing got by the ring of protection that was around the planet and observatory. While the SID-pilots were kept busy, a few ships attempted to break off unnoticed to damage the observatory. The mines took care of anything that attempted to enter the protective circle around the observatory and planet.

By the time the attacking ships withdrew, there was only one ship able to move on its own power. The small ships would not be able to pick up many survivors, though they could tow life pods or disabled ships. Cot was sure they could make it to the nearest space station. Had these pilots been battle tried, there would have been more damage to her equipment.

A message was dispatched to the OD, the Officer on Duty at the nearest Space Station. The ships and crew were to be delayed until a Star Force agent interrogated them. How the OD treated her request would let her know how a Star Force agent was received. *Star Chaser* supplied the names of the ships and crewmembers.

Captains Allison Macalister and Goudie Grant arrived as Hallie was gloating that it didn't take much to drive the wolves away when you had the right hunting dogs.

"Now what would you know of dogs and wolves, Hallie dear, when you were raised in the city where the only thing that howled was you when you were caught by your grandmere doing something you weren't supposed to," Goudie said.

"There's some truth in that statement," Allison said. *"I met grandmere Drummond. She's a short woman with plenty of power over the young ones. Reminded me of my own grandmere."*

"And all of ours that hold the tradition of scaring young ones when they're impressionable so when they get older will do what she says," Goudie said.

"Greetings, Group Leader and Hallie," the two new arrivals said in unison.

"Are we too late for a fun game of tag?" Goudie asked.

"They'll be back and more will come, I'm sure," Cot said. "*Star Chaser* and I are glad to see you, SID-mates. We have an LSL that I posted on Discovery for Star Force. Since then, we've been getting visitors that want to destroy the observatory and Reun, the planet below."

"We've gathered at a good time then," Allison said.

"Let's all shuttle over to the observatory. It's empty so there's plenty of space for all of us. We have three days to run *our* investigation," Cot said.

With their ships and the monitors to keep watch, the four pilots gathered for a conference aboard *IV New Prospects*. Goudie, a systems specialist before the call of CF piloting lured him away, was excited to see an old command station.

"I see what's been done here, GL." Goudie had his fingers tapping through information on the screen to the console he had replaced. "The information isn't lost or corrupted; it's encoded then encrypted then parsed into different folders."

"You sure this isn't a pet of some kind?" Hallie asked as *Star's* bot friend followed her back from the medical lab.

"I'm not sure what it is. It's *Star's* friend."

"I hope picking up hitchhikers isn't catchy," Hallie said. "I don't even want to think of what type of pet *Gallant Soldier* will pick up."

"I say, nothing that is bigger than a hand and can clean up after itself," Goudie said.

"I'm not into pets on board," Allison said. "What do you do when you get in your AVEC suit and your pet hasn't one?"

"Can't put it in the closet," Goudie agreed.

"So, what did you find, Goudie?" Cot asked.

"Your guess is right about the profiles but there's twenty-five not twenty-one. The medical lab with its set up and backup system was meant to be automated so that if one of the agents that had been transitioned into a foreign species returned to the med lab, they

would merely have to scan themselves and request a transition back and the auto surgeon takes care of it."

"By this information here, if there were any shuttles, all they had to do is call for one and they would have been picked up and transformed back to his or her original self," Allison said.

"Anyone come back?" Hallie asked.

"One person," Goudie said.

"Who?" Cot asked.

Goudie shook his head. "The program deleted all files referring to who it really is. To find out I'll need to do a deeper search. I'll check the backup to the backup, if the SIDs aren't already doing it. GL, whoever set this up is good," he said, lowering his voice, "If our SID-ships didn't pick up on the double encoding and sparsing that means that whoever wrote this program knows how to embed code to confuse logical thinkers."

"Was it Dunkel?" Cot asked.

Goudie laughed. "Do you know what that means?"

"No," three voices said in unison.

"The Hunters use it to describe the dark side of their passion. Dunkel. There's a file here with that name. I assure you; it's not a person. It's a mental state."

"Someone with that name is here," Cot said. "He's unconscious in a pod at the end of the tie line attached to the observatory."

"Is he the one that did the damage to this terminal?"

"That's the one," Cot said.

"Well, there you go," Goudie said slowly as he thought of what could be playing out. "Death, destruction and all its friends." He let out a heavy sigh. "SID-mates, we have a problem. If someone in a group gets the name of Dunkel, then whatever the job handed to that person is it's Dunkel's until death or the job is completed."

"We need to get Celese up here now," Cot said. "She may be targeted for assassination. This Dunkel uses weapons that don't belong on a spaceship."

"Allison and I can check out your prisoner," Hallie said.

"Just be careful. He's been escaping from traditional confinement methods. If he has this special assignment, he's going to be prepared for the usual obstructions."

Goudie tapped commands on the console. "Here we go. Shuttle has been deployed. I hope you don't mind that I'm using *Jumping Jack* but I'm more familiar with my shuttle."

"Not a problem for me. Celese Angul," Cot hailed.

"Yes! The toxicity meters have dropped around the globe and we can see things growing just like you said! People are changing too! This is incredible! It's like we're coming out of a bad dream!"

"Celese, there's a shuttle that will be landing outside of your bunker in twenty minutes. It's time for you to return. *Your job is done, Lt. Celese Angul. Return to base.*"

Celese's voice changed when she responded, *"My job is done. Returning to base as ordered."*

Chapter 13

Old and New and Some Forgotten

"Her favorite beverage is Soco," *Star* said.

Hallie made a face. "I tasted that once."

"It is not for Muland taste buds," *Gallant Soldier* said to his pilot.

"Some people like to find out for themselves," *Space Cat* said knowingly.

"Don't get distracted," Cot said to the SIDs. "We have some investigating to do, people to locate, and we still have those ships out there. They'll be back. We also have to find out who this Dunkel is."

When Allison and Hallie had searched the pod he was gone.

"I've never seen a person go through this transition process before," Hallie said.

"But I have read a lot on the after affects, depending on how long they were living as another species. Some of the returnees carried a mirror with them and were always looking in it. Some spend time in a mental hospital until they have their memories erased to be able to move on with their life. Not everyone can do this type of undercover work. What I'm worried about is that she said she was supposed to be only an observer and she was rotated in by Agent C'Rona Dom. That could mean she was not given a psychological evaluation to see if she had the right temperament for it."

"*Space Cat* hasn't been able to find any information on what C'Rona Dom looks like. Any personal information, like description or whereabouts is classified," Allison said.

The lights above the medical regenerator blinked that the patient's cellular patterns were back to her original template. None of them knew what the next sequence was but an alarm on their AVEC suits went off at that moment.

"Swarm approaching," SID-pilots and ships said in unison.

"Back to your ships. Protect the observatory and planet. It looks like this medical transition program is prepared to administer and protect the returning members, so our job is to prevent anyone from interfering with the returning agents from the planet," Cot said.

"I've got the observatory's command module programmed to do some pretty amazing stuff," Goudie said as they ran to the shuttle bay. "It's going to be really hard for someone to have a weapon on the observatory. I enhanced the already existing security."

"Then you and *Melody* are in charge of the observatory and its occupants," Cot said. "Allison and *Space Cat*, check the other side of the planet. You're the fastest. The word is out that the observatory is off the Lost and Found Listing so we're going to have every type of adventurer out there wanting to board her, besides those that want to destroy her."

"We'll be doing a bit of bedazzling then, Group Leader," Hallie said.

The bay doors opened, and four shuttles shot out. Around the observatory ships were coming out of hyper jump, surrounding the observatory as if they knew where the structure was.

The four shuttles and SID-ships moved in and out of the attacking ships until the new arrivals realized they were being picked off by something else. The AMs and Sub474s that Cot took a liking to were knocking out communications and disabling maneuvering rudders. So far, their use of superior technology was giving them the advantage and without taking a life.

"We have them regrouping out of the IMs, GL," Goudie said. "Connection to the observatory computer has been dropped. Permission to return to see what's happening to the central computer."

"Permission granted. Take backups. Keep an eye out for Dunkel," Cot cautioned. "SID-ships, run tests on the Investigation Markers to verify there are no openings. Allison and *Space Cat*, go on around the planet again and check them out."

"Will do, GL. Permission to add a few surprises to the perimeter. We spotted a few places that would be a good spot to add extras in case someone visits and needs a tail."

"Good idea, follow through," Cot said.

"Group Leader, someone is crawling outside the observatory," Gallant Soldier informed them.

"Hallie go over there with Goudie and watch his back."

"Right, GL," they responded.

Chapter 14

Opening the Can of Worms

Cot, dressed in her AVEC suit, tumbled out of *Star* to fly over to where the crews' quarters on the observatory was. As she got closer, she maneuvered her feet to grab onto the bulkhead, taking the impact with bent knees. Moving along the outside she found the hatch that would allow her entrance. Before entering she ran a scan to be sure there was no one lying in wait for her. Not wanting any surprise attacks, Cot initiated a cycling at one entrance while entering through the emergency hatch below the shuttle bay. It seemed clear until she looked up. A weapon was pointed at her from overhead. The SEs with her activated before it registered in her mind as well as the ship's security neutralizing the shot. Cot disarmed Celese easily and rolled them both into the bulkhead.

"Who are you?" Celese panted.

"Lt. Col Cot," Cot answered. Cot released her and stepped out of her reach. Cot pointed at a dark shadow that moved along the overhead and through a vent. "What is that?"

"The Terminator. My presence activated it."

"What is the Terminator?"

"A predator species."

"Let's move out of here and go over to the command center. Captain Goudie is working on the computer systems—upgrading them so they won't fail when everyone starts returning."

Celese stared at her for a moment. "Command center? I didn't see anyone when I passed." Celese started forward, lurching off balance. It probably would be a while before Celese got used to her new form.

When they entered the bridge Goudie was supervising the upgrade of a second console.

"Lt. Celese, this is Captain Goudie, our systems specialist, and Captain Hallie our medical tech. Everyone, this is Lt. Celese," Cot introduced. "Lt. Celese, we found only four names on lockers in the med lab supply modules yet there were twenty-one that were sent to the planet. Do you know how many of your group is still alive on the planet?"

"Communication hasn't been reliable in the last year. The atmosphere has worsened making long distance transmissions impossible."

"Was there anyone against this project aboard the observatory?"

"Yes, but I don't know who."

"Do you know who would sabotage the observatory's medical area?"

"No."

"How many people were stationed on this observatory?" Goudie asked.

"Thirty-six on board and twenty-one transitioned for planet-side duty. Four of the original twenty-one agents didn't make the transition so four of us were conscripted to take their place and their military ratings."

"That would scare the bejebees out of me," Goudie said quietly.

"It was scary. I kept thinking of the positive aspects, like when I return back, I would be transitioned to the same biological age, in better health and with bonus pay that I could retire on. We were only to be living like this for a year, but things happen. I imagine it will take time...I didn't realize that three additional appendages would be so missed."

"*Group Leader, this is Allison. Come in,*" Allison said over the comm link. Cot was interested in the change of expression in Celese, though it was slight. Did Celese hear the comm link?

Cot stepped back so she could have a private conversation. "Go ahead, Allison."

"The extra monitors I sent outside our normal scan are picking up another swarm. They're spreading out to surround the planet. I'm also picking up signals from the planet...twenty of them, but very weak."

"I read you. They're probably in bunkers or deep underground. Now hear this - all SID ships, investigate. Allison, monitor the pickups. If they're legitimate, pick them up. Use the shuttles. Hallie, stay with the medical facilities. Allison will be delivering people if they're the missing agents – move quickly. We don't have much time."

Cot moved back to speak with Celese. "We've got more incoming ships that are interested in this observatory so we're going to take up our positions to prevent them from getting too close. Are you going to be alright on the observatory?"

"I lived and worked on OBE for years. I don't mind getting reacquainted with this place and myself."

"Do you have an AVEC suit?" Cot asked Celese.

"You mean an outer suit? We stored them in the pods."

"I'd feel better if you wore one."

Chapter 15

Who's in Charge?

"Star, where is the *Quisental*?"

Cot had returned to her ship and twenty minutes had passed with the newly arrived ships staying out of normal scan range.

"It is wrapped in my netting drifting with a beacon that law enforcement will pick up as a dangerous criminal. Star Force sent a message that Special Forces has two ships that will intercept *Quisental* in twenty minutes," Star said. "There are agents in this area, and they are giving an ETA of four hours."

"Jump gates."

"I have monitors that will give us that information."

"Very good, Star. A lot of unfinished business and slight of bodies," Cot said.

"How is the transitioning going?"

"I will contact Captain Allison," Star said. "Her shuttle has completed its pickups and is returning to *Space Cat*."

"Group Leader, Hallie here. We've been ordered off the observatory IV New Prospects, by the transitioned group. Lt. Celese quoted galactic law that if one of them returns from a covert operation and is owed back pay of a substantial amount, they can take ownership of the observatory and lab, the only assets left of the project."

"She is correct," Star informed Cot. *"The rule covers over 300 pages."*

"Then we'll pull back and observe," Cot said to the others. "As long as no one attacks the observatory we can observe and protect while we wait for our Special Force replacements. We have a lot of data to sift through to figure out what went on while we wait for our replacements."

"You've got the right," Goudie said. "My brain is already tired. Profiles have been switched around in the observatory data bases and not as part of a code. It's like someone cut the profiles up into pieces then tossed them into a jar, mixed them up and pulled out the pieces randomly and fit them in a file, not heeding what it was being dumped into."

"Dunkel and Celese could be one and the same or for that matter the Terminator and Dunkel," Cot said. "I believe she's Carrion or belongs to a species that can morph into another."

"Celese?"

"Then why the surgery with the templates?"

"I don't know of any species that can morph for long periods of time," Hallie said.

"And they would be in trouble if their own species doesn't tolerate the environment well. I will not volunteer for any species changing assignments," Goudie said firmly.

"Why do you think Celese, GL?"

"The person that had a conversation with me from the planet was not the same person on the observatory."

"Do you think it has something to do with the Hunters? She's Carrion and Carrion Tribes have taken up that line of work quite seriously."

"No. I think whatever it is, it has to do with the reason the medical lab was brought in and military agents sent planet-side."

"But they were left behind. No self-respecting soldier will leave behind fellow mates if they're alive. So, we're back to what is so important about the planet," Goudie said.

"I don't think it's just the planet," Hallie said.

"I agree," Allison said. "If it were just the planet, then why leave the agents on duty? No one told them their job was done so they'll be continuing what they were told to do."

"Who was the speaker for the returnees, Hallie?" Cot asked.

"Lt. Celese."

"It could have been because she was transitioned back first and has had longer to adapt back to her original self. It's the safest and most secured area of the observatory. Did you get the names of who were transitioned?"

"No. Names weren't mentioned."

"One professor and four students died...that's on record. What about the other students? Maybe the students and crew were against the twenty-one that came with the medical lab?"

"We have two more days before Star Force and all their agents arrive," Goudie said.

"I'm signing off, SID-mates. Get some rest. We start fresh either in six bells or if someone starts something," Cot said.

Chapter 16

Regrouping

Those on the observatory and in the surrounding ships were at a standoff. Since the ships had the weapons and the observatory didn't, Cot suspected there was more to this power play on the unseen level. Whatever would tip one side over to violence was not at that point yet.

After her rest, she meditated then did kata. Both practices deepened her connection to other levels of consciousness. *Star's* monitors were showing the neutralization of the toxic chemicals was completed. The planet was what she meditated on, sensing on levels *Star's* monitors weren't able to. A quickening in the soil was affecting the seeds planted and survivors that lived underground were working hard to plant as much as they could to store for lean times until the weather stabilized into predictable seasons.

Twelve hours later she went over the records the others were de-encrypting. Once Goudie figured out the code the SID-ships and pilots were able to take on translating what had occurred. As of yet, the Star Force agents that should have arrived had not shown themselves. No further messages from High Commander Er, so the four continued monitoring from a distance and unraveling the story behind *IV New Prospects*.

"Group Leader Cot, to SID-mates," Cot said.

"Captain Goudie, here, GL."

"Captain Allison, here, GL."

"Captain Hallie, here, GL."

"Scramble communication," Cot said.

"Engaged," three voices said.

"Hallie what have you found in the medical database?"

"The medical lab was programmed with an agenda before it arrived here and with the information of the original twenty-one agents. Its systems are not in any way tied into the observatory. There's a subroutine that genetically identified each person that was transformed and it was to transition the individuals back to the same age they began their transition with added benefits. Allison researched the program."

"Allison, what did you find?" Cot said.

"That subroutine looked familiar, so I went back to a report I read two years ago. It gives a person knowledge he or she never had or probably would never have. A musician, mathematician, scientist, dancer, artist, and so on. It enhances what is already there or places a seed of what was never there. It's one of the most invasive enhancements in programming a person that science has presented in a long time."

"That's quite an incentive to sign up for a risky mission that doesn't look too good about returning," Goudie said.

"Did you find any mention of the four they added?" Cot asked.

"Maybe," Hallie said. "Someone added a program called Dunkel after the lab arrived here. When the first person came back, the old program didn't recognize him or her, so it defaulted to Dunkel. That person was given all the attributes and knowledge an assassin would have."

"And the first person back wasn't any of the replacements," Allison said. "Another interesting find is that buried in another file are two templates for two people on the observatory. Captain Pernov and C'Rona Dom. I found both had visited the planet and only one returned."

"We can make a guess that C'Rona Dom returned, because he's the head of security for the reformed Interplanetary Counsel."

"How do we know that's him and not someone else transitioned to his template?"

"The captain and C'Rona didn't transition, they visited in a shuttle. They never went together."

"So, where's the captain?"

"Unfinished business with a lot of money due, that's not going to be a neat and tidy cleanup. I bet someone on the investment side already spent it."

"Write up your reports and have them ready before the end of the first watch, mates. If we can't figure out who is who and what is going on by the time our relief gets here, they can unravel it. Our primary job is to protect the observatory, returnees and Reun," Cot said.

"So, you're not curious about who Celese is? You did say the person we met isn't the same as the one you first spoke to," Allison said.

"I'm curious. But I don't sense any danger to us or to her so let her and the others sort it out. Can you image if one template is messed up how others may also be? I'd rather not get involved with that. We'll be here for months."

"That's a fair and true statement," Hallie said. *"You have plans for us?"*

"When the fleet arrives, unless our CO gives us a change of orders, we're back to mapping space and poking at things that we find interesting."

"This getting together for a joint operation is a good break in our mapping work," Goudie said.

"Then you're going to like this," Allison said. *"Space Cat is receiving multiple warnings from sensors we sent toward the jump gate half a day from here. They're moving too fast for most travelers."*

"Allison, see if you can get better reading but don't get yourself surrounded. Goudie, start patrolling on the other side of this planet. Hallie, find those two Star Force ships that were supposed to have been here by now. I don't want invisible observers when trouble may be heading our way or maybe they were waylaid by those ships we sent limping away.

"Righty, I'm off, GL."

"I'm gone, GL."

"Beginning patrol now, GL."

"Star, I want to know just what's happening on those ships that are sitting out of what they think is our range."

"I can move two Su010 to the center of their group and begin listening but it will take ten minutes to position them."

"Do it."

She rose from her seat and went to prepare for meditation. It was time to see beyond the obvious. Carefully, she picked her colors for candles, placing magenta to close her circle between the silver and gold. A bundle of herbs was lit and as it smoked she swept the area, saying a small prayer over each color. Magenta for speedy action for the higher good, gold to promote deep understanding, black to absorb negative energy, turquoise for awareness, pink for harmony, white for sincerity, purple for intuition, blue for devotion, green for healing, yellow for learning, orange for power, red for strength and silver to neutralize any undesirable vibrations.

Cot didn't need to touch Bua to feel its power as it built up energy within her. In her mind she pictured the observatory. Images from the observatory's past flashed by her. Emotions from the shipbuilders to the first crew members through the return of all the transitioned she felt; however, feelings about something didn't mean that's what they had acted on. Many of the people on the observatory were trained agents.

When Cot opened her circle, all the candles were burnt down to stubs. Four hours she had been out of contact with her team.

"Star, report."

"Everyone is awaiting your return."

"What is happening with the ships and observatory?"

"There have been several attempts to shoot the observatory down and they have attempted to board *IV New Prospects*. They have failed in all attempts due to problems they have encountered with their equipment."

"SID-mates, this is Group Leader Cot, requesting a huddle."

"Captain Allison, in the huddle," she replied.

"Captain Goudie, in the huddle," he replied.

"Captain Hallie, in the huddle," she replied.

"Engage the encryption."

"Captain Hallie, did you find our Star Force comrades?"

"Yes, GL," Hallie returned sounding amused. *"They ran into a group of ships that we turned away. There were some issues they were resolving with the group that they were not anticipating."*

"And those are...?" Cot asked curiously.

"Discovery of the observatory under Star Force protection."

"Any ETA?"

"Maybe in a few days," she said. "There's some legal haggling going on and I think there's going to be some sticky work to be done."

"Did they know you were watching them?"

"Yes. I gave them the information on the folks in the observatory."

"Good. Captain Allison, what have you to report?"

"The planet is going through a fast track of recovering. I sent a few probes to the surface. No toxic evidence in the dirt, plants, or creatures that are abundant. Surface wise, I believe whatever Star put in the rain or chemicals, not only neutralized the toxins from the ground, air and other life forms, but also propagated on a fast track all life forms in that area."

"That's incredible, even for Star's mix of chemicals," Cot said slowly.

"I believe so too. There should be some evidence of toxins," Allison said.

"What do you find, Star?" Cot asked.

"I have no past records to compare the formula I used. I used what I found in the university's own database that Celeste had pointed us to. The uncharacteristic regrowth and proliferation of all life forms in forty-six areas on the planet can be attributed to a common connection. The underground water links."

"Is there a consequence we should worry about?"

"Fights will break out between people who think others have it better than they," Goudie said. "We pick up readings on weapons that have the potential to contaminate the area."

"We could do a minor interference and remind them that this repeat behavior will put them back into toxic poisoning. If they chose to use the weapons again, we won't repair the damage," Hallie said.

"That's a lesson they'll have to learn on their own," Cot said. "We'll let SF guide them if they feel it's necessary."

"What about those on the observatory?" Goudie asked.

"Now that is another story," Cot said softly. "The arms dealer, Turner, that we've been told is the instigator of the last calamity on this planet is in a sense responsible. Turner was trying to turn over a new leaf by taking on a new job that was not in the arms dealing field. His cousin, C'Rona Dom offered him a job doing maintenance on the observatory. He was a pilot on the shuttle that was taking down the negotiators of UP to the planet's leaders. The captain of the observatory had no problem with him doing the maintenance but was not pleased with him being given shuttle duties when their normal pilot became ill. She didn't feel letting him intermingle with the planet's populace was a wise decision. She felt it was too much of a temptation too soon in his redemptive path. And she was correct. He was tempted to help out the weaker of the tribes negotiating for power in the new opportunities of traveling amongst the stars. It didn't occur to him that they needed to grow or mature into the responsibility of holding power over vast numbers outside of their tribe. Meanwhile the UP operatives on the planet were young and into following orders and didn't know how to adapt to fluid situations. They had been promised a lot to participate in a program to educate key groups on the planet to escalate the planet's move to become stellar travelers. The college students on the observatory would have been more appropriate, and they were frustrated with the unnecessary mistakes made by the inexperienced agents on the planet."

Cot thought for a moment, trying to make sense of the last emotional feeling she felt from the parting students. Though relieved, they were reluctant to leave their work behind, feeling it was unfinished.

"The students were called back due to their professor's death and the three who were in charge of the overall running of the observatory. Once back, they had new assignments, graduated and moved on with their lives not realizing that the agents would be left behind. They had been left out of the operation after C'Rona Dom received word that it was a military operation, and the students were not cleared for what was going on planet-side. It meant that the observatory as a university project had ended. The university filed a protest and dropped any support of the project when UP's Intelligence

Department refused to compensate them for taking over the operation of their observatory. UP's Intelligence Department didn't want to tell anyone outside of a select few that they lost control of the project."

Cot frowned, remembering what she felt in her connection to the first transitioned person as she walked through the observatory knowing a little of what she was going to have done to her and then reconnecting to that person seventeen years later as she disembarked from the strange shuttle back onto the observatory. She had long ago given up hope of being rescued and had focused on helping those she had been sent to spy on. Seventeen years living as a species one isn't born as and adapting left the individual with a lot of repressed emotional dump sites that will take a long time to deal with. But she got her youth back so perhaps she would use the extra time to work on reacquainting herself with her natural biological body.

"C'Rona Dom," Cot continued, "had taken the position in the new Investigative Department, hoping somewhere along the line, he would be able to get those agents back. The agents on the attack ships were interested in covering it up. They're the UPID agents that retired with prestige, power and the funds of the twenty-one they abandoned. They can be taken to court for this and will lose everything."

"What happened to the Captain?"

"She went down to help bring the agents back. She was the first and became Dunkel. The Dunkel program was a failsafe that none of the agents would return. When she realized what had been done to her, she left the observatory, hoping it would change her, but it didn't. Turner is the dark shadow, the Carrion who returned with Dunkel to protect the returning agents. They weren't attacking each other; they were attacking us. We represent those who abandoned the agents. The observatory is of no consequence to Dunkel. The medical laboratory is."

After minutes of silence, Cot could hear Goudie sigh.

"Group Leader, what do we do now?"

"Just what our commander directed us to do. We protect the observatory and all those associated with it and the planet until Star Force can send their ships to straighten out this mess."

"Red alert!" all the SID-ships said at the same time.

"State the alert, *Star Chaser*," Cot said calmly. In her mind's eye she could see ships arriving from Star Force and from the Interplanetary Counsel.

"Monitors registering incoming from all sides," *Star* reported. "Interplanetary Counsel ships will be in normal range to announce their intentions in ten minutes. Star Force ships will be in communication reach in two minutes."

"We have armed fighters from Interplanetary Counsel coming in on my side," Allison reported. *"NR in five minutes. I hope I don't know anyone on those ships, because it's going to be a waste of life if some hot-shot thinks they're going to get some points trying to knock me out."*

"Star Force fleet on my side," Hallie reported. *"They have sent forward buoys announcing to all that approach that this is a closed section to all until Star Force has wrapped up their investigation. The message is from Rear Admiral Zieda, Commander of Star Force squadron, Red Moon. That's got a bite of authority."*

"The ships that have been here are coming active with their weapons," Goudie reported. *"The new arrivals are sending their challenge, Group Leader."*

"If you have replacement gizmos, send them out. By now the location of what we have out there has been pinpointed – move them about. AMs, Sub474s, Simms, and no more than a dozen nets, if you have them *Star*."

"Deployed," four ships responded.

"Now, we wait for our comrades."

"Cot, you have a FYEO," *Star* mentally sent.

"Go ahead and play it."

"Lt. Colonel Cot, this is Rear Admiral Zieda of Star Force Command aboard the battle cruiser Emerald Isles. Greetings. It looks like you could use some support with more weight."

"Greetings, Rear Admiral Zieda. Your arrival is timely. They're intending to take out our security ring around the planet and observatory."

The sudden simultaneous firing of canons from the approaching ships on three sides affirmed her estimation. It was met with a solid wall of resistance as the reinforced acoustic mines, Sub474s, deployment of nets beyond the demarcation line, and Simms did their jobs. The energy wave from the attacking ship was bounced back toward the

attacking ships and Cot could see a few of the smaller ships not equipped to handle it go dark from their system overload.

"Warhawks and zips have launched. They should be hitting your area now. We'll exchange locations so we don't incur any FF hits."

"Our defense won't mistakenly hit friendly ships. As long as your fighters remember not to fire at our defense they won't shoot back. *Star Chaser* will send an encrypted message on the location of our defense."

"Lt. Colonel Cot, you've been in such skirmishes. You know there's going to be wild shots on both sides."

"Rear Admiral, it's because I know that a good fighter doesn't make wild shots when there's a chance of taking out a friendly. If you can't guarantee the accuracy of your pilots, then I won't send the locations of my defenses. I trust my group to not hit anything by accident."

There was a long pause and Cot wondered if her new alliance and CO would be putting her on a blacklist. Cot knew she was right in her appraisal of the situation. This was not a battle between pirates or smugglers. This was a situation where two law enforcement agencies had a difference of opinion, and she knew who had the upper hand.

"My war chief has assured me there will be no wild shots," Rear Admiral Zieda said. *"He is a man of his word."*

"SID-mates, send to *Emerald Isles* our locations. We don't want to lose anyone on our side."

"As ordered, Group Leader," three voices responded.

"We'll get back to this conversation," Rear Admiral Zieda said. *"Have you any further recommendations?"*

"No, Admiral. Over and out."

"I have viewed the rules of engagement," *Star Chaser* said. "By Star Force parameters of who leads space battles, it is the officer that had first engaged a military force larger than itself. When a superior officer arrives, to avoid conflict of command, the first officer remains in command until an opportune break in the battle allows the transfer of battle flag. We are in command though we have no flag."

Cot sighed. "My first encounter with an SF flag officer and we have a disagreement in tactics."

"You are clarifying to a newly arrived officer the rules of engagement," *Star Chaser* said. "Without notification there would be casualties that could have been avoided."

"The most annoying of this is that we're using shots to put the ship out of commission does not kill anyone and they are intent on blowing that observatory to space debris, regardless that there are biologicals on board."

It was hours before the new arrivals found that they were not going to get beyond the investigation's line of demarcation, and with the overwhelming numbers of warhawks and zips they backed out of shooting range.

Star Chaser had sent all the information the four SID-ships had found on the situation. The research was extensive and detailed from information on the ships and crew along with the university and the politics behind it. Cot had never been a captain of a ship, so she didn't know how detailed information a captain or admiral received on a situation, but she was impressed with what the SID-ships had come up with.

While the SID-ships and their pilots waited for the Rear Admiral to give them permission to leave and resume their own business, the weapons officers of the fleet were bombarding the four pilots for information on their tactical equipment.

"*Star*, as a gift to the Rear Admiral for her timely arrival, earlier than her ETA, we'll give her one of your SEs."

"I'll be down two," *Star* reminded her.

"Pick out a mixed dozen of your upgrades to hand over to her Weapons Officer, Lt. BeBo. In exchange *Star*, you get to pick out what you want and how many from their weapons supply. She's being very generous. This is your supply depot, so trade well."

There was a moment of hesitation, then a list began to scroll down Cot's screen.

"I see you've been looking over their supplies. Send it to Lt. BeBo. She is very intrigued with your mobile Net. It's the right size for a zip to use to slow down its tag tail. If they can duplicate your results, they'll have their zips with more light-weight protection."

"I will give them one of each of my upgrades," *Star* said reluctantly. "They will find the swap more to their advantage."

"You're right. They'll have a tactical advantage no one else in any fleet has. Thank you, *Star*."

"You have an invitation from Rear Admiral Zieda to dine with her in an hour," *Star* said.

"I see. Mess dress uniforms. This will be my first occasion to try out my new dress uniform. Have you picked the SE out?"

"I have chosen an SE and added tactics for body guarding a rear admiral to its duties. There are less protocols to follow when a rear admiral's life is threatened."

Cot smiled. The rear admiral was going to get more than what she could imagine a bot could do. A valuable lesson Cot learned was the small but genuine gestures paid off in the long run.

Chapter 17

Among New Associates

Cot, Hallie, Goudie and Allison chose to come over in their own shuttles, each bringing a dozen upgraded tactical gizmos from their weapons lockers. Considering the fleet was substantial, three dozen would not spread very far with the other ships that may have talented mechanics that given the right stimulus could create nearly as clever equipment as the SID-ships, though the SID-pilots doubted they could do as well as their ships.

"Well, here goes," Cot said softly. She tugged at each of her tunic sleeves and walked down the shuttle ramp. The other three were waiting for her. Cot joined her pilots.

"Squad Leader Lt. Col. Cot MacDiarmid and her mates, asking permission to come aboard the *Emerald Isle*," Cot said to the small group from *Emerald Isle* waiting for her.

"Permission granted, Squad Leader Lt. Col. Cot MacDiarmid and to your squad mates," the First Officer said.

The four removed their covers and Cot introduced them to the officers before them. They all followed the first officer through corridors that were familiar to the four who had all served on various battle ships.

"The Admiral and some of her bridge officers are assembled for your welcoming dinner," Commander Rog explained to Cot. "I regret I will be unable to join you. I would have liked to know about your partnerships with sentient ships."

Cot glanced at the Commander and could feel the quickening of a Peaceful Warrior.

"What do you know of it?" Cot asked softly.

"That your group is the 22nd try at mixing sentient ship and biological pilot and or crew." He glanced at Cot as they walked side-by-side with the others trailing.

"Are the others doing as well as we are, Commander Rog?" Goudie asked.

He turned slightly and grinned at Goudie, "Well, captain, I would say you're all doing an ace-up job. It's only now that Star Force officers are talking openly about it. Other space organizations have been trying it. For Star Force, you're the 3rd group. That's all I can say for now. Well, here you are, Officers' Dinning Compartment. Have a grand visit."

"I'll ask *Star Chaser* if she would like to carry on some correspondence with you, Commander. I'm sure you both could find common ground."

His face beamed. "I would be honored if she would."

"She likes cultural stories. If there are messages or symbols embedded in them, you'll make a friend for life," Cot told him.

"I'm grateful for your offer," he said.

Cot was thinking how good it would be for *Star* to converse with people instead of just computers.

The four were ushered into a large dining area, the Officer's Mess. All the officers stood as they entered, surprising Cot.

"I'll bet it's that slash on your cuff, Group Leader," Allison said under her breath.

Cot glanced at her.

"I agree. Those sailors we passed couldn't take their eyes off your arm," Goudie whispered back.

"Look sharp mates," Hallie said under her breath.

The rear admiral herself walked over to Cot and her SID-mates.

"Greetings, Officers. You have done a grand job of keeping those ships at bay until we could get here. We would all like to spend time talking to you about your ships and what you've run into since you've taken flight, unfortunately there isn't that much time. HQ wants you all to continue with your mission of stirring up the muck, I understand. Lt. Colonel Cot, you have the seat to my left. It's not often I get the honor of sitting next to someone with the Gideon on her sleeve. Ensign Ri will seat the rest of you."

"Thank you, Rear Admiral."

While the platters of food were passed around and everyone ate hurriedly as most veterans learned to do, Cot noticed the Rear Admiral studying the SE that hovered between them.

"Lt. Colonel Cot, is that one of those multifunction gizmos HQ's engineering labs gave you to test out?"

"Yes, Rear Admiral." Cot leaned closer to her and lowered her voice, "I thought since you're letting us plunder your supplies, I would offer you your own personnel bot. It does maintenance work, serves as a bodyguard, works outside and inside a spaceship, can scout ahead of your ship in travel corridors, and more. *Star Chaser* has set it to your bios so you're the boss."

"Do tell. May I test it? Does it have a name?"

"Yes, Rear Admiral. *Star* has given it RA's PA, for Rear Admiral's Personal Assistant, however, you can shorten it to PA."

"PA, fetch my uniform dress cloak."

The SE immediately moved out of the dining area with the hatch opening automatically, and a startled guard peering in and then looking after the SE that disappeared.

Five minutes later, with alarms going on over the ship, the SE returned with the folded cloak.

"We didn't interfere with your ships security."

"Security, this is Rear Admiral Zieda, stand down. It's just my new PA fetching me my cloak." Rear Admiral Zieda smiled at her new acquisition. "This will take care of HQ bothering me to get a personal attendant. Does it cook?" she laughed at what she thought was a joke.

"Once it learns your taste, it does deliver very good dinners."

"You do know, of course, that this puts me in your debt." The rear admiral didn't look like that bothered her.

"I'm counting on it. If *Star Chaser* doesn't cash in on the entire debt with her want list to your purser, one day I may have to call in a favor."

The rear admiral raised her glass to Cot, "It's the way of life. You always owe someone, so when you can choose, gladly do it."

"Because there are going to be some that you regret," Cot finished.

The rear admiral signaled dinner was finished and everyone rose as the rear admiral rose. "I expect a detailed report soon from all of you. Your thoughts on the situation are also expected. With all the equipment you've swapped with my fleet, you should be able to get by for a while."

She looked at the four SID-pilots. "You're doing in days what would take us months and with the use of resources we don't want to expend. Already we're getting reports back on the monitors your group has been leaving in areas we have never been able to get a monitor in." The admiral looked at Hallie and gave her a grin, "and it hasn't been detected as of yet. Captain Hallie, you were the first person that not only managed to drop off monitors in the den of iniquity, but you escaped alive."

Hallie grinned back. "It was a grand challenge."

"Welcome, all of you to our Star Force family," Rear Admiral Zieda said.

"Thank you, Rear Admiral Zieda," Cot answered for them.

"I would like a word with you, Lt. Colonel Cot," Rear Admiral Zieda said to her softly.

Cot nodded to the others to walk ahead.

"Just what was programmed in this bot? I understand how easy it is to find my quarters, since the ship is a standard-built warship, but how did it know what alarms to set off so that I wouldn't be concerned with it knowing my security?"

"I'll have *Star Chaser* send you the details of its programming, if she hasn't already." Cot knew *Star* could hear the conversation and was hoping she was sending the information now. Of course, the rear admiral wouldn't understand the information, and she would probably think for a long time about turning it over to her tech considering how much information may be in *Star Chaser's* programming.

Cot joined her SID-pilots in the hanger and they quickly left, eager to get on with their own adventures.

Chapter 18

A Blast From the Past

"*Star*, is there a way that you can see if this is really happening?.... I know it sounds odd, but there are a multitude of dimensions and timelines as well as...this just doesn't feel right."

"I know of dimensions and timelines." *Star* sounded as irritated as she felt.

Cot let out an exasperated sigh. When she retired to sleep four hours earlier, as far as she knew, *Star* was content with running scans and tests on whatever caught her interest. When she was awakened abruptly from sleep and made it to the bridge, she found *Star* was aggravated with everything. Did the other SID-pilots have this problem?

"Incoming!" Cot warned.

Another squadron of military ships flew out of the gate while a squadron of war birds flew out of the cruise liner's bay. None of the ships had identifiers that *Star* could trace to a planet or star system. It wasn't surprising, considering how expansive space was with all the planets and other large chunks of rock that could be turned into habitable homes for one species or another.

"*Star*, can you tap into their communications?" She was surprised *Star* had not already done it.

"No."

One of the ships exploded, kicking out a life pod. It was ignored as the other ships fought the liner that was over-whelming the remaining ships with her droves of warplanes and her own cannon fire.

Then it was over. All the ships, including the liner, went back through the gate, leaving the life pod. Cot waited for someone to pick up the life pod whose beacon was flashing for someone to find it.

"Did you get a reading on the lock for that gate?" Cot demanded.

"I did," *Star* said.

"Then send the last code that worked."

Cot stretched her back then shifted position, feeling the seat reshape to fit her.

This does not make sense, so why am I trying to?

"Just state what you're seeing not what you think is happening," she reminded herself. "How's the passenger in the pod doing?"

"Starting to panic."

"That's not good. He'll never be any good to anyone if he survives this. Let's bail him out."

"Shall I send a medbot to escort him to the bridge?"

"No. Leave him in the pod and move it into your cargo bay. Put him in hibernation and play something that will calm him."

If anything, the life pod and its occupant were real, or *Star* would not be able to register it as a life form. Cot rose and headed to the cargo bay to wait for the life pod to be towed in. There was debris from the war games making it dangerous for the life pod that did not have that much energy to deflect debris -- provided it was real debris. Cot found herself frowning at her disbelief that all this was real.

The cargo bay doors slid open, and the power beam drew the life pod up to the doors and then released it. Automatic cargo handlers secured it and drew it inside.

The face that was staring at her through the transparent portion of the pod was scared and hyperventilating. Cot released the pod hatch.

"Ensign?"

He leaned over the shell and threw up on the deck. The medical and cleaning bots immediately detached from their kiosks.

Cot waited, picking up more from watching him than conversation would have told her. He was not a species she was familiar with, but it wasn't difficult to see that he was terrified. His one eye was blinking frantically, and his mouth was opening and

closing like a creature gasping for air. The atmosphere in the cargo bay was comfortable for his bios as they were for hers.

The med bot administered a sedative.

"I'm Lt. Col Cot. And you are?"

"Ensign Puke, Colonel."

"Do you want to run that by me again, Ensign?"

"I... it's Ensign JeGar, Colonel."

Cot nodded to him to get out of the pod. "Is there a reason why you've been left in the pod?"

"The captain's going to kill me himself, Colonel if I don't return in the pod."

"Why do you want to return?"

"It's to be a Kleiter, Colonel. It's one of the toughest troops..." his eyes spotted the gold Gibbon on her flight suit. He gulped.

"Who is your captain, Ensign?"

"Captain Mohar, Colonel."

Cot had heard of him from way back. He was known as a soldier's last chance to redeem her or himself in not only the military's eyes but the legal system. It was that or go to prison for the rest of their lives.

"What are you in for, Ensign?"

"Killing." He stopped abruptly. "Murdering a family in the Defur Region," he added.

The historic Massacre on the Gladimore in the Defur Region is my guess. That explains some of this. "You were with the military that boarded the ship, *Gladimore*?"

"Yes, Colonel."

"Whose uniform were you wearing, Ensign?"

"I can't say, Colonel."

Cot leaned close to him. "Why?"

"I can't remember, Colonel."

The massacre on the civilian passenger cruise ship in the Defur Region was in all military training manuals with what went wrong on all levels of discipline and morality. Two military powers boarded a passenger liner out of boredom. The crew and passengers

were treated as captured booty and subsequently, many died from the abuses. Squadrons of Star Force troops rescued what was left of the crew and passengers. Both planets whose military were involved were prevented from traveling the stars for another ten decades. This incident was one of many that brought Star Force to its prominent position of power, according to Star Force documentation.

"What was your rank?"

"First Lieutenant. Colonel, I have to go back," he pleaded.

"You still want to be returned in the pod?"

"Yes, Colonel." He said it with so much conviction she knew it would not be worth arguing.

"Say this...Ara Kara... Say it."

"Colonel?"

"ArrraaaaKaaaarrrra." She had him repeat it for five minutes. "You don't have to say it out loud. Use it whenever you're worried, frightened or angry. Okay?"

He nodded.

"Alright. Get in."

The pod closed and sealed.

"*Star*, put the pod in the shuttle. I'm going to change uniforms. Wait out of sight."

"What do you hope to see?" *Star* asked.

"His captain."

The shuttle, *Reflected Light*, could be deceiving if you didn't do a deep scan of it, which would be rather difficult. The new emitters on her countered any energy beam sent her way to scan her including telepathic. *Reflected Light* was fully armed with the newest technology for a shuttle and enhanced greatly by *Star's* tinkering. It could carry up to four people Cot's size comfortably and had a cargo bay that the rescued pod was stored.

What were the odds that Cot would run into a member of the disgraced group; especially since this happened over ten generations ago. In space, anything could happen, and it usually did.

A shuttle marked with a captain's logo came out of the gate. It flew close to *Reflected Light* as if knowing what Cot wanted – a meet.

She sent the customary hail and received an acknowledgement with an invitation to come aboard. Cot accepted, not wanting to show too much of her shuttle's interior. Four SEs were on her suit and since the suit was a new design, she was sure this far out in space the captain would not be aware of what the SEs were about, though she was not going to gamble her life on that. *Star* was her backup. She turned abruptly and spotted the bot she was now calling *Star's* friend. "You stay here and watch the shuttle," she directed.

A light on the exit hatch notified her that the umbilicus that connected the two hatches was secured. When her hatch opened, she could see Captain Mohar waiting. He stood parade rest, hands clasped behind his back and standing stiffly with his cover tucked under his arm. His uniform was dark kaki, battle ribbons proudly displayed on his chest, and his uniform worn in the old ground trooper's manner, with creases sharp. He wore a beard trimmed closely with artistic arcs. His eyes were shinny blue, blending in with his pallor. He was a Yoll. That meant he had fangs and claws that could kill a person in one quick swipe. *Star* didn't tell her what his species was. It was good she had not. Anticipation could get twisted when prejudice overshadowed her experience.

The energy he projected came toward her; an intentional attempt to intimidate her. She was too fresh from POATA to let it affect her, or maybe it was the medallion. She touched it momentarily then walked over.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?"

"It's just a shuttle," he said. His eyes studied her closely.

"It's the captain's shuttle and protocol does give a common metaphor for a relationship." It was taken right out of the class textbook from her first season in the diplomat academy. It was quoted from a young Lieutenant Mohar who had a weapon pointed to his head by a rebel group leader who was not big on protocols.

The captain laughed with his whole appearance changing. He bowed to her. "I'm Captain Mohar. Welcome aboard. Lt.Colonel...?"

"Lt. Colonel Cot, Captain."

"I believe you have something of mine. Shall we talk about it?" He waved his hand to her to step further into his craft.

"I have no intention of keeping him if he wants to return."

"Then?"

"I was curious. Am I taking up any of your valuable time?"

"I believe you know you're not. I'm just as curious of you as you are of me. Not many passing ships see us. However, it seems our timelines cross over."

Cot settled in one of the seats. All seven of the seats were comfortable and functional.

"I see you're a graduate of POATA," he said.

"Yes."

"Is that the blue flower of Peal?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Does that mean something?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "I lasted one week. Not enough time to memorize the little details."

"You were at POATA?"

"I was asked to teach the first year it was opened."

"Oh."

"I wasn't fond of teaching so many pampered idiots."

"They didn't think outside the box enough?" This Cot found surprising.

"They were too well behaved. Nothing to challenge me."

"So, you like breaking the bad ones."

"No." He was so firm in the reply Cot was surprised. "I assist them to redeem themselves."

"Your ensign looked like he was about to break."

"Life pods don't allow the occupant to suffer mentally or physically *too* much."

"How am I involved in this?"

"Unfinished business?"

"For whom?"

The captain smiled. "The web of life doesn't limit itself to one reality or dimension, nor does it know time or space in the same reference as some species do."

"I have no regrets about *my* past actions. In all my military skirmishes I knew who I was shooting at."

"In all your past actions? And it was *the* enemy? The golden gibbon you're wearing isn't earned by just participating in a dozen battles or leading war parties...unless times have changed its meaning. Does the end justify the means?"

"Of course not. The journey *is* as important as the end. What has that got to do with our meeting?"

"This battle has been replayed so many times we all know the rules and our roles without thinking, and that is exactly what makes us different from the machines that we want to believe we control."

Cot let out a sigh in frustration. She was missing something. "So, does this mean that there's something in my life that I need to replay?"

"Do you feel absolved of all your kills?"

"I removed people whose intention was to do the most harm they could against those least able to defend themselves. Their deaths were not lingering or painful."

"If I were taking a life, I would want to know each person personally. It's a heavy responsibility to make such a profound change in so many people's lives. You know, killing one person has a ripple effect."

"They were brutal and mean-spirited people who felt nourished from the anguish they suffered on others." She was angry he was questioning her motives when his reputation was sullied with brutality for the sake of it.

"There is always an alternative to taking a life. When you see none, ask for help."

"Even if they're shooting at you?" she asked in disbelief. "There isn't time to do anything but react..." She paused, now understanding part of what he was telling her. "I have a responsibility to my squad, to my commander, and to myself to stay alive."

"Righteous anger. Then, if it's not in the past it may be yet to come or will never come. It all depends on the choices you make, initiating a new timeline. Another fractal of yourself to play out a drama for the sake of learning." He smiled and rose from his seat, gesturing Cot to the back of the shuttle where the two maneuvered the life pod so it was in the captain's possession.

Finished with that, Cot was anxious to leave. The moment her shuttle's hatch locked she could feel the vibration from Captain Mohar's ship as it started up.

"*Star*, this is another strange trip."

Once back aboard *Star*, Cot pulled up all the information she could on Captain Mohar. There was no death listed for him. If he were alive, he would be 500 standard years old. His species had no average life spans on record. There were so many puzzles and mysteries yet to be solved or just revisited to be reminded that the possibilities of life were endless.

Her eyes moved to *Star's* bot friend that was roosting on her console. She needed a break.

"The conn is yours, *Star*."

"*Star* has the conn."

* * *

Cot felt herself spinning out of control. She was still alive. Where was *Star*? Firing her suit equalizers, she was able to stop the spin. Looking about her, she could not see anything that could rescue her. Her homing device was activated. She had two days' air if she didn't breathe heavy. Testing her limbs she was grateful to find no injuries. The vastness of space was all around her, including moving space debris. She was just another spec of chemical components moving about in space. Not closing her eyes, she retreated inward, touching a part of her that was in harmony with space, and she moved out of her body, searching for her friend, *Star Chaser*, not considering how odd it sounded.

Star was a lonely ship flying in a wild spin with only her protective buffer preventing her from colliding with space matter. Cot moved onto her deck.

The small bot, *Star's* friend, hovered near her. Looking at the damage Cot determined what it would take to get the SEs activated. Cot focused on the main console. The lights came up and activated the SEs, which began to move around the bridge finishing the repairs.

Cot could feel herself drifting out of the ship, her task accomplished. She was tempted to visit other places but a stronger need to return to her floating self had her back just as the thought occurred to her.

Time was difficult to tell when there was nothing to use for a focal point. It was startling to see four of her SEs materialize in front of her helmet. They towed her toward a ship that was quickly growing in size before her.

"*Star*, am I ever glad to see you!"

As she moved into the safety of her ship, *Star* was giving her a report of what had transpired. *Star* said nothing of her help to restart *Star's* system, but she didn't expect it.

Chapter 19

The Gate Keeper

It was dark and smelled of dust...and something else. Straining her ears she could hear movement. A lot of movement. She tugged at the shackles around her wrists, knowing it to be futile. It only caused the cuts to reopen. Shuddering, she could feel many things crawling up her legs, then to the cuts on her body. She would have screamed but remembered orifices and open wounds were what these creatures settled in.

She rolled out of her bed, entangled in her bedding at the first warning *Star* sent her.

"A missing gate?"

It was a relief to be awakened from her nightmare. She was drenched in sweat from her struggles. She dropped her soiled bedding in the cleaner and tiredly made it to the shower. The molecules and components the ship's system put together to fit in with her preference for body cleansing wasn't what her species on her home planet Maridoileag would consider cleaning; however, it was refreshing as she felt the energy massage her body as well as remove any harmful bacteria or odors others would find unacceptable. It took a few minutes to clear her thoughts. In a cleaned uniform, and in a better mood, she stopped long enough in the galley to drink liquid refreshment.

