Calose 3rd

Destination Space Station Merlota

Chapter One

Calose provided Cronas' space security her identity, a list of her crew and passengers and their reasons for their visits, as well as her business account to charge for any purchases she or her crew made in the city. Calose informed them she would be looking for freight to haul within a few days. Her cargo bays measurements were given to increase her potential for getting contracts with odd shaped or large machinery that smaller freighters couldn't haul and that the larger corporate freight carriers would haul only if they had a long-term contract and were guaranteed business on the space port of delivery. Once *Calypso II*'s availability was registered with the HMO, all those interested would submit their inquiries, their loads and destinations, a certification from the harbormaster's office that it was a legitimate load, and then price would be discussed with her or her LS, Commander Heru.

The chaotic energies of space cities made Calose jittery, so she preferred short visits. Though it was required she wear her AIU, Calose muted it to avoid being in tuned to too much mental chatter of those around her. The AIU was originally developed so when a species conversed, the images of what they were conveying would be translated for the wearer of the AIU to understand. It was practical during the war years and for new users it took a while to adapt to. Mental thoughts could be kept on a low frequency as much as verbal speech spoken at different levels.

Within two days she expected Belig to hire a crew and contract for a cargo delivery on or near where her belongings had been stored by DSS, at Space Station Sigma. Once she was sure Belig was safely on her way she would notify their PO that her obligation for a health check on Belig was completed.

While waiting for Calose to join her in *Calypso's* shuttle bay, Belig was anxiously relistening to the information her DSS lawyer sent her, making sure she had everything she would need for the court. The previous week, according to the information her lawyer sent to her the Federations court heard the charges against Mda Marce Bruno about the theft of her ship and registering the freighter under false pretenses. Mda Marce Bruno was ruled culpable of the two charges. DSS's lawyer took care of the first set of court hearings that didn't need Belig's presence

since her freighter was under DSS's lease. It was a short trial for someone who was reputed to be wealthy, but the evidence was overwhelming against Mda Marce Bruno.

Her lawyer reminded her that the court first had to determine the legal owner of *Space Journeys*. Once ownership was confirmed, she could wear her captain's uniform, which identified her as an owner-captain. The second hearing Belig would have to appear in person and swear under oath that she had not authorized Mda Marce Bruno to take possession of her ship, which then proceeded to address Mda Marce Bruno's responsibility for Belig's loss of potential wages.

Belig's eyes opened wide at Calose's appearance. "Give me a moment to get used to seeing you in this uniform," Belig said. "For a moment I flashed on you in your NCO dress uni at the official turning over of the military post to civilian ownership." She laughed in amusement. "This is the first time I've seen you in your captain's dress uniform." She poked at it to test its protective material that was also body armor. "I'm hoping mine is going to be as nicely reinforced."

On some ports captains were vulnerable to dock bandits who kidnapped or disabled a captain to hold for profit. Carrying a sidearm or weapon, frowned on by local law enforcement who preferred their own security to prevent any attacks, made wearing protective clothing a method of self-protection for the vulnerable in uniform when making an appearance at the harbormaster's office on docking.

"Very different colors and not looking like our war dress unis. Let's get moving. I must first present myself at the Habor Masters Office as a legitimate captain to arrange to unload our delivery of freight and register for future deliveries and then on to the court." She hesitated and looked at Belig. "Unless you would rather do it on your own."

"No. No. I would like your company. It will be nice to have a friend standing by me." She grinned. "Especially dressed in a captain's owner uniform with an impressive skill level ribbon bar."

"Ah. I'm glad my boots are polished then and no stains on my coat," Calose said, tugging at her sleeves while making sure her com bracelet was active.

The HMO had an agent waiting for them when they docked the freighter's smaller shuttle, *Dulcinea*. Calose's identity was confirmed and her interest in hauling freight passed onto the management's active desk in the Harbor Master's Office. A slotted time for the HMO to send

out barges to unload the freight and the supplies they had in *Calypso's* cargo hold was arranged and her LS, Commander Heru, would oversee the unloading.

"I am impressed," Belig said softly as the HMO agent, an AIH, Automated Intelligent Helper, quickly and efficiently cleared the delivery and the availability to haul freight. "I wish all my businesses at space ports was done so quickly. Do you think that's the future of HMOs having AIHs doing the brunt of the work?"

"Don't count credits yet. The actual unloading of the cargo has yet to be made and our contract for hauling hasn't been set yet," Calose said. "That's just the arrangements made to get it done. I noticed there's a lot of ships in the harbor waiting for their business to be taken care of. For all we know, it may not be until tomorrow or during late watch that my cargo will be unloaded."

"Ah yes. The waiting. That's the part that had my crew on edge while they were itching to get time off for shore leave," Belig said.



An officer on the court met them at the entrance to the city. Both were identified at the city's stella guardian, the dock's security check point. Belig's business with the court was verified. Both women dutifully downloaded to their wrist coms the official numbers and names of the city's departments should they need assistance for any problem they had during their stay. Visitors had no excuse at not knowing the laws and rules of their port of call and weren't allowed further on the station without passing the stella's scan. The stella scanned the individual matching the name, bio-readings, and wrist comm identifier. It kept the more serious crimes like kidnapping, murder, burglary, and riots to almost unheard-of low numbers. It wasn't perfect, because every now and then stowaways without passports manage to get into the spaceports, and citizens of the city did cause occasional problems, some expelled as unwanted criminals.

Their first stop was at the court clerk's office for Belig to confirm that she didn't sell her ship to the person who Mda Marce Bruno seized the ship from for a gambling debt. That information had been confirmed the previous week. She only needed to validate her information to get the confirmation certificate that the judge ruled she was the rightful owner and captain of *Space Journeys.* Belig stopped at a communication box outside of the clerk's office and notified

the uniform shop with the case number that she was legitimately an owner captain so her new uniform that signified her status as owner captain could be finished. They then hurried two flights up to the court that was preparing to hear the day's first case on the docket. The case of Captain Belig of the Qutran Clan vs Mda Marce Bruno suing for financial compensation. Bruno's final judgement would depend on what Belig's lawyer brought in evidence against Marce Bruno who caused the loss of wages to Captain Belig. Mda Marce Bruno's lawyers were arguing that with all the updates Mda Marce Bruno made to her broken down second-hand military freighter she owed Mda Marce Bruno a substantial sum of credits.

It was a heated verbal fight between the lawyers that had Belig squirming in her seat wanting to jump up and defend her reputation for keeping a well-tuned ship. Calose's cautioning hand on her arm had her sitting further back in her seat looking offended.

Mda Marce Bruno's lawyer had read the list of what was updated and the DSS lawyer pointed out that Captain Belig was a mechanic and had kept her freighter in excellent running condition before letting DSS lease it out. He also presented to the court clerk documents showing that DSS had run diagnostics on the ship before leasing it out which proved the ship was in top condition. If there were any upgrades and additional hardware or software added to *Space Journeys,* it was a choice made by Marce Bruno for his own benefit on a ship not his.

The arguments went back and forth until the judge called a halt and gave his verdict. The judge remarked that Marce Bruno should not have invested so heavily in something that wasn't his to begin with. The Court ruled that Belig, an owner/captain of the ship in question, was to be paid by Mda Marce Bruno, lost earnings, that the lawyer reasoned was what Belig's potential to earn was, from the day of her release from a work contract on Dysta Space Station to the present day for transporting freight and/or passengers. Her shipping logs, that all captains of spaceships were to keep, were used as proof of what her earning potential was.

Bruno accompanied by his lawyer, and escorted by two officers of the court, along with Belig and Calose, toured *Space Journeys*, to validate Bruno's claim of upgrading the freighter while in his possession.

Belig immediately noticed a tiny camera at the entrance. She studied the datapad to see if that was something Bruno forgot to mention.

"Why the spy equipment on my ship?" Belig demanded.

Bruno looked skeptical. “I see it. This ship was for my wife's use, and I would not put any monitoring or spy equipment on her ship, nor would she have any need for it herself. It would be insulting her as well as I that I don't trust her. Your SPs added them thinking I would get it back.” He smirked at the thought. “Easily spotted. Amateurs.”

One of the court officers remained on the dock calling the superintendent of the police docks for information on spy equipment that was not noted on the ship documentation from the SPs inspection. Finished with his call the court officer joined them in the captain's quarters where Belig was voicing her feelings at the spy equipment in her quarters.

“The dock guard said an inventory was made on the ship's arrival to their docks and there wasn't any spy equipment when the ship was docked or when it was seized. The superintendent of the Space Police docks is sending a group to remove the equipment,” he reported.

They were inspecting the cargo area when a team of seven officers arrived. It was hours before they left, finding the quarters and mess had monitoring equipment not part of *Space Journey's* security software. The SP security team had gone over it twice just to be sure there was no more unauthorized monitoring equipment.

“The redecoration of the cabins is very nice,” Belig commented to Calose. Belig noticed Marce’s look of surprise. “Thank your decorator for me, Mda Marce Bruno,” Belig told him, showing she held no malice as the issue was near a satisfactory ending for her.

“That would be my wife,” he said stiffly.

They entered the shuttle bay to verify that there was a shuttle. Belig and Calose were surprised at the sleek new model of a Casar4F sitting next to Belig’s original shuttle.

“You cannot expect me to have my wife fly in that thing,” Mda Marce Bruno scoffed as he waved two of his six arms disdainfully at the older shuttle, *Little Star*.

Belig held her breath expecting it to be reclaimed by Bruno, however he was unconcerned and followed the court clerk out of the bay as he made a mark on the datapad that what Bruno had listed as what he added was there. Since the Judge ruled whatever Bruno had added was his loss and Belig’s gain, Belig was doing silent cheers which Calose was sure everyone wearing an AIU heard it loud and clear.

Finally, all parties signed off on the agreement that Captain Belig was compensated to her satisfaction and required no further continuation of the case against the perpetrator. The

moment it was agreed upon, his lawyer sent the credits Bruno owed to the Cronas' Bank which dispersed to Belig's account what she was owed and the rest to the Court's accounting office.

Belig smiled as the lights on her comm blinked as it updated. The clerk smiled at Belig. "You are now registered as the captain and owner operator of *Space Journey's* and licensed to practice your trade on our space station. Good journeys to you, Captain Belig," he said.

When everyone left, Calose and Belig took one more look over the newly decorated freighter with Belig savoring the changes and added space the decorator had given her quarters. They also wanted to make their own inspection to see that all monitoring equipment, not part of Belig's ship's system, was gone.

What had been fifteen military sized shared crew cabins were now enlarged to twelve cabins with luxurious interiors for crew or passengers. The captain's cabin was too showy for Calose's senses, so she remained in the passageway and peered into the cabin, making what she hoped were the right tones in her oohs and ahs. The other cabins were also too extravagant for her taste, so she didn't go in to inspect closely.

"Are these changes going to be a hardship?" Calose asked.

"I'll give it some thought. It must have cost a lot of credit to expand the captain's quarters and make the mess into a roomier lounge. It doesn't bother me at all that I have less passenger cabins to ticket out. I didn't take on that many passengers, but now, for an increase in price, I will consider it. My crew will have their quarters with ensuites. Amazing. It would have cost me a standard year of credit to get one of the upgrades done. I wonder what color was used for the bulkheads. Isn't it nice and...restful?" She gave a teasing glance at Calose as she patted the bulkhead.

"I prefer what I have. The most important part of the ship she left untouched is the cargo bay. That is commendable, unless she just hadn't gotten around to that area. I noticed your weapons were also upgraded, and your captain's chair looks a bit luxurious for a serious captain. You may fall asleep in it. Another advantage of having Bruno crash into your life," she said.

Belig gave her a grin and a hum of agreement. "I'll have to test the weapons out in a less busy area of space, and hopefully not nick someone trying to sneak up on me. He upgraded my anti-hijacking security too." She patted the captain's chair. "My Uncle will be very impressed with this chair. It looks like I'll be putting off visiting his repair shop for a while."

“That little red button with a white dot on it? Very impressive. It didn't prevent the SPs from boarding it to seize it as stolen property, but it was a wise pilot to let the law take its natural course. Don't forget to read the directions on how it works,” Calose teased.

They both laughed.

“Do you believe Bruno that the monitoring equipment wasn't his doing?” Calose asked.

After thinking about it Belig nodded. “I do. They were too obviously placed and the documented inspection on my freighter's arrival at the police docks showed no monitoring equipment. It was done after it arrived here, and it was done to pass a message to someone in SPs security.”

“So, you don't think it was aimed at you?”

Belig laughed in disbelief. “You think there's someone interested in what I do on my ship? We got the obvious. I hope we didn't miss any.”

“Not with those scopes and scanners SP security had. They were the latest from what I've seen at the security conference at T'es Burough a few months back.”

“Really? I'll have to go to one. Usually, I go shopping when I can afford it and if I need it. I don't want to be short of credits for those slow times. However, with the upgrades Bruno made I’m going to have to test out what I have and cross off my past list of needs and make a new list.” Mentally she pictured knick-knacks or little mementos that she had habitually picked up at the various stations she visited. Did they fall under needs?

Calose smiled, grateful she didn't have the need to add mementos since she had a good memory without physical objects on hand to remind her.

“Shall we take a closer look at the Casar4F?” Calose asked. “What does *Dofino* mean?”

“Yes! It probably refers to a sweet cheese. I’ll keep it. Easier than renaming it. She’s a beauty.”

The two spent over twenty minutes looking over the control panel which was a voice activated holographic panel. Belig programed it to her voice and was relieved it read her bio and accepted her as its owner. She couldn’t wait to download the specifics of operating and maintaining the new craft.

“Wow. I’ve sat in one at DSS. I didn’t get a chance to work on it, but I did get to observe how to calibrate it and secure it against theft.”

“You’re further ahead than I am. I thought *Calypso’s* shuttles were modern and if necessary, can outrun a SP shuttle if pushed,” Calose joked.

“They wouldn’t have to outrun you. They have the armaments to shoot you down or disrupt your power so you’re just floating in space until they pick you up,” Belig said.

Calose grinned.

Belig gave her a hard look. “I hope you don’t tell me something that under oath I would have to admit you told me.”

They both burst out laughing.

“Let’s check your lifepods. More important than this cheese bit, Casar4F shuttle,” Calose teased.

They walked to where the lifepods were stored. By Federations rules, all passengers and crew must have access to a lifepod. Belig sat in one of the lifepods larger than the others, and looked over its console, and Calose sat in a smaller one, more than likely for a crew member and tested buttons.

“This is more like a cross between a dinky and a lifepod. I'll have to play with them to see if any of them are worth trusting in an emergency,” Belig said.

“Bruno's wife must be large. He's big himself,” Calose said.

They ran self-tests on the lifepods, to see what came on. Belig finally got out of the pod and started back to the mess, with Calose following.

“I can get used to this,” Belig said. When Calose didn't answer she added, “You should find out who Marce Marcia's designer is.”

Calose gave a dramatic shudder.

“You don't have to gussy up the cabins like mine are, but you never know the possibilities until you talk to an interior designer.”

Belig was feeling good and by her mood, Calose thought her next stop in the city would be to a bar WVETs visited to catch up with friends, interview potential crew, and hear the latest wag and learn of potential hauls.

“Are you saying your accommodations on *Calypso*, for a non-paying passenger, was uncomfortable?” Calose said.

“No. It was more than nice and those last few days sharing company with Ambassador JenMoc and his ward, Sasha was the best company I’ve had in a long time…ah, though you

came up there too as good company. I'm just suggesting there's always room for improvement in the decor and what better person to spot that than a person that makes it their occupation. So, where are you off to now?" Belig asked.

"I'm going to be a tourist. I want to stretch my legs and take a walk and look around the city. I've never stopped at this port."

"So, sightseeing. Then?" Belig asked.

"Why?"

"Just wondering how long you'll hang around. I'm looking forward to celebrating my ship's name change and who better to share a small party with than another captain in the same celebratory mood. I also left my kit in your shuttle."

"Stop by and pick it up. If I'm not there, the shuttle's security bot won't arrest you. I'll be here for a few days at the most. What do you plan on doing for the rest of the day?" Calose asked.

"I'll check the Space Merchant job posting for certified crew members. From the ships we saw as we docked, I would say business opportunities look good. My best guess is that by the end of First Watch tomorrow, I'll be ready with crew and cargo to head back out in space. I'm anxious to make sure I've got a ship in top shape and a seasoned crew. It would be embarrassing to have earned a new skill bar and have my own ship breakdown, and in the middle of nowhere with a crew that doesn't know enough to predict, prevent, and repair. I'm going to make sure they sit for the downloads and practice on the holographic programs. No slouches. I also plan to pick up my belongings at Space Station Sigma where DSS stores inmates' possessions. Since I was released early, they didn't have time to send my belongings to DSS, which is good because I had no ship to unpack everything in."

"If I get my ship's name update by tomorrow, I'll hail you for a meetup."

As Calose left Belig's ship, a cart from Ri's Uniform Tailors stopped at the security attendant's booth. The security attendant pointed to Belig's ship. Calose nodded to the attendant as she stepped past, heading quickly to exit the police docks. For her, being too close to a law enforcement structure gave her prickles from the intense energy around the building. It could either be from the collective mental focus or a device directed at those around their HQ. In any case, it was unpleasant. She was lucky to have gotten a berth on the civilian side of the docks, so she wouldn't be as bothered.

Calose contacted her ship of her status and to find out if their PO had called with their next assignment. Bout, OOD reported no messages. Calose then gave a list of what she intended to do: first was to revisit the HMO to certify the PD of freight that Heru had listed as possible freight hauls. Since they were a large freighter, they could schedule haul for many companies with various stops, provided they were in the same direction. Then she would see if there was a musical playing and purchase a ticket, visit a few stores, and finish up with a stop at the Temple. It was a ship rule that anyone that debarked needed to notify the OOD of their intended itinerary, though the wrist comm would also give their location.

Her stop at the shipping harbor masters warehouse was eventful as the warehouse was near overload of sensory stimulation. Heru was waiting for her. She had set up meetings with four possible customers. Their best choice was a large delivery to Space Station Merlota where the port taxes were not unreasonable, and the customer reported they anticipated more freight to arrive at Cronas the next day and would need to be transported to Merlota. It was a perfect shipping contract. Heru was pleased with the contract since Merlota would be a delightful port stop to them all since they could browse the shops of the originator of most of their security garb and perhaps order more updated armored ENV suits and secure lined clothing.

“Belig will be by *Dulcinea* to pick up her kit. I’m off on my sightseeing tour,” Calose told Heru who nodded distracted.

Calose turned to see what had Heru disturbed. It was a flash of something that was too brief for Calose to see clearly. It could have been a dimensional being or a species shape shifting. Impatient to make the most of her shore visit, she left Heru to enjoy her time off ship.

The stores on the first level were for tourists and cruise liner's crews who were only there for two days with novelty items among the souvenirs from garish to memorable for those with puckish tastes. Hotels, rooms for rent and other inexpensive residences with few amenities, should any visitor stay longer than originally planned, were scattered between the shops. Also was a shared office for city security and the space police should any of the tourists have a reason to visit them. There were law offices and an entrance to the courthouse on the second level. On the other side of the space station was where the SP docks were for ships of various sizes for official use. The city was busy and crowded and even when she put distance between her and the security buildings, she felt an unpleasant buzz. She turned her AIU to the lowest sensor reading.

The larger the space cities the more unique novelty shops vie to be *the* one-of-a-kind shop. The constabulary, the local law enforcement, kept a close watch on the sellers to ensure that they did not bring grotesque and dangerous curios into the city. A few escapes of unknown biological varieties were enough to ban such oddities under the penalty of banishment from the city after spending time in a cell. Besides these curio shops, there were also gambling rooms to entice visitors and residents to spend credits, and new performers in standup comedy shows, hoping to eventually perform on stages on the upper levels in the city. These businesses were located on the second and third levels attracting those who were not staying long. Calose noticed there was a heavy presence of security, guessing it was due to the tourist cruise liners that docked and because the courthouse had offices on the first five levels of the city. It was important that visitors have a memorable experience without it being dangerous. On the third level was a shop that supplied spaceships with foodstuff from all around the galaxy, should tourists have need of familiar food. She wasn't the only ship's captain or officer in the shop. Crew members were in one corner giggling at the selections. When it was her turn to be waited on, the clerk, an AIH gave her tastes of the exotic foods in which she was interested. Of the five she tasted, only one suited her. She also found treats she hadn't had in months. She added a few more that she knew her crew would like.

By the time she had left the shop, her business account was charged for ten delectable choices. She notified *Calypso II* to expect a shuttle from the shop to deliver her purchases. Shops belonged to an automated shuttle service so visiting customers from off the station didn’t have to burden themselves with packages that could set themselves up for thieves or a pickpocket, or just because people didn’t like to be burdened with carrying packages.

Happy with her purchases she exited the shop smiling.

It was a mere glance to her right, to let her eyes adjust from one light source to another, that she caught sight of a person ducking into a store, not where his species would find to their taste, and he was quickly back out on the street, looking embarrassed. He should be, she thought, using the reflection in a store shop's window to watch him hurry in the opposite direction. Something else caught her eye in the shop window. Musical instruments and a list of available tickets to musical recitals on various levels of the city. It would be nice to replace what she had given to Sasha as a going away present.

Calose stepped inside and looked around. Across each of the eight walls were various instruments that covered preferences that would delight various species. Holographic images of living and deceased artists were displayed holding their instruments. The shop was busy. Parents who sought to discourage their offspring from one instrument, were redirecting them to another, and older clients were evaluating an upgrade of their favored instrument. She was pleasantly surprised to see she wasn't the only one in uniform interested in musical instruments.

When one of the clerks became available, he approached her. The clerk was the first arachnid she met far from their home planet or a shipyard.

“Excuse me, Honorable Seller, but how is this played?”

“The Syss. It requires a large abdomen, Captain,” he said in common speech. He demonstrated a short melody.

“And this one? I have heard it is one of the favorites in music recitals.” Calose pointed to another that was not as nice as the one Zooey's son gifted her.

It was one of Zooey's treasures that her friend hadn't played in her last years, due to her poor health. Zooey explained to her that she was considered very old and that was why it was imperative for her to return home so quickly. She needed to perform the necessary rituals so that she could transition into another life, with no regrets. It took her three standard years to tie up loose ends. As she described it, she wanted to make sure her web of life had no dangling ends.

“This is played also by resting against one's body only on the cephalothorax. If you're interested in hearing it played, there is a live concert projection on 20th level and it is live on stage in one stan hour on the 30th level.”

“I am. Can I purchase a ticket here for the live performance?”

“I will see if one is available.” He politely didn't ask her if she was cleared to be on the 30th level, one level below where the elite of the city resided, otherwise like the less elite the 20th level. Like most cities, status was how many credits a citizen had to their name which meant also what level or neighborhood one lived in. Since she was a visitor, he checked her wrist com on a scanner.

“You may have a seat on the 30th level. An excellent privedlege, Captain,” he said in a lowered voice. The clerk looked pleased and then accessed her account to charge her for the ticket. It was rather eerie to have some of his eyes on her and others staring at the monitor for a moment. When all eight eyes focused on her, his pedipalps tapped the counter excitedly.

“There is no charge, clan friend. It is a privilege to serve you.”

This was one reason she kept a distance from arachnids unless they asked for her assistance. They wanted to do favors for her as if she was someone special, and then there was the expected return courtesy, not that any assistance requested of her was inconvenient. It was that she was considered part of their web of life that made her uncomfortable. It was an emotional bond she was still trying to get used to.

“I am honored to be a friend and to accept your gift,” was her standard reply, and though she did send that thought to him, she sensed there was something more in his interest of her. Now would be a good time for Zooey to send a message to her. Zooey didn’t like visiting busy space stations. There were many species that would know of her presence, and some didn’t approve of a spirit of the dead appearing. When one finishes off life in one form, they should be gone and not bother those still living. If only they knew, Calose thought amused.

She also picked two new instruments she wanted to add to her collection and filled out the order to have them delivered to *Calypso,* along with a download of how to play them. She notified the freighter to expect a shuttle from the music shop to deliver two new instruments, and for *Calypso* to verify the software downloads didn’t contain anything harmful for her species. Viruses or subliminal negative messages weren’t what most musical stores allowed to contaminate their sales products, but if you had a ship and the crew that could make sure the download was a pure lesson of the instrument, it was a mistake not to use their skill.

Zooey is going to love this meeting; she thought on another mental level AIUs didn’t read. With her ticket registered and a standard blessing given to the happy clerk, she resumed her walk with a clear destination in mind. She had forty-five standard minutes to get to the 30th level. The entrance to the concert hall closed fifteen minutes before the start of the performance, allowing the audience to settle. Audience distractions once a performance began were bad manners. Whatever species insisted on that practice, was picked up by all the concert halls and most of the smaller ones in space cities. The unfortunate late ticket holder did not lose all. At intermission, the doors opened for late arrivals.

Roadways that fanned further back from the main road led to apartments and small shops. As she walked along the spiral road she glanced at the menus of the restaurants. Aromas that escaped from the kitchens permeating the atmosphere were meant to draw customers in but failed to tantalize her palate. At the fifth level, the shops changed their sales pitches and became

more refined and with distinct clothing styles costing more credits. Even if she liked a style her preference was for garments that were reinforced with concealed armor. There were a few shops she found that were reliable in their guarantee for stylish protective clothing. Between the shops were busy bars and classes offered various skills.

It was in a shop window that she caught sight of someone following her. Why? Was it because of her uniform? Uniforms weren't a rarity in space cities. Crew members roamed the cities their ships docked at, finding remaining in their uniforms gave them faster service in most places, and flirty smiles that could get them a soft bed and a companion for the night. Her AIU didn’t pick up on any negative thoughts aimed at her, but then again, she had lowered its reception.

She took an available elevator to the 11th level where there was a business she wanted to check on. She continued her walk, keeping to the public areas where security monitors were in view. It was the seventh shop front that she paused at. Slides with pictures of available tours showed on the shop window. What interested her were the two tour directors. They had slides of themselves with different tour groups visiting places around the galaxy. She smiled as she gazed at the two faces, glad they had survived the war. Both had sustained life-threatening injuries and were convalescing in the limb restoration infirmary as she was. The infirmary specialized in using the patient's cells to recreate the missing limbs or other body parts. Not all species were treatable but there was hope that breakthroughs in recreating the cells for more species with injuries was near. In the meantime, prosthetics for missing limbs were fitted on patients, working better than their normal limb, and damaged organs were replaced with technologically created organs. While the physical body was dealt with, the monks worked on the mental and spiritual side of the injuries. By the couples smiles and the energy she could feel from their slides, their time with the monks had done them well. It gave her joy that these two did make it through their ordeals and were successful enough to rent space on the 11th level of a large space city. Many species considered the number eleven a beneficial sign.

She took the elevator to the 30th level. As she stepped off her wrist com signaled her, she had a message. She didn't recognize the caller and ignored it; however, she did send a message to Commander Bout where she was. She wasn't familiar with the city and unsolicited calls reminded her that her crew needed to know her exact whereabouts.

The performance hall was beginning to fill when Calose arrived. The seating was organic where the audience sat. At times, she was amazed at how musical venues could seat a group of mixed species and cultures to make up a balanced room of energy that amplified the recitals' own blend of tones. Calose didn't think anyone could say they had bad seating.

The orchestra suddenly appeared on stage already seated. The conductor started on time. Not a moment too early or too late. Calose relaxed with the music. She enjoyed the swaying body movements of the conductor as he guided his orchestra. The new pieces mixed with older pieces, leading the audience through emotional valleys and up hills and through it all, a satisfying journey. Some recitals she had attended had clashing combinations, as the conductors introduced new works and styles. A wide variety of musicals would be played with the mixture of species making up musical troupes. She liked exposure to different musical interpretations of life. But today, the collection of music selected was emotionally delightful and not for testing clashing styles.

It was the last performance that Calose was looking forward to. It was after the intermission. An older arachnid appeared on the stage surrounded by twelve different instruments. It took her back to her visits with Zooey and her clan where everyone played more than one instrument. In the early evenings Zooey's clan gathered, and music was played. The sound instruments that picked up vibrations from the abdomen and cephalothorax were learned at a young age. It was the other instruments from other cultures that were learned as the children grew older. Sound was a sacred vibration to arachnids as it was with other species.

This artist was a maestro skillfully accompanying her primary instrument with three others. Her choice of music was from diverse cultures as well as those favored by arachnids. Calose could feel the audience's enjoyment, bringing the hall to a wonderful energetic high then let down softly at the end of her performance. The audience's applause was a polite mixture of sounds from throats and waving of limbs as the various species showed their appreciation with their sending out heart felt vibrations. It was experiences like this that Calose took the time to attend music recitals on the stations she visited. There were always people that gathered on the stations that played in musical groups, as well as performed in theatrical skits, danced, or played sports that were unique to specific species. The galaxy was filled with creative beings, both seen and unseen. The uplifting vibrations of these activities were amazing. Attendance of such

creative productions always left her mind in profound reflection on beauty, things her imagination hinted at.