"*Star*, I have the conn." She slid into her seat. While her monitor unfurled, she looked around for *Star's* bot.

"Where's your friend?"

"Resting."

"Do you have a name yet?"

"It has not given me a name to call it."

The feeling she picked up from *Star* was that *Star* was curious about the bot. It was an oddity that *Star* ran into something so small and smart.

She began to read the ship's log that *Star* provided her with, already forgetting about the bot. A tapping noise from a storage cabinet had her turning to see what it was. Getting up, she opened the door, stepping back reflexively when the bot shot out.

"You locked your friend in the closet?"

"It was to prevent it from wandering while you slept," *Star* said.

"Is that something *we* should worry about?"

"No."

"How far off the mark is the gate?"

"Until I locate its new location, I don't know."

"How long until we reach its original location?"

"Thirty minutes."

"There are stories of public travel gates that no longer exist or that were rediscovered days from the original location."

"Public travel corridors have been shown to emit a common energy, provided the change isn't due to disruption inside it," *Star* said.

An alarm sounded as a protective shield went up automatically protecting Cot. At the same time, *Star* banked to the left and *Star's* bot scurried out of sight with a bang of the closet door that Cot had just freed it from.

An unfamiliar battleship materialized before them, filling her screen. They were so close, Cot was sure they would have collided had not *Star* been steering the ship.

"Go to transparent and tag that ship," Cot said.

The solid hull on her bridge disappeared. Space with its wonders surrounding three sides and the huge presence of a warship above her had her holding her breath in awe. Cot could hear the movement of energy between the two ships as *Star's* energy buffer pushed against the larger battleship's buffer. Cot could see the stabilizers working on keeping them from being bounced into space. It was a long thirty minutes before the battleship finally passed them.

"There may be others coming through. Go still. Let's wait and see what's developing." Glancing down at her screen to see what ship it was, there was no name. "I don't recognize that type of battleship. Is it a new class warship?"

"I am still searching for its origins," *Star* said.

Cot resettled in her chair studying her screen split into four squares, filling up with data. The battleship mined the area with drones. As each new drone was activated, lines on her screen became green indicating the connection between each was enabled. It was fast work and in ten minutes the ship continued on its way.

"Usually, battleships have support vessels around them, both forward and aft. Why is this one acting different? And they're mining their path as if expecting trouble."

Star had accessed the crew's logs which appeared on her screen. That was no surprise.

"It's a pirate ship by the sounds of the crew's logs, flying under a false flag of merchant. It could very well be mistaken for a battleship converted to merchant ship. There are many of those after the Incursion Wars."

"The tag I put on it will send information to each kiosk it passes for Star Force to keep track of it," *Star* said.

"Hopefully SF will stop it for inspection before it does any damage to lawful space travelers."

Space was as vast as the unknown number of dimensions that travelers could pass through, some in physical form and some not. Some in ships and some in spirit form. At one time dimensions were given at number levels, however, as more species let their presence be known, dimensions became more of a qualifier of the species that resided there rather than in spiritual levels of development. That was one of the reasons why to set aside a portion of space and claim it as one group's territory was considerably naïve. But it didn't prevent it from happening, since the representatives of planets were practical and saw it as something to cover in their dealings with other planets, should their neighbor become unreasonable. Therefore, it was a necessary duty of those patrolling space to log any unusual ships and send them to their superiors in HQ, which was one of the reasons SFHQ had Cot and her SID-mates spread out to add more monitors and keep track of any suspicious activity that was hindering lawful travel.

"Send the profile to HQ when we're out of their range. How are you coming with a signal to deactivate a few of them so we can slide through the gate?"

Suddenly she sat up in her chair, feeling alarm at the movement in the space before them. Ripples and scattered lights in various sizes and swirls of purple dust gave

the impression that a breeze moved a curtain of space right where the gate opening was moments ago. Whatever was exiting was causing energy displacement before it. The exit aperture began to open, and information filled her screen too fast for her to read.

A nonCFS zip ship popped through the gate, then more. A squadron spread out to engage the drones which came active immediately.

"Bring up low power. We can slide through while they're occupied. They'll expect something like that so be careful of passive satellites."

Her eyes darted from her console with technical specs to the scene the transparent hull revealed - a panoramic view of a battle between the drones left behind and the zip ships.

Once *Star* passed through the aperture, the gate closed.

"Can you pick up readings on where they entered along this corridor?"

"I will follow their trail," *Star* said.

"There's a mother ship that they came from. I don't want to run into her."

The energy in the corridor changed, causing Cot's surroundings to lose their consistency and become a blur. Feeling overwhelmed with the stimuli from the view with the transparency on, she hoarsely ordered the transparency turned off. On her screen she could see evidence of the mothership she was anticipating. It breezed by without seeming to notice them. When everything returned to normal, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"It fits the profile of the *Meekk*," *Star* said.

"Bounty hunters. They're looking for revenge. No wonder that ship left drones behind. *Star*, we need to slow down or we're going to end up in a galaxy not on our charts."

The added thrust *Star* gave to miss the *Meekk* had them speeding faster than it was proscribed to travel in corridors that normally delivered a ship months or years faster to a destination than if just traveling through normal space.

The corridor curved but they were going too fast to take it. *Star Chaser* burst through the corridor's energy wall like they were shot out of a cannon. Cot whooshed in shock at *Star's* sudden deceleration. It took seconds for her sight to be able to focus. *Star's* bot friend was the first thing she saw, sitting on her console.

Her attention went to her screen. They were in a section of space she didn't recognize. They were hanging in a strange backdrop of no stars but plenty of spaceships. There were all sorts of ships, some she remembered from her academy textbooks and others she thought were so bizarre in design she would have remembered seeing or hearing them in her own space travels. The collection stretched out as far as her eyes could see.

Star Chaser's curiosity was piqued. They hit an energy protective barrier, bouncing back gently and then held still.

"It looks like a graveyard where they store decommissioned star ships. Usually, they break them down into salvage within weeks... We're getting a hail from one? Return hail, *Star*."

Suddenly all ships turned, facing them. The speed was unnatural. Alarm fluttered in her stomach.

"Did we warp into something out of our space or time?"

Their comm channel squealed until *Star* shut it down. The bot had dropped from the overhead to the console and stared out at the ships.

"*Star*, this doesn't look like a good place to be."

"They would like to speak with you," *Star* said.

"Who? About what? Can you clear the channel, so we get a clean broadcast?"

"They are all trying to send at the same time. It's creating an overload in the communication systems which is causing the squeal."

She leaned back in her seat. "Can you single out one ship and bring up an image?"

"Until they stop with multiple signals I cannot single out one. At the intensity they are sending it will not be long till they lose signal strength."

"Then we'll wait."

After ten minutes a clear signal came through. *Star* translated. "They want you to help them."

"With what?"

"They wish you to present their request to leave this area to the Keeper of this space."

"Why can't they present their own request?"

"They have attempted to harm the Keeper's messenger and since then no one else has responded to them. They call this space the Dead Zone."

She thought reference to the dead zone by spacers was a metaphor.

"They told you that?" she asked.

"It is in their accusations to each other that I heard this."

"They're the types that would turn on us as soon as we give them what they want. Let's just get out of here."

Hours later they were still stuck in the dead zone. Cot held her head between two hands as if she had a headache. When the ships reenergized their battery packs they resumed their bombarding *Star Chaser* with their communications, ignoring the problem of too much cancelled them all out.

"Where's Captain Mohar when I need him?"

"Will Captain Mohar lead them to Xibalba?" *Star* asked.

"They want to go to Xibalba? Dead space is Betwixt and Between?" She took a deep breath and expelled it to release the tension in her head. It was silly to believe in a child's tale especially when she had passed through so much of adult reality, but here she was remembering the Tale of Xibalba as written in the Popul Vuh read to her by a friend of her auntie's. He was a Hunter of artifacts; he had told her proudly.

"Betwixt and Between," she repeated softly. "Are they the same? What made me think of that?"

"It is also referred to as the Underworld," *Star* needlessly pointed out.

Star's excitement was registered as intensity of energy that was transmitted in the connection they shared that wasn't just through the comm channel. This was something *Star Chaser* was interested in... death in its various guises. Or perhaps it was the portals to rebirth they led to, since in a sense her consciousness was reborn in a ship's computer.

"The Underworld refuses them admittance," *Star* said. "That's why they are still here. They have nowhere to go."

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"You're the captain," *Star* said.

"Not to them. No way am I helping these people. Back up and let's get out of here."

"I cannot move," *Star* said.

Long hours passed and she remained firm. *Star* tried out various stories on her, reciting myths from hundreds of cultures. As if hearing different versions of the same story would change her mind about freeing ghosts that were sociopaths when in the physical plane and held no remorse for their actions in the spirit plane.

The bot moved so that it was even with her face. Cot turned her head to the bot and stated with firm conviction. "No. N.O. No. Why can't anyone take my no to mean no?"

The bot moved to the viewer, scanned the ships that surrounded their ship and moved back to eye level with her.

"If you're going to pick now to talk to me, don't bother. They aren't asking you to enact some crazy ritual that calls for you to go naked in some underground tunnel and say "Hi Queen Something-or-other..."

"Queen Ereschkigal," *Star* corrected.

"Alright, Hi, Queen Ereschkigal, I need to talk to you about these people who made it their soul purpose, and I use the term soul loosely, an agony for many people to live and die."

"They are moving," *Star* interrupted her conversation.

She craned her neck to see the outside. "What is that?" As she stood a dozen balls of glittery lights hit *Star Chaser's* hull causing an immediate sense of disorientation to engulf her, knocking her over. For a long moment she laid flat on the deck fighting panic at the emptiness she felt.

"Am I Dead?" she asked the overhead hoarsely.

Getting no answer, she struggled to her feet and dragged herself onto her captain's chair. That exertion left her feeling exhausted.

Where's Star?

She looked around feeling light-headed and missing a level of consciousness of her surroundings that had become part of her waking awareness. She gripped the chair's arm feeling like her world was overlapping boundaries with others, as images, sounds, sights and pressure around her fluctuated and changed. The bot appeared in front of her...but it wasn't a bot. It was really a spaceship.

Of course. She knew that.

"This is upsetting my stomach. I can't focus on anything."

Her hand went to her head where a sudden headache had developed. Then she vomited. For the first time the bot made a high pitch squeal as it barely made it out of the way of her last undigested meal.

She closed her eyes, shutting out some of the stimulus that was upsetting her equilibrium while the SE medbot administered to her. Though her stomach and head felt less tight, she still could not feel *Star Chaser*.

"Comm on. This is Lt. Colonel Cot MacDiarmid to whoever is out there."

"Well, it's about time! We've been trying to talk to you since you got here."

"What do you want?" Her voice was hoarse.

"Didn't your second tell you?"

"It's a strange story," she said, wondering how much *Star* had told them.

"Queenie's not talking to us. You know how those female types are. The demon herself, yakking and making no sense. Your second, he said you'd talk to her for us."

Star presented herself to them as male, which considering the type of crimes they had committed made sense, she thought.

"I'm not interested in being your go-between. I'm sure the Queen or her spokesperson already told you what she wanted in order for you to move on."

"She's running something that's holding us here. Some kind of machine. It's the only thing that she has over us. You're stuck here too, you know. She'll talk to you. She's curious about new arrivals. Just like a female, busy about other people's business. Well, are you going to talk to her or not?"

"I'll talk to the Queen. But I won't speak to her about your business."

"You think you're better than us? You wouldn't be here unless your soul was dirty. You don't help us then we'll make your life miserable here. And don't think we can't. We're all you got here."

"If I'm all that dirty, then why do you think she's going to talk to me?"

"Cause she's a female! She acts really nice just to find out how she can torment you."

"Just what do you think I can accomplish for you? You already know she's not going to let you go."

"Surely in that ship of yours you have some explosives. Drop off a few here and there. It'll be enough to knock out the machine that keeps us here."

Cot thought he sounded desperate. "What makes you think a machine is keeping you all here?"

"Are you short on brains? What else is there?"

"Magical power," she said amusingly. She knew she should not have said that the moment it crossed her lips, and once it was uttered, there was no bringing it back....unless she could jump back in time.

"There's nothing here. It's a...." what she recognized as a death rattle came from the speaker, then in a fearful whisper he finished, *"It's a dead zone."*

"How do I get invited to speak to the Queen?"

"Ask." A loud click told her the conversation was ended.

She tried to engage the engines again, but not even a beep that she was doing something wrong came from the console. "Engage transparent bubble," she ordered.

Nothing happened.

She went through the menu and found the command on the panel. Suddenly she was sitting in space and feeling exposed.

"Well, this is something to write to the others about."

Before her was a virtual haven of ships, more than what she had first glimpsed, looking every bit deserted. Staring hard at them she tried to determine what made them look abandoned. The good news was that *Star Chaser* was on the outskirts of the captured ships.

"They look like flies caught in a web."

Leaning back in her chair she closed her eyes and went through the stories *Star Chaser* had been telling her about Queen Ereschkigal.

* * *

Cot adjusted her dress cover. If she was going to visit a queen, she needed to wear something impressive. For a few moments she studied her image. Her beret was just at the right angle with the right number of finger widths above her brow that Dress Code

specified. Her hard earned POATA medallion was resting in the hollow of her throat, with her rows of ribbons aligned perfectly. Her Colonel's pips were affixed where they were supposed to be, saber, white sash and clip, was gleaming freshly cleaned. Her boots were not as shiny as a new pair would shine, but they were comfortable and held a shine as any four-year cadet's efforts could produce.

She frowned. Why was she looking at this like a cadet at her last official parade inspection? She shook her head to refocus. Focusing was something that was becoming more difficult the longer they stayed. She reminded herself that she was to appear before the gatekeeper dressed in her best. Then she was to recite a long-winded request for entrance, answer the question written over the gate, then wait for entrance.

Frowning at herself in the mirror, she went over all her auntie's stories for something about seven gates dealing with the underground or death. Her aunt's teachings were about discipline and hard work. Nothing on death...except...

She had no time to go over any more stories. *Star's* bot friend was within arm's reach of her. "You're to stay here and make sure *Star* is not feeling alone."

She held onto the sides of the passageway as another wave of displacement hit changing another part of the hull's appearance.

What did Queen Ereschkigal have to do with this place and was she going to be able to find a safe space that looked like the entrance to her den?

"Queen Ereschkigal," she repeated to herself again so she would not mispronounce it. The movement was so quick she didn't realize she had moved except for a massive door was before her. She hit the heavy wooden door with her fist but not even a thud resulted. Pulling her sword she used the hilt, getting the sound of pathetic taps. While she waited for something to happen, she examined the door's carvings looking for the question that was supposed to be somewhere on the gate. There was a lot of dying in the panel scenes but no written text. Death was not something she wanted to dwell on, especially at this moment.

Gods, but I hope this is not another reminder for me to think about all those murdering thieves I shot down. Thinking about what they did to others before I removed them from the physical equation, is sickening.

A booming voice from behind the door asked, "Who knocks on Queen Ereschkigal's door without an invitation?"

"It is I," was all that she could think of to say. It was a terrible time to forget what *Star* had told her to say. She turned to see what was buzzing next to her shoulder. It was *Star's* bot. "You're supposed to be keeping an eye on *Star*."

She slid her saber back into its sheath. Not expecting an answer she turned as the door swung open into darkness. Not one nebulae or star shined. It was like a black hole in space.

"Just stay close so you don't get lost," she told the bot. Stepping over the threshold was like walking into a space vacuum. Everything around her was dead... or perhaps, it was more like everything was so unfamiliar that it didn't register with her. It was then that she realized maybe she should have worn her outersuit.

She turned her head to see where the bot was. A gray outline in the dark environment set it apart. Holding her hand in front of her face she couldn't see even the outline.

"You lead and I'll follow," she told the bot.

Her steps were without hesitation and even stranger was that as dark as it was, she moved as if her feet knew the way. The smooth walkway suddenly changed to loose gravel and with it came the feeling of something unpleasant.

"Little Sister, why do you bang for entrance into the underworld?" The voice was so terrible that it grated on her nerves making her flesh itch.

She stumbled, knocking the bot against the wall. Regaining her balance she squinted into the darkness. "Queen Ereschkigal?"

"You have something to ask of me?"

"Yes." She gulped, hoping her upset stomach would settle down.

Queen Ereschkigal stepped out of the darkness and nearly scared her half to death, her rebelling stomach forgotten as her other senses were sending her alarming signals. Her fear rooted her to where she stood.

"Do I scare you little Sister?" She leaned close to her and a sickly-sweet odor engulfed her. She tried not to gag on the sweetness. "Death is feared by many," Queen Ereschkigal said.

"Maybe they still have a lot to do in the land of the living." She was referring to herself and hoping she was not offending the Queen. She never felt this type of fear before where her heart hurt as it beat.

"Death is a gate to further enlightenment." The queen leaned even closer to her and studied her features that were deathly pale. "You are dressed as if you were at your funeral best, so I thought you were here for passage."

"No!"

"No?"

"No."

"Are you here for a loved one?"

"No." She shook her head so vigorously she sent her beret flying. She was more worried about her knees giving out than a lost beret.

Queen Ereschkigal caught her cover. The captain's emblem flashed from the light in the queen's eyes. "Very nice. May I keep this?"

"Yes."

"You are so willing to give something of yours to a stranger."

"It's the least I can do to bother you."

"So, it's not a loved one.... Are you here for some kind of test?"

"No test." Cot gulped audibly.

Queen Ereschkigal looked her up and down. "You don't appear to be as dim witted as your answers. You knocked at the entrance to the gate yet you do not wish to pass through. Is there a reason for this visit, Little Sister?"

"The ships..."

"Ah! You have a cause."

Cot hesitated, as her face reddened. She meant to say ship, her ship.

"A reason for being here. A purpose outside of yourself. A selfless act. A sacrifice," the Queen hinted.

Cot felt alarmed at her thinking she was here for those criminals, yet she couldn't speak.

"You have nothing to say," the queen said, sounding disappointed.

Cot struggled to get her muddled brain organized. She was surprised when it came out sounding clear and not at all as garbled as her thoughts were. "My ship is snagged. I would like us to be able to leave. As for those other ships, there is nothing I can do for them." Did she sound regretful?

Queen Ereschkigal leaned away from her, giving her space but not fresh air. "They are not your worry. As for you, do you intend to follow the same road only in the other direction?"

"I don't understand why I'm here." She looked up at the dark apparition and this time dared to look in the eyeless sockets.

"You can only pass through the gates for yourself."

"To see you?"

A rough laugh came from the Queen. "To know the sacred is to experience it."

It seemed to be a mocking answer.

"Are the gates to keep out the profane?" she asked.

"What is Sacred cannot be profaned. The vibration of the sacred is too different for the profane to know it."

"What are the gates then?"

"Between the gates is where change takes place."

"Why seven gates?"

"Each individual brings the number of gates they wish to pass and what each gate shall represent for their soul growth."

"Those souls in the ship are waiting to go through the gates?"

"Whatever is needed for them to move on, they must do themselves."

"So, I don't have any gates to go through?"

"What you seek, you will find."

Some things get lost in translating from languages or general meanings and in this case, it was her. This had to be another dream. She needed to move on. Then she remembered those that she killed.

"Do you know..." she hesitated, not knowing how to ask.

"Yes."

"Do I have to make amends for their deaths?" she asked in a fearful voice.

The Queen laughed heartily. "Only if you think you should. Are you going to burden yourself with their misdeeds too?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you concerned with their deaths?"

"I wasn't until I ran into Captain Mohar."

"Perhaps he is looking for someone to take his place."

Her eyes widened. "Not me."

"Every realm, dimension, reality, whatever you call it, has a set of rules. Learn them before you step into them."

"How? Is there some sort of book to read?"

The Queen smiled. "I'll loan you my copy. Do remember to return it to me when you've finished with it." She pointed to the medallion that Cot had forgotten about. "You shall travel through all sorts of unfamiliar places due to the pull from the medallion. You must learn to control it, or you will be jumping from one adventure to another with not enough time to absorb any of the opportunities you're given, and attracting energy from these different dimensions that don't belong where you are. You are at the point where you must know that if you don't like the direction you're going, you don't go in the opposite direction, because you're operating under the same set of ideals and principles. You must step off into the unknown. Normally I don't give advice. It's lost on those that can't hear...however, I don't believe you're that type."

"My aunt called it the state of being," Cot said.

"It is living in the moment, breathing in and out with love, not avoiding, controlling or manipulating what comes before you."

"But don't I control what I experience?"

Suddenly she was back in her quarters, sitting in front of her mirror. Her aunt was looking at her.

"You can. But before you learn to control, learn to yield, to trust in the process, love yourself and those that come to you with gifts, the unwanted as much as the sought after."

Cot touched her head where her cover should have been. She figured out what the hat and first gate were about.

"So, the first gate is leaving preconceived thoughts and beliefs behind. My cap represented keeping my thoughts in order. My hair represents my thoughts." Cot grinned at how clever she was. "That wasn't so hard."

Her reflection in the mirror showed her wearing a deep frown as she knew there was more to it than that. Her cap also represented that she was the captain of her ship. She gave up the symbol of her leadership. The insight was brief and then it was gone. It had something to do with *Star*.

And she thought her life got interesting since moving into the SID-piloting program. It has been interesting since meeting her aunt as a child.

Chapter 20

Promises Kept

Cot woke and stretched languorously, taking pleasure in not having anything scheduled to be up early for. Mentally, she went over the last few days. They had made three stops at various gizmo suppliers and *Star* was happily updating their purchases. Other supplies, including an interesting figurehead *Star* asked her to pick up, had been completed. She was amused how *Star* had her bots immediately affix the figurehead to her bow, as if she were an ancient ship of the sea. It wasn't made of the same metal as *Star's* outer hull so Cot wasn't sure how long the figurehead would last in the elements of space. *Star* had sent a report of her new figurehead to the other SID-ships. She was sure she would be getting comments from the other SID-pilots soon.

Before she retired her reports to HQ and correspondence to her SID-mates was caught up on.

Staring at the overhead, stars twinkled in the pseudo nebula. The view changed subtly, giving way to gaseous clouds with sparkling galaxies, suns and black holes.

"Greetings, *Star Chaser*."

"Greetings, Cot."

"What's our status to the nearest gate?"

"Two hours and 15 minutes from Flaming Chronos Gate. There is nothing that needs immediate attention," *Star* said. "However, you will need to prospect a meteorite for cell juice soon."

"I noticed on yesterday's scan the cells were low. Isn't that rather sudden?"

"The quality depreciates at a higher rate as its level lowers. I am investigating why since this is not mentioned in the shipyard specs, nor have I noticed it on our previous travels."

"There are differences in our travel now and previous. We're taking travel corridors more than we ever have, we're traveling at higher gs, and we're in constant motion. All three are probably contributing to that drain, unless you missed a leak."

"I have no leaks in my cell chambers. I am investigating those three factors. I will send my observations to our SID-mates and see if they are experiencing the same drain."

"Maybe we'll come across a supplier," Cot said.

"Their quality is not guaranteed. It must be unprocessed and fresh," *Star* said. There was a pause. "Our extractor is more than adequate."

"One of the bots can't operate it?" Cot asked.

"Creating an automated extractor is not a priority," *Star* said.

The extractor was seldom used but not so trivial that it didn't get *Star's* attention to upgrade as much as possible for that model. *Star* upgraded everything under her control. However, with the extractor, if it were to become automated *Star Chaser* would have to design a new model. That would take her focus away from her primary duties and would mean they would be stopping at numerous meteorites to test out her creations, slowing their journey and not something Cot thought was appropriate for a quasi-military star fighter to be involved with...unless it moved up the priority list.

"Carry on, then. If you find a meteorite that meets my criteria of nothing dangerous, living or.... "

"You want it to be safe with minimum effort," *Star* said.

"Thank you, *Star*. Create a message to all SID-mates." Quickly she sent a message to her squad, stating the problem and asking if they were having the same issue. Then she asked for a solution to the problem. "Send," she finished.

This should stimulate some problem solving, Cot thought. Three of the sentients were scientists. "Let me know what our SID-mates say about the cell juice. If everyone is having the same problem, I'll expect everyone sending in an evaluation and suggestions of how to remedy it."

"It could be a potential problem," *Star* agreed.

Cot dressed in ritual clothing and went to her sacred space to begin her daily salutations. A flat stone was lying at the base of her altar that she didn't notice when she was standing. Its hue was unknown in her color spectrum, thus giving off an odd appearance. Without fear, she placed her left palm on top of it.

Queen Ereschkigal's Book of Travel.

Chapter One – Preparation and Rules to Follow for Passing Each Gate.

Work with whatever you encounter, engaged fully in the moment, it began.

Chapter 21

Mortliege

"What's this?" Cot tapped the screen where there was an indication of an explosion and a noticeable gap between information.

"I am still analyzing it," *Star* said.

"When did it occur?" The information *Star* provided was adequate for her, but normally such happenings were meticulously recorded to share with the other SID-ships and pilots, whether they would find it as fascinating as *Star* or not.

"Four hours ago."

"Was it a planet going nova?" She hadn't seen any warnings broadcasted that there was a white dwarf soon to go nova in this part of space. She turned around at the scratching sound. "Did you lock our guest in the storage closet? Is there something I need to know about you and the bot?"

"No."

"Have you two decided on a name yet?" she asked.

"No."

The relationship between *Star* and her bot friend was getting more curious as their journey progressed, but she didn't see any reason to insert herself into the connection yet. They needed to find their own way. As she had learned in dealing with various species, not all relationships followed the same stages or could be measured by the amount of trust you placed in another. It was common sense that if you knew someone was not good

with secrets you wouldn't tell them something you wanted to keep a secret; however, it didn't mean a friendship was impossible.

"There will be no abusing guests, *Star*."

"I will follow protocol," *Star* agreed.

"What pro..." She jumped back in astonishment as *Star's* friend zipped out of the closet she was opening. It buzzed two circles around her then hovered close to her shoulder. When nothing else happened, Cot returned to her seat, determined not to laugh aloud. Apparently, *Star* still had the upper hand in the relationship.

She called up the star charts and the bot settled close to her.

"This gate will take us past a section of space that has heavy commerce activity. Rizon Space." She had to admit her tone sounded wistful. She could feel *Star's* interest perk. "They have more service space stations and shop stations along that travel corridor than planets. There are food vendors worth their stall placement on all the stations that can accurately gage eating tastes and keep you there tasting new foods for months. Clothing, toys, ship repair supplies, entertainment, and anything you want to buy is along that travel corridor, but you have to watch yourself. If you stand out like a mark, you'll have every gamer hitting you up for something."

"Do you want to stop there and shop?" *Star* asked.

There were stories and secrets for *Star* to find at Rizon's Space Corridor and plenty of potential trouble to get into should *Star's* delving into people's secrets without asking to be found out. It was bad enough that at every stop at an arms dealer, *Star Chaser* was able to get into their private files and pick them apart for information. Even if they were legitimate dealers, their suppliers weren't. As with most information *Star* gathered, she reviewed it and sent it to HQ. Rizon was not a place for *Star* on this journey. She also had enough shopping.

"No. I was just reminiscing. I was doing escort service for an ambassador's family. They loved to shop there."

"Are you bored, Cot?"

"I'm not bored, *Star*," she said firmly to discourage *Star* from devising something to excite her. *Star* thought it was her purpose to keep her mentally and physically active.

"We are within distance of the gate to send a gizmo forward to scan for any ships within the area," *Star* said.

"SOP, *Star*."

"Standard Operating Procedures, Cot. Releasing six monitors. Transmitting test signals. Tests returned good. Monitors are away."

There was a ten-minute wait before the steady blips on her screen showed their passage was clear of any foreign objects. When it was within the right distance from the entrance to the travel tunnel *Star* sent the pass code and the gate opened for their entrance. *Star* drifted in, collecting some of the monitors as she entered. Once inside the passage *Star* cut power to drift, leaving little disturbance of their passage for someone to trail. Unless there was a need to hurry, the currents in the corridor could carry them along at sufficient gs. The forward monitor was sending bio-information on the corridor, which *Star* liked to digest and compare to other places she had information on.

While they sailed through the corridor, she reviewed reports *Star* prepared for her. *Star's* progress recovering the information from their visit to the *Murdelie* was not completed. *Star* couldn't explain why the information kept being deleted at different points of the recovery. She suspected that their visiting bot had something to do with it, which would explain *Star's* treatment of the bot. Her short report to HQ would have to suffice. It lacked detail and so far, she hadn't received a request for further information, to her relief.

Her eyes lifted to a movement on her screen. The forward monitor sent images back of weapons fire from outside the corridor. It must be another entrance that was open.

"Cannon blasts from a midsized ship from outside the travel corridor," *Star* said. "Information is now coming in."

"Send two predators for back up. Bring up speed. Prepare defenses...remember don't release any weapons fire in the corridor."

"Two armed predators released," *Star* said. "The forward monitor is not equipped to defend itself from cannon fire. It is taking evasive maneuvers and continuing information gathering."

From the images the monitor sent, a ten-person yacht was facing-off five larger ships that crewed fifty or more. Now on first sight this would seem as though the civilian yacht was outgunned and needed to be rescued, but if that were so, three of the larger ships would not be listing as if they had lost helm power. Two mobile ships were maneuvering to get a clean shot past their drifting comrades.

"How long until the predators are in position?"

"Three minutes."

"How long until this ship is at the gate?"

"Ten minutes."

"Release four more predators beyond the gate to seek and disable the pirate ships."

If *Star Chaser* increased speed by too much it would cause energy in the corridor to change and they would probably miss the exit by inches which would put them somewhere else in the galaxy.

"Five ships without identifiers and the civilian yacht is called the *Glass Eye*," *Star* reported.

The civilian yacht that had fire power most private yachts wished they possessed continued to make good shots at her attackers' defense grids and defending her hull against the sporadic shots from the only two mobile ships that had limited cannon fire. *Glass Eye* made a direct hit to one of the two attack ships, leaving one active that slid behind one of its defenseless comrades. A small explosion came from the yacht's port side. It ran into a mine.

"Pirates in the five ships are hailing the *Glass Eye* and demanding the mortliege to heave to for boarding and seizure. It is their repeated message."

"A mortliege and pirates?" She never met a mortliege and hoped one would not have reason to come looking for her. "Do you have information on the yacht yet? How many are there on board?"

"One biological on board the *Glass Eye*. I am in the process of accessing the ship's records," *Star* replied.

"Just copy them. Translate later," she said. "We need to prevent detection of the gate from the pirates, if they don't already know of its existence."

A shot at the yacht sent it spinning toward the gate so even if the pilot tried not to reveal its presence, it was going to happen when it suddenly disappeared.

"When the predators are in position, blind the five unnamed ships, then tow that yacht in. Leave no trace of this place in their ship's memory or the crews...and program their ships to the nearest military outpost."

"Releasing two Clev R16s to diffuse the area of ships trace in this area. I will run a biological test on the species to see if there is a wavelength to disrupt memory."

Star Chaser's predator defenders sent coordinated shots to disable the remaining pirate ship. *Star Chaser* reprogrammed the five ships with new headings to the nearest military outpost while she towed the yacht through the gate. The yacht's navigation system was down so it would be necessary for them to make hatch to hatch contact with the yacht.

"Pilot in the *Glass Eye*, don't shoot your rescuer, please. We're towing you through the gate. Ready yourself for a hatch-to-hatch connect."

There was no response that her message was received.

Cot hurried to welcome the pilot.

"There is a toxic leak in the yacht," *Star* reported.

Cot donned a face mask and waited while *Star* encased the hatch in a bubble with bots inside ready to assist the captain of the yacht. As soon as the hatch cover was open, a tattered body fell through with alarms sounding that the environment was unhealthy.

The SE bots promptly closed the hatch once the captain was aboard. *Star* cleared the air. A medical bot immediately became active and attended to the battered figure. From her appearance, she spent some time in the company of unfriendly people and escaped without shoes and much clothing.

"I will send out a team to inspect *Glass Eye*. Shall I begin immediately with repairs?"

Should the ship be repaired? Towing it around until they find a suitable place to drop it off may leave them vulnerable to attacks which they've seen a lot of lately. Cot studied the unconscious woman, thinking of how disruptive her presence would be until she found a place to drop her off. Would *Star Chaser* forget that she was classified and

chat with the stranger as if it were with a friend? Their rescued passenger certainly had a story to tell.

"Tow us to a safe place and inspect the damage."

After the medbot made certain the woman was stable enough to move, she was lifted and moved to the guest quarters. *Star's* friend hovered over the injured pilot. Cot felt there was some concern on its part for the wounded woman.

"Since you're no help, wait out in the corridor," Cot said to the bot. She certainly wouldn't want to wake up after a life and death skirmish not knowing what her situation was and find what may be a spybot staring at her. She had *Star Chaser* for that.

The woman's clothing was removed carefully, reopening cuts where the clothing had become part of the clot. Despite all the damage, body tattoos covered most of her skin. She heard a mortliege's tattoos were to honor the patron the mortliege took at fifth level. That told her she wasn't a neophyte so whatever trouble they left behind they may still be looking for their guest.

Once their passenger was settled for medical sleep, Cot went to change into her AVEC suit to make a visual inspection of her own of the *Glass Eye*. *Star* estimated four days to finish repairs on the exterior hull with the interior a big question mark.

For a few moments she stood surveying the bridge. Bare bones of the hull surrounded her with tubes and connectors hanging.

"It looks like this ship was stolen from a salvage yard. How was it able to defend itself and how was the pilot able to manage so much as injured as she was? If she's an example of all mortlieges we're certainly lucky we haven't had to face any."

"I will research the profession's requirements are," *Star* said. "How do you wish me to proceed with the repair?"

"Assess the damage and then I'll make a decision. We're not a shipyard."

"I will continue my assessment."

Cot returned to her ship and took a moment to see how their injured passenger was. *Star's* guest bot was hovering outside of the opened hatch.

"Let our guest wake up on her own," Cot said to both *Star* and the bot.

"Would you like her hatch cover locked?" *Star* asked.

"No. Until she wakes up, she's no danger...unless you believe otherwise."

As Cot studied her, she wondered what was familiar with her. She was sure she had never met her before.

In the cargo bay Cot lit her incense sticks and set up her circle. She called her guardians. Before her the altar stone disappeared, and a blank background appeared. Cot drew runes in the air designed for intuiting a soul's intentions. A slice of tattered clothing with her passenger's blood on it was lying before her and that she used to get more than one level of reading on the woman. Waiting patiently, the images from the wounded passenger's life began to flash before her. Finally, Cot made a gesture of thanks to those that had assisted her and reopened her circle of protection.

"How is our new guest, *Star*?"

"Healing. Sleeping."

"She's a Star Force agent." Cot frowned, realizing how complicated this rescue had become. "Let me know when she does wake. What's the progress of your assessment on the repairs of *Glass Eye*?"

"I can fix what is broken but not replace what was removed. With the exception of the chair and console, my supplies do not cover redecorating or replacement of major utilities."

"Fix only what will get *Glass Eye* to a safe port or if that's not possible we'll tow the ship to the nearest ship repair and be done with it all. Were you able to get anything from the yacht's records?"

"I copied everything before it was wiped clean. If I had not done so, everything would be gone. There is no backup."

Where had the pilot been that she needed to wipe the ship clean so there was nothing to recover? "Any chance of a backup being hidden?"

"The program was very efficient in wiping all evidence of previous programming," *Star Chaser* said.

Cot's eyes narrowed as it occurred to her that maybe this mortliege had plans to commandeer *Star Chaser*. SF agent or not, that wasn't going to happen.

"Maybe she knew you copied over the files," Cot said.

"I copied encrypted information. I have not decoded the information yet."

"If you don't have it by the time she wakes, we'll ask her for it," Cot said.

It had to be a good code if *Star* was unable to translate it, but then, *Star* was stumped with not being able to recover the missing *Murdelie* files. Now that they were out in space *Star Chaser* knew, she was encountering new challenges that she couldn't solve as quickly as she once had. Cot believed it was good experience. She would discuss it with her SID-mates, to see if they were encountering similar challenges, though she didn't think the other SID-ships were as over-confident in their knowledge as *Star Chaser* was. *Star Chaser* was the only pre-adult consciousness used in the sentient program.

"How did she maneuver the ship without a console?" Cot wondered aloud.

"ReaT helmet," *Star* answered. "There were remnants of it in the compactor and the compactor's memory was erased with everything else so there isn't anything to salvage."

"If she wasn't a SF agent, I would suspect she was lying in wait for us with a staged battle, knowing we would rescue her and her ship."

"How would she know we would be there?" *Star* asked.

"HQ can track us through the kiosks I send my reports, and I suspect they have something on you that lets them know your position."

"I have found nothing that can be tracking us," *Star* said.

On the second day when she was warming up for a workout *Star Chaser* made an announcement. "The mortliege has awakened. Her name is Diana Rue."

"Is she on her feet yet?"

"No. She is still gathering strength. She asked me who I am, what year, and sector we are in. She would not give me the code to restore her ship's programming."

"Maybe she will when she gets to know you better," Cot said amused. "When I'm finished with my workout I'll have a visit with her. That should give her enough time to refresh herself and test her legs." And by then, *Star Chaser* would have plenty of background information on her, she thought.

"Why would she not answer my questions? We have rescued her," *Star* asked.

"Maybe because she thinks you're interrogating her. What would you have done with Ara if she didn't answer you?"

"I had gathered information on Ara to know what information to exchange with her."

"You're classified. Communicating with Ara would have been revealing classified information. Offer our new guest some refreshment."

"Ara and Diana both have a high security clearance."

"Ara isn't Star Force. Just how high is Diana?"

Star must have begun her search the moment she learned Diana's name. There is no stopping a curious *Star Chaser*, she thought humorously.

"Her records are classified."

"Why does someone so important have no backup?"

"We have no backup," *Star* said.

"We have CBIS, your defenses and our SID-mates, *Star*. I thought I read in the manual that when an agent is on an assignment, there has to be backup if not within minutes, then at the most a day."

"Maybe she is all that's left of her team," *Star* said.

"I'll ask her," Cot said. "Don't tell her we know she's SF."

"I have already asked her if she is on a mission. She returns my questions with questions and does not answer me," *Star* said.

"Did you speak of our mission?"

"No. Though her security clearance is above yours, protocol only allows me to pass on that information after I have cleared it with you."

"You've gotten better at keeping yourself a secret, *Star*. You can acknowledge information she knows already."

Star Chaser arranged for her self-defense teacher today to be short and fat, who liked to throw his weight around. For one hour she was kept busy defending herself with non-lethal but weakening counter punches, tempted at times to deliver a lethal blow to stop the relentless attack that she was sure was leaving bruises on her torso and appendages. She was flat on her back, breathless when suddenly the holograph folded in on itself and stopped.

Solitary clapping had her looking up startled.

"Good workout, Captain."

Both women studied each other than Diana added, "Thank you for the rescue."

Diana Rue looked fully recovered from her injuries; in fact, she looked very healthy and fit. She was wearing a civilian version of a flight suit and on her feet were spacer work boots, no doubt with pockets for weapon storage. That wouldn't be something Purser *Star Chaser* would add to a closet without being asked.

"I'm glad to have been able to assist, Diana Rue. That was good shooting for a civilian yacht."

"It was a good program that came with the weapons, captain."

"Call me Cot."

"Diana is fine for me and thank you for the clothing."

"You're welcome. There wasn't any luggage on the *Glass Eye*."

"It was removed along with everything else." Diana looked at *Star's* bot that moved past her and settled near Cot's shoulder. "So, this is a Caronda Fighter and *Star Chaser* is a sentient ship, aye?" Diana continued."

"Yes."

"This is a friendly ship for a military investment. For all the secretive business about these ships why am I conscious?" Diana asked.

"Are you hungry?"

"Famished." Diana gave her an odd look.

"I'm surprised *Star* didn't offer you refreshment."

"I was offered. I'm not prepared to be questioned relentlessly than offered a beverage without having some suspicion about my host's intentions."

"*Star Chaser* is curious. When she has the advantage of gathering information she takes it. We'll share a meal and talk...and see if you want your ship repaired."

"There's something left to repair?"

"Do you have any suggestions on where to take her for repair?" Cot asked.

"None. How long was I out?"

"Two days. Was the attack personal?"

"That last bunch wasn't into conversation, so I don't know."

"How long were you being pursued by them?"

"Not long. You should teach *Star Chaser* to ask questions along this line. I may have answered them not having all my wits about me."

"We have different agendas, though not too much different. Here's the galley. Order something. I'll have a moment to clean up and will join you. *Star* will keep you company. *Star*, whatever question she asks, you get one from her. Keep in mind, you're classified."

Star's bot watched Diana from the corridor.

When she returned Diana had a glass of something half full in front of her and was listening to music with her eyes closed. The bot was sitting out of Diana's reach on a shelf. Though she was sure she was quiet, Diana's eyes opened the moment she was at the hatch.

"Did the drink take care of your hunger?" she asked.

"It's a recommendation by your medbot before I eat something solid."

"Do you have a palate preference, Diana?"

Diana gave a preference, and a SE prepared two plates. Conversation during their meal was limited to compliments on the meal and music. When they finished their meal, the SE removed their dishes.

"So, you were asking why I didn't move you to a sleep pod to be delivered surreptitiously to a medical station."

"Yes."

"You're mortliege, you know of a travel gate that's seldom used, you practice QuaDom and you're Star Force." She gave the hand gesture that she had practiced with *Star* on how to be recognized by another SF agent.

Diana gave the return sign.

"How did you find that information out? That information is classified."

"*Star Chaser* is very good at finding secrets out from storage devices and computers. What time or place did you think you were in?" she asked. She could feel Diana's displeasure with that information, though her body language didn't change. Cot

didn't blame her, but trust issues needed to be taken care of now, since Diana was aboard *Star Chaser*.

"Sometimes racing across space in a ship that is out of whack can put the passenger just about anywhere. My brother Ati's not going to be happy with me when I return it as stripped as it is."

"Let's go and sit on the bridge, as a peace offering for being so invasive in your business. Not many are invited to visit *Star's* bridge."

Diana stood quickly. "Lead the way, captain."

Their stroll up the corridor was *Star's* treat to Diana. The hologram was a geyser park with the end of the path walking under a waterfall.

"Either you don't get out much, or you like personalizing your tourist visits," Diana said. Diana halted before stepping onto the bridge.

Star had the hull transparent with black space all around them brightened with gaseous purple clouds and sprinkling of dust particles and planets of various sizes. *Star* changed the interior back to the bridge, reading Diana's hesitation at stepping off into space as emotionally difficult. Even after changing it to the bridge it took Diana a few moments to adjust.

"You do know how to wow your guests." Diana sat in the chair Cot gestured was hers. It formed to her without her need to shift around. "I know this isn't military furniture. Not even *Glass Eye* had this much comfort. And the service bots and medbot...are they SFs latest?"

"I like being comfortable given the chance. What time are you from?" Cot asked.

"The same as yours," Diana said.

The two consoles unfurled before them, coming active when flat.

"Just how much damage to *Glass Eye* was done? I wasn't too conscious of her condition."

"*Star*, show us status on *Glass Eye*, please," Cot said.

Both screens for each chair began to fill with information. Cot watched Diana as she studied the report. She looked like she understood it.

"This is showing it has a crack in the engine plant and needs a new one." Diana sounded annoyed. "I was lucky the last bunch that captured me was greedy and wanted the software and armaments intact."

"You're right, so just how did you manage to fight off those pirates with you as injured as you were and with a stripped ship?"

"My few secrets from you I'll keep." Diana smiled at her then turned her attention to the scan of *Glass Eye's* interior. "I see you found me a pilot's chair. Thank the gods. Piloting without something soft to sit on or lay on was rough," Diana said.

"What does your brother do that needs all that armament?"

"He's a gambler. The people he gambles with can get nasty about losing or collecting what they feel are their wins."

"*Star* found a GRF seal on your hull. She pulled the repair logs on *Glass Eye* from Geminess Repair Faculties, where a month ago she was given a clean bill of health. Have you been jumping through timelines?"

"I might have."

"All that we can do is give you enough thrust power to a dock. We'll throw in an AVEC suit since life support isn't possible to restore. *Star* will need the code so she can reload the system software."

"She can download the information back where she found it. I'll handle the rest," Diana said. "You can leave me and my ship near a ship repair yard, and we'll call for a tow."

Cot felt a stir in her connection with *Star*. She glanced at the monitor. "*Star*, give me a reading!"

Diana looked at her terminal. "Something's coming through hyperspace. It's a big disturbance maybe the beginnings of..." Diana started.

"A squad. Twelve ships I count and maybe more behind them. *Star*, we're leaving."

"SEs are back on board. I have released *Glass Eye*. We are underway," *Star* reported.

"What are you going to do with *Glass Eye*?" Diana asked.

"Nothing. She's a dead gutted ship."

"Where are we going?"

"Away from here. If you want her back, we'll return when they've cleared out. *Star* has left a monitor, so we'll know if they find the *Glass Eye* what they'll do with it. They could be just a normal patrol looking for pirate activity."

"If this is a normal patrol, I hope they don't have some techie that loves to collect abandoned yachts and fix them up during her or his spare time," Diana said. "I would like to at least drop it off at a repair facility."

"Unless it's the captain's passion, I doubt room will be made for a hobby of that proportion. The captains I knew liked neat and tidy bays without something that complicated taking up space."

It was in a matter of moments and then there was only space around them with nothing threatening.

"So how did you end up being surrounded by pirates?" Cot asked.

"It's a complicated story," Diana said.

"Just the kind *Star Chaser* is interested in. You can leave off the secret stuff."

"I was returning from an assignment when I realized *Glass Eye's* navigation kept recalibrating. A ship appeared before me without the usual space displacement registering. Morgan, an old acquaintance, greeted me with all the usual pleasantries people who haven't seen each other for a while do. He came over to the *Glass Eye* with wine he procured from some unmemorable planet and proceeded to drink himself into the usual stupor while regaling me with his stories. When he started to repeat stories, I suggested he return to his ship and sleep it off, and when he's feeling better he could tell me where we were. He was quite amicable about it and toddled off to his ship.

"I woke up to alarms on *Glass Eye*, his ship was nowhere on my scans, and I'm being attacked by ships I wasn't able to identify. *Glass Eye* will automatically go into attack mode if threatened. I was sadly outnumbered and was going to go down in fiery glory when Morgan shows up again, draws the attackers to him, and he disappears with the ships. I was almost out of that part of space, when a pack of pirates netted me. While I was aboard the pirate chief's ship, her crew boarded *Glass Eye* and proceeded to gut her. Morgan again drops in and gets me out of the pirates' clutches. I fled on a ship that even my brother's interior decorator wouldn't recognize. As soon as he leaves, I find myself

near a gate I happen to have a code to but...there's a new group of pirates whose ships I don't recognize and they have their guns blazing my way, blocking my escape through the gate."

"Is Morgan mortliege or a...."

"Whatever strikes his interest is what he's about. He's an adventurer crossing paths with whatever entity that travels in space. However, I've never known him to dump trouble in someone's lap unless he meant to," she said.

"Don't you think it's rather suspect that the pirates gutted just about everything but the self-defense items from your ship?" Cot asked.

"Not for a pirate. They won't waste something that they can turn around and use. They'll strip her battery but it's useless without the firing software and they'll try and recover that before destroying her or keep her shell and battery and redecorate to their liking. Without communication I didn't know who you were, so I ran the destruct program. Normally, there's no recovery from that wipe. I'm impressed that *Star Chaser* copied the entire system."

"I only copied what I could not duplicate from a shipyard's detect and repair program," *Star* said.

"So, whatever special software you have running, as soon as the ship is operational, you can see if your special equipment that's still attached can be restarted with *Star's* assistance."

Diana shook her head in disbelief. "Are all the SID-CFs like *Star Chaser*?"

"No," two voices said. "Sentient means they have their own characteristics and attitude. That's what makes them SIDs."

Diana looked thoughtful. "I was briefed on the project with a dozen others. I don't think any of them realize how fluid and advanced *this* project is."

"I think more than a dozen do realize it and that's why we keep running into squads of fighters looking to shoot us down," Cot said.

"I'm sure it was expected by HQ. After all, the rest of the galaxy military commands have all said no to the grand sentient programs," Diana said.

"Approaching a meteorite that has SRL44," *Star* reported.

"*Star* needs a chemical compound to replenish a cell. It's usually found on a meteorite and not always on the surface."

"Just what do you plan on doing?" Diana asked.

"Would you like to come along, and see?" Cot asked.

"Is it something that will get me shot at?" Diana asked.

"No. Just a necessary chore *Star Chaser* has trained me for."

Diana looked at her puzzled but followed her back through the corridor that was now looking like a walk through a cavern.

"*Star* has an AVEC suit for you that has been upgraded from the manufacture's specs, like all her equipment. Would you like to see what being taken care of by *Star* is like?"

"Just what can you do with an AVEC suit?" Diana asked.

"It's nothing like military armor. It's for working in space so everything about them is mobile, light, and strong." Cot stopped in front of the storage locker.

"Mobile and light sounds good." Diana watched the crane descend with a suit, then the arms of the automatic dresser moved to assist her with dressing.

While Diana tested out her suit, Cot dressed and waited while her suit's seals were tested. She noticed Diana had not tested her suit. She gestured to Diana to move toward her so she could check hers out. Cot never let another person dress for space without someone or something testing that everything was sealed and air pacs were clean and full.

"Thanks for the check. I'm so used to relying on myself, I forget the number one safety rule," Diana said. "You're right about these suits. It's so light and mobile I may forget what I'm wearing. I know these aren't standard SF equipment or they would be on the thief's markets."

"I only know of 12 pilots that have these suits." She checked the equipment she would be using, to make sure the extractor was charged then checked the needle before sliding it back in its holster. It was ready for work.

"What is this?"

"A juice extractor. If you want to know the exact chemical compound it extracts, you can ask *Star*."

"Is it something I need to know to survive?"

"I hope not. No."

"Then I'll just take your word."

Chapter 22

Nightmares

"Are you sure this place is deserted?" Diana asked, looking around as if she expected company.

Cot felt the same. There was something about this meteor that made her anxious. *"I'm not. We're only protected from what we know about which leaves us with a lot of unknown dangers that if we're lucky we will feel by the prickling of our skin."*

"Ain't that the truth," Diana muttered.

"I've heard a lot of spacer stories of ghosts on space rocks," Cot said.

"What place doesn't have a handful of stories?" Diana said.