Following the recital, she sought a place to enjoy the afterglow and quiet the rumbling in her stomach. She was hungry. An eatery was comfortably set between a clothier and jeweler with lunch selections nicely displayed behind a transparent screen. No Private Rooms Available was the sign on the door. For the knowledgeable customer it meant species that needed to attack their meal to work up an appetite weren't served here. Carnivores, Calose thought weren't all into attacking their meal. Most that she knew liked their meat cooked and savored before they swallowed it and did not feast on sentient beings, which among many representatives in the political area was open to discussion on what the definition of sentient was. It was a hot topic.

Stepping inside Holitope's Tea Room she did a quick scan of the room, locating a small table away from the door and not obviously tucked in a corner for privacy, but private enough. To that table she headed to. When she sat down, a menu instantly appeared before her, but Calose disengaged the holographic menu.

An AIH appeared before her. “Captain, may I get you something?” it asked in common language.

“I would like a light lunch. Do you recommend anything to eat and drink?” She asked in the same language.

“Almond Roe tea, with a sandwich of Bohemian Melt.”

“Then I'll have that selection, thank you.”

AIHs as servers, she found, were above reproach in sizing up a customer in food tastes and delivering exactly what was desired. Better than using a menu in an unfamiliar eatery.

The AIH gave her a slight bow and left.

“You don't have to thank them,” an irritable voice scolded.

The attitude reminded Calose of a lesson one of her teachers from the Temple of Peace had told her about unhappy people. His advice was to treat them with tenderness from the heart.

“Why do you think not?” Calose asked.

The companion with her at the table was already standing to leave. She rolled her eyes and collected her things and after nodding at her ill-tempered companion, left. She didn't even glance at Calose.

A very pampered woman, Calose thought of the departing woman. She wondered what she did during the long galaxy war because she didn't have any of the energy people who had experienced the darkness of the war carried with them. Even the ones that were far from the actual battles, did suffer something from hearing about the losses, deaths, and destruction. What made this person so unaffected? Was it her species? There were some species she couldn't get a read on, and this was one.

“Why do you not think so?” was the remaining woman's challenge. She got up from her seat and plopped down into the empty seat at Calose's table.

“Because I have no reason not to,” Calose said gently. She could feel the woman's unhappiness that reflected in her eyes. At closer inspection she appeared to be the same species as the woman that left; however, she was readable.

“Who are you?” the woman demanded, as if affronted by a stranger's kindness, studying Calose's uniform.

“Captain Calose. And you?”

“Mem Marce. Perhaps you've heard of my husband, but then again, captain of what?”

“A freighter.”

“You must do well to be on this level, and an owner too. I do recognize the different uniforms. Quite helpful when asking for directions. Do you take on passengers?”

“Sometimes.” She didn't smile at the woman's mistaken belief that she was a wealthy freighter captain, but she didn't want to mislead her. “It's a refitted military supply ship so my passengers aren't expecting to travel in luxury.”

“Well, my husband acquired one of those small ones for a steal, he said.”

Here was where the woman's hurt was, Calose thought.

“It was just exactly that. He stole it. I spent weeks fixing it up to travel around at my leisure. I hate going nowhere while he's entertaining and carrying on with his business, so he got me my own ship to putter around in. Now it's gone. Seized by the authorities, no less, on my first outing. My pilot had to hire a space taxi to bring me home! It was a good thing I didn't take the children along. First time out and a dismal failure!”

Calose could see the AIH standing near the counter and guessed she was waiting for her to signal that she was ready for her meal to be served.

“Would you like another beverage or a dessert? I see that my meal is ready and wouldn't mind your company.”

“Well, I, I don't mind dessert. My friend is so disapproving of me eating desserts. She mocks my weight. I told her this is my normal weight.”

The AIH appeared at their table.

“Oh, ah, I'll have a Sugar Tea Orga Flavor with a stiff dollop of UR, and a Cinnamon bun with warm icing. Add it to my bill...Thank you,” she added after a pause to the AIH.

Their selections were quickly placed before them, as if anticipated. The table her guest had previously sat at was quickly and quietly cleaned, then the AIH departed to her station at the counter. Calose guessed that Mem Marce was a regular customer. Since her friend was disapproving of her after meal treats, chances were that Mem Marce waited until she left before she ordered her treats and her dose of the drug UR. For some people UR was an aphrodisiac and others a mood lifter. The latter was probably why Mem Marce was being so sociable to a stranger who wasn't in her class.

As both ate in silence, Calose sent out peaceful energy to her, and could feel the tension in the woman ease, though it could have been because she took a gulp of her drink and was eating the sweet pastry she desired. Calose took a sip of her beverage and smiled at the taste. She would have to see if they supplied this to ships. Finished with her sandwich and beverage, she glanced at her guest and waited for her to finish eating.

“Where would you go if you had your own ship?” Calose asked when her lunch guest finished her dessert, capturing the last of the crumbs and bits of icing with her fork.

She laid her fork gently at the side of the plate. “I want to see what's out there among the stars. I thought when I married Bruno, with his big yacht, that's what we would be doing. Seeing other planets and visiting other space stations, collecting souvenirs and memories!”

“What happened?”

“His traveling away from home is to his office, onboard his yacht outside of the city's authority. There he spends his time. He says I'm not to visit because I would cause a disruption to his security. He believes there would be an unhappy guest who would use me to get to him. I got a tour of one of his yachts a year after our marriage when I was pregnant and miserable. He was giving it a final inspection. He was trading that yacht for a new one and took me because I was complaining about everything. Being pregnant is no fun. I made everyone around me

miserable but the AIH, but their programmed machines too ready with banalities meant to appease weak minds. Anyway, I got pregnant one after the other. They are brats, I'm afraid. They adore their father because he's not around for them to hear him yelling at them to be still. He doesn't like children. Can you imagine that? All those arms to fill with hugs that I'm so grateful to receive when he comes home. But not for the children. He uses his arms for playing games, six handed poker, biets, tiles and other gambling games, which mind you, he's good at carrying on with multiple games at the same time. It makes us both richer than the tribal leaders on Ista, as the saying goes. But living on the 40th level isn't all that wonderful. Everyone on that level is so boring."

"You can rent or lease small yachts with AIHs that can be both pilot and bodyguards so you can explore the places you want to visit."

Her eyes lit up for a moment, then darkened. "I don't want to go alone, really. My peers are like Issan that just left. They only will travel on space cruise liners that segregate the lounges with species they approve of which limits it to the robotic waitstaff, and they talk about the same things and complain about the same things, which is about things they really know nothing about. I don't dare disagree with them or offer another point of view. They become disagreeable for days and sometimes weeks! And then, dragging the children along is not relaxing for me at all. They don't want to do anything. I don't know what happened to them between the age when they were so active, crawling everywhere, to now. They just sit around making a mess expecting someone else to clean up after them. My children are influenced by their playmates. How else are they going to learn to clean up after themselves in the larger world? Or learn to pick friends on merit and not bullying tactics? I thought of sending them away to a school, but they all have bullying and a brutish pecking order with little guidance on proper behavior." She sighed despondently and sipped her beverage. "My husband suggested I'm trying to raise them as monks, which sends him into fits of laughter." She sighed happily at that, changing her energy. "I do love to hear him laugh, even if it's at my expense. He says it so lovingly."

Calose tapped the button on the table and popped up a monitor. She pressed an icon for travel and then tapped the icon that showed the agency she liked. She swiveled the monitor around so Mem Marce could see. "They are a reputable travel agency. The owners are WVETs with good service records and they have genuine care for their clients. Tell them what you want to experience and ask what type of protection their services offer for travelers. They can book

your passage with like-minded people so sharing your adventures can be memorable and as safe as you make it. Cruises have trained child sitters that, depending on how difficult your children are, can offer them experiences that draw them out into an active adventure rather than a passive one."

Mem Marce nodded. "I have overheard nice things about them." She sipped her sweet tea, looking deep in thought. She was calmer and the anger she had toward her husband channeled in another direction, dissipated harmlessly.

Calose rose to leave. "It was nice meeting with you Mem Marce Marcia. I enjoyed our conversation. I do hope you take that trip soon."

"How do you know me?" she asked surprised.

"I know the captain of the ship that you decorated and added all those upgrades to. She is incredibly grateful. Your color palate and style suit her."

"Oh! Well." She smiled, genuinely pleased. "I never did that before, and it was fun."

"There are classes you can take to see if that's for you. If it's what you like, you can open your own decorating service. I'm sure there are ships captains who would like their cabins personalized."

"And you?" she asked.

"I like mine the way it is. Plain and simple. Good day." Calose turned to join the AIH standing at the counter.

"I would like to order the tea Almond Roe that you recommended sent to my ship, if it's possible," she addressed the AIH.

"It is possible, Captain."

"Then make it a full cylinder, sized for a captain's mess." She smiled.

The AIH read her bracelet which had her ship's information, location of *Calypso* and what to charge her account.

"It will be delivered right away, Captain. A notice sent to a shop shuttle will deliver it to your freighter. Do you have a crew member that will be there?"

"Yes." She tapped her private com and spoke softly to Commander Moya, her engineer who responded.

"Expect a delivery from Holitope's Tea Room, Commander," Calose said.

“Captain, we've received lots of lovely treats delivered from Otto's Delicious Treats and musical instruments. Between you and Heru we're going to run out of storage room in the cargo bay.”

“I doubt it. Is everyone on board?”

“Bout and Kaving stepped off to check something out.”

“I'm on my way to the Temple for a visit. Over.” Calose nodded to the AIH and turned to leave.

“Thank you for your patronage. We look forward to serving you again.”

Calose smiled. She nodded to Marcia as she passed her. She was sipping her tea and scrolling through the advertisement on the tourist's site.

At the elevator was a directory of the city. She keyed in a request for the location of the Temple of Peace.

Level seven and eleven.

As she waited for the elevator it was a momentary flash of danger which had her turning quickly. Her arm lifted to ward off what her body instinctively knew was coming.

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Her body ached and as she became more conscious her muscles spasmed and burned for long minutes before finally relaxing. She wasn't aware of how long this went on but the length of respite from the spasms became longer. She finally tried to lift an arm, weighted by bandages.

“Don't move yet. The bandages are soaked in a counter active drug to pull out the toxins. It will be less painful not to exercise muscles yet. Monk Hi has advised that you visit the Temple before you leave Cronas.”

“Rondo. I can taste it,” she mumbled between numb lips. *Cronas. That's where I was last*. *Where am I now?*

“We received word a few days earlier that the local gang had picked up a contract for your capture, so we've been watching your back since your arrival.”

Speech was too difficult, so she asked telepathically. *“There's a gang here? How did they know I would be here?”* Mentally, she was registering her disappointment that they hadn't taken Zooey's warning that they had a tail seriously enough.

“You have a tag on your ship or it's your name that is on someone's watchlist at the docks. A few weeks ago, a group of outcasts started to run protection scams. They were too

amateurish. It was like they were reading a how-to. Cronas' residents have a good working relationship with the constabulary. The city's constables and SPs have been efficient at keeping them contained with deportation to either be re-educated or moved to planets that are too primitive to have modern conveniences to escape. Days before your arrival the few remaining members failing in bullying and disruption of citizens and visitors, and losing valuable members such as leaders, moved to picking up contracts from various galaxy cartels for kidnapping or killing influential people in the city. They must have imagined themselves to be mortlieges. You were the second contract they picked up in a week; the mayor was the first. After they knocked you out and moved you to their hideaway, we raided them and found information that links them with terrorist groups on different space platforms."

"Who are you? How are you involved?"

"I'm Agent RuaN of the Federations OSS. I help the city trail suspects. I have the advantage of moving in places most citizens on Cronas aren't aware of."

Calose smiled and wet her lips, the feeling coming back. "I bet you know the structure of this city intimately."

"Of course, my clan was part of the construction team."

"So, who put the contract out on me?"

"The Logum Cartel. The few members left are trying to make a comeback."

"I'm grateful they were too cheap to hire a real assassin."

"You mean a mortliege? Not possible. They have a strict code of honor to keep out the gross and to be a respected group. They wouldn't have picked up a contract on our mayor or you unless it went through a thorough review of its merits. Meaning, what good for all would it be and can the signee pay."

"DoTa Prison isn't so secure as I thought. Is that where they still send the dangerous gang members?"

"For some. Energy waves are routinely changed to prevent telepathic messages to escape the confines of the isolated cells and if messages do escape, we follow them to locate other members of outlawed groups."

"How long was I out? Has my ship been notified?"

"A standard ten hours. If the drug had been longer in your system, that would be another story. Your uniform's body armor prevented all but one dart from getting to your skin. Your crew had taken part in your rescue."

Feeling physically better, she rolled out of the soft bed. She was dressed in what could be called a hospital gown. Her bare feet dangled over the side of the bed which she hung onto until her equilibrium returned.

"I am indebted to you for saving my life. If you need..."

"We know where to reach you. It's unfortunate for you, just as it is easy for us to find you, it is easy for your enemies also to locate you, as this attack has proved," RuaN cautioned.

Calose nodded. "I knew that when I made a move against members of the Logum Cartel's even if they were minor soldiers in their organization. I was heading towards the temple and now, I feel I really need some healing."

"Can I ask why that cartel is after you if they were minor soldiers?"

"It was during the war when even small battles were important. They had two of their members, one the son of a captain in their cartel, working on a ship repair platform, the *Asamble*. They were too full of themselves to hide their sabotage and attacks on the residents and mechanics. There were no available Fed agents so, I accepted the assignment though I wasn't an agent."

"The war certainly gave many of the gangs in roads into their darker businesses."

"And to their undoing. The war made them sloppy with their assigning favorite untested off-spring to strategic jobs."

RuaN rubbed his pedipalps together, sounding like a laugh. *"During the galactic war the penalties for their crimes were harsher than now. Then it was an instant death sentence for leaders and their lieutenants. I was honored to have been part of the forces that brought their fortresses down and eliminated many of their leaders and soldiers. They were Gepak allies. Our eliminating their leaders and top soldiers along with seizing their assets necessitated the promotion of children who knew nothing about being subtle. They thought mimicking the bravado their family showed at home was part of the power to display to the public, making identifying them easier."*

"It certainly makes life interesting, if not at times daunting," Calose said.

"In the last five years splinters of the old gangs, made up of unimportant relatives off-spring, are working to rise in power among other badies. They hope their blood relationship to a once formable leader will garner them weak minded followers they can sacrifice for their own gain. That's not to say a few of the original cartel's customers haven't risen to the top as well. Those families hung on and blended into the faithful citizens of the Federation, to infiltrate the ranks of the Federation's governing bodies and law enforcement. As those people are identified they are removed from their positions of influence."

"We all have our myths that give us faith and hope in our futures." Calose took a deep breath and then laughed. "We all have lessons to learn and sometimes share with others because..."

"... all webs of life cross and intersect with others," RuaN finished for her. *"The Wise One warns us to always know what the energy on the strand of web we are about to traverse is about."*

"I've been blessed so far, that my strands have intersected with beings that have saved me from the darker aspects of this life."

"My ancient mere would say that you should not temp the Fates which such faith. Sometimes they test their believers more than they test the nonbelievers," he returned.

"So, I've heard said."

"It is our belief."

Calose nodded, seeing an image of what arachnids call their spiritual leader, the Wise One who was a brilliant ball of light, that when it touched a strand on the web of life, it sent a beautiful sound out that was a wonderous vibration. For this reason, music was a sacred practice among arachnids.

"I'll leave you to get dressed. A change of civilian clothing was delivered by one of your crew when she picked up your uniform. Your uniform has been cleaned and checked for any damage. You have two of your crew that will make sure there are no more attacks against you on Cronas. Adieu."

"May your adventures be rewarding," Calose said.

Chapter Two

As with all temples she visited, they had a hologram of walking up a flight of stairs to get into the entrance. It was a metaphor for raising one's thoughts to higher realms, so when the visitor entered the temple, they were in the proper mood or vibration. Feeling weak and with sore muscles that were still feeling the results of cramps, she climbed the holographic stairs with focused willpower. As she rested every few steps, she studied the statues of various teachers in their last seen physical manifestation. They had risen above the vibrations of 3rd and 4th so they were no longer seen in physical form in the lower dimensions. They were believed to come to those in spirit form or dream time when the petitioner asked for help. She wondered what level Zooey's spirit was on.

The holograms appeared different for everyone, and for Calose, she realized the effort



needed to reach the top wasn't too strenuous. Another wonder of the temple, she thought. She stepped through the decorative holographic entrance, feeling a benevolent energy infusing her with the light and love the temple embodied. Beyond the inner pillars in the foyer, she looked along the wall for the universal symbol for an energy worker's door. The markings she was searching for were found and a room was available. For the next hour she relaxed under the healing hands that pushed, prodded, and pulled her outer and inner body into a healthier shape. The soreness in her muscles was gone by the end of her treatment.

Finished with her session she dressed and stepped out into the hall to exit the healing area. She caught sight of Belig, entering an energy room. She wondered if Sasha had nudged some lingering trauma stuck in her muscle tissue into consciousness so Belig would seek help.

From the healing area she entered further into the temple where a chanter was reciting a mantra. Finding an empty bench, she sat with Kaving and Bout taking a seat next to her. Closing her eyes, she let the energy and power it evoked surround her. She hummed along with the rhythm and wiped the trickle of tears from her face. She didn't understand the words but didn't need to. When the chanter finished, she remained a few minutes more wondering what pain inside of her was released. Sighing, she rose and with Kaving and Bout close by they headed to their shuttle.

"Good to see you back and looking a lot better, Captain," Kaving said as they took their seats.

“Working hard are you, Captain? The local police, thank you for your assistance,” Bout teased.

“Unintentionally on my part. Have you heard anything interesting from our PO?”

“No,” Kaving said.

Once back on-board *Calypso* Calose settled comfortably in her captain’s chair. Her console was blinking. She had a queue of unread messages.

The first message marked with the official logo of the Federations Ship Registry Office had her smiling. There it was, *Faithful Friend.* Calose gave a whoop and jumped from her seat and did a jig around the bridge as the official voice from the Registry's office notified everyone on the bridge that the dockmaster on Cronas, would be getting a notification that the military supply ship *Quen*, a MDCLR from the shipyard Beezdus, renamed *Calypso II* at the military auction docket at Idobon, was now officially *Faithful Friend* on all spaceship registries in Meto Galaxy. A download followed, changing her ship identifier. The official seal of the Meto Galaxy's Spaceship Registry Bureau closed the message when the download was completed, with the name of the clerk that finalized the name change.

Everyone on the bridge smiled widely. “The *Quen* is honored to have its spirit carried on as *Faithful Friend,*” Bout said, making a blessing sign of good fortune.

“That’s a vigorous dance after your recent event. It appears that time spent in the healer's booth has given you miraculous healing," Kaving said.

Calose laughed and collapsed in her chair breathlessly. “Not so miraculous. It reminds me to work on my stamina.”

A new message dinged in her queue. It was from a military colleague. What a coincidence, she thought since Belig and her had recently spoken his name. Quickly she resettled in her seat.

The last time she saw Chief Ravy or as he liked to be called, Di was the day their commanding officer of Asamble's Spaceship Repair Platform, read the names on an EAOS list, End of Active Obligated Service. There was so much cheering that the names of who moved into reservist status, and to the promotion list weren't heard. As the entire space platform's crew celebrated the end of the war and their luck at having survived, Di celebrated with a few close friends his acceptance into the JAG officer's corps, beginning rank of Ensign. There were three others who were escorted into their commanding officer's office where they were briefed on

newly created job openings, then interviewed to see if they wanted to fill the positions. She was one of the three. There wasn't a rank or official title associated with the job, but a credit voucher was an incentive to start businesses that did favors for a bureau known as OSS, Operations Special Service. She agreed and was transferred to a sub bureau called Special Projects. Calose was interested in doing something different. She had no desire to return to her home planet or get stuck on a space city or another space platform, continuing to manage others. What a coincidence that it brought her to purchase a large freighter once known as *Quen*, Clan Friend, and a highly recommended crew that knew of *Quen's* secrets.

On opening his message, she grinned at his letterhead. From the Desk of Lieutenant Commander, LCDR Di. Office of Judge Advocate General of Meto Galaxy, Space Enforcement. That was impressive. Though, thinking about it, it should be no surprise in his advancement.

Memories of the war resurfaced. There were many brave people that stepped up before they were drafted, and for those that knew they would be soon, they took the time to say their goodbyes to family and loved ones. Many didn't return and a great many that returned had physical and emotional scars.

Federation Medical Hospices were established on planets and space stations to support the overwhelmed Healers Halls run by the Monks of Peace, to treat anyone, civilian or veteran, with mental or physical injuries. The Galaxy Federations Committees Medical Staff believed it was their continued duty to treat the consequences of war. They utilized the trained Medical Corps rather than letting them go into an already civilian saturated population of lost and shell-shocked souls.

The war had forced the Federation to make life decisions for planets not psychologically or financially ready for space travel or even dreamed of the advanced technology they were introduced to, and the greatest shock, the existence of sentient life on neighboring planets. The shock of species so different than themselves or larger than those found on their planet but not considered sentient or equal in consciousness, had to be done or the planets would have no chance to survive the Gepak's propaganda and dark allies that fed on hate and violent energies. Many of the planet’s leaders, at first, only consented to holographic projections for visits, due to their fear of the physical presence of beings that were too different to them. Some adapted faster, looking for advantages that they could benefit from, to keep their leadership roles among their citizens. Gradually, as the war raged on in space and started to effect isolated planets, the leaders

of the planets began to allow the Monks of Peace to set up Healing Houses or Temples throughout their nations, offering their neutral services, able to move peacefully with their ability to shape shift into comforting images and soothe those who sought their help to deal with their frightening thoughts.

Calose had spent more time than she cared to count in recovery from injuries in space battles where as soon as she had recovered from the physical wounds, she was released back to another combat flight crew, as were others. It was the last assignment, which required a more extensive recovery in body and mind that when she was finally released, she was grateful that her next assignment was on a military platform, servicing space fighter ships, instead of flying them into the thick of the space battles. Her new assignment proved to be an ideal position for both her and the squad she was assigned to manage as their Chief Petty Officer. It was a demotion in rank which didn't matter to her as it was a reprieve from the battle front. Due to her experience with the monks and their ability to deeply ease anxiety and restore a person's faith in themselves she encouraged her squad to see the monks for problems she felt were beyond her skills. Their mental and physical well-being was her responsibility, and if she couldn’t, she knew where they could get the help they needed. Everyone was affected by the war stories and reported deaths of friends and family. It disturbed her to see the people she was responsible for, walking around with death in their eyes or guilt that they weren't at the battle front. She felt they should be proud of their work, doing their part in keeping their fellow military space pilots in machines that could defeat the enemy.

Calose said a prayer for all those on both sides of the war, feeling the deep ache for those she wouldn't see again, some she didn't want to see again, and some she checked up on without their awareness. It was a constant worry with her that those that deserved a better life wouldn't have that one push that would propel them to that just reward. So, when she was in that position to assist, she gave the push unbeknownst to them.

“Y’all, we have our new orders,” she said softly, reading the coded message that they were assigned a new PO, Project Officer with their new assignment. Orders were that they were dispatched to Merlota, exactly where their freight was bound for. Their arrival was to be within three STD weeks. More details of what their assignment was would be given by a Federation agent whose ETA at Merlota was within three weeks.

“Heru, check and see if the HMO has received the rest of the expected freight to be delivered to Merlota.”

Within minutes Heru reported back. “Would it surprise you that the final delivery has arrived on the docks by the freighter *Hermades*, Captain?”

“No. Let's go make the official arrangements to transport to Merlota with the HMO.”

Heru and Calose went to the dock to have the HMO agent verify that the cargo was legitimate.

“That's a lot of freight,” Heru said softly. “The bulk of it looks like parts from around the galaxy. Not surprising considering Merlota is a large producer of finished goods.”

“And *we* have the space,” Calose said.

Calose signed the contract and Heru monitored the loading. Two items were large machines that *Faithful Friend’s* bots guided into her bay and secured for flight. One was a damaged digger, used for excavating valuable chemicals from meteors, and the other was something Calose didn't recognize. According to the dockworker that supervised the moving of the pallets onto their barge, few ships wanted to go that far off their normal routes with no waystations or space stations between. To be sure the holdup in the deliveries were not due to pirate activity in the area, she had Bout check reports put out by the space police patrols and shipping lines.

“No problems reported,” Bout said. “Probably due to the War Office selling the six space stations that once were part of a line of observation posts between Cronas and Merlota.”

“Independent freighters our size usually won’t gamble on delivering the two larger machines without a guarantee there would be freight to pick up at Merlota worth the trip,” Calose said.

Independent freight captains gambled picking up loads at one station and at the point of their delivery having another load to deliver elsewhere.

civilian clothing, but in protectively lined cloth, she left the ship’s loading to Heru to oversee. She docked the shuttle, *Dulcinea* which had one day more on the rented slip and hurried down the ramp to meet with Belig whose shuttle was a few slips away from hers. A body suddenly blocked her path. The energy of the person was repulsive and menacing as were three others that surrounded her. She wasn’t wearing her AIU so what the Knab, a subspecies not usually found traveling in space, was saying to her wasn’t as telling as the energy projected at

her. She remembered this ugly engulfing energy that was meant to scare their prey to the inability to move. Ambassador JenMoc's warning about thinking an issue was delt with and no longer needed attention came to her. Now she knew how to manage the dark energy aimed at neutralizing her.

Saying nothing she waited for either the dock security to intervene or for the three to make a threatening move on her. The Knab leader had a stick that Calose knew was an electrical pain inducer. The leader moved to hit her arm with it. Her movements were automatic, and she disarmed the leader and dropped him then downed the others by the time security had arrived. Belig rushed to her side. Her face showed fear and nausea.

"I thought for sure I wouldn't be able to come to your aid," Belig said panting. "I could hardly move."

"No need," Calose said and turned to the security officer who was taking charge of her fallen attackers. The lieutenant took possession of the pain stick and directed his team to secure the four in a security net, meant to immobilize the perpetrators. It was against the law to carry a pain stick on all Federation Space Station's and cities.

"Do you know these Knabs?" He asked Calose and Belig.

"No." Both women said.

He turned to the one that had the stick. "Do you know this person you attacked?"

The Knab forcibly spoke glaring at Calose with murderous intent. Belig took a step back at the intensity then returned to stand beside Calose.

The officer turned to Calose for an explanation. "What have you to say to his accusation?"

"I don't know what he said. I'm not familiar with the language and I'm not wearing an AIU."

The officer seemed impatient with Calose on that point. "And why is that when it's a policy on all stations that visitors have a translator?"

"Because I'm here only for a celebratory drink with a friend on her shuttle." Calose pointed at Belig's shuttle. "And mine is just two slips over."

"Do you know that Knabs have a species memory?"

"Yes."

"Have you had any meetings with Knabs in the past?"

"Yes." Now she could remember her experience of meeting them.

"And?" he asked impatiently.

"I'm not at liberty to speak of it."

The lieutenant looked back at the four. "Take them and jail them for conspiracy to kidnap a Federation citizen." He looked back at Calose and gestured for her to step out of ear shot from Belig. "Their planet Zarnesta has requested membership into the Federation's Space Family. Are you aware that until their hearing, they have temporary passage through Federation space to see if they can abide by the rules of space travel and visits to space ports that will allow them to visit. All Space Force departments have been notified of this because they don't have a good reputation to begin with. This group holds you responsible for a raid and the destruction of one of their villages during the war. Bounty hunting is a violation of the Federations Galaxy law." The security guard studied Calose's face.

"I've heard of the Knabs and their treatment of our space pilots that crashed landed on their planet," he continued softer to be sure Belig couldn't overhear. "Many of us that were part of recon missions to rescue our soldiers and pilots from hostile areas are not happy some species like the Knabs have access to travel freely in space. Leave an address where you can be reached if the courts should decide to call you as a witness," he finished briskly.

The security guards escorted the Knabs off the docks with the officer in charge calling on his comm unit to report the altercation. Calose could hear him asking for further security officers to send a patrol to scour the docks for the ship the Knabs arrived on.

If this was their first venture on a space station, word would get out to all space stations to be on the lookout for Knabs bounty hunting.

Belig was going to ask Calose what that was about, but Calose held her hand up. "I'm here to drink a celebratory drink with you, and then I'm off."

"I can keep a secret."

"It's not mine to tell."

"Then let's quickly board my new Casar4F shuttle, *Dofino* which has no Knabs. My new crew is finishing up with their paperwork at the Merchant Bureau, then they'll be busy loading up cargo I've arranged to deliver to my next port of call. We have this shuttle to ourselves. They're using my old shuttle, *Little Star*," she said happily.

They toasted to their ships' name changes and to Mem Marce Marcia for her decorating talents that Belig was happy to be the recipient of, regardless of the odd route for her to get them.

Calose was pleased that the dark cloud over Belig was gone and as they exchanged safe travel blessings, Calose reminded her to keep up her practice in meditation, chants, and exercises. Belig reported that her new crew of three had dropped off their belongings in their cabins and were pleased with their cabins that they didn't have to share. They reported back at the offices of the Space Merchant Bureau to sign papers and have their uniforms rank and skill bars verified as well as given new codes on their identification passport, indicating they were employed and crewed on *Space Journeys.* They were older WVETS that had recently been released from a rehab, cleared by their counselors and the monks from the Temple of Peace. The monks had made the recommendations, using whatever 'magic' Belig attributed to them to matching her and them as having the personalities that would work well together.

Calose suspected if they had gone through the re-education program with the monks, meditation and other good habits would have been a daily practice with them. Belig was especially pleased to tell Calose two of them played musical instruments.

Belig was also happy she picked up three contracts to deliver goods to Sigma Space Station, exactly where she intended to pick up her belongings.

Chapter Three

"So, the ships that *Faithful Friend* spotted from a distance were Knab bounty hunters?" Bout asked, sounding doubtful. "By the Space Police's report, they're not considered that intelligent, just focused and driven for vengeance and retribution to their enemies."

"We know for sure at least one ship was captured," Moya said. "*Faithful Friend* has scanned the seized ship and will be able to find where it came from and what changes they've made to it to accommodate their needs."

"*Faithful Friend* doesn't have a reference in her memory banks about the Knabs," Bout said. "If the Space Police does, we should also, just due to the type of assignments we are sent out on, and most of all because of their focus on the Captain. I've never heard of the species until Kaving mentioned them days ago. There are so many species that surfaced during the war and labeled by the Federation as NOT appropriate for interstellar space travel that I'm surprised we

didn't get a list or more importantly *Calypso* or *Faithful Friend* doesn't have a file on the subject."

"After today, WE are going to get a list!" Calose said determined. "*Friend,* get a list of all species NOT cleared for space travel and potential types of ships they would travel on if they do enter space travel. I'm expecting the Koku to be included in it. Did the SP find another ship?"

"No. Just that one. They have a space band red flag warning to find others that may be out in space. I want to know who gave the Knabs clearance and ships to go out on an exploration of our galaxy," Kaving said. "The Federation Council and Space Police owe us further information on that. Zarnesta should be a closed and isolated planet. I'm making an official request for an update with no redacted parts to the reports."

"They're more dangerous than that group of Koku we rescued off of Dray Soc," Bout said. "I hope you have enough influence to get your request, Kaving."

"They must have some intelligence if they are flying spaceships." Moya said.

"All you need to know is how to sit for a download on running their ship. There should be some protection against outlaws or hijackers learning how to take over a ship. It's not enough to have the owner clear the crew for specific downloads," Bout said.

"Yes. Here's the red flag warning. The Federation's Law Enforcement sent out a warning to all ships, planets and space ports to not allow Knabs to land or dock and to notify Law Enforcement immediately if they are spotted," Calose said, reading her monitor. "A physical description and characteristics are attached."

"Well, your next encounter with them is that they know you aren't going to stand there and let them take you," Bout said.

"I should have felt them sooner," Calose said disappointed.

"Not necessarily," Zooey said. *"They are vibrating at a lower level than what you're used to. Now that you know they are loose, you'll be better prepared.*

"So low that my AIU wouldn't have been able to pick up their communication?" Calose asked.

"It's space and port security's job to be able to register lower thought forms on their AIUs as well as the higher vibrations," Bout said. "If you're worried about any future attacks, you can change the frequency range on your AIU and wear it when you leave the ship instead of leaving it behind, Captain," she said sternly.

“Okay, I seem to be getting sloppy with my own welfare lately,” Calose admitted embarrassed.

“So, this new assignment has the makings of an interesting adventure!” Zooey said to change the subject.

“Hopefully, this one doesn't involve me on the wrong side of poisonous darts,” Calose said.

“Thanks to teamwork, it all worked out,” Bout said.

“That material your uniform is made of did exactly as it was supposed to. Those goons were a bit upset that only one dart reached your skin,” Zooey said.

Calose glared at Zooey's apparition. “Well one was all it took. I could have been given a warning. I missed that threat too!”

“You knew you were being followed,” her XO Kaving pointed out. “We were lucky they were amateurs. And you did get a premonition of the Knabs. You just didn’t believe it could possibly be true and for that matter, neither did I.”

“That group with the poisonous darts, I didn't think on the 30th level I had to be careful. I didn't see an ID on them that would allow them above the 20th level.”

“They didn't. They had an electronic device that bypassed the security scans,” Bout said. “You were slack. You took too many things for granted. And with two close calls on one port stop, that is a good warning for us all.”

“Don’t look so upset about yourself, Calose. It’s not as bad as we’re making it out. Agent RuaN's team was keeping an eye on you, Kaving and Bout too. If you knew they were that close it would have ruined the chance of RuaN's team finding out where the local gang was hiding out. They would have picked up your vigilance on an AIU. Cheer up. You know you would be bored with the mere life of a freighter captain.”

“That drug was painful. If they hadn't given me the counter, it would have eventually killed me. The eventually is what scares me.”

“But it didn't. And, I might add, now that you've had a dose of it and the counter active agent is also in your system making permanent changes, its effect on you is no longer a threat. Didn't Agent RuaN's team tell you that?” Zooey asked.

“I'm a bit fuzzy on the details.”

“Then, what is it that has you so jittery,” Kaving asked concerned.

“It’s not because of those Knab assassins, is it?” Bout asked.

“No. Maybe it’s this new job in Merlota. It feels different. Or, what about that ship that disappeared as soon as we spotted it on scan? Could that have been the Knabs?”

“Sometimes premonitions are just cautionary feelings. It doesn't mean anything disastrous is going to happen to you or the crew,” Zooey said.

“Thanks for the reassurance,” Kaving told Zooey mockingly. “And no, I don’t think the Knabs are mentally capable of understanding a download on how to operate the Shroud software or have a ship that can operate sophisticated software like that.”

Calose didn't say anything. She was doubting her intuition about sensing danger to herself when she hadn’t even sensed the Knabs until they were in her space. Why were her new lessons in the exercise chamber on the Knabs? Was it a coincidence? She didn’t believe in coincidences. It surprised her she was able to not be frozen with the energy they directed at her. Perhaps the exercises in the EC did help.

“What is interesting about this new assignment is that on Merlota, none of my species is there, maybe that's why you feel there is a problem,” Zooey said. *“Who will be there to see that the lines of fate you are choosing are wise?”*

“Wait a moment,” Kaving objected. “We all support each other. Just because she's the captain doesn't mean she determines all our fates,” she teased.

“Now that you mentioned it, I’m thinking about that ship that knew we spotted it. I don’t see the Knabs as being that mentally capable of understanding the download of a Shroud’s software no matter what its version is. *Friend,* can you do a species study of what is known of the mental capabilities of a Knab?” Moya asked.

“Now you are asking the right question,” Zooey said. And rather than sticking around with more comments, she disappeared.

“Gathering known information,” Faithful Friend reported.

Bout studied the information *Friend* had begun to access. “This will take a while. Even SPHQ’s is still gathering information and they’re downloading from the Federations Bureau of Species Capabilities. That’s a sub bureau of another sub bureau.”

“Let’s move on to something easier to access. Just how much do we know of Merlota?” Calose asked.

“The material for your captain's dress uniform was made there,” Bout said. “All our armor is from their labs. The Shroud software is from their labs, and the better-quality FTs are from there. In fact…I would say most of our clothing and software is from their labs.”

“Find out about visitors and residents. What dimensions visit, what's their culture like...you know, the usual.”

“Right, the usual info that has JAG sending us there,” Bout teased.

“XO, you have the comm.”

“Captain, I have the comm,” Kaving replied.

Calose went to relax in the music room. She was hoping listening to some music would let her escape the unsettling feelings she was picking up, not knowing whether it was from premonition or energy readings she was picking up from the area of space they were traveling through. However, the music she chose was the recording of a jazz saxophonist she met a few years back. The music didn’t quiet the building energy of trepidation, which was worse than her premonition of something was not right. Yes, that was what the feelings were about. Something wasn’t right. And that something felt out of place.

Calose cleared a space around her with protective spells for different levels of awareness, then sat in the feeling of what was out of place.

Before her she saw a dark cloud on a space station, and it was moving toward a familiar person. The danger would be preventable *if* the person left the space station. She looked for the name of the space station on the landing dock. Emerso. What was she doing on Emerso? Did she pick up a delivery there? Belig needed to leave right away.

“*Friend*,” she called her ship.

“Captain,” was the immediate response.

“Locate Captain Belig and her ship Space Journeys.”

“Captain Belig has changed Space Journeys course to the outpost Emerso. Her arrival is in forty-eight standard hours.”

“What caused the change of course?”

After a few moments *Faithful Friend* responded. “*She received a message from a previous crew member, Jeremy, that he wishes to join her crew. He feels she owes him a job. She has changed her flight to Emerso, where he presently resides.”*

“How far are we from Emerso?”

"If we change course now, we can pick up a direct connection on a travel tunnel an hour from our present location and connect to Epie Corridor, arriving an hour after her."

"Notify the bridge we are changing course."

Calose hurried to the lift to talk to her crew who knew that *Friend* had changed course.

Heru looked at her in surprise. "Captain on deck and no doubt with a reason for the course change."

"Captain Belig is on her way to Port Emerso and into a dangerous situation." Calose said. "Something is not right with that port. *Friend,* give me information on what Port Emerso is about."

"I can tell you," Kaving said as she and Bout entered the bridge. "It is one of five small outposts strung along the Hydr Line, hours from each other. In the war they specialized as way stations for supplies varying in weapons, food and soldiers and one as an R&R stop for soldiers moving from one place to another. After the war, the five outposts became civilian-owned, with their own specialties and offered job openings for WVETs not wanting to go back to life on a planet or large space station. About six months ago dock wag was that some of the rejects and failures to thrive began to gather on Emerso due to low rent. It's been brought to SPHQ attention to increase patrols in that area to check in with the local constabulary at least weekly. Emerso's workforce is primarily robotic service. Its living inhabitants are families that have jobs on its neighboring outposts. Gambolie being the primary job employer. It was once the R&R port stop for soldiers and now has become gamers hot stop these days. The other three outposts turned into support space ports for travelers passing through the Epie corridor, with a stopover favorite at Gambolie."

"What is it that you have to take a side trip to Emerso?" Bout asked.

"It's a bad feeling I have regarding Captain Belig. She received a message from one of her old crew members to hire him. It's not a friendly request. I feel she's walking into something she can't manage. The port won't have docks large enough for a freighter to dock only large enough for barges and shuttles, so she'll have to take a shuttle to meet him for an interview. With her new crew she won't give them shore leave, or I wouldn't if I were in her place. I would want my new crew to study and get familiar with the ship, and guard against any pirate or hijacking activity. Her freight is priority."

Kaving studied Calose for a moment. “You know Emerso isn’t a port that our species is welcomed even if we shape shifted.”

Calose nodded. “In my vision, I didn’t get a good feeling for the port. I’ll make my visit quick and make sure she’s back to her shuttle safely.” A shiver ran along her arms. “*Friend* will be able to locate her and keep track of me. This time I’ll be very aware of my surroundings.”

“I’m sure you will,” Bout said. “I would hate to ask Zooey to make a grand appearance to scare whatever threat may overpower you.”

“Our Master has trained me very well, thank you. Now, let me get myself ready for a speedy extraction.”

“Use a holograph to study the space port,” Bout warned. “Don’t do remote viewing. None of the small space ports in that area are safe for RV. It’s an aversion left over from the war.”

Calose nodded. “Okay.”

In the quiet of the holographic room, a replica of what *Faithful Friend* pulled on the structure of Port Emerso spread out before her. She walked the dock to the Harbor Master’s Office to study the layout and to see how it was cared for. A running documentary gave her information on Port Emerso. It was managed by an AIH, Automated Intelligence Helper, licensed by the Federations Space Control Bureau, so presentation of her credentials when she requested a docking space for her shuttle would go direct to a Federation Space Control Bureau. Emerso was not financially profitable to afford a living harbor master, but important enough to remain an open space port, one step up from an outpost. Due to the requirements of maintaining a register and keeping official documents as well as running a dock, an AIH dedicated to managing all HMO functions was installed. Calose didn’t expect Emerso to be a busy port only a stopping point for delivering supplies for the inhabitants and dropping off workers from the more popular space port, Gambolie, and the other three small ports. The cost of living wasn’t as high on Emerso and was an hour from Gambolie, and hours from the other small ports. Gaming meant it attracted a mixture of visitors and had a floating harbor. It also had a heavy presence of local law enforcement, with a small police station. Emerso and Gambolie, with three other outposts were strung along a demarcation line during the war serving as stop overs to jump gates, as Kaving had explained. After the war when privatization was encouraged some of the outposts were able to become prosperous from venture capitalists and added to their outpost structures

while others nearby became less expensive residences to the larger ports. The documentary explained one of the outposts, Juno became a school for all ages and trained in the basics of most trades. It was one hour from Emerso and had an aggressive program in placing their graduates in intern jobs throughout the galaxy on space platforms, cities and planetside so the small stations not become overcrowded with adult relatives.

Calose met a few of the interns and was not impressed due to their lack of motivation and limited creativity. This area of space wouldn't be a place she would do business in. Something about Jeremy had to be important for Belig to divert her from her original journey.

"Friend, do a more in-depth background on Jeremy once crewing aboard Galactic Star under the captaining of Belig and now Space Journeys. Also, locate all her previous crew." Her earlier request for information on Belig's crew hadn't had any red flags, however, it didn't mean there weren't any presently.

Calose guessed Belig would visit the one bar on Emerso, Dirken's Water Hole. From the holographic image of the space station, she walked from the docks to the residential area, looking over the layout of the streets until she found the bar, Dirken's Water Hole. Around the bar were a scattering of small eateries and art shops mixed with family dwellings. *Faithful Friend* provided her with the names of the citizens of the port and their employers. Most of the citizens worked at their neighboring space port Gambolie in various skilled positions while their children attended school at the Juno outpost. Gambolie's businesses were always open and by their position near a transit portal, they had many visitors to their gaming parlors.

Faithful Friend's arrival outside of the distance line of the collection of outposts now space ports were according to local time on Emerso, morning. She verified that Belig's ship was hanging outside of the distance line as her own ship. Her shuttle, *Dofino,* according to *Faithful Friend's* monitoring her wrist com, had only docked minutes ago.

Calose notified the HMO she needed a slip space for her shuttle, *Dulcinea*. Her business was visiting a friend. The HMO didn't ask for details of who the friend was. Was that problematic or just the way it was with small spaceport stops, not worrying about pirate activity.

Her clothing reinforced with fabric that could act as body armor should she run into trouble was a style that wouldn't attract attention according to the styles worn on Emerso. Once she docked, she quickly hurried past the docks and down a familiar street. She easily found the bar and noticed a small group was surrounding a table, watching a game played. No one paid

attention to her entrance, except one patron sitting away from the crowd. Her eyes continued to scan the room until she spotted Belig sitting stiffly in a corner with a burly looking species she didn't know the name of, but she recognized Jeremy from his record.

"You don't remember me, do you?" a voice challenged.

Calose heard the low voice, but it was mixed with sounds from the other customers. Her AIU was recalibrated so the low energy thought vibrations like the Knab would not be missed, however, she was being bombarded with a lot of negative and emotionally angry thought forms and she needed to keep her focus on getting Belig off the space port before the trouble she felt was aimed at Belig came to a head. She met Belig's startled eyes which interrupted a one-way conversation she was having with Jeremy.

"Belig, the HM has a package you need to authorize *now* so the delivery person can sign off on it."

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" the voice became more forceful.

Belig quickly got up and gave a dismissive wave to the guy sitting at the table with a large mug of something that looked like it was nearly finished. Jeremy didn't look like he could see Belig's abrupt movement as it happened, due to his intoxicated state.

The two hurried out of the bar not saying anything until they were away from the bar's entrance.

"How did you know where I was? Not that I'm not grateful for the rescue. It was getting sticky there."

"Your wrist com. I heard from a bit of wag about a few unhappy ex-crew of yours that were intending on giving you the press."

Hurried footsteps behind them had both women turning. A Corska, dressed in dock workers clothing caught up with them. She wasn't drunk or had the look of being on drugs, but Calose felt her as an abrupt person. Belig looked at the woman as a distraction. The Corska gave Belig a glance and turned her eyes on Calose.

"I know you," she challenged. Calose waited.

"I heard you're a captain of a freighter. You're going to give me a ride out of this place."

When Calose said nothing, not recognizing her, she went on. "You owe me. I heard the Knabs are out on hunting parties looking for survivors of their camps."

Calose still didn't know who she was. Her speech was fast, and her thoughts were jumbled, mixing with the energy she was picking up from the woman.

Belig glanced from Calose to the woman and then glanced at the bar they just left. She noticed another ex-crewmate that was a friend of Jeremy's along with some other rough looking people entering the bar. They looked like they had trouble on their minds.

"We need to get a move out of here," Belig said urgently.

The woman glanced at Belig. "They are troublemakers. Unemployed. Ready to be picked up by the local constabulary for mischief." She gestured to Calose and Belig and led them away from the bar, down an alley. She led them to a small eatery to seats at the back of the shop.

"My name is AMa. I was a space fighter pilot during the war, shot down over hostile territory. I was rescued before I was damaged beyond repair." Her laugh wasn't pleasant, and her voice was harsh.

AMa held up her arms. "Bionic. Stronger than my own limbs could be." She touched her face. "My own family wouldn't recognize me. When they repaired my face, they asked me if I wanted to be a ravishing beauty or a plain Jane. I didn't know what a plain Jane was, but I certainly didn't want a face everyone would be looking at." She tapped her head. "My brain isn't the sharpest tool in the workbox, but it was trainable for a new skill I could make a living at and not be bored." She gave a lopsided smile, which Calose thought was her natural way of smiling.

"You got yourself put together fine and you got your own freighter. Still a captain flying about in space," she said to Calose.

Calose felt uneasy and wondering who this person was. Her mannerisms and bluntness were her natural state. Perhaps they met in a recovery ward.

"This port used to be where ex-military were dumped if they couldn't make it planetside or on larger space ports. It's getting to be a problem where the rejects are bullying some of us that want to be left alone. Too many of the children are copying their parents and bullying other children. I've put in a request for reassignment, but I haven't heard back from my Federation Medical Team Agent."

"Are you looking for a job planetside?" Calose asked.

"No. No. People planetside don't like WVETS as if we will contaminate their community with ideas that are foreign to them. Every new idea is foreign. How else do you grow?"

"Who placed you here?" Belig asked.

“The war office. I’m part of the Federations Medical WVET reeducation and placement program. It’s been five years with five more years to go to make sure I’m adjusting to my new life.” She tapped her head. “They want to be sure all their repairs are still working.” She leaned toward Calose. “They offered to regrow my arms and hands since they finally were able to recreate my cells, but I like the strength of my prosthetics. Bionic power.”

“You said Jeremy and his friends are troublemakers?” Belig asked.

“His crowd are slackers. They figure the bots will do the work they don’t do. They’ve blown their chances at all honest businesses and now gamble at night and sleep it off in the day. They harass people for money, food and shelter. The constabulary has put them on notice, so they’re looking for a cheap ride out of here. The wag is Jeremy knows someone to give them all a ride somewhere else.”

“I gathered from our conversation that was supposed to be me,” Belig said. “I’m not as naïve as I used to be. But then, he did get me to stop by.”

“To find out if he set you up?” Calose asked. “Curiosity?”

“I was curious. He wasn’t that interested in working and didn’t bother to update his application from when I previously hired him. He was drunk for the interview and was stalling for time. I lucked out that you came by.”

AMa’s eyes moved to study Calose.

“Is there a place you like to transfer to?” Calose asked.

“I read they’re hiring workers at a storage company to work with computers. They’ll train and I can sit downloads now. My brain is rewiring itself as the medical experts predicted. They prefer WVETS, so I have a chance. If I don’t get the job, they have plenty of job offerings. It’s a small station so worker turnover is typical. People get bored at small stations. I won’t. It’s the people. The company that hires has a good reputation for managing. I’ve already applied and if I get there within a month, I’m guaranteed a job.”

“Who is the company?” Calose and Belig asked together.

“RajMaTish. They own shares in other space stations. Cllm404 is where the job is.”

“I’m passing by there,” Belig said surprised. She glanced at Calose, “I told you the Fates would find a way for me to thank you for your taxi service, I can take her on as a non-paying passenger.”

“I can work,” AMa said hurriedly. “I’m sure there is something on your ship I can do. I also have plenty of stories and information about places to not go to. My stuff is here and packed for a quick escape. I’m always ready if a ship comes my way. The seer told me any day.”

Belig smiled. “Lucky all of us.”

AMa left and quickly returned with her kit.

Calose smiled at Belig. “Let’s get moving to the docks then. The longer we stay here the odds are higher Jeremy and his friends will set up an unwanted party for you at the docks.”

Calose’s wrist comm buzzed. *Dulcinea*, her shuttle had been recalled by *Friend.*

There went her intention of this being a quick extraction. Something was happening in space that necessitated her shuttle not being on Emerso. Politics was her guess.

“I know the HM personally. I can get a security guard protecting your shuttle.” AMa spoke into her wrist comm.

However, as they neared the docks it sounded like a riot was going on and people were rushing by them to join the crowd.

AMa didn’t seem worried about the crowd. “All shuttles have autopilot, you can move yours to section B on the other side of the station.”

Belig notified the HM that she wanted to move her shuttle, *Dofino*, to section B. The HM gave the coordinates for her to relocate, warning them that the lower docks were closed due to an unruly crowd.

“Aren’t you worried about your shuttle,” Belig asked Calose.

“It’s been taken care of.”

As they moved quickly away from the docks before they were seen, an alarm from the direction of the docks was sounded and with it a verbal warning given over the port’s emergency broadcast to the citizens of Emerso that the Space Police and local constabulary were notified and all still on the docks or causing discord would be arrested.

AMa guided the two women down alleyways and onto a moving escalator that moved at a brisk pace where they held on with tight grips. The dock AMa was leading them to was on a higher level. The docks were for those living in the more expensive homes.

“Nice housing,” Calose mentioned.

“These are for the civil servants that are rotated every two years to oversee the robotic services. The Federation rotates them so that they don’t become despots or in the habit of taking

bribes from troublemakers like Jeremy and his crew. The new group is still adjusting to the culture of no one talking to them but rather prefers to suffer in silence until the new government employees figure out for themselves who is causing problems for the community's well-being. The robots don't talk about social problems and there are no monks or the like to keep the meek protected from their lack of courage to standup for themselves. I'm tired of suffering through the adjustment period."

The three found Belig's *Dofino* had been moved, and they didn't waste time boarding the shuttle to be out of sight. As they settled in her shuttle, Belig was communicating with her ship, preparing to leave Emerso.

"XO Kaving to Captain Calose," Calose's comm vibrated.

"This is Calose. What's going on XO?" she asked softly.

"That's my question for you, Captain. What happened to your quick extraction?" Kaving laughed. "Calypso *registered a dozen Space Force ships heading to Emerso. Since we aren't supposed to be here, we left the area calling the shuttle back. I trust Belig will take you on board her new shuttle."*

"Not a problem. We're in Belig's shuttle. Jeremy has a gang here that had plans about hijacking Belig's ship."

"Your intuition was right. I want to let you know that we have activated the Shroud. We'll keep an eye on the situation until you signal you're ready to return to ship. Over."

"And rightly so," Calose said. "We've picked up a citizen, AMa who wishes a ride to Cllm404 for a job posting and Belig offered her passage on her ship. We're headed to her ship now. Hopefully before Jeremy and his gang realize we're away."

"I see and I see you are being followed by another shuttle."

"Belig, are we being followed?"

"Chased is more like it. My crew is getting set to defend against any boarders besides us."

AMa glanced at Calose. Her eyes for a moment narrowed then went back to watch the screen that showed a shuttle that was meant to ram them if Belig didn't cut her engines.

"What's that ship doing?" Calose asked. She moved closer to hear the communication Belig was ignoring.

“They demand to let their shuttle on board my freighter. It’s not going to happen. Excuse me,” she turned back to her controls.

“Go past your freighter,” Calose said. “There are SP ships that are closing in on this chase. Give the SPs a chance to corner them.”

“I’m not exactly a starfighter pilot,” Belig said. “I’m a mechanic that is a captain of a freighter.”

“Let me!” AMa said impatiently, after glaring at Calose. “I used to do this for a living,” she muttered.

AMa was skillful in avoiding the chasing shuttle that tried to get close enough to use their weapon that would normally defend against a pirate attack. Unfortunately, the SP ship chasing them didn’t have any qualms about using their weapons and blasted the shuttle chasing with an antimatter blast causing the ship to lose power. AMa not wanting to be held up by SP questions about why a stolen shuttle was chasing them, maneuvered around Belig’s freighter, and neatly settled in the open shuttle bay.

“Wow!” Belig said as they settled in the bay. “You certainly know how to make a clean get away. Oh! SP is asking the captain for an explanation. That’s me!”

A crewman was at the hatch cover.

“Captain Belig! The Space Police Captain is demanding to speak with you!”

Calose remained in the bay, waiting for her own shuttle to make a quick landing before the bay doors closed.

Belig didn’t wait to see that as she ran following her crewman, expecting Calose and AMa to follow.

AMa watched Calose as she stood back and watched her shuttle *Leonise* arrive and hovered in the shuttle bay with an extended ramp. Calose jumped on it and was inside her shuttle, and back out into space.

A crew member came hurrying back realizing that the passengers Belig brought back didn’t follow.

“She’s in a hurry to be somewhere else,” AMa said to him.

“Aye, I noticed. Captain Belig would like you on the bridge while she talks with the SP captain who wants to know what her business was and is on Emerso.”

“Ah. She can tell them she’s giving me passage to Cllm404 for a job.”

The two of them hurried up the passageway toward the lift to the bridge.

AMa and Engineer Ja introduced each other in the lift. AMa shouldered her kit with her belongings as the two came off the lift.

“Where’s Calose?” Belig demanded.

“She had her own business to attend. They always do,” AMa said.

“The SP wants your ID,” Belig said.

“Ah, the usual stuff. I got it.”

After AMa’s credentials and story were checked, that she indeed did have a job offer on Cllm404 and she had the usual travel kit, and Belig’s story which didn’t include Jeremy as a hire, *Space Journeys* was given the clear signal to leave the Hydr Line sector.

Chapter Four

“Tell me you don’t have any more feelings of trouble that will take us off our course for Merlota,” Kaving said, stroking her whiskers. “You know how space station’s security like to monitor freighters logs between pickup and delivery.”

“I’m sure they’re on their way to safer space. And I’m sure her curiosity about her old crew has been satisfied.”

“There are no coincidences,” Bout said, touching his forehead and giving Kaving a knowing glance.

“What?” Calose asked, suspicious she missed something she should have picked up herself.

“AMa being on Emerso,” Bout said.

“Is this an I told you so moment?” Heru mocked. Her thoughts repeated her very words when Calose returned to the ship after her DSS excursion.

“So?” Calose asked hesitantly. She did miss something.

“You don’t remember her?” Bout asked, leaning toward her so his eyes were even with hers.

“No. She said she knew me and that I owed her a ride to Cllm404 for a job.”

“I thought maybe since the Knab made a sudden appearance and you seeing AMa you would remember your shared experience.”

"No, not at all. But then, she did say her face was changed from surgery from her…war…wound." Calose took a deep breath and held it before letting it out.

"You know Bout, I don't remember much about my experience as a prisoner of the Knab," Calose admitted slowly, not pleased with making war connections she chose to forget.

"What do you remember?"

"Nothing I need to know now. The past is past." Did she sound desperate? Even to herself, she sounded unsteady. She reminded herself that this journey, with an intellectually and spiritually advanced crew and a ship far superior to most freighters, was meant to train and prepare her for a purpose they would not reveal. She knew it would require opening herself to lessons beyond anything she could yet imagine. The past was not past. Reviewing past actions was part of her growing to be more aware… She grimaced at that and gave a weak laugh at Bout, one of her teachers.

Bout nodded and smiled. "Some of us that were in the war, remember everything. We remember minutes in detail. Some people don't remember large blocks of memory that deal with a trauma they experienced. What do you remember NOW?" he commanded in a low rumble.

Everyone was silent as they watched Calose's face go from a blank look to stunned to a wistful look.

"I remember," Calose said, "dying and going to a place that had so much love, I can't describe it. I remember dying in detail. I remember making the choice to come back and what injuries to have. Then there was waking up in my mortal heavy body, out of that loving environment and into a busy busy busy energy and me being immobilized for a long time as my limbs were regrown from my cells. I also remember my amazement at being able to see dimensional beings without any devices." Calose started laughing, "I wondered if the medical doctors gave me new eyes."

Bout smiled. "You came back with a new life path."

Calose shook her head to clear her thoughts from Bout's command to remember. His power to invoke people to remember deeply hidden memories was what made him ideal as head of security. Calose appreciated that he was careful about using his ability, especially on her since she knew there were places in her past experiences that she didn't want to remember.