Cot planted the extractor into the hard surface and said a few prayers, hoping it would appease whatever spirit lived on the meteor they were mining. The light blinked, it was not a good extraction.

"It's not working. We're going to have to find a tunnel to take us closer to the core." Cot retracted the needle and slung the extractor onto her shoulder holster.

"I'm reading some blank spots to the left. Could be tunnels. I hope Star Chaser knows how to leave false trails, just in case we were followed," Diana said.

"I hope she stays alert and focused on leaving false trails," Cot said. *"Her curiosity can become her primary interest if not reminded that there are responsibilities that come first."*

"It must be difficult to go from a military mind set to this...less structured way of handling assignments," Diana said.

"Even military skirmishes have fluid and unpredictable moments. Working with Star is a fluid and unpredictable assignment. She's actually a relief after all the military posturing that went with missions."

"Here's a cave entrance. Shall we go in?"

Cot felt the hairs on her head rise. *"No."*

Cot back peddled as quickly as she could in the AVEC suit, but even as mobile as it was, moving in weightless space in a suit that was working to keep at least one of its boots firmly planted on the surface, made quick escapes nearly impossible, unless the boots were released and the jet pacs ignited. Cot turned and fled back to the shuttle and up the ramp. The hatch wouldn't open. Cot thumped back down the ramp and to a panel on the outside of the hull to force the hatch to the shuttle to open. It was drained of energy.

Breathing heavily Cot pressed herself against the shuttle's hull trying to control the fear that was driving her to panic. Her panic was using up her air.

"I....had... I had a dream of a place like this. I was covered in corney beetles," Diana said in her helmet speaker. *"I was being consumed by them."*

"I dreamt of a place like this too. I was covered in worms," Cot said. *"They were sucking the life out of me."*

"That's some relief that we've both dreamt of this place. Dreams like that have meaning," Diana said.

Cot shuddered, and glancing at Diana nearly screamed in terror. Diana's mouth was opened in a silent scream. Turning away from an unnamed terror Cot stumbled over the uneven surface. Her boot caught the tip of an outcropping, and she fell with enough force to take her breath away. Gasping for air she forced herself to her hands and knees and scrambled from what was after her. At some point she made it to her feet and stumbled into a tunnel. There were many branches in the tunnel but the one she chose had the rune hagalah marked on it. Abruptly she came to a dead-end. Turning around there was only darkness and a sound that terrified her in her dreams. All sense left her as her emotions took over. Never in her combat experience had she felt this frightened. The sound was from hundreds of worms heading her way. When the first touched her, she had a flash of recognition. Enas. Cot felt herself broken up into thousands of tiny bits of light, life cells connected by one purpose - survival

Cot stood before the gate of Queen Ereschkigal. She didn't have to look down to know she was in her best dress uniform, minus her cover. Using the hilt of her sword, she tapped two times on the heavily carved door. While waiting for it to open, her eyes

glanced at the inscribed words above it. "Separate not yourself from the mystery of being."

"Attention and presence," Cot murmured to herself.

"And that is the key to opening this door," Queen Ereschkigal said.

Cot blinked at the sudden change of scenery. Before her appeared the cloaked figure of the Queen. No horrible stench and no overwhelming energy surrounded her this time, but that's not to say there wasn't something felt from her presence.

"Little sister, you are once more before me," Queen Ereschkigal said in a quiet voice.

"Yes."

"What lesson is between this gate and the next?" Queen Ereschkigal asked.

"To not ignore or dismiss what I experience as I experience it."

"To be present in the moment," Queen Ereschkigal agreed. She waved her forward.

Cot found herself back in the cave with every inch of her body covered with crawling worms looking for a safe and nourishing place to begin their next cycle. It seemed a long time passed before Cot let her barriers down, feeling each tiny being's fear of the new life they were about to begin. Mentally, Cot chanted the same chant she did to the chrysalis on the *Murdelie*. The vibration was comforting, magnified by hundreds of tiny beings and their combined power was staggering.

The feeling of elation, connection, and anticipation thrummed throughout her body from each cocoon as it prepared for its new life. It was an experience of life becoming, which filled every cell in Cot's body, energizing her more than what she thought she could feel, bursting and sending out tiny atoms. Cot lost comprehension of what it all meant, but she knew she was still a part of the physical.

Cot could hear her breathing and then became aware she was lying on her back.

"Adjust vision," she whispered. A porous ceiling was above her. She was in a tunnel on a meteorite rock. Using the wall for support she rose to her feet.

"Time left in air," she asked in a stronger voice.

Ten minutes.

She must have been unconscious for a long time, or she had a leak in her life pac. She checked her bio readings. They appeared to be normal, but the medipac was low. That explained why she wasn't feeling any physical side effects of being unconscious for so long.

Looking around her, she located the extraction tool nearby. Picking it up, Cot checked the battery power. It was fully charged. She thumbed the switch and when ready, scanned the sides of the tunnel then the floor, moving slowly to find the right spot. The scan picked up a hot spot and Cot began the extraction. It took two minutes to fill six tubes, though she only needed one. A cell didn't need much juice, though it was a major component in the ship's systems.

Finished she slung the extractor over her shoulder and looked for a way to the surface. The runes carved in the tunnel walls would show her the way out. A small view of stars in a nebula appeared before her and the scene expanded as she neared the exit.

"Time in air?"

Five minutes.

The shuttle had not moved. No sign of Diana. She opened the shuttle's panel and inserted a tube of the juice. It only needed seconds for the fumes to accelerate the other chemicals in the cell. The panel lit up and that power was restored.

An alarm light was blinking in the corner of her helmet. She was on her reserve. That was two minutes if she didn't breathe deep.

"Identify me *Reflected Light* and unlock the hatch. Bring life support back up."

The hatch slid open, allowing her into the first chamber to clean any foreign contamination and provide fresh air. Once cleaned, she swapped out her life pac and hurried to the controls. She ran a scan over the meteor looking for Diana and came up with nothing. "Diana where are you?"

Dreams.

"I dreamed of worms. She dreamed of corney beetles that made a racket and stink. What sound does a corney beetle make?" Her fingers tapped out the question then multiplied it by a swarm. "Rerun the scan. Yes!"

Picking up an extra life pac Cot quickly left the shuttle. The reading of Diana was aft and should be within her sight. "*Diana! Can you hear me?*"

"Yes?" a hoarse voice answered.

Cot turned around and found Diana falling through a doorway in space. Cot grabbed her before she hit the surface. Diana's life pac was red lining. It was empty. Diana held onto her as she swapped out her empty pac with a fresh one. They stood there as fresh air wafted into her suit, reviving her enough for her to open her eyes.

"We have what we need so we can go, unless you want to stay and sight- see," Cot said.

"No," Diana whispered. "I've had enough visiting."

Cot supported most of her weight up the ramp and held onto her as the hatch closed and the cleaner began. At the buzz of completion of the decontamination cycle the containment hatch slid open and a medbot quickly approached Diana. While she was being administered to, Cot began running a check on all the shuttle's systems to make sure everything was back to normal levels. Cot sent a signal to *Star Chaser*.

An alarm on the console notified her that they had been picked up by something. The shuttle identified it and destroyed the satellite homing in on them. It was as good as notifying the owner where they were.

Star Chaser swiftly arrived.

"There are a dozen ships searching this area," *Star* reported. "The *Glass Eye* is being towed by another group."

"What exactly are they looking for?" Cot asked.

"The pilot of *Glass Eye*," *Star* said.

As soon as *Reflected Light* settled in *Star Chaser's* bay Cot helped Diana onto a bed the SEs provided. "You don't look well so I'm insisting you follow the medbot's instructions."

"I think I'll do just that." Diana closed her eyes as she was transported to her quarters.

Cot ran up the corridor to the bridge. "I have the conn, *Star Chaser*."

"Cot has the conn," *Star Chaser* said.

"Set a course for the *Glass Eye*. Let's see who all is so interested in this ship that's ready for the shipyards."

Cot checked *Star's* logs. They had been on the meteorite for two days while *Star* dropped passive scans and zipped around space, leading their pursuers on false trails. By the amount of information *Star Chaser* gathered on the ships chasing her, she put together a profile on the crew's skills and the captains. They must have figured out that *Star Chaser* was running tests on them because they suddenly became cagey in stalking her. They should have given up and left.

"These ships aren't from any of the sectors I'm familiar with," Cot said, "and they're not accustomed to working together. By your scans, *Star* you're not able to get a complete composite of their hulls or crew. They're scanning on different wave lengths so how sure are you we aren't being tailed?"

"Even the ones I can't scan to my satisfaction, they leave a trace for their associates to contact them."

"I wonder what brought them all together, and why some followed you and some followed *Glass Eye*. Diana. Glad to see you on your feet. You don't happen to know, do you?"

Diana dropped into the seat next to Cot.

"No. They assumed I was listening to their communications, so they said little to each other."

"*Star*, how long did it take them to realize you were baiting them?" Cot asked.

"Five hours."

"What information did they gather on you?" Cot asked.

"I am unable to access their ships' logs for a direct assessment."

"Their crews are going to be in a foul mood if they don't gain something worth selling on this mission," Cot said.

"They'll be looking for payback," Diana said. "What are we doing now?"

"We're going to see who is interested in the *Glass Eye*. They have three days on us, but *Star* can cut their lead time down." Cot leaned back in her seat, the weariness of the day catching up with her.

"Hey, Gemini. I was wondering where you disappeared to," Diana said.

Cot opened her eyes, startled that she had dozed off. "Gemini?" She looked at the bot that settled near her console.

"Gemini," *Star* said, "is acceptable."

"Finally, it has a name. I'm going to get some rest while it's quiet. *Star*, you have the conn."

"*Star* has the conn."

Chapter 23

It's a Matter of Perspective

Cot woke from a restful sleep.

"Greetings, *Star*. Anything that needs my immediate attention?"

"Diana received a message from Star Force Headquarters an hour ago. She's been reviewing information I've gathered since we were at POATA."

"My reports must be in question."

"She is reading my reports," *Star* said.

"*Our* reports weren't contradictory. Where is she?" That was not a comforting thought considering *Star's* penchant to gather information on everyone and everything that she was interested in. Did *Star* sneak in a report she hadn't perused first?

"On the bridge."

Cot dressed quickly and went to join Diana. Diana was sitting in the visitor's seat reading what was scrolling across the screen rapidly; too fast for Cot to read consciously. Gemini was sitting above the console watching Diana.

"I have the conn, *Star*. Greetings Diana."

"Cot has the conn," *Star* said.

"Greetings and health to you, Cot." Diana leaned back and stretched.

"Are you searching *Star Chaser's* database for something specific?"

"Did you know the SE you left with Rear Admiral Zieda of the *Emerald Isle* had a tag on it that's traceable to a prison planet?"

Cot felt stricken. "*Star*, did you put that tag I asked you to destroy on the SE?"

"Yes. It is nonfunctioning. I returned it to the person that was responsible for it being on your POATA medallion."

"Rear Admiral Zieda tagged me?"

"I returned it to Commander Xulu who was responsible for its creation and placement," *Star Chaser* said. "The game goes on. We won that round."

Cot dropped into her seat with mixed emotions.

"But it was on Rear Admiral Zieda's SE," Diana said.

"Commander Xulu created them, therefore he will be on the look-out for them so he is not tagged," *Star* said.

Diana started to laugh as if it were a funny joke, which Cot didn't think was funny at all.

"What does that mean?" Cot asked Diana.

"That *is* what happened. From the moment the call came for *The Emerald Isle* to go to your assistance, Commander Xulu has been speaking ill of you. After the tag was found he stepped up his insistence that you need to be arrested, and your star ship removed from your control before you go rogue. Rear Admiral Zieda sent a message to HQ and HQ sent me a message."

"I didn't meet him at the rear admiral's dinner."

Diana looked thoughtful. "Commander Xulu's previous assignment was Commandant of AmDeRa Prison Colony. As you know, prison populations work their debt off to society and victims of their crimes in prison shops. They produce gadgets, jewelry, household items, etc. They sell them at a reduced cost to any company that wants to buy them. There are many, and not just in the civilian sector, who don't want to have something with that type of energy on it, so anything prison colonies produce has a stamp identifying where it was made or assembled."

"The prison produces the medallions the school purchases?" Cot asked, "That's suspicious considering the tag was in the medallion."

"The arrangement for AmDeRa Prison to produce the medallions started two years ago," *Star* explained. "The arrangement was made by Vice Academic Dean Holfer. Vice Academic Dean Holfer and Commander Xulu are from the same graduating class in business management. The school and all records had been destroyed due to the Incursion Wars, so it is not possible to verify their claims of schooling. Their university was on space station Batun IV, which no longer exists. Shall I continue?"

"What about all those that had earned medallions produced from the prison?" Cot asked.

"Everyone that finishes the program is awarded a medallion. In the two years, only four people have won the wreaths and two of them have been accused of treasonable acts. Perhaps you and Ara should return yours, Cot," *Star Chaser* said.

"I worked hard for it...we worked hard for it. Send that information to SFHQ immediately, *Star*."

"Should I warn Ara?"

"Yes. Treason?"

"Buyer beware," Diana said. "*Star*, why did you put the tag on the SE instead of reporting your findings to SFHQ or to Cot, your captain?"

"My job is to protect my captain. Commander Xulu proved to be a danger to Cot. He ordered the Quartermaster of the *Emerald Isles* to give us inferior and non-functioning equipment in exchange for my upgraded equipment."

"We will discuss why you didn't tell me later. Is any of what he gave us upgradeable?" Cot asked.

"No. I have added them to our trash. The embarrassment Commander Xulu will face when his past is found out is evening the score."

"That guy doesn't like you Cot...or for that matter, graduates of POATA."

"Does the rear admiral know that he traded us poor quality equipment?"

"I'm sure she'll know now if she doesn't already suspect. Commander Xulu was assigned her ship for her to evaluate. My involvement with this situation is from SFHQ to look in *Star's* records about the incident. Thank you both for your explanations and information."

"What has Star Force to do with prisons?" Cot asked.

"I don't know. However, Commander Xulu has been under review for membership in SF. His career has been monitored since he petitioned to join Star Force five years ago and as you'll find, everyone is evaluated from the moment they make the request, or as you had done, put it down on your education profile so it's recorded. Your career had been guided since then to see that you had experiences that would test you and

help you develop your talents as much as possible and hopefully, into Star Force material."

Cot felt her face flush at the revelation.

"Everyone's request is taken seriously but it takes more than a desire and showing talent. At the onset you had Ambassador Keli vouching for you which meant you jumped to the front of the applicants. A case manager was assigned to you and gave recommendations and assessments as you moved through your tasks."

"So, my training for the SID program was part of my SF training?"

Diana smiled widely. "No. You and *Star Chaser* did that without SF intervention, though, you being on that base was for something else that your manger had in mind, which failed to materialize. Career wise, I think you did well."

"Why do you know so much about my career?" Cot asked.

"I was asked to observe and examine you when your case manager at that time didn't want you in the SID program and challenged the selection. He had other plans for you, but as QuaDom teaches, we all end up where it's best for us to learn something. You were assigned a new case manager that was experienced with SID-ships and QuaDom."

"What did my aunt do with Star Force?"

"She was a Galactic Ambassador that negotiated differences between planets and sometimes between individuals. QuaDom takes us to places we wouldn't normally have chosen for ourselves, and sometimes, we spend a moment of our lives working with others whose mission we oppose. It's not working for the greater good, or working to improve ourselves, it's being present and aware that we are part of something greater than ourselves. There are no mistakes and failures. Everything is a lesson."

"That's a basic tenet of QuaDom." Cot felt Diana was talking more for *Star Chaser's* benefit since she had heard this many times and wondered what she was up to with *Star*.

"My aunt was my mother in all ways but giving me physical birth. It amazes me how no one on Mari knew how extraordinary she was."

"You mean in a sense of power?" Diana asked.

"No, well yes, that too. I know people with power can cloak it so others can't see or feel them. But I mean her personality. Thinking back, I don't remember anyone showing her honor and respect that she deserved not even as an elder."

"Perhaps, she appeared to others in a different manner than she did to you. When a QuaDom master appears on her home planet, her vibration will be so different than others on the planet, that even a person not sensitive to others will know she's different."

"A Brounder would have noticed," Cot said.

"A Brounder is master of the energies of Maridoileag. Your aunt was beyond a Brounder. If that is what you noticed of her, than I would say she controlled their response toward her for their sake, and all others that came in contact with her."

"Why?"

"I don't know her reasons or what circumstances you two lived in. If *you* visited Maridoileag now, you would know you're different from everyone else."

"If my energy changed that much my SID-mates would have made a comment. We're all from Mari."

"Mari?"

"We Mulands that have taken to space travel believe that if we identify our planet, enemies we make will visit her while we're busy elsewhere."

"That's a feeling shared by many. I don't know what your fellow SID-mates feelings are about your changes, but I can tell you, you have changed since the last time I observed you, and after our visit to the meteorite, both of us have changed. I can also feel the talisman you're wearing. It's the one Ambassador Keli wore. She said when you were ready it would be yours. She used it to cloak herself, but there are some who will be able to see that the wearer is a powerful person, and not all these people are practioners of a spiritual way. Those that do see or sense it and fear you, will either see you as a threat and attack you on different levels or stay away from you."

Cot was quiet as she acknowledged that she had been feeling changes in herself, especially since Bua came into her possession. She would meditate on this later.

"Is Rear Admiral Zieda registering a formal complaint against us?" Cot asked.

"I don't know. You tagged your gift to her," Diana pointed out. "I'm responding to SFHQ as to why. I believe this will merit the Commander a deeper investigation and

those that were found treasonous will have their actions reevaluated by Star Force. It is grievous that a person once held in high esteem would be brought down so easily."

"It sounds like something the Gepack agents would do. I would have liked to meet this Commander Xulu to get a feel for him," Cot said.

"It won't happen. We're out of that section of space and you and *Star* have other business," Diana smiled. "I read *Star Chaser's* version of you using unreliable intuition to locate unacceptable behavior in some students at POATA, which she substantiated so you would not be proven wrong, and then you set traps for them to be caught. Maybe someone at POATA suspected you were behind it and told Commander Xulu that's why he needed to remove you."

"Should I send her an apology?" *Star* asked.

"No," both women said.

Diana finished her report and sent it off to SFHQ.

"So, what are you going to do about the *Glass Eye*?" Diana asked, clearing her screen of the report.

Cot gave a short laugh. "I could be sensible and point out that there are more of them than us, so we should just leave and consider ourselves lucky for getting away with our lives."

"If you were just another captain," Diana said. "However...."

"What is it about that ship *and/or* you that so many people are chasing you down and some crossing the time barrier for?"

Diana looked thoughtful as she shook her head. "The ship has been stripped down and they have it. I didn't bring anything from the ship. What I'm wearing is what you've provided."

"*Star*, what do you have on the *Glass Eye's* location?" Cot asked.

"An hour away."

Information began to scroll across both of their screens and then a visual of the *Glass Eye* being towed, surrounded by dozens of ships spread out.

"I'm sure HQ would like to know more about the ships *Star* is barely able to pick up the presence of. Be vigilant *Star* for nets."

"So, all the experimental equipment HQ gave you is upgraded?" Diana asked.

"*Star* has high expectations of her helpers. Yes."

"The rear admiral should consider herself lucky that neither of you were upset with her," Diana said.

"Of course I'm upset with her, but she's a rear admiral," Cot said. "We'll be lucky if she doesn't put our names on her payback list."

"Have you done a background on her?"

"*Star* has backgrounds on everyone we meet. Right, *Star*?" Cot asked.

"It is not complete," *Star* said. "She has missing years on her record."

"She may have been involved in covert work." Cot glanced at Diana. "I've been finding a need to know about a lot of characters we've come across lately."

"It's a good idea, on many levels," Diana said.

"What do you have on me?" Cot asked.

"We'll compare notes one day," Diana said. "Knowing how you appear to others is important as a Star Force Agent."

Chapter 24

Separating the Pack

"I recognize two of those ships," Diana said. "*Gumo* and *Telema*."

"Pirates?"

"Chimoc Ho captain's *Gumo* with a crew of four. Lars Mn captain's the *Telema*. He used to have three crew members but months ago he was the only one that escaped being arrested for selling stolen goods. Their usual business is ferrying passengers from one port to another and that's on the other side of Zed Sector. I wouldn't have thought their ships would travel this far without some mishap even if they caught passage through a travel corridor."

"*Star*, what can you tell us about those two ships?"

"According to *Gumo* and *Telema*'s maintenance record they were at the shipyard for refitting in the Hibri Sector at the same time. They are capable of traveling 6gs for six hours without system failure," *Star Chaser* said. "They both were fitted with two cannons with an electromagnetic pulse capability, fore and aft. I detect no testing since they were

fitted. Their ships logs are on automatic and haven't been accessed for any information. The manufacturer's password hasn't been changed."

"Hibri Sector. They certainly are getting around. If it's Chimoc and Lars, it looks like they've changed a lot since you've last seen them," Cot said. "I recognize one of the other ships, *Lepon*. Barboc is the captain. He and his shipmates are salvage hunters with a nose for knowing where there's a ship ready for the picking."

"They must want *Glass Eye* for her weapons. Word sure does get around fast. Can you for a fact say that Chimoc Ho and Lars Mn are in those ships, *Star Chaser*?" Diana asked.

"I can read the logs, but I cannot read what species is on the ship. They have sonic deceptors on the outer hull preventing a scan for a biological read. The ships are still registered under Chimoc Ho and Lars Mn of Zed Sector."

Cot called up a tactical on her screen. "I want to know why these people are after you and that ship. You take *Reflected Light* here for passive observation.... *Star* and I will be here. There's a dust cloud they'll have to readjust their formation to pass through here, unless they go around. I don't think they will trust each other to lose sight of the other. Remember, we're just going to observe and see where they plan on taking *Glass Eye*. Are you sure there's nothing else on that ship?"

"If there is, I don't know about it. I promise not to take any unnecessary chances with your shuttle."

"If I call for your return, return with no questions asked. Agreed?" Cot asked.

"You're the captain. Yes," Diana said.

"Send an SE with her, *Star*. As soon as *Reflected Light* is out of your back draft, move to a position so we'll be facing the group that has *Glass Eye*."

"Dispatching SE," *Star* said.

While waiting Cot began to run various scenarios through her mind. The waiting was the hardest, she thought. A sudden insight made her laugh.

"*What's so funny?*" Diana asked over the conn.

"The instructions of a master are merely words until internally experienced," Cot recited.

"*And?*"

"Let all resistance to external experience drop."

"I hope that's not a premonition of something nasty. I'm coming up to my coordinates. Shuttle coming to all stop. Thanks for the SE backup. Ready to observe."

"Acknowledged, *Reflected Light*. Comm off."

No sooner than they were positioned than additional monitors sent out to expand their scan area began to send readings of a dozen new ships from an area Cot didn't expect visitors from.

"Looks like we're having a party, and I don't recall seeing any invitations going out," Cot said.

"I am unable to get clear readings on these new ships," *Star* said. "The only thing they have in common is a transmission code - Der Jägers.

"Der Jägers – The Hunters! That explains the mix of species and origins of interested parties in what the *Glass Eye* may have. We're outsiders and won't be welcomed at all. *Star*, was there anything unusual on *Glass Eye* that you haven't mentioned?"

"Gemini found an object attached to the outer hull of *Glass Eye*," *Star* said. "It was not a figurehead and poses no danger. It's part of an art object from a planet no longer open to off-planet visitors."

Cot let out an aggravated hiss. "Get us out of here before we're spotted. Bring *Reflected Light* back as quick as you can."

Star moved to intercept their shuttle. Cot watched on her screen the cargo bay doors close with the shuttle back in the bay. Two ships noticed them and deployed attack droids. *Star* accelerated out of the area. Minutes later Diana could be heard running up the passageway to the bridge.

"What's going on? What happened?" Diana asked breathlessly.

"Gemini found something on *Glass Eye's* outer hull. *Star Chaser* identified it as part of an art object. Those are Der Jägers out there. That means there's going to be a situation we have no business getting involved in. We as in *Star Chaser* and I." Cot meant that comment for *Star*.

"The Hunters? An artifact? If they know we're here, they're not going to let us go without inspecting us. It won't be a pleasant experience, especially to *Star*."

"Their trackers have been destroyed," *Star Chaser* reported.

"Where is the art object?" Diana asked.

"It's stored in *Reflected Light*," *Star* reported.

"And it wasn't spotted by them?" *Diana* asked.

"We need to dump it somewhere. Do you have any ideas?"

"If you want to get rid of it safely, I have an older brother who can handle it. We can leave it with him and not have to worry about his welfare and you being followed. He hangs out in the New Frontier sector."

"So, you're not interested in keeping it?"

"I don't like getting beat up, shot at, or chased out of space sectors for an art object... even if it's part of an assignment. There's no fun in having something I have to keep hidden in fear of it being stolen or worst yet, haul it around with me." Diana grinned at Cot. "Have you heard of Murphy's Diner?"

"What spacer hasn't? But which one?" Cot asked. One of the officers at POATA described it as a franchise diner found in every out of the way corner of known and unexplored galaxies whose claim for notoriety was its customers that dealt in everything. Another added was where Hunters stopped to pick up messages and make deals.

"Anything you want to know, someone at Murphy's Dinner will know....for a fee," Diana said. "My brother likes the eclectic atmosphere."

"Where exactly in New Frontier?" Cot asked.

"Over the border at the corner of Iond and Bendi Sector."

"How long will it take to reach there, *Star*?" Cot asked.

"A week's journey from here - taking all of *our* shortcuts and if there isn't anything interrupting our journey," *Star* answered.

"Set our new destination for the New Frontier. I'll notify SFHQ, later. *Star*, you have the conn. Diana, would you like to join me on the mat? Then over a meal we'll talk some more about this art object, before I write my report."

"*Star*," she thought to her ship, "*send an update to the High Commander and let him know about the artifact. Send an image. If he has something to say about it, let me know immediately.*"

"A bit of practice with someone that bleeds and bruises like you is a good reality check, aye?" Diana said.

"There's no better satisfaction then hearing a real grunt when you get a good hit in, yes."

Both changed clothes and began their own warmups on the mat, preparing for a physical contest they were anticipating with eagerness.

"No, *Star*, we don't need a referee," Cot said when a kata master appeared dressed in the elaborate costume of a referee.

Two hours passed, according to *Star*, who reminded them that they should take a break. Cot limped as she circled Diana, and Diana circled her, favoring her right arm. If they were really injured neither admitted to it and the medbot didn't register the injuries as serious enough to stop the contest.

Cot suddenly went into a spinning wheel, snapping two quick kicks at Diana, nailing her with one. However, the second kick was knocked aside, tossing her onto her sore leg. Diana was already in the air with both feet aimed at Cot's midriff, but Cot rolled out of the way.

A warning bell sounded, breaking both women's concentration. Diana landed on empty space and Cot was rolling onto her hands and knees, breathing heavily.

Cot steadied herself from the sudden cramp in her leg. "Report!" Cot said as she hobbled to the bridge with Diana close behind. A medbot trailed the two women.

"A CF flotilla with one capital ship off the starboard, five hours from our present position. All war birds have been launched," *Star* reported. "Weapons are hot on all ships."

Diana looked over at Cot. "You're not upset because I was winning, are you?"

"You weren't winning. You were getting tired. A few more minutes and I would have taken you down," Cot answered, rubbing her leg.

Diana laughed, sitting gingerly in her seat. "You were on your last leg."

Cot looked over the scans then went further back on the logs. "*Star*, why didn't you notify me that you had two sightings of beacons?"

"There is no danger. I am out of their scan range."

"Danger is identified on multiple levels, *Star*. You identified the art object Gemini found as not dangerous but those that are hunting it *are* dangerous. There are protocols that are set up to prevent oversights. These passive beacons could be more than what they seem."

"I was out of their range," *Star* insisted.

"How do you know?"

"The manufacture's specs do not extend beyond two hours from its position," *Star* said.

"How many devices do you have that have been modified beyond the manufacture's greatest expectations, *Star*?"

"Not to change the subject but, what do you plan on doing about those ships heading our way with their weapons armed?" Diana asked.

"What have we out there, *Star*?"

"I've dispatched two Clev R4s, independent mobile tactical sniffers."

Cot was amused by Diana's worried looks at the ships showing on their screens. "If you're interested, we can observe them to see what they're up to. It could just be a combat test area."

"If I were interested, but right now I'm worried about those ships that are getting closer," Diana said. "Do you have something that makes you invisible?"

"In RT they're eight hours away to our four. *Star*, gather as much information on them as you can without us being detected. I want to know if they belong here or if they're from somewhere else." Cot turned to Diana, "Let's go see what that artifact is about."

Neither woman touched it, letting an SE move it from the shuttle to the deck of the of storage bay.

"That is downright ugly," Diana said.

"What is so interesting about this artifact that you brought it aboard?" Cot asked, not expecting a response from Gemini. Cot stood inches from it and then backed away.

"It is radiating energy that I cannot record," *Star Chaser* said. "It is not the entire artifact. It is the base a statue would rest on."

"I can feel it putting out something. If it's not recordable it means it's from a planet not sanctioned for visits from any star travelers including Star Force agents," Cot said.

"I can feel something too. By all the hunters collecting around *Glass Eye*, I will assume some of them can read the energy."

"But not enough to know it's no longer there."

"If we were in an asteroid dust cloud, the emanations would be evident. A green aura would surround it that I could measure," *Star* said. "I would attempt to radiate the same rays here, but it would disrupt the life support. I could have it moved to the exterior of my hull."

"No. If we see it so will everyone else."

"Not necessarily. When the first group attacked me, they were distracted and left without searching *Glass Eye*. The second group of pirates captured *Glass Eye* and gutted the interior missing it on the hull entirely. The group that you rescued me from weren't interested in anything short of capturing the *Glass Eye*. I thought it was for the weapon system. How do we know that wasn't why?"

"Because the Hunters appeared from all over space and Gemini found an art object, the only something Hunters are interested in. *Star*, did Gemini give you any information?" Cot asked. The pause from *Star* had Cot wondering just what *Star* was trying to figure out. For a fast processor, this was lengthy for her. Did Gemini communicate on a level *Star* didn't know?

"How does Gemini communicate with you, *Star*?" Diana asked, as though reading Cot's thoughts.

"On a frequency I am unfamiliar with," *Star* said.

"So, you...infer information from Gemini?" Cot asked. If *Star* was inferring, then it opened up further discussions on intangibles to *Star's* solid world.

"We are in communication but how I have not identified yet," *Star* said.

"So, you're getting messages in your database and you believe them to be from Gemini," Diana said.

"I am getting information from Guest Gemini, but not in my database," *Star* said.

"Has Gemini explained to you why you can't recover a particular file?" Cot thought to *Star*.

"No."

"Ask."

* * *

"We've been here for two hours. Isn't that long enough?" Diana said.

Cot looked up from her screen where she was reviewing the communications *Star Chaser* unencrypted from some of the ships. Her feeling was that the ship's logs *Star* was able to access were put there for their benefit. By now every military and pirate ship knew the SID ships could unencrypt communications. It meant they couldn't take anything *Star* intercepted as fact without verifying.

"Two hours is long enough to satisfy the curiosity of SFHQ, *Star Chaser*. Let's resume our course to Murphy's Dinner in the New Frontier Sector. Leave one monitor for this area."

"All but one monitor has been recalled. We will resume course to New Frontier Sector when all are aboard," *Star* said.

"Hanging around that close is nerve racking. Are you hungry? I'll prepare a special dish," Diana asked.

"Will my stomach be safe?"

"Your attempt at Barouche Stew put mine in jeopardy," Diana said.

"I was missing ingredients. I adapted and you did say it tasted good."

"That was until it came back to haunt me."

"*Star*, let me know when all monitors have been collected. Anything following neutralize it."

"Anything following our trail I will neutralize," *Star* said.

Chapter 25

Conversations On Different Levels

"How long have you been practicing QuaDom?" Diana asked. They finished their meal and were back on the bridge relaxing to soft music.

"Since I was a young girl," Cot said.

"Who was your first master?"

"My Aunt Keli. And you?" Cot said.

"I stumbled into a master in my second life stage."

"Where you a mortliege then?" Cot asked.

"Yes. As a mortliege I had my own rituals and beliefs that my mentors didn't pressure me to change. I had once thought it was because I completed my assignments timely and neatly. At each rise in rank, I was assigned a new mentor until one day I met my first master. He taught me the art of dying. It solidified my belief about death and how it worked in the larger scheme of things."

"Just what is a mortliege?" Cot asked.

"What have you heard?"

"I've heard that a mortliege is an assassin," Cot said, knowing there was more to it than that from her short association with Diana.

"To me a mortliege is a go-between agent. My assignments have ranged from giving life to dealing death and all sorts of things in between."

"You've killed, yet you don't have that energy around you," Cot said.

"And for all the battles you've been in, you don't have that energy around you."

Diana smiled at Cot. "When my assignment is to deliver death, I give the recipient the opportunity to prepare both spiritually as well as physically for their physical end. It doesn't do one any good if an evil person is not given the chance to repent and ritually prepare for this physical death, so they don't reenter their next life angrier and more dangerous than what they had left. One of my mentors said, some folks are more dangerous dead than alive, but they need to be dead."

"That got your attention?"

Diana nodded smiling. "I was attending a funeral a gambler my brother Ati knew. I was there to ensure Ati brought the family shuttle back. I was a distance from the group where I couldn't be seen when suddenly I noticed this short fellow dressed oddly standing by me watching the funeral rites with a lot more interest than me. The deceased was certified to be who it was and then cremated. I nearly fell backwards had not the short fellow supported me, when through the smoke stack a dark energy flew out and circled those gathered for the witnessing and it was evil. Before it could harm anyone, my

companion held up his hands and whispered something I couldn't understand. Poof! It was like dust, falling back into the crematory stack. When everyone was leaving, I looked back and saw that same fellow spreading something sparkly around the area and into the crematory."

"What became of the ashes?"

"I don't know. But I met that same person a few days later at a space station. He asked me if I was ready for a new career. I was on my way to visit another brother. I jumped up, collected my small travel bag, and followed him."

"No one in your family chased after you to change your mind?"

"No. We all have diverse interests. There are some of us that actually chose to be planet-bound. So, tell me, how did you handle going off to battle as sensitive as you are, or did that come later?"

"Wars are not for the weak," Cot said softly. Cot remembered shadows of the horrors she experienced. She had been captured by the enemy and sent to a prison camp called the Cone. She had risked her capture to send out a transmission that identified a traitor in the Flag Ship's staff. Though it was a short imprisonment, interment for any period of time was intended to be torturous by Gepack standards. Those were times she put behind her.

"But there are some things that are worse. I could have stayed on my home planet and been forced into a life I had no say in, though, I would like to think I would have found a way if Aunt Keli hadn't come into my life. I know she helped others, but she didn't talk about it. There is a saying amongst the clan that without a clan you don't exist, but auntie and I didn't believe that. How did you get out into space?"

"I was a war orphan," Diana said, "I was being transported with hundreds of others to work camps on a faraway planet by the victors, and the ship was stopped by a military blockade. The captain of the ship was great at planning space battles but not on what to do with orphans being shipped to the enemies' mines. We were left at a space station much to the horror of space station manager. Some of us were able to talk some captains into giving us a lift to another station where we might have a better chance of getting a job or finding our way home. I met a traveler who agreed to drop me off at her next port. I didn't realize just how far her next port was. She taught me during the trip

how to defend myself, how to recognize trouble, and that going home wasn't an alternative. The port she stopped at was where her adopted parents were meeting her. I became part of her family. Her parents traveled across more galaxies than I knew of and made it a practice to pick up, and help abandoned children no matter their species. I traveled with them for most of my youth and learned a lot from them and my siblings."

"So how big is your family?"

"Vast is a good description."

"How many are vast?"

"It's hard to say since my adopted parents are still moving about the galaxies picking up abandoned or lost children, and when their adopted children have children, it adds to the family."

"That must have been quite an adventure," Cot said.

"Where did you get Gemini?" Diana asked. "I didn't see anything in your reports describing this bot."

"You read my reports?"

"Yes."

"I haven't sent a detailed report about our guest to anyone. It came aboard while we were restarting the *Murdelie's* systems. A day after we departed from that area I found we had a hitchhiker, Gemini. *Star Chaser* insists it's a guest not a vagabond or stowaway."

"So, *you* found the *Murdelie*."

"You know of it?"

"I overheard one of the pirates mention it mysteriously disappeared. He wanted to go looking for it instead of seizing my little yacht. A much richer prize by far."

"The *Murdelie* was lying right in front of our exit corridor. All security systems were down so I was able to board her. Once on board most of my equipment, including the bots, occasionally stopped functioning. The ship had been cleaned of all traces of previous occupation. I did find a new bio-engineered chrysalis in the incubation chamber, but the chamber was out of synch."

"A chrysalis left alone? A bodyguard must have been somewhere. What happened to the chrysalis? If something happened you can bet someone worse than a mortliege will be after you," Diana said.

"I found two unconscious adults Enas. I moved them to the medical bay. One was dressed in a security uniform but without any physical weapons. One did resume consciousness for a few minutes to give me some advice about the ship. By the time *Star* got the power restored everyone, including her owners, arrived, with guns blazing. We had to make a graceful exit, keeping in line with SF practice of keeping a low profile. And rest assured, we did synch the incubation chamber before we left."

"I feel better already," Diana mocked. "The *Murdelie* has been awarded the contract to carry important people from around the four galaxies to accompany statues of ambassadors that represent peace to the Galactic Peace Garden. No one on board would be carrying weapons except the ship's defense cannons. The entire ship would be cleared of any negative energy to honor the Peace Representatives and to also make sure telepathic species wouldn't pick up any Enas' business."

"I met a recently hatched Enas in an escape pod I borrowed to get off the ship. He informed me that he and the female still in the incubation tube were a new genesis."

"Are you saying these two are a higher level of Enas?"

"If the young Enas wanted to, he could have immobilized me, instead he allowed me to escape, thanking me for stabilizing the incubation chamber for his sister. I offered my assistance should they need it in the future."

Diana looked at her curiously. "You sound unsure of this offer. It's not unusual for Star Force agents to make personal pacts in order to broker or manipulate a situation. If HQ didn't trust your judgment, you wouldn't be in Star Force piloting an experimental sentient ship."

"It's the first offer I made to assist individuals without thinking of the corps and its complicated rules and protocols."

"I'm not one to judge since I wasn't there. I've liaisons that I can't explain and only hope I use them wisely. I have to admit, though, *Star Chaser* is the first sentient ship I've connected with."

"*Star Chaser* is one relationship I never expected in my career."

"Working with sentient beings comingled into a spaceship has been going on across galaxies for centuries to different degrees."

"I had heard we're not the first," Cot said.

"You're the first self-sufficient star fighter, one person crewed. A crew of a dozen was the smallest I've heard of. Something about one-on-one bonding being a bad investment since the ship will outlive it's mortal partner. There's an explorer ship, *Ebze* that is centuries old and still going strong. Every so many years it comes back to it's home port to pick up a new crew and sails back out to parts few know about, exploring who knows what."

"I heard about the *Ebze* when I was in the diplomat academy. A visiting ambassador from that ship gave a lecture on a species that has since officially been recognized as self-determining. But he never mentioned the *Ebze* was sentient," Cot said.

"It's not advertised, especially to the military types. They tend to see any space duty to be in their sphere of influence, even if it's escort service for diplomats. It's about control and power."

Cot thought about her aunt and wondered if she had escort service to the places she had visited. From what she learned in the diplomatic school, her aunt was considered among the most favored to emulate. She was grateful no one knew they were related. Living up to a legend would have been more difficult than learning to live with so many different species while simultaneously adapting to her change of life circumstances. She had gone from living a near solitary life in the woods with her aunt and wild animals, to living in a city packed with more strange species in crowded living spaces than she had seen in books her aunt had provided her with.

"Who are you thinking of?" Diana asked.

"My aunt Keli."

"You look like her." Diana's smile looked wistful.

"No, I don't." Cot felt taken back. Age was difficult to gauge with some species. Just how old was Diana?

"In her middle years you both could be mistaken for each other."

"How do you know her?" Cot asked.

"We've crossed paths many times."

"When and where?"

"The last place was on the *Finhorn*."

"The *Finhorn*? Where all those people were killed?" Cot was stunned. "Many people came to speak to her about it, but she wouldn't. She said what is done is done. She was very firm in that. I thought that odd since..." Cot pursed her lips to remind herself that she had promised her aunt she wouldn't speak of it.

"It was one of those events that required a skilled negotiator like Ambassador Keli and a powerful group like Star Force to see it was done correctly - discreetly. No lives were lost because of the power SF exerted to resolve it."

"No one died?" Cot asked. "I must have misunderstood the situation then."

"You have the clearance with Star Force to look this up so when you have more time you can read the details. But remember to repeat this to no one under the threat of death," she warned.

Cot held up her hand, "*Star* and I wish no mortliege looking for us. We will tell no tales. So..." she said expectantly.

"So, a brief rendition: A group of escaped prisoners had made it to the ship *Finhorn* with the purpose of having Ambassador Keli negotiate a legal release for them and others that were held as political prisoners or were kidnapped for one reason or another, usually having to do with family politics. Star Force had been investigating the rumors for some time, so this proof was what the agents were looking for. It took swift and quiet planning to raid the prisons many were scattered in without a mass slaughter taking place."

"Then why did she leave the service if she was so good?"

"She retired. She felt she had something important to attend to at home while she still could."

"Why do you think you and I were brought together?" Cot asked.

"Why's are important to you?" Diana asked.

"Auntie would say that asking why and then listening on different levels gives ears where eyes are blind. Did you arrange for our meeting?" Cot asked.

Diana laughed. "I did no engineering for this meeting. I would rather have a casual meet in a bar than roughed up by pirates. I think eventually we would have met since our lives were touched by Ambassador Keli. That happens, you know?"

"Predetermined?" Cot asked.

"Common interests draw a lot of strangers together," Diana said.

"I'm going to meditate for a while. If you need something to do, *Star* likes to act as a Cruise Ship Events Planner. *Star Chaser*, you have the conn."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

"Would my working out bother you?" Diana asked.

"No. I hope you want a challenge."

"I did very well on two of her workouts."

"*Star* was being nice to you." Cot tried not to blink the double vision away or shake her head as her senses altered. Suddenly an egg-shaped luminous ball appeared next to Diana while at the same time Cot could still see her aunt's physical form smiling at Diana then her.

Sitting Āsanas, she took a few moments just feeling the energy as it hummed through her body, then focused on her lower spine and whirled up and out through her head in a whoosh. From the center of her forehead energy gushed out, through the envelope and out the ship's hull. It was in a matter of minutes. Cot felt she was part of the light that moved through space and faster than thought, she was standing before an old carved totem of the original Clan Committee of Forty-four on Maridoileag with the subclans represented by their shields around the totem.

Looking around her, Cot sought what had summoned her. Down the slope were children playing in the shadow of the Meeting Hall where Maridoileag Clans brought their business. Turning to look at the building it was in flames. Through the flames Cot could see the people who had built it, they were watching the building burn, yet it wasn't consuming the structure. Those that set the fire weren't Mulands.

Before Cot could put together what she was seeing, the scene changed. An old man, dressed in the ritual clothing of a Brounder, walked through a forest that evaporated around him and became a city with towering buildings.

"Return home," a voice near her said.

She turned to see another Brounder whose face she couldn't make out. "We need your help." In a brief time, images of Maridoileag passed by too quickly for her to know what she was seeing. When the images stopped, Cot knew she was back on *Star Chaser*. Memory of what just occurred was fading like a dream; the more she tried to remember the faster it faded. It reminded her of one of the tricks Gepack agents used, manipulating dreams.

She cleared her space and opened the isolation chamber. The attack was so sudden, she was lifted and sent flying into a corner of the storage bay. Cot rolled to her feet and saw a small ball of light heading toward her. She put her palms up and blocked the small ball from hitting her. It bounced from her and would have attacked again, if Diana hadn't suddenly appeared.

Whatever it was, it disappeared.

"What happened?" Diana asked.

"*Star*, there was an intruder on board, did you get a read on it?"

"I detected no intruder on board," *Star Chaser* said, then added, "however, something sent you into the hull."

"When I finished meditating, I disengaged the privacy chamber and I was attacked."

"What were you meditating on?" Diana asked.

"Nothing in particular."

"For two hours it was nothing?" Diana asked disbelieving. "Sounds like you went visiting somewhere and brought a spirit back that took issue with what you witnessed or experienced."

"I don't know. I'll have to protect more than my sacred space for now on."

"*Star* woke me out of a deep sleep. I didn't realize I could sleep so soundly. You were right about her being nice to me. This time she was determined to get me to surrender."

Cot nodded, not sure of what had just happened, but something did. She touched Bua and realized she wasn't wearing it. Glancing back at her altar, it was resting near the cushion. What had her taking it off? This was the second time since Bua came into her

possession that she had removed it while meditating. Did it have to do with the energy the talisman radiated?

Perhaps she would get an answer in her dreams.

Chapter 26

Assignment

Cot woke from a restful sleep. Whatever had attacked her the previous day didn't find resolution in her dreams. She would send a message to her other SID-mates to see if they had any dreams of Maridoileag.

"Greetings, *Star*. Anything that needs my immediate attention?"

"I have given our SEs a chronological number so Diana can keep them separate. Star Force HQ sent a communiqué. Diana is waiting to discuss it with you."

"Renaming them will help me too. I'm assuming when I tell one of them to do a job, you're assigning the one most able to do it. Do you know what the communiqué is about?" Cot asked.

"It's classified."

"You're amazing me, *Star*. That used to not stop you from knowing the contents."

"I have not been able to break the code," *Star* said.

Cot dressed and went to see Diana on the bridge. She was curious what was in the communiqué that had *Star* upset, or was it only because she couldn't break the code?

Diana was sitting in the visitor's seat with the hull transparent.

"I have the conn, *Star*. Greetings Diana."

"You have the conn, Cot."

"Greetings, Cot. I wouldn't mind traveling like this now and then. It's a magnificent sight to witness."

"That's the truth. What does HQ have to say?" Cot sat in her seat and her console began to unfurl.

"We've an alleged traitor to locate. We're the closest, so we've been given the assignment."

Cot shifted in her chair, not liking the sound of it. Becoming part of an assassin's team wasn't something she wished to be part of. "What did this traitor *allegedly* do?" Cot asked.

"*Allegedly*, he leaked Star Force business to outside parties. My assignment is to find the source of the leak, stop it, and clean up the loose ends. You and *Star Chaser* are to accompany me. This is the fastest ride I've ever had to any of my destinations."

Cot tapped on her screen where a message marked private from High Commander Er of Star Force blinked for her attention. In short order: *Star Chaser* and Lt. Col Cot of Star Force were reassigned to accompany and assist a mortliege, Diana Rue, to complete an assignment from HC Er, without hesitation. There was no mention of Diana Rue as being SF.

"Star Chaser, *ask for confirmation from HC Er. FHEO.*"

"*For his eyes only,*" *Star Chaser* confirmed.

"A tip was that he's headed to the New Frontier, so it's not out of our way," Diana said.

"So, I see. Just what are the rules for SF crossing the NFB? Military ships of any kind have failed to cross."

"There are guardians along the New Frontier Boundary that won't allow anyone with murder in their hearts to cross it. No one's been able to figure out where or who these guardians are, but there's plenty of buzz on the docks about some who didn't meet the criteria that tried to cross and ended up in a ship without power, drifting away from the NFB."

"SFHQ thinks we're pure of heart, then."

"Or this is another test."

"I didn't see a name in my brief. Who are we hunting?"

"Boyton. He's the son of Rear Admiral Boyez, commander of special operations for Star Force."

A fluttering in the pit of her stomach at the name had her worried. Since she hadn't heard of the name before, she wondered if the feeling was from *Star*. It would be a first. "Star, *gather some information on Boyton.*"

"What complicates this assignment is an anonymous tip that was in my mail. It said he was responsible for that mess you rescued me from. You know how annoying anonymous tips are? They rank pretty low on reliable and high on distractions. The fact that someone took the time to send it to me the same day I'm assigned the job of hunting him down, is messing up my sense of tidiness."

"Could it have been someone in HQ that wants to slow things down?"

"Cot," Star mentally signaled. *"High Commander Er has replied with an added note. Diana is the lead in this operation."*

"Are you sure HC Er said that?" Cot asked suspiciously.

"He added that Rear Admiral Zieda would like to come visit me, but he would rather she not until after we have reported to General Or. Why is that?"

"She has enough authority to commandeer our services since we haven't reported for duty yet."

"Why would she do that?" Star asked.

"There's always power games going on but it doesn't mean it's bad. We're a tool and you, Star Chaser, have a talent any smart CO would like to have at their beck and call. Have you been corresponding with Commander Rog?"

"He is now Captain Rog of the Milescent. He patrols the Rizon Corridor where you would like to shop."

Cot smiled at her humor. *"Do you still correspond with him?"*

"He is preoccupied with his new duties and hasn't sent a message since he took over his new assignment."

"So, what's your plan?" Cot asked Diana who was plotting something on her screen.

"Before we cross the border, I want to see a person that offered the whereabouts of Boyton."

"Do you have a file on Boyton?"

"Yes. Do you want to read it?" Diana asked.

"I would," Cot said.

"Have at it."

After reading the list of charges - petty is what she would call the majority of them, and there is no reliable evidence to support the one charge that was serious, Cot closed the file.

"It is not prosecutable," *Star Chaser* said. Cot appreciated *Star's* restraint in not saying anything until she had finished.

"There is nothing convincing to substantiate the main charge, and all the others are more like harassment. Why did SF justice department look into it?"

"The charges were leveled by a supervisor of Boyton's, who witnessed his actions against the girl." Diana was looking out at space, with a thoughtful look on her face. "The girl would not back the supervisor's allegations and has since disappeared. These accusations shouldn't have been taken to this level," she said slowly, "however," she turned to Cot, "they have been. I feel this is politically leveled at his father, Rear Admiral Boyez, to distract him from his duties. He was on a fast track in promotions in SF and that usually creates jealousy from powerful people both within SF and without."

"Admiral Boyez. I took part in one of the attacks he led against the Gepacks. He was Admiral of the Fourth Fleet of the United Front," Cot said. "He is cautious before committing the lives of people under his command but don't mistake his caution for not being able to make snap decisions. He just liked to have as much information as possible, so he didn't send his troops into a trap. There were many of those, tempting the incautious."