"Everything that happened to me was supposed to. In my death experience my path just became clearer and it wasn't to be flying about in fighter spaceships killing the enemy. I did my

part in defending the galaxy against the forces of hate. I was frightened of the Knabs because their whole being was so ugly and filled with hate and violence. How can anyone exist like that? I had never experienced such intensity of hate like that before. It doesn't mean I would have been able to defend myself any better because when I crashed, my injuries too severe to have done anything. It was like drowning in gray sludge and suffocating."

"And?" Bout compelled.

Calose closed her eyes for a moment. She took a deep breath as a different face appeared inches from her face. "I remember the name of AMaLaTon. She was my weapons system operator. I was angry with her because she was wasting shots shooting at space debris. Debris isn't harmless," Calose said softly. "I told her that via our communicator, but she shut hers off. She wanted to be solo in a fighter ship to engage the enemy. But she didn't follow the flight captain when we engaged in combat. I had been assigned to evaluate her. I was reassigned to this squad, and they already had a captain." Calose took another deep breath and she laughed sadly. "I can't even remember his name, but he was their ace pilot and intended on keeping that position. Like AMaLaTon, he didn't follow his commanding officer's plan of attack and would take his squad into unnecessary skirmishes. The intention of the admiral of that battle group was that I was going to replace him. What did they plan on doing with him? His species were aggressive fighters." Calose was silent as memories were coming back. "I see now, the Captain…Whodae. Yes, Captain Whodae caught wind of the plan, and he thought to get rid of two problems, at least for the time being, he paired us together. AMaLaTon was a good fighter pilot but she still had to learn to work as a team. Whodae wouldn't let that happen in his squad and no one else wanted her on their squads. So, there we were out on patrol, and before us was the aftermath of someone's space battle. Something came out from the debris we passed and…It was so fast! I fought for control as we were in a downward spiral to a small, hostile moon below us. AMa. She endured capture too," Calose said sadly. "She was very blunt and always seemed aggressive, but that was a characteristic of her species. Aggressive and difficult for me to connect with. I'm glad Belig was able to drop her off at her new job posting." She took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. "I'm glad that we both lived through that whole experience. Captain Whodae. Someone on the rescue shuttle said he led his squad on a battle of his own making. Some species are difficult to manage when under highly stimulated situations."

"Do you feel relieved remembering that situation?"

Calose looked up at him. “It was a missing piece in my chamber exercise lessons.”

Bout nodded. “Sasha removed a hurt that was preventing you from realizing what your intuition was warning you about. Step by step. Inches by inches,” he smiled. You were able to go above the Knab’s weapon, and you opened yourself to the next step, forgive AMa.”

Chapter Five

Sometime during her sleep, she received an alarm wakeup call from *Faithful Friend.* The ship's defenses came online before her eyes were opened. Someone was being aggressive at their first contact with the freighter. While Calose hurriedly dressed in her battle ENV suit, *Faithful Friend* sent her images of what was transpiring and Bout and Kaving kept her informed of their assessments. She was fully briefed when she reached the bridge. Zooey was sitting in her seat looking calm as if the sparks from shots against *Faithful Friend's* outer shields were nothing, but then she was spirit and nothing in the solid world would affect her.

“Captain on the bridge,” Kaving reported, then returned to her study of her screens. Everyone except Zooey was in ENV suits.

“I don't think this will be a long engagement. They are on a suicide mission. It's a robotic decoy intended to collect information then destroy or be destroyed,” Zooey informed the others.

“Does it have anything to do with our new assignment?” Calose asked.

“It's for whatever ship that travels in this area of space. Someone has an invested interest in this area.”

“I suppose its tamper proof and an anti-tracker so we can't follow it back to its owner,” she said.

“Were investigating that now,” Bout reported. He shifted in his armor as if it wasn’t fitting right.

Calose wondered if he gained some weight since returning from Dray Soc. Her attention went to her own console studying the vaguely familiar readings.

“Tagers,” she said as Bout also announced it.

During her war years the space mines were called tagers. Minesweepers used during the war continued their deployment after the war as a standard necessity to clear space trade routes for the first year, then moved to areas less traveled until the clearing of tagers was only done if a

space traveler spotted one and didn't want to destroy it themselves. All the new spaceships had sensors that detected objects in space and tagers were on the list. Since her ship didn't automatically destroy it, she was curious why not.

"New model," Kaving informed her, "Similar to the older ones but this one has a few differences."

"*Faithful Friend* is studying it to give us the exact differences,*"* Bout reported. "Moya feels it's harmless against attacks on our outer hull. He's in sync with *Faithful Friend,* as they study its behavior."

Mentally, Calose tapped into *Faithful Friend's* processing and found it gathered enough information to trace the model's origins.

"Tagers are against Federation space and land laws, so what is out here that it's defending that could get its owners hauled into a Federation court?" Kaving asked.

"Nothing yet. Someone plans to own this section of space, most probably as a future investment," Zooey said.

Calose looked over a space map. "The planets around here are not open yet to space exploration and are protected against exploitation. A moon base perhaps?" She shook her head. That wouldn't make sense. A moon base for watching what?

Calose looked over at Zooey's chair. She wasn't there.

Intrusion and attempts to infest ship's systems *Faithful Friend* notified her. Attacks have been neutralized. Calose could hear mentally, Moya's excited victory exaltations.

Bout repeated the message. "Intrusion attempt failed."

"It's a new tager and we were able to neutralize it?" Kaving mused aloud. "I'll want to read Moya's report on how that was managed."

"Send reports of our find and destroying the tager and why to the Federations Space Police, the Merchant Space Bureau and to JAG, who is our PO on this assignment. Request additional information from all three, at why and who, Bout," Calose requested.

"It did not get off any messages to its base; however, there are traces of other tagers in this area. They are inactive*,"* Kaving reported.

"Horu, deploy warning buoys to any ship that travels in the area."

"Buoys are being programed and will be deployed and the ever-efficient partner, *Faithful Friend,* has done as you ordered."

"Sometimes, I think we're just here to give *Friend* company," Bout said.

"She would be lonely without us," Kaving said. "Right *Friend*?"

"*Faithful Friend,* increase speed to optimum level. We'll let the SP investigate the why and clean up whatever else is in this bit of space," Calose said.

"A very good choice. Too many things on your plate will give you indigestion," Zooey said.

Calose glanced at her. "Especially since I don't know yet what type of dinner this is. A buffet where it's one plate with as many refills as I can stomach, or a three-course meal where the plates are collected before the next course is served."

"I've been to both, and a buffet is my favorite," Zooey said.

"I like the three course meals. Everyone is paced in eating so no one gets to the dessert first," Heru said. "You're not on watch for another four hours, captain."

"I too can use a few more hours of sleep," Kaving said.

"You have the bridge, Heru. Bout, I'm sure you would like to get out of your suit?" Calose teased.

"It's a bit tighter than the last time I wore it," he admitted. "I've been lax with my workouts." He sniffed at his slackness.

"You've been catching up on downloads from Federation security threats," Kaving said. "Your brain must be exhausted."

"Aye. My brain does hurt," he said as he joined her on the lift.

Calose headed to the lounge for her own physical workout. Her workout wasn't enough to keep her thoughts from wondering why this section of space had tagers. Was that why there weren't any deliveries to Merlota from the shared corridor with Cronas? There would be rumors on the docks if that were true. Some secrets meant to be secrets, as she found, were not easily hidden as too many species would have sensed the secret. Telepathy was a two-edged sword, as the saying went. So, what's with the tagers? Perhaps at Merlota she would get an answer.

For the rest of the journey to Merlota, there were no more encounters. Calose had already read up on Merlota to learn its rules of behavior, dress and species that visited and resided on it. But she also wanted to know what the space station specialized in. The best way to get a feel for the space station was to get a short-term job. She would have to come up with a valid reason why a freighter captain would take a short-term job. Perhaps to do just that, get a feel for potential

companies to haul for. They had plenty of space for hauling and with all the production Merlota did, she was sure there were some out-of-the-way places they would like to extend their sales.

She kept an eye on the newsies so she wouldn't be surprised by any pirate activity or uprisings on nearby planets that would threaten her passage or hints at why space mines were deployed in the area between Cronas and Merlota.

As she scanned the local news a bulletin flashed on her lower left screen. It reported a new travel corridor was being planned for a day's travel from Merlota. The name of the corridor was not provided. Calose estimated it would take years to get the construction completed, but it would bring additional business to the area. It looked like there would be jobs for master builders in Merlota. Was that the reason for the space mines? Was someone planning on building a space platform in that area but didn't want to begin until the travel corridor was past the planning stage?

Besides specializing in security for spaceships, people, habitats, bots, Automated Intelligent Helpers, that is AIHs, and Environmental Suits and masks fashionably designed and reliable for most work conditions a small advertisement for specialty suits for heavy work outside ships and needed for space station construction were special order. If the customer wished to wait for their order, Merlota was also part of the galaxy tour circuit, which meant tourists interested in gambling, craft shows, entertainment productions, and graduate schools dealing with healing, electronics, design, and management were available. So why didn’t freight captains want to deliver freight from Cronas to Merlota?

From the mix of attractions, she was sure Merlota's visitors and residents would be a good mixture of galaxy species. It meant the security would be better than most space stations and by the list of interests there would be a wealth of species to test their ENV and AIH designs. She would see how her crew felt about looking for potential freight jobs at the space port. With all the manufacturing there would be sellers interested in finding new prospects for their products off the well-used space corridors for an interested freight captain, and Bout could get a new armored ENV suit.

Satisfied with her ship being in no danger from inside or outside problems, she began preparation for a remote viewing meditation. On the deck she drew a vesica piscis design for protection. From the fabric lined drawers, she pulled out crystals and carefully laid them out in a grid. She was going to remote visit Merlota.

In remote viewing, atmospheres that she would normally have to wear an ENV suit she didn't have that problem when she remote viewed. However, it didn't mean that she could visit anywhere at will. There were rules. Some places had protection from uninvited visits, and some people didn't approve of anyone dropping in on them. As part of her preparation, she always asked for permission and guidance from her guides. As her spirit rose out of her ship, she arrived quickly outside of the space station. Thought followed arrival.

She studied the dozens of spaceships station keeping at the standard one- or two-hour distance from the station. It was where ships that normally hadn't been cleared to dock or didn't want to pay for a docking space, waited outside of the busy traffic zone of the station.

She saw freighters of various sizes, yachts, cruise liners that were arriving and leaving the dock area, and shuttles moving adroitly between ships guided by tugbots that were moving ships slowly into their appointed harbor space, or out of the harbor area. Traffic was heavy, showing a thriving space port. She could see where *Faithful Friend* would be able to dock and unload her cargo.

Her remote visit to the docks was brief; she did not want to trigger alarms if the station's sensors detected energy anomalies. Merlota was too large to explore on a single visit, so she focused on familiarizing herself with the areas she would normally use. Curiosity carried her through the station, where some people wore ENV suits or masks while others breathed unaided. Merlota accommodated its most profitable visitors by dividing the station into sections with different atmospheres, allowing various species to shop or stay for extended periods without ENV suits or breathing masks.

Robots stood at doors marked with warnings about the atmospheres beyond them. She passed through several and found much the same beyond each threshold.

Satisfied that there wasn't anything that stood out as harboring thieves or bullies, she returned to her ship.

Two hours from Merlota's security buoys they reduced speed.

"This is the plan," Calose told her crew. "We have two weeks before our handler arrives with the reason why we've been sent here so let's make the best of our wait. Moya and Bout, this place is where top security and parts for ships and equipment are produced and designed. Look into it, get to know sellers, politics, etc. and potential customers. Let it be known we can take

passengers if they are sellers interested in new markets as long as the Federation clears their intentions for business."

"I'll stay with the ship," Kaving said wryly. "I don't trust the benevolence it's selling especially since someone is mining the space nearby."

Calose smiled. "Well said. Heru and I will do the delivery service AND I want to offer my services to check out their automation manufacturing facilities. Heru can look around and take note of their visitors. I'd like to know about who planted the mines too."

"Sounds like a good plan," Kaving said. "Bout, you may want to look for a better fitting suit of armor."

Bout laughed. "What better place is there?" He glanced at Moya. "We can both look since it will be part of our cover for being berthed for two weeks. We are very careful and professional," he mocked.

Moya chuckled. "Most certainly. I would like to see what they offer for bodysuits. Maybe a more decorative blue."

Space port buoys had numerous functions that went from identifying ships entering their space stations area of influence to sending out advertisements for the businesses on their station. They also notified the navigator that they were entering a commercial area and gave the allowed ship speed. On ship navigation screens a map showed areas where ships were parked, and available mooring areas depending on the size of the ship and its business.

At Merlota's buoy *Faithful Friend's* security automatically identified her crew, and their business of delivering freight for Lilin's Machine Shop. Instructions to wait until tugbots arrived to guide the freighter to a docking space large enough for their ship to deliver her cargo as well as information on what to expect once she was in the space station's docking area.

At the space station's distance line, two tugbots appeared before her and guided the freighter into an assigned docking space. Merlota's docks were designed to accommodate any size ship for tourists or freight deliveries or pickups. Calose was impressed but then since Merlota was in the business of supplying space stations with the material as well as the designs for expanding their warehouses, docks, and the needed worksuits and equipment to do the construction, it was expected. Dressed in their ship's uni's Calose and Heru were met by an AIH that escorted them directly to one of the harbormaster's offices.

The harbormaster’s offices were easy enough to find as all HMO's were plainly marked and situated to be easily found. No respected dockmaster wanted an undocumented stranger wandering around their docks where valuable cargo was stored for pickup or delivery. It was a hard-won lesson from the war years, and especially the years afterward when pirate activity became aggressive with discharged soldiers finding a need for excitement and something to do to earn credits that didn't come on a regular basis.

“Greetings and welcome. You made good time, Captain Calose,” one of the HB clerks greeted pleasantly.

“Unexpected space currents,” she said, the standard explanation for an early or late arrival. Commercial freight captains never admitted to using travel tunnels: not every tunnel accommodated every species, some required an entry key, and others could not safely absorb the energy from too many ships without enough time to recover and recycle or rebalance it’s inner structure. Automated gates scheduled and regulated traffic through heavily used commercial tunnels according to ship size and the number of ships passing through, protecting corridors vital to everyone’s trade and travel with a stabilized corridor.

All freight captains carrying someone's cargo were monitored, if only from point to point. It was a carryover from the war, which became more specialized when commercial interests sought ways to discourage pirates and being shortchanged by freight crews that stole or added contraband to what they were carrying. Captain Belig, to her embarrassment, was caught with stolen goods for not getting her cargo certified at both points.

Calose presented her passport, restated her business and business account to credit for the delivery. She also arranged for a more permanent berth after the unloading of her cargo.

“Your ship's name change is noted and verified, Captain Calose,” the clerk said. “After this check, it will be permanent and no longer noted as a recent name change.”

That brought a smile to Calose's face. “It took long enough,” she said.

“Wear your wrist com while on the station. It has been updated and should there be any further information we need to keep you informed of it will be automatically sent to you. You will have no need to update us with your status should you purchase or pick-up work for any of our vendors. It will be automatically taken care of. Should you need to check or verify any of the information there are station stellas scattered about the station. Anything else I may help you with?”

“I am looking for a two-week temporary job and something to haul when I'm ready to leave,” she reminded the clerk, “Will I need to report anywhere for that information?”

“It has been noted. The capacity of your cargo bays will be welcomed by our manufacturing businesses. Please add your preferences of types and destinations when you get a chance. It would be appreciated. Thank you.”

Her wrist com notified her she had a message on the job board.

With a smile, the clerk pointed to a wall where jobs were posted and the requirements.

“Thank you.”

“May your stay as well as your crews, be enlightening and restful,” was the response.

That was the translated version of 'may your stay be without stress and unwanted excitement,' if you were a Tektonian. For some reason, most space stations used their own version of the Tektonian greeting, some alarming and some nonsensical. It became a discussion a visitor to the various bars used to start a conversation with strangers, after they passed the cultural rules on conversing with strangers.

“Let's see what the board has,” she said to Heru. Heru had presented her ID and business and joined Calose at the job board.

A manager for two weeks on dayshift in Lilin's Machine Shop, she read. Wasn't that where their delivery was headed for? The short description of the requirements of the job simply said, “oversee work production”. The hours were listed and how she would be paid. It was for two weeks, covering the permanent dayshifts manager Bebe's vacation.

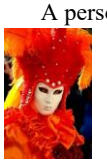
“It looks like that is perfect for what you need,” Heru said.

She accepted the job. Her first workday was in ten hours, morning shift according to Merlota's time.

After passing her wrist under the stella outside of the office to verify her com had been updated, she and Heru headed back to *Faithful Friend* to be present for the standard inspection of the cargo they were delivering. The inspection was to verify there wasn't any contraband or stolen articles added to her cargo since her last certified inspection on Cronas. And most importantly, to verify she hadn't removed anything from the shipment. As *Faithful Friends* LS, third in command, Heru's presence was also required.



An AIH waited near *Faithful Friend.* By the official label on it, it was the cargo inspector. Commander Heru opened the cargo bay and the AIH began its scan. It took thirty minutes. A certificate of clearance and verification said that the cargo hadn't been disturbed since the inspector at Cronas had validated and listed the cargo's information. The new certificate was encoded on the pad to be handed to the owner of the cargo. Behind them they could hear the warning rings of a loader approaching.



A person wearing a decorative bright red ENV suit with a headdress of feathers was steering the loader. It would rival a Lonledue's captain of the fleet's hat. The long feathers waved this way and that as the loader moved around bales and stacks of merchandise. On the loader a sign identified it was from Lilin's Machine Shop.

"Ahoy, there!" Calose called the driver who stopped at her ship and began poking at dials on the loader.

"Well, hello, hello, hello," AIU translator said.

"I'm Captain Calose, of..."

"*Faithful Friend!*" the translator said. "You are our new dayshift manager as well! Welcome! You have delivered our supplies that have been held up for months, Captain Calose! I'm Mem Chin-mo Lilin. Youngest daughter. Partner in training." She climbed down from the hauler to stand in front of Calose. "Your final payment will be credited to your business account once all is unloaded."

"Greetings and good health, Mem Chin-mo Lilin. Thank you. This is my LS, Commander Heru. I gathered not many delivery ships come this way from the Space City Cronas." The energy she picked up from Chin-mo was pleasant. Much like the clerk in the HMO.

They watched the loader scanning the cargo and then started to move the contents to the hauler, beginning with the large machines.

"We're too out of the way for Cronas deliveries," she said amicably. "I don't know why people deliver anything through Cronas if they expect prompt service from us. We have a very prosperous business outlet in Estabol. All the space stations that used to be at regular intervals between us and Cronas have been auctioned off and towed elsewhere or destroyed during the war. We are hoping the Federation will be opening the Schatian Travel Corridor soon, as the newsies are hinting at."

The name of the corridor startled Calose and Heru. She exchanged a quick look at Heru.

“That will bring those whose business is building space stations back and construct a city nearer to us. We would prefer the city to be separate from our spaceport since we deal in security systems and do not wish to blend our trade secrets with a larger spaceport.”

“Understandable,” Calose said.

“The war has been over for five standard years giving them plenty of time to investigate the corridor with the latest technology, available at a reasonable price from our very shop,” Mem Chin-mo Lilin said proudly. The feathers moved on her headdress as if alive, waving with approval.

Calose smiled and gave a slight bow to her to show her respect for their shop's achievement. However, she didn't like the idea that the corridor that was being planned was the Schatian Travel Corridor, that the military had said they had dismantled halfway through the war.

“You are not worried that your businesses will suffer from competition?”

Mem Chin-mo Lilin gave a chitter that Calose translated to laughter.

“We are stimulated about those who believe they can fill the markets with better quality of goods at our competitive prices that we create and manufacture here and a dozen other spaceports.” She waved her hand dismissively. “There are many small research and manufacture businesses that wish to join our franchise, as well as dip in our investment pool of credits, however, many owners don't have the qualities we require to be part of the Lilin's family of reliable and affordable products.”

“I've seen some of your competitors' products. If the Federations Bureau of Business hadn't passed a regulation that the pedigree of a product all the way back to where all the parts were manufactured to the point of sell, we wouldn't be aware of the slavery some of the members of the Federations Council supported.”

“Yes. Against the very mandate the Federation made clear to all planets that wished to become part of the space family, otherwise they would be isolated on their planet. A high ideal to aspire to for many of the planets that at one time weren't aware of other planets having sentient beings more consciously advanced than they.”

“Those are some of the mixed blessings of a galaxy wide war,” Calose said. Both became silent as they watched the progress of the unloading.

“The war planners provided great technology for their allies and then auctioned most of it off at the end of the war, such as space stations of varying sizes, spaceships, and other military property no longer needed. It was to give a lot of the new members of the Federation a chance at becoming part of the space traveling membership without emptying their planet's coffers and advancing their technology and understanding of life itself, with the mix of species. It certainly got the planets to think as a whole planet and not as separate communities at war or fighting over what they perceived as irrevocable differences,” Heru said.

“The Monks of Peace, certainly played a busy part in that.” The red feathers vibrated with pleasure. “This space port was one of the military stations auctioned off. We had no need to relocate it. And your ship was from the auction also?” Mem Chin-mo Lilin asked.

“Yes. I spent weeks at the shipyard looking over the ships to be auctioned. There were a lot of dealers from planets and soldiers like me with borrowed credits, bidding on equipment to start a new life.”

“It must have been a very busy place!”

“It was.”

“Did you have difficulty finding your ship?” Dark fluorescent eyes shined behind the mask.

“No. I was steered in the right direction with advice on how much of a solid investment it would be, and it has been.”

So far, Calose was finding the two people she met at Merlota were affable and didn't mind sharing information, so she moved on to something else that was bothersome.

“The Schatian Travel Corridor is something the Gepaks had created.” Calose's voice changed to seriousness, “The anomalies the Gepaks created on land and space to spread their chaos gives me worry that the Federation is going to use their technology, thinking they can manipulate a technology that was created to do harm.”

“We have thought of that also. We can change or diminish some of the energy used to create the corridor to enable more mixtures of species to pass through without harm. Yes, yes, yes. We are front runners in that part of science and technology. We have received orders for three of our test models and have yet to hear from the scientists in charge of that corridor's final testing. We haven't been able to fix all wrongs that have been revealed in the aftermath of the war, both physical and psychological, but we keep working at it.”

“Yes, many wrongs. There in the vacuum of the war's end, are trained soldiers with no job, and they spend their last pay in a bar. Some may eventually return to their planet where they know too much to feel comfortable with communities that are also struggling with a new awareness of their strange neighbors and adjusting to it all. The offer for counseling is rebuked and the provisions for retraining for a civilian job refused as if they can have the same offers years down the road after they're charged with bulling, stealing, and some with behavior that no one wants around.” Calose was surprised at the dismay and anger in her. Damaged war vets were still a lingering ache for her.

“Yes. Some species cells can be regenerated. Mental damage is another problem that lingers for many. We've seen our fair number of them some standard years back and occasional visits now and then. Though we are a small science station, we have stronger security than most of the larger space stations and have tightened what is acceptable behavior covering many species that want to do business with us. We have holograms set up on what our science and design teams offer as well as manage our security with AIHs so that there is no species prejudice shown to any of our visitors, residents, and leased businesses who offer entertainment and supplies to those on Merlota.”

“What happens to those that break your laws?” Heru asked.

“They are asked to immediately leave our station. If they don't the Space Police are notified. Some planets were better off not being exposed to Federation information they didn't understand. Look what happened to the handling of Modifi. I hope those involved in that scam are arrested. Their plan for forced land reforming and colonization is detrimental to the lives of its natives.”

“Were they one of the planets that was scorched in the war?” Heru asked.

The feathers on Mem Chin-mo Lilin's headdress moved, this way and that, as if trying to pick up a signal. In a lower voice she said, “Perhaps I spoke too openly on my thoughts. Forgive me for being too familiar. We won’t talk any further about it just in case our conversation is overheard.”

It dawned on Calose that not only was Modifi one of the planets near Merlota Space Station, but it was in all probability on the rewilding list, which would include a high demand of colonization if the Schatian Travel Corridor was reopened. Where exactly did the corridor end or begin? Artificially created corridors were composed of energy that didn't agree with all species,

which she wondered what type of species the Gepak scientists had developed it for. The Gepaks picked allies that were obsessed in eradicating species not their own and were brutal to any of their members they considered weak. The Gepaks thrived on chaos. The Knab somehow escaped becoming allies with the Gepaks probably due to their inability to become allies with anyone but their own.

The loader beeped that it had moved all the cargo onto its bed.

“This is what we call our early evening. You're not due to work until tomorrow morning, so I'll not invite you to come to the shop to share a cup of tea. You’ll need to settle in after your ship is moved to a rental berth and there will be another inspection to make sure your ship is secured,” she said. “Contact me if you have any questions. My number is downloaded to your wristcom.” She climbed back onto the driver's seat and drove away, weaving expertly between rows of merchandise loading and unloading, with her red feathers swaying this way and that, until she disappeared.

Heru in thoughtful silence watched the last of Mem Chin-mo Lilin feathers disappear in the docking area.

“Well, that was informative. What are your plans?” Calose asked.

“As your LS I think I'll do what’s expected of me, looking over the possibilities of what business we might pick up...hopefully, we'll soon know why we're here.”

Calose and her crew sat on the bridge, as their ship was guided by docktugs to a berth they rented for two weeks. They discussed the disturbing news about the reopening of the Schatian Travel Corridor. Bout and Kaving were especially disturbed by the false information they had been given, as high-ranking officers during the war, on the handling of Gepak technology. Moya’s own anger was difficult to gauge as his species was part of the committee that oversaw the removal of Gepak hardware and software around the galaxies. Moya left the bridge immediately after they settled in their rental berth. Bout and Kaving huddled with Heru with Calose listening to their objections as to why the Schatian Travel Corridor must not be reopened.

By the time Calose had gone through arrival protocols and listened to the more knowledgeable exchange of information between Bout, Kaving and Heru she was tired. She laid down for a nap, forgetting about her curiosity to see if the Schatian Travel Corridor was represented on her star map.

Waking from naps usually were brief respites from things that were nagging her sense of orderliness. Naps were not like her deep sleep or meditation but sometimes she woke with a clear sense of wrongness of what she knew and some new information that conflicted. So, Calose looked up information on the planet, Modifi on her waking. The information started right off on the planet's strategic position for the Federation during the war. There were three space stations already orbiting near Modifi, with a fourth planned for security forces to monitor that area of space. The fourth space station was Merlota.

The representatives of the Galaxy Council, spread thin and under a time constraint, did their best to explain a war that engulfed metagalaxies and how important their tiny planet among numerous others necessitated protection from space beings they had no idea existed previously. Modifi's conflicted leaders agreed to have foreign bases on their planet with off-world weapons, if the aliens protecting their planet didn't mingle with their planet's population, fearing their cultures would be undermined, and rightly so, Calose thought. As the war in space continued, but not where the citizens of Modifi noticed since they had their own civil wars going on across their planet. Their new leaders demanded the bases and all aliens leave, and the space station hovering over their planet be moved. Their reasons given were that the aliens were spreading propaganda and causing further discord among their citizens. The same day as the demand, the weapons depots were overrun by natives, and the space station was destroyed. While debris from the skies of the destroyed space station fell onto their planet, dark clouds blotted out their day and night sky. Choking gas poisoned all life on Modifi.

That was a heavily edited version, Calose realized. It meant there were a lot of secrets that were redacted, and the edited version was rewritten with carefully chosen words. Who was the report written for?

After the war the Meto Galaxy Federation Council quickly began to gather lists the scientists had been keeping track of on damaged planets where the civilian recovery was near impossible for them to be self-sustaining. Scientists and interested parties presented their ideas on what remedial work could be done on planets affected harshly. Modifi was listed under the list of global destruction. Land reforming was recommended for those on this list. The MGFC agreed to the recommendations of hundreds on the long lists. In all probability, in the beginning when large corporations managed to wheedle their way into the remedial programs, they interfered where it was detrimental to the inhabitants of the planets, but exceedingly helpful for

their top heads of the corporations, until the complaints reached the original Council of Ten, which was in less than a year. The agents of the corporations were removed with varying charges of malfeasance. Some served time in a remedial behavioral hospital, some paid huge fines, and those that proved to be unrepentant and caused immense harm to others, were sent to a prison planet best suited for their biological make up. Then removing the cartels and gangs in the terraforming business, a more difficult task, began in earnest. Criminal families, the cartels, were insidious in space and planet business and DNA was used to eliminate their agents embedded during the war into Federation agencies.

Calose looked up how far along the land reforming was and just who the atmosphere was being prepared for. Are there any Modifians still alive? The rules of reforming a planet were that it had to be reformed to not just support its last known sentient species before it was damaged, but its water resources, and all native life, had to be sustainable after the remedial action.

That got her interested in accessing the Galaxy Library. A big sign popped up on her screen that said *None of your business*. Not the message, *Classified*, but rather a blunt none of your business. Maybe the groups of colonists had already been selected, and it wasn't any Modifians, which should be a controversial decision to the Native and Sentient Planet Rights Organizations. Where were the Monks of Peace in all this?

She looked under another file at what species had once lived on Modifi. It was a long list, and she noticed there were none marked as self-determined, a bad translation of the word sentient. After all the experiences of commingling with various species, in not just cultures but births or hybrid births over twenty-five standard years, some were still having problems with personal prejudices on what they considered either on equal footing of intelligence or higher in consciousness with different value systems.

Now that would be an interesting story to follow, she thought. What happens when a Jobeler is part of a council to judge a nonJobeler for infanticide? A more informed judicial system would have the species being judged by her or his own peers. Calose sighed. "Well, that won't work either. Even one's own peers are at different levels of consciousness. The question would be, did that person knowingly kill the child. Then why?" Calose shuddered at remembering hearing of infants in pain from the poisoning done during the war. Would putting an infant out of pain be a more compassionate decision?

“I wonder who the accuser would be?” Calose shook her head. Sometimes her thoughts wandered off on problems not even in her present moment.

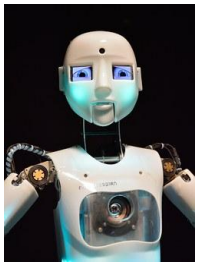
She decided to take a walk and put the mental diagram she had from her remote viewing into a more solid map. She dressed in comfortable walking shoes, loose fitting shirt and pants and a coat. She looked at herself in the mirror and nodded at her image. By her review of the fashion on Merlota, she was close enough not to be labeled a total fashion failure.

“I'm going to take a walk,” she reported to Commander Bout who was OOD. “Anyone else out and about?”

“XO Kaving accompanied Heru for a look around. There's a visiting circus, so chances are, that's where they're headed.”

“I doubt that's my destination, Commander. Stay alert.”

“*Friend* and I are all eyes, ears and sensors, Captain.” He lifted his wolf muzzle in the air and sniffed.



She asked an AIH policing the dock for the fastest corridor into town. After a brief pause for a translation, it pointed toward one of the passageways. A message appeared on the AIH asking her if she wanted a taxi.

“No, thank you. I want to walk.”

Another message appeared, cautioning her that different parts of Merlota were designated for the biological environments needed for various species. Her color was light blue. Her access to any other color would necessitate her wearing an ENV suit or mask. Where she could get either was shown on a short list.

“Thank you for reminding me.”

As she glanced around her, she was impressed with the holographic scenes that gave the impression of being on planetside, though it wasn't a planet she was familiar with. After a twenty-minute walk she could hear loud yelling, singing, if that’s what it was, and music coming from one of the large halls. Peering in she saw what a typical spacer bar would be like. A mixture of species having fun, some wearing ENV suits and some just masks. It looked like there was a designer for ENV suits in Merlota because a dozen of them were interesting designs to make them attractive.

Lining on both sides of the street were signs of rooms for rent above stores. Clothing stores, specializing in various species shapes and the one that caught her eye was a store display of ENV suits and masks, decorated in various styles, from flamboyant to casual. There were other businesses she had no idea what they dealt with as the cuneiform writing was unknown to her. Beside one of the stores or offices was an export office. That would be where Calose would check into when it was open for business.

AIHs with an official law enforcement patch stood near the different access areas into different colored sections. She thought about wearing an ENV mask just to see what was in those sections. Sightseeing during her off hours would give her a solid view of the space station and what businesses it supported in the various sections, like the ones her remote viewing didn't allow her to visit.

After she had enough sightseeing in the section she could visit without an ENV, she returned to her ship to get some sleep and get ready for work in five hours.

Day One on the Job

Calose asked the dock AIH for directions to Lilin's Shop. Again, she was asked if she would like a taxi. The map displayed on the AIHs chest, with a red circle depicting her and an x as her destination, she decided it wasn't that far to walk.

“No. Thank you. I'll walk,” she said.

The scene around her quickly changed to shops that dealt in design, manufacturing, repair and assemblage. The length of the shops on both sides of the walkway was long with colorful murals. Further down were the color-coded environment signs indicating what air quality for species in the shops. The shop signs showed they were a continuation of Lilin's.

She wanted to arrive a little before her own shift was to start to see how the shop was kept, giving her an idea of the quality of work that was put out. She stepped into the shop under the sign of Lilin's. She paused to let her eyes adjust to the different lighting.

On a table near the entrance parts were scattered and above the table a high-pressure cleaning chamber was running. She turned to see what was behind her. A robotic arm was reaching toward the table. It dropped a heavy part onto the table, causing a loud thump.

A voice in the shop called to her. “You must be the new day manager. No one else comes here. I'm Mori, late shift manager.”

“I'm Calose. Lilin's temporary day shift manager.”

He nodded and waved to her to follow him.

“How long are you planning on staying?” he asked, raising his voice above the shop hum.

“Just two weeks. Until Bebe gets back from vacation,” Calose said.

Mori laughed, the vibration in his facial bones making his jowls quiver. “He isn’t coming back. Gottu is furious with him, even hired an assassin, according to the wag. They suspect he fled with Gottu’s property: his slave. No, neither of them will return anytime soon, unless Gottu meets the end of life as he knows it in an alley because of his cheating and other deadly games. What he needs is a visit to the House of Healing.” Mori giggled, producing an entirely different sound. “This is strictly a nonviolent station, and he has pushed his luck too far. If he continues down this unhealthy path, no one can say how long he’ll live. He probably planned to gamble her contract away to another slaver, so she found someone to rescue her. He threatened her often enough. Enslaving anyone violates Galaxy law, no matter how the contract is worded.” He glanced around and lowered his voice. “Lately, too many visitors have cut their stays short because of Gottu’s behavior, or so I’d guess. That’s bad for businesses that depend on tourists taking the gamblers’ tour, isn’t it? But don’t worry. This is a very safe space station. If it weren’t, the monks would certainly be stressed, wouldn’t they?”

Calose took a deep breath. *Trouble?*

“What's the manager's job entail?” she asked.

“Not much of anything.”

“Then what does a manager do here?”

“Check out the production list and see if supplies can meet with the production schedule. You've probably already noticed that services on Merlota are run by AIH's, Artificial Intelligent Helpers,” he translated with another giggle. “Services with perfection delivered, down to the exact measurement of a beverage or portions in a meal. I'm not saying the meals are not worth their prices, but they beat the vending machine junk. As for drinks with a kick, well, watch out where you pass out.”

“So, this isn't a safe station?”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that. No more dangerous than any other space station of this size. There are plenty of AIHs policing the station, mostly to keep drunks from wandering into parts of the city they can't breathe in. No letting the unwise hurt themselves, or roughing up the

citizens and visitors, heh, heh. Just keep away from any crowds that gather in the streets. The police AIHs get confused with a lot of milling around and they register it as chaos, so they collect everyone and it's up to their sentient manager to sort it all out. This station has bad memories from a gang of pirates getting out of hand and getting in places they shouldn't."

"Is there any other advice you can give me about my stay here?" Calose asked.

"If you have a ship, sleep on it, and make sure the AIHs that patrol the dock know who you are. Oh, and if you purchase anything here it will be added to your possession list via your wrist com. It's to cutdown on dealing in contraband and narcotic trafficking," he said lightly.

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Don't gamble."

"Space travel is my gamble."

He nodded. "When I had a nice little ship, I felt the same. These days, it is too expensive to keep up and gamble at the tables. We all have weaknesses. Follow me and I'll show you where productivity is tracked."

Calose followed him as he walked down a row of working AIHs. Assembling and repairing.

"Where do all these parts go?"

"There's another shop that puts these parts into something marketable, then they're shipped out to buyers on other space stations and planets. That's handled in the green area. The AIHs don't need to worry about change of atmosphere, but to keep Merlota as a diverse species station, we have six different environmental areas for species, giving the opportunity for a mixture of hires. You'll be issued your own ENV mask in case you need to visit the other buildings. Besides general goods, they also have customers that special order or send their AIH to be finetuned for more skills." He made a clucking sound that could have been a laugh. "Some of those customers bring their own ship for the delivery and pickup. Very special customers." He gave a hand sign that she translated to special customers. "The station's shape, a hexagon is to provide six different environments for our customers to not have to don ENV masks or suits to enjoy the pleasures Merlota can provide the customer as they wait. There are a lot of pilots living on the station that are waiting for their number to be called up to make a delivery as well."

He glanced at the shop clock. A wide grin spread on his face. He scooped up an ENV mask from the desk and stowed it in a holder on his waist. “Got to go.” He nodded to her and left the shop floor without looking back.

Calose looked around the small office, taking in the autochair that fits most species, a desk with a monitor that was autopaging through a work list, and on one wall pictures of various AIHs that were popular on spaceports. The pictures changed slowly to show additional models. Turning back to view the shop, she decided to see just what was being worked on. There were so many different parts from large to tiny, spread out on long tables, with no intermingling of parts with their AIH neighbor's parts that shared the table. A few she identified as repairing as opposed to creating, though both reached into a shared box for parts, or a part was wheeled in. She recognized an AIH was repairing a Scathion 260 and wondered if it was the same, she had met on DSS, then chuckled at the idea. As she moved on, she thought she was being stared at and turned around. The eyes of the Scathion closed, as its head was repositioned.

Robots. Sometimes they make me nervous, she thought.

Toward the back of the building was a huge storage area. The freight she had delivered had been picked through and sorted. Damaged goods it looked like. The two large machines were not among the storage contents.

Her growling stomach let her know she needed some replenishment. She had not asked Mori how long she had a lunch break. On her way out, she passed an AIH labeled number 5. It was whipping a part wildly in the air. For a long moment she watched, disturbed that she felt compassion for the AIH. Did AIHs feel frustration?

Shaking her head, she left the shop, nodding at a security AIH as she walked past it. She hadn't been watching which streets she took, only the color code, but as she walked up a steep



slope of stairs at the end was a Healer's Hall. They were on all space stations, more popular than the Federations Medical Hospices. All Healer's Halls on space stations had the same hologram of being at the top of a stairway. It was one place that was always open to all species. She was curious and went in. If anything, just the vibes of the place could bring a sad person out of their melancholy.

The door opened automatically, and she was sure a scan was running over her because music that was soothing for her started at a low volume and then slowly rose, but not enough to

be more than background noise. Benches were up front where a formless stone was on a raised floor, with a dozen or more carved swirls on its smooth surface. The walls were bare and there were doors on one side color coded with the type of environment on the other side of the door. Stepping further inside she could hear murmuring and cries of anguish. Her heart hurt because she felt the person was suffering. She walked quickly to the front row where a person was huddled on the floor with dirty clothing wrapped around her.

Calose whispered a prayer as she gently rested her fingertips on the huddled figures' shoulders. The clothing was damp and thin. Taking her coat off, Calose draped it over the person's shoulders. A healer dressed in orange came quietly to their side and wrapped his long arms around them both. Calose didn't know for how long the three of them were there. She was surprised when the healer helped them both to their feet with little effort.

"I will take her now," the monk mindspoke to her. *"Thank you. Do come again. You have been helpful."*

Calose watched the healer support the figure through a door. Turning to leave she realized she hadn't her coat, then decided the thin figure needed it more than she did. If she had anything in the pockets, it wasn't anything she couldn't replace. In her years of space travel, she learned everything that was important was kept in a place that couldn't be lost, dropped, or removed through force.

Briskly, feeling as if she had an energized nap, she headed back to town. She forgot about lunch. Back in the shop, it felt like she was only gone for a few moments. Time, she knew, was measured in numerous ways, planetside, space, and by species, and it was measured to be able to relate to others. Pausing in the entrance to the shop she was sure the same parts were being worked on when she left. Laughing at her momentary disorientation, she continued walking through the shop, looking about as the AIHs worked.

By the end of her shift, a being, a fey perhaps, that came up to her knees if it became still, flew into the shop, wearing a funny-looking hat.

“Helloooo, there,” she chirped. She twirled around and danced a jig. “I just returned from the circus and learned a new dance. I'm A Jai SuLa. I'm a gadabout. I adore clowns and they are such good satirists. Better than a newsie!”



“Are you my relief? The second shift manager? Do you need a report or anything from me?” Calose asked, overwhelmed by the energy A Jai SuLa was putting out. Calose felt like she consumed a stimulant, making her jittery. For a moment a memory of meeting another fey, a long time ago tried to make its way to her consciousness, but whether from the energy or her own reluctance to remember some things from her war years, she pushed it out of her conscious thoughts.

“No, no. Nothing at all. Nothing changes but the managers,” she giggled. “Oh, don't forget your ENV mask and its waist holder.” She went into the office and returned with a belted case for a mask. She opened the case to show the ENV mask within it. Calose hadn't seen it earlier. “Since Lilin makes them, and managers do sometimes have to visit the other shops, we get our very own. Nothing fancy but you can bet it is of the highest quality.” She giggled again. She handed Calose the mask case and with shooing motions hurried Calose out of the shop. Gratefully, Calose took the mask case and left feeling more settled with each step away from the shop.

Chapter Six

“Captain on board, who's on deck?” she identified and asked as she entered her ship.

Her XO welcomed her. “I'm OOD unless you feel the need to sit on duty. How was work?”

She held up the gifted ENV mask.

Kaving took it and inspected it carefully. “Very ordinary looking, but good quality. Let's turn it over to *Friend* for a test for reliability. Heru and I met a monk on our return to the ship. He or she, had your coat to return. You left it somewhere?”

“I visited a Temple for lunch and forgot it. That reminds me, I'm hungry. I'm going to clean up, eat and take a tour of the station with my ENV gift.”

She wanted to get a better look at what the station offered and most importantly, rid herself of the last of the influence of A Jai's energy. Normally, she would use music to counter or neutralize disturbing energy, but curiosity of the spaceport was a stronger appeal.

The ENV mask passed the safety test. With the mask case belted around her waist, she wore her returned jacket. Leaving her ship she passed the dock security, an AIH that was making its rounds pausing at each docked ship. It wasn't long before she passed the long row of entertainment buildings. From one building, the loud ringing of the bells from the gambling wheels as they spun came from a door that opened as three customers entered the gambling hall. She suspected the wheel stopped and landed on the number that an agent of the gambling house bet on. Someone had to be seen winning, or customers would lose hope of their own luck and if smart enough, walk away before they bet what they could ill afford to lose.

The dance hall was in full swing next door and happier music bled out of an open window. Next to the dance hall was a comedy club with a short line of customers waiting for entrance. Those customers were a happy bunch with their laughter and giggles mixed with good-natured groans, as some of their fellow customers tested out their one-liners. Calose thought it might be an open night where the audience competed for an award.

She wanted to walk, rather than sit to be entertained, and found herself back at the steep slope that led to the Healer's Hall. As she entered the building, there were people seated on the benches at the front. She knew intuitively it was a funeral. The mourners were silent, and the air was heavy with tragedy. Not wanting to be rude, she didn't want to call attention to herself and leave, so she sat in the back of the hall.

After everyone left an orange draped figure approached her. The face was so serene and the energy around this being was so loving that Calose was at a loss for words. Without being aware of the monk taking her hands, both entered a shared meditation.

On her return to the ship, Kaving was pacing anxiously on the deck.

“Where have you been?” she questioned worriedly.

“For a walk and I ended up at the Temple. I crashed into a bereavement ceremony, and I didn't want to cause any further disruption by rushing out. Why?” she asked concerned.

“There have been inquiries of you and *Calypso IIs* name change with some new arrivals. They placed charges of fraud with Merlota's HMO who informed them *Faithful Friend* is a legitimate Federation name change,” Heru said.

“How do you know this?” Calose asked.

“I was looking on the jobs board when three Benjiterasco's came in looking for blood. They were so aggressive in nature three security AIHs came active,” Heru said.

“We've identified the ship they came in on as maybe the same that has been following us for a week,” Kaving said, “The *Califor'd*. Have you ever heard of it?”

Calose shook her head.

“Me either. I looked them up and they are far from their home planet, Dimo'd.”

“We're going to have to keep watch of that crew,” Bout said. “There is a warning out to report any violation of Federation Laws to a SP. Another species that shouldn’t be allowed to travel off their planet.”

“Just be careful yourselves. They must have a reason to follow us,” Calose warned.

“That's what we're wondering about,” Kaving said. “I've sent a couple of inquiries out to the nearest SP HQ and to our PO. Since we still haven't received a clear reason why we've been sent here, we'll have to walk about very carefully. Usually, our friendly ghost Zooey has a message for us. She must be busy elsewhere.”

In the workout area, Calose ran a program with a vigorous workout that required agility and precision. It was a relief to concentrate on something that removed her from the mixed vibes she was getting from the space station. Pleasantly tired from her workout, and after a luxurious soak in her bath, she skipped her meditation and went to bed.

It wasn't until her alarm went off that she realized she had slept with no wakeup from the unfamiliar quietness of being docked or felt the need to walk around the interior of her ship just to be sure it was secured. The thought crossed her mind, that maybe she shouldn't be so reliant on her ship's security.

Day Two

Mori was out the workshop door as soon as he saw her. He waved as they passed. He looked tired, as if he had just woken up. His mask case bounced on his hip, with a bright scarf securing it. The scarf didn't match his clothing, which could be described as disheveled. He looked like a man in distress. Calose wished him well, then turned her thoughts to her job, observing the robotic workers, the AIHs.

On the shift manager's screen were orders, the numbers of the AIHs and what table and row they were on and a graph showing their production output over the week. If the AIHs didn't have numbers on their shoulders and legs, Calose wouldn't have been able to tell one AIH from another. On her shift, there wasn't a number 5.

With everything automated her only way to keep alert was to walk the floor and watch the AIHs work, which was her original plan to get a feel for automated production. Computers kept track of the production and made any adjustments to the AIHs' productivity leaving her with little to do but observe. It seemed too easy a job, but she didn't want to be lulled into thinking she could just sleep on the job.

At what she guessed was lunch time for her, she tried what she thought she recognized in a vending machine next door as food that she could digest. It was manufactured food, dyed to look like something familiar. It was sweet to make it go down easier but digesting it would take a while. It gave her flatulence and heartburn. She was relieved she didn't work with anyone whose olfactory senses would be offended. This was where she regretted not carrying her jacket where she usually had one pocket carrying an energy bar and in another a first aid kit.

A Jai came bounding in at shift turnover. She was humming what to her may have been music, but to Calose, there was no recognizable rhythm or harmony. A Jai wasn't putting out as much energy as she had the previous day.

"I heard we are the only two managers now, Mem Calose!" A Jai announced. "Unless Mem Chin-mo Lilin steps in for more training on the front line." She laughed as if there was a joke hidden in what she said.

"What happened to Mori?"

"He's in security's custody awaiting SP pickup. He went wacko in his boarding house. Destroyed property that wasn't his. Medical said he was on a drug. I warned him! I did. I told him to take up a safe hobby! Go to the circus! New shows every night. Boredom does that to people. They get mixed up with the wrong crowd, take unregulated drugs not suited for their biological makeup and bad things happen. I warned him! You need to be careful too. A ship of Benjiterasco's arrived and they are just walking a thin line with the AIH security." A Jai let out a deep sigh and then was chirpy again, as she looked about the shop. Calose thought for a moment she was saying hello mentally to the AIHs.

"Aren't the security AIHs programmed to detect drugs?" Calose asked.

“Oh, Calose, may I call you Calose? That's not allowed on this station.” And then she added in a lower voice, “The business owners are paranoid about the station's security AIHs. Too efficient. Only AIHs programed to work the tables or service their customers can enter their establishments.”

“A Jai, may I call you A Jai? Are you saying that the owners can provide any unlawful entertainment provided it is done only in their place of business?”

“Sort of. It's important to keep business owners feeling they are supported for their investment in the station, but customers are also important. Business owners have their rules and are allowed so many infractions before they are fined or told to leave. That was very wise of you to quarter in your ship while you're here. Some business owners spy on their customers to find a weakness they can profit from. And then, there are some visitors that are trouble waiting to happen.”

“How did you end up here?”

“I told you, I'm a gadabout. I follow the Qi Rise Circus. Did you think I was joking?” She laughed heartily, with a strong blast of energy emanating from her. “Where they go, I go. I work wherever they have a gig and when they leave, I hitch a ride on their ship. I could never do what they do. I'm too short and lack the quick wit needed. But I can move around the audience and hear what customers say about their performances and pass it on to the ringmaster.”

Commented [cr1]:

“So, you work for them?”

“You've never been to a circus, have you? Qi Rise is the best. You should drop in but leave your sensibilities outside. They are healers of the soul, and what they teach is for dream time. Eventually you learn to leave your critical and judgmental self out of making sense what you experience at the shows.” She paused for a moment and shook her head. “I do believe it's like being too reliant on others telling you what you heard and what you saw, instead of you discovering by your own senses. As the saying goes, there are no mistakes, just lessons on your journey.”

“The only circus I've been to I was a child. My one and only. Afterward, I secretly went where the performers and animals stayed.” Calose stopped as she remembered the incredible sadness she felt from the animals and from most of the performers. They weren't happy like they had made the crowd feel.

“That was a planet bound circus,” she said, reading Calose's thoughts. “Those types of circuses aren't part of the Circus Federation. All participants in a Circus of the Federation must know how to manage themselves so they aren't subject to what they pick up from the audience – melancholy is most difficult for planet bound citizens.”

“Well, if I do find myself with nothing to do, I'll...”

A Jai pulled a pass from her hat band and handed it to Calose before she could finish her sentence.

“You'll love it, friend Calose. They also have food vendors that serve healthier food than the vending machines have for your species. That pass will get you also, one free meal cooked for your gastric and palate's delight.”

“Thank you. How often do they have their shows?”

“You can go at any time and not be late. The audience leaves happier than when they arrived. It's all lighthearted fun. You'll see.”

Calose nodded and left A Jai dancing up the aisle humming a tune.

Commander Bout greeted her on the bridge. “You had a visitor. A Tamaj being and not putting out pleasant vibes. I didn't clear her to board only took the message that it was asking about your business.”

“Where are Commander Moya and XO Kaving?”

“Resting from their tour of the station. They haven't figured out why we're here. I hope it's not about the reopening of that corridor.”

“Me too. I'll take a walk to the HMO's office and see if a Tamaj ship is docked nearby.”

She changed clothes and stepped out of her ship. The security bot was slowly inspecting the dock. A beep had her turning to the sound.

“We're headed to the harbormaster's office. Free shuttle service!” was the translator's version of the whistles and hoots from a Mison, dressed in a decorated environmental suit to allow him to be in an environment not suitable to his species. It pointed to the ship in the slip adjacent to hers.

“We aren't happy with our berth,” it hooted ending with a piercing whistle.

“Thanks for stopping,” Calose said as she got in.

“Nothing to do with us. The dock AIH ordered it. They give directions and if they see you need further help, they provide it,” he hooted.

It didn't explain to her why the Mison had a berth that wasn't in his natural environment unless there were other species on his ship and given this dock, that was more appropriate.

When the shuttle stopped in front of the harbormaster's office, they weren't the only ones wanting to see the clerk. Calose decided to come back later. She asked an AIH where the circus was being held. It held up an appendage, as if hailing a taxi. A nearby parked taxi's door opened, and she stepped in. She was joined by two others wearing ENV suits. They appeared to be Humanoid but not of the same species. They were silent and were dropped off at a rooming house with a mixture of color-coded rooms available. Calose let out a sigh of relief. She didn't feel comfortable to be near them.

The circus was in full sensory exhibits from audio to visual and whatever senses of the various species in the audience. Acrobatics and dancing clowns, twirling costumed performers and noisy laughter from the gathered crowd at some of the stunts, added to the infectious happy atmosphere. The crowd was a mixture of species in full ENV suits, and some with just facemasks while others like her had no problem breathing unaided. Calose couldn't tell what species any of the performers were. When the main show was about to start, people followed the dancing clowns gesturing the way into a gray theatre with only the ceiling in bright colors. The dull gray background was a relief to Calose's senses after so much brightness.



The audience laughed, clapped, and hooted at the clowns as they did satire skits on galaxy politics and the pitfalls of encountering a species radically different than one's own, and everyday foibles that were common to most species.

When Calose had enough she found an automated bus available with one of its stops at her berth. There were six other passengers on board.

“No,” one of the passengers in front of her said with certainty, tilting his head a bit, so he could extend his long snout out the opened window, waving it as if a flag. “I checked on the ships in the dock from the viewing room. I keep hoping my friend, Bedongomore, will be back to pick me up. He left rather abruptly and without even warning me! That's so not like him.”

“He probably picked up a short haul delivery to some outpost and had to leave right away,” one of his companions said, indifferent.

“Well, that is possible. I was a bit involved in a game and I'm not to be disturbed when I'm involved in gaming,” he admitted.

Calose felt he wasn't really worried about his 'friend' he just liked to talk about it and added his own bit of wag to the wagging.

“Or lost a bet to Gottu and had to leave right away,” another companion added, giving him a side look. “Then he won't be coming back at all. You'll just have to do like me and hitch a ride on a delivery shuttle going to the next gambling spot,” he suggested pragmatically, pushing his breather to a more comfortable position over his rotund belly.

“If he just waited a bit more, I would have won us a bit of credits for the next stop,” the first passenger said.

“I heard,” another passenger interjected, “if Gottu doesn't stop with his uncivilized behavior, he'll lose his business license on this space station. At the last general meeting, Merlota's committee said they are going to start enforcing their rules of behavior that all business owners and visitors agreed to. I think that was a fair warning to Gottu and his bully agents.”

“Hmm,” another said happily, “No telling who will take over his business! It would be so wasteful to have a different type of business in his space. Perhaps one of us should bid on the lease.”

“And what of those that owe him credits?” another asked softly. “Will they belong to the new owner?”

At the docks all but one other passenger besides Calose got off. Calose's berth came first. A security AIH was waiting near her ship.

“Yes, security?” she asked.



A message was displayed on its chest. A visitor to her ship asking about her left a message at the HMO's office.

“Thank you,” Calose said.

The AIH left to continue with its patrol.

“That was I,” a disdainful voice spoke from behind her.

Calose turned to the voice in surprise and stared at the nearly translucent figure taller than her, dressed in clothing that could blend in with the shadows on the dock. Was this a Tamaj? How many tall translucent species were there? She heard they traveled in a group of four and usually kept their business interests to another part of the galaxy.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. I saw you yesterday at the funeral of Merde and was curious how you knew him. Are you a fellow news correspondent or someone he knew from the war?”

At mentioning the war, she stared hard at Calose as if trying to mentally compel her to...what?

“I was taking a walk and happened to stop in for a moment of prayer,” Calose said.

“*Nothing just happens,”* was the woman's thought, then she added verbally, “Well, if you want to stick to that story, I can't force you to change it. If you do want to tell me about Merde Hue and you, I'll be here for another day or two. I'm cleaning out his rental room and gathering information on his business interests. Family, you know. They make such a big deal about putting a claim to the personal belongings of dead relatives, their bank accounts, and their business interests when they had nothing to do with the deceased's accumulation of whatever is left after the taxes. I'm the family lawyer, so my job is to keep the peace and gather information on all the deceased owned and owed.”

For a moment Calose thought she was making a cynical joke. Calose didn't know what to say so she remained silent. The incongruous energy she was picking up from this person had her wanting to step back and process what it meant. There was a strong subliminal command to answer her during the prolonged conversation. What was the question she wanted an answer to? She was sure it wasn't about Merde Hue. What made her think that? The woman was waiting specifically for her, that she was sure of. Was she looking to board her ship, but the presence of the security AIH that was waiting for her prevented it?

“Toodles,” the woman said, and walked to another ship further down the dock. It was a new TW model space yacht, half the size of her freighter. But TWs were known for their defensive weapons supposedly to protect the yachts from pirates and such.

XO Kaving was OOD and was waiting for Calose as she stepped on board.

“That person is trouble. She's an agent for a cartel. Did she tell you what her business is?”

“Something to do with Merde Hue. I haven't heard of him since...”

“Fifteen Federation standard years,” Kaving finished. “Coincidence? I think not. A pity we didn't get any hints of what we're to keep our eyes open for. Where is Zooey?”

“I would imagine she's poking about in some part of the galaxy.”

In her music room which also served as her meditation room, she lit incense and settled into a Burmese pose. She chanted until she felt the right energy surrounding her. From that quiet spot, she waited for a vision or message that could help her understand what she was picking up from Merlota. It was annoying to know that there were a lot of things going on around her but not yet understanding any of it. She didn't want to do any remote viewing, suspecting the Tamaj, if that was what her visitor was, would latch onto her. There were so many hybrids traveling in space that knowing what innate talents a person had was not easily ascertained biologically.

Nothing pertinent to her present concerns came to mind. Where was her spirit helper, Zooey? She needed her to help untangle the mixed readings she was getting from some of these people and the station itself.

Before going to sleep, she played music, setting the ambience for her dream time. She slept until *Faithful Friend* woke her. As she reached consciousness, her dream was in fragments from meeting friends at a soldier's bar during her off-duty hours mixed with meeting a fey in a hospice. It confused her about what they had to do with each other. It all became nothing as her waking thoughts moved into full consciousness with a list of daily to dos.

Where was Zooey?