Diana studied Cot, watching her gaze turn inward. She was sure she was remembering that hard earned lesson.

Cot was remembering such a lesson. It was about a star pilot fresh out of the academy that hadn't even taken time to unpack his grip. He eagerly stepped forward to take the place of a seasoned injured squad leader of a squad of new untested recruits. His wing commander realized his error in promoting the flyer when he didn't acknowledge his return to base command. Cot was sent to find him and his squad to bring them back. Why her CO thought she could talk the arrogant youth out of his kill wasn't her place to question. She arrived too late and found floating body parts amid the debris of ships. She also found the enemy using the escape pods for target practice. Cot had not been able to

save anyone, but she did use her skill to kill the enemy before they fled back to their mother ship.

Her wing commander dishonored the squad's name so it wouldn't be used again, holding it up as an example of what the consequences of disobedience in war was about. The star student once held as the most likely to succeed in his military class, failed in his first command.

"Wars aren't for the romantics, but there always seems to be enough to ruin a good battle," Diana said. "Admiral Boyez had reached the top of his promotional ladder on his home planet and with the United Front Alliance, without going directly into politics," Diana said. "It's logical that if he wanted to remain in a military command his next step up would be to transfer to Star Force."

"So, what does a mortliege do about this?" Cot asked.

Diana smiled. "Investigate. Balance things out. All sorts of organizations, besides individuals, hire a mortliege to take care of loose ends, Star Force included, which is why I was approached to become a Star Force agent. Boyton's love interest is the daughter of an agent of the SF's Internal Investigative Committee."

"Then wouldn't that alone set off another investigation to see if all this is out of line?"

"Exactly. Because of the conflict of interest, the SF Secret Service has been called in to investigate everyone involved."

"What happens if the investigation shows that there are members that are less than stellar and more morally challenged than a common military hack?"

"Looking for justice, aye? Would you like to see them made examples of SF justice?"

"You're playing with me," Cot said.

Diana returned her gaze at the passing nebulas and planets. "Not necessarily. It's not a good sign that one of the executive members didn't abstain from participation due to personal involvement with the accused. There are a lot of SF agents that resent someone so highly placed giving in to self-indulgent interests. "

"I hope whatever the punishment is, doesn't degrade the organization," Cot said.

"Would you lose confidence so quickly in Star Force if in less than a year you see something about it that disappoints you?"

"Are they asking for the Admiral to step down while the investigation takes place?" Cot asked, ignoring her jibe.

"Yes. And there's the rub. There's an important conference that will be taking place in weeks and the Admiral is one of the key members on the committee as well as many of the people that are being transported by the *Murdelie* to the dedication of the Galaxy Peace Garden."

"What would happen if he's not there?" Cot asked.

"He was specifically requested."

"Is that a fact?" Cot said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Diana said. "I hope his bodyguards are up to the task."

"You said our destination is C48MC22. That's far over the border, about a year from here."

"HQ has some gates we can use to cut it to days. Chances are the pass codes will be changed once we pass through."

"With all that's at stake, how trustful are you of using them?" Cot said. "*Find alternate travel gates for us,*" she thought to Star.

"*They expect us to,*" Star said.

"*I know. Let's go about life as though we are naïve but keep a few hidden moves. Too many coincidences. Be more careful than normal about anyone accessing your system or coming on board. We have fail safes in place. Use them.*"

"I don't trust anyone with my life. That's a mortliege for you. We don't rely on anyone else's intelligence reports but our own. I have an alternative gate that will put us deep inside of the New Frontier, but on the other side of C48MC22. It's a day off our mark."

"How do you know he'll be there?"

"I don't. That's why I wish to speak to the person who gave HQ his location. I want to be sure this is not a wild ride of chasing my tail. We should be there in a few minutes."

"We are one clip out of range of Space Station H's buoys," *Star Chaser* announced.

"Cot, dress in your Star Force uniform," Diana said. "We're going to visit the Commander of this station. It's important we make a good first impression. Asking about residents is a breach of etiquette and we need to be very proper in our asking."

"Come to a stop, *Star*. Stay out of sight while we're gone. No one is to board you without my authorization. Prepare *Reflected Light*. What are you intending on wearing?" Cot asked Diana, not believing she would disembark wearing spacer overalls.

"I'll meet you at the shuttle dressed for duty," Diana said

Cot dressed in a dark SF uniform. Wasn't an SF agent supposed to be unseen in business? It was annoying that she was just a passenger on this assignment. Cot set her cover at the proper angle and went to join Diana in *Reflected Light*.

Diana was sitting in the passenger seat, dressed in a Star Force uniform. Her rank was 2nd lieutenant. She stood and gave the slight nod of her head a lower-level officer would give to a senior officer.

"A uniform?" Cot asked surprised.

"You don't think I look acceptable?" Diana asked. "Is something askew?" She moved her cover to another angle.

"I don't think a uniform or rank is what you're about in Star Force," Cot said.

"You're right. Not all of us wear uniforms. But a civilian around a SF officer attracts more attention. The Commander is very observant. I don't want her to focus her attention on a mystery or something that is out of place. I want her to focus on locating a person for us."

The docking bay they were assigned was in a sheltered bay. It was not a place Cot felt comfortable with. This was an unfamiliar station and what politics were she didn't know. The moment the shuttle settled, all power was cut and her connection with *Star Chaser* ceased.

"Someone initiated a kill switch. I hope we're not walking into a trap we can't handle," Cot said. "I'm not familiar with this side of the galaxy and its protocols." She didn't want to let Diana know that her contact with Star was also cut. There are some things best kept to herself.

"This is unusual for this station. But we're here, and not going anywhere, so we might as well see what it's about," Diana said. She was calm as if this was a normal occurrence in her life.

"I would say the commander has some serious problems that she's making sure she's got the upper hand," Cot said.

"Captain of the shuttle *Elusive Shadow* open your hatch for boarding," a gruff voice demanded over the com channel.

Diana looked over at Cot surprised. "*Elusive Shadow*?"

"We're undercover," Cot said. She chuckled at *Star Chaser's* disguising the shuttle's origins. Cot glanced at the SEs that were accompanying them. "If this is a station takeover, it makes sense for them to cut the shuttle's power. It's interesting that they didn't neutralize the SEs."

"That tells us something about them," Diana said. "They can't penetrate the hull."

"Pirates or a military takeover?"

"It does sound like a band of common brigands," Diana said. "Let's exit out the emergency hatch and see what's going on."

"SE 1, 2 and 3, guard us," Cot directed softly. "SE 5 and 6 you're backup."

Diana opened an escape hatch and dropped onto the deck. She peered between the shuttle's struts. She signed to Cot there were two and two. Cot nodded and gestured to Diana to creep toward the other end of their shuttle. It was odd if this was a space station invasion that the shuttle wasn't surrounded with invaders.

The bay looked as if a windstorm had blown through it, leaving the contents of the cargo containers tossed about. There was no telling what may be hiding in the debris, including citizens of the station taking refuge or dead, Cot thought.

One of the creatures placed something against its body. "Captain of the shuttle *Elusive Shadow*, open your doors for boarding immediately or we will destroy you."

Sticks were pointed at the shuttle as if they were weapons. They were smooth with no handle or marking on them from what Cot could see. Thoughtfully she mapped out her next move and was about to run to hide in the scattered debris when liquid from the sticks shot out over the shuttle's exterior. Cot leaned into the shuttle's protection field as the defense system of the shuttle repelled the liquid, sending it back to the attackers

along the same trajectory as it was shot out; however, the structure of the liquid changed, turning it into something that looked like a black wave, rolling in slow motion toward the four figures. The four men stood facing the wave of energy while some invisible force moved them rapidly away from the wave. The black wave changed into a large mouth, yawning wide to swallow up whatever it moved over. If *Star Chaser* was manipulating the energy wave via the shuttle, it was a good method to disguise where the defense was coming from, making the shuttle appear to be more than what it was. The four invaders turned and ran up the stairs to the control tower.

Cot turned slightly to see what was moving behind her. Diana knelt next to her. "I've heard about the nightmare sticks, but I've never seen one used," Diana whispered. "Do you recognize this species?"

"No. You?"

"No. Do you have a plan?" Diana asked.

"I want to get to the control tower to see what's going on. Can you create a diversion?"

"I can set off the alarms on a few decks and while I'm at it, I'll see if they have any hostages in lockup and try not to release the dangerous ones," she said amused.

"I don't want to panic the legal residents, just the pirates. Shall we meet back here in an hour?"

"That's making it a short excursion. I'll let you know if I need...."

"SE1 protect and assist Diana."

"With all this excitement Gemini should have come along." Diana and her bodyguard disappeared around the other side of the shuttle.

Cot doubted Gemini would go anywhere that violence was a possibility. She looked at the stairs for a few moments to see if the pirates were going to return. "Set up an image distortion for me, SE2," she directed. When she felt a change in the vibration around her, she broke her cover and headed straight for the stairs to the control tower.

Normally, the control tower in each docking bay didn't have elaborate security because it was believed once an illegal entry was made in the docking bay then it was better to lock the whole bay down and isolate that section from the rest of the space station. Space stations were set up so that each docking bay was a separate structure that

could absorb most catastrophes and be released into space from the main structure. So why was the space station intact after this takeover?

Maybe it was an inside job.

Running up the stairs, she hid behind a post and peered into the command room. The four characters from the docking bay were hanging over a terminal that had another one of their kind making sounds she couldn't understand. It wasn't possible to determine if the communication was upsetting or if it was just an order being delivered.

The four made a noise and the screen went back to the logo of the station.

"SE2, neutralize the five," she whispered.

SE2 buzzed then trilled and the five fell to the ground unmoving. Quickly, Cot entered the room. A dozen people were lined up against a wall. They looked frightened but very still, as if frozen in place.

SE3 darted forward and emitted another tone. All the people collapsed to the ground. While most of them remained on the deck unconscious, two rolled to their feet and staggered toward Cot. One of them grabbed her elbow for support while the other disappeared out the door.

"I'm Lieutenant Cosmo of Security. We've been attacked," he croaked. It looked painful for him to move. He lurched to the communication terminal.

"I need to send out a broadcast. One of their ships is heading to the space port Lankersham."

"Why?"

"They're bounty hunters."

"What if they're already there?"

"Then when I open up a communication you can do whatever you did here to give our comrades a chance to turn the situation to our...advantage."

The translator hesitated for an unusual amount of time before coming out with the word 'advantage' which could have been understandable if a new slang word was used, or it could be that Lt. Cosmo was hesitant about telling her more of the story, which in itself wasn't unusual. Whatever issue was with her, he was being untruthful about the situation. She could feel it.

"Who are they looking for?" Cot asked.

"Someone by the name of (unintelligible). He's a lawbreaker." His slurring of the name and adding in a louder voice "lawbreaker" was setting off mental alarms in her head. Was he trying to set off an audio security alarm?

"What's the reward?"

On some stations all that was needed to get security back up was to say the name of the wanted person and a code word in the same sentence and an alarm would go off in the Security Office. Since they were in the office Cot wondered what the security defense would be.

"It's a worthy enough reward," Lt. Cosmo said defensively.

It had to be big for him to be this evasive. Was it just a coincidence that bounty hunters were on the same space station as the person who Diana was looking to question?

"How did the bounty hunters take over your station?" Cot asked.

"Our mayor thought he could delay them while he looked into their claim that such a large reward is for such a worthless person." Lt. Cosmo made a contemptuous noise.

"So, you've seen this person they're looking for?"

"He passed through." His lips tightened. "You are not going to help us," he commented.

The lieutenant suddenly fell to the ground unconscious. Startled Cot looked around her then back at the unconscious lieutenant.

"Where did the other guy go?" Before Cosmos had fallen unconscious, he had activated the console. Taping through the menu she found the security cameras.

"Diana," she called over her comm link.

"I'm here. Go ahead," she replied.

"I think there's a reward out for Boyton. Did you know about it?"

"Did someone tell you that?"

"He didn't give me a name but did say there is a reward for someone. When he's conscious again, I'll get a name."

"What else did you find?"

"These people are bounty hunters, not pirates. Another interested party is heading your way. You might want to ask him. Did you find any more people?"

"Yes. They're all unconscious. I can't wake them."

"Would it be worth our while to wake them to question?"

"No. It's easier to suspect whoever is unaffected as a person of interest."

"I'll keep an eye on things from here since I have security cameras of the entire station. How long are you going to be looking around for your person?"

"You said an hour...that gives me thirty more minutes. Can you see anyone beside the person heading my way that's awake?"

The screen flickered quickly through images of the space station, pausing when a person was found running down a corridor. Cot suspected *Star Chaser* was manipulating the space stations security via a SE.

"Deck 3, 6 and 9 have what appears to be 2 or 3 unconscious people in the public corridors. They aren't dressed as security."

"Space stations are always busy. There should be more people caught in the corridors if it was a surprise takeover," Diana said.

The next set of images were the inside of rooms and personal quarters. "The scan is now going through public and private quarters. I have a live one. D2 L3 S9. The guy that was up here is dragging an unconscious person in the corridor. SE1, neutralize the person on D2L3S9 until Diana gets there."

The SE that accompanied Diana moved quickly to its new assignment. At that moment SE3 near her buzzed and exploded. Cot jumped to the side and turned to defend herself. She was knocked off balance by something she couldn't see. The blow sent her in the other direction and over the center console. SE2 appeared active but remained still as if it didn't register any danger to her.

Not knowing what was knocking her around, Cot rolled and jumped as well as zig-zagged in the small area, avoiding whatever was in the control tower with her. She thought she saw a dim outline of something larger than the doorway moving toward her, cutting off her escape to the docking bay. She moved again, feeling a flow of energy pass her. The exit was open to her, if she wanted to take it. Moving one way and then toward the exit she felt something hit her heel, knocking her leg hard into the door frame. Pain laced through her leg as she fell onto the stair landing. Cot pulled herself through the stair

railing, dropping to the deck below. As soon as her feet touched the deck she was flinging herself sideways. SE2 didn't follow her.

Another unseen energy hit her like a fist as she struggled to move. It took her breath away. It seemed a long time passed before her vision cleared. Moving slowly she tested her limbs. Everything moved. Looking above her SE2 was hovering near her.

"Cot, they have left the area," Star Chaser's voice sounded in her head. "I have dispatched a recon bot to attach to its hull."

"Good. What's the damage they left behind?" Cot asked.

"Diana was following the employee you warned her about, but she too was disabled. He escaped in a private escape pod with the unconscious person he was removing. We lost SE1 and SE3."

"Diana, come in," Cot called.

"I'm behind you. What happened to you?"

Cot was sitting against one of the crates while SE2 repaired the bruises she sustained.

"We met something we weren't able to handle. I'm sure *Star Chaser* will be ready next time. We lost two SEs."

"They adapted to my devices. I have gathered information on this species and will have protection from them on our next encounter," Star said.

"They aren't any species that I've met," Diana said. "Their weapons are invisible to my senses and I'm sorry about your gizmos. They're handy to have around."

"Me too. It's a good excuse to stop somewhere and get replacement parts. *Star Chaser* has run out of some parts to the gizmos she's been upgrading. Let's see what's happening upstairs," Cot said to Diana.

"I would like to know where they're going and if they have the person I wanted to question," Diana said.

"*Star* has a bot attached to their hull. Until it's discovered we'll be collecting information. HQ may have a new species added to their list if they don't already," Cot said.

As they climbed the stairs people started to gather on the platform, looking anxiously down at them.

"Halt!" Lt. Cosmo pushed aside those in front of him. He held a nerve destabilizer pointed at them.

"Lt. Cosmo, I'll handle this," a quiet voice from behind him said. "Everyone, return to your duty stations. We need to assess the condition of the space station and its residents."

"Princess - Commander Era," the lieutenant turned quickly, and bowed respectfully to a child. As the others filed back into the control room the princess waited for Cot and Diana to reach the platform.

"Thank you," Cot said to her and bowed her head slightly. "I didn't see you earlier," Cot said.

"I will say, I was doing as a child would, hiding until adults made it safe again."

"My name is Lt. Col. Cot. I am a representative of Star Force Command. This is Diana. She is seeking someone." Cot instinctively knew this child would know she was lying when she introduced Diana as a second lieutenant.

"Greetings, Princess Era. Commander of Space Station H. I came here to speak with Logomedesomolmon," Diana crossed her hands and laid them over her chest.

"Greetings, visitors. I will say, my name is Princess Era, 5th daughter to the Queen of Montagu and King of Standingfield. I will stand as spokesperson for Space Station H. I will say, Logomedesomolmon who is a favored traveler of our planet and but a passing mark in our long memories, left while we all were occupied with the Modas."

"Who are the Modas, Princess Era?" Cot asked.

"I will say, that requires a long story that will take more time than you have. I will say, in short, the Modas missed their point of arrival by 100 eras. It is a miscalculation that brought them into this part of space for which they will be regretful for many lifetimes," Princess Era said.

"They were your guests?" Cot said.

"I will say, all are welcomed who respectfully request a visitor's pass to either the space station or our planet. The Modas chose not to be in that state of grace," the princess said.

"What were they looking for?" Cot asked.

"I will say, a name, a person, a time that is 100 eras ago. I will say again, they miscalculated."

"Longomedesomolmon left with them?" Diana asked.

"I will say, he chose to leave with another - adventurer. I will speculate, his adventurous self will have many stories to recount though not within your lifetime. I will say, he is beyond your reach. I will ask, what is your business with him?"

"We would like to ask him about a sworn statement he made about another," Diana said.

The child's face broke out into a wide smile, showing blunted teeth that were made for mashing rather than tearing and rending. "I will say, Longomedesomolmon doesn't comprehend what a sworn statement is. I will say, it has no value in his world."

"My observation of those on Space Station H is that your guests are discreet and respectful of other guests and do not bear witness for or against another," Diana said.

"I will say, you have correctly observed," the princess said. The princess stood in silence as if listening to someone speaking out of their hearing range.

"You have one more question to ask and I will confirm or deny," she said.

"Is Boyton a traitor to Star Force?" Diana asked.

"No."

She then turned to her lieutenant. "Their visitor's pass has expired. They will be leaving."

"Thank you, Princess Era. May your long life be filled with adventures and quiet times of equal interest," Cot said.

"May I say, Lieutenant Colonel Colleen MacDiarmid, that your life is filled with adventures that move in strange and unusual places. I will say, the Unden will protect you." She looked intently at Cot as if trying to impress something on her. "Follow your original destination and you will find the one you're looking for." She then turned and walked a few feet before disappearing, as if she walked through an invisible door.

Cot and Diana exchanged looks and turned to climb down the stairs back to their shuttle.

"Where to now?" Cot asked Diana.

"C48MC22 and into a probable trap. So, tell me about your connection with the Unden," Diana said.

"I'll ask *Star Chaser* to search for information on Unden. That's the first time I've heard of that name. What do you know of them?"

"Nothing."

"And the princess?" Cot asked.

"Princess Era is 50 of your ers. The royal family lives a long time and has a biological memory, making them more knowledgeable at birth than you and I in our adulthood. Her older sister is usually the commander of the station. She's less informative and too cryptic with what information she does impart, so we got lucky."

"The lieutenant didn't look quite like her. Is he a mixed species?"

"I don't know much about the planet's species mixes. What I do know is that while the royal household tends toward longevity the rest of their planet's inhabitants don't live as long. Though they don't look that different, I think that has to do with their manipulation of appearance. Not even their servants that reside in their household live longer than the rest of the population. That's where belief in the "other" comes from. Unlike most species that face the prospect of falling from godhood amongst those they oversee should other species appear with greater if not equal power, they didn't hide the coming of other species. The planet's inhabitants' loyalty to them as their gods has been unwavering."

"So, what we saw of the princess doesn't necessarily mean that's what she looks like," Cot said.

"That's exactly right, but then, there's a lot of species whose appearance is determined by how our senses interpret what is before us. I may see her with a horn, and you may not, or one of us may see something and the other not."

Cot nodded, understanding from her own experiences. Her first off-planet trip to a space academy for diplomatic training was horrific. It was the first time she was confronted with the reality of sights and sounds from unspeakable shapes and figures to odors that had her gagging. In the end, she had to rely on what her senses presented and respond with common sense. As for seeing what others didn't see, she grew up seeing spirits and entities of the forest and fields that not all could see.

"Welcome aboard, Cot and Diana. Shuttle diagnostic will begin when you disembark from the *Reflected Light*," *Star Chaser* said.

"Greetings. I have the conn, *Star*. Find the fastest route to C48MC22," Cot said.

"*Using our gates?*" *Star* mentally asked.

"*We'll enter HQ's portal then where it's convenient, leave and find our own way.*"

"Cot has the conn. We will be at the portal in one standard hour."

"Noted."

"Would you mind if I used your exercise program?" Diana asked.

"Help yourself. If you would like, *Star* can create a program just for you," Cot said.

"Would you mind if I use yours?"

Cot laughed and Diana grinned broadly. "Try your best, but *Star Chaser* adjusts the program for the individual with surprises."

"Nothing a good trainer wouldn't do," Diana said.

Gemini hesitated as if in quandary as who to stay with. It ended up staying with Diana in the bay while Cot returned to her bridge. She had reports to attend to.

"Approaching first portal," *Star* said later.

"Acknowledged. SOP."

"Standard Operating Procedures, sending out forward monitors."

"Have you received anything from the monitor you sent after the spaceship with the two people Diana was interested in?"

"It was dislodged before the ship went into hyperspace."

"How long will it take to reach us if we wait here?"

"One hour."

"We'll wait."

An hour later Cot's screen blinked that *Star's* monitor was approaching them.

"Verify that it's not carrying anything it didn't leave with. Download its information to my screen."

They moved into the travel corridor smoothly as Cot's screen filled with information she didn't find enlightening about who was flying the ship and where it was going.

"*Star*, you have the conn," Cot said.

"*Star Chaser* has the conn," *Star* said.

* * *

It was an hour later that the ship's alarm awakened her. Automatically, Cot dropped to the deck and dressed quickly in her AVEG suit.

"Report, *Star*," but she didn't expect an answer since the familiar presence she felt from *Star's* connection was gone. When did she stop feeling her presence? She didn't even remember if she was dreaming. She always dreamed when she napped.

Diana joined her in the corridor dressed in her AVEG suit. No Gemini.

"What's going on?" Diana asked as they thumped to the bridge.

"I don't know. I lost contact with *Star*."

"Does that happen often?" Diana asked.

Before them there was a closed hatch cover to the bridge. It is only closed during emergencies.

"What is often?" Cot asked. She pushed the emergency release and was surprised when the hatch cover opened easily and even more surprised when four figures were on her bridge.

"Identify yourselves," Cot demanded.

The four disappeared.

"*Star Chaser*, identify intruders."

"I have been breached," was *Star Chaser's* dispassionate report.

It took a moment for Cot to register that this was not the voice she was used to.

"*Star Chaser*, did they download anything into your systems?" Cot asked.

"I have been violated. I have become non-compliant with security regulations for a Star Force ship. I will begin to erase all..."

"Stop. On my authorization, you are to erase nothing until I authorize it. Do you recognize my command as Captain of *Star Chaser*?"

All systems shut down with their faceplates activating simultaneously. Their suit comms came on and the scans on their face plates began filling with information.

Both women looked at each other.

Cot headed to the storage bay with Diana following closely on her heels. This was where the CBIS would prove its credits.

"What is that?" Diana asked as Cot signed on the CBIS.

"This is *Star Chaser's* backup and a security monitor. She was upset it was going into places she felt were her private spaces, but she finally let it complete its backup. Now it is testing time. It doesn't store her personality, only files on the operation of the ship."

"I've never heard of the company."

"They were a small company that merged with a larger one to continue with their work on the CBIS. I was able to buy it from them when they were selling their test models for liquid credits. Since I knew one of the owners, he gave me a model he felt was ready for marketing. I understand the company that bought them out changed the name and other things so what is being sold now isn't the same quality as this test model."

"A test model, aye? Has *Star* upgraded it like she does everything else?"

"As far as I know, she wasn't able to access it." Cot was hoping with her warning to *Star* earlier that *Star* would be sure her important data was stored in the CBIS.

Cot activated the security mode and watched the alarms began to appear across the lines of code. She hit repair all and could see it move faster down the list of warnings.

The lights in the ship came on. Gemini appeared.

"Gemini, where have you been?" Diana asked.

"Star, *can you hear me?*" Cot mentally called.

"I am here. I have never left."

Cot hesitated as she sought anything unfamiliar in their connection. "*Star*, are you functioning sufficiently to manage the ship?" she asked aloud.

"I'm recovering," *Star* said.

"Were we in the corridor HQ gave us?"

"Yes."

"What is our location now, *Star?*" Diana asked.

"I will have to exit the travel corridor to get a galaxy fix," *Star* said.

"How far are we from our exit point?" Cot asked.

"I have no information on that point," *Star* answered.

"Review your journal logs," Cot said.

"My journal logs have not been restarted," *Star* replied.

"Start your journal logs," Cot said.

"Sounds like a system wipe," Diana said.

"I hope CBIS can help with that," Cot said. She looked at the submenus for *Star Chaser's* private files then selected restore.

"I have an unauthorized attempt to access my system," *Star Chaser* warned.

Cot accessed a console in the loading bay and signed on. The captain's console appeared with the request from CBIS to logon to *Star Chaser*. Cot allowed access.

"I have an unauthorized user in my system," *Star Chaser* said.

Cot continued to allow CBIS into various levels of *Star Chaser's* program. She turned back to CBIS and watched the progress, keeping an eye on both screens.

"All systems need to stop for new user's control," *Star* announced.

Cot tapped another menu on CBIS and selected copy files to system instead of allowing CBIS to take control. Lights in the bay dimmed.

"Now we wait," Cot said.

"Looks like you've been through this before," Diana said.

"The other time was a lot more complicated."

"Do tell," Diana said and waited, looking like she expected Cot to continue.

"Wouldn't it be better if you told me your version than *Star*?"

"*Star* wouldn't tell stories about me," Cot said, then wondered. If *Star* thought it was a harmless trade for information she wanted, maybe she would. That was something she would speak to *Star Chaser* about later.

"On a patrol during the Incursion Wars I was shot down and landed on a planet with a burnout. My ship wasn't the only one that crash landed on that planet's surface and in that same area. It looked like there was something that captured what it considered space debris falling to its surface and directed it to fall in that area. Old and recent models of ships were scattered about, so I pirated parts from the wrecks to get my ship back into space."

"You make it sound easy," Diana said, "but I bet it wasn't."

For a moment Cot wondered just how much Diana already knew and then decided to tell her just what she was willing to discuss. "It wasn't. The parts I used were not recognized by my fighter, so I had to get the system to register the parts as new and assign all the attributes I needed the part to do. When a new part is installed the ship's computer will test the manufacturer's specs. I had to turn off a lot of security checks to get that fighter back in space and hope I didn't burn up in the process. It was a learning experience I hope to not have to go through again."

"An engineer would have loved to have been in that situation. Do all pilots have to know how to work on their ships?"

"I spent a lot of time with the ship mechanics at the diplomatic school. They needed someone to test the ships they repaired and I was thrilled. First, I was just a passenger and took notes from the test pilot. She taught me to fly too. Then she was shipped out and by then I was hooked on fighter piloting."

Diana smiled. "That's how you got into the space academy."

"Yes."

"So, you got your ship off the planet and into space. Good thing you were rescued."

"Yes." *After a fashion*, Cot thought. It was what happened after she got into space she didn't want to recount.

Her fighter shorted out the batteries and all she had was life support. She was unseen unless someone passed by and happened to be looking out their proverbial window. Due to her situation, she witnessed a meeting that would blow the spy-intel organization into a frantic frenzy. Who would have guessed the spy they were all looking for within the fleet was the very person that was the head of intelligence?

Her last life beacon was fed with the information with her location and dispatched. It was the energy required to send the beacon off that registered a blip on someone's monitor and she was captured by the enemy and sent to a death camp. She was lucky it only took a day to find her, or she would have been executed with a dozen others.

Diana watched Cot's gaze become unfixed. There were a lot of stories not included in her file that Diana was curious about. She wondered if *Star Chaser* would fill her in.

"Shall I begin recording?" *Star Chaser* asked.

"You should always be recording," Cot said. *Star* was not up to her old self. "*Star Chaser*, all stop."

Both women held on as the ship came to an abrupt stop.

"All stopped," *Star Chaser* reported.

"*Star*, this abrupt stop would be an emergency all stop," Cot said. "Normally, all stop unless I say it's an emergency all stop, you can stop with less shock to the biologicals on board."

"*Star Chaser* is not performing to her specs?" Diana asked, unsure if she should be amused or worried.

"CBIS hasn't finished updating all her systems, so I'll wait before I make any adjustments."

"So, we've come to an all stop in a travel corridor, and we don't know where we are or if we get out of it, how to get back in," Diana said.

"Not a problem yet," Cot reassured her. Cot logged into her personal logs and quickly moved through stories she collected. After an hour she found the Tale of Two Hags and the Tea Kettle. The information was in the second line. She typed in the code.

Space before them changed.

"That's an exit?" Diana asked as she leaned forward to stare at a portal into another galaxy of stars. It shimmered and undulated. Diana closed her eyes as her equilibrium became unsettled, waiting for them to exit.

Cot could feel a change in energy as they moved out of the corridor into another part of space. The results of the scans from all around them filled her monitor. She picked her way through them, looking for something that she could make sense of.

"*Star*, can you locate where we are and C48MC22?"

"Ten hours from our present position," *Star Chaser* answered. "Would you like a more precise measurement?"

"Ten hours is sufficient, *Star*," Cot said. "Increase speed to as fast as possible without injuring us," Cot said.

"Speed has been increased," *Star* said.

"How long?" Diana asked.

"My fastest speed possible without injuring my passengers is an unknown," *Star Chaser* said.

Cot suddenly gulped as her equilibrium and stomach lurched. Diana grabbed the arms of her seat.

A medbot was activated and administered something to each. Whatever it was left Cot's limbs so loose she would have slid out of her seat if the harness to her seat wasn't activated.

Mentally, Cot couldn't form a complete sentence or even remember who she was. How long the feeling lasted she couldn't tell but suddenly she snapped out of it. Cot looked at the medbot that had moved from her to Diana. Diana's eyes opened instantly without assistance from the medbot.

Cot looked at her screen and could see they had come to a stop. "Where are we, *Star Chaser*?"

"We are at the border of the New Frontier. We must cross it to get to C48MC22. The warning buoys warn all ships crossing that there are no treaties or agreements between those that live in this space sector and the sector we are leaving," *Star* said. "Shall I resume course, Cot?"

"Is there any unusual danger we should be looking for?" Cot said to Diana.

"Be alert for anything," Diana said. "For a one-year journey we made it in shorter and good time. I like the travel corridors and their shortcuts, just not the side effects."

"*Star*, continue course and send out scouts."

Star was silent for longer than Cot was used to. "*Star*, acknowledge my last two commands."

"Acknowledged," *Star* answered.

"Did you send out scouts and what is the course and are we on our way?" Cot asked impatiently.

"Scouts have been deployed. I have completed the course. We are underway."

"All stop and shut down all but life support," Cot said quickly.

The bridge went black.

"I have come to all stop with only life support active," *Star Chaser* said.

"Why does she acknowledge some of your commands and not all?" Diana wondered aloud.

"Exactly. Something is interfering with our communication."

Cot got up and went into the bay to check on CBIS. Parts of the device were scattered about the deck.

"This is getting more serious," Diana said. She looked around for evidence of what destroyed CBIS.

Cot studied the parts lying about the deck. It was dismantled without damage to the parts. "Computer, emergency down." Cot then gave a code in a dialect no longer used on any planet - handy to know if you wanted to set a code in case of a ship take over.

"What are you doing?" Diana asked.

"I'm putting the ship into manual over-ride. It will come back up without external override capability. I will be the lone captain of this ship."

"You think someone has been controlling it from...where?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm going to take over. Let's get your job done so I can get to my ship's issues."

Cot headed back to the bridge.

Cot selected coordinates and began testing what gizmos she had and querying the equipment *Star Chaser* had upgraded. So far, they have all been responding. That was reassuring.

As they arrived at their destination, an awkward looking space monitor, Cot sent out two gizmos to inspect the monitor. It was above a dozen planets that could support life but not to her species.

"I can't get a reading on this hull," Cot said. "It's made of material not recognized by *Star Chaser's* database. Why can we see it if our scans can't identify what its composition is?"

"It's an automated monitor. For an arriving ship, you can ask the monitor what each planet's requirement for visiting is and you'll be told there is no visiting. Once you land, that's your permanent home, so chose well," Diana said. She smiled at Cot and gestured to the monitor. "Are you planning on visiting the monitor? You can query it without visiting."

"I did but I'm not privy to the information. I want to see if anyone is on it. It's big enough to hide a dozen people my size."

Chapter 27

Surprises Abound

"In the New Frontier you'll find space monitors like this but of various sizes. I've only seen four and inspected two," Diana explained as they jetted over to the monitor. "They are spaceships you would find in a ship junk yard. They appeared to be stripped down to the hull of all electronics and when you scan it you won't find anything to read. The two I've entered had a power source I wasn't able to identify but I believe it's what maintains its place in space. All the monitors allow passing ships to leave a message that is delivered to a kiosk over the border. I tested it. I left two messages. One was for immediate delivery, and it delivered it at the same time I was dictating. The second message was a two-day delay and that's exactly when it was delivered. Whoever maintains these monitors have only one access hatch left to enter. It's usually where the main access had been when it was an operating ship. That's over this way," Diana said.

They fired their jets and expertly maneuvered around the slowly rotating monitor. They passed hatch covers permanently sealed. The docking extenders for a visiting ship had been removed.

One of the SEs attached to Cot's shoulder detached and opened the hatch cover after Diana tapped in a code. Cot could imagine an alarm light going off somewhere in the space monitor. The SE went first, then Diana. Cot looked back out in space, searching for anything that was not *Star Chaser* before entering.

The station was smaller than *Star Chaser*, but not by much, which is why she was curious to visit it. It could be a meeting place.

"How do I activate this?" Diana asked.

"Tell it what you want it to do." Cot eyed the SE before her. "SE inspect the space before me." She turned back to Diana, "Just what do you want me to do with what I find, if I should find someone?"

"Hold him, her or it, until I get there," Diana said. "SE, lead to the right."

"Keep in touch," Cot told her. Cot moved slowly through the station, studying every shadow and nook. There were a lot of both. Her visor was showing that someone had passed and not wearing a space suit. The readings were fresh. A week at the most she calculated. She realized she hadn't looked to see how long Boyton was on the run.

"Cot, how are you doing," Diana asked.

"I haven't found anything that someone would use to stay alive here. No food dispensers, life pods or quarters. Just nooks for tiny people to hide in," Cot said.

"If you trust your helmet visor's readings, you will see that the interior has adapted to your life signs," Diana said.

"I noticed, but I don't trust it." Cot realized that she had come to depend on *Star Chaser's* assessment.

Everything Cot passed showed part of a power plant. The only thing that was using power was the stabilizer that kept the monitor from losing orbit, yet there wasn't any vibration she could detect.

Cot paused when a vibration did register on her visor, but it wasn't enough to power a stabilizer. Slowly, she turned around watching her visor's readings. Nothing but bulkhead, more cabling, nooks and shadows.

"Diana, did you get a reading of that vibration?" Cot asked.

"No. No vibrations. I'm done on this side and heading back to the hatch," Diana said.

It occurred to Cot that somebody in Star Force may have sent them on a false trail.

Cot reached the end then began her walk back. She met Diana at the hatch.

"I found traces of someone but unless they're hanging outside until we leave, we're the only ones here now," Diana said.

"Let's go. I'd like to see what's going on with *Star Chaser*."

As they stepped out into space Cot could see *Star Chaser* moving away from them. "Emergency shutdown, *Star Chaser*! All stop by my order! Identify me!" Cot ordered.

The ship continued to move away from their position as if her commands weren't heard.

"*Reflected Light*, identify me," she said in an untranslatable language. "Dispatch to my coordinates immediately," Cot ordered.

"Blasters!" Diana said.

A ship suddenly appeared. It fired a dozen shots their way and disappeared after *Star Chaser*. *Reflected Light* darted toward them. Since the shuttle couldn't disable the shots heading toward them without injuring them, the SEs moved to intercept and while they were engaged Cot and Diana boarded the shuttle. It was too late to help the SEs, they exploded.

Cot dropped into the pilot's seat and immediately began to start the process of locating *Star Chaser* and following her.

"Are you following *Star Chaser*?" Diana asked.

"Right now, she's more important than your assignment. Do you plan on overriding my decision?"

"Count this as mixed luck. I think my assignment is on your ship. Do, carry on."

"My consolation is the SEs on board and the medbot are programmed to disable the unauthorized person or persons and the ship will come to a stop in twenty minutes. I just don't know what *Gemini* will do about this."

"*Star Chaser* is headed further in the New Frontier." Diana said.

"What can be in this sector that your fugitive wants?"

"To be anonymous, provided he can escape whoever is hunting him. I'm curious how that ship was able to cross over the boundary when they looked like they meant to take out *Star Chaser*."

"Maybe destroying a ship is not the same as killing a person," Cot said.

Cot did another scan for *Star Chaser*. "*Star Chaser* is leaving behind gizmos to disable her tail and she's changing course without picking up speed. What is her pilot up to? I hope her arsenal of gizmos isn't emptied," Cot muttered.

"Just what is *Star Chaser* capable of doing to protect herself when she's attacked?" Diana asked.

"I don't know who's in command, her or her pilot but..."

Cot went silent as readings of the remains of a ship came across her scans. "I guess that answers our questions. She took out her attacker. This is not looking good for us when we do take possession of *Star*."

"There's no failsafe on *Star Chaser*?"

"Yes, of course. The ship will protect itself, which it just did."

"So, when we catch up with *Star Chaser*, do you have any plans to get her not to think we're attacking her?" Diana asked.

"It depends on what we catch up to. Tell me about Boyton. What are his skills?"

"That's rather interesting but that part was left out of his files," Diana said.

"I don't think it has to do with his father. The person on the monitoring station we were at wasn't male," Cot said. "I wasn't sure then, but now, I am."

"Maybe Boyton's girlfriend. Where's that artifact?" Diana asked. "I can feel it."

"Probably in the shuttle's baggage compartment. I didn't put it there. Did you?"

"No. I thought it was in my quarters."

Cot tapped in an inquiry. "Here we are in unknown space and just like any other well-traveled space corridor we're getting invitations. Right now, I have 2000 businesses that have sent their destinations and advertisements. No Murphy's Dinner yet. The shuttle doesn't have the capacity to cross-check what danger these businesses pose to us in a reasonable amount of time."

"What do you consider a reasonable amount of time?"

"Two days. If we're lucky, we'll be here for less. We've been tracked since the shuttle left *Star Chaser*, so it's going to be interesting to see who does more than send advertisements."

"It must be a busy corridor then." Diana watched over Cot's shoulder for a few minutes. "I'm going to look over that artifact. Maybe I can figure out what the markings are. It will give me something to do."

"All right. If you should suddenly find a hidden pocket or a button on that thing, don't investigate it without *Star Chaser's* containment field around you. I've heard a lot of stories in spacer bars about artifacts handled by strangers."

Diana grinned. "Aye. I've heard my share of stories too. I think we have enough to deal with now without me adding them to our list."

Diana went to the back of the shuttle and opened up the storage compartment.

Cot busied herself sending out coded messages to *Star Chaser*, monitoring the space around them, and querying the SEs that were still on-board *Star Chaser*. So far, she wasn't getting any return pings from anything *Star Chaser* controlled.

Hours passed without any disturbance. Cot kept herself alert and busy reviewing data as her inquiries returned. She became aware of a silence in the shuttle that was suspiciously too quiet. Without changing her demeanor, she activated a security buffer around her, then tested the security in the shuttle. Something was in the shuttle beside them. Cot engaged her AVEC faceplate. The shuttle wasn't large enough to lose someone yet there was no Diana. "*Reflected Light*, where is Diana?"

The storage cabinet opened as if someone was there. Diana rolled out unconscious.

"Activate medbot. Activate..."

A shape materialized moving swiftly from the storage cabinet to her, then it dissipated. Cot thought she recognized the species but too quickly it dematerialized. She didn't want to disengage the security buffer around her to see if she could help Diana, so it was up to the medbot that was more qualified to see to Diana's needs.

"*Reflected Light*, how far are we from *Star Chaser*?"

On her visor the distance and location appeared. They were closer. *Star Chaser* must have slowed, nearing her destination.

"Show me all ships within one hour of *Star Chasers* location."

Four ships appeared.

Cot looked back at Diana. She was still unconscious. It was important that Diana be awake when they reached *Star Chaser*. A light blinked on her visor. *Star Chaser* acknowledged *Reflected Light's* signal. Cot mentally reached out to see if her connection to *Star Chaser* was back. Instead, she sensed something else. Cot jumped up and grabbed the figure that dropped from the overhead. It wrapped its appendages around her and squeezed. The AVEC suit, enhanced with *Star Chaser's* changes, sent a shock to the outer skin of the suit. The energy sent the figure flying into the bulkhead. In the blink of an eye it disappeared through the overhead.

Cot looked at the noise behind her. Diana was on her feet struggling with another figure. A ding from the console signaled they had reached *Star Chaser*. She turned her attention to their approach. The bay doors weren't opening. Her commands to the SEs on board *Star Chaser* were not being acknowledged. The shuttle continued progress and her screen filled with warnings of an impending crash. Cot kept over-riding all stop. She was counting on *Star Chaser's* independent system to recognize its own shuttle and that she was captain and would open up. Cot kept sending commands to *Star Chaser*.

"Hey!" Diana shouted near her ear. "Are you trying to kill..." Diana let out a huff as the bay doors slid open seconds before it was too late. Diana sat down and watched as they glided into *Star Chaser's* bay.

"It isn't over yet," Cot said. "*Star Chaser*, I hope you have a plan. Mine is to retake your bridge."

Before either rose from their seats, the shuttle or *Star Chaser* accelerated, pushing Cot and Diana into their seats.

"I hate going so fast I can't enjoy the ride," Diana panted.

"Your suit will adjust," Cot said. Her own suit was showing how hard it was working to keep her relatively comfortable. Her console showed a planet that *Star Chaser* had as destination. "*Star Chaser* was waiting for us. That's a good sign," Cot said.

"If this doesn't knock us out, I'll be grateful to be able to see where I'm going," Diana said.

Cot linked the shuttle's monitor to *Star's* bridge. "We're heading to a planet that doesn't have city structures above ground on this side of the planet, nor can I see any underground cities. There are living creatures on the surface, but I wouldn't be able to know their intelligence."

"The planet is called Ascer. I was there once. It's another planet of choice for those that want to disappear permanently. I think Boyton will be heading further from the boundary."

"Permanently, as in there's no ride off the planet?" Cot asked.

"When I visited Ascer, I provided my own transportation, but it wasn't easy to keep possession of it. The inhabitants were interested in destroying it. One-way-ticket was their practice."

"We've come to a stop. Let's see if we're allowed off this shuttle."

The shuttle hatch opened, and both hurried down the ramp.

"Lieutenant Colonel Colleen MacDiarmid, captain of *Star Chaser* on board. I have the conn."

"Lieutenant Colonel Colleen MacDiarmid, Captain of *Star Chaser*, is on board. Cot has the conn," *Star Chaser's* voice responded.

"*Star Chaser*," Cot said surprised. The connection with *Star Chaser* was different. She hadn't recognized it until *Star* responded verbally.

"Yes, Cot. I am *Star Chaser*, explorer of galaxies and adventurer of space. We have arrived at our destination. All guests have disembarked," *Star* said.

"Where's Gemini?" Diana asked.

"Guest Gemini is no longer on board," *Star* said.

"Let's make a visual inspection of *Star Chaser*," Cot said to Diana.

Though Cot couldn't see her altar, she could feel its presence. They were in an energy phase. Diana must have felt the same as she paused where the altar would have been.

"Energy is different here. How do you change the visor's scan range?"

Cot lifted the arm of her suit and opened a panel. "Up or down?"

"Every species is different," Diana said.

Cot jumped back when her manipulation of her scanner showed a person two feet in front of her.

"So, you can now see me," Boyton said. "Leave me alone," he said firmly.

"Why are you running?" Cot asked.

"When someone sends a mortliege after you, would you just wait around to find out what that could be about? Would you just hang around when your ship is blown up, or someone who you love their life is threatened? I don't think you would just wait around for things to happen to you."

"So where are you going?" Diana said.

He smiled. "Where politics doesn't care who I and Ambe are."

"Why the New Frontier? Sooner or later what you're running from will find you," Cot said.

"For now, no one can cross the border with the intention of doing harm to another. Soon, the reason why we are hunted will be forgotten as new problems arise. *Star Chaser* has been helpful. I'm sorry if you find it offensive that I borrowed her, but I helped put her together," he said grinning, "so it didn't seem so bad to borrow her when my love and my life were in danger. She's more than what I had dreamt of her being."

"You're one of her developers?" Cot asked. Looks were deceiving.

"Ailinn's consciousness was who I chose to embody this star fighter. She chose the name *Star Chaser*. I wanted a consciousness that had potential but no life experience. The others are older egos that had experienced life, and everyone knew what they were about."

"You called *Star Chaser* to help you?" Diana asked, worried that the sentient ship had a vulnerability SF hadn't thought of.

He sighed exasperated. "I wished for help. Some things are not explainable and are a waste of time to try."

Cot smiled, understanding perfectly. The SID-ships were telepathic with their pilots. It made sense that they would also be telepathic with their creators.

"So, why did you put the CBIS out of order and then put it back together?" Cot asked.

"It's Eri Som's invention. He had a good idea, but it wasn't meant to be a backup for a sentient ship. As it was it would have shorted from too much information. As a thank you for the use of *Star Chaser* and for the loss of some of *Star's* defense toys, *Star Chaser* and I reprogrammed CBIS to be her back up, with the right information. CBIS should only be connected to her when her systems have crashed, just like on this occasion. You met the Corini's. They patrol some of the older travel corridors and don't want certain types in corridors they patrol. Sentient ships are one. I gave *Star Chaser* all the travel corridors I know of and their rules of travel, in exchange, she has promised me you'll leave us alone."

"She did, did she?" Diana asked annoyed.

Boyton chuckled. "She did. Since I'm no longer working on the sentient project, there are a lot of people that want me to work on theirs. I want to do something different."

"Star Force is after you for that reason?"

"There's a division in Star Force that develops weapons that are detrimental to the life force of various species. That's where I was transferred to. I told them if they move me to that area, I will try every way I could to shut it down."

"Star Force uses biological weapons? That's against their code. Is that why they put a price on your head, because you wouldn't work for them?"

"No. It's more than that. They transferred me to a high security space station anyway and gave me four projects to complete. The head of that department is a Creep. He was stuck on me like adhesive, so I had to figure out a way to do just what I said I was going to do before he did something to me to become compliant to his wishes. No one would believe me when I reported my suspicions about him because once in his department, I was isolated from anyone outside of Space Station Uln. While the virus I set in his life support systems was shutting down all areas, and the wipe of all his computers and files was in progress, I escaped in his personal yacht."

"So, who is this creep?" Diana asked.

"It's from one of those planets they closed to space travel. They have their own agenda to take over universes, as that department proved. I let the galaxy police know about Creeps working on Space Station Uln. Star Force knew Creeps were dangerous but someone in the Projects Department thought he could control them. You don't control Creeps. They manipulate energy so you think you're the one in control."

"Boyton, you have one minute left," *Star Chaser* said.

"This is but a brief stop in our journey." Boyton smiled. "I'm taking two SEs and a few of *Star's* defenders that she upgraded. Until we reach our destination, I'll need something I can trust to watch our backs. I have some advice about that power base to an artifact. I put it in the shuttle because *Star Chasers* hull isn't enough to prevent the energy it's putting out to be felt by the Hunters. You should find some place to leave it otherwise you'll have every Hunter that can pick up on the energy chasing you down."

Boyton's image faded.

Diana looked at Cot. "I can't detain transmissions."

"So, what do you suggest we do now?"

"Creeps," Diana said thoughtfully, "and in Star Force."

"Someone was manipulated into allowing a Creep to have their own experimental department. That is scary."

"Your Enas wouldn't allow them to be within a day's distance from any of their ships," Diana said.

"Because of the telepathic imprint they could make on a developing cocoon," Cot said.

"It's not discussed but yes. I'll have a word with my contact in SF to see why a Creep is in Star Force. I would hate to think the Creeps have infiltrated SF."

"It's disturbing that someone in SF knew *Star Chaser* would be involved because of their connection and used us to hunt Boyton down. Boyton was lucky it was you that SF paired us with because bounty hunters normally don't care why or what is going to happen to their trophy, they just want to collect. So where do you want to be taken now?" Cot asked.

"Murphy's Bar. I noticed there's one on this side of the New Frontier, unless you want to be chased by Hunters."

"You don't want your ship back?"

"Glass Eye? The last time we saw it, it wasn't in the best of health. Ati is going to be positively furious unless I replace it. By now he knows I borrowed it."

"Locate the nearest Murphy's Bar, *Star*."

"It is one hour from our present position taking a travel corridor Boyton provided," *Star* said. "Do you wish me to use it?"

"Did the travel corridors we had intruders visit us have any warnings that we would not be welcomed?" Cot asked.

"Yes. I can now identify which are private and restrictive. I am going over the travel corridors that I have in my database and adding this information," *Star Chaser* said.

"Is this one restrictive?"

"Not for us."

"Then we'll take it," Cot said. "SOP, *Star Chaser*."

"Standard Operating Procedures, Clev R4 sent in advance," *Star Chaser* responded.

"Who is unable to travel in this corridor, *Star Chaser*," Diana asked.

"The list is long and will take longer than an hour. Do you wish me to begin?"

"No," Cot and Diana said.

"But you can show me a list of the ones I can't travel in," Diana added looking over at Cot. "Just in case I have the code to one of them."

"It would take less time for you to give me your list, and I will tell you if you can't enter it without some consequence," *Star* said.

Diana grinned. "Hm. That's one way to learn my gates."

"But not the pass codes," *Star* said.

Cot watched her screen as *Reflected Light* glided into the dock they were assigned. The space port LandL was located in the New Frontier, two hours from the boundary markers. The space port was the size of a city of five thousand. The port was busy. The traffic controller gave them five minutes for Diana to debark and *Reflected Light* to be on her way.

"Diana, it's been nice meeting up with you. May the space tides bring you glory and adventure," Cot told her.

"And you, Cot, take care of your partner, *Star Chaser*. And thank you for the gizmos. I'm sure I'll be using them soon."

The moment the shuttle docked, the ramp was extended. In less than a minute, Diana was gone along with the artifact and some of *Star Chaser's* updated gizmos. If she was carrying the artifact Cot and *Star Chaser* felt she needed added protection. *Star Chaser* liked Diana Rue, and Cot thought with a smile, so did she.

Cot felt the influence of the artifact, as it moved further away. "If I can feel its absence, then it's good to get rid of something that I only notice when it's gone," she said to *Star*.

"The energy is of little significance to your bios," *Star* said.

Cot thought otherwise since she noticed its presence.

Reflected Light was back in space, heading to where *Star Chaser* was waiting, giving the appearance of a well-armed yacht. Once the shuttle was safe in her cargo bay, they left the New Frontier.

Chapter 28

Home Is Where The Heart Is

Cot stared out at endless space with its bright stars, planets, galaxies and colorful gaseous clouds. She thought of her aunt who had given up traveling through space, experiencing it's wonders to take under her wing an unschooled child, isolating them both in the woods where interstellar space was reduced to pin pricks of bright lights seen in the night sky - mere glitters through treetops.

A Brounder had predicted at her presentation to the clan at one month old that she would become a star warrior. Bounders became an integral part of a child's presentation ritual when baby switching, kidnapping and assassinations became a common practice. Healthy children were a commodity to families. She never heard of a Brounder being wrong.

An infant's presentation before the clan one month after birth served numerous purposes, besides adding the name to the clan register. It showed the child who survived ailments a new born may suffer - both natural and planned; the infant was given an official clan name; the gender and parentage were validated; and a health check was given. As a bonus that all parents looked forward to was a prediction of their progeny's future place in clan life.

Why did her parents, with four children already, begrudge her destiny to leave the clanlands? She used to think it was jealousy, but it didn't ring true since they could have left themselves.

Smiling, she remembered her aunt's patience and humor in teaching her how to astral project to almost anywhere. There were rules to follow, of course. The privacy of others was important and there were places a novice should not visit. Astral projection wasn't the same as traveling in a spaceship, but for a child excluded from family gatherings it meant she wasn't as naïve as her clan and kin intended her.

Did her aunt regret her choice? Her heart told her no.

Though she astral projected to many places off-planet, once her senses were open her favorite places where the woods and pastures that she knew as her home. Whereas once she hoped someone in her family would explain why she was not permitted to see

them, after her aunt's arrival she hoped they would forget her. But her whole world changed once she left her home planet as a candidate for the Academy of Diplomacy.

Pursing her lips in thought, she wondered what would make *her* leave sailing through intergalactic space with all this unfathomable beauty around her to living planet bound. Why was she finding the thought of living on a planet bound so restrictive? Since leaving Mari she had little or no privacy, seldom was there peaceful silence, personal space around her was sometimes less than an arm's length, and there were confusing rules to remember about living so close to other species. Living planet bound during her childhood was simpler.

She sighed. She hadn't realized her tolerance for living in close quarters with others had reached an end-point until she had transferred to her own ship...*Star Chaser*.

She gave herself a mental shake. She had administrative duties to attend to.

Reluctantly, her gaze returned to her monitor where there was a list of supplies and gizmos they needed with the most important at the top of the list, a GPS 202. The list stayed long as the SID-ships exchanged innovations and upgrades to various gizmos their pilots picked up. Each SID strived to outdo the other or discover new gizmos on the market to tinker with. The item at the top of all their lists was a mechanical bot that did the microscopic work on gizmos the SIDs tinkered with. It was an older GPS model, the 202 that the manufacturer had stopped producing five years ago, a long time considering how quickly new inventions all around the galaxies made it to the markets. The SIDs favored it over the newer models because they could make their own modifications without changing the exterior of the bot, a compact and mobile worker.

She accepted the list and sent it to her queue so she would have the list handy at their next stop at a supply depot. With all the monitors they were leaving throughout the galaxies they needed to keep their stores well stocked. Just as the SIDs had their challenges their pilots found shopping at a Star Force approved supply store wasn't easy when the reputable dealers had their loyal customers to supply first. If the SID-pilots appeared as SF agents to get favorable picks of gizmos and parts or purchase anything more than half-a-dozen items in one place it would alert spies who would be interested in selling information. Until the SID-ships were taken off the classified listing the SID-

pilots were obligated to keep a low profile. Selling information was a profitable business but dangerous for the spy.

Keeping a low profile meant being cognizant of who was watching them as each strolled through shops looking for items on their parts list. Cot had her own fun, masquerading as different species, learning their mannerisms and keeping *Star* busy with doing background studies on each species so she pulled it off successfully. *Star* was thorough and learned cultural stories and what planets they migrated to, and most importantly answered the questions of would that species travel alone and under what conditions. It was more fun than studying species in an academic setting.

"*Star*, how far is the next supply depot?"

"Unknown. I will download the information from a kiosk once we cross back over the border. When we returned back into the New Frontier space to avoid the CFS scout ships I've added twenty-two hours to our next cross-over to ensure the short-range scout ships are not around. I have no current information on the territory we will be crossing into."

"We'll leave monitors to map the area. How much longer till we cross over?"

"Six hours and forty-seven minutes. Should I include unscrupulous suppliers as part of my search?"

"Are you looking for excitement, *Star*?"

"I am detecting a change in your bio-readings since our last guest Diana left. Perhaps you are bored."

"I am content. When you find the next reputable supplier, we'll research my disguise."

Cot moved to her correspondence. For the fifth time she reread a message sent from High Commander Er's secretary, Yu Tat who was given the task of monitoring her squad's correspondence. Yu Tat gave her and the squad high praise for their modified gizmos they were leaving throughout space. She felt proud of their accomplishments since leaving POATA. They were causing a lot of chatter among HQs people of importance due to the unexpected busy traffic the gizmos were picking up. The galaxies were enormous with only a small amount of space in each sector mapped and known, so in both the familiar parts of space and the unexplored the upgraded monitors were

generating enough interest to send out mapping crews with the newest equipped science ships to investigate. Yu Tat had marked sections of space SFHQ was especially interested in.

Was that a hint, she thought humorously.

When she was an officer in CFS, Consortium of Four Sectors, the areas that SFHQ marked were often referred to as NR, the No Return sections of space. At places spacers liked to gather it was known that people that didn't want to be found would head there. New Frontier had requirements for crossing over its borders and they all involved nonviolence. Cot figured the type of people that disappeared in NR space didn't have the same requirements; however, no one reported any activity in those NR areas or knew of anyone who had returned from there. She wondered why previous patrols and monitoring devices hadn't picked up anything. The gizmos they were given to test were new from research laboratories. Were they that different from previous models or was it because of the additional tweaking the SIDs gave to the gizmos? Again, her thoughts went to possibilities, right where rereading the message kept taking her. Was Yu setting them up for a future assignment? During the war years she had tracked a lot of enemy ships and individuals into dark places. She hoped they were not going to be asked to track killers into NR areas. Closing the message, she pondered how much to add to her note to her squad on HQ's praises. They were all developing their intuitive side and Captain Moody more sensitive than all of them would certainly pick up the ominous energy she got from the note. She sent a note to her SID-mates on the praise and hints Secretary Yu Tat passed on to her and the parts of space of particular interest to SF. Mentally, she telegraphed her pride in their accomplishments and to stay alert. They would have to wait and see just what SFHQ was planning about those NR places.

It took a few hours to go through her squad's official correspondence and respond. She always left for last the most detailed of all her reports to SFHQ. Since *Star* had not been able to assemble whatever recordings they had of the *Murdelie* Cot decided to let her original report stand as it was and say no more unless directly questioned. Instead, she summed up the latest information on her squad and included her own observations and suggestions then sent it off.

The rest of her day was as *Star Chaser* planned, with no adventures. Her meditation and mental touches with her squad brought nothing to pursue. Quiet breaks were nice. The next day she got as far as taking in half her first meal when *Star Chaser* had an announcement.

"Cot, we have crossed into Choi Sector. The kiosk has a communiqué to you from Star Force Headquarters marked urgent."

Cot rushed to the bridge with mixed feelings.

"I have the conn, *Star*."

"You have the conn, Cot."

Cot impatiently waited for the seemingly lengthy process of identifying her and the recipient that was required for messages marked urgently. The screen flashed parties identified.

Greetings, Lt. Col Cot MacDiarmid, captain of Star Chaser.

From High Commander Er of Star Force.

Urgent

You and your squad are to go to Maridoileag immediately, full speed.

"*Star Chaser*, find the nearest travel corridor to Mari and engage with full speed. Notify the others to set sail for Mari, urgent with all speed and extreme caution."

"What reason do I give them?"

"Orders from Star Force Headquarters. Details will follow when we're all in the same travel corridor where we can initiate a solid secure link."

"Message has been sent. I have given Setti IV as the common corridor for us all to meet."

"Very good, *Star*." Mentally she reinforced the urgency and her feeling that they should practice extreme caution since they all would be gathering in one place. She received an affirmative from her squad through their mental connection.

Cot continued reading:

A weapons cache containing off-world weapons is suspected to be hidden on clanlands on Maridoileag. Any problem within the clanlands customarily falls under the supervision of the Ecole ol Msor Project with the local Space Consulate acting as backup to their agents; however, the Ecole ol Msor is in Memora. It occurs every one-hundred

years where new management and agents prepare to take over their on-going projects. This is a month long process and their agents are in seclusion. The local space consulates monitor their projects during this time and use CFS agents that are familiar with the projects only under dire emergencies.

This is a dire emergency.

The cache of off-world weapons belongs to Brooker, a known weapons dealer that sells to anyone with the credits. Brooker has a contract out on him. The contract wasn't picked up by a Mortliege but an independent contractor. We suspect the person that has picked up the contract is locating Brooker's caches of weapons and blowing them up without consideration of clearing anyone from the area. We haven't been able to find out who put the contract out on him nor who the assassin is. We also have not been able to find a pattern in the explosions or if it is done by more than one person, but we do have a list of what planets and asteroids Brooker has stored his weapon caches from his secretary.

Maridoileag is fifty-two on the weapons cache list, but the numerical order isn't useful by what has transpired. Your squad has been requested to assist in locating and removing the cache before it is blown up or before someone discovers it and uses it for their own ends. According to the local space consulate, the clans are on the brink of declaring war and one has hinted at having off-world weapons at their disposal.

While you're on Maridoileag, Colonel, there is another matter for you to handle. Your sister's child by the name of Claire has requested you to stand in for her interests. She applied and was accepted for off-world education. By Maridoileag's rules, her request to be relinquished from clan life has also been accepted with her understanding that she can't go back to clanlands. This was done with the full knowledge and approval of the agent of Ecole ol Msor. Her clan chieftain refused to honor her request after the agent left the planet. The local consulate through CFS has formally passed on your kin's request.

Normally a diplomat would accompany you to stand before the clan chieftain, but the diplomat would have been an agent from Ecole ol Msor. The Space Consulate reported CFS declined sending their agent to accompany you, stating their presence

would escalate tension that could trigger the clan war. Your squad will be your back you up should you need it.

To ease some of the tension between your squad and other galaxy interests the existence of SID ships is now public knowledge. The powers behind the official request for your squad to become involved are not above suspicion for another attempt to interfere with the SID program. Take this opportunity to hone your-self-preservation within the rules of Star Force and keep in mind why your squad was chosen to be stationed near the New Frontier.

Your material reward will be that your squad has first pick from the weapons cache and what you don't have need of will go to FS agents who will join you above the planet. Maridoileag's governing bodies don't have authority to authorize off-worlders on the clanlands so if you need assistance, be selective who you invite to land planet-side. I'll let you know when and who the FS agents will be meeting you for the pickup.

Keep me informed.

May your homecoming have a good outcome for justice, Lt. Col. Colleen MacDiarmid and Star Chaser.

HC Er.

Cot took a steadying breath to center herself. *She* was requested to return to the MacDiarmid Clan Hall. The squad was being sent home. Home?

"*Galaxy Traveler, Penumbrae and Flash* have responded. They have changed courses and will signal when they are in Setti IV corridor for further communication," *Star* said. "It will take us 119 standard hours to reach Setti IV. I cannot estimate the others' time."

"That's pulling all safeties, *Star*. How many people interested in our travels do you think know how far we are from Mari?"

"That isn't possible for me to estimate."

"I think it's more than enough to give us all battle jitters. Use only public corridors and stay out of scanning range of ships and for floating monitors send out a false signal. We'll have a lot of interested parties looking for us and though we are public knowledge, there's going to be people still intent on shooting at us. Find out as much information as you can about Maridoileag and its global politics of today. Also, petitions were heard at

the MacDiarmid Clan Castle in Midland; verify that it is still in practice and I want a schematic of the land and building I will be visiting. I'll need more information on Claire MacDiarmid and what is going on with this kin business. *Star*, you have the conn."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

She rose from her seat. She needed to find expression for her feelings on this return to her home planet, to the clanlands, and what better way than sword practice. In all probability she would need it.

Cot could feel *Star Chaser's* excitement in their connection. Was it because she would be working with the other SID-ships once again or because she was curious about Maridoileag?

Cot's sword practice started with drills then moved to fighting with a partner. *Star's* method of training was to test her first and then create a program that would have her able to defend herself at least against a moderately skilled opponent. By the time they reached Mari, *Star* would have her reasonably trained in whatever form of fighting the clansmen participated in.

When the drill master inflicted too many mortal wounds on her the program ended. After storing her sword, she spent time relaxing under the skillful pommeling of a bot.

Returning to the bridge and feeling more relaxed she focused on the problem of the weapons cache. Where on Mari could a cache of weapons be hidden and why would HQ suspect it was in clan territory? And what was the beating of war drums about? In this day and age, a clan going to war was a ludicrous idea since there were arbitrators, overseers and backup overseers to facilitate peaceful discussions and decisions within the clan's hierarchy. What would happen to Ecole ol Msor's project if the clans did go to war? What were the rules of the project if their study subjects started to kill each other? She sighed to herself. What did it matter to her since she withdrew herself from that culture?

"*Star*, do we have a recent global map of Mari?"

"The most recent is from the archives of a business group now out of business."

"Request a complete global via Star Force channels and see if you can access the file Ecole ol Msor has on the clanlands of Maridoileag."

Thoughtfully, Cot stared out at space. What were the clansmen going to do when she, an outsider, turned up poking her nose in their business and dressed in a foreign military uniform? Maridoileag was a subject she stayed away from with her squad so her only memory was from a child's point of view. She knew some of her squad kept in contact with their family. When they gather for their meeting, she would find out how close and how useful it could be to their mission.

Two days later Cot was working on her sword drills for stamina and coordination when *Star* interrupted her with a holograph image of herself dressed as a MacDiarmid warrior, looking very frightening in war paint with war shield and sword held ready.

"Cot, we are thirty minutes from our rendezvous in Setti IV Corridor. We have made good time."

Star sounded smug.

"We have made good time." She sheathed her sword and stored it in her weapons locker then cleaned up. Earlier she had organized the information *Star* had been able to gather on Maridoileag to present at the briefing. She knew her squad would also have gathered information without alerting anyone of their impending visit. They all were wary of being setup for unpleasant surprises since their departure from POATA.

Once settled in her seat her monitor unfurled.

"*Star*, I have the conn."

"Cot has the conn. The squad is assembled and ready for you," *Star* said.

"Verify secured channel and open up communication."

"Channel security verified. Communication established."

"Group Leader Lt. Col. Cot to SID-mates. Identify."

"*Quiet Quest* nicknamed, *Mistress Q* , and Captain Wimsey Macnab present, Group Leader; *Quiet Storm* nicknamed *Stormy*, Captain Aysen Macfarlane here, Group Leader; *Space Cat* nicknamed *Spacie*, Captain Allison Macalister, present, Group Leader; *Melody* nicknamed *Kitten* – Captain Goudie Grant present, Group Leader; *Gallant Soldier* nicknamed *GS* with Captain Hallie Drummond at the helm, present, Group Leader; *Galaxy Traveler* nicknamed *Traveler* and Captain Barron Rose present, Group Leader; *Penumbrae* nicknamed *Penny* – Captain Fionnaghal Hay present, Group Leader; *Flash* with Captain Mòr Macgillivray present, Group Leader; *Caointiorn* nicknamed *Ti*

and Captain Feah Lamont present, Group Leader; *Gormal* nicknamed *Roaming* and Captain Maciver Campbell, present, Group Leader; *Brianag* nicknamed *Bonnie Bria* and Captain Moodie Stewart, present, Group Leader."

"Greetings SID-mates. Star Force HQ has ordered our squad to Maridoileag at all speed to locate a weapons cache believed to be stored on clanlands," Cot said. "Brooker, a weapons dealer, has a contract out on him and like all good dealers he has caches of weapons hidden throughout the galaxies he deals in. The problem is that someone is destroying the caches without concern of who is in the vicinity and many of his caches are on planets in the middle of civilian populations. The fallout from the contaminants, as we all know, are damaging to all life forms on many levels. We've been assigned the task of locating and removing the cache before someone detonates it or before someone finds the weapons and makes use of them. SFHQ believes the cache is hidden on clanlands because one of the clans said they had access to off-world weapons, and to complicate our removing the weapons, the clans are beating war drums."

"Is there a particular reason why we're being asked to locate this cache?"
Moodie asked. *"Our present locations aren't anywhere near Mari, if expediency is a factor."*

"We were requested by powers outside of Star Force," Cot said. "Do you feel someone has an ulterior motive?" she teased.

The others laughed.

"We've been chased, hunted and attacked across plenty of space sectors. Maybe this is another attempt to eradicate the SID program only this time with us all present."

"HQ said they've made the SIDs public knowledge to cut down on legal attacks," Cot said. "So, we no longer have to sneak about, or so we could hope."

"What reason was given for us to personally handle this?" Fion persisted.
"Normally the EOM's agents monitor and restrict any outside contact with their study subjects, or so they would like the naïve to believe. The only reason I can keep up with my kin in the clanlands is through my kin in the freelands."

"Group Leader, may I answer that?"

"Go ahead, Aysen."

"Ecole ol Msor Project is going through management and staff change-over. It occurs every one hundred years. For a month the staff is in seclusion familiarizing themselves with their research subjects," Aysen said.

"Sounds like a religious retreat," Baron said. "Do outbreaks of violence occur whenever they withdraw their attention for a month and who watches their subjects while they're away?"

"I would imagine that if there was a pattern of violence during the changeover it would have been covered in our social classes at the academy. Local space consulates monitor their subjects, and they call in help if needed, which in a roundabout way is how we were called in. Moodie, can you focus in on what we need to prepare ourselves for?" Cot asked.

"Even before you sent us the message, I was having nonsensical dreams about Mari. Some of it now makes sense. Give me a few days to sort through my images and I'll have more information."

"Anyone else having dreams or has any suggestions about our jumping into clan politics?" Cot asked.

"I'll probably be having nasty dreams now," Barron said.

"Who do they suspect picked up the contract on Brooker?" Wimsey asked. "Is it legitimate?"

"HQ said they don't know," Cot said.

"It sounds suspicious. We were almost at our new station without any major damages to our SIDs and we're being called back into trouble," Barron said. "I'm going to tell my mother to stop praying for my safe return," he mocked.

Cot smiled. Barron was the youngest in his family and told everyone that his mother always ended her correspondence with him with a prayer for his safe return home. Barron shared Cot's aversion to returning to Mari.

"It's definitely not the kind of contract a Mortliege would be involved with," Aysen said. "The Mortliege Guild's Overseer would not accept a contract that calls for the maiming or deaths of innocents and any mortliege that took up this contract would be expelled from the guild, which means a death sentence. So, I suspect it's someone outside

of a guild and who in all probability has a record and is under the Watchful Eye," Aysen said.

"Don't discount that it could be Brooker himself. We'll let the SIDs handle the information gathering since they do it so well," Cot said.

"Storing weapons on a planet isn't a one or two person operation," Aysen said. "It's a good guess that it's hidden on clanlands considering clan loyalty would keep a secret better than neighbors in the freelands."

"There's another reason why we're all here. SFHQ received a petition from my kin in the clanlands. A child requested that I stand in for her in declaring her independence from clan. The clan chieftain refused her freedom and bartered her to another clan for marriage. You're to be my backup should I be accused of kidnaping and need rescuing."

"Ahhhhhyeee," the others said.

"I've never heard of child marriages anywhere on Mari," Wimsey said.

"I had no use for clan news until now," Cot said. "I thought I was done with it and their meddling in my life. So, if any of you can fill me in about the MacDiarmids I would appreciate it."

"The last news from home that I heard was that MacDiarmid Chieftain Ciam Skene has been razing forests for money though by the poor conditions many of the clan members are living in little goes back to maintain MacDiarmid members or their holdings. Many think he's mad but are afraid to do anything about it because kin disappear," Hallie said. *"When I heard that I thought my kin were exaggerating. You know how clan gossip can get...wild without facts. There are overseers, after all."*

"You best be careful, Group Leader. You appearing in your uniform, a real hero and looking more impressive than any warrior in a clan, they just may elect you as General Warrior or worst Chief."

Cot and the others nodded, understanding the power of presence. They all looked imposing in their uniforms and armor as it was intended, inferring more power than they possessed.

"My home is not Mari. It is merely my birthplace," Cot said. "I plan on getting in and out quickly and with your support our business here shouldn't take more than a few days."

"Yet they are calling for you to intervene when the overseers of the EOM are absent," Wimsey said. "And they're asking for us to look for a cache of weapons on Mari that agents much closer can take care of. Makes my hands itch, looking for a hidden trap to shoot at."

They all nodded in agreement.

"I won't be the only one visiting a clan I have no fidelity to. Fion, that cousin of yours that runs a bar near the border that has a lot of visitors from both the clanlands and freelands - that would be a good place for you to visit to pick up news of what's going on."

A wide grin appeared on her face. *"For sure it's the type of bar that a clan chieftain would spend time in. My cousin's brews are strong. So, do I share how dangerous each of those weapons are to the clan chieftain if I get a chance to speak with him? Or do I just ask if anyone knows where the cache is hidden?"* Fion asked.

"If the chieftain knows already not telling him will create trust issues. If the chieftain's assembly doesn't know about the cache, and we tell them, they will distrust each other, perhaps forcing them to make a deal with us. However, don't fool yourselves about being warriors returning home. We're outsiders sticking our noses in clan business."

"Aye," they all agreed.

"Once we know where the cache is we'll need to find a way to make sure it doesn't blow up in our faces and create a diversion so we can remove everything before anyone can challenge us. About the removal - HQ gave us first pick through the gizmos. We'll use the sleds on the shuttles to transport what we want to keep for ourselves and hopefully the container SFHQ is sending arrives in time, so we don't have to move everything on our sleds. Don't transport anything found in the cache in your shuttles no matter how tempting it is, until we know there isn't anything that will turn out to be a problem. Don't leave it all to your SIDs to check - verify yourselves. Know what you're bringing on board." Cot was thinking of Gemini, who *Star Chaser* allowed on board without informing her or even asking. She hadn't gone into detail about Gemini with her SID-mates, but she suspected the SIDs didn't keep anything secret from each other.

"Beware of gifts given during war," Barron said.

"And unexpected visitors," Aysen said.

"Captains Wimsey and Aysen, you two will be our advance team. Walk among the freelanders and gather information on what is being said about clanland business and weapons. In three days, we'll convene for another meeting outside of Gerber's Gate to exchange information and make plans," Cot said. "If it's safe, you'll all get a chance to visit your families if you wish, but it can't be for long. HQ hasn't changed our report date to L'Gsta Outpost and we still have a lot of space to cover with monitors."

"We should be getting replies from our families by the time we reach Gerber's Gate," Fion said. "How much do we tell them?"

"As little as you think you can get away with. Obviously, your squad leader is here at the request of her kin. Until we gather more information, we have no idea who these people who share our ancestry are. They are strangers to us as we are to them. Is anyone not able to be at the gate in three days without attracting attention?" Cot asked.

"We'll be there," Macnab said.

"Aye," the others agreed.

"Study the current map of Mari SFHQ sent us. Practice your sword skills and let us go forward, brave hearts," Cot said.

"With courage the battle can be won," they said in unison.

"Meeting is ended, you're dismissed. End transmission," Cot said.

"End transmission," was echoed.

"Star, see if you can learn what type of safeguards Brooker would use to keep his cache from being broken into. I can't believe he would trust locals with off-world weapons since many are lethal if not handled with properly."

"I will search out information on all databases."

"Star, you have the conn."

"Star Chaser has the conn."

Cot headed to her quarters to change into her ritual garb. As she walked from her quarters to her sacred spot she began a chant. When she settled in front of her altar, she touched Bua to strengthen her focus.

Smells of the forest she spent her childhood in surrounded her. Sounds of sheep, a barking dog and whistles a shepherd gave to her dog were part of those sensual

memories. There were happy memoirs along with the bittersweet. Mixed in were surprises both good and bad that gave her an interesting and mature view of her world though she was a child with no obvious social power.

There were also the shadows, emotional scars under her armor that could be fatal, she reminded herself. Anger at her parents welled up as if she pushed a button. It was exasperating that after years of work to let childhood hurts go, there were some still there.

She formed her circle, closed it deosil, and called her guides and guardians to watch over her progress and assist, when necessary, in order for her to reach insight and answers to her questions. Pressing her hands over her heart, she called for her mentor, Keli, to guide her.

She breathed in the negative feelings she had of her childhood through her right nostril and through her heart, where she wrapped it in happiness that she had experienced with Keli, changing the dark cloud to a silvery one and then exhaled through her left nostril.

She had done this so many times, but the emotional pain was just as sharp as if she hadn't done the work. She repeated it three times, then six, then ten and still it was just as painful. What was she doing wrong?

"Keli, heart to my heart, what am I missing to let go of this child's anger?"

The image of her aunt Keli appeared superimposed on her featureless stone altar.

"Well, my dear, you are a great warrior in space but so far from the forest," Keli teased. "As a warrior, you have faced fear, temptation and death admirably. However, it is your child's heart that is wounded. Children don't understand adult business and certainly not the politics of a clan."

"A child's perspective isn't the same as an adult, I understand that. I've tried in many ways to unburden this hurt and I'm not succeeding."

"Facing them won't undo your anger because they are who they are, and you want to make them something they aren't. That will not be your challenge when you return to Maridoileag, my dear. There is something else far more sinister and therefore dangerous to you than distracting childhood hurts."

"Is it scarier than the Gepaks?" Cot asked lightly. "Not even Queen Ereschkigal could be as scary as the followers of the Gepaks." Cot shuddered.

Gepaks and their followers were evil for the sake of evil, and they had a smell and feel to them that made it easy to locate them, until some found a way to disguise themselves. What made them so evil was their ability to take over another and make that person do things that were horrible.

"Queen Ereschkigal is not evil, nor is she from the dimension you spend most of your time in. You created what you saw around her because that was what you needed at the time. This malevolent entity on Maridoileag is something that resides in your dimension. You will need to extinguish it, so it does no more harm to Maridoileag or any other planet. You will need Bua to protect yourself. Seek the guardians of Maridoileag first." And then she was gone.

Cot astral projected to Maridoileag. Hovering above the globe nestled in the darkness of space two hands cupped together held Maridoileage's sphere of blue, green, white and red. Then the hands were gone. Looking down on her home planet, she sought something that felt wrong, but her spirit, as if impatient, moved to where she had grown up in Orlean.

Orlean's grasslands, fields of grain and forest were gone and in its place was a sprawling city, composed of shoddy buildings in various states of disrepair, poorly constructed and not meant to safely shelter anyone, she felt. Orlean was a slum city with barren and dusty land surrounding it. It was daylight and there were a few children playing on a dirt road while others sat against buildings in the shade of a single storied building doing nothing. Two of the children looked at her and dropped to their knees looking awestruck.

Cot ignored them and took a side street to a clearing where her aunt's cabin had been. She could feel the power that still resided around it. She walked around the area taking in energy, feeling a deep wound someone had inflicted on this small community.

"Are you a saint?" a child asked.

Startled, Cot turned to see who was asking. "No. My name is Colleen. I'm a warrior that travels in a spaceship among the stars. Right now, I'm traveling in spirit, like in dreams. Who cut down the forest and lay to waste the grasslands?"

The child's face took on an angry look and his hands clenched. "Skene. His soul be dammed with no more lives to claim." He spat on the ground and then ground his

worn heel over it. It was a common curse. "He burned the farms that didn't support him and cut down our forest to sell the wood to others. My father, mother, uncles and aunts stood up to him, and they were murdered in their sleep. No one was allowed to work on our land or to help us, so now my brothers and I live only on the garbage and discards we find at night. When I'm older, I will kill him." He said it with so much vehemence his face became ugly.

Cot was shocked by the accusation and wondered where the overseers were to let this happen. Could what he was saying be true? She touched Bua then her heart.

"By then Skene will be no more," Cot said. "Why not instead find something more useful to do with your life. You have the agents of the overseers and Space Consulate to go to, or you can leave the clanlands and seek support among those in the freelands. You're not without options."

"I will kill Skene and become the chieftain! I will then kill all his men and those that didn't help us!"

"Killing? And when will you stop? Vengeance is like rot. There will be nothing left of the sweetness of your soul when it takes over."

"You're not a warrior! Warriors don't talk like that! I will become a great warrior like the warriors in the arena and lead the MacDiarmid's to rule the clanlands," he said. "I will be Chief!"

"War and violence. When that road is taken there is no room for kindness and love."

"Have you come to save us Saint Colleen?" Another voice whispered before the boy could respond. Three others crowded around her.

Cot smiled, not having a real answer for them. "I'm not a saint, but I will see what I can do," she looked at the angry boy, "without starting a war."

An anxious voice called the children and they ran away. Cot turned back to look at the cleared space where her aunt's cabin had been and could see an energy vortex. Someone was tending it. That was reassuring. Her spirit moved off the planet and back to her body as if summoned.

Cot sat quietly processing what she had witnessed and wondered about Cian Skene. What kind of chieftain would destroy clan resources and abuse the young, the future of a clan?

Who was Skene?

When she reached out to see him in the spirit world she found he wasn't there. That was something to think about.

Chapter 29

Maridoileag

"Cot, you have a message from Star Force Headquarters," *Star Chaser* reported.

"Is it marked urgent?"

"No. Would you like me to read it?"

"No. I'll read it on the bridge." Cot sheathed her sword and stored it in the weapons locker. She was making progress in her sword work, and she was sure it had to do with her drills though *Star* would say it's working with a 3D partner. *Star* had added a shield with a fighting master to teach her skills using just the shield. *Star* got her templates for her various training masters from tapping into various libraries the space kiosks had links to. Cot was impressed at how *Star* changed the programs so she not only faced species she was most inclined to meet up with but some she had never met before and hoped she never would.

Cot slid the shield off her arm. The shield was as specially crafted as her sword was. Both were programed to actively protect her with energy and not always on a visible wavelength. She was sure no one in the clanlands had such armaments and felt a moment of guilt for anyone that should try to take her on, thinking she was easy. One zap from her shield would render most attackers' unconscious with a headache on waking, an acceptable deterrent against them trying again.

Cot wondered just what type of warriors she would be facing. Every clan child learned weapons skills as they learned their clan lineage. Cot was sure she was the exception since she wasn't raised by her family until her aunt stepped in. Her sword skill came to her through hard work at the diplomat academy, where it was part of a physical exercise program. Her instructors thought her quickness in picking up the skill was due to species memory, but she felt it was from practicing solitary drills she obsessively did to

avoid crowds that were almost everywhere on campus. When she transferred to the military academy, she was just one of many that did well in the sport but it again allowed her some personal space. It became a fun form of exercise for her, not something she thought she would need to defend her life with, until *Star Chaser* took up creating training programs that had her fighting as if her life did depend on it.

"Working with a fighting master would be a better use of your practice time," *Star* said.

"I didn't want to work that hard," Cot said. "You already tired me out with shield practice. I hope the other SIDs are treating their pilots to the same physical training rigor."

"When you face clan warriors you will need to be able to physically accept a challenge," *Star Chaser* said.

"Exactly what I hope to avoid," Cot said, "though, you are right, I would like to survive any challenge."

She cleaned up and changed clothes. Her walk to the bridge was a sensory delight of being surrounded by rolling hills. Her bridge was the entrance to a forest. The holographic image ended as she stepped on her bridge.

"I have the conn, *Star*."

"You have the conn, Cot."

It was a brief message. Star Force would be sending four agents, Clayton, Bour, Ma'ta and Symo along with two CFS agents, names still to be presented. They were to assist with removing the weapons but had not received a pass to enter clanlands since the overseers were not available to consent to their presence. They would bring a containment box for explosives. SF and CFS believed that the cache was what was stolen from an experimental laboratory CFS and FS used. Its location was a week from Maridoileag, if a nearby travel corridor was utilized. The items were stolen eight months ago. That was a relief because it meant the Estes of Moray didn't get their wealth from Brooker, but then it opened the question of who did Brooker pay for the location and protection? The social scientists were still monitoring the clanlands and would have, or should have, noticed weapons being moved into someone's yard. But then, they would

also have noticed if seven chieftains were using murder as a way to take over the clanlands. What kind of guidelines and rules did Ecole ol Msor Project have?

"Pass the information to the others. I don't want anyone shooting CFS agents over mistaken intentions," Cot said.

"*They* have been shooting at us," *Star* reminded her. "I have information on Claire of the MacDiarmid Clan. Your older sister titled her as daughter six years ago."

"Show the information on my screen."

Claire MacDiarmid, age ten, refused marriage to Arrol Hay, twenty years her senior, Cot read. Instead, she declared emancipation from clan and claimed a free education off-planet. The education request was authorized by the Ambassador from the Space Consulate and Agent Homa from Ecole ol Msor Project granted her passage out of the study. After the Ecole ol Msor pulled its agents off-planet, a writ for the arrest of Claire MacDiarmid was issued by the clan chieftain.

What was ten year old Claire's importance? Why did her elder sister wait two years before declaring Claire her daughter? Was she rescued from another family? Why did Claire want to leave Mari? She could have quietly been sent to live with kin in the freelands.

"Claire is not her daughter biologically," *Star Chaser* said. "Your older sister was past her childbearing age twelve years ago."

"A family will take in a child as their own for various reasons. When that happens, the child becomes a family member as if born into that very family. And biologically, Muland females can control their reproduction time; though, I doubt that's what this is about."

Cot scanned the report looking for names and not finding what she was looking for.

"Did you find out who Claire's biological parents are?"

"No."

"A bio-scan will provide that information. Have you found one on her?"

"No record of Claire exists in the MacDiarmid Family Archives."

"So, who is this person of interest?" Cot mused aloud. "*Star*, see if you can find out more on her before she came to clanlands." Cot was suspicious that Claire wasn't

from Mari but why would someone from another planet want to move to the clanlands? The freelands would be a better alternative. Unless the original plan was for her to become part of a clan so that she could take advantage of the free off-world education that was available to clansmen who wanted to leave the study.

Her attention returned to her screen with the next person of interest. "Arrol Hay has a long list of arrests due to violent altercations using clubs, axe handles and whatever else is at hand to bludgeon anyone that angers him. He's banned from the freelands where he faces the death penalty. Why is he allowed freedom in clanlands? *Star*, send a message to Captain Fion Hay about this marriage arrangement. I don't want her blind-sided when she visits her clan and she mentions a MacDiarmid is her squad leader. Add to it a question on how repeat violent offenders are normally treated in the Hays clan and if child marriages are now practiced."

"The message is sent. There is a report that a yacht exploded three hours from Gre. Gre was on the list of Brooker's weapons caches. Number 46."

"Who reported it?"

"Space monitor GCB6."

"See if you can get more information on the explosion and the yacht - where it's been and who the owner is. Have you found a pattern in the explosions of the weapons caches?"

"All are within 48 standard hours from travel corridors for a ship going as slow as 4gs. That is the acceptable speed for ships traveling in those busy corridors."

"Any reports of ships traveling over the speed limit?"

"No."

"By now all travel corridors near the weapons caches will be monitored. Gizmos remotely controlled to blow up the weapons could get through some patrols," Cot thought aloud.

"We will have layers of monitors so a signal cannot pass," *Star* said.

Cot thought the SIDs were too confident of their abilities and made a mental note of cautioning everyone about that vulnerability at their next meeting.

She went back to *Star's* report: Clan chieftain Cian Skene declared a land debt on Davie MacDiarmid, her sister's husband, a cousin four times removed and from the

central lands where farming was a primary occupation. He was a first-born son so he inherited a large portion of the family's farmland. Claire was the payment that Skene claimed. Skene arranged her marriage to the Hay clan. Bartering between clans was usually something the clan chieftains managed and using children was against all laws on Maridoileag as far back as the first gathering of the tribes and later written down when the seven continents gathered for an alliance on trade agreements. For a moment her mind mused on the number seven. Was it coincidental that there were seven clan chieftains causing problems? Were they planning on using off-world weapons to take over seven continents? Was that too farfetched? Since the seven waited until their EOM monitors left the planet to challenge all other clans' legitimacy, she decided that it was an idea to bring up at their next gathering as farfetched as it sounded. She was curious if any of the others thought of that. Seven was a power number to many on Maridoileag. Seven continents, seven great oceans, seven stars that made up the Mariners Belt that all travelers used to set their compasses to when adrift at sea. Seven were looked for in all things.

It was through the alliance of the seven continents, hundreds of years ago that a spaceship was designed to travel through space. They had seven diplomats, or volunteers, on the spaceship to seek out other intelligent life. Mulands as a species were telepathic and believed they had callings from other intelligent life forms in the universe. Their space diplomats weren't gone long when they returned with more than what anyone could have anticipated – space beings in unimaginable ships and in unimaginable shapes, with an invitation to join the Galaxy Union. All the governing bodies around the planet eagerly agreed to join and to follow the rules of membership in order to become star travelers and space merchants. Maridoileag's citizens were mentored for ten years with the reward of space exploration, immigration to new places, technology to make life easier and medical advancements for healthier lives, and an educational system that taught all ages and genders the wonderful secrets of the world. It was astonishing that even those that thought they were unable to learn did.

The price was to unlearn many of the prejudices some cultures on Maridoileag still possessed, learn to respect all life forms on their planet and other planets, and set aside one fifth of the planet to a social experiment.

At first it was called the Experiment, then Those People, and now it was referred to as the Clanlands. It started with volunteers and supposedly continued with participants willingly being part of the experiment. Three tiers of governing were established with none having sole power over the other. Twenty-two family groups were established with no limitation to any new ones forming, and for the land sectioned out for this experiment it was more than enough. It was a wonderland of abundant wildlife, fertile land for farming, water resources and good weather. In the beginning there was direct observation from the Ecole ol Msor agents, walking through fields and cities, as the families set out setting up rules for protecting and enhancing their lives and property.

A hundred years later Maridoileag suffered planet-wide extreme weather changes from the debris of a passing meteor's tail that realigned the planet's axis tilt, setting Maridoileag's survivors back in all areas of life and causing havoc to landmasses. Many didn't survive the climate changes of cold and hot and ground movements that formed mountains, valleys, oceans and waterways where none had previously been. It took ten seasons for the weather to become stable enough to have a decent planting season, where the harvest was plentiful with enough to store for winter and seeds for next planting.

With the rebuilding of the planet's economy through the assistance of the Galaxy Union, Maridoileag's citizens settled into the same arrangement with the Galaxy Union: four fifths of the planet lived as freelancers, that is free from Ecole ol Msor's monitors and one fifth continued on in the social experiment now called clanlands.

Those in the clanlands renamed their divisions of governing as chieftain, cleave, general over a warrior class and then civilian members. The warriors helped keep social order as there were few resources during the recovery. Labor was intensive for those that put the weight of the rebuilding literally on their shoulders and couldn't at the same time protect their family from thieves and raiders that they suspected were from the freelands.

Cot learned about the social experiment in her first season at the diplomat academy. These social experiments were set up on various planets where small segments of inhabitants were semi-isolated to study how the dominant species would have evolved had they been left on their own without the benevolent guidance of beings from other planets. The professor teaching the class at the diplomat academy held strong contempt for what he termed sham experiments. He questioned their origins and who was behind

the experiments. His main contentions were: how was it decided which species on a planet was dominant; and under what definition were those studied isolated. He saw it as contrived social manipulation for other purposes and since he didn't publicly pose the purposes in educational journals he wasn't taken seriously.

Cot had her own feelings on the subject and didn't feel ready to put them forward in front of strangers; however, with years of trying not to think about it, she wondered how she would formulate an argument against the study now. After all, those involved were volunteers and there were overseers... whose purpose was what, she wondered. Did the overseers replace the observers?

Cot's attention returned to her screen where *Star's* information was before her.

According to *Star*, seven clans had risen to dominance in the last year and only when the Ecole ol Msor agents left did they start an aggressive campaign against the other clans. However, *Star Chaser* noted their influence was on the decline due to bad management of their clans' assets and the other clans banning together to counter their influence which was why this new move to threaten with war seemed just another grasp to stay in power.

The MacDiarmid Clan was one of the seven.

Cot stared at the images *Star* provided, stunned at the changes to the land. Deserts were encroaching on clan cities with their backdoors sealed against blowing sandstorms. Fields were parched and rivers were dry. There were few forests and there were far too many cities to her way of thinking.

"What kind of management is this? When does the director of this experiment intervene? *Star*, did you get a copy of the Ecole ol Msor's mandate or rules for this social experiment?"

"No. Each time a new management comes in the old records, after being reviewed by the new group are stored somewhere I am still in the process of locating. There are no written current rules available at any of the listed experimental societies or at any of the space kiosks."

"Where are they getting food and supplies if their lands are so pitiful?"

"I will research that," *Star* said. "There are two chieftains the Galaxy Union Embassy agents have labeled as tyrants. They pressured five others to declare themselves

as sole authority on ruling the clanlands. They've declared all other clans nonexistent, however cleaves from three of the seven have asked the Galaxy Union to mediate peace between them and the Estes of Moray who are leading others to go against this diktat of the seven chieftains," *Star* said. "The tyrants are Cian Skene of the MacDiarmid Clan and Cian Aengus of the Hay Clan."

"And I'm stepping on Skene's toes by appearing to remove something he feels he owns. What is the ultimate plan here? They declare war on the smaller clans to absorb their people and possessions just to stay solvent? It won't stop there because you have two tyrants that will turn on the weaker of the seven. We've seen it happen countless times. Something is not right here and off-world weapons in the mix opens this seemingly small war to a larger threat to the planet. Seven continents. Seven chieftains," Cot thought aloud. "With weapons aimed at the other continents it would make the technological advancement compared to the clanlands meaningless. And here we come, like a cluster buster, with ships and equipment more advanced than Mari has at their disposal. Are we meant to impress or to scare the problem population into compliance?"

Cot leaned back in her seat, thoughtfully moving her gaze to the updated scan on Mari. If there was a battle over Mari and the clans were being used as a distraction or ignition point what did the planet have that an off-worlder would want? What did Mari have that could interest off-world power brokers? Her finger tapped the highest mountain peak along the Xea Mountain Range. It was the last pristine peak on Mari. It had that honor because it was home to the last of the Renzas, a mountain goat that was part of Mari's flag. Because they were a symbol of Mari and the last known herd traversed the higher levels of the mountain, the peak named Renzas's Point was monitored closely against any visits. As soon as she thought of it, she shook her head. All that energy just for a mountain top?

So, is taking over the planet the intentions of the clan chieftains? The freelands would go to war with the clans and the clans, even with their off-world weapons, would be wiped out as well as most of Mari. The freelands would no doubt ask assistance from their off-world partners to put an end to the clan threat. That would certainly end the EOM project. Was that the intention? What would all this excitement on Mari do to the

surrounding planets? What would it do to CFS and SF? Who was behind the EOM project?

She thought of how nice it would be to speak to Diana about this. She seemed to know a lot of what was going on in the galaxies. Or SF would know what a little war on Mari would do around the galaxy.

"I need to stay focused on my assignment."

However, her mind kept going, driven by a suspicion that there was a lot more going on about their return to Mari. Was it to get the SIDs in one place? What made the SID project so important that people wanted to stop it? Their primary purpose was to be able to cross into the New Frontier and as long as their primary focus was peaceful, and their actions reflected that, they could. But if that were so, how did those ships that were after *Star Chaser* and using deadly force, cross the border? Or was there something on or about *Star Chaser* that changed her peaceful purpose? What had that to do with her assignment at Mari, she thought impatiently?

"Cot, we are approaching the rendezvous. Captains Wimsey and Aysen are transmitting from above Maridoileag."

Cot glanced at her screen to see what the forward monitor was showing.

"*Mistress Q, Gallant Soldier and Space Cat* are waiting outside the exit. Coming to the exit point, Cot. Brace for an abrupt slow down, 4-3-2-1-0. We have arrived."

They had been traveling as fast as *Star* judged to be safe for her with a bubble surrounding her to prevent any bio disruption. She felt a slightly disorientated feeling when the bubble was disengaged but it left quickly.

"Give them the standard greeting. Set destination to Mari as fast as it is safely possible. We don't want to run over anyone or break any space traffic laws. Open a secured conference channel when we're all assembled."

On Cot's screen images from each of her SID-mates appeared as they linked. According to her calculation it took ten of them five days to gather at the first gate. It meant they all exceeded speed protocols in the corridors.

"Greetings SID-mates. I'll start with Captains Wimsey and Aysen. Wimsey, what news have you and Aysen come up with?"

"Greetings, group leader, SID-mates," Wimsey said. "A water dispute between freelanders and clans has escalated into a declaration of war. For two years the dispute has been an exchange of words in court hearings. An official investigation showed that dozens of rivers that flow into clanlands have been dried by private companies buying land at the source of the rivers in the freelands. This is against Mari's environmental laws. No river, lake or ocean can be prevented from running its natural course. The owners of these companies are causing delays in the hearings while clanlands have been drying up. When EOM agents left war was declared."

"We also heard many are leaving the clanlands for the freelands. It seems on the surface that someone is interested in the demise of the EOM's experiments," Aysen said.

"Fion, what did you hear from your cousin?" Cot asked.

"Seven clans have declared a reformation of clans to firm up the dwindling members and fortunes of clan holdings. The pronouncement was that all clans not of the seven remove all emblems and to petition joining one of the seven. If a person can't find a clan that will accept him or her, they will be escorted to the border...evicted from clanlands; thus, forfeiting all their land and possessions as well as family entitlements. There is a rumor that the seven chieftains have a private group of warriors going around and removing opposition to their reorganization of the clans. My cousin said there's talk of rebellion everywhere, even within the seven clans' membership. Everyone has kin in other clans they wish to dissolve," Fion said.

A collective sigh could be heard.

"And that business with your niece, Cot. I asked my uncle about it, and he wouldn't speak on it, nor will my niece. I was told its clan business I have no business sticking my nose in. Everyone knows that Arrol's immediate family has a history of violence without much provocation and for that reason they have been denied participation in any sports. Arrol's four brothers died in unofficial blood sports, according to my cousin," Fion said. "That family is unhealthy and justifiably should be banned from reproducing heirs."

"Is that still practiced?" Wimsey asked.

"Only the overseers would know what is allowed and not allowed in the clanlands," Allison said.

"My brother said blood sports in the Arena are the most viewed and attended sports on Mari and it's one of the few places a warrior can prove him or herself. But I thought there were safeties to prevent fatalities or permanent injuries," Hallie said.

"In the official arena but there will always be those who want to see and be in the more extreme combat sports where personal safety isn't in the rules," Maciver said.

"How serious is this war gathering among your kin, Mac?" Cot asked.

"Word in the clan hall is of disbelief and no one really knows who is spreading rumors about using off-world weapons. My mother said too many people are ignoring the seven chieftains and their bullies and are standing up to them in public places. I don't think the seven chieftains will be in any important standing when the EOM get back to their monitoring," Mac said.

"For HQ to say the cache is on clanlands, it means someone had noticed an unusual amount of weapons were headed to Mari and they lost track of it when it crossed the borders onto clanlands. The hiding place had to have been already prepared and shielded from normal scans," Wimsey said.

"Bonnie Bria was able to find some interesting information about EOM projects that few know about. The participants get a stipend, and it's paid directly to a representative of the group or groups, which in the case of the clans it's the chieftains, and they decide how the money is handled."

"A stipend!" voices echoed.

"No wonder some of those chieftains got so ornery when the Estes of Moray were declared legitimate by the EOM," Fion said. "Their members were from other clans they were unhappy with."

"So, the consolation of clans is one way to get more funds into the chieftain's coffers and not allowing a child to leave the clanlands means keeping a stipend," Wimsey said.

"Our being called here may have been a good diplomatic decision, but I can feel something has moved in the ethers to take advantage of our being here and I'm not clear if it's something malevolent or beneficial," Moodie said.

"If the clans have people leaving and their lands are drying up, who gains from all of this?" Aysen asked.

"If someone is trying to put an end to the EOM project, is it our business?" Feah asked.

"Is that in our orders, Group Leader?" Moodie asked.

"No. But we can save lives if we don't call attention to ourselves."

"Well then, I have this map," Moodie said, *"of energy currents and underground waterways on Mari."* It appeared on all their screens. *"This is a view of the clanlands. Notice the Maruric Currents and where energy vortexes are located and then notice who owns the lands with the vortexes on them. Now notice where the underground waterways are located. All those lands drying up don't have to. In a few of the key rivers where it's still public lands and no clan can own it; there are deep reservoirs that if drilled it would get water flowing again. These rivers feed into irrigation ditches all the farms have access to."*

"I wonder why the Water Dousers haven't said anything," Allison said.

"A discreet inquiry may tell us why," Cot said.

"A broadcast message from Maridoileag," they all heard from their SIDs.

"A chief has been selected for war. Chief Skene of the MacDiarmid Clan."

"Imagine that, Squad Leader. That must be the shortest time ever for electing a chief."

"Clan stories tell us it took a year for the last Chief over all the clans to be elected, and it wasn't without bloodshed and then the chief died a few weeks later, with no one to replace him. End of the idea of going to war."

"That makes this business as suspicious as they come," Barron said.

"Should you be walking into Chief MacDiarmid's Clan Hall alone, claiming your kin that wants out of clan business?" Goudie asked.