Chapter Seven

Modifi

Calose hurried to work, curious to see who would be taking Mori's place. As she stepped into the shop, the workers began working. There was no one to greet her. In the manager's office she found a message on the screen. It notified her that until the third shift hired a sentient manager, that shift was suspended. Until then, the first and second shift needed to add more workers to the line to make up for a lack of third shift production.

Calose looked out on the shop floor, wondering where there would be room to add more workers. She was surprised to see additional workers had already been added. The noise level of drills, tapping, and the hum of machines was louder than she remembered. Why didn't they just have an AIH supervise the AIHs?

It occurred to her to read the manual on a manager's duties for Lilin's shops. It should have been the first thing she read on her first day. After rereading the information twice, she couldn't find the answer on why an AIH couldn't supervise another AIH. She did find that there

was a rule that the sentient manager could not leave the shop with AIHs working unattended. What did they think the AIHs, programmed for their jobs, would do? Or wouldn't?

Maybe when she was gone, they took a break too, she thought humorously. That was amusing enough for her to check the productivity of her shift. Sure enough. When she was gone, productivity slowed down. Robots with a sense of taking advantage of not being watched. Was that in their programming? Did the programmer have a sense of humor?

Now she felt like she was taking advantage of her employer, however, she wasn't told she couldn't leave the shop during her entire shift. What bothered her more was what kind of programming was running in these AIHs that allowed them to have a rebellious streak to cheat their owner of work productivity, just like a sentient laborer.

Talking to Chin-mo came to mind. She had encouraged her to call her if she had any questions.

“Hellllllloooooo!” a voice from the front of the shop called.

Calose nearly tilted off her chair. While thinking, she dozed off.

“Yes?” Calose answered loudly and rushed to the front of the shop, hoping she didn't look like she had just woken up. It was Chin-mo or appeared to be her in a less colorful ENV suit but just as fashionably styled.

“Hello, hello, hello. I'm Mem Moto-be Lilin. Elder daughter. Partner in training to Lilin.



Are the workers putting out a profitable amount of work for our enterprise? Have we added enough to compensate for only two shifts? We have lots of orders to fill. Yes, yes, yes.”

Calose was confused at the questions and not waiting for an answer, but she nodded intending to be in answer to the productivity being high enough to meet the new dayshift production numbers.

“I'm here to assign two of our superior workers and yourself to manage them in their duties with the scientists from the re-forming division of the Federation. Senior Scientist Abbot Nirdar is leading the group to the planet Modifi. They are humanoid, composed of similar elements, carbon based and breathe the same air as you. Your health scans show you will be able to move about on Modifi with little discomfort. No need for an ENV suit, though, you may take the ENV mask we have assigned you. I see you have it secured to your waist. Very good.” Her

eyes seemed to squint as she studied the AIU Calose wore. “Well, it is the second to the latest version we put out. But then, you will be fine.”

Calose's eyes opened wide.

“Well, I can tell you don't just jump into action without thinking about it. I'll assign the right workers then. No worries about the shop while you're gone.” She moved into the office and scrolled through the list of AIHs. “Take number three and five. Both have low counts for the production line, so we won't miss them that much.”

“Hello! Mem Moto-be Lilin, I'm here to pick up your laborers,” a voice boomed from the front of the shop.

“Ah, yes, that will be Second Scientist Kale List who has come to deliver you and our workers to their shuttle. We cross train our workers for various types of jobs and among them is to be lab assistants to scientists,” she shared with Calose as they walked to the front of the shop.

A taxi was waiting outside.

“On time and not a moment to waste. See that you keep them safe from theft. They are rated highly for such expeditions. May you all return safely,” Mem Moto-be Lilin said.

The two AIHs took their places in the back seat of the taxi while a burly fellow sat up front, gesturing for Calose to join him.

“I'm Kale. Second in command of this expedition.” Kale wore a badge on his uniform that identified him as a physicist.

“Greetings, Kale. I'm Calose. Is there any danger where we're going?” she asked him.

“Nothing unusual for a science teams evaluation visit. We're just going to check the planet’s reforming process. It's all planned. We have spots mapped out where we are to take our samples. There're some anxious settlers that are pestering the Land Management Bureau since it was posted that it would be open for colonization soon, whenever that is. The applicants usually don't bother to read the small print that there will still be landmass movements and the air mixtures in some places won't be stabilized due to underground tunnel collapses and such. They just want to be the first to choose where to start their farming communities, towns, cities and set up their local governments. I'm glad I'm not one of the Enforcement Agents that land with the groups to keep them to the rules of establishing communities. Some people don't like their neighbors right off and bring illegal weapons. Not a nice way to start a new life.”

“What about plants and animals that are already living there?”

“Ah. Yes, what was started and seeded throughout the process may not grow up to be what the microbiologist and wildlife specialists expect. Another interesting adaptation for the colonists. Oh, you mean when we go down now. We've got a balanced team of veteran scientists who will identify any poisonous plant life and keep us at a safe distance from aggressive wildlife. We're to observe, record, and take test samples of land, water, air, fauna and so on, just to see what is going on. What was planted five years ago was enhanced so everyone is excited to see just what stirring the chemicals, the basis of life on this planet, has resulted in.”

“Five years? The war only ended five years ago. That was a fast determination to reseed life on the planet. Aren't you worried that by accelerating a natural process you've created creatures that may need some study before dropping off settlers?”

Their arrival at the docks ended whatever his answer might be. Calose was skeptical already knowing the rumor around the galaxy of unscrupulous interests in remodeling planets for private interests and ventures. She also knew the Federation Committee had a bureau that was addressing the problem of the revictimization of planets physically damaged during the long war that were still recovering from the shock that they belonged to a galaxy peopled by species they had no knowledge of. That was one of the jobs she and her crew had been asked to participate in for the Federation by delivering equipment while covertly evaluating the conditions the replanted colonists were experiencing.

On their arrival at the dock, there were a dozen people in the overalls of scientists standing near a mountain of equipment that was sitting waiting to be loaded on a waiting shuttle. One person with a clipboard and a security AIH were standing in front of the shuttle checking off the scientists' equipment as it was moved onto a refurbished military troop shuttle. Calose turned to Kale. “Do you need additional help loading up? We can assist.”

“Sure, sure. Abbot! How about these shop AIHs helping with loading the equipment?”

“Kale, you know we can't have just anyone touching the equipment. Are they the AIH biological testers?”

“Yes.”

“Stash them with the equipment. Come on people. Let's move faster with loading your gear. We've got a lot of ground to cover before nightfall.”

“You heard him. The AIHs go with the equipment,” Kale told Calose.

Calose turned to speak to the AIHs, however, they were already moving to the back of the shuttle where the equipment was being loaded.

When Calose got onto the shuttle she found two orange robed figures sitting quietly in the center of the shuttle.

Kale smiled at Calose's look of surprise.

“One of the recent changes in recolonization protocols. Monks from the Temple of Peace are to be present at all the stages of repairing planets for habitation. It's to keep everyone involved ethical.”

So, the rumor she heard about a closer monitoring of the process was true. That was a relief. Telepathically, she sent a message to Bout about her reassignment. This was probably why they were sent here. Would her crew also join her planetside?

“We've got Monks Abba and Zedda with us. They haven't been following the process from the start, but they will continue from now into the colonization phase of Modifi.”

Calose nodded to each of the monks and received a returned nod. Calose got a feeling that she was involved in a shivy deal. As the shuttle lifted, she concentrated on the monks, concluding they were genuine. Her attention moved to the others, but her concentration was broken when the shuttle took a sudden nosedive into the space above Modifi after it cleared the buoys from Merlota. Everyone was straining against their harnesses, until they hit the atmosphere of the planet and cloud cover. The sudden leveling off brought noisy breaths from everyone.

“Lu, we've got sensitive equipment here!” one of the scientists panted when they all could breathe again.

“And wits,” one of the other scientists added. Calose looked across in the next row of seats and could see his monitor. It was reading on the environment of the planet, changing rapidly as they kept descending.

The pilot flew close to a snowcapped mountain whose peak was just above the clouds. He



slid open his window and leaned out. The cold air he let in had Calose pulling her coat closer around her. She wished she had a warmer coat.

“I can see taking a vacation climbing that peak,” he said via his translator. He flew down to the foot of the mountain and then hooted with surprise when from

the thick vegetation a large creature with a wingspan longer than most of them were tall, rose up before them, nearly knocking them out of its sky. Calose was sure it was the freighter's collision prevention system that saved them all from impact.

Calose felt the creature's annoyance at being disturbed. The fresh air gave her senses a chance to acclimate to the energy of the planet. She breathed deeply, liking the feel of planet air after being surrounded by her ship and the space station's filtered environment. The planet's environment had so much life in its flow.

"Hey! Have some respect for the life that's living here," one of the scientists said. His name tag said he was Jac Wne and below that a tag that read Wildlife Biologist.

"The first group of colonists will start wiping out whatever they feel is on what they consider their land with no polite by-your-leave or who was here first," the pilot returned cynically. "Or for that matter, they'll be hunting for edible meat."

"They'll be assisted with clearing space for their communities without wiping out the surrounding wildlife. The guidelines they've all agreed to, have steps to follow and it's not wiping out the surrounding wildlife," Kale said, sounding upset with Lu's prediction.

"What's that smoke to the left?" Abbot asked.

Lu took a sharp turn and headed to the smoke. Those that removed their flight harnesses too soon were holding onto their seats, sliding into a bulkhead or a fellow scientist. It looked like a forest fire as they got closer. As the pilot buzzed over the area, they all could see a group of people setting fire to clear space, probably for them to put up their homestead.

"Is that one of the planned communities?" Lu said sarcastically.

Abbot quickly called Merlota's HMO and reported he wanted the Federation's Special Forces immediately to locate and deport illegal colonists to the co-ordinates he gave. He added that the colonists were destroying wild habitat with fires.

The pilot buzzed the group, flying circles above them laughing, while the ship's camera recorded all the faces looking up at them. "Some people just don't want to wait. Looks like they're waving at us. Friendly group, no?" Lu said mockingly.

"I don't think you should be flying so low," Calose advised, not liking the feeling she was getting from the people below them. Her seat screen showing what the cameras on the freighter's belly were showing were not friendly faces. "If they're here illegally, they're going to be prepared to stand their ground with weapons."

“Hey! Those are weapons they're pointing at us, not sticks,” one of the women shouted.

“You're right,” Lu said and quickly sought cover in the clouds.

Everyone held onto their seats and to equipment next to them. When he leveled out everyone sighed with relief.

“Just where were you going to start your tests?” Calose asked Abbot who resettled a map on his lap. She was hoping it would be far away from colonists that were not waiting for the official notification that the planet was ready for habitation.

“Let's take a scan over the planet and see if there are any more illegals here,” Abbot said.

“What about the tunnels?” one of the scientists asked. “We're near the first one on the topographical map of this area. Drop us off. We'll contact you if we have any problems. We'll take one of your AIHs,” he told Calose. Soren Co'en his name tag read. Speleologist was the patch below his name.

“For what? My understanding is that they take biological samples from soil above the ground. If there's anything dangerous in one of those tunnels, I don't want you to throw one of them away to save yourselves. I'm responsible for them.”

“Especially since whatever is in the tunnel may want to eat you, and not the AIH,” chuckled Lu. “Very expensive sacrifice, considering those AIHs probably are worth more than you,” Lu laughed heartily.

“Alright, head to the first tunnel you have on the map, Lu,” Abbot said. “Scan the area to be sure there's no sign of colonization. We'll let law enforcement take care of illegals. Blast them for the damage they're already doing! There are plenty of cleared areas ready for colonization!”

“Why do people want to settle on an uncivilized planet where there are going to be creatures that see them as dinner?” His name tag read Hanmel scientist.

Calose thought he sounded like a petulant child forced to be among adults, rather than a professional scientist. Where had she heard that same tone? Was it recently? Or was it a long time ago? Calose worried that memories or those from a dream were messing up her time perspective. Get over it, she told herself sternly.

“Exactly, Billy Boy. Not a chance the colonists are going to live in harmony with anything or anybody, if they don't feel safe,” Lu said. “They'll go out and hunt the local animal population for entertainment and dinner.”

“There is great abundance everywhere. I think everyone will adjust to each other's differences and give respect in the sharing of the abundance.”

“Right,” Lu said. He circled an area that looked safe to set up a camp. When his scans didn't pick up any large biologicals around the area, he settled the shuttle on a flat surface. “Everyone is calm and rational until problems hit, one right after the other. How many of those leaders led a battalion or squad of soldiers that were made up of different species into a life-or-death battle?”

Calose hadn't been on a planet for a long time. Standing on the ground took a few moments for her to adjust to feeling the energy of the planet under her feet, and then all around her. Everything around her had colors, vibrating different degrees of energy. It was as if she drank a stimulant. To regain her balance, she focused on what Lu said. His questions were directed to his instrument panel, while the scientists' attention was on unpacking their instruments and quickly spreading out. She thought they were well-practiced at not wasting time once they were on site. Her attention moved to the AIHs who had moved out before the scientists. They only had to move themselves. She sought out the monks and noticed they had moved to a rock outcropping near a cave entrance, away from the bustling activity.

Breathing deep, to further acclimate to the planet's energy she felt trepidation. The wildlife scared away on their arrival slowly returned with a few birds then suddenly a flock of various colored birds descended into the trees and brush around the camp. Their chirps and tweets filled the air, becoming a raucous bedlam, that suddenly lowered in volume as if someone turned the volume down. Uneasily, she looked around, noting where the two AIHs were and that two of the dozen scientists were missing.

“Where are...” she started to ask.

“Benji and Soren are in the cave already. They're cavers. That's all they live for,” Kale said. He had activated a security rod that sent out a location beam and would send out an emergency beacon to the space station Merlota should it be necessary.

“Abbot, should we go to the next test site?” Kale asked.

Abbot looked uncertain. “We don't know what's living in the cave. A wildlife expert should have gone with them.”

Hanmel snorted his response. “Like what lives in a cave on a planet that was dead and has only been given life five years ago?”

Calose could feel his energy, finding it at odds to the focus of the group. He was the closest to her, leaning against the shuttle doing nothing.

“Hopefully, the tunnel goes down far so they can place motion detectors inside to see if there's plate movement. There's going to be ground quakes still,” Morgan said.

“It looks like a good place to set up camp for the night,” Hanmel said, as if he were boss. “We can get a lot of testing done by the time you return.”

“We're staying the night?” Calose asked.

“Are you nervous space girl?” Hanmel mocked. “You can sleep in my tent. I'll protect you.”

“Billy! Mind your manners!” Abbot snapped.

“This is a wilderness,” Calose explained, reasoning with him as she would a child, “with carnivores that can drop from above, crawl, run and find us as tasty morsels, not to mention small microbes that will find our bodies new places to explore.” Calose could feel an intelligence on the planet and hoped she wasn't giving ideas to a resident or residents that were interested in playing tricks on unwelcome visitors.

“That won't scare big, brave Billy Hanmel,” Lu said mockingly, “He'll send an SOS to his daddy and a private army will arrive to save him by wiping out the entire area of all living things.” Lu had moved to the shuttle's door, sitting comfortably on the deck, watching the scientists as they busied themselves.

“That's not taking into fact that you have illegal claim jumpers who are probably armed to the teeth, with weapons to protect their bit of stolen land,” Calose continued nervously. She was also thinking that no one told her to pack for an overnight in the wilderness.

“Those are wise words,” Lu told Calose. “You look old enough to have been caught up in the draft. WVET? Or did you spend the war in a nice safe place, like an office? No excitement,” Lu mocked.

Since he was facing Hanmel and staring at him, Calose didn't think he was directing that at her, but she answered it anyway.

“Taking unnecessary chances in unknown territory should be a concern for us all. If one of us is injured, it will disrupt your schedule and a timely completion of your assignment.”

“Let's move on to the next site,” Kale suggested.

“So, where's the next stop?” Lu asked Abbot.

“Hanmel, Marie, Jac and Morgan, you four set up a rest camp. Morgan, your senior team leader until we get back. Since you want a camp, Hanmel, you're responsible for having a hot lunch when we return,” Abbot said.

“Unless you have instant hot meals, I don't advise using a fire for your meals,” Calose advised. “You don't want to draw unwanted attention to yourselves.”

“We'll take your voice of caution seriously and use our rations only,” Jac said, patronizingly.

His tone didn't bother her; it was his not taking her warning seriously that had her worried. She had a feeling something was going to happen that these scientists weren't prepared for. If they were as seasoned in investigating reseeded planets as they intimated, they were not displaying any sensible caution a veteran would. She noted the sounds from the wild birds had ceased and only a few remained in the trees watching them. Why didn’t that worry anyone but her?

The four began to remove packs from the shuttle. Marie and Jac removed Benji and Soren's gear they left behind and tossed it next to their belongings. Calose looked longingly at the personal packs, imagining them having proper clothing for camping out. Already she was cold. Her night would be spent in the warmth of the shuttle, she decided, hopefully wrapped in a spare warm blanket.

“Nothing will get past our security,” Hanmel said as he pulled out a rifle from his kit.

The remaining birds wisely flew off. They must have some knowledge of armed predators, Calose thought. She glanced at the others, wondering if that observation was noticed by the others that were beginning to shout at Hanmel.

“My stars! I hope that's not loaded,” Lu shouted alarmed.

“The way you're handling it, you're going to shoot your foot off and anyone standing next to you,” Cormac said, echoing Lu's alarm.

“I suppose you know how to handle an ARR202,” Hanmel bragged.

It was a basic training weapon in the ground troops during the war so Close guessed that if any of the scientists had been in the war, they would know enough about its capacity to do harm.

“I know that you have a loaded weapon with the safety off! Waving it around like that will cause it to discharge,” Rachel said sharply. “I'm glad I'm not going to be here when a small

creature squeaks, and you panic. Good luck with your crew, Morgan. Take copious notes and recordings so he doesn't get assigned to any more field trips. He just broke the first rule and we're all here as witnesses."

"If we live that long," muttered Lu. He headed back into the ship and from the sounds of the shuttles engines he was getting ready to take off.

It gave Calose a nervous flutter in her stomach. She glanced at the AIHs, giving them a nod to enter the shuttle. Cormac, Rachel, Halley, Lauren, Monk Abba, Kale and Abbot got back into the shuttle with Calose. Her apprehension didn't subside as they took off to their next site.

Lu lifted straight up, circled the area that was taking the shape of a campsite and flew just above the trees, giving the scientists a view of what the land looked like. According to Lu's scans there were no large biologicals in the area.

"Looks clear. We probably scared whatever life there is away," Cormac said.

"Lu, according to this map, there's a lake on the other side of the trees to the left. I would like to take a water sample," Halley said.



Lu found the river but couldn't find a place to land. A good distance from the river the waterway disappeared into rocks. As Lu skimmed close to the ground looking for where the river would reappear, large animals that they thought were rocks roared at them when he went too low.

"Whoa! Lauren, there's two more for your wildlife study. Do you want us to drop you off?" Halley teased.

"No, thank you. I want to be on the ground starting off in a cleared space with the shuttle ready to carry me to safety should it be more than a flock of birds chirping their heads off."

"Any flat landing place on the map for me to get water samples?" Halley asked.

"Those were great wildlife specimens! Look at the readings I got on them from this distance," Lauren said.

Cormac and Halley looked at Lauren's readings.

"This species isn't my study, but these don't look anything like what the scientist that seeded this planet said to expect," Cormac said.

“You got that right,” Halley muttered. “Hey,” she tapped Calose on the arm. “I see you're not dressed for cold weather. I have an extra coat in my pack so go ahead and borrow this coat.” She removed her coat and handed it to Calose.

“Thanks,” Calose said. “Just how long is this expedition going to be?”

“If all goes well, that is if we have no interruptions or abnormal readings, three to four standard days, a week at the most. We have a guideline to follow that's required by the Board's Federation of Scientists. Since no one told you to pack anything and there is a space port right above us, I would say we're following the usual practice to return to the space port at nightfall. Safer for us and our equipment. We can download what we've gathered, and by morning we'll have readouts. Our test results will determine whether we return to where we pulled samples from for further testing or move on to another area. The reason to retest a site means the scientists that planned the rewilding are not getting the results they want, or someone wants a clarification of what we pulled.” She smiled.

“What about setting up camp?”

“Oh,” she laughed. “Having Billy set up camp is Abbot's way of keeping him occupied so he doesn't interfere with our jobs.” Halley added in a lower voice. “His carrying an illegal weapon will get a complaint from me when we return to the space port. It puts a mark against all of our reputations as senior scientists if we don't register our objections. We are observers not armed adventurers! Gods, but I don't want to end up having a negative mark on my record because of Billy.” Dismayed, Halley got up and went to her pack.

The borrowed field jacket had seen many field assignments. The pockets were filled with odds and ends a field scientist would use while on assignment. From patting one pocket she felt what could be a magnifying glass and in another a first aid wand for known animal bites, and she found a locator in the lining. It had a headlamp, and a flexible face shield. It also had a padded body armor inside the lining in case of falls as well as providing warmth. She liked all the extra pockets. It reminded her of her military flight suit. It never ceased to amaze her with what she put in her pockets, forgetting what the small treasures were until it was time to clean the suit.

“Nice, right?” Lauren smiled. “The company that makes our coats, specializes in clothing for people that spend time in the wilds or working outdoors in bad weather.”

“I think I'll order one for me.”

“They also fold up nicely, so they don't take up much room in a pack, that is, depending on what you keep in the pockets,” Lauren said humorously. “There's a skirt you can add so it covers your legs too. Great for the sudden rainstorms or cold drafts when you get stuck far from your camp in bad weather.”

Lu found the river again and once more it disappeared into the side of a hill. The satellite map they were using didn't show any clear spaces for Lu to land near the water.

“How about you hover above the river, lower one of the AIHs down, it gets a sample, then hoist it back up?” suggested Cormac.

“Did you bring anything to do that kind of stuff?” Lu asked. “My agent told me to have an empty shuttle since you all would be bringing your own equipment.”

“Yeah. I checked off ropes and harnesses at the station,” Abbot said. He got up from his seat and headed to the back of the shuttle.



Suddenly, something hit the front of the shuttle with a loud crack, knocking the ship into the side of a cliff. They careened off the brush growing on the rocks and bounced against another part of the rock wall before continuing in an uncontrolled flight. Everyone was flying about, into seats, bulkheads, and each other. Cormac's body didn't prevent Calose from injury, but he did take the brunt of her colliding with the bulkhead of the shuttle. Abbot who had been walking down the shuttle was now sitting in the middle of the shuttle in the lap of the Monk Abba.

Another shot hit them in the back of the shuttle where supplies and the AIHs were, sending the shuttle into a growth of trees on the side of the rockface. Lu was struggling to get control of the shuttle as it was now wobbling badly in the direction of the dense greenery below them.

Autopilot controls must have been damaged, Calose thought.

Calose fought against the instability to make her way to the empty co-pilot's seat. The windows were shattered, reminding her of her war years. Someone had used a missile to take out the pilot. She firmly pushed aside war memories that threatened to overlap with their present situation.

Stay in the moment, she ordered herself.

"You need help?" she asked Lu, as she did a quick assessment of the bridge and Lu.

Beads of blood were on his face from the shattered bits of reinforced shielding that hit him. It had to have been a powerful penetrating projectile to have exploded the fore shield. If this were a military operation, he would have been following SOP and wearing a regulation helmet. When her eyes looked into his, she could see he knew he messed up. The smell of blood was strong. Looking at his chest, blood was seeping through his fingers that were gripping a metal disk that was sticking out of his clothing.

"Saints preserve us," she whispered as she quickly took the co-pilot's seat, activated the co-pilot's instruments, and fought for control of their shuttle. Their craft shaved treetops heading into the side of the cliff until she could feel the ship respond to her command. The moist air blowing in her face had her wiping it and squinting to see where they were going. The control panel had alarm lights at steady, rather than blinking a warning of failure. Monk Abba moved to the injured pilot's side and tended his wounds. Peripherally, she could see him remove the metal from Lu's chest and using his robe to staunch the blood flow. Cormac stumbled over to them with a first aid kit. Blood coagulates and pain killers, along with fast healing strips of sealants were part of first aid kits.

Calose concentrated on their leaving the area.

"Where are we?" Cormac asked.

"I don't know but we're heading back to camp," Calose announced. With her eyes moving from the control panel to the outside, Calose gave power to the damaged engines to rise higher so she could hide them behind the cliffs. They all could feel the ship shudder as it struggled to

respond to commands. The locator to their campsite was blinking off/on. Calose hit the reset several times until the light and scanner gave a steady reading.

She could hear Abbot calling Merlota Space Station with a medical emergency and reporting they had been attacked by armed people. From the control board, Calose could see Abbot had released the recordings from the freighter's cameras to, she hoped, the Federations Special Forces. Calose hit the button that would beacon out their location with an emergency broadcast. It gave out a pathetic signal. Perhaps not a good idea considering they were attacked, but she was planning they all shelter inside the cave until help arrived. That plan was dashed when the scans picked up live weapons fire coming from the direction of their camp.

“Do you have weapons on board?” Calose asked.

“Yes. But nothing serious to cause anything more than a shock.”

“Set them to their highest power. The scans are showing someone is firing a weapon from our camp.”

“It's probably that cursed Hanmel,” Comac muttered.

She studied the shuttle’s power readings. The shuttle was straining to keep them above the clouds. Once they were above the camp area, the scan of the area registered three biologicals in the clearing. Only one moving about. No weapons fire. She dropped through the clouds and hovered close to the ground not able to land since the second shot had disabled or removed the left landing strut. It wouldn't be possible for a level landing. Monk Abba climbed out with Cormac and helped a wounded Marie and Jac into the shuttle. Hanmel the only one standing, jumped into the shuttle as Cormac and Abba exited. He offered no help with the wounded. Calose was relieved to see he didn't have his rifle with him, then worried where she could take the damaged shuttle until help arrived.

“Hanmel! Only you, Marie, and Jac. Is this all? Where are the others?” Abbot demanded.

“Dead,” Hanmel said flatly. “Let's get out of here.”

Calose was about to lift off when she caught sight of orange movement from the mouth of the cave. The monk Zedda.

A small weapon was pressed against her head. “You didn't see anything,” Hanmel said.

“I will not leave a member of this team behind,” she stated indignantly without thinking her situation through.

“Hanmel, put that away!” Abbot shouted at the same time.

The moment the gun pressure was removed, Calose took advantage of the distraction and bumped the shuttle roughly to cause Hanmel to lose his balance. The blow he aimed at the back of her head wasn't as hard as it could have been, but it hurt. Calose moved the shuttle close to the mouth of the cave, hit the automatic opener for the shuttle doors, and cut the engine.

The shuttle dropped heavily at a tilted angle, rolling everyone sideways who didn't have a firm grip on a seat, into the bulkhead away from the shuttle doors. Calose was out of her seat and about to lean over to assist Lu when her shoulder was rammed against the frame of the cockpit as Hanmel shoved into her.

“Everyone out!” she shouted as she pushed back at Hanmel to get to the doors. She pulled Lu to follow her. His bandaged face was a grimace, but he struggled to get past Hanmel. She noted everyone that was mobile was already struggling to their feet. Hanmel's weapon was kicked out of the shuttle by Rachel who then pulled Cormac out before he could attack Hanmel. Hanmel came back at Calose, pushing her off-balance then hitting Lu with an elbow punch to his jaw, knocking him back into the pilot's seat. Lu gave a pained whoosh sound. Calose was sure Lu's brief surge of energy was gone and was about to go back for him had the monk not grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the shuttle.

You cannot help, she heard.

The ship's engines were restarted and began to lift. There was a protesting whine that hurt her ears, but the shuttle was slowly rising and picking up speed. She regretted leaving the injured on the shuttle with Hanmel, but he was minus his gun and his rifle which she could see was discarded next to the smoking campfire.

The shadow in the cave was Monk Zedda that had been left with Morgan's group. Benji



was sitting next to an unconscious Morgan. They all moved into the cave, turning on their lights. Now that the immediate danger of Hanmel was gone, the monks Abba and Zedda began taking care of the wounded, including Abbot that had a bleeding cheek. Calose's bump on the head was bleeding, which she hadn't noticed until Abba knelt beside her and gave her first aid. His touch eased her headache and the ache in her shoulder.

“I'm worried about Morgan,” Benji said to Abbot. “His bleeding has stopped, but his color isn't good.”

“We need to grab supplies,” Cormac said, pointing at food packs among the scattered belongings of the group.

Calose went to stand next to him. It looked like someone had been looking for something among the scientists' personal packs and did not care about hiding it. Her eyes shifted to the surrounding shrubs. Fluorescent orbs were staring out from the shrubs. “We're being watched. If anything in those bushes have weapons, we'll be picked off if we leave the tunnel.”

“We can defend ourselves better in the deeper sections of the tunnel,” Benji said. “You can turn your lamps off to save power. Mine is strong enough.”

“What about Soren?” Kale asked.

“He continued down the tunnel while I came up to get food and see if you left us our packs. We were sure if you left you would have dropped off our gear. We didn't want to stop exploring, so I drew the short stick to pick up our gear. I met Monk Zedda who was dragging Morgan into the tunnel with the first aid kit. That crazed Hanmel! The idiot emptied his clip shooting at anything that moved. Marie and Jac were down bleeding and Zedda pushed me back into the tunnel. I could have sworn Billy shot at me intentionally! There wasn't any chance of us reaching Marie and Jac!”

“He must not have read the directions that instructed that wherever the operator's eyes move that's where the muzzle aims,” Rachel said. “Dumber than a garden slug!”

“They aren't so dumb, considering they know what plant is poisoned and what isn't,” Cormac said. “Who gave that scagget authorization to carry any weapon?” he demanded.

“His father said he was authorized to carry a weapon. I didn't bother to find out just what weapon it was. I thought it was the usual stungun,” Abbot said. “We aren’t here to kill!”

“The ARR202 is a combat weapon for ground troops, for mowing down lines of the enemy, not for wildlife hunting, which is absolutely not permitted at this point of our research,” Rachel said angrily. “How did he get that past the equipment check? All we can carry are stunguns for protection.”

Lauren patted her shoulder to calm her down.

“Good thing he ran out of ammunition,” Cormac said.

“Lucky me. I heard the last bullet ping next to my head then the empty eject,” Benji said.

“Where's this light coming from?” Halley asked. “It's too bright for a headlamp.”

“I don't know, but let's catch up with Soren. I don't know if all the noise topside has reached him.”

Calose cursed softly. The AIHs were on the shuttle.

“Good thing Monk Zedda thought of grabbing the first aid kit,” Abbot said. “We'll have to do some emergency drills, after this.”

“Or just follow the rules and not allow the pampered sons of pompous committee members who have a financial interest in a project to be allowed on field missions,” Cormic said. “I hope those SPs you called for help have food, Abbot,” he added. “I'm getting hungry.”

“What happened to Hanmel?” Calose asked Lauren.

“Did you recognize his panic? Billy,” she stressed, “is like a civilian in the middle of a war zone. He is a phony and a scagget. He knows nothing about science. This is his first time in the field. He obviously didn't attend the required holographic sessions on learning the rules of what a field scientist is required to follow. By the fifth session, a team of veterans grade the mental and physical qualifications of the petitioner. He wouldn't have passed the first session, so right there is grounds for challenging whoever is responsible for inserting him in our team.”

“I agree. If I had known Billy Boy No Wonder, was assigned to our team, I would have protested to the committee chair and demanded an investigation,” Rachel said. “No free rides on field missions! That's rule number one!”

“Like all of you, I was assigned to this site less than 36 hours ago. There was barely enough time to go over our orders, check equipment and supplies, and for me to read up on all of your specializations,” Abbot said, sounding weary. “Of course, Billy's was rather short with 15 years of managing a chemical lab. There was a message that he needed mentoring. Gods but if I had time, I would have said NO.”

“In case you haven't guessed by now,” Kale said to Calose, “Billy's father is on the Colonization Board and Billy, who only wants to be called Hanmel, the family name, was sent along as a spy, because he certainly isn't worth spit as a scientist. Apparently the Hanmel Clan has a lot invested in Modifi's colonization to their specifications.”

“That still doesn't qualify him to pack an illegal weapon in his gear,” Lauren added. “And it makes my head spin to think of what his father's orders are for him. That Hanmel Clan is acting criminal if my suspicion is correct!”

“I just wish it was on someone else's watch and on another planet,” Abbot muttered.

“Aren't you worried about him being out there?” Calose asked.

“No. By the sound of the shuttle as it was lifting it's not going far. I just hope the wounded survive when he crashes,” Kale said, sounding regretful. “I have no worry about our samples as they're better protected than our colleagues.”

“Without his daddy and his illegal weapons, he's a coward,” Rachel said. “I was keeping an eye on his handgun when it got knocked out of his hand. I got a good kick of it and aimed to the outside of the shuttle.”

“We were lucky it didn't go off and shoot someone,” Cormac said.

“It did. It got me!” Abbot said outraged, touching the cut on his cheek.

“That was your karma for letting him come along. You could have left him back at station 4 since he was late,” Halley said.

“Yeah? Well, then I have nothing to worry about now,” Abbot returned.

The group laughed, dissipating the anger and fear of the group.

Calose could feel a soothing energy surrounding them as they began their walk further into the mountain's interior.

They moved slowly to accommodate the slow pace the monks Abba and Zedda set in front of their line, carrying the unconscious Morgan suspended in a sling made from a length of cloth, a sanghatis, from Monk Zedda's robe.

“Just how far has Soren gone?” Cormac asked.

“As far as he can,” Benji said. He sounded tired and Calose felt his wound was hurting. Abbot looked tired too.

She touched her head, feeling a lump and tenderness where Hanmel had hit her. Her hair was sticky with blood from a run in with something else, but it had stopped bleeding. She rotated her shoulder then moved her arm to see how much her shoulder injury was going to be a hinderance should they need to do some steep climbing, or if she needed to pitch in to carry something. Luckily, her borrowed coat had softened some of the blow to her shoulder.

“Let's take a break,” Monk Abba said.

They all leaned against the wall for support and from the sounds of breathing, Calose felt most of them had fallen asleep as soon as their heads rested on the cave wall. Her thoughts went to the AIHs, worrying about their well-being. If she thought deeply about it, she would wonder

why she worried more about the AIHs than the people still in the shuttle with Hanmel. Three of them were wounded, unless Hanmel's mental state could also be counted as a wound.

Did the AIHs have a program for medical assistance?

Calose looked up to see the monks moving among the dozing scientists. Monk Abba sat next to her. He took her hands into his and they sat for a while. It seemed only a moment when she woke up startled. Abbot was leaning over her.

“We found a few nutritional bars stashed in our field suits.” He handed one to Calose. Regretfully, that wasn't in her borrowed coat. “We'll eat while we move. Cormac went back up the tunnel and could hear noises. He thinks we're being followed but he didn't want to see by what.”

They continued their descent, when suddenly the cavern opened before them, with huge



stalagmites and stalactites hanging over an abyss. The cavern looked like someone had a light turned on so they could see carved faces and symbols in the hanging mineral deposits. Benji turned off his lamp finding there was no need for it.

“How did they get up there to do that work?' Halley asked.

“Lasers,” Calose said softly. She could feel an unmistakable comforting energy surrounding them which was increasing as they descended further into the cavern. She was sure part of the energy was from the symbols that could be seen if she altered her sight.

“This is proof! We told you, some of the population would have moved into the natural caves if they hadn't dug some of their own,” Benji said excitedly. “It's happened on all the planets we've studied where there were wars and devastation on the surface.”

“Yes, yes you and Soren did say so,” Abbot said soothingly. “Let's hope if there are survivors from the reseeding, that they're a lot friendlier than the one's we left behind.”

“What we left behind were illegal land grabbers and an idiot that broke Federation rules and laws, and I for one will have a list of charges to bring against him,” Halley said.

“Yeah, me too,” Rachel said, sounding more relaxed.

“I'm with you on that,” Cormic said.

Calose shined her light on a carved face in the cavern wall to get a better view. A dragon. Before she could call the others’ attention to it, they could hear footfalls coming toward them from further down the sloping path.

“Soren?” Benji called.

“Benji! It's a holy city!” A voice called up to them, echoing and vibrating the crystals hanging around them, sending an interesting sound out.

Soren came into view with a large smile on his face and Benji went to join him. Both wrapped their arms around each other, until Soren noticed Benji's bandaged arm.

“Aiee, Benji!” Soren said, then catching sight of Morgan in the sling the monks carried between them, demanded, “What happened?”

“Later. What did you find?” Abbot demanded.

“Abbot!” Soren said breathlessly. “Now, I don't want you getting all bureaucratic and start issuing orders like we have any say in the indigenous people's rights to live here. They call this the Sacred City Ma.” His face lit up when he said the name. “We are in the mountain of Ali'Um, the Mountain of Hope! On our maps, it's not marked, but then, the landscape hasn't been given official names, only location IDs. Obviously, the native people will have a say in that!”

Abbot looked uncertain at Soren, wondering just what Soren thought he was going to do with the finding of indigenous people to the planet existing after all the reseeding chemicals were dumped on its surface. Mentally he went over just what the chemicals were and the possible harm it could do to native populations. He shuddered at the thought of what HQ in the rewilding bureau was going to have to do. It looked like his superior knew what he was hinting about when he made an emergency deployment of a science team to Modifi.

The monks continued down the widened path, carrying Morgan, into another wide-open cavern that was a carved city from mountain rock. Once around the corner their path was lined with elaborately carved ancient teachers and some that were considered goddesses and gods. The colors were as if they were freshly painted. The sounds of chanting came to them as did the flutes and clanging of cymbals. Calose was as astonished as the others when more than one species was walking up from the city toward them, dressed in the robes of novices for the order of the Peaceful Warrior.

"It's a statue of the Blue Guardian of Peace. Oh, goddess and gods, bless us," Lauren said reverently, staring at one of the statues at the entrance. "This is like the Holy City of Om." She turned to Rachel. "Isn't it?"



"Something like a holy city," Cormac answered when she didn't.

Rachel was staring with her mouth opened in awe at the colorful statues that were along the stairs that led to the entrance of a carved city that was lit up from unidentified sources. Many of the statues along the stairs were of species that evolved as a collective into a spiritual vibration that many in the lower dimensions wouldn't be able to see.

The monks gestured to their group to follow them down into the city. Soren was pulling Benji along, talking nonstop, with Calose and Kale listening.

"You mean even before the galaxy war started the monks were here?" Benji asked.

"They see the future and send out monks to assist communities that will be the hardest hit by devastations or such. They are the messengers of peace and arbitrators between disputing parties. They were working with the various battling factions on this planet before the galaxy war started. We've seen in countless societies that caverns throughout planets have long been places of refuge for the natives when surface wars become too violent for their sensibilities."



"Yes, yes. But we've not been able to show how much the monks partook in establishing cavern shelters," Benji said.

"What does it matter?" Lauren asked impatiently. "Listen to the music and chanting. It's beautiful."

“I thought the natives would be suspicious of another species telling them what to do,” Kale said.

“That sounds like misinformation with ulterior motives,” Halley said.

“Whoever is responsible for the carvings and statues I give my respect to,” Lauren said.

“What about the chemical reseeding influence on the surface?” Abbot asked.

“There were many sentient beings in varying degrees of what some Federation members considered intelligent on this planet before the war, during the war and when the chemicals were dropped, to the present. Multitudes of species are sheltered in caverns scattered around the planet until it's safe for the natives to move back to living on the surface of their planet. These are very intelligent people who've been neutralizing the more dangerous chemicals! We need to make sure their planet isn't stolen!” Soren said anxiously.

“Calm down. What else did you find out,” Abbot said.

“This mountain is called Ali'Um translated to Mountain of Hope. It was a spiritual retreat long before the Federation took interest in it. Colonizing this planet without the indigenous natives' input is against the Galaxy Federation's mandate. According to one of the monks, the rewilding committee is aware that many of the indigenous and sentient people and other native creatures existed before they began their unlawful chemical drops!” His anxiety again went up as the others within hearing distance also picked up on his message of an illegal chemical reseeding action.

Abbot held up his hands in supplication. “Our job is to verify the planet is habitable, for what species and then turn in a report. We can't become involved in politics. We need to stay neutral.”

“And let's not forget to mention that the original natives of the planet are still living!” Rachel said. “That's not over-stepping our neutrality. It's stating the obvious that our sworn duty as scientists to uphold reporting on the process of repairing a planet covers, whether clearing toxins or replanting an environment to sustain the creatures living on that land.”

Lauren nodded with a glance around the others who returned her nod.

Chapter Eight

The injured were shown to the healer's room. It had access to an underground arboretum which Calose and her crew were planning on adding to *Faithful Friend.* See-through partitions

separated it from the infirmary to keep those who might be allergic to some plants from being affected. As Calose waited to be attended to, she studied other rooms with views into the arboretum. Chanting and music, came from monks attending to those in beds. She could see energy coming from hands that hovered over the patients. Peaceful and loving vibrations permeated the air giving Calose a warm feeling. It reminded her of the many visits to military recovery centers during her active duty in war zones. After the science team and she had been attended to, they were escorted out onto a path and pointed to another hall. Their team members were seated at a long table, eating, and having intense conversations in low tones, punctuated with an angry jab of an eating utensil not necessarily pointed at anyone.

Morgan was still unconscious, and the conversation was about how he got injured. When they were all seated and the injured treated were served food and drink. At the encouragement of Rachel, the Monk Zedda repeated his version of what had transpired at the camp.

He had helped Billy set up the camp, which the others mumbled “Bet Billy didn't do much of anything while Monk Zedda set up camp”, and once finished with that task Monk Zedda said, he retired to a rock facing away from the camp to meditate. He was startled out of his meditation by a single shot then rapid-fire shooting. When he climbed down from his spot to see what was happening, he saw three people down bleeding and Billy shooting into the surrounding brush with his rifle. The camp site looked as if it had been ransacked with personal pack contents strewn about. Billy was facing away from him, and Morgan was near the cave entrance, bleeding profusely and not moving. He grabbed a first aid pack from the scattered items and dragged Morgan into the cave. He intended on getting the other two wounded scientists, but his movement attracted Billy's attention, and he swung the rifle that was still firing in his direction. He hid in the cave, believing Billy would not be able to fire into the cave or enter it himself.

“Why did you believe that?” demanded Abbot.

“It had the mark of a sacred city at its opening,” he explained.

“You knew that and didn't say anything?” a few of the others demanded simultaneously.

“If you should stumble on something sacred, it was meant to be. We are here as observers,” the monk replied.

Calose knew many people, especially the monks, believed that at underground sacred city entrances the profane could not enter, and that included weapon fire. She didn't want to challenge anyone's beliefs on that, but she also didn't want to have to test it.

“Did you actually see Billy shoot the three scientists?” Abbot asked the monk.

“No.”

“Well then, we may have our suspicions, but Billy's lawyers will want picture proof.” Abbot sighed. “We have three casualties on the first day! When we get back, I'll see that he's banned from any further field assignments because of the weapons he brought with him and his attack against Calose. I'll also have that family removed from the planet repair committee for pushing an unqualified Billy to join this team. They've had warnings about their meddling with science teams, and this will be their last infraction.”

“So how long has this city been here,” Rachel asked.

“Over ten-fold of a Lonex's life span. That could be longer than your family remembers its beginnings,” Monk Ozi teased.

“How many are there living here?” Abbot asked.

Monk Ozi smiled. “On Modifi more than you can count. Modifi has supported life in varied life forms with each developing to higher consciousness since its beginning, ending in cataclysms and beginning again. Nothing dies, just reforms, and moves on. The consciousness of the planet grows as does those that inhabit her.”

“What about during the war years?” Cormac asked.

Monk Ozi, told the story of Modifi for the last 25 standard years, using Federation's passage of time, but by Modifi's time it was 34 years. His tale was that there were over thirty-two thousand evacuees from the Federation's space posts above Modifi and military posts on the planet during the war years that had to take refuge below the surface of the planet. After the war, the refugees chose to become citizens of Modifi. When the toxic chemicals were dropped on the planet's surface after the war, everyone on Modifi had to take refuge below the planet's surface.

Everyone from the science group was stunned.

“Federation space stations and military posts evacuated here during the war? How did that happen?” Abbot asked.

“There was a saboteur that blew up the space posts. There were no spaceships nearby to evacuate personnel, and we were fortunate to be able to safely transport them to our planet before it exploded. No fatalities and the saboteur did escape safely but was identified.”

“How did you rescue everyone? How did...”

“Telepathy,” Rachel said.

The monk nodded.

“Those assigned to the weapon bunkers, knew someone in their group was a spy, and not for the Gepaks but from a cartel. Those in the bunkers found explosives set to go off and they escaped with our help.”

“Why didn't anyone send a message to HQ about the sabotage and spies?” Calose asked.

“Because they knew already but needed more time to identify those who were taking advantage of the war to create chaos for their financial benefit. We assured the officials we trusted that there would be no unnecessary loss of life and will rescue those left on the space stations as well as in the bunkers.”

“So, the reports were falsified?” Rachel demanded. “What about those that were reported dead? What of their families?”

“If they came forward then, as well as now, their families and their lives would be in danger. A public trial would be drawn out, with the witness's families threatened and more than likely assassinated to certain their silence.”

“I don't believe this,” Cormac said incredulously.

The monk looked around the table sending out soothing energy, then looked back at Abbot. “Armed people arrived on this planet, a day before your team arrived. They started killing anyone they spotted as if it were a sport and not caring if it's a female carrying her young or a child too young to run for cover...because their cover was destroyed. Habitats and vegetation are being destroyed as if they knew exactly where families were located. Waterways that had been poisoned with the chemicals were slowly coming back, but these men are poisoning them again. We were expecting a move from the group that wants this planet for their own use, but not this soon. We are marshaling our defenses, everyone playing a part they feel comfortable with, for we are a planet that practices many faiths, so some will take up arms and others prayer.”

“So, nothing has really changed since the war!” Cormac said angrily. “You let others do the dirty work while you stay in your safe caves.”

“On this planet we seek peace. Everyone has their own unique way of seeking and keeping peace. Not all species have it in their genetic makeup to be violent. You're an entomologist and have seen this. Those that are nonviolent have protectors that help preserve their genetics. And so, it is here, as it has been for hundreds of years.”

Cormac became angrier. “It's fine for non-sentient beings, but for armies to be sent out to fight for pacifists who won't protect themselves is a waste of brave soldiers' lives!”

“Who provided the support at home, grew the crops, tended the wounded, and prayed for those who found fighting a better outlet, and for those whose psyche became wounded from their killing?”

By Cormac's expression, it didn't lessen his feelings about those who chose a different life path during the war. Calose suspected he had some issues that needed sorting out.

The monk paused to let the anger showing on Cormac's face smooth out. Cormac's breathing became deeper and his fists tightly gripping around his drinking cup loosened.

“What concerns your group's business, is that there has been a lot of subplate movement, tremors, and lava flows from six volcanoes. It's causing plume smoke and when the wind blows from the ocean, and toxic air is spread, and much on the surface will die. Our temple on the other side of the ocean reports the areas where the volcanoes are erupting have mass migrations of those that are mobile. The toxic chemicals are still being neutralized, and the volcanic action is off the last of the poisons, covering damaged land under the burning lava.”

“What does that mean for this planet?” Benji asked.

“Nothing will happen that we can't recover from. I would suggest you not investigate some of the caves that smell of sulfur,” he smiled at Benji who gave him a thumbs up.

Even as he was speaking everyone could feel a slight tremor under their feet.

“What do you think, Calose?” Cormac demanded. “You're a WVET. What's going to happen when the story changes that the space stations that were destroyed were done by a cartel spy not some crazed native on a primitive planet and lives thought lost may still be alive?”

She didn't want to be drawn in on a JAG matter. Was that why she and her crew were sent here?

“My only concern is what happened to the two AIHs I've been given responsibility of.”

“Worried about paying for them? The agency will pay any damages,” Kale said.

Calose felt an unreasonable anger at Kale's assumption he knew what she meant. Before she could respond, she felt a hand laid gently on her hand. Looking down, she found her right hand covered by Monk Abba's hand. She relaxed her hand and stood abruptly. She needed to move around.

“I'm going to take a look around, if that's permitted.”

One of the resident monks, serving them nodded.

“Don't you want to know what we’re going to do next?” Abbot asked.

“I'm here to manage two AIHs, which aren't here. So, I'll let you scientists figure out what your next move will be.”

As she left the room, Lauren spoke what everyone must be thinking, “If what Monk Ozi says is true, then if anyone on this team discovers the truth, our lives and our family's lives are in danger, whether we say something or not.”

Calose stepped out of the stone city into a brighter light and walked along a smooth street



with carved spiritual beings in the walls. They looked incredibly old. The buildings or carved rooms could just as easily have been holographs of a city on the surface. No names were on the buildings. They probably didn't get many visitors asking for directions.

After a half hour of wandering around, Calose went into a temple. Someone was ringing a bell to clear the space. At first it appeared that no one was in the temple, then she began to see outlines. The temple was filled with people praying. It took her a few moments to quiet herself and then she was aware of chanting, drums and flutes. She sighed happily and became immersed in the vibrations.

“Fourth and fifth dimensional beings,” Monk Abba, informed her. *“Can you see them?”* he asked.

Calose took a deep breath and let it out, further quieting her thoughts. “When I chant to raise my energy, and quiet myself, I can see fourth dimensional beings. For higher dimensional



beings, I can feel their presence and hear them.”

A voice calling her name had her turning her head. Rather than disturbing the energy in the temple she went outside.

“Ah, there you are. Are you a follower of the Peaceful Warrior?” Rachel asked.

“I chant, meditate, do as little harm to living things as I can, and try not to get involved in other people's convoluted business.”

Rachel smiled. “Now that takes some doing with our current situation. And that's the dilemma of us all on this expedition.”

Both started back to the eating hall.

“What's the dilemma?” Calose asked.

“Who has a legitimate claim for colonization when citizens of Modifi are here and alive. They must have a government and a representative to say who can migrate here and who cannot. And by the story Monk Ozi told us, it wasn't Modifi citizens that blew up the Federations property as the public documents reported,” Rachel's said. “Look, don't mind Cormac's outburst too seriously. He just had to let off steam. Cormac is the youngest in his family and missed the conscription into service by a year. He feels embarrassed and cheated yet relieved he didn't go to war. His siblings didn't escape injuries though the physical ones are healed. His mother died defending their city, his father is a raving nut case and must be hospitalized several times a year, and Cormac's the only one that has a professional education. He's got a lot of guilt.”

“That opens a jar of nasties. How did you get involved with this group?” Calose asked.

“When I finished my schooling, I planned to work in a laboratory that specialized in gases, natural and manufactured. By the time I graduated the war was getting strong and those types of laboratories were run by the war bureau who wanted students fresh out of college who were up to date with all the new lab equipment. Whether the war continued or not, I had a future job.”

“Did you make it to a laboratory?”

“I was drafted at my graduation’s celebration dinner,” she said dryly. “That's where I got a good dose of weapons training. After bootcamp I was rushed to the front lines, where I had up close experiences of the effects of the Gepaks attacks against civilians with gases aimed at specific species for specific effects. A real-life laboratory with real life suffering at my disposal, fresh out of college. What more could a graduate want?” she finished bitterly.

Calose felt a shudder from Rachel. She laid a hand on her shoulder in commiseration. Rachel gave her a quick smile. The tension around her eyes left and the shoulder under her hand relaxed. Calose attributed it to the energy in the city.

“Cormac went with Monk Zedda, back up the tunnel to see if anyone is following us down here and see if any of our equipment and supplies are retrievable. He needs to do something physical to calm him down. Monk Ozi told Abbot that no one will enter the tunnel that has murder on their mind. I'm not sure I believe that since I was pretty angry with Billy Boy Hanmel!”

“They believe nothing profane can violate the sacred. Two different types of energy. I believe there is some truth to that. In the time we were gone, who ransacked the camp? I would like to hear what the three wounded scientists have to say,” Calose said.

“Jac, Marie and Morgan. Morgan was the supervisor, and he had a serious head wound. In the back of the head, like Billy tried to give you.”

“Do you think Billy intentionally attacked the three?”

“As evidenced in that he tried to do us in when you wouldn't leave until we picked up the monk? Look, I'm not a neutral party here. I don't like him or his family. Three of us were assigned to another team to investigate a claim against a company that hosted colonists on a planet that was toxic to half the settlers. We were pulled right at the space port, as were the rest of this team from their original assignments. Why us? What happened to the original team that was part of the reseeding of this planet? What we've witnessed is that the original inhabitants are alive and thriving and we've seen a hunting party destroying habitat. We've also been attacked, which I am assuming was from a hunting party not from this planet. I hate it when corporations and families like cartels get involved in the resettling businesses. This is my livelihood, and I don't take kindly to having it hijacked into a weapon against the interests of the indigenous of that planet.”

“Enlightened inclusiveness seems to be difficult for some galaxy citizens,” Calose said.

“Right. Abbot wants to get back to the surface to continue our work. When we've done as much as we can before the volcanoes send out their poisons in the air, we'll take a vote on just what we're going to do with Monk Ozi's information. Cormac wants to retrieve the ARR202 to get Billy arrested,” she said.

“What about the rest of you?” Calose asked.

Another tremor was felt beneath their feet.

“We all want to get on with what we’re here for.” She shook her head in consternation. “I'm putting a lot of faith in the Federation's undercover operations that they are aware of all this and won't leave us dangling. Someone picked us specifically, and it wasn't in the interest of the Hanmels.”

Calose sighed, wishing Di had given her and her crew a clearer message of just why he wanted them in the area, but he specifically said in two weeks. What was supposed to happen in two weeks that was more troublesome than this?

“Do you think it's more than one planet that's been lied about?” Calose asked.

“Thinking about it in a greedy way, I think it's the ones that are strategically placed where space ports or space stations with plans for expanding are. That's probably why the Federation has assigned the monks to follow the entire process. Too many complaints of bribery, abandoning colonies too soon without the contracted support, and nepotism within the businesses that deal in colonization are flooding the communication channels to the Federation's Committees and making it to the newsies.”

She and her crew were witnesses to plenty of that.

“Merlota is planning on expanding?” Calose asked.

“Someone wants something in this part of space,” Rachel said.

“There you both are,” Kale said. “One of the monks is going to show us a way back to the surface but on the other side of the mountain. The monks don't want their city invaded by an army of Federation troops. I can't say I blame them. Until we get a feel for what's going on here, even we're in danger.”

Rachel gave Calose a knowing glance.

They entered the hall where the others were gathered.

There was a collection of packs and instruments Cormac and the monk Zedda retrieved from above ground, piled in the center of the room.

“ENV masks are missing from our packs. Cormac went looking in the surrounding bush and found three that were damaged from weapons fire. The monks are supplying us with masks from their supplies.” She nodded at Calose that had her ENV mask in its case on her hip. “It's good you carry yours around with you.”

Calose patted the case. “Never enter an unfamiliar situation without an ENV or the exit within easy reach. An AIU’s bio protection is for a short time.”

“Sound advice a supervisor gives before pushing a trainee out the exit hatch on a training mission.” Rachel chuckled.

“With the tremors we're feeling,” Lauren told Calose, “I would rather be topside. The SPs Abbot called for should be close by, searching for us. We'll stay close enough to the cave opening if the volcanic clouds head our way and thank goodness, we all have the monks' donation of masks with us. We all keep air filters for light work in our uniform pockets. I have a dozen I carry in my pack. I'll give you one. We'll be okay.”

Packs and equipment that were retrieved from the camp topside were unpacked and repacked after the contents were checked. They had what they would need should they encounter volcanic ash in the atmosphere. Their supplies were tied securely onto a cart that looked like someone or all of them would take turns pulling up the path to the surface.

Soren and Benji took the lead, electing to pull the cart in tandem, and setting a fast pace upward. Calose thought they would be reluctant to leave but by their conversations, they wanted to check out more of the caves marked on their map before the predicted volcanoes exploded. Calose wondered just how long this expedition was going to last.

When they reached the end of the tunnel, it was to see a starry sky with tiny bugs blinking and moving like stars against the dark backdrop. Everyone helped set up a night camp. They all seemed to take their safety for granted, except Calose. She couldn't sleep on the hard ground, and she could hear too much of the nightlife. Everyone wore air filters rather than use the air up on their borrowed breathers just in case ash from the volcanoes reached them in the night. The monks had given blankets for the night and food but tents and cots they didn't have.

Chapter Nine

The next morning, everyone woke up out of sorts. Calose didn't believe she slept at all. Some began rolling up their blankets as they stiffly moved about. Food was heated from the supplies the monks had given them for their travel. It was tastier than their camp rations. There wasn't much talk as Calose was sure everyone was thinking about the information Monk Ozi had given them. Calose wondered how many of them thought it likely a gang or cartel would take action on a long-range plan to take over planets under the cover of war and then complete their theft after the war with the Federations unwitting assistance. Billy Hanmel's shooting at them gave credence to the threat they posed to his family's efforts to complete their plan.

Calose sought privacy for her morning toilet behind a tree and heard someone moving slowly through the bushes. To her relief the soldier wore the uniform of the Federation Military Special Forces, the Federation's ground troops. When she got back to camp, Abbot was explaining to a SF lieutenant colonel what had occurred.

Once they had their camp packed up a troop shuttle lifted them and their belongings to a large troop freighter that was meant to carry and support ground troops with up to six shuttles. This was a floating HQ for a Special Force battalion that expected to be deployed from weeks to

months from battlefield to battlefield. The Federation found that their members expected support from a neutral policing arm of the Federation not only in space but also when violence on their planets from noncitizens threatened the balance of their political systems. Space Police and Special Forces were formed to keep peace in space and on planets. Both forces were monitored with cameras and in many cases accompanied by monks to insure neutrality.

Once on board they were escorted to a wardroom where the lieutenant colonel began a meeting with Abbot and Kale. There were additional monks in on the meeting, one for each SF company.

Calose moved to where Lauren was sitting.

“What's going on?” Calose whispered.