"It's not something I can turn down since SFHQ has ordered me to do just that. This suggests a preplanned tactical move on the part of Chief Skene. It's important even more so for me to visit and get a proper view of what is going on in the halls of the Chief of the Clan War. With *Star Chaser* watching my back and all our gizmos watching over me, I have a good chance of surviving my visit," Cot said. Mentally, she was correct; however, visiting the enemy's camp with only her wits to survive may be what happens in reality. Depending on *Star* or the gizmos is a vulnerability since if Skene planned all this,

he would have knowledge and the ability to disable her connection with *Star* and a way to disengage whatever gizmos she brought with her.

"So what clans will Skene be leading into war?"

"The MacDiarmids, Hays, Fadens, Campbells, Grants and Stewarts," Fion said. "I'm going to be facing some stiff opposition to my peace talks in my cousin's bar. There are some stiff necks as well as thick heads stuck in a fantasy of power." Captain Fion Hay was wearing a big grin, contradicting her worrisome words. "I'll be wearing my uniform to off-set the fact that I'm no longer a clan member. They can't resist a warrior in full dress. I'll have my sword, Fire at Dawn, and my shield, The Blow Stops Here. With all the workouts my trainer, Penny has been putting me through, they don't have a chance at beating me no matter how well they performed in the arena games. Besides, with all the gambling from both sides of the border, it's guaranteed the games are rigged, so the chances are in my favor I will be facing egos with little real fighting skill."

"Or maybe not," Goudie said.

"From this information we're getting now, there are members of the seven clans that don't want this war or dissolving the other clans to consolidate holdings. Grant and Stewart Clan Councils heard clan members disagree with their chieftains, pointing out that the amount of protesters backing the Estes of Morey proved it was time to stop their bulling to consolidate clans for profit and start running what they have as profitable life sustaining co-ops," Barron said.

"The Lamont Clan is in the North, too far from where the seven are conducting their businesses to be part of their domination scheme, but they've been listening. Though they live in the freelands, family is still family. The young that see the area games as something romantic will want to see action if they can cross the borders. No telling who they'll hook up with."

"If they hire themselves out, they'll be used as fodder," Cot said tersely. "We all know how unskilled mercenaries are used. Does anyone know what kind of weapons will be used on either side?" Cot asked.

"In the arena games they use traditional swords, knives, shields and hand-to-hand," Wimsey said.

"When we get over Mari, we can do a scan and confirm they don't have anything we can't neutralize if it comes to that," Mòr said. "Did the Space Consulate have any suggestions?"

"They only confirmed off-planet weapons were delivered to Maridoileag but didn't say what type or where they went after reaching the planet," Cot said. "Star Force on the other hand, said they believe the weapons were stolen from a nearby research science lab...not yet tested, I'm guessing."

There was a moment of silence as they all digested this. Untested and new from the research labs were the type of weapons the SIDs liked to add to their collection of gizmos.

"This is the plan. Mòr you'll be Fion's backup when she visits her clan. Maciver, Goudie and Moodie, you each have one day to visit your clansmen and gather information and talk them out of this war if you can. Allison, Hallie, Baron and Feah, you're in charge of all the gizmos, communications, and our backs. We'll depend on you to keep us apprised of what's going on and I mean anything around Mari too. Nothing is too trivial. Our SIDs will be at your beck and call. We've had enough encounters with adversaries that our defenses are known and have been picked apart. We've all made considerable changes to our SID's original design so what used to be the vulnerabilities of a Cornoda Fighter isn't with our SIDs. Have no expectations, be open to all possibilities," Cot said. "We need to know where the cache is and who intends to use it. Brooks no doubt set up a containment field around it to prevent anyone from entering it and has either eliminated or had his agent on Mari forget where it's located."

"I don't think he would use something foreign to Mari to hide his goods," Wimsey said thoughtfully, "then it would easily be discovered by those that are familiar with the area."

"With all our SIDs scanning the planet's surface, they'll find something," Allison said.

"Nothing like a returning warrior to get the story tellers swapping tales and with a heavy emphasis on the old ones seldom repeated," Fion said.

"With that will be the drinking and it will bring out the foolish challenges to swing a sword against us just to see what we're made of, and in all of that, the truth of what is really going on shall slip out," Goudie said.

"I'll be sure to carry an extra pair of SEs to pick up on conversations not meant to be overheard," Fion said.

"On to our assignments then. It will be a great day to wear our finest," Cot said.

"On to a fine day of revelry," the others said.

Cot sent, via the Space Consulate, her arrival time to the Clan Chieftain Ciam Skene, since it was through the Space Consulate that had contacted Star Force. Ciam Skene's henchman, Donald had given her a time and place to land her shuttle. Cot was sure that if Skene wasn't planning a war he would have played delaying games, but he scheduled their meeting for ten standard hours.

"In the middle of the castle quad? I don't know if I should feel honored or worried."

"By the size of *Reflected Light* and cleared space around the castle, that is the nearest open space *Reflected Light's* size can fit. Otherwise, you would be three hours outside of the town, landing in someone's field or at the crossroad," *Star* said.

"Landing on a crossroad is out. I don't want someone creating a new hex on my name because *Reflected Light* is parked at one. I won't believe in it but there will be enough people that will use it to challenge me. There used to be open farmland around the castle. I remember when I was taken there to be handed over to the Space Consulate, that it was haying time and the fields were busy with families cutting, rolling and stacking bales under the hot sun. The town population must have expanded considerably."

"It is a small city by some standards, of fifty-two thousand people. Not all the new buildings are constructed well and many are abandoned," *Star Chaser* said.

You must be in tune to the planet before you enter the castle, Cot heard.

She touched Bua.

"*Star*, locate an energy vortex with an underground stream nearby and where the shuttle won't be noticed."

A minute later, "I have located an area."

"*Star*, you have the conn. The captain is leaving the ship."

"I have the conn. The captain is leaving the ship. All safety protocols will be engaged when *Reflected Light* leaves *Star Chaser's* landing bay."

"Affirmative, *Star*. All safety protocols," Cot said firmly.

Reflected Light sped quickly through space and blazed into the planet's atmosphere. As she neared her destination, she realized the whiteness she was seeing below her was a desert, a wasteland. As she drew closer, she could make out the remnants of a river ribboning across the bleak land. By her instrument reading she located where the groundwater ran closest to the surface. If she drilled a hole, it would bring water up and give life back to the area and along its dry bed. Why not?

An energy beam shot out from the shuttle and drilled into the dry riverbed.

By the time the shuttle settled on the sands just above the riverbed water was gurgling up out of the ground and was quickly forming into a lively river.

Cot shook out her arms. Her body was tingling from the energy that she could feel penetrating the hull of the shuttle. She hurried down the ramp, excited to feel Mari's energy under her feet. When her feet touched the sand, it felt like she stepped on a pad of energy that filled her then spilled out as if she was a porous container. She drew the energy from the ground and lifted her hands to let the energy flow out of her into the starving environment. It was so alive, intelligent and familiar.

Bending over the gurgling water she scooped water up in both hands and blessed the water, land, and all those that lived on it. She called the spirits, guardians and ancestors of Maridoileag to witness the renewal of energy she was calling forth. She tapped into the energy below and above, calling all who desired and loved the land to help it blossom and thrive once more. Blinking her eyes she could see the outlines of spirits that were guardians of the river. They were there pushing the water to hurry it along. Cot smiled, thinking of farmers who would soon hear their irrigation ditches filling. Taking a deep breath, she held the scent of water fresh from deep underground for a few moments in her lungs, then expelled it with a giggle. The energy was tickling her, even her ears tickled.

When Cot opened her eyes she was surrounded by the forest she remembered as a child. Hooded figures waved her to enter their circle around a fire that was ethereal in appearance.

Bounders, she thought, the spiritual guardians of Maridoileag. They're responsible for us being here.

This wasn't a war in the real sense, and she wasn't here to fight any battles, she thought impatiently. Her squad was assigned to locate and remove a cache of weapons...and she was here to escort a child to the space consulate.

She gave all sorts of reasons why she wasn't going to involve herself in the politics of Maridoileag. Then, Cot stopped thinking and surrendered to experience the energy that surrounded her. It was soft and nurturing, like she remembered it when she sat with her aunt to watch days transit to nights and nights to mornings.

She didn't care about the clans. Mulands weren't the only ones that relied on the river.

And that was it. She felt she got it right.

* * * *

"Cot, the others are engaged in their assignments. It is time for you to meet with Chief Ciam Skene in Castle MacDiarmid," Star said.

"Yes, it is."

She was sitting on the top of the riverbank, watching the progress of the river and the return of wildlife, starting with the spirits who brought insects that attracted birds, that brought seeds, and others returned too, nourishing the land along the river. The sound of water splashing over rocks and boulders was part of the music tiny water spirits were playing in celebration of the return of surface water. The energy from the water charged the land and it was thrilling to feel various levels of life reawaken, from seedlings to scraggily tree trunks. She brushed the dirt from her clothes and boarded *Reflected Light*. As the shuttle rose back into the clouds and headed to the castle, she refocused on her next task.

"How does it look where you are, *Star*? Any strange ships or energy beamed your way?" Cot asked.

"No. But we have located an off-world spaceship in clanlands. It appears to have crash landed. *Quiet Storm* is inspecting it."

"Keep me informed and remind everyone, traps could be anywhere, especially on crashed ships."

Cot removed her armor from the closet and began to suit up. As she dressed, she reviewed what she knew of Ciam Skene MacDiarmid. He was the youngest to become chieftain since the early times. His parents and siblings were washed away in a flood before he reached adult status. *Star* wasn't able to find any further information on Skene's family. He moved into the Young Men's Youth Hut where males not old enough to live on their own resided. For Cot, it further supported her suspicion that he wasn't originally from the clanlands or Mari. Unless a child was seriously burdened with a physical affliction or mental, family or neighbors would take a child in. So, the social experiment had a lot of outside variables. She wondered if that was the real connection between Claire and Skene.

There was a large missing section of information on Skene up until he became clan chieftain. His method of taking over the clan was to kidnap family members of his opponents. When he became chieftain, many expected their missing family members to be returned, however, Skene used it as a method to keep any opposition to him silenced. He decimated the forests, and prime farmland became poorly planned cities and towns. What businesses were in the cities to keep people employed and useful? Why hadn't anyone stopped him? Where was he getting the funds and supplies to keep the clan solvent? What was the overseer's remarks on kidnapping?

"*Star*, who was the overseer of the clanlands?"

"There are no names."

"No planet or biological markers?"

"None. I have checked on social experiments on other planets the EOM manages, and they are the same. All communication is done via a 3D image, and the image is always a round gray stone. There is no information in the few libraries in clanlands on the subject and I have not been able to find any mention of it from any of the local space kiosks," *Star* said. "Do you want further investigation on who is behind the project?"

"Not if it's a distraction to our two primary objectives," Cot said.

As the shuttle neared the landing area, she could see more of the city that crowded around the castle's walls. Vehicles moved on the many connecting roadways going in and out of the city. Tiny dots began to be recognizable as people. They paused to see what was entering their air space.

"I have scanned the few public channels of communication and there is mention of an impending war and a call to arms of all able-bodied people. Families not participating are considered traitors and will forfeit land and clan name. I have an incoming message from Star Force Headquarters."

"Open." She quickly scanned the message.

"War has been declared by seven clans against any that oppose their rule. The Space Consulate and all those not from the clanlands are no longer welcomed and will be considered spies and executed as casualties of war," Cot said. "Do you think our arrival has hurried things along?"

"I do not have enough information to make that assessment. Your arrival does not appear to be a good tactic for gaining information."

"What did you find out about the castle?"

"The castle has two areas where my scans can't penetrate. They are using technology that I'm not familiar with. I will confer with the others," *Star* said. "I have not detected any weapons that are hot or aimed at *Reflected Light* from where I can scan."

The shuttle settled in the castle's quad and powered down. Her attention went to an outside view of warriors dressed in armor quickly and orderly surrounding *Reflected Light*. They weren't wearing war paint, which gave Cot some relief.

"The surrounding of *Reflected Light* could be part of the warriors welcoming back a notable warrior," *Star* said. "It is called the Welcoming. They bang on their shields with their sword hilts and stomp their feet, attempting to make the ground tremble. I have scanned the crowd for weapons and there is nothing that we cannot handle. The blocked areas are where the stables had once been, and the south side of the castle is the chieftain's family area. I will look for clues on what they are used for presently. There is technology here that isn't from this part of the galaxy, Cot."

"Send that information to Star Force Headquarters. I think Cian Skene made a pact with the colloquial devil, *Star*. This news doesn't bode well for my visit. Have you done a biological study of Cian Skene?"

"I have not been able to get a scan lock on a dozen people in the castle. I am working on neutralizing what is blocking my scan."

"Focus on locating Skene and neutralizing his first."

"I have already begun," *Star* said.

"Guardians and beneficial spirits of Maridoileag, guide me to do what is right for the citizens of Mari." She concentrated on shielding her energy as the Brounders advised. It was difficult to contain the energy she was feeling from the planet so she diverted it into the ground, where most wouldn't feel it or see it.

Stepping out of the exit hatch, she paused at the top of the ramp to look over the crowd. A roar and then pounding of sword hilts against shields brought the crowd's noise to a heart throbbing beat. They began a chant, and she watched in astonishment as the energy they were generating filled the quad. It was tempting to dip into it just to see what it was like, however, it would be a distraction to get involved in their energy. Instead, she drew her sword and hoisted her shield across her chest to show her colors. The SIDs had worked the image of a Chameleon on their shields. Considering there were many species with the name, the image chosen was of a four-legged creature with long mane and tail, a horn in its forehead, clove hooves and taller than a Muland. It was difficult to locate that creature in its natural habitat of forests and mountains.

Her shield caught a light and sent flashes of rainbows in front of her and in those flashes her shield deflected an energy beam meant to harm her. She saw tiny sparks from different spots along the eaves of the castle's roof as the weapons were neutralized.

The noise from the crowd went on until a grossly overweight man dressed in the colors of a MacDiarmid with the sash of clan chieftain over his large body labored toward her shuttle. He wasn't moving very fast, yet his face was wet from physical exertion. His appearance opened up a wide path through the crowd to the shuttle's ramp, though Cot was sure it wasn't out of respect that people moved aside. She was amazed the chieftain would let himself be so out of shape. The way he wore his sword Cot could tell he wasn't comfortable with it, so it was just an ornamental piece for him, banging against

his leg. His right hand rested on the hilt of a knife, and across his expansive chest were two gun belts. She recognized the model by the butts of the weapons. It was an off-world weapon that used bio-guided bullets. Depending on the year this weapon was created, it could hold up to one hundred to one thousand target images at one time.

"Disarm it," Cot thought to Star.

"It has been done. I still cannot get a good bio-reading on him to determine what he is. What I have picked up from epithelia cells he is dropping is that he's not a pure Muland."

"See if you can go through Mari's immigration records at the Immigration Hall around the time his family showed up." Cot was thinking of all the Muland families that had migrated to other planets and wondered if they were part of a social experiment too.

Cot walked down the ramp to meet Skene. His thick lips were compressed and his heavy jowls wobbled with his uneven rolling walk. There was something dark and evil about this man and foreign to a Muland. Cot had never seen a Muland his size. Was this a Gepak follower or just a malevolent entity taking advantage of an opportunity it found to possess another? Why couldn't the clansmen see he was an off-worlder? She was sure the agent from the Ecole ol Msor Project would have known. If you study people for a hundred years you would know the study was compromised or contaminated with outside blood, she thought.

The moment her feet touched the ground a shock of energy traveled from her feet up through the top of her head. Her ears popped, her eyes watered, and her nostrils flared as she adjusted. This was different from the riverbed. This was the power base of the MacDiarmid clan. Whether someone could see it or not, feel it or not, the thousands of years the MacDiarmid's lived in this castle, they left bits of themselves, for good or bad, in the ground and walls of the castle keep. If she were a Brounder and put her hand on the ground or the stone surface of the castle, she would have been able to pick out the lives and stories of MacDiarmids going back to the builders and first occupants of the castle.

The clashing of the shields became louder, and she thought she felt the steady boom of a drum underneath the clashing.

War drums? Is her appearance starting the war? But no one was wearing war paint and that was as important as sword, armor and shield when going into battle.

The Brounders told her she and her squad were part of the collective energy of Maridoileag that was removing the curse their forbearers had shackled their futures and their children's children to. Their evidence of the curse was freelancers who invited off-world businesses that weren't always good for Maridoileag and the clan culture that was a study of the de-evolution of the Mulands as a race. As much as Cot agreed that those points were detrimental to Maridoileag she also knew that all planets that participated in space travel had the same dilemma and it was part of spiritual growth populations go through. Instead of entering any agreement or speaking of her beliefs, she restated her assignment to them and said that once the assignments were completed she and her squad didn't plan on staying any longer.

She hadn't anticipated how powerful the combined energies of the MacDiarmid's past and present would have on her when she was in the castle and surrounded by MacDiarmid warriors that were drumming up the spirits of the MacDiarmid's. Were they expecting her to join them in this war? As she looked over the warriors and observed the colors of the energy they were creating, she wondered if her squad was feeling the same seductive energy of clan power. An energy master could usurp it and use it for her or his own interests, she thought.

Skene was ten feet from her when he came to a stop. The noise also stopped as if a switch was turned and for a split-second Cot thought she lost her hearing except a clock chimed the hour somewhere. She remembered as long as she bore arms, she was required to stay out of his safety space. Three swords length. That suited her fine. Being any closer meant she would be in his energy field.

"Greetings to you and the MacDiarmid clan, Skene," she said.

"Yee ah. So, you're here," he said contemptuously. He puffed out his chest and ran his hands along the belt holding the sword as if trying to find something to do with his hands. "I see no point in your visit." His accent was so thick, Cot barely understood him. Did she lose her ear for the dialect of the MacDiarmid clan?

Suddenly a light from his forehead band shot out. It was instantly neutralized by her shield.

Skene looked surprised. *"So, this is going to be a battle between us that only we can see,"* Skene thought.

Cot didn't show her surprise at being addressed telepathically, nor did she return an answer.

His thick arm rose to readjust his headband that became dislodged at the return fire. It didn't get far as the cloak over his shoulder was too restrictive.

"Why have you declared war?" Cot asked.

"You've come to offer your services?" he jeered. One of the soldiers next to him quickly stepped forward and leaned in for a conversation with Skene. Skene's aura bounced around behind his head and shoulders as if it were a dark balloon.

Her connection to *Star Chaser* was cut. In her peripheral she could see an energy damper was engaged covering the entire quad. By the colors it was putting off she recognized it's manufacturer. The code to deactivate it shouldn't take *Star Chaser* too long to figure out, she thought.

"No. I've come to pick up..."

"Claire, your sister's adopted child," he said distastefully and loudly. "It's not your business. It's my business. She's from outside of our lands and that makes her a foreigner and mine to do with as I please." He gazed at the warriors around him with arrogance.

Adopted from outside of the clanlands? Family members in the freelands?

From an exterior portico a man approached them with his own retinue. They were from High Cleave's household by their capes. The cleave was the top arbitrator and business advisor to the clan. His badge of office was not just the weave of colors in his cape but pinned to his sash was a large emerald gemstone. The office of High Cleave was not a position the chieftain had a say in. It was passed from present cleave to first born child, male or female. Their family's honor rode on the business dealings for the clan and by the appearance of those around the High Cleave, his family was doing well. So where was he getting his allowance?

The High Cleave had enough authority to override Skene's decision to ignore Claire's request not to be bartered. Did the High Cleave have something to do with the barter? By the color of his aura High Cleave Harrison was a man of honor and bore no deceit or ill will, so where did he stand in this business? He was a sharp contrast to the Skene. She noticed Harrison stopped more than three sword length's away from Skene. The two didn't like each other.

"Lt. Col. Colleen MacDiarmid," he said in a loud voice, "I am privileged to meet you at last." This brought a cheer from those gathered around them. "I've heard so much about your exploits," and he added in a lower voice, "and unannounced visits."

Cot was surprised. "Thank you. I didn't realize I was of any interest to anyone on Mari."

Those within hearing laughed with Harrison.

"You're a warrior and a hero in a galaxy of warriors and you're a MacDiarmid. Our warriors and citizens are proud of your achievements."

There was cheering when he made that comment.

"Let's get this over with," Skene said irritably and turned his back on them. "We have more important business to get to."

"Claire MacDiarmid is important business," Cot said to his back. She sheathed her sword and slung her shield on her back to protect herself from any attacks from behind.

The dark cloud surrounding Skene leaned to his extreme left, nearly detaching but for a wisp clinging to his head, then it was back over him again.

High Cleave Harrison fell in beside her. The warriors clashed their swords against their shields as they passed. At each row of warriors, she could feel a hatred for Skene.

So why was he still the clan leader and elected as Chief of the Clans?

The warriors gave one last shout followed by a bang on their shields as she entered the castle interior. It took her a few moments to decipher what their cry was.

"A Champion has returned!"

She was relieved they hadn't put any ownership on her. By Skene's attitude she didn't think it was his idea to assemble the troops to welcome her. Was it their general? Where was he?

She recognized Donald, Skene's secretary, by his sash and lack of weapons. He was standing in the corridor entrance with more armsmen and an automated chair that was huge. No doubt the chair was for Skene. She lost sight of Skene's two henchmen when the chair became active. There were so many predator species in the galaxy that had rogue members that it would be difficult to identify what had attached to Skene. If this was a Gepak follower, a different protocol had to be followed starting first with a quarantine of the entire planet. Once one found a place to nest, others quickly followed.

Perhaps, this was what the Bounders were referring to. If this was a Gepak follower, she wasn't sure the Bounders would be able to clear all of their nests before a lot of damage occurred.

Skene collapsed into the chair with a loud grunt and other noises of escaping gastro gases. From the warriors that were around them she could feel their disgust and shame. They didn't identify him as their leader, but few chieftains had warrior clans behind them personally. It was their general they followed and so far, she hadn't seen a general. Maybe he was busy with war preparations. The assembled warriors, she was sure, were present because of Skene's plans to go to war. That meant war vans to transport the warriors and supplies were at the castle waiting for the order to move out. Since *Star Chaser* didn't find them in her scans, they must be in the shielded area that used to be the stables.

Armsmen standing at attention along the corridor attached themselves behind their group as they passed. The sounds from their armor and thick booted soles sent echoes reverberating against the stone walls. In the dim lighting, Cot could see maintenance hadn't been kept up. Paint was peeling and wood was missing from panels. Dust set heavily on the picture frames obscuring the details of the frame and framed.

Skene led them into the clan hearing hall. The light in the ceiling was bright and radiating more than light. The SEs neutralized the negative beamed energy and the intensity in the hall lessened. There was a sense of relief from those gathered.

Paintings and carvings of deceased clan heroes and chieftains were hanging, and the fallen pictures were left leaning against the walls. They too looked as if no one dusted or cared for them. It was an insult. Why did the clan let this abuse continue?

As for the living, the hall was filled with clansmen and women dressed in their finest. The moment she crossed the threshold the women folk gave their keening cry, the ritual of welcoming home a warrior. Cot could feel the collective energy aimed at her and was again taken by surprise at the goodwill behind the energy that was intentionally sent to her. She directed the energy back with heartfelt well wishes.

Skene's chair came to rest on a dias. High Cleave Harrison gestured to her to take her place to the right of Skene's chair. He took his place to the left in a seat that was clearly the High Cleave's chair. Skene looked pleased with the women's cry and waved to

the crowd as if it were for him. One of the two henchmen Cot distrusted leaned close to Skene and whispered something. His face took on an ugly look.

"Alright, shut up!" he yelled at them. They ignored him.

Cot looked at seat that was to be hers on his right. It had a worn cover over it as if it had been hastily tossed over the seat. Cot flipped off the worn covering, revealing stones and burrs. Cot looked at the armsman standing at attention near her chair. His eyes moved quickly away from hers. His face darkened and he braced stiffer. The feelings she was receiving from him were confusing.

"Well, well," Skene muttered irritably, looking over at her. "Children's pranks," he said.

The women closest to the podium began to stomp their feet and gave a chirping call of displeasure. Soon the whole hall was booming as many feet pounded.

"Well, clean it up!" Skene shouted angrily at Donald, standing close to him. Donald in turn, looked at another. There was hesitation before the armsman he pointed at stepped forward.

Cot's SE neutralized the poison in the burr as he hesitantly reached for it. He jumped back in fear when the objects disappeared from SE's vibrations, including the chair. Those nearest to see it, oohed and relayed what they had seen to others around them, causing the room to become noisier.

Skene grunted as he rose awkwardly. Donald moved to stand between Skene and her, carrying on a rapid conversation with Skene. She couldn't tell whether he was protecting him from her or the other way around. A dark shadow above Skene weaved back and forth behind his head.

"What kind of magic games are you playing," Donald demanded of her.

"If you have something against me, speak it plainly and not play coward's games," Cot said loudly. Cot knew she couldn't let this go. She had been insulted publicly in front of the clan. "If I were any other person, I would be obligated to draw my sword to appease my honor. Then you would die as well as any other who unwisely went against me; however, these are children's games not worth the loss of anyone's life."

Hands quickly moved to sword hilts. Voices grew louder in the crowd as words were said that could cause fists to fly and hidden weapons to be drawn. The collective

unhappiness of Skene's leadership was strong. Was his stranglehold on them slipping? He must have thought so too, because he looked around surprised. Donald left the podium as if he had something important to attend to. High Cleave Harrison looked after him, frowning.

"Let's begin the Hearing of Petitions," High Cleave Harrison announced loudly to quiet down the group. His glare at Skene and his armsmen on the podium were greeted by returned glares.

This is like being near a time bomb that's ticking down to zero, she thought. Cot watched everyone, wondering what would set off the explosion of emotions that were so close to the collective surface.

One of the women, whom by her armband was from the high Chieftain's household, came forward with her own chair. It was taken by one of High Cleave Harrison's men since Skene's men made no move to assist.

"Thank you, lady of the castle," Cot said.

As soon as Cot sat, a line formed with petitioners. An armsmen from High Cleave's retinue stood next to Cot and explained it was tradition that when a warrior with honors sat with the Chieftain of the Clan and High Cleave, the General stepped out of sight in honor of the warrior, and anyone could approach and air a problem they had. All claimants were protected from retribution when in the clan hall. Ciam Skene and High Cleave Harrison were obligated to listen and make a ruling, with her weighting in if she felt it was necessary. If she differed from both of the clan leaders, her decision was the action to be taken. Cot nodded to the armman to thank his explanation. He remained standing at her side. She could feel his high state of vigilance as he eyed not the crowd but the armsmen in the darker parts of the hall where Donald had disappeared.

The petitions were many and were related to the consequences of the war Ciam Skene declared. Taxes and whatever resources the citizens had that Ciam Skene wanted were taken without anything given in return. Cot sided with High Cleave Harrison that taxes should only be a percentage of what the family or individual made, and supplies taken should be paid for immediately. One petitioner challenged Ciam Skene's authority to declare war without collective clan consent. Cot and High Cleave Harrison agreed to that also.

Skene didn't acknowledge anyone that came before them. He was napping, giving an occasional snort or snoring, to show his contempt of those coming before them with their worries. However, there was someone nearby recording everything.

Cot was sure the recording was to punish those that spoke up. Yet all had been defiant and by the look in their eyes, knew there would be consequences. Were they going to be part of the rebellion? It meant Skene was fighting a war on more than one front and by the cleave's responses to the claimants, he wasn't consulted by Skene on the war effort. It was as plain as day so what was all this war noise about really?

"The clan can't afford your war," Cot said when the last person in line was listened to. "An honorable chieftain would not ignore his advisors and run the clan into financial ruin."

"You have no say here, woman," Ciam Skene told her. Skene spat which didn't clear his chair and landed on his foot. "She's an outsider and belongs in jail. This meeting is over! Strip her of her belongings! Chain her in the arena!"

He hadn't finished what he was saying when Cot was hit so hard she was numb and unable to defend herself. She was stripped naked as she remembered the dangerous criminals about to be put to death were treated and dragged to an arena where she had previously been welcomed. Her shuttle was gone. How did he do that?

Let's see how you get out of this! Skene thought triumphantly.

"Wake up!" she heard the armsman next to her shout.

Abruptly Cot's eyes opened and before her the same crowd was before her. Her sword was out of its scabbard, and her shield was held too low.

"This isn't your hall. She does have a say and so does all of us," High Cleave Harrison said in a loud but calm voice. "She asked a fair question that we all ask."

Cot blinked a few times then pulled her shield higher as her eyes refocused and could see armsmen moving into the crowd.

"I am the Chieftain and the will of the clan. What I do is not up for discussion!"

"You have no right to destroy the old clan meeting hall!" shouted someone from the crowd.

"Nor cutting down our forests!"

"Nor laying our fields fallow and starving our families!"

"Find out who they are and silence them!" Skene demanded. But the crowd wouldn't let his armsman pass the first row of seats. Skene's armsman drew a sword to cut down one of the women blocking his path. Cleave Harrison shouted for him to stop with others pushing at the armsman to step back. The women were not so easily pushed aside.

"This is the clan hall! You cannot attack clan members for what they are free to say in our clan castle. All voices are heard here. This is the first I have heard of you planning to destroy the old meeting hall. Is that true?" Cleave Harrison demanded.

"You have no say in military matters! I am the Chief of all clans in the clanlands now!"

"The meeting hall is our heritage. What does that place to do with any military matter?"

"If you must know, there are off-world weapons being hidden there and I am going to seize them." He pushed to stand up with another face imposing itself over his puffy face. "I shall be the one that will make the laws on this *planet*. No one will go unpunished for standing against me!"

"You're not a MacDiarmid nor a Muland. Who are you?" Cot pushed her sluggish voice out.

"You're insulting me in my own castle!" Ciam Skene shouted at Cot. The force of his anger wasn't anything near the energy that he had hit her with earlier. Cot then realized her connection with *Star Chaser* was reestablished.

"Star, *locate the Clans Communion Hall. It used to be where all the clans met to discuss common problems during the Dark Ages.*"

Ciam Skene's dark shadow above his head wavered and she didn't think it was from weakness.

"Flying around in your spaceship doesn't make you a warrior! I am the elected Chief of all the clans, and I make my alliances with whom I please."

"You're speaking of off-world weapons. Weapons most here know nothing about. Some are so toxic they will kill whoever touches them and whoever breathes the fumes," she yelled back, hoping everyone in the hall could hear her.

"Your stories are tales for the weak. They have no weight here!"

"I've seen what those weapons can do!" she said. "They aren't like a sword or canon. If any of you have seen transmissions from the space newsies you'll know Skene is condemning Mari to a painful death if you use off-world weapons."

For a large person he drew his side arms quickly and would have fired if Cot hadn't been quicker and flicked a star from each sleeve, hitting the backs of each of his hands to numb them. Surprised, he fell back in shock, unable to hold either weapon. His bio-seeking device wouldn't have worked but Cot wasn't taking chances. His armsmen drew their swords and rushed her. By then the noise in the hall had risen to a loud clamor magnified by the walls and many hurried out of the hall, away from the sword fights.

Cot fought whoever came within reach of her sword and shield. Death was in their eyes and Cot rendered them unconscious or numbed their hands, so they lost their weapons. She was relieved that Skene's henchmen didn't carry the same weapons as he did and that whatever he had hit her earlier wasn't used now.

"This silliness had gone on long enough. Put down your swords and bring Claire MacDiarmid to me," she shouted over the noise.

"You obey her and you're dead!" Ciam Skene shouted as his men held him up.

"You aren't a MacDiarmid nor are you a Muland!" Cot shouted at him.

"Kill her! A farm to the man that kills her! She's a Brounder! Kill the Brounder!"

The room suddenly went quiet.

"Star, *how are the others doing?*"

"*Not as busy as you.*"

"She's a Brounder! I said kill her and the girl!" Skene shouted and then under the protection of his guards disappeared into the milling crowd.

A dozen Skene's armsmen came in force to the podium with their weapons ready to use. They were all strong armed men and looked like they could put up a good fight.

"Star, *can you locate the child?*"

"*She is on her way to Reflected Light. Your sister and her were waiting in the hall under guard when chaos started in the hall. While the guards were distracted, I gave her instructions on what hidden passages to take to get to the shuttle. I will protect her and your sister. The blocked room is where he has hostages.*"

"*She can hear you?*" Cot asked alarmed.

"You know your species is telepathic, that's what makes a good SID-pilot, it also enabled someone like Skene who has strong telepathic abilities to influence large groups of people."

The armsmen tried to rush her but found Cot's sword play more skillful. Their puzzlement at why their fellows were slumped to the ground with no blood gave Cot an advantageous distraction. Cleave Harrison and his men were at her back fighting just as hard, only they were inflicting real wounds.

"What is this craziness about Brounders?" Cot yelled over to the Cleave.

"Since Ciam Skene took leadership, he has become obsessed to destroy them. Too many of us were against it so he's been destroying their homes and razing forests they might take refuge in. Any child that shows the gift of seeing or looks like a Brounder is sold off to another clan with orders to kill them. A group had formed to hide away these children with help from the other clans."

"He's cursed the MacDiarmid Clan!" Cot shouted angrily. "He's not Muland and the Brounders can see that as plain as I! It's no wonder he wants to get rid of them. But why the girl, Claire?"

"I don't know," Harrison said. "I'm not part of his inner circle. It wouldn't surprise me if his inner circle was composed of one, himself."

"Skene has cursed the MacDiarmid clan," she called out to the armsmen surrounding them. The men yelled and cursed her but didn't move any closer to her.

"They have never seen a women fight like you, not even in the sport arenas," Harrison said. "We need to leave the castle. He'll be gathering his private guard to come after us."

"Ciam Skene is bringing weapons and more warriors," Star said. "He went to the stable area to get them."

"Let's leave now," Cot said.

"I would like to," he said, "but our way out seems to be blocked."

Cot grabbed Cleave Harrison's arm and dragged him with her to the back of the dais and through the not-so-secret passageway behind the wall. His armsmen followed closely. Cot led them out of that corridor to another room and through another hidden passageway.

"Where are you taking us? Your ship is back that way," Cleave Harrison said.

"There is a room in the castle where he has hostages locked up. I want to free them."

"We have searched the entire castle for over three years to find where he is keeping his captives and haven't been able to find them!" one of the men said.

"You said Skene isn't a Muland or a MacDiarmid. Sometimes I feel that way too. The last year his madness has gotten worse giving him the appearance of something not wholesome," Harrison said.

"Hold," she whispered. With sword point she ran it along the floor. A wire. She followed the wire to a detonator.

"Star, *is this the room you can't scan?*"

"*It is.*" Star said.

"Do any of you know how to disable these charges?" Cot asked.

"Aye, we've been trained," a lieutenant said. He gestured to others to look around the room area.

Cot disabled one and then looked for the release to the wall. Every room had a secret entrance. "Have you them all?" she asked the lieutenant.

The lieutenant nodded. She pulled the lever and the wall slowly swung open. What they saw were women and children packed in a room, fearfully trying to back away from the opening as much as they could. One of the women's face broke out into a smile when she noted that Cot's uniform wasn't that of a clansman's.

"Good got! This is worse than we thought," muttered one of the armsmen.

"We've found our babes and kinswomen!" another said joyfully.

"These are the women and children he's been kidnapping to keep the warriors in line," Cleave Harrison said. "None of us dared to challenge him for fear of him doing as he had threatened, torturing them and returning them in pieces."

"We'll move them out of here through secret passages. There's enough in this old castle to keep Skene and his men split up looking for them and us," Cot said.

The cleave's men moved through the group encouraging them to move out of the room to give breathing space to those at the very back of the room.

"Who is back there that they are protecting?" Cot asked Cleave Harrison.

"I can't see. But we need to move quickly. Skene is going to send someone here if this is his treasure."

A woman stepped out of the shadows. Cot knew her immediately as a Brounder. "I will lead them out, if you provide a distraction."

"Lady Bethia!" Cleave Harrison said.

"You have six men. Split the group and use the secret passageways," Cot said.

"Seven," Cleave Harrison said. "I will take a group with Lady Bethia." Before Cot could answer the armsmen and Cleave Harrison were moving the women and children into groups. The woman they were protecting was a shock to Cleave Harrison.

"It is Lady Sorchia. Ciam Skene first wife. We thought her long dead!"

Cot quickly went to her side. One of the SEs detached from Cot and ran a scan on the woman, then sent energy to her. After a few moments the woman's eyes opened.

"Lady," Cleave Harrison said, "we need to move you." He and Lady Bethia helped her to stand.

"Let's go!" Cot whispered.

"We will use the vans Ciam was going to use to move the troops to the battle front." Cleave Harrison motioned to his men to move out.

"I'll create a diversion." Cot waited until everyone left before she moved the wall back in place. Before she closed the room she left a message for Skene, telling him he was no longer chieftain or chief of anyone.

Cot moved from shadow to shadow in the long corridors and wondered if Skene's men searching the castle for her were serious in finding her. They passed her many times as she hid in the shadows.

"Star, *what is happening with Skene?*"

"A dozen of Skene's lieutenants are turning their back to him. There is a dozen more that are loyal to him and they are fighting the others to get to the hostage room."

Cot spotted a lieutenant that was hurrying past with his troops.

"Lieutenant?" Cot said as he passed her.

He and his men turned on her quickly. He saluted her. "I have no quarrel with you, Lt. Col. Colleen MacDiarmid."

"Nor I with you or the warriors that are for upholding the clan's honor. We found where he was hiding his hostages. We have released them, and they are heading to the motor pool."

"Is my wife among them?" he asked anxiously.

"I don't know."

He turned and with his men close on his heels hurried in a new direction.

"Well, that went well. Star, *how is it going with our SID-mates?*"

"They are having interesting conversations with their clansfolk. Though the clan chieftains don't want the war, they don't want off-world weapons in anyone's hands and are willing to go to war for that."

Cot continued her move through the castle looking for Skene. She needed to separate the entity from him before any more harm was done. An hour later of not finding Skene, she realized she needed to get to her shuttle and move to the next phase – securing the weapons cache everyone was interested in taking for their own. She was sure Skene would be there too.

Stepping into the courtyard she faced a different Skene, looking less fat and he had a new weapon which fired the moment he spotted her. Her shield took the brunt of the shot, but the force knocked her down leaving her breathless. He mistook it for a killing shot and went to cut off her head with his knife. Cot kicked him in the knee, and he went down with a cry of pain. His two henchmen rushed her before she got to her feet, but her shield she had across her chest sent out an energy that knocked them both unconscious.

Reflected Light activated a protection envelope around her as she struggled to her feet. She had reflexively held onto her sword and pulled her shield over her. All those drills worked, she thought. Cot escaped under the shuttle through the bottom hatch cover.

A young girl and a woman she didn't recognize were waiting for her at the helm. The shuttle had four scenes showing on the monitors. The two guests were yelling and cheering as the fighting progressed in various places of the castle. No wonder she didn't see anyone in the halls. They were around the motor pool and some outside of the castle gates.

"Is your team winning?" Cot asked.

Both turned around quickly.

"Greetings kinswoman and young one. I'm Lieutenant Colonel Colleen."

"Colleen," the woman said slowly. "You have changed." She stood up. "I'm Susan, your eldest sister. This is my daughter, Claire."

Cot was surprised that she was taller than her sister and though there was some family resemblance, it could also be said their resemblance was typical of a MacDiarmid. Claire had no resemblance to her sister or to a MacDiarmid. All Cot could say was she felt and looked Muland.

"You don't look like what I was expecting," Claire said.

"Taller, scarier? Perhaps more imposing," Cot suggested. "I don't remember my sisters or brothers, Susan. I wasn't permitted to be part of the family."

"For your benefit it turned out," Susan said.

"It did," Cot said. It was as if something clicked inside of her. "Please be seated, but not in that seat. We need to leave now."

"Cot, a ship has just taken off from the castle. Your Ciam Skene person is flying it. He's alone," *Star* said over the comm.

"Send his position to the others."

"Message sent."

"*Star Chaser* said you're here to take me somewhere that I can go to school. Can mother and the others come too?"

"I don't make those decisions and *Star Chaser*..." Cot paused. What could she say about *Star Chaser*?

"I know she's just a ship," Claire said.

"Do all ships talk?" Susan asked.

"It depends on the pilot, but usually pilots like verbal communication rather than having to read messages on screens."

"I want to be returned to my home in the central valley where my family is waiting for me," Susan said. "Claire has made her choice and I support it. Is she too young to be alone where you live?"

"The Space Consulate will assign a guardian to watch over her and take her to her school."

"What about Da? He was taken away even after he agreed to send me to Ciam Skene. He's a liar, that one," Claire said angrily.

"He was conscripted," Susan said. "Skene has been gathering men and boys from the fields and slums to be fodder for his war."

"What does that mean?" Claire asked.

"When a general plans his first siege on a protected site, he will send troops to storm the site to test how well protected it is. Usually, it takes two days of sieges before the general has an idea of how to proceed with his more seasoned troops," *Star* explained.

"When will Da come home?"

I don't know," Cot said. "*Star, we will follow protocols. Our conversations will be kept private.*"

"Incoming call from Captain Allison," Star said.

"Activate the privacy shield, Star."

"Group Leader, this is Captain Allison."

"Captain Allison, this is Group Leader, go ahead."

"We've located the cache right where you said it would be and I have finished a recon. There are two energy fields covering the building. One is from the Hall itself. The other is foreign to Mari."

"How many of you are free?"

"Just me and Spacie. The others are in the midst of clan politicking. They're trying to talk the clan chieftains and council into not trying to storm the old clan meeting hall for the weapons that will give them power over their neighbors."

"Then you and I will meet at the meeting hall until the others arrive. Give me ten minutes."

"Aye, Group Leader."

"Deactivate the privacy shield, Star."

Cot turned to Susan and Claire. "The shuttle will take you home, Susan. Claire, don't leave the shuttle as it will return to me once Susan disembarks. Now, excuse me, I need to be about my business."

While the shuttle flew them to the site of the Clans Meeting Hall, Cot read the reports from her team and Susan and Claire ooohhed and aaahhed the land below them.

"There's water in the canals," Susan said to Claire in a low voice. "They said there wouldn't be any this year. They lied."

"Look at the dirt its wet," Claire said. "We can go swimming! Or..."

Cot thought about saying something but decided she had involved herself enough. She glanced at the land below them. Dried parched land was being dampened by water from the automatic sprinklers that turn on when there was water in the lines. She could see people gathered around the irrigation ditches, some were dressed in their armor. Hopefully, they would take off their armor and put on their work clothes and till the land to prepare for seeds.

As the shuttle approached the mound where the old clan meeting hall stood, the screens brought up different views of the building for them to see. They flew into one of the few green spaces. The hill was green with a forest on two sides, and at the bottom was a bridge with a river flowing high up its banks. The contrast of the green hill and forest to the dry land on the other side of the bridge was sharp.

"That's the Clans' Meeting Hall," Susan said in awe. "No one in our family has seen it except in books. I thought it was just a story. They say every clan's story is carved on the posts, showing how each clan started."

A close up, showing the details of the building's frescos appeared on their screens. Scenes from the lives of ordinary folk before the dark ages were in bright colors as if they were just recently painted.

"They don't look so old," Claire said.

"This is where I get off. Susan, may your family's wealth be measured in you and your children's gifts to the clan," Cot said. "Stay and watch over Claire," she told a SE. Holding her sword in one hand and shield in the other, she hopped out of the exit hatch landing neatly on the grass. Two SEs stayed close to her shoulder.

The shuttle disappeared as she ran up the slope to where Allison was waiting. The moment she touched the ground she could feel the power of the planet, more powerful than in the castle and far different than at the riverbed. It was invigorating and opened her senses further to the life that was around her. It was because of her connection that she became aware of something dark and foreign to Mari shoot out of the forest and come toward her so fast she hadn't brought up her sword to block it. Instead, her shield

energized and zapped it. Before Cot registered the first shot another shot from the forest struck a glancing blow to her shoulder that her armor easily deflected. Then a dark thin ribbon came out from the forest rising up and diving down at her. She used the shield to protect her from being touched. The ribbon filled out into an ominous cloud two feet away from her then formed into a shadow figure.

"I have been feeding on your friend," it growled.

For a moment Cot feared it was referring to Allison, but she could see Allison moving cautiously toward them, holding her sword and shield in front of her and glancing around her to make sure nothing was sneaking up behind her.

Cot signed for her not to come any closer.

An envelope of skin, empty of life and what once gave it form was tossed at her feet. It might have been Skene but Cot didn't look to be sure. It could also be an empty space suit of a species she wasn't familiar with. An SE evaporated it, putting an end to any further distraction of what it could morph into.

The wisp of energy circled her staying outside of her sword reach. "And now, I will have you and your ship," it rumbled and, in a blur, dropped on her from behind, however, she spun around stabbing it with her sword. A howl that would scare many came from the shadow and again it attacked her only to stop abruptly when it came to an arm's length from her shield. A foul stench came from the creature.

"Leave Maridoileag," Cot said.

"We like it here. There are some here that like us and are willing hosts," it mocked.

It stuck again knocking Cot back and her sword missed stabbing it. Something pricked her. Cot felt something foreign in her thoughts.

"Out!" She used Bua to force out whatever had passed her shield and suit of armor and was trying to settle in her. When she willed it out of her, Allison stuck it with her sword.

Allison gave a yell of triumph when it howled and fled into the forest.

"Squad Leader, Cot, Lt. Col. Cot," Allison shook her.

"I'm here," she said. With Allison's assistance she steadied herself.

"It's a Faulk, a follower of the Gepaks," Allison said. "I smelt the same foul odor the followers have when they're not in possession of a physical body."

Allison had enough close experience with the followers of the Gepaks to know a Faulk. Cot rubbed where she had been pricked.

"What did it hit me with?"

"The energy it has used has been identified and we will be ready next time," Star Chaser said over the comm channel for both to hear. "So far our scans have located seven such entities on Maridoileag but there may be more if they are underground."

"We won't be able to track them down and at the same time secure the weapons," Allison said.

Cot agreed with her concern. To leave Mari without eradicating the foul creatures was something neither was willing to do.

"Star Chaser, let SFHQ know that there are seven known Gepak followers on Mari and put it on the public channel."

"Broadcasted," Star responded.

"Everyone will hear it," Allison said.

"Exactly. There are bounty hunters that only hunt Gepak followers. They have more experience locating and capturing them and will be here quickly. They'll also be able to locate any Mulands that have succumbed to their influence. With that concern taken care of we can concentrate on securing the weapons."

Cot studied the forest, letting her eyes relax and extending her other senses that could detect past the shadows along the tree line. She knew they were being watched. Absentmindedly she rubbed where she had been pricked. Both women walked the perimeter with Allison pointing out possible places of vulnerability if the clans should charge up the hill. What Brooker's shield would do to protect the cache was something Cot didn't want to find out.

"How soon will the others arrive here, Star?"

"Those in the clanlands are facing problems with some members. They have not asked for assistance. Captains Wimsey and Aysen are being detained by the local law enforcement for suspicion of being arms dealers, but reported they don't need assistance."

Unusual activity from the nearest travel gate is registering on the monitors we left behind. It is too soon to identify what is coming through."

"Thank you, *Star*. It looks like it's you and I for the moment, Captain Allison."

"The SIDs have been testing to disengage Brooker's shield since the cache has been located but they haven't found the code yet. They're working on a shield of our own that will surround the entire hill to prevent anything from entering or leaving that isn't cleared by the SIDs and that includes an explosion."

"While they're working on it, I'm going to patrol along the forest line. I don't want any surprises from the Faulks. Keep an eye on the road. Let me know if the clans start arriving."

"Will do, Squad Leader."

As she moved through the knee-high grass toward the forest line, she kept her sword moving in slow left and right motions like a dowsing rod, trusting her sword would pick up the energy *Star* identified as the Faulk. The ground was downhill and uneven, making her progress to the edge of the forest slow.

She stopped and raised her sword tip, feeling the energy of a Faulk. Her sight adjusted to the darkness of the forest's interior and before her, exactly where her sword pointed was a figure that became clearer as it moved out of the forest. Its face was superimposed with Skene's, but Cot could see it was losing its connection with the Muland body. She wasn't sure what was causing it to be at odds with its host body, but she wasn't going to give it a chance to regroup. She raced to it as it moved with speed to her. Her sword made a sweeping cut as she passed him, and she swung her body around so her shield could do its damage. He didn't defend himself but took the paralyzing blow from her shield, wavering for a moment, then he turned and faced her. A dark gray blob left his body and Skene collapsed. The gray blob hovered close to the ground. Suddenly it went down a creature's hole and came back up in the body of an underground creature leaping for Cot. Energy from her shield zapped the creature, and it collapsed in the grass.

Allison shouted a warning. From her peripheral vision she could see someone running toward her, holding his sword above his head, yelling his clan's war cry. The dark shape quickly rose from the ground and moved to intercept the person, engulfing him. He fell to his knees, dropping his sword in the dirt, but only for a moment. This was

a warrior and he recovered quickly, picking up his sword as he got to his feet to face her. When he moved toward her it was as if he was at odds with his body.

Allison shouted a warning to the other warriors that were circling the area. They weren't bold enough to charge up the hill. The energy protecting the weapons cache around the hall wouldn't have allowed anyone to go further than halfway up to where Allison was standing.

Fion appeared suddenly startling the warriors. She advanced to the line of warriors with her sword drawn, her shield sparking, daring anyone to challenge her. Four SEs glinted in the setting sun. Dusk was not a good time to fight as the fading light could play tricks on the eyes.

Cot's eyes quickly returned to the warrior that was slowly advancing toward her.

"Now," the entity said, "we shall see just how good you are."

"The warrior you have embodied isn't a weakling like Skene. He will fight you," Cot said.

"Let us see!" it said and stumbled forward.

Cot blocked the sword swing with her sword and flicked his sword from his hand, then easily knocked him out. He collapsed, rolling down the slope. She used the energy from the planet and Bua to surround the dark form as it escaped the warrior. Suddenly, the force around her built up, and this time the dark form changed into a small insect-type creature. As it made a dash toward her, energy from her shield burnt it to a crisp.

"Group Leader!" Fion shouted.

Cot looked back. "Secure the site and follow through with the plan." Cot slid her sword into its scabbard and continued into the forest. Standing still inside the forest she touched Bua. Taking a moment, she realized that a humming that started the moment she touched Mari's surface was increasing noticeably in volume. As it increased her body vibrated and from her forehead a light shot out, removing all darkness and shadows in the forest. The life force of all the creatures in forest connected with her. The alien energy was easily located. It had not been able to find another host, as the combined energy in the forest isolated it. Cot continued further into the forest, placing her feet where they were meant to be placed, on no living bug or plant. In a clearing it waited. Cot stood still to see what it was about. There were six Faulks waiting for her.

Using the energy from Mari she focused it into her hands until her fingertips were hot with energy. She didn't wait for them to make a move but pointed at the entity she felt was the leader and sent a spark that hit it in its center. With her other hand she sent a charge at another that moved. Cot walked steadily toward the gathering. Two were but wisps but she continued to send energy to them. The other two made no move toward her until she was near a circle drawn in the dirt. The two started toward her but suddenly wilted until they were no more.

Brounders that she had met earlier stepped into the clearing and formed a circle outside the line drawn in the dirt and began to chant. Herbs were tossed inside the circle, and it became cloudy with dampness and then the deafening noise. The howling reminded her of the black twisters that covered Homin during the winter season. The residents lived below ground along with their pets and livestock. Cot and her co-pilot were on escort service to a diplomat's family and had the misfortune of being denied a place to wait out the storm in a safe house. They were in effect left above ground to witness the work of the twister as it hit the planet's surface and funneled everything in its path into its gray orifice and flung it out either through its cloud like sides or where it touched the sky. It was horrifying yet one of the most powerful experiences she had ever witnessed as it howled and growled and set her skin and nerves on fire from its energy. Her co-pilot, Gen Ho had seen twisters in newsies and was able to keep them both away from the path of the Devourer, as Gen called it. This Devourer in the forest sucked up everything within the circle and then dissipated. All that was left was a dark spot that fell and was quickly caught in a container by one of the Brounders. It happened so fast that Cot was uncertain about what she had witnessed.

"We will pray over it and turn it over to those that can find a safe place for the remains," one of the cloaked figures said.

"It can't be left on Mari," Cot said. "Not a speck of it."

"We will follow your advice with all seriousness," the figure said.

"Sisters and Brothers, I thank you for helping me and allowing me to use your energy," Cot said.

"Peace be unto you." They all bowed then Cot was left alone in the forest. She gave one last look around her then ran out of the forest and into the bright daylight. For a moment she was blinded and was surprised when she ran into a tall armored warrior.

"Hey, now! Don't be pushing. Hey! Who are you?" the voice in front of her demanded.

When her eyes adjusted, she found herself at the base of the hill near the bridge where warriors were milling around, dressed for battle. Looking up the hill where she needed to be Captains Fion, Mòr and Allison were standing. Her mouth dropped at the sight they were providing. The sun was behind them, and their armor and shields gave them the appearance of being larger than they were. When her SID-mates spotted her Fion began walking down the slope as if she were taking a stroll.

Energy from Mari was still running through her and as she moved through the milling warriors they fell back as if she had the pox. Not looking left or right she walked up the slope and through a force field that gave way to her. She came to a stop next to a grinning Fion.

"Did you eliminate the Faulk you were after?" she asked.

"Yes and five others. The SIDs put an additional force field over the hill," Cot observed. "Did you break Brooker's code?"

"No. We thought it would be safer for us to control the entire hill so when we do, we don't have to worry about the lone warrior making a name for himself and rushing us," Fion said. "They are a bit awed by us," she smirked. "We had to fight a few of them until we backed them down to where the line of our anticipated blast zone was. They aren't as well trained as they should be."

"What of a protection zone should something explode?" Cot asked.

"The SIDs estimated how powerful the blast would be if we failed to prevent a detonation of the contents that Star Force believes is in the cache."

Cot turned back to face the warriors at the bottom of the slope. It wasn't just warriors that were gathering around the clearing before the bridge. Children and elders were gathering.

"Hear ye, hear ye clans of Mari! In three days, the Clan Meeting Hall will open to all who wish to speak. Bear no weapons. Gather in tents, bring your families, build your bonfires and seek peace and wisdom within the Hall of the Clans," Cot said.

She turned and walked back up the slope with Fion at her side.

"Our Loremasters tell of how all you need to do is touch the walls anywhere in the hall and it will speak to you," Fion said. "Even with the three energy fields over the top of the hill, I can feel there is something magical about this place."

"Yes. What has been asleep for a long time has been awakened. Two days should be all we need to be out of here."

"Provided we can empty the place out in a day," Fion said.

"I don't think we have that much to empty. If there was that large of a cache it would have been noticed at too many points of its voyage here. I think there is something in this cache that is worth more than a treasure of weapons."

"And if we find it? Is it part of our take?"

"If it's that worrisome, I don't think we need another reason why some would like to see us fail. The SIDs as well as us are on trial here, and I think we will always be, though one never is really free of the eyes of someone watching. We'll need the SEs programmed to seek any gizmo not of the usual weapon-type."

"Being from the science lab, we're all interested in what the labs have for us," Fion said.

They met Allison and Mòr halfway up the slope where they kept an eye on the gathering warriors below them. It was as far as Brooker's force field would let them go but whatever energy was coming from the Meeting Hall went beyond his field.

"Can you feel it?" Mòr asked excited.

"It wasn't like this an hour ago," Allison said. "Stories say that when there is disharmony in the clans and the troubled gather together in the clearing around the Meeting Hall seeking answers, they will find peace and harmony."

"If the Hall has been hidden all this time, who would know to come here?" Mòr asked.

"That's the mystery!" Allison said.

"I wonder how those that hid the arms and the Faulk solved the mystery," Cot said.

It was part of the mysticism of the clans that Cot had forgotten about. Since the Meeting Hall was in a lot of the clan stories but its location left out, she assumed it was a metaphor.

"*Star*, what is everyone's status?"

"Captain Wimsey is back on-board *Mistress Q* and Aysen is back on board *Stormy* adding their support to our perimeter around Maridoileag."

"How soon until the code is known?"

"We have six of the seven," *Star* said.

"I need some rest before our next encounter," Cot said.

"Aye," Fion said.

"Let's stay close in our shuttles," Cot said.

Three shuttles appeared above the hill taking turns picking up their pilots.

"I have put Claire to sleep," *Star* said as Cot settled in her seat. "She's had a long day, and it keeps her from looking around. You have an incoming message from Lt. Colonel Ara from CFS."

"Establish a com link to all SIDs," Cot said.

"*Lieutenant Colonel Ara*?" many voices said in unison over the com channel.

"*Star*, do you know what it's about?" Cot asked.

"She will not tell me. She has been cleared by Star Force Headquarters to assist in picking up the contents of the weapons cache. She is flying a new class ship from the CFS yards," *Star* said. "The new model is called Benter."

"I've read about the first dozen that are still being tested. It's a sleek version of the BC-7DS, without the large side canons," Allison said. "It uses energy disrupters which can put a hole in a ship's buffer. It's crewed by three and after being on our roomier Caronda's it is way too small for me even if one person were to fly it."

"We have been spoiled," Mòr said. "I'm not sure I will go quietly back to cramped quarters shared by too many."

"BC-7Ds are not for sleeping with all the space used for munitions and weaponry but the Benter has separate quarters for its crew. All the space the cannons took for

munitions on the BCs were turned into sleeping areas on the Benter. Sounds like a newer version of ships ambassadors would use," Fion said.

Once Cot was back in space she opened a communication channel with Ara, conferencing her SID-mates so she wouldn't have to repeat the conversation.

"Greetings, Cot," Ara's cheerful voice came over the comm, then her image. *"I see I have all your SID-mates. Greetings all."* She leaned forward as if to get a closer look. *"Who's the sleeping child?"*

"My kin. I see you've been promoted. Congratulations Lieutenant Colonel Ara," Cot said. "We're kind of busy here. Is there something you need to tell us?"

"I'm here to assist you with recovering the weapons Brooker has stashed here and look for a clue in how he managed to steal them."

"You do know that there's a clan war brewing over these weapons?"

"I do. But that's why your squad is here, to change their minds by removing the temptation. So, what's your plan?"

"The SIDs have one more code to decipher to Brooker's energy shield. Until then, we're taking a break."

"Before you all pick through the gizmos," Ara said, "I'll identify what was stolen from CFS's inventory."

"After we chose what we need," Cot said. "It's the price paid to the piper, don't you know, Lt. Col Ara. Those are *our* orders. Do you have a list of what you're looking for?" Cot asked.

The list appeared immediately on her screen which also was sent to the others.

"Lt. Col. Ara, you know my squad members, welcome. In five hours, we'll meet again. Get some rest, all."

"Aren't you afraid the assassin will blow up the cache?" Ara asked.

"No. It wasn't the assassin that was destroying the caches."

"Who then?" everyone asked.

"Brooker and he and his ship were blown up by space security from Gre."

"Why was he blowing up his own caches?" Ara asked.

"There was a rumor that he had a contract out on his life and he didn't want anyone to seize what was his."

"What proof do you have for this theory?" Ara demanded.

"Star Chaser will send you the information, if Star Force HQ clears it."

"There's a large reward for capturing him," Hallie said. "You weren't planning on collecting some of that and retiring, were you Lt. Col. Ara?"

They all laughed with Ara.

"Five hours the operation will begin. Rest well everyone," Cot said.

"How do you know everything will be alright while you're resting?" Ara asked.

"We have SID-ships to guard the hall and there's enough ships on military maneuvers two hours away to prevent anyone with a detonator getting through their web just in case Brooker wasn't blown up on his ship," Wimsey said. "No one will approach our site without us knowing it well in advance, Ara."

* * * *

"Okay, listen up. While we were resting our SID-ships did some scanning and testing. No off-world weapons among those gathering. There isn't anyone detected on the North face or the South side of the hill."

"Why is that, if I may ask," Ara asked.

"You may ask. The North face has the illusion of a steep cliff, and the South side is a thick forest with an illusion that it's too difficult to move an army in gear through. West and East are the only ways for the crowds to move and set up camps. There is order and calmness in the camp and from what our SEs have been able to arrange, new arrivals are being directed where to set up their own tents. So far, the sanctity of the Hall will keep them from fighting amongst themselves. The SIDs haven't yet been able to find the last code to disengage Broker's shield."

"I can do that," Ara said.

"You can?"

"While you were resting, I was able to figure out what the last key would be," Ara said. "Broker is from the Plantar System."

"I don't know what that means, but if you have it, give it a go."

"Before I do, let's go over what my role is here," Ara said.

"Once we're in, three of us will look over the inventory, seven of us will move what belongs to the SID-ships to the sleds. Hallie will remain on *Gallant Soldier* and

keep an eye out for any ship that is approaching our location," Cot said. "Feah, Moodie, Wimsey and Mòr, will take the SEs to help move the inventory we'll be taking for ourselves. Each SID will give a list of what they want once we scan what's there. Goudie, work with Ara on securing her list. Once we get what's on our lists, pack the rest into Ara's container."

"I want to be one of the three," Ara said.

"You're with me, number four," Cot said. "We won't tell anyone that a non-Muland was on sacred grounds."

"Once I've neutralized that energy field, you'll have to supply the protection around the area to prevent those folks from rushing up the hill," Ara said.

"We have our own energy shield over the hill already," Cot said. "Alright, team. Let's move on to this plan now. Let me know when you're all in position."

Cot glanced at Claire who was waking up.

"Star, can you entertain Claire with some stories. I don't want her getting too curious and push buttons."

"We will entertain each other. She may know stories you haven't heard. If she becomes too curious, she will grow sleepy."

After ten minutes Cot received an affirmation from her squad.

"Ara, send the code. Can you control your container remotely?"

"I can," Ara said.

"Then, I'll pick you up. Send the code to operate your container," Cot said. "You can do that from my shuttle."

"Energy fields from our shuttles are up," Goudie reported.

"I'll monitor the perimeter," Wimsey said.

Cot was going to send out the umbilicus to allow Ara to walk between the two ships, but Ara was already in space with her jets aiming for *Reflected Light*.

"Ara is on board," *Star* reported.

Ara peeled out of her AEG quickly and dropped into the seat next to Cot, grinning at her entrance. "No time to waste. How's *Star Chaser*?"

"Since SID ships are now public knowledge, you can ask her yourself."

"Hello Ara," *Star Chaser* said. "I noticed your gizmo, the Lancer 4KS has failed its expectations."

"Oh, rubbing it in, are you? Did you program her?" Ara asked Cot.

"No."

"I was heading to the science station to turn it in when this situation came up," Ara said.

Cot rolled her eyes as she felt *Star Chaser's* interest piqued.

"Something wrong?" Ara asked quickly.

"Oh, no. Just thinking of how fast we can finish up here."

"So, who's the child?" Ara asked. Claire was in her bubble laughing at the 3D learning module *Star Chaser* was running for her.

"Claire MacDiarmid. She petitioned the MacDiarmid Clan Leader to leave the planet for education and after the EOM left, he sold her to another clan. FS sent me here to see that her request is honored."

"What are you going to do with her?" Ara asked.

"Hand her over to the Space Consulate when this is through."

"What are you going to do with her while we're working?"

Cot glanced at the Claire. "Don't say anything around her that isn't for public ears. Release the privacy bubble around Claire."

Claire's eyes opened wide to see Ara. Ara was a species not even close to resembling a Muland.

"Claire, this is Ara."

Ara put out one of her tentacles for Claire to touch. "I'm pleased to meet you. You're going to have to remain here while we take care of business. You are not to touch anything here. Okay?" Ara put a conn link on her shirt.

"This will keep you in contact with us. Should you see anything that looks like trouble, speak up. We'll hear."

Claire nodded and repeated, "Ara."

Ara used autosuggestion on Claire. It was best, since Claire could adapt to species differences better in a suggestive state.

"I will engage her attention fully," Star said.

Cot and Ara exited, running up the slope to a cave that became evident once Brooker's shield was lifted. Baron was standing guard outside of it. "You're not going to believe what's in there," he said.

Both women hurried in. Wimsey was sorting and dispatching gizmos that they had never seen but the SID ships were laying claim to.

Ara left Cot's side and walked through the scattered weapons and gizmos.

"Notice some of those weapons are the kind that will leave dead zones?" Wimsey asked.

"Are they neutralized?"

"I would hope so. But I can't say for sure if they are neutralized or can be detonated from a remote site. That makes me very nervous. They're not from the science labs FS uses. Look at the logo on the sides. We're leaving them for last to move and there's an extra dampening field over that area, but I don't know if it will contain most of the energy force if they should go off."

Cot watched as the cavern was quickly being emptied as some of the new gizmos were put to work in loading up five sleds. "Did you find a detonator or a trip to those explosives?"

"No."

"Wimsey, move those explosives on a slow barge. One of us should have one available."

"Barron."

"Good. Give Ara control of it. She and her escort can tow it at a safe distance along with their container. We'll load it remotely, once we all leave here."

Cot looked around for Ara and spotted her wandering through the remaining weapons. Cot went to join her.

"It looks like we're making good time emptying this place. Were you expecting weapons from another source to be here?"

"No, I didn't. But I didn't know what to expect."

"What are you looking for?" Cot asked.

"It's classified. CFS secrets and all. You know how it goes."

"Does it go boom if it reaches space without a compound that will neutralize it?"

Ara didn't interrupt her search but kept moving, and behind them the gizmos continued to empty the cave. Cot gave her the time she needed to decide if she was going to tell her what it was, but she was also going to have *Star Chaser* find out too.

"Star, *what classified weapon is Ara looking for?*"

"*Does this mean I can access her ship's records?*"

"*I know you've already tried.*"

"*And I have accessed her ship's logs. CFS found a new weapon on an abandoned ship, the Nautili. It was sent to the nearest Science Station to find out what it was about and before anyone could look at it, it disappeared along with a storage room filled with gizmos that hadn't been tested yet.*"

"If," Ara said over *Star's* silent conversation, "you must know, so you don't mess with it, it's a sound wave that paralyzes most living species within its range. CFS found it on an abandoned ship. It disappeared one day after it arrived at the Science Station."

"What does it look like? I can help you find it."

"I have no description. It was in a box with instructions and never opened."

Both looked around the cavern that was now empty except for the explosives Cot wanted to be moved last.

"Your team would make good thieves. You work fast," Ara said impressed. "I can't find it."

Cot pointed to the explosives. "We're moving that when we're all out of here. We don't know what's going to trigger it, but I can't leave it here. We have a remote barge that will carry it but at a distance so none of your helpers get hurt."

Wimsey gave her a thumbs up before boarding his shuttle.

"Ara? Cot?" Claire's hesitant voice said over Ara's conn. "The clans' forward runners are at the bridge. They have something with them that is..."

"Cot, this is Hallie. It looks like ships are transitioning from space. They're not ours."

"Claire, Cot and I are on our way back to you," Ara said.

"We won't make it to her on time. *Reflected Light*, pick me and Ara up and fire up the sled for space."

"Group Leader," Goudie said. "I'm watching your back. We were able to pull the sleds with our shuttles in an energy bubble with no serious drag in leaving the planet's atmosphere. Each sled has our share of gizmos. Our SID-mates are back aboard waiting for those new ships to identify themselves. Barron found what Lt. Col. Ara was looking for. It was packed in an empty ammunitions box. We added it to her barge."

Reflected Light landed near them, and they leaped into the shuttle, not waiting for the ramp to extend.

"Star, bring Ara's ship in for a close tow, we're on our way. Remember not to bring anything in your bay unless you've scanned it and know it's not going to be a problem. No more surprises like Gemini."

"As ordered," Star said. Cot suspected *Star* was more interested in getting Ara's ship up close so she could send her SEs to investigate Ara's secret project.

"I finally get my ride on a SID ship," Ara said. *"Can you tow the barge as well?"*

"Yes, Star can tow but if we have a heated battle, we'll leave both of the barges."

The tow captured the netted platform that was hauling their supplies and covered it in an energy bubble. *Reflected Light* landed smoothly in *Star Chaser*, and the sled full of new gizmos was also brought in. *Star* wasn't leaving her new toys out in space where someone may steal them, though Cot thought it was more because she wanted to look them over and began her testing to see what she could improve on them. The storage bay was crowded. Cot didn't need to hurry Claire out of the shuttle. She ran beside her, excited and wide awake.

"It's a forest," Claire squealed in surprise, as *Star* seemed to go all out for Claire and maybe Ara, and turned the corridor to the bridge into a forest with chirping birds and little animals peering from around trees. They followed a winding path, using the holograph to camouflage what *Star's* interior was really like.

Cot held onto Claire's hand as she hurried them to the bridge, not allowing Claire time to sight see.

"Oh! A hologram program, just like on the luxury liners!" Ara mocked her.

"Star, I have the conn. What's happening on Mari?"

"Cot has the conn. There is a lot of gathering among those already in the clan camps. There are no weapons and those that arrived in armor have put them aside."

On the bridge *Star Chaser* had produced a small seat with its own monitor for Claire and that's where Cot directed Claire to sit. Cot glanced over at Ara who was making herself comfortable in the guest's seat. *"Engage privacy screen around Claire."*

"Engaged. Hologram has been set around Claire so she will be involved in her own program," Star said..

"Thank you, *Star*. What's happening with the ships Hallie reported?"

"They are on the other side of the planet. Some are Gepak hunters. They are being vetted by the authorities to assist in the capture of any Gepak followers."

"Hallie, are you in need of assistance?"

"No, group leader. It looks like CFS ships and a dozen FS are appearing right behind the other ships. The Gepak eradication team has arrived. Is our job done here?"

"SID-mates, do any of you have any unfinished business on Mari?"

"No," was everyone's reply.

"Then when HQ clears us, you can be on our way. I'll see that Ara hands over her sled contents to the agents HQ has authorized to pick up."

"We would like a meeting, when you get a chance," Goudie said. *"Private."*

Cot looked over at Ara. *"Star Chaser* will entertain you until I'm back."

Cot looked over at Claire who was playing a game that had her giggling. "Claire, will you be alright if I leave for a moment? This bot will provide you with whatever you need."

"What about me?" Ara mocked.

"Do you want to play a game too?"

"What do you have?" Ara asked.

"Tell *Star* what your taste is, and you'll get her version of it. I'll be back soon."

Cot left the bridge and hurried to her quarters. Something was bothering her squad.

"All right SID-mates, what's going on?"

"We have a bit of a mystery – a space mystery that involves visits from entities that are able to wipe any mention of them from our reports and that the SIDs have no recall of such visits," Wimsey said.

Gemini came to her mind.

"Can you describe small and when you were visited?"

"None of us know the size or what they look like," Wimsey said, "I know I included my experiences in a report to you and HQ but when I reviewed my reports, there isn't any mention of the visit. What brought our attention to this was while Aysen and I were planetside we were making small talk and I mentioned my experience. She said she had met something similar while we were separated in Amsen Sector. She also went over her reports and found not a word of her experience was in her report."

"To make a long story short, we've all had similar visits throughout our travels, and we all put it in our reports, but we can't find mention of it," Hallie said. "I saw one of those tiny ships, I'm sure of it, while we were patrolling Mari's moons for any sneak attacks," Hallie said. "It was just a quick blink and when I asked GS to further investigate, Gallant Soldier reported there was nothing to investigate."

"She contacted us and we got suspicious because it sounded a lot like something we experienced...and it would happen when each of us were alone, not when the three of us were together," Moodie said.

"Star, do you remember Gemini's visit?"

"Yes."

"Have you been able to retrieve the information from our visit to the Murdelie?"

"Nothing sensible."

"Send the information to our SID-mates via IBs before we leave orbit."

"I will download and dispatch eleven Information Balls immediately."

"You visited the Murdelie? When was that?" Hallie asked.

"Where was that?" Wimpsy asked.

"It was in one of my reports but obviously, like yours, parts have been deleted," Cot said. She wondered just what was in her report to HQ and if parts were removed, it was no wonder she didn't get any further inquiries.

"Let me think about this and we'll have to find another method of exchanging this type information. You've all done good. I didn't think I would admit to this, but I'm looking forward to arriving at L'Gsta Outpost.

Chapter 30

A Not So Subtle Push

Cot didn't want to leave Ara aboard *Star Chaser* however, Ara didn't trust *Star* or her and refused to leave her ship attached to *Star*. Trusting *Star Chaser's* security, Cot left her on board while she took the shuttle down to Como, one of the largest cities on Maridoileag that had just as many non-Mulands as there were Mulands. The Space Consulate wasn't a particularly impressive building from the exterior, intentionally blending in as a modest structure with its neighbors. The offices were underground, allowing for a secured interior as well as keeping its exterior size moderate to the businesses around it. The foyer where one began a search for the proper department to take one's business to wasn't confusing or culturally different from a stroll down a familiar city street. When you left the building, you felt you had been provided with all the assistance you needed and what you came for was promptly taken care of. All space consulates supported by the Confederation of Planets for Ethical and Fair Treatment of All – CPEFTA or EFT for short, were like that. The overseers, an advanced race of beings, were most gracious to accept the role of managing the Space Consulates, thus assuring that the risk of galaxy politics intermixing with the consulates primary goal – peaceful coexistence with all its members and their citizens, was not undermining the stated purpose of the consulate.

Cot felt confident that the consulate representative would take care of Claire's immediate needs and handed her over to a Muland elder who would begin the process of educating Claire to space travel so she would not become overly emotional on her journey to wherever the Space Consulate sent for her off-world schooling. It was a relief this assignment was over because the longer she remained on Maridoileag the more irritated she became at the politics behind the Ecole ol Msor Project and perhaps what added to her irritation was that whether it was with Star Force's willingness or not, Maridoileag still had an influence on her life. The proof was how they got her and her squad from the far reaches of space to fly back to help with a problem that had nothing to do with them.

Once Claire was led away Cot quickly turned and almost ran past the security desk only to hear a telepathic inquiry requesting her attention.

"Yes, I'm Lt. Colonel Colleen of Star Force Command," she responded in kind.

"You have a message from your commander on a secured channel in conference room R12. I will show you the way," a guard bot said.

Now what? she dared to think in a facility that could read any bioenergy whether in thought or action.

She didn't want to sit for the teleconference least it indicate she was agreeing or willing to do anything her caller suggested or ordered. While waiting for security to validate who she was, a thought occurred to her that she was acting as if she were a privileged officer that was above taking orders. She was in the military which was a culture of rank, file and orders followed without whining, unless the orders were against the code of ethics and honor she signed up for. It also occurred to her that the reminder of her unprofessional feelings may well have to do with influence of the building's management, which made her even more determined to stand.

"Welcome, Lt. Col. Colleen. I am High Commander Er."

Cot was sure her facial features gave away her surprise. It wasn't how she imagined the High Commander to look like.

"Your immediate order is to deliver Claire MacDiarmid to JunPolTe's Preparatory School for Females in the Choi sector aboard *Star Chaser*, then carry on with your business to L'Gsta Outpost."

Cot sat down abruptly. In the time it took for the chair to form for her comfort she had run through many reasons why the request that a military ship just removed from the 'Need to Know' list was assigned as a taxi to a civilian child.

"I trust that you and *Star Chaser* will be secured from a child's curiosity as well as any other passenger you pick up. And," he added, "do your best to *not* make her feel unwanted. She is your personal responsibility as she is under the protection of Star Force. That is all. Good travels, Lt. Col. Colleen."

That was that. Rationally, she could understand how SF got wrangled into this. Brooker's cache wasn't just of weapons but also of stolen untested gizmos from a research laboratory various galaxy military powers utilized. What the SIDs kept were with the agreement that detailed logs be kept on how they used them and under all the conditions and for those logs to be sent via SFHQ. SFHQ assured the various interested parties that any changes the SIDs made would also be passed on to the laboratory. Star Force's

bargaining to secure and remove the cache instead of CF agents meant Cot was to intervene in a clan matter. It further meant that Star Force had to follow through with the MacDiarmid problem to the end which was delivering Claire to her school. There was always bartering and other agreements made between all levels of organizations, no matter what their size. It was part of her training at POATA so why was she being so petulant about it? Maybe it was because she didn't take kindly to buildings that used unseen methods to interfere with her moods or thought processes. SFHQ was up to something and the planting of possible reasons by those managing the consulate made her want to leave Maridoileag as soon as possible. She had her orders and would deal with it - away from the consulate where she was not being manipulated.

While Claire finished up with her advisor who mentally and physically prepared Claire for her journey, Cot waited at a nearby beverage shop. The security bot informed her she would be summoned when Claire was ready.

If she wasn't in her uniform, she would have walked off her annoyance with SFHQ but Maridoileag in the freelands was nearly as in awe of warriors in any uniform as were those in the clanlands and she didn't want to attract too much attention. This need for heroes to worship was an obsession pushed by the sports arenas across most of Maridoileag, as the screens inside the shop were showing. It wasn't just competitions involving Mulands but different species.

Cot had informed *Star Chaser* to prepare a secured area for Claire and to make plans to keep Claire occupied for the duration of their taxi service. *Star's* proficiency in creating environments made her ideal for this assignment. Cot knew this assignment would entertain her SID-mates and no doubt the other SIDs were comparing methods of keeping a child contained and occupied.

A beep sounded on the communicator the security bot gave her. She rose from her seat and nodded to the waitress that watched her leave with adoring eyes.

Claire was waiting for her in the foyer, clutching a bag of clothing and dressed in a new outfit that didn't denote clan affiliation.

"Are you ready for your adventure?" she asked.

Claire nodded her head enthusiastically.

Cot dropped her communicator in a slot, and both stepped into the air-taxi that appeared. At last, she was on her way to the airport where *Reflected Light* was parked.

At the airport security bots inspected them and Claire's luggage. Cot thought it odd since there wasn't any security when she landed, but she was in a hurry to leave Maridoileag and didn't wish to open any inquiries that would keep her involved on the planet. When she left *Reflected Light*, the shuttle, *Star* and the SEs she left behind were more than enough to prevent anyone from getting near the shuttle by any means.

She took Claire's hand and walked at a fast pace to the shuttle. Claire skipped and ran beside her. *Reflected Light* extended the ramp as they approached. Once they were within the reach of *Reflected Light's* security bubble, Cot slowed down. The ramp retracted the moment Cot entered the first hatch. Claire quickly took her seat and once they were cleared for lift-off *Reflected Light* began its ascent out of the planet's airspace.

"You have been followed electronically since you left the consulate," Star informed Cot.

"Any threats to our safety?" Cot asked.

"Neutralized."

"Was it from anyone we know or need to worry about?"

"The originator is a CF agent looking for Lt. Col. Ara. Should I let him know she is with us?"

"No. How is she doing?"

"She is sleeping."

"She's going to be very angry with us for putting her to sleep."

"She is sleeping of her own will."

"That's good. She looked tired."

"When we are aboard *Star Chaser* you will not be able to roam at will," Cot informed Claire. "You have your own quarters. That's what we call sleeping rooms on spaceships. You will spend most of your time there. If you need assistance, tell *Star Chaser*."

"How long do I have to stay in my room?"

"Not long."

"What am I going to do with her for the week we're in flight?" Cot asked Star.

"I have programed lessons and games as well as a companion that will keep her company," Star said.

Cot's attention went to the scans her shuttle monitor was showing of what was going on above Maridoileag as they headed to *Star Chaser*. Each ship was identified and if she wanted more detail, it was available. The fleet of ships were from the group that made it their life-long job to search for Gepaks and their followers like the Faulk. The fleet gave full support to a planet that had reported Gepak contamination. They were composed of eradicators, educators and healers. It gave comfort to Cot that Maridoileag was left in good care.

Once on board *Star Chaser* a bot in the shape of a flying creature on Maridoileag presented itself by landing on Claire's shoulder, then buzzed in her ear. What an annoyance, she thought, then realized that was how some of the SEs communicated with her.

"For me?" Claire squealed. Claire looked at Cot with big eyes, begging it to be true.

"Your very own companion," Cot said.

"What's its name?"

"What would you like to call it?"

"Pointadea. I always wanted a friend called Pointadea."

It was a character in clan stories, Cot remembered. Not someone she particularly identified with as a child, but if it entertained Claire for the journey she didn't care what its name was.

"Pointadea, can you show Claire to her quarters and secure her for our journey. We are going to be underway promptly," she explained to Claire. She did feel a little guilty about isolating her with a sitter.

"It would not be against any protocols for her to be on the bridge," Star said. "I have secured the area so she will only see what is not considered a military secret and her new friend will tell her how to behave. Ara will also be on the bridge and will be just as vigilant in keeping Claire from seeing what she should not see."

The comment made Cot laugh at herself. She was being rude, and to a harmless child. Well, not so harmless. Children were notoriously curious and poked at things they didn't understand. She didn't doubt Ara's ability to influence a telepathic child's mind.

"Claire, I'll go with you to your quarters, and we'll leave off your bag, then you can join us on the bridge for the first leg of our journey."

"Can Pointadea come too?"

"Yes."

Stepping out of the cargo bay that was covered in a hologram image of a cave they entered the corridor to the crew's quarters that was a hologram of walking in a field of flowers. Flying creatures from Maridoileag were buzzing about busy with their everyday lives balancing the ecosystems in nature.

"This is like walking in a picture book," Claire said. "Oh," she nodded to whatever her companion buzzed.

Cot was tempted to leave Claire in her quarters as she became engrossed in examining every little bit of space *Star* created for her. It was a visual stimulus that would delight any child.

"As we get closer to her school, I will replace familiar objects with what she will have at her school." *Star* sounded pleased with her education program for Claire.

"How is Ara doing?" Cot asked.

"Her energy is very low. I believe she had pushed herself to get here before other agents did and didn't sleep. Her body is still recovering."

"The agent looking for her, does he know her ship is attached to you?"

"I have kept its presence hidden," Star said.

"Let's get out of here before someone thinks to look closer. Have the agents picked up the barge?"

"They have. I will not be able to move as quickly due to towing her ship."

"Locate the ship the agent came on and arrange a malfunction," Cot said. "Find out what you can do about this agent and why he is looking for Ara. After she mentioned problems in the ranks, I don't want to drop her off in the middle of something unpleasant."

"I have started diagnostics on her ship and her gizmo. It would not be a good time to have her leave now," Star said.

"Have the other SIDs left?"

"They have departed and left suggestions about transporting a child in a military ship. I have already taken the necessary steps for securing the ship from both Lt. Col. Ara and Claire's curiosity. We are underway."

Cot leaned back in her seat happy to be moving.

Chapter 31

Star Chaser Gets Her Way

"Are you sure there was something wrong with my ship?" Ara demanded as she glared at the monitor where *Star Chaser* provided *Ingrid's* diagnostic results.

Cot could understand Ara's mixed feelings of being shown an analytic intimate detail of all *Ingrid's* system functions with flaws highlighted because it meant *Star Chaser* had decoded *Ingrid's* security in order to do her usual efficient exam, yet it saved an unexpected breakdown somewhere in space, not to mention that what could be fixed *Star Chaser's* repair bots had done so.

"Just how hard did you push *Ingrid* to get to Maridoileag?" Cot asked, though she knew the answer just as Ara knew the report before her was more precise than what she would get from most civilian ship repair depots and perhaps more honest than the military shipyard that embellished their inventions that *Star's* diagnostic showed it couldn't perform fully to their specifications, that is, until *Star* made corrections.

"She's made to go at top speed for long periods of time," Ara said, sounding annoyed and distracted as she continued to study the report.

Was *Ingrid* rushed through shipyard production and through CFS's additional installations and testing without an official shakedown cruise, Cot wondered, or did Ara take possession of her with the intention of being the one to give the ship its test run?

"Star, find out how many Benter models have been turned out, their names, and fine points. Find out also, who the buyers are."

“There are five completed, Qme, Disent, Ingrid, Moreta, and Quwar. All are for Consortium of Four Sectors Special Forces. Only Ingrid is active. The others are still going through testing,” Star responded quickly. *“Others are interested if they run as well as the ship contractor has projected.”*

“You ran mean and lean,” Cot said to Ara. “RML.”

“RML is standard procedure when time is important and you know it,” Ara answered. “What’s your point with all these questions of how I got to your Mari? Would you have rather dealt with a consulate CFS staffer? The probability that he read your personal file and has a chip on his shoulder because he knows your Gideon splash and POATA medallion will always outshine his career and a Star Force Agent will always outrank him is more than likely. You know how some of them are; they’ll make themselves obnoxiously worthless just to prove they have some meaning, if only to themselves.”

“So, you saved us aggravation and wasted time,” Cot said. “Thank you for your kindness.” She didn’t add that the consulate’s overseers would have prevented any such petty displays on its property. They were grand manipulators on maintaining peaceful relations in their building. She wondered what they did about such unprofessional conduct off their premises, by one of the staffers.

“Mock me if you will, but I’m telling you, there are many that were jealous of your achievements when you were one of us and even more so now that you’re Star Force with a ship of your very own - and an experimental SID at that.”

“And you?” Cot asked, not seeing it as a problem unless it interfered directly with her immediate assignment.

“I’m happy where I am and I have no problem with other people’s good fortunes and well-earned titles.”

“Nor do I. How many do you have on your team?” Cot asked.

“There are two other members,” *Star Chaser* answered for her.

Ara looked annoyed then chuckled, “Alright. That’s no big secret, no more than your destination to L’Gsta Outpost.”

“Ara has an incoming message via *Ingrid*,” *Star Chaser* reported.

“Keep your ship from nosing in my communications,” Ara said quickly.

“*Star*, engage a privacy shield for Ara. Will that do?” Cot asked her.

“Since *Ingrid* is ready for flight, I’ll take my message aboard my ship and be about my own business. Thank you for the hospitality and satisfying my curiosity about a SID ship.”

“No problem,” Cot smiled. “Next time we’re within hailing distance, we’ll have to share a story or two over a refreshment.”

“I’ll have to think about that. Now that I know your ship is as bad as a pirate, stripping it of any secrets it may have, I’ll keep my distance,” she said, then added with a grin. “Maybe if I need to test a new encryption I’ll visit.”

Once Ara’s ship was back in space and on its way, Cot asked *Star*, “Did she leave anything?”

“I have found a dozen snoopers and have disabled them and put them in *Ingrid*. She may need them again. She will be pleased that the crews’ quarters are more comfortable, and they have a better galley selection of nutritional supplements. *Ingrid*’s designers were not Colunds. The changes didn’t require much effort. I don’t think the designers cared to make the crew comfortable.”

“It’s a military vessel and designed not necessarily for the comfort of the crew but definitely for their safety. *Star Chaser*, your multi-talents are amazing me more every day. Boyton must have inspired you to advance beyond anyone’s expectations.”

“Except yours, Cot. You had none.”

“You are beyond my experiences, *Star*. I would have done a disservice to us both if I had a set of expectations of you, us, and our relationship.” Cot looked over at Claire. She was in her study bubble, her lips moving to repeat her lessons.

Cot leaned back in her seat and called up the information on the Lancer 4KS. Though she didn’t care to have that type of energy changing her cells to enable them to be unseen it didn’t mean that one day she may have to use it.

Chapter 32

The Missing Piece

As Cot read the reports of worrisome situations in the areas, she would be passing through she found that two days from the school in the Mezo Clima Sector there was an

official Star Force investigation going on. Heading the investigation was Rear Admiral Zieda.

Cot gave a mental sigh. Was this the reason why she was transporting Claire to her school, which coincidentally was in the Mezo Clima Sector? Why didn't HQ just tell her to give the rear admiral assistance?

"No," she answered herself. "Assigning us may be taken as HQ not having faith in the rear admiral and her staff. So, we're going to have to see just what happens as we sail that way."

"It is a very interesting problem," *Star* said. "The public report leaves out what the energy is composed of. I will look further into it."

"A mysterious disruption of energy," Cot read thoughtfully, "causing aggressive behavior to those passing through Mezo Clima's business zone. It's not species specific and not everyone is affected."

Was it a potential threat to the school?

Now that she knew she would be in RADM's vicinity she was faced with the decision to either give her the courtesy notice that she was passing through or slip by and tell her later. She was already on shaky grounds with her and sneaking around her was sending the wrong message. Maybe she could trade something with her so the rear admiral won't hold her up...or not take issue with *Star Chaser* investigating without pulling them into the investigation.

Before entering the next travel gate, she sent her courtesy message to the rear admiral stating her intention of dropping off her "kin" at a private school in her patrol area. She was hoping the rear admiral wouldn't send her fleet's star fighters to escort her for an official visit to her quarters. Bored star fighter pilots had the tendency to look for excitement and playing games with a SID-ship might be too tempting. She was once one of those bored star fighters looking for trouble, which during the war years wasn't difficult to find and was expected.

For the next three days, Cot read the personnel files of *Emerald Isle*, and the captains of the other ships in Rear Admiral Zieda's fleet, wondering why *Star* thought it was important for her to become familiar with the intimate business of fleet officers and crews. There were some personnel irregularities, but she concluded that *Star* was upset

about the treatment of one crewmember in particular, a Colund. He was part of *Emerald Isle's* engineering staff. For a second lieutenant he was stationed too long on the *Emerald Isle* and he had no promotions though there was nothing in his file that should hold him back from raising in the ranks or prevent him from being transferred. Second lieutenants were moved every year to a new ship and under a different CO to learn more of what an officer's duties involve.

"Just what do you expect me to do, kidnap him?" she asked *Star*, intending it as a joke.

"He is being singled out because of his talent. He is a Colund." *Star's* pride was evident in her tone. "His commanding officer is afraid if he is transferred, he will lose his best engineer that makes his department look good in the eyes of his commanding officer and the rear admiral. The rear admiral believes Commander Warren is responsible for more than what he really does."

"And you know this because?"

"It is in the logs of two officers."

"Who would put that in their logs when it could be construed as abusing one's power of authority?" Cot asked.

"Commander Warren and Captain Yerov. Commander Warren had sent a private communication to Captain Yerov of *Emerald Isle* why they should delay Second Lieutenant Modu's transfer to another ship."

"The Command Staff of Personnel at Headquarters decides who and where crewmembers are moved to. Ideally, it's to enhance the learning of the crewmember. I wonder how they managed to circumvent military custom."

"I will find out," *Star* said.

"You're treading into the business of powerful people. Leave no tracks," Cot said. She realized it was too late to dissuade *Star* from that investigation and after picking up disturbing trends in some of the captains that made up the rear admiral's fleet, she was curious too. Was she willing to step on other officer's toes that someday may be her CO? What did the Star Force mandate state? Behavior unbecoming a member of Star Force would not be tolerated and any disciplinary action against someone reporting such behavior was dealt with harshly. This was the time to prove it. She had already witnessed

Boyton Slu's case being mishandled but the conclusion and removal of all those that allowed it to happen gave her confidence that Star Force made the best decision to find the truth by calling in Diana.

Minutes from their exit point *Star* announced that they had arrived. The forward monitors didn't detect any ships lying in wait. Cot glanced at Claire in her study bubble. She appeared to be singing along with her pal, Pointadea. So far, between *Star's* programs and Pointadea's companionship, Claire was content with not asking her to spend a lot of time with her. *Star* suggested four face-to-face conversations a day would be all that Claire would need so she did not feel rejected and isolated. That was a relief. Not knowing who Claire really was made her vigilant about her presence on *Star*. The information *Star* was able to find on Claire was limited to her life with her sister. *Star's* bioreadings on Claire showed she was Muland but her genetics weren't pure.

Cot returned her attention to their exit point.

"Exit point in 4-3-2-1-0. We have arrived," Star said mentally. "New monitors have been released and previously released are back in their stations."

From blurry lights in the travel corridor, they burst out into a panoramic view of dark space, various colors in swirls of gas clouds and dots of brilliant lights from planets, stars and whatever else caught the light of a sun. She heard Claire's bubble disengage.

"Oh, it's so beautiful!" Claire said breathlessly. "I could stay here forever." Then in another breath, "Are we almost there?"

"It is beautiful. We have two more days of travel." Cot could see a message sitting in her queue. *Star* sent her identifier. In a few minutes a message marked private returned as if someone was waiting.

"Cot, a private message from Rear Admiral Zieda," Star Chaser reported.

"Engage privacy."

A shimmering energy field surrounded her chair, cutting Claire off from hearing or seeing her.

"On Comm. Greetings, Rear Admiral Zieda. We come in peace," Cot said, attempting witticism.

“Lt. Col Cot, captain of Star Chaser, greetings. Peace to you too,” RADM Zieda smiled. *“What’s this about you transporting a child on a military vessel? Is she a princess?”*

The screen showed a grinning RADM Zieda so Cot wondered what she had up her proverbial sleeve that caused her to grin like she just won a bet.

“No royalty that I’m aware of. I’m delivering her to JunPolTe’s Preparatory School for Females at SFHQs request then we resume our voyage to L’Gsta Outpost, where we will just make it on time for reporting to duty.”

“Yes, the L’Gsta Outpost assignment is important to reach on time. JPT Prep? It is within my fleet’s patrol. I think that is decent of you to notify me.”

Cot thought of a predator playing with its prey. “If I didn’t and something happened, I didn’t want to be blamed.”

“It seems you do stir up things wherever you go; however, trouble is already here. Perhaps this is fate, you arriving now.”

She’s playing with me, Cot thought with certainty. *SFQH and her must have all this planned out. So, for who’s benefit is my taxi service for?* “Have you heard of the CFS’s Lancer 4KS?” Cot thought now would be a good time to offer a peace gift. Hopefully this one turns out better than the SE she had given the rear admiral on their first meeting.

“I heard it doesn’t work,” RADM Zieda said carefully.

Cot smiled. The rear admiral was interested.

“Either they were too ambitious in its programming, or someone sabotaged it. Once *Star Chaser* worked the problem out it’s been fixed and returned to Lt. Col. Ara of CF Special Forces.” As she was saying this, she could feel an idea germinate.

“Just what does this reprogrammed gizmo do?” RADM Zieda asked.

She was sure that by now everyone interested in the SID ships knew when any of them fiddled with a gizmo it became more than what the original manufacture or inventor had in mind. What only the SID pilots knew was that it became a competition among the SIDs, otherwise, Cot was sure only *Star Chaser* would be fiddling with gizmos.

“The intention of the inventor was to make the person handling it disappear. It’s small enough to carry in a pocket.”

“And?” RADM Zieda asked.

“We have the plans for a working model.”

“*What do you have in mind to do with those plans, build a SE to blast people to invisibility?*”

“Before it becomes a standard tool on the free market, I thought maybe you would like to let your favorite engineer tinker around and find a way to neutralize it without harming the user.”

“*Send the specs over. I’ll have Commander Warren, Emerald Isle’s Chief of Engineering look it over. Are you planning on using one yourself?*”

“No. *Star Chaser* determined it will damage a Muland’s cellular structure.”

“*I see. Species specific.*” There was a brief pause. “*I understand you need another sponsor for your passenger to JPT Prep.*”

“Another?”

“*You didn’t know you need two physical sponsors?*”

“No, I wasn’t informed. Are you offering to be her second sponsor?” Cot asked. Another bell rang in her idea corner. A plan was percolating.

“*HQ gave me a heads up that you would need another sponsor and asked if I would be willing to be that sponsor or to name someone on my staff. It will give me an opportunity to ride in a Caronda Fighter converted to a SID and I’m hoping you can also repair my Jeeves, the SE you gifted me with, or give me another.*”

“There is something wrong with your SE?” *Star* and Cot asked simultaneously. “*Star, let me handle this.*”

The rear admiral chuckled. “*It stopped working when it was blasted while protecting me from an overzealous bodyguard on a trading vessel a few days ago. My Chief of Engineering has been using Star Chaser’s directions to make others; however, he hasn’t been able to program the finer details of service, if you get my drift.*”

“*Star* will look into the repair and if necessary, provide another with those finer details,” Cot said. “Why not have Second Lieutenant Modu pilot you over and *Star* can give him private lessons in constructing a working Lancer 4KS model, a neutralizer to go with it, as well as learn to program the finer details of service to an SE?”

Cot could see the rear admiral's eyes moving as if she were reading something on her screen. She guessed she had called up information on 2nd Lieutenant Modu.

"He's one of the junior members of the engineering team. Why him?"

"Colund's are known for their technical expertise and ability to modify and sometimes reinvent uses for old things," Cot said. "A highly prized crew member already, he would be surpassing any of your present engineers. All he would be lacking is further officer's training."

"By the looks of his personnel file it seems someone already has claimed him as their private treasure and has put a hold on his transfer orders from HQ. I'll let Commander Hatr know I have a personal request for a pilot and that I'll be giving the second lieutenant an evaluation to find out why his orders for reassignment have been delayed. Heaven knows the last two pilots were incompetent."

"I hope your time here with us doesn't cause you to miss any excitement."

"My second, Commander Hatr, is looking forward to being acting fleet commander, except for the additional reports he'll have to write. I haven't notified any of my captains yet, but I'm sure they will be happy to have a break from me. I'm quite demanding, I hear, and sometimes unreasonable with my expectations from the drills I have them running."

"Running drills? Are you expecting more trouble? Maybe this isn't a good time for you to be away."

The rear admiral looked predatory. *"This is a very good time. The expansion of the disruptive energy has ceased. We're diverting all traffic around the area with our fleet fighters. Now it's just letting the scientists run their programs to identify the cause and how to neutralize it."*

"Fighters as traffic cops," Cot said, leaving unspoken how it was for fighter pilots' morale to be given a mundane job as opposed to their lofty views of themselves.

"Which is why the drills. The whole fleet is not on a single mind set...mine. Let's see, it will take about thirty minutes for my orders to trickle down to Second Lieutenant Modu and if he's a proper cadet he'll always have a kit packed, then thirty minutes of flight time to reach Suma IVs travel tunnel, or have you moved?"

“We’ll wait for you before continuing our journey,” Cot said. “Crew quarters on *Star Chaser* aren’t much more than a space fighter’s quarters on a warship, Rear Admiral.”

“*I’m not that spoiled, Captain,*” RADM Zieda returned. “*I will see you soon. Out.*”

“Out. *Star*, have a bot prepare quarters for RADM Zieda and her pilot.”

“It will take less time for Modu to be ready. I have already notified him,” *Star* said.

“Does the second lieutenant know you’re a ship?”

“I identify myself as *Star Chaser*.”

“We won’t tell the rear admiral you’ve preempted her,” Cot said. “Deactivate privacy.”

Colunds, as a species use mind speak between themselves and learned verbal and sign language to communicate with other species. What worried Cot was how much *Star Chaser* told the second lieutenant about herself.

Cot turned to Claire. “We’ll be hosting two other guests. There are going to be conversations you aren’t privy to hear, Claire, and when that time comes you’ll have to leave the bridge and return to your quarters.”

Claire sighed. “Adults always think what they’re talking about children haven’t heard before. You can’t always protect us, you know?”

“This isn’t about your protection.”

“Oh, that’s different.” She rolled her eyes at her friend Pointidea.

“Thank you, Claire. One of our guests will be your second sponsor for attending JPT Prep school.”

“Oh. Have you seen the uniforms they wear at JPT Prep? They aren’t something I would wear home on school breaks,” Claire told her looking serious. “And some of their activities I’ve never seen before. Are all foreign schools like that?”

“No. It depends on the species attending and what the school’s focus is on. Some are spiritually focused and sequestered from anything outside of their walls with few material objects in the students and their teachers’ lives. Some are sports orientated with mental and physical challenges. JPT Prep’s goal is to give you exposure to all of these

activities and ideas so that when you graduate you can pick where you want to focus your next four years on,” Cot said.

“Do they have a shopping center nearby?”

“I don’t know. Is that important to you?”

“Auntie Jane moved to the city where there was a shopping center, and she talked about how nice it was to see all the new things no one with common sense would buy. I’d like to see that. Will the school have enough chairs to sit on? There weren’t enough chairs and tables for everyone at our school and no heat so when it was real cold we didn’t go to school.”

“I would imagine everyone has their own desk. I don’t know the temperature of the rooms.”

“I saw pictures, but I want to see it before I believe it. It all looked pretty. I’ve never had a room of my own.” Claire turned her head to listen to Pointidea, smiled, and then went back to her work.

An hour later a blip appeared on Cot’s screen.

“Prince Feat, *Rear Admiral Zieda’s shuttle has arrived. Scan completed with no threats found,*” Star mentally informed Cot. “*Her captains were delaying her departure with the argument that she needed a squad of planes to escort her on her private business. She did not tell them why she would be gone for four days or where she was going.*”

“*I’m sure she said it was a military matter only she was privy to know about, and they will ignore her and send out a squad to tail her anyway. Resume course when her shuttle is secured.*”

“Prince Feat is secured,” Star Chaser said moments later. “*I am resuming course. Shall I adapt my speed her fighters can follow?*”

“*Stay out of their scan range. Leave a trail for them to follow so they won’t be terribly frustrated.*”

“Wait here, Claire. I’m going to pick up our guests.”