“Kale let me read the arrest report of Billy Hanmel. Marie, Jac and Lu were in bad shape when they were first interviewed and said they couldn't remember anything. They were moved to the casualty center, away from Billy, and when questioned by a JAG officer, their stories changed. They said Billy Hanmel threatened them with retaliation from his family if they didn't collaborate with his story of being attacked by wild animals. Wild animals using automatic weapons?” Lauren mocked. “Anyway, Marie and Jac's official story is when they returned to camp with bio-samples, they found the contents of their packs scattered and Morgan lying in a pool of blood. They rushed toward Morgan and Jac reported hearing a loud bang and Marie who was in front of him, fell to the ground and then he was shot. They vaguely remember being carried into the shuttle but then they don't remember much else because of their pain. Lu said he remembered the shuttle being hit with a frontal shot, and he blacked out. He was conscious in and out as the monk gave him aid and can remember you helping him to stand, but Billy punched him. That's all he remembers until he was pumped with drugs as he was airlifted out of the wreck of his shuttle. He remembers happy thoughts of his insurance paying for the replacement of his shuttle and if not, the rewilding board certainly would. The SF medic reported Marie and Jac's wounds were from direct hits of a small arms fire. When Billy was asked a second time to detail what happened he changed his story to claim jumpers came into their camp and shot the three scientists. He admitted he fired back with his unauthorized rifle, which he believed was what chased them away. SF crime scene investigators have returned to the site and are investigating. JAG will give the final judgement. However, it's on official records now that Billy Hanmel is no longer permitted to join any resettlement research group and will have to be certified to keep his

designation as scientist. SF didn't find a signed letter of compliance on file that he fulfilled the pre-training to accompany a science team, and he carried weapons not permitted by civilians on a closed planet. His punishment is awaiting the conclusion of the crime scene investigators on the camp site. The Hanmel family has been officially removed from all rewilding boards since it was the Hanmel family that placed Billy's name on our team without any of the requirements met. They are being charged as a criminal cartel, as they should be. It's about time!"

"What about the supplies in the shuttle and the two AIHs?" Calose asked.

"A very efficient battalion leader. When his recon unit located Lu's shuttle, the injured were moved to medical and our supplies have been moved to the shuttles they're loaning us. I bet your AIHs are with the rest of our equipment."

"I'd like to see. Which shuttles are they in?"

"Let's go see." The two walked back into the shuttle bay.

Rachel was climbing into one of the three shuttles left in the bay. From the personnel moving about, the three remaining would soon be in use.

The two women eagerly hurried over.

"Calose," Rachel said, "you may be relieved to hear, you still have a job. Your AIHs are in the back with the rescued supplies. Lauren, do you want to help me test these devices to make sure they're still working? They took a good knock when Billy crashed. Then we'll split the testing equipment between the three shuttles they're letting us use."

Knowing the AIHs were secured she turned her attention to six devices that Rachel was recalibrating. She could feel energy leaking from one of them.

"What are you going to use these for?" Calose asked.

"They're for measuring the air quality and bacteria and identifying what kind of microbes are living in the grasses along the riverbanks," Lauren explained. "We're going to compare these results with the samples your AIHs will be picking up further upstream. If the AIHs are better at this, Abbot is thinking of recommending using AIHs instead of us lugging in all this equipment. After all, if your laboratory can walk, collect samples, and carry its own test tubes, why should we carry it? Hey?"

"Are they working?" Lauren asked.

"No," Rachel said. "I can feel an energy leak from one of them. The calibration is off. Any data it collects right now isn't worth spit."

“We'll get it back to right again,” Lauren said, confidently. “And before we're back in the field. I've worked on enough of these I can do it blindfolded...but don't hold me to it.”

“So, when do you think we go back out?” Calose asked.

“We’ve got two days before the toxic air from the volcanoes make it too dangerous for us without specialized ENV suits to continue our work, so we've got to get a move on.”

“And then, there are the winds which will change conditions suddenly,” Lauren said.

“Ahh. There. A pin was missing. It fell to the bottom of the frame.” Rachel inspected the pin and reinserted it. Then a test ran and all the lights blinked. “Yep. Back to working order.”

“You’re going to do the entire planet in two days?” Calose asked skeptically.

“No. Three shuttles in three different directions. The SFs already have a dozen shuttles out looking for the mercenaries while three have been held back for our use. Abbot and I in one will be dropping monitors where it's too rugged or dangerous for us to touch ground and where we can, we'll get samples and get out quickly. From being attacked by the mercenaries, we should be quite safe with a hand full of SF watching over us. We'll be measuring the air quality too and how the toxic gases spread and how far, and what is affected. Two of the new monks will be accompanying us,” Rachel explained. “Just in case we do run into mercenaries.”

“I've never seen Abbot this excited. I think he's feeling like a scientist again. Benji, Halley, you and I and your AIHs will be accompanied with four soldiers to guard us against wild beasts, and Kale, Cormac and Soren will be taking the third shuttle with a squad of soldiers to study the volcano eruptions as they occur, and at the same time pick up whoever they spot in danger,” Lauren said.

Calose left the two talking about their excitement at getting a chance to see a planet change under its own actions. Both AIHs were sitting among scientific equipment. Calose made herself comfortable with them.

“You don’t have to sit back here,” Rachel said.

“Would you sit far from your testing equipment?” Calose asked.

“Not after that last fiasco, no.”

“Nor would I. As big as they are, they get lost too easily.”

Lauren shook her head. “You would think you own them.”

“I didn’t read the fine print to see if something happens to them if I, the manager, will be held financially responsible for them. I don’t want to be hit with a fine that will threaten my ownership of my freighter,” Calose said.

“You have a point there. Each space station has some odd rules and laws that take a galaxy lawyer to straighten it all out. By then, you owe a lot of people even if you’ve won the case,” Rachel said.

“Hey, team! We're lucky with this battalion freighter. It’s got over a dozen showers and clothes cleaners, and food dispensers, hot or warm or even cold, and beverages I've never even heard of. These special force soldiers travel in style,” Benji said. He looked at Calose. “I noticed you didn't come prepared for a week of camping. You can clean up feeling less dusty. It's up the corridor and to the left.”

“Gladly.” It took her ten minutes to clean up and though her clothes were still going through a cleaner, she found a uniform waiting for her instead of the robe she borrowed. It fit perfectly with pleats just where they were supposed to be. There were no patches identifying her with a squad or rank.

“Hey, who do I owe a thank you for these clothes?” She noticed her ENV mask had been replaced with a military issue.

“Me. Corporal Steads, Chief Calose.” He grinned at her expression. “WVET, am I right?”

Hesitantly, Calose nodded. He wore the field uniform of a SF but his uniform patches were new, and he had no ribbon bar showing a specialty. With the rank of corporal shouldn't he have a ribbon bar showing more than a graduate from basic training? Maybe he was a transfer from the SP and only his rank was transferable. That was awkward for whoever had more training than him and his rank was higher.

“I recognize you from pictures my mother showed me. Fire and sparks, she called you.”

Calose blushed. That was from another life. The nick name was also from another squadron where she was a higher rank. “Thanks for the clothes. I wasn’t expecting to be here longer than a day. What happened to my ENV mask?”

“We didn't have canisters to replace the one's your mask uses. The air tank was low. No problem about clothes. They're extras we carry. We won't lose you in those. Everyone else is in a uniform,” he explained when Calose frowned. “You're the only one wearing civilian clothes. We don't want to mistake you for one of those illegal colonists.”

Calose thought about her clothes, which were nondescript and not made for roughing them in the wilderness like a colonist. It annoyed her that Halley's warm coat was gone too. Hopefully, Halley had it.

“Our mission here is to be about two weeks, cleaning up whatever doesn't belong here. Now, with the quakes and volcano's puking in the air, only the scientists know what, no telling what we'll be doing. Some of us just got off from R&R so we're fresh and eager. The wag is it's due to a big ICM here, and as usual it's up to us grunts to put it to right.”

“What mess is that?” she asked.

He grinned. “A Federation bureau mess. Illegal sale of land.”

“What do you do with the illegals?” Calose asked curiously.

“Move them to a space station that has larger prison holding cells and let JAG sort it out. The illegals paid a lot of credits and some of them are WVETs that hire out to protect the illegals from anyone that tries to move them off their land or the planet.”

“Who is behind all that?”

“Someone the JAG has under investigation.”

That added to her distrust of Cpl. Steads. The size of the ship they were on, an HQ for a battalion deployment over an entire planet was a serious Federation SF action. It meant the planet's legal residents had called the Federation's Bureau of Enforcement for aid.

“Is your mother still in service?”

“She retired at the rank of Commandant. She said when I joined, she didn’t want to have to hear scuttlebutt about my stubbed toes or failing the water jump on my first try.” He grinned. “She said it’s a small community and she had enough of the what the sadsacks could wag-up.”

“What does she do now?”

“Well, mother and father tried a lot of different things, getting bored after a month or so. They’re now running a packnstack business on Space Station Bu. There's plenty of space shuttle and ferry business with a gambling waystation off Bu and luxury hotels and entertainment areas on the planetside on Bukon.”

“I've heard there are more raids there than big time winners on the waystation. Columinas, is it?” Calose said.

“You heard right, but people keep visiting. Mother and father frequent the Running Wag on Bu. A WVET spacers' bar. Have you heard of it?”

“No. I'm not a bar person. I don’t remember your father, but the mixing of noncoms and officers wasn't encouraged. Your mother’s few visits, however, were memorable. Spit and shine, and our only time we had to be in our dress best, even if a formation wasn't called for.”

“You’ll have to tell me about her visits. Meanwhile, grab a snack while you can. Let me show you where the mess is.”

“Sure.” *I’d like to know what I did to stand out in your mother’s memory since she wasn't in my command structure.* Calose was feeling even more suspicious of the corporal's motives of getting to know her, though she couldn't yet understand why he wanted to get acquainted with her. His use of a nickname, Fire and Sparks wasn't connected to Chief Calose, and on the spaceship repair platform she was just Chief Calose. What was annoying was Fire and Sparks was a nickname her trainer on space fighters gave her because she shorted out three fighters before she learned the proper emergency procedure of shutting down a fighter that was compromised from enemy fire. Who would know about that? It didn't go any further than her training camp since her improvement was rewarded with a ribbon at graduation. She pushed her early memories away as she focused on the soldier that didn't fit right in the SF environment.

“I wouldn't trust him either,” Zooey said. *“No arachnids here to watch your back,”* she warned.

“I got you. Are you planning on disappearing?”

“I'll look around the planet. I'll see how the roundup of the illegals is going.”

Calose followed the corporal to the mess. Their assortment of snacks had her stomach rumbling in anticipation. She filled the uniform pockets, ideally suited to holding things, then chose a bar to munch on.

The corporal moved off as the rest of the scientists that had cleaned up were gathering around a meeting table. She spotted Halley and went over to see if she could still borrow her coat. Her new clothes didn't come with a warm coat.

“Halley, do you mind if I still borrow your coat?”

“Sure. I'm wearing my new coat. Do you like it? More specialized pockets. I was feeling guilty about using it when my old one was still usable. Where is it?”

“I don't know. I thought maybe you had it.”

A wary look came over her face. “I'll find it. Looks like they took your clothes too and your ENV mask.”

Halley strode off pausing at a bored-looking Rachel who shook her head at what Halley had to say. Calose finished up a sweet bar getting a rush from its energy. The bar tasted a lot better than what she had from the vending machine next door to Lilin's Shop. When she returned to Merlota, she would talk to one of the Lilin shop owners about stocking the vending machine with edible food.

Feeling tired, Calose found a seat near the group that was listening to Lieutenant Colonel Tupes who was reviewing his plans with the science team leaders, Abbot and Kale and SF squad leaders. Abbot and Kale were nodding while Tupes spoke. Now with the knowledge of volcanic activity an EP was ordered, emergency pullout. The evacuation of the mercenaries meant additional battalion-sized ships with enough brig space would be arriving to hurry up the collection of illegals.

Calose thought Tupes looked interested in observing the volcano action of spewing firebombs that would change the planet's topographical landscape. It was better than watching a battlefield change a planet's landscape, Calose thought.

When the meeting broke up, just as Rachel predicted, the AIHs and her would be going on the shuttle, *Evans,* along with Benji, Halley and Lauren. Monk Abba would be accompanying them with twenty-four SFs, two assigned to be bodyguards while the rest would be out on hunts for anyone that asked for help as well as the mercenaries.

Halley and Rachel returned with a military knapsack and Halley's coat.

“They have a whole stack of unused backpacks, so we grabbed one for you. We put your clean clothes, a military field first aid kit, and your ENV mask inside, anything else you need, get it now while you have a supply depot on board. I don't know who the thief is on this ship, but your things along with my coat were stashed in a corner,” Rachel said. “It looks like someone was in a hurry to hide what they stole and wasn't familiar with the ship to keep it hidden.” She held up the transmitter receiver button. “We tag our belongings.”

Halley nodded. “For some odd reason there is always one on a team that's a thief, so over the years we've learned to be vigilant.”

“Thanks,” Calose said gratefully. She looked pointedly at Corporal Steads’ back.

“I gotcha,” Halley said softly.

Rachel nodded. “He doesn't connect to this group at all,” she said. “He could be a new transfer,” she added thoughtfully.

“Yeah. Not a new uniform but the troop patches are,” Halley said. “No ribbons of accomplishment or training specialty, only a bootcamp completion. Just what does he specialize in?”

“He didn't say,” Calose said.

Corporal Steads was one of the two bodyguards that would be coming with them when they were dirt side. Sergeant Elstom would be in the shuttle monitoring the land below them and keeping track of the other SFs that were scattered to search for hostile forces to Modifi. On the shuttle, Calose shared her seat space with the two AIHs #3 and #5.

Sergeant Elstom remained in the larger shuttle with another spotter, hovering over the land to keep an aerial view of the land below and the troops spread out looking for armed militants. The AIHs, scientists, Calose and two bodyguards were deposited in a barge with their



equipment to their test sites. It took three trips for everyone with their equipment to be delivered to each test spot. They didn't waste time on sightseeing, letting the shuttle handle recording their work and the planet’s lush environment. They scrambled down to water or over rocks and cliff faces for their samples and moved on to the next site. Calose kept a nervous eye out while they were on the ground. Every stop they made she felt they were being watched.

Finally, she knew what was bothering her. A SB, used during the war to spy on enemy locations, was keeping an eye on them. The moment she noticed it; it flew out of sight. It was an intelligent design that knew when it was spotted.

“Did you see that?” she asked Cpl. Stead pointing to where she had seen it disappear to.

“No. What?”

“A recon SB. Do you think your sarge can pick up the signal to see where it’s coming from?” *How could he have missed that?*

“Sure. We should have had an alarm unless they kept out of our scan range. Sarge, this is Cpl. Stead. Come in.”

“Report, Corporal.”

“One of the civvies spotted a SB checking us out.”

“Copy that.”

Both could hear the annoyance in his tone. Calose thought his annoyance was because his scans hadn't picked it up.

Calose checked everyone's position as did Cpl. Stead. The AIHs were split up, with #3 helping Halley to collect and label her samples of dirt, fauna, water, and whatever else was on her list. Benji found a cave entrance and disappeared to investigate it. Where was #5 and Lauren? The Monk Abba had been requested to join one of the scouting groups when a pocket of mercenaries was surrounded, and a peaceful surrender was sought.

"IMFAC Corporal. Start gathering the scientists. Something's out there and I'm reading trouble."

The corporal blew a whistle, signaling everyone to gather their belongings and retreat to the barge. Only two people at a time could fit in the barge with their equipment. No one was going to leave their equipment and samples. Lauren with her equipment was the first to leave.

"Benji's in the cave," the corporal mentioned to his partner. "I'll go and get him."

As usual, the AIHs would be the last to be loaded onto the barge. The instruments the scientists were using went before the AIHs.

"Where's the corporal," Halley asked as she got into the barge with her samples and gear. "Your military ENV mask shows empty. Why aren't you using yours?"

"I was told they didn't have refills for that model."

"Not true. When we get back to the freighter, I'll show you how to fill it yourself. The nice ones have a lock on the canisters so someone can't tamper with them. After they hid your clothes, I don't trust these SFs. However, to give you an empty one? That is directed right at you," she whispered.

Private Yuto came back from the entrance of the cave alone. Because of his anxious looks around them, Calose and Halley felt it was imperative they return to the shuttle. IMFAC to Calose meant immediate evacuation. How long have they?

"I'll wait with the AIHs," Calose told him when he looked her way to see if she would squeeze in with Halley and her equipment.

"Suit yourself," he replied.

When the barge returned, there was still no corporal and Benji.

"Sarge, how long do we have?" Private Yuto asked.

"When the barge reaches you, whoever isn't there will have to wait in the cave until we secure the area," the sarge replied crisply. "Get a move on!"

The private moved to drag Calose with him into the barge, without the AIHs. Instead, she stepped away from him, pushing him into the barge and ran to the cave entrance. She had given the AIHs a glance and by the sounds behind her, they were close behind.

Further down the tunnel it became pitch dark. She should have heard echoes of life from the two men in the tunnel. A soft blue light came on, focused on the path before her. It was from one of the AIHs. It was odd that her breathing, and footfalls made no sound.

She would have fallen into a net across the path had not one of the AIHs pulled her back. Pointing a light above them, two bundles were hanging.

“Corporal? Benji?” she called softly. No movement.

A light from one of the AIHs followed the rope that held the two captives to the other side of the path they were on. It was a long drop below them.

How was she going to get them down? Before she came up with any ideas, one of the AIHs began to scale the side of the cavern, pulled one of the netted bundles over the path they were on and sliced the net to drop a body near Calose's feet. The second bundle landed further up the path.

When the two men were freed from the netting, both came to their senses.

“What happened?” Benji asked weakly. “I've got a terrible head...” He got no further as one of the AIHs touched his neck. “Ah. Much better.”

Corporal Stead got to his feet unsteadily, using the wall for support. “That was a greenies mistake. Rushing in without a light.” He sighed in relief when a drug was also given to him.

“There's trouble outside,” she told Benji. “The barge has taken Halley and Lauren with the equipment and the private back to the shuttle. They'll be back when the area is secured.”

“Well, we can't stay here. Those nets are made by Cucuions. Very large spiders,” Cpl. Stead said.

“Cucuions? A miserable net weave job if it is from a spider,” Benji said. “I hope it's not a side effect from the chemicals dumped on this planet.”

Calose studied the netting suspiciously. None of the spiders she knew would have made such a mess of spinning this net. Did the chemicals from poison affect whoever put this net up? Zooey would know. Where was she?

"Right here. Not from one of my descendants! There are no arachnids on this planet. I've searched everywhere." Zooey sounded offended that someone would accuse a member of her species of having woven a poor netting.

"Maybe that's good. The chemicals from rewilding would change the DNA for most creatures on the planet," Calose thought. From the feeling she received from Zooey, she agreed.

"It is due to the chemicals," the corporal confirmed Benji's suspicions. "Their life span isn't long either because their biology has been sped up like everything else on the surface. They have a nasty disposition and aren't sentient, like us. We've been running into them on four other reformed planets. We usually don't go into tunnels unless we have fire-blowers. Burn out everything."

"Jeeze!" Benji said horrified. "This isn't the war, you know! If they live in tunnels, that's their home!"

"It's them or us. They attack us and we protect ourselves," Corporal Steads said with defiant righteousness.

"So, what do you suggest?" Calose asked, now concerned about their safety with the corporal stating his feelings about justifiable murder. She wondered how he passed the psychological profile done on all the military recruits for both space police and ground troops.

"Get out of this tunnel," he stated and started to head back to the tunnel exit.

"We don't know what the intentions of the spybots owners are," Calose said.

They paused a moment when a cry could be heard further down the tunnel.

"That sounds like someone's hurt," Benji said.

"Yes." Calose whispered, trying to get a feeling for whoever called for help.

"*Help? Anyone there*?" a voice called more clearly.

The Corporal shined his light down the trail and at the top of the cave, not really keeping it steady to spot anything.

"I say, since we're here and we've got the Corporal to save us from ourselves, we can go see what's calling for help," Benji said. "No shooting anything that moves, corporal. Understood? On this assignment, it's observation. IF it proves to be mercenaries you can do your thing."

"Alright. Proof? I'll let the mercenaries shoot you first, but if it's my life, I'm not going without a fight," Steads mumbled.

“That's brave of you,” Calose said in jest to Benji.

“I'm here to investigate,” Benji said. “Whatever it is, speaks a language I can understand.”

Calose didn't want to tell him it used mindspeak on a wavelength for them all to hear. Benji was right. Whatever it was, was intelligent enough to communicate with them.

“Just know, I don't think that's wise,” Corporal Stead said firmly.

“Let's go.” Calose didn't wait for any further discussion but moved down the path. One of the AIH's moved directly behind her, shining a blue light on the path in front of her.

Chapter Ten

They came to another netting. Everyone shined a light on it, revealing at the bottom of the net a small creature, a mouse, entangled in something that stuck it to the net. Calose gently cut the threads that held it captive and would have released it on his own but one of it's legs appeared to be injured. Calose scooped it up and tucked the creature in a side pocket of the uniform.

“Is this food here?” It asked gleefully.



“A rodent?” Cpl. Steads demanded. “That's what you heard?”

“Hey! Mind your manners!” Benji said indignantly. “This is his planet. Right now, you're supporting a science group that is investigating ALL life forms on this planet excluding the mercenary groups. Any negative opinions you have about the planet's inhabitants keep to yourself.”

“Thank you,” it said to Benji, sounding indignant at Cpl. Steads comment as much as Benji and Calose felt.

“Anyone hungry?” Calose asked to cool down the antagonism Cpl. Steads was creating. If he was testing to see how either of them felt about his killing whatever threatened him, he got a good reply from Benji. Having another Billy was not making her comfortable for their collective sakes. She removed energy bars from her pockets and shared with the men who gratefully took what she offered. She took one for herself and broke off a piece and dropped it in with the rescued mouse.

She was sure the corporal heard the mouse mindspeak via his AIU. The energy around him waffled when the mouse spoke.

A poke from her pocket brought her attention back to the mouse. The two men drank from their water containers. Calose poured water in the water flask's cap and offered it to the mouse. It sniffed the water and didn't drink from it. Curious, Calose sniffed the water. It did have a strange smell. She wondered if it had been refilled from one of the waterways on the planet or taken from water on the troop carrier. She poured out the contents of the cap. Two things not to trust. Her military ENV mask and the water supplied by Cpl. Steads.

They resumed their walk upward until they could see a light ahead. Daylight. The corporal took the initiative and hurried forward to step out on a lip to the entrance, to see what lay beyond the mountain.

"Our shuttle is above us, probably scanning the area," Steads reported.

"Let them know we're here," Benji said.

"They'll know by scanning the area. They have our biosignatures. They'll know we're the friendlies," Steads said. He was blocking their access to the small ledge that would give them a view of what Steads was seeing.

A strong tremor under their feet had Calose and Benji steading themselves with hands on the sides of the cave. Steads quickly moved back into the cave.

"I hope the two-day prediction is correct," Calose said.

"Benji, is your group interested in any samples from this area? We might as well put your AIHs to use," Steads said.

Calose studied him. Where did he intend the AIHs to go? Over the cliff? And it wasn't up to Benji since they were her responsibility.

Benji looked at him surprised then at Calose and then gestured to her that it was her decision. "Calose?"

"They take organic samples not samples of rock," Calose said. Whether that was all they could sample or not, she wasn't going to go along with anything Steads suggested.

"Well, that's a waste of machinery," Steads said annoyed.

Benji pointed to a rock. "That is an interesting shape. I haven't seen anything like it."

"A crystal?" Calose shined her light on it for a closer look.

"*Not a crystal*," sang the small creature.

"What is it?" Calose asked.

"*A weapon. You touch it and it explodes. There are many of them spread around the caves to prevent us from exiting our travel tunnels or crossing into the intruders' encampments. They use those sticky nets too*."

"The colonists!" Benji and Steads said together.

Calose thought of them as mercenaries, not colonists.

"The vibration from a barge landing might set it off," Calose said.

Steads nodded. He was going to use his comm link when Calose spotted the Spy Bot, zigzagging outside of the cave.

"Unless that is your SB I suggest we keep our communications more guarded," she warned. "Let's get further into the tunnel and make plans," whispered Calose.

"There is another exit," the mouse said.

"How far?" they all asked.

"Show us the way," Calose decided.

They didn't have far to retrace their steps to get to a place where there was a fork in the underground path that they had missed.

While the small creature remained in Calose's pocket, it gave Calose a commentary on the creatures that were on the planet during the attempted genocide of all life on the surface of the planet. It was just before they reached another exit that Calose realized it was referring to the dumping toxic chemicals as genocide before the reseeding the area was done.

Suddenly there was a bright light that grew steadily larger as they neared another cave exit. It was a cloudy day but the valley that spread out before them had Benji sighing. "Now that's a nice view. Look at all the open land and near a cave to explore."

A dirty brown river passed through it had Calose wondering if that was supposed to be a



golden brown.

“I see buildings on the other side of that river,” Calose said.

“*That is the Lou'ou lodge. At one time the river wasn't contaminated and was a beautiful emerald color. The poison killed every living thing in the river. But, it will soon be cleaned. You'll see. The Sacred One has already began its cleansing and much of the planet will be returned to its own balance.*”

Cpl. Steads ignoring them, was trying to reach the shuttle through his comm but was only getting static. He moved further out of the cave entrance onto a larger ledge than the previous one, with a path leading away from the entrance that a surefooted creature could use. Calose stepped closer to the path to see where it went. The side of the mountain was covered with vegetation. The path disappeared around a large boulder. Aside from the path, below them was a steep drop into a forest.

“Hey!” Calose gasped as a hard shove from behind her had her tumbling down the mountain. Her hands grabbed for anything to halt her fall, but the vegetation came away from the mountain easily. She thought she heard weapon fire, but her tumble was making a lot of noise as she got her body's direction from headfirst to feet first. She hoped she didn't squish Mouse.

“*This way, this way,”* Mouse said. Apparently, Mouse was out of her pocket safely.

Someone grabbed her, halting her out of control slide. One of the AIHs had a firm grip on her arm as they followed Mouse who was jumping from one rock to a root to a rock. The ground exploded near her, burning her hand as she steadied herself on its smokey surface. She landed on the wrong foot and twisted her ankle.

"This way, this way," Mouse encouraged urgently.

Calose was relieved Mouse sounded unharmed. Had the AIH not kept a firm grip on her she wouldn't have been able to follow as she stumbled when she put her weight on her right ankle. Calose felt a shot of something in her neck and a sudden spurt of energy and not feeling any pain from her ankle that kept collapsing when she tried to put weight on it. Mouse disappeared into a small niche under an overhanging tree that grew close to the slope of the mountain. Glancing upward, she could see the corporal following them with a weapon, its red targeting dot giving her a good idea where the weapons fire was coming from. One of the AIHs pulled her into the small niche just as the energy discharge from Steads weapon crumbled the tree and sent bark and dirt into a cloud formation. Calose covered her face to keep out the dust from her lungs. Her ENV mask would be helpful at the first chance she got to retrieve it from her pack.

The opening led into a cave that opened further enough for them to stand in. A light from one of the AIH's revealed a shadow at the back of the cave.

"*Pull the lever,"* Mouse said.

One of the AIHs pulled the lever and a capstone rolled across the entrance cutting off the choking dust and light.

"He will not be able to get in," Mouse said confidently.

"Where are we?" Calose whispered.

"A safe place."

Calose sighed, removed her backpack, and slid down to the ground. She needed a first aid kit.

"I can feel my ankle swelling," Calose explained to Mouse who sat on a stone near her face. He was inquiring about the contents of her backpack.

"Only military rations in my pack," she teased.

Mouse twitched his nose and stroked his whiskers disappointedly.

She found the kit and under the light the AIH was shining she removed her boot and was able to see how much her ankle had swelled up. She was hoping she didn't break it. With whatever the AIH had given her took away the pain so break, or sprain was what she needed to determine. One of the AIHs removed from the kit a limb and joint support designed for wrist or ankle wraps with drugs inside the wrap's walls that released needed drugs to speed up the repair and lessened the pain.

“Thank you,” she told the AIH as it repacked the first aid kit and stored it back in her backpack. Now she knew that they were also programed for bodyguarding and first aid.

“So how long are we going to sit in here?” she asked Mouse.

Mouse twitched it's whiskers. *“I will check.”* The AIHs shut their lights off. They could hear rocks falling and curses as a disturbance passed their cave entrance. There were more shots fired and more noise as parts of the mountain side collapsed. A long moment passed and there weren't any more noises coming from outside. A thin sliver of light appeared as Mouse made to open a small enough space to look out. One of the AIHs held Mouse back to prevent him from slipping out. They could all hear a ticking sound coming from outside.

“Bomb!” Mouse and Calose thought.

One of the AIHs scooped up Mouse while pulling Calose into the shadowed back of the cave which was a curve and to the ground. Not much room to hide all of them from the concussion of a bomb. The other AIH moved toward the small space Mouse opened. A boom did follow but it wasn't very loud, nor did it shake their hidey hole.

Other booms