As Cot entered the cargo bay, she studied the shuttle. It was a short-lived design with not enough design elements to attract a following of buyers. It had a double hull to entice the civilian population to feel safe with space travel, but anything else added was

costly. According to the shipyard news, it wasn't popular enough to continue producing them, so they sold off their mistakes cheap. It was do-it-yourselfers and those that had little funds to invest in better shuttle models that bought them up. The flaws were that the shuttle needed a larger power source than what it was sold with; it lacked room for storage and passengers; and had no room for defense weapons. Cot had heard of space hermits living in them because the only two good design points were its life support which used the chemicals in space to power it, and it was easy to add space shipping modular units to it. SSMUs were standardized for the convenience of space traders and others that made it their business hauling cargo across space, both illegal and legal.

"What is a flag ship admiral doing in a shuttle like this, Star? Find out what this shuttle has that a flag admiral would find useful to be shuttled about in it," Cot thought. *"And if you can, do your usual to improve on it for the admiral's safety."*

"Captain, permission to come aboard?" Rear Admiral Zieda said, standing at the top of *Prince Feat's* shuttle ramp. Cot could see her pilot, Second Lieutenant Modu standing behind her with two sets of carry-ons, one easily identified as belonging to the admiral.

"Permission granted, Rear Admiral Zieda. Welcome aboard *Star Chaser*."

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?" Second Lieutenant Modu asked.

As much as he was trying to contain his excitement, Cot could feel it. There weren't many 2nd Lieutenants that were personally asked to pilot a fleet admiral on her shuttle and get to spend four days aboard a SID ship, she thought with amusement.

"Permission granted, Second Lieutenant Modu," Cot said.

The rear admiral looked around as she descended the ramp. "I wasn't expecting such a large cargo bay in a star fighter." When she stepped off the ramp she paused for a moment. "I can feel something different about this ship. Is that expected?"

"I've found each ship I've served on had their own feel." Cot thought about how prejudice colored a lot of people when they stood next to a SID-ship, imagining all sorts of things happening to them. She didn't know if any of that was true, and without being intrusive on the rear admiral thoughts, she didn't know what she was feeling.

"Second Lieutenant Modu has the remains of the SE you presented me. As you will see, there isn't much left of my Jeeves."

Two SE porters disengaged from the wall when the visitors' feet touched the deck and took their carry-ons. Second Lieutenant Modu reached in one of his pockets and pulled out a small bag and handed it to Cot.

"These two bots will deliver your carry-ons to your quarters. Second Lieutenant Modu, this is your bot assistant that will be with you at all times. It will show you to your workstation and quarters. It will also monitor your bios and when it feels you need refreshment or a break it will let you know."

The grinning lieutenant followed his new assistant further into the cargo bay while Cot dumped the remains of the SE in a trash container.

"I see you don't have much hope for it either," RADM Zieda said.

"If there is anything to be recycled, it will be. Nothing is wasted here."

When they stepped into the corridor to the bridge the Admiral paused and took a deep breath. "A forest! Any interesting animals?"

"Just be careful what you ask for. *Star Chaser* is very good with details and can conjure up just about anything a guest wishes."

"Holograms on a military ship can have their uses; however, when captains were asked about using as a tool to confuse the enemy on hostile takeovers it was unanimously voted down."

"They like the VID Helmets," she said. "It would be rather interesting to see how the entire crew responded to actual images on hostile boardings," Cot said.

"It would be. What weapons would they use, who would they shoot first and what area would each officer think to isolate, would they work together and who would panic? I'll have to bring that up in my next meeting, since I'm already unpopular," RADM said, sounding unconcerned.

When they stepped onto the bridge Claire was standing next to her chair waiting.

"Hello, Claire of the MacDiarmid Clan," Rear Admiral Zieda said.

"Greetings, Rear Admiral Zieda. Welcome aboard *Star Chaser*. Thank you for being one of my sponsors," Claire said.

Cot smiled at *Star Chaser's* prepping Claire on what to say.

"I hope you find the school agreeable. Do you have a favorite subject of study?" RADM Zieda asked.

Claire's eyes opened wide with surprise and wonder as if this question touched something deep within her. "There are so many new things that I've never heard of. I hope there is enough time to look at all of them!"

"That is an adventure and sounds like fun," RADM Zieda said.

Claire nodded vigorously, then sighed happily. "I'm going to my quarters," Claire said. "It was nice meeting you Rear Admiral Zieda. Good night, Cot." She gave a sly grin at Cot as though she was getting away with something and in Mari's sense of propriety; she was, especially as a child of the clans.

Children in clans used a more formal address for adults, depending on the adult's status in the clan, just as it was in the military, she thought; however, Cot didn't want to be reminded of a life she felt didn't honor all people, especially those that didn't fit in a clan mold. She also thought it absurd for a child to address her by her military rank since a child isn't part of that organizational structure. If she spent time thinking about her choice it would be irksome. She was well aware that it had something to do with the fact that she suspected Claire wasn't originally from Mari and therefore not a kin where she felt some obligation to support her clan affiliation by using a family honorific title.

"Sleep well and dream deep, Claire," Cot said.

"Sweet dreams, Claire," RADM Zieda said.

An SE appeared before the RADM.

"Rear Admiral Zieda, this is a newer model of SE Butler that will serve you as your new Jeeves," *Star* said. "I have added to your Jeeves' program things that are pertinent to a rear admiral's needs and to your personal tastes that you've acquired since we've last met."

"I thank you, *Star Chaser* and Lt. Col. Cot for your diligence in making my Jeeves tailored for my use. I feel I'm going to owe you more favors than a junior lieutenant owes her chief," RADM asked.

"Would you like a tour?" Cot asked.

"I would."

"Let's start with the bridge, since we're here," Cot began.

Instantly the bulkhead disappeared around them, leaving only the furniture as visual reference points. Cot's admiration for the rear admiral went up as she didn't panic.

Her reaction was to reach out to the back of a chair for an anchoring point then she stood in awe at the wide open space that *Star* showed all around them.

RADM looked everywhere, including below her. “By the stars!” she said under her breath. “Do you travel like this often?”

“With a transparent hull? Not when I have a civilian passenger aboard and not for all my passengers. Since *Star* did this without my asking, I would say she believes you would like this.”

RADM nodded still looking around her. “Is this RT?”

“No. We’re going too fast for real time, but she does some amazing modifications to allow us to see what we’re passing. She takes inconsideration our species and what we would see it as.”

“Amazing. To think without bots and artificial systems we all would be working in a different bubble of reality and even then, a manty or thought reader would say sharing the same genetics doesn’t guarantee you and your mate would be experiencing the same thing. A transparent hull would help crews to work on the outside hull of a ship without panicking.”

“Don’t the holographic rooms allow that?”

“We don’t have a program for that. Many of the training programs I have asked for, Captain Yerov of the *Emerald Isle* informed me that the crew doesn’t want educational programs in their limited space for holographic programs but would rather have programs of entertainment.” She was quiet for a few moments, enjoying space. “However, I doubt that was the reason why he didn’t want to implement my suggestion. I find that too often he needs to demonstrate that he is captain of *Emerald Isle* to me, and to his crew by allowing only the programs he likes.”

Cot smiled, knowing that a captain’s career would go nowhere if he undermined a rear admiral’s command.

“I have checked that information and it is not a fact,” *Star Chaser* said. “*Emerald Isle* is using less than a bit of her space for holographic programs.”

“Is that so, *Star Chaser*?” RADM asked mockingly. “And I suppose you can add a substantial amount of necessary training programs without the captain’s knowledge?”

Cot was going to warn the rear admiral that *Star Chaser* would take up that challenge and since she had studied the crews' profiles, would also add personal classes for each. For some reason, *Star Chaser* liked the rear admiral.

"Yes. I have studied the crew's profiles and can design training programs for each member by station, their next level of training by headquarters manual, and give them five of their favorite entertainment programs that are cleared by HQ, with Captain Yerov included," *Star Chaser* said before Cot warned the rear admiral.

The rear admiral laughed. "You can do that in a few days?"

"I can. They have six rooms on seven decks that were originally programed for holographic entertainment. They were locked down a week before you took command."

"A week," she said thoughtfully. "Supposedly no one knew of my official taking command of the ship and fleet until two days before I stepped aboard the *Emerald Isle*."

"I will investigate," *Star Chaser* said promptly.

"You do that," RADM said. "I noticed on my menu there were some grayed out choices. Unlock them and put them back into service on all menus and go about programming your lessons and I'll sign off on it. I can't wait to see what Captain Yerov's expression will be when he sees what is in his assignment box from me. I shall have to notify my second before he gets bombarded with rude interruptions by Captain Yerov."

"Shall we move on to the galley," Cot said before *Star Chaser* added that she would also send something to the rear admiral. *Star* was fair with her assignments and wouldn't leave anyone off her training list now that she had RADM's permission to spread her knowledge around.

Cot led the way off the bridge to the galley. "This is where *Star Chaser* creates some amazing food and liquid menus. She likes to create new menus every week that she downloads from the various kiosks we pass. Though she knows my taste, she likes to surprise me with new things to expand my culinary taste buds. Not all are successes, but they are all memorable."

"Is it something my Jeeves can replicate?" RADM asked.

"If you eat something here that you like, *Star* can program it to Jeeves to prepare for you." As soon as she said that she realized that it was implying that *Star Chaser* had immediate access to Jeeves. "That is, if you give her permission."

“If I should need your assistance, say from any space sector, would Jeeves be able to reach *Star Chaser*?”

Cot knew that *Star* had a connection to all the gizmos she had fiddled with. Did that mean that others could reach *Star* through her gizmos? And was that so with the other SIDs and their gizmos?

“*Star*?” Cot asked, wondering herself.

“It would be as any communication protocol follows, from one point of contact to another, but through many conduits. It would take time to travel from kiosk to kiosk until it reached a kiosk I was connecting to. However, you must know that each kiosk adds a layer of code which also is stripped and replaced by other code as people mining the kiosks for information will tamper with what they think is interesting. It would be more expedient if you went through Star Force Headquarters’ communication links where it would reach me in half the time and with less code swapping.”

“It would seem so.”

Cot had a feeling that the rear admiral already knew that and was testing in an indirect way *Star Chaser*’s penchant to seek information disregarding protocol where it was normally followed.

“Shall we look at your quarters?” Cot asked. She wondered if she should point out to the rear admiral that if she used a trained telepath the message would get to her instantly without her going through *Star Chaser*.

“I hope the size isn’t too tight for you,” Cot said.

RADM Zieda snorted as she followed her. “Have you ever had to travel for days in your shuttle? My present one I seldom use because I’m unable to fit the support personnel that need to travel with me. I end up using a troop shuttle to accommodate everyone and they aren’t comfortable. I do believe the shuttle’s purpose is to discourage me from making personal forays at ports, though I’m not *the* captain, merely an exalted passenger. I was lucky this time to escape with only a pilot and a squad of fighters discreetly following me.”

“There must be a reason why they’ve chosen the double-hull over speed, weapons and comfort.”

“Double hull? The only double hulls I know of are used by the smugglers,” RADM answered.

“Our scans show it’s double hulled. How did you end up with it if you dislike it so much?” Cot asked.

“It came with my appointment to the *Emerald Isle*. The previous captain supposedly adored the shuttle and when I became the flag officer, the current captain presented it to me.”

It didn’t sound right. Why would the captain of such a large ship...then it occurred to her that the captain of the *Emerald Isle* probably hated the shuttle and offered it to the admiral either as a joke or out of spite. That would fit in with Captain Yerov behavior that *Star* was digging up on him.

“Star, *are you making improvements on her shuttle?*”

“Yes. *Modu and I find the shuttle lacking. He was not satisfied with its performance on its flight here. Following my scans I have maintenance bots fine tuning some of the electronics. I also am replacing her power source with Reflected Lights spare. Emerald Isle’s maintenance bots have not been attending to this shuttle.*”

Chapter 32

It’s Not What It Seems To Be

Seven hours passed since Cot had retired after taking RADM Zieda for her inspection tour. Rested, Cot rolled out of her bed and dressed quickly in her workout uniform.

“Anything to report, *Star*?” she asked as she dressed.

“Claire has requested to leave her quarters and study on the bridge. The bridge is secured against her curiosity. I have assigned her some lessons to occupy her until you address her request.”

“Anything else?”

“No unidentified ships in our vicinity and no calls for assistance,” *Star* reported. “However, Diana has left you an encrypted message.”

“What is it about?” Cot asked.

“She said I was not to open it until you read it and I must guard the contents with my life. It was waiting at the kiosk we passed an hour ago,” *Star* said.

“*Star Chaser*, I have the conn,” Cot said as she stepped onto the bridge.

“Cot has the conn.”

When her identity was confirmed, Diana appeared with a smile then her image faded and her message began.

“Greetings, Star Friends. I have been asked to pass this information onto you from a source that wishes to be unnamed. Gemini is a spaceship belonging to a species that is referred to as Ta-ta. The nearest I can describe the Ta-ta is a consciousness beyond our comprehension. In the physical sense when they appear, they can be either tiny or large. They are ancient and have wandered the galaxies for eons. Any individual or group that has interacted with them has been known to make leaps in their own consciousness. The Third Triup of Evensort – Captain of the *Murdelie* and her crew are examples. As you have found, a higher level of consciousness in a new generation of Enas has evolved from their interaction.

“You and your squad was picked by the Ta-ta to be a liaison between Star Force and the Blessed and Thankful Higher Life Force in the Many Dimensions and Realms of the All Mighty, otherwise known as the Ta-Ta. Keep in mind, there is humor in the long version of what others over the many years of meetings have referred to them as. They picked up on the pretentious elders and so-called holy ones of various groups who insisted on representing their congregations or followers and have for millions of what we call standard years, withdrawn from meeting with any group until a certain spiritual level is achieved with the individuals they meet. So, you don’t spin your wheels on wondering how you have achieved that high standard in this life, they consider many of your lifetimes.

“A Ta-ta presence will be with you all in your SID group, as you move to your new post, L’Gsta Outpost. That is why your squad is given so much freedom from the usual military command structure.

“You have made friends with the Gemini group and the new Enas. Use that friendship with wisdom and caution. That is all that I can speak to you about this. Be

aware of what is around you, my space friend, and you too *Star Chaser*. Good journeys, Diana”

“What do you say to that, *Star*? Your *Gemini* was more than what it seemed, or did you know that?”

“I have been able to assign a pattern to the *Gemini* ship. Due to that I have registered in our passing by a gaseous cold cloud with the same energy pattern. Once we changed positions the pattern dissipated.”

“When was that?”

“As you were reading Diana’s message.”

“So, we are under the Ta-ta’s ever watchful eye as we are HQ and every nation our liaison offends. I should feel honored but I’m more pleased that I don’t feel under pressure like a fresh-faced 2nd lieutenant under the watchful eye of a veteran chief petty officer,” she mocked. “*Star*, you have the conn.”

“I have the conn.”

Cot stopped by Claire’s quarters.

“Good day, Claire. You’re up early,” Cot said.

“This is morning time at school. I would be attending my second class now.”

“What are you studying?”

“Mathematics. We never had these formulas. *Star Chaser* has explained it so I can understand. My friends would like *Star Chaser*’s lessons better than Master Hubert’s. He’s so boring.”

“Are you permitted to communicate with anyone on Mari?”

Claire beamed. “I have requested it. Everyone in Evo, my school, wants me to write them and tell them what it’s like to go to school with aliens, but it’s up to the Overseer. My friends would be envious of Pointidea.”

“You’ll have a lot to write about.”

Claire made a face. “I can’t imagine living with something different than me.”

“Pointidea is different.”

“I mean, well, you know.” She looked over at her new friend guiltily. “Like a scarier insect or lizards.” She made a face.

“I know how that is. Chances are your roommates, or roommate will be carefully selected. Surely, you’ve met other species. Mari is an open planet.” She was thinking that Rear Admiral Zieda was what on her planet would be classified as a larger-than-life insect, so *Star Chaser* must have affected a change in Claire’s vision.

Claire shook her head. “We know about *them* because they’re in the VIDs but they aren’t allowed in the clanlands.”

“I see. Since all is quiet around here, I’m going to do my morning workout,” Cot said.

“Can I work out too?”

“That’s why I’m here. *Star* can program a workout for you. What kind of exercise do you have in mind?”

“Using a sword,” she said looking hopeful.

“Sword it is. You’ll need to change into a gi. *Star* is producing one for you as we speak. I’ll wait while you change.”

By the time they entered the cargo bay Claire was skipping to keep up with her.

“What will you practice, Cot?” Claire asked.

“It looks like sword practice for both of us. Have you practiced with one?”

“Yes. Bean taught me so I could fight back.”

“Bean is your friend?”

“Bean is my guardian. Pointadea is my friend. Bean doesn’t like to appear around people.”

It was a relief to know that Claire had met her guardian. It was in the genetics of Mulands that all children through dreams, apparitions, clairaudence, symbols, and other means, that a benevolent guide appear. Cot was suspicious that some parents, especially in the clans, disapproved of this natural guidance since they were left out of this side of their child’s development, so children kept silent about this hidden side of them.

In clan life, moving out of childhood meant a new world of worry and responsibilities and parents were discouraged to be tolerant of disobedience or individuality in their off-spring, so to Cot, this was when they most needed their guardian, a friend. Once out of childhood, what was once kept in the immediate family

became clan knowledge and life was judged on how compliant and successful the new adult was in the clan world.

Star's hologram teacher for Claire was a Muland her size whose humor was seeped in a child's practical wisdom. Claire moved slowly at first, giggling and sometimes bursting out in laughter at her teacher's instructions. Her giggles became grunts as she caught on and she picked up her pace, until she hit herself in the head with her sword. Lucky for them all, it wasn't a real sword.

Cot started her warmups at the other corner of the matt. Loosened up she started another routine of sword drills to work on specific muscle groups. When she was ready, she called for a partner. It was a lively partner who insulted her and was ridiculously showy in her moves, but deadly in her attacks. It was satisfying to find a rhythm in their battle, and it was nearly distracting when the insults turned to outrageous and funny critiques on her swordsmanship. When the program ended Claire and RADM Zieda clapped their appreciation.

"Your exercise routine is very entertaining," RADM Zieda said to Cot. "And you Claire are doing very well."

"Thank you, Rear Admiral Zieda," Claire said.

"Good morning, RADM Zieda," Cot said. "We have some business to discuss when you get a chance in your busy schedule." Cot was thinking of preparing the rear admiral for *Star Chaser's* investigation of her fleet's officers that were not completely honorable. She didn't feel comfortable with *Star* revealing that she had profiled the rear admiral's crew and not give her a complete report.

"Claire has studies to attend to in her quarters," Cot added.

Claire rolled her eyes at her friend Pointadea and left to go to her quarters.

"I just happen to have some time now. I reviewed some of the training programs *Star Chaser* has prepared and find them very refreshing. She has a funny sense of humor, just like your training partner you finished up with. I'm beginning to think she's more than just a ship. It can be very disturbing for a rigid military type."

"So, I've heard. I'll join you on the bridge after I clean up.

"I'll wait for you on the bridge," RADM said.

In a fresh uniform Cot joined the admiral on the bridge. She secured the hatch behind her, to prevent any conversation being overheard.

“*Star*, I have the conn.”

“Cot has the conn.”

“*Star Chaser* likes to poke around, as you know...”

“Has she found out what that dreadful energy is?”

“No, but she’s running a program on it. What she has dug up is more on your fleet.”

“I figured since her lessons are so personalized that discrepancies in their personnel files would be picked up on, or maybe she was sticking her nose in HQ’s reports...” She left the rest unsaid.

Cot cleared her throat. “Should I go on?”

The rear admiral grinned, giving Cot the feeling she was in unknown territory. Did the admiral already know? Was she being tested?

“Are you going to tell me that Captain Yerov of the *Emerald Isle* has been rigid in the unnecessary and purposely lax in running drills?”

Cot sighed gratefully. “Yes.”

“I picked the *Emerald Isle* because of her potential and not because of her captain. Captain Yerov is another Star Force officer under a deeper review as well as some of the other captains in my fleet. They are relatively new to Star Force, and their reviews would not warrant a close scrutiny but together they do. I’m what you call the enforcer.”

“Like with Commander Xulu?”

“Which is why your SE is very important to me. Commander Xulu’s placement on the *Emerald Isle* was by no accident. We wanted to know if anyone would be contacted by him so we could close down whatever villainy might be in SF that gravitates toward him. I’m telling you this in confidence that you won’t report it even to your squad.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“Because you personally have been chosen to meet with the ambassadors to the New Frontier. Haven’t you noticed that in some things you are more astute than your SID-mates?”

“I don’t follow.” She was thinking that her being a practioner of QuaDom gave her an advantage over her SID-mates in working with most species, but she wanted to know how much Star Force knew of this.

“You’re more telepathic than your squad members, though as they continue working with the SIDs they are increasing their telepathic strength that Mulands that cultivate the ability aren’t able to achieve. Think of this. Everyone that has been known to have had direct contact with these beings has risen in intelligence and consciousness uncommon to their species. It’s something most of us star travelers are looking for. Expanded consciousness.”

“Why a SID ship?”

“I’ve been asking myself that since I was brought into the small ring of Need to Know and I don’t think most of us know and those that do are more advanced in consciousness and answer in a language we don’t understand. Having the consciousness of beings infused in spaceships is not something new. Your SID ship is an experiment on a one-on-one, which also is not new. Some people think that it’s a great risk for one person to have that much power at her reach. Where’s the failsafe in that? However, I suspect the Ta-ta, these beings we’re trying to contact are behind your squads SID ships because according to SF reports, the Ta-ta via their representative, know all about each of you and the consciousness in each SID ship.” The rear admiral rubbed her chin then looked out at space. It seemed a long time of silence passed.

When the rear admiral brought her thoughts back to the present, Cot asked, “Have you read my report on our finding the *Murdelie* abandoned just outside of a travel corridor exit?”

“The *Murdelie*? SFHQ sent out an alert that it had disappeared right out from under the feet of the port authority and CFS security forces that were assigned to it until the delegates boarded.” She chuckled at the mention of CFS losing the ship. “You found the *Murdelie*? Is it classified?” she asked, then waved her hand, “Which wouldn’t make any difference since I do have top clearance. I would like to see your report.”

“All our communications are second level.”

“Oh, posh. There are three levels above second level that I know of and I’m at those levels. Security levels are not just numeric, for I know there are levels even within the ones I know of. So?”

It didn’t take long for RADM to go through the report. “I would have sent this back to you and asked for more details,” RADM Zieda said when she finished.

“However, considering the secrecy of the Enas and the delicacy of your unauthorized visit with no one aboard, I would say you said enough. No need to attract retaliation or too many stamps of top secret to attract attention.”

“I was going to send more details in images; however, every time I tried to access the information I had gathered while on the *Murdelie*, it wasn’t uploaded or downloaded or retrievable in any form. Simply put...*Star Chaser* wasn’t able to recover those files. My suspicion and *Star* confirmed it, was the visitor that hitched a ride with us, was erasing it.”

“You picked up a hitch-hiker?” RADM Zieda asked in disbelief.

“It came on board when I was on the *Murdelie* restarting its systems and since I had a lot of people chasing me, including the *Murdelie*’s security bots, I didn’t notice the visitor until the next day.”

“What about the safeties on your ship to prevent unauthorized boarding?”

“The safeties are fine, rear admiral. The visitor was a Ta-ta.”

“What does it look like?” Rear Admiral Zieda asked excitedly.

“I don’t know. It was in a mobile bot about the size of my fist. For all I know, there could have been an army of fifty in that mobile ship. We called the visitor Gemini since it didn’t give us a name.”

RADM Zieda was quiet for a few moments. “So, they got up close and personal with you. Testing you, though I’m sure they already knew you were the right one to lead the welcoming committee.”

“We’ve been in the New Frontier on an assignment. It was before we were dispatched back to Mari for HQ business and picking up Claire.”

“All of you?” she asked in surprise.

“*Star Chaser* and me. I can tell you, there are some unpleasant experiences where we were not welcome to travel. Gemini left us, peacefully, in the New Frontier.”

“You are certainly having your share of adventures,” RADM said quietly, then sighed. “My adventures are cleaning up the rank and file because we had one recruiter that was discriminating on who she brought in the fold and became rich from it, for a while. While cleaning up some officers, I have some type of energy running through a portion of the Mezo Clima area to neutralize. My first guess was that it was from another dimension but the scientist...they like to have proof before they apply a remedy.”

“Can you tell me about this energy?” Cot asked.

“Even crew members in my fleet, though warned of what behaviors to expect, weren’t immune to physical altercations with each other and short tempers. However, we did get the affected area mapped out. Now that we have it mapped out, we stay out of the area and hope there won’t be any ships we have to rescue under the influence. Meanwhile the scientists from over fifty nations are plugging away at their findings to come to how, why and who.”

“*Star Chaser* noticed a familiar energy reading in one of the clouds we passed. It was the same as the *Gemini* craft that visited us.”

“Stands to reason they would be keeping tabs on you. There are a lot of interested parties in the SIDs and in your mission.”

Chapter 33

School Is In

“This is Colleen MacDiarmid, captain of the shuttle *Reflected Light* arriving with Student Claire MacDiarmid. I’m requesting a landing pad,” Cot announced to the automated tower.

On her screen landing directions appeared.

Cot could hear Claire moving in her seat with excitement. She had her clothing carrier filled with what the school authorized students to wear.

When the shuttle settled Claire was up and hurrying to the exit hatch, hopping up and down when the hatch didn’t open.

“The ramp needs to extend before the hatch opens,” Cot explained.

“Hurry, hurry. I want to see,” Claire said. Her friend Pointedea was sitting meekly on her shoulder. It was decided that Pointedea would continue as her tutor, companion and bodyguard. The requirements for personal bot companions and bodyguards were restrictive with a long list that the school administrator said grew monthly. Some species were quite creative with their favorites and cheating in classes wasn’t allowed.

Cot suspected for *Star Chaser* it was an actual link to know what Claire was up to. Claire was something of interest for *Star Chaser* to study since she was close to the age the personality of *Star Chaser* was before her physical body expired.

RADM Zieda and Cot, both in civilian dress, followed Claire down the ramp. Two people from the school were waiting. One was Claire’s size dressed in the school uniform.

Everyone introduced themselves then Claire’s fellow student left together.

“Most of our students on their first day aren’t as excited as First Year Student Claire,” Administrator Heni said smiling. “Come this way to be added to the sponsor book then you can be on your way.”

The majority of the school was below ground, allowing nature to appear undisturbed above; however, Cot spotted security monitors looking as if they belonged in the scenery. The holograms in hallway showed windows everywhere with expansive views of mountains and a river meandering nearby.

“Our students adapt to the living conditions below ground quite quickly and since we have pleasant weather nearly every day, teachers have classes in the various gardens above ground.”

Cot verified her identity as sponsor to the student register’s list and while waiting for the RADM to finish up, looked around the room at pictures of the school grounds and classrooms.

“I’m sorry, I forgot to ask, would either of you like to take a tour before you leave?”

RADM Zieda looked at Cot then smiled at the administrator. “Has it changed in six years?”

“Not by much. Equipment has been updated, candidate admission requirements have expanded, professors have come and gone, but the underground structure hasn’t

changed. The gardens above have changed immensely as they would in a natural environment.”

“I would like to see the gardens. I don’t see many in my business,” RADM said.

“Let me call up a cart for you. Its voice operated or you can operate the controls.”

A portion of the wall opened, and an air cart became activated.

“Here you are. Step aboard and when your tour is finished you can direct it to take you to your shuttle. Have a pleasant visit.”

Both women seated themselves and RADM directed the cart to return to the surface to give them a tour of the gardens. As their cart moved into the daylight a shield became opaque to block the too bright light.

“I hope you don’t mind my flying, but I don’t get many opportunities to fly one of these,” RADM said. “This takes me back when I drove a cart through the mad traffic on Planta. That was before I became admiral where even on vacations, someone has to drive me somewhere. As if my mind is too busy to focus on my driving.”

Cot held onto her seat, though the invisible restraints would have prevented her from falling out or bouncing around for the rear admiral suddenly swerved to the left.

“That is new!” RADM said as they headed to a brightly colored hedge.

Cot could see what looked like an intricate design within the living wall. As they drew closer, the cart rose to give them a better perspective of a labyrinth. Cot could feel an unpleasant energy vibrating against her entire body as they drew nearer. When they flew over the first wall Cot was hit with near panic and an urge to escape. Then a painful punch to her ribs, which she blocked subsequent punches from the flaying fists of the rear admiral who appeared to be fighting her for her life.

“Cart, take us out of this area!” Cot shouted.

It lasted only minutes, and Cot sat half in and half out of the cart with the RADM restrained and panting.

“I thought for a moment you were someone else,” the rear admiral said wearily. “That’s just like that energy we’re investigating. It took so much out of me. I feel like I’ve been on foot patrol for half a day.”

Cot felt drained too. She touched her throat communicator. “*Star*, are you monitoring this?” Of course she is, she thought and by the rear admiral’s expression she thought so to.

“It is coming from a structure below the labyrinth. The way the walls on the labyrinth are shaped it had been containing something foreign to this planet and not in my database. Modu and I have identified it as similar to what the Star Force fleet is investigating in space.”

“Similar?” Cot asked.

“In space, energy doesn’t vibrate as it would on a planet due to the atmospheric differences,” *Star* said.

“You said the labyrinth is leaking this foreign energy?” RADM asked.

“The shape of the labyrinth is no longer blocking what it had been containing. The energy has found its way out. I will devise something more complicated. The origin of this energy is from a room below it. By the school layout, it is a science laboratory.”

“It won’t be the first time a school experiment got out of control,” RADM said. “Let’s go talk to the Headmaster.”

The cart deposited them in front of the administration offices.

“May we meet with Headmaster?” RADM asked a bot that was waiting patiently for a visitor to ask for assistance.

Administer Heni came out of his office.

“You want to see the Headmaster?”

“Immediately,” RADM said firmly.

He looked surprised. “He’s in a meeting with some of the teaching staff at this moment.”

“It’s very important. Tell him Rear Admiral Zieda of Star Force is requesting his presence now.”

He looked unsure but nodded and escorted them to an office that simply said, Headmaster.

The headmaster’s chair was large as well as the desk. Before Cot could ask RADM what species the headmaster was Cot could feel the strong presence of someone. She turned before the door to the office swished open. A Tracon entered the room

looking angry. To Cot, they always looked angry. In the Incursion War she had served two years under the command of one, until they were both rotated to other ships with promotions. For a few moments Cot stared at the Tracon picking out characteristic markers of species to individual differences.

“Lieutenant M?” she asked hesitantly.

“Lt. Col Cot,” he grinned. “I’ve followed your career. Congratulations on all your promotions and merits. I’m now Headmaster M. With the end of the war, I was able to go back to doing what I loved...teaching.” His arms swept the room. “And look what I am doing now. Tedious but necessary administrative work.” He then winked. “I’ve also been relegated to the toughies. We have some students that no one wants in their classrooms. It’s like shaping up 2nd lieutenants whose heads are full of theory but no real experience to make sense of it.”

Cot and RADM Zieda smiled.

“This is Rear Admiral Zieda, Headmaster M,” Cot introduced.

“Rear Admiral and of Star Force. Is something wrong that brings you two to my office with the rear admiral pulling rank on my staff?” he mocked.

“Have you had any unusual behavior problems?” Cot asked.

He laughed. “Oh, that. Who told you about it?” He shook his head. “A student was working on a science project and tuned her device to a vibration we had never registered before.”

“How did you know if the vibration isn’t registered?” RADM asked.

“Everyone in the class was fighting and when the device hit the floor peace was restored. Since it’s a science class the professor, and the students verified it was the device. It wasn’t just his class affected. When I was appraised of the situation, I allowed him to continue as long as he developed a containment field around the device so it doesn’t leak. If it is something new the school, as well as the inventor have a lot to gain besides prestige.”

“Can we speak with the professor?”

“Certainly.” He pushed a button. “Assistant Heni, have Professor Rinoco report to my office now.”

“Headmaster, he and five of his students are on a field trip and will be back in three days.

“Where did they go?” RADM asked.

He pressed the speaker button again. “Assistant Heni, did he register a flight plan?”

“No, Headmaster. But he’s had a lot of calls about the new invention. I think he wanted to get away from all the calls.”

“Are you telling the callers they have to go through the Academic Council?”

“They rudely disconnect when I tell them he is not available.”

“Star, *trace the calls and see if you can get into....*”

“I have been able to break his code to his files. I have downloaded all his information.” There was a pause. *“He is not aware of the two points of energy but rather sees it as one. It looks as if a break between dimensions has been generated. According to his notes they only are aware of the effects of the break, not of what has been done.”*

“Can you fix the break?”

“You will have to physically turn the machine that is keeping the break open off. If they are causing the other breaks in space, there is more than one machine. I am sending out monitors to locate the school’s science shuttle.”

“Something is wrong with the professor’s experiments?” Headmaster M asked.

“Can you let us examine the professor’s records and his classroom?” RADM asked.

Headmaster M looked worried. He sighed then gave a code to the admiral. “I’m sure your ship will be able to upload the information without any problem, rear admiral. Professor Rinoco is an outstanding and very patient teacher. I would hate to lose him because of misconduct.”

“Thank you, Headmaster M,” RADM said. “He’s not in trouble. We just want an idea of who is behind this energy discovery.”

Another person entered the room without knocking. He wasn’t as large as Headmaster M but the way he carried himself, he was someone important. He didn’t bother introducing himself.

“It’s not going to be used as a weapon, is it? We don’t support military projects,” Headmaster M said nervously.

“No military projects,” RADM said.

“We need to get into the classroom to see the machine he’s left there,” Cot said.

“You can’t remove anything that has been created on school property unless the school’s council gives permission. It’s in our charter and agreement all visitors and sponsors have consented to before they arrive,” the newcomer stated.

“And you know under certain conditions such as lives are in danger, some agreements become null,” RADM said.

“What life? There has been no loss of life. Are you intending on removing something?” The newcomer demanded. “I am the owner of this school. Whatever those students developed is not to be removed until we have it investigated and a value by an independent interest put on it.”

“We intend on investigating and making certain there is no threat of loss of life or that your students and teachers are delving into something out of their reach to contain or control,” RADM said.

“Whoever you think you are, you have no authority here to tell me what I can and can’t teach.” He turned to Headmaster M. “Call the police. Call the school lawyers and who are you?” He turned back to the rear admiral.

Headmaster M glanced at Cot, giving her a slight shrug.

Star Chaser chose that time to let Cot know, a dozen star fighters from Rear Admiral Zieda’s fleet had arrived.

“I’m Rear Admiral Zieda of Star Force. My fleet is investigating a disturbance in space that is two days from here. The energy from your school lab is the same that is causing a lot of problems, among them a disruption of trade along a busy space corridor. If your school is responsible for the disruption, your worries should be how to help neutralize the disruption.”

A message came over the communication channel of the Headmaster. He pressed his neck comm and listened.

“There are ships above our school. It is against the committee rules for more than one ship from one interest to be above the school. It could be interpreted by some of our important students’ parents as an aggressive act against them.”

“They are from Star Force fleet that is investigating this energy you have in your classroom and that is causing so much trouble in space that neighboring planets have asked Star Force to investigate,” Cot said.

“May I use your comm to speak with my team?” RADM Zieda asked.

“Of course,” Headmaster M said hurriedly. Beside him the owner of the school was fuming or maybe he was just nervous.

Cot was wondering how much he was expecting to get for this invention. While the rear admiral was speaking with her squad leader, Cot was keeping an eye on the owner. He was edging over to the left side of the room. Cot moved to put herself between him and his destination.

“Perhaps you would join us in our visit to your school lab?” she invited.

He paled at her offer and quickly said in a cold voice, “I don’t wish to join you anywhere.”

“Then you will wait here, Zeman Co, confined to a chair where you touch nothing and speak to no one,” RADM Zieda said. “You have already shown us your disinterest in assisting us in our investigation. My guardsman will be here to see that you stay out of trouble while we investigate.” She pointed to a chair for the owner, Zeman Co to sit.

They waited in silence. An airman dressed for business but not showing any weapons arrived with another airman. Both saluted the rear admiral and Cot.

They spoke to the rear admiral in code. Whatever was said one left and the other remained in the office to monitor the Headmaster M and Zeman Co. He wasn’t alone for a dozen security bots no larger than five inches dispersed around the room.

The rear admiral and Cot left the office. She turned to Cot looking worried. “We have two scientists on their way. Meanwhile, we need to see if we can neutralize it before it expands any further. According to my pilots, they can see that the disruption is growing, though in small increments. We’re evacuating the school but not letting them know the reason to avoid panic and children calling their parents and everyone else. I’m

letting Lt. Car take care of the small details of what to do with the students. Since there is a shopping mall nearby, I'm sure he can figure out where to send everyone on a day off."

"*Star Chaser*, monitor us and the situation," Cot said.

"Acknowledged," *Star* said.

"I told my squad not to interfere with *Star Chaser*, just in case they get it in their heads to poke at your ship," Rear Admiral Zieda said with a smile.

"I hope so. I don't like *Star Chaser* being poked any more than she does."

The cart stopped abruptly before they reached their destination. The control panel went dead.

"According to the map, the room we're looking for is down this hall. Whatever is in that room is affecting the cart's system," Cot said. She shook out her arms as something foreign touched her. The rear admiral was walking at a faster pace and soon passed her as if she were standing still.

"It's out this far and none of the students or teachers noticed?" RADM asked. Her voice was garbled, as if coming from a defective voice box.

"Everyone may be having classes outside. So how do we get to it when..." Cot stopped as everything around her suddenly became unfamiliar, including her own voice.

Thoughts became disjointed and meaningless and feelings were nonsensical, having nothing to anchor to. She couldn't tell if she was moving at all or if she was separated from her body. Abruptly, as if an adjustment was made, she became aware of herself. From this point she was not in body form, nor in recognizable spirit form. She just was.

A distinct thought, clear as if it was written down for her, presented itself and then was gone.

Her body wasn't heavy, and her thoughts didn't have a difficult time to adjust from one reality to another. There was no hurry as she felt her body inhale and exhale. Her consciousness moved to the sounds around her. They played in her head as colorful glows with no boundaries separating the pallet of colors then they lengthened into thick cords of distinct colors, as if she was seeing the reverse order of a painter's pallet from out of the tube to mixing.

“Cot, the breach in the dimensional field has been repaired. The abnormal conditions in Mezo Clima space have ceased,” Star Chaser reported mentally.

The vibration of another’s thoughts sent soft tingles in her mind and it resonated through her body and out through her fingertips and toes. Smiling she blinked at the lights in the school hall.

“Whatever that was, I don’t want to experience that again,” a hoarse voice next to her said.

Cot glanced at Rear Admiral Zieda who was holding onto the wall to steady herself. She gazed at her hands that were bracing herself up against the wall. She gave a soft laugh.

“Is there something amusing you want to share?” RADM Zieda asked sounding annoyed.

“Boredom is not an option in our lives,” Cot said.

RADM laughed. “That is a certainty.”

They got a ride back to the Administrative Offices on the cart that had become operable.

A group of people had joined the owner and Headmaster M in his office. Cot stood off to the side and listened to *Star Chaser’s* report as the rear admiral took care of what was transpiring in the office.

Star Chaser had located the missing school’s shuttle and so had others and not authorized visitors to this space sector.

Cot glanced at the rear admiral and was able to get her attention without appearing to interrupt.

The rear admiral looked relieved to step away from the argument that was going on.

“The Science Academy will be sending a representative to the school to give them a new list of what experiments they cannot perform without specified safeguards. My job here is done. The fleet can now settle down and get back to a new way of life.” She grinned.

“You mean a new structure? It might not be an entirely closed matter, Rear Admiral. *Star* found the school’s shuttle, and they are in trouble.”

“Let’s go.” RADM motioned to her guardsman who immediately left. “I take it you want to use *Star Chaser*.”

“Let me first see what *Star Chaser* has found that my own fleet hasn’t.”

Chapter 34

Another Interesting Day at Work

“Trai?” RADM Zieda said in alarm. “What are they doing over here? Their planet is almost five years from here and they are restricted to their part of space.” She looked over at Cot, “Unless they know of some corridors and gates I don’t know about.”

“They have a different bio-make up so they’re going to be able to use gates we wouldn’t be able to.”

“We’re thirty-six stan hours from my fleet and with the squad flying behind us, I’m sure we have enough authority to challenge and contain them, however, I don’t like the odds since the Trai wouldn’t be here if they unless they had more than what our reports on them give. *Star*, open a comm channel with my second, Commander Hatr.”

“*Star, find out what they’re up to and keep in mind, the Trai get rather nasty to anyone that interferes with their business.*”

“*I have read their methods. Flash and her captain, Mòr Macgillivray, have had a confrontation with them at the beginning of their journey. Galaxy Traveler and Penumbra had to extricate her.*”

“*That’s why I’m worried. They will have studied how Captains Barron Rose and Fionnaghal Hay rescued Mòr Macgillivray and will have worked out a plan should they run into a SID-ship again.*”

RADM Zieda glanced at Cot, “Commander Hatr said the *Belo*, identified as belonging to the Trai, was found in the Mezo Clima’s travel corridor where that disturbance is. The scout pilots said the Trai were running high intensity scans in the area until the *Andora* and *Hazel* moved into position to clean sweep the area to clear it for reopening. He also said they disappeared too quickly for him to challenge their presence and the energy stopped. He sent scouts and a dozen fighters out to look for the *Belo*. I let him know where they are. Did you know that any situation that seems a threat to JunPolTe’s Preparatory School for Females is considered a cause for war? Too many people of power

have their girls attending the school to not consider it blackmail or some type of threat for influence.”

“*Star*, how far are we from the school’s science shuttle the *Eleanora*?”

“We are twenty minutes from their location. The *Eleanora* has been boarded by two adult Trais, an adult Suglite, and others in armor that will not allow a bio-scan. It is on a meteorite,” *Star* said.

“We need to find out just what business they have with those students, and I don’t mind saying, the reason for them being with those students scares me. I was surprised the Trais didn’t back the Gepaks during the war years,” RADM Zieda said.

“The Trai don’t take orders from anyone but those in their species hierarchy. I’m worried too. I’ve seen the results of their interrogation techniques on a Gepak follower after they had him for only ten minutes.”

“Which is why they’re banned from traveling outside of their area of space and why monitors are still active around their planet,” RADM Zieda said. “I wonder if anyone noticed one of their ships has gone missing. I hope those additional star fighters and scout ships Commander Hatr is sending this way get here before our demise,” RADM Zieda said.

“You don’t think *Star Chaser* and your squad of bodyguards can confound them until they’re surrounded by your backup?” Cot said mockingly. “I’m going to use your shuttle and...”

“You can’t go flying over there to confront them,” RADM Zieda said. “If anyone is going, that would be me. I can’t be caught flying one of these SID ships if something should happen to you. I’m pulling rank,” she added. “Besides, a rear admiral dressed in her best from Star Fleet will scare the fur off their face. They’ll know they’re in a lot of trouble. I’m going to change into my most impressive uniform.”

“Rear Admiral, I was also going to suggest that you use the double hull and have some of your pilots fly over with you.”

“A pilot fight a boarding?” she laughed. “If I ask for volunteers, they all will without heeding my request of trained.”

“Rear Admiral, you know their personnel file and can hand pick who you want in your shuttle. We’re still out of range of their scans, otherwise they would have armed

themselves. I can't allow them aboard *Star Chaser*, but they can board outside of her. Another test of their readiness."

"Alright. So, Second Lieutenant Modu doesn't have to shoulder responsibility completely for this risky encounter. While I'm changing, I'll notify my squad of bodyguards," she mocked.

"*Star*, send over enough SEs with her for each person that is on the meteorite. I want everyone to be covered. Were you able to upgrade her shuttle?"

"Modu and I have used *Reflected Light's* old power source to replace hers. We have corrected the flaws in the programming and reloaded it. She has a forward and aft cannon that had been disabled and now is enabled. Also, she has a working model of the Lancer 4KS. It will work with her cells; however, too long she will feel sore all over."

Ten minutes later an impressively dressed rear admiral joined her in the docking bay.

"What is this?" RADM asked.

"All of that is for later. What you do need to know is you have the Lancer 4KS at your disposal. Second Lieutenant Modu will explain how it works."

"Is that a holograph of my second lieutenant?" RADM asked. She poked at it, and it jumped.

"It's a wave of energy that is emitted by the bot to look like whoever you chose it to look like. They use this technology on RajII in place of the biological slaves they had previously used," *Star* explained.

"Well, that makes me feel better. As much as second lieutenant Modu is a better pilot than the ones I've had lately, I would hate to sacrifice him with his newly learned skills. I have four special ops trained pilots that will be joining me," RADM said.

"Commander Hatr likes to make sure those flying as my protection squad are qualified for anything that may happen."

Chapter 35

To catch a thief you need bait

Cot smiled. "*Star*, transparent hull."

The admiral's shuttle paused long enough to pick up four jettisoned bodies from star fighters that were following them. Cot was impressed at how quickly the transfer was done. The shuttle resumed its flight to the meteorite where three ships, one the size of a small battle cruiser, one a luxury yacht, and the third a small scout ship, were station keeping alongside of the meteorite.

"*Belo*, is the Trai ship with two hundred crew," *Star* said. "*Kuten* is a civilian yacht owned by the Motow family of Orintas from the planet Brubo. There is a crew of fifty. The third ship is civilian owned by a Vergreter called Wooton. *Sharpo*, has two seats but one pilot. Wooton declared himself the leader of this gathering."

"I'll bet that didn't go over well with the Trai. Wooton's name is an ex-prisoner that accused Rinoco of collaborating with the prison guards during the Incursion War," Cot said. "Let the admiral know. Have you any information on Wooton?"

"Yes, and the other two reporters of Ronoco's collaboration, Binali and Rom. Wooton arranges buying and selling of things. In the Tuead Sector he served time in a re-education colony for selling two people. When he had finished serving his time, he was escorted out of that sector due to the families he did business with were angry with him. They had to return the money which was given to the victims to start a new life. Binali had resettled in a new colony and died in a flood. Rom works as a chef at Ballots Space Port. He has a family of four. All three have a warning flag that they are being monitored. Though Binali is reported as dead, the flag is still there."

"Does it say why?" Cot asked.

"They were not considered truthful in their stories of how they were captured by the Gepak followers or of their behavior in the prison camp. Others suspected them of theft and telling lies to gain favor from their guards."

"Did this energy generator get registered with the Academic Council?" Cot asked.

"It has and in a week the school will present it to the council."

"So Wooton hopes to sell it before the Academic Council can submit it to the Science Academy as a legitimate school discovery."

"Rear Admiral Zieda has confirmed that the five students and professor are uninjured. She is now negotiating for the release of them."

Five hours later there was still a disagreement between Wooton, who claimed he had signed agreement that the device was his to find a buyer for.

Cot sat up startled as ships started to appear from hyperspace.

“The first three ships registered to CFS and three-star fighters from the Admiral’s fleet,” *Star* identified.

“That is going to change the face of the argument,” Cot said.

A few minutes later, a battle cruiser, the *Andora* appeared. They had to be going at full speed to have made the time they did. The star fighters that were solely to provide services to the rear admiral remained out of the gathering.

Star Chaser, keeping out of range of the ship’s scans, moved her monitors slowly to avoid detection and to keep the *Belo* vulnerable to a shot that would give it second thoughts of getting aggressive. The Trai were impressed with might.

“The *Belo* has armed,” *Star* said.

In the blink of an eye, one of the star fighters from the rear admiral’s squad fired a shot at the *Belo*. It wasn’t meant to disable the ship, but Cot imagined the crew got a shake up when the shot bounced off their safety buffer.

“*Belo* has disarmed. The school shuttle is taking off with all school members. The rear admiral’s shuttle is heading to the *Andora*. I have recalled all but one SE.”

The CFS ships surrounded the *Belo* and it looked like they were going to be boarded.

“I hope the *Andora* pulls back and takes an observer position. If the captain of the *Belo* does something rash like dumps its illegal arms, there’s going to be free floating space mines.”

“In coming message from Rear Admiral Zieda, Cot.”

“Greetings, Rear Admiral. It looks like all has gone well.”

“The ships were nearby and were dispatched to the school as a precaution. Trai this close to the school was considered a threat. Since they aren’t authorized to be in this sector of space they’re going to be boarded and inspected by the CFS, then escorted to the nearest space port to go through another inspection. My guess is they’re going to be escorted back to their planet.”

“What brought everyone out there?”

“A conniving and naïve schoolgirl and her bodyguard only five years her senior. They thought to make enough money to run away to a new colony settlement. He’ll get some prison time at a correctional facility; she’ll be expelled and sent to a correctional school; and the professor and his other scared students, they all got a lesson in greed and stupidity.”

“Who is responsible for the dimension breach in that travel corridor?”

“The love struck duo. They’ve been doing their own seeding and testing on school days off. Wooton is the seller, and he invited two interested parties to observe the effects. He tried to blackmail the professor into giving him the plans for the device, saying he would expose him as a collaborator when he was in the prison camp if he didn’t. The professor ignored him, so it was up to the two lovers, Candice and Bej who had gone to Wooton with the discovery to setup the capture of the professor. He’s the only one that knows the wavelength mixture. The student that had stumbled on it couldn’t remember what mixture of sounds she was using. Can you imagine the havoc that would cause? The Trai took a gamble to go where they are not allowed to travel and lost. They’ll lose their space travel rights. Finally, their planet will be locked down. The Motow family were thinking this would be a good investment but after the Council puts sanctions on them, I think they’ll be blocked from space travel for at least ten generations.”

“I guess this is where we say goodbye, then.” Cot smiled at the admiral’s grin.

“Thank you. I got my adventure fix, a mystery solved, a new SE, a nicer shuttle...the seats are so much more comfortable, thank you very much, and I got a ride in a SID-ship. Oh, and Second Lieutenant Moduc says thank you for the training. I’ll see that his career gets back on track.”

“SEs recovered,” Star reported.

“Have a safe journey, Lt. Col. Cot and Star Chaser.”

“Thank you, Rear Admiral Zieda. Until we meet again, have pleasant adventures.”

“Star, next stop. L’Gsta Outpost. Our new posting. Our squad will be together again.”

“We shall arrive on time,” Star reported.

Cot was hoping there wouldn't be anymore delays. She wanted a permanent post to feel the daily comradery of her SID-mates and their SID-ships. A place to call home.

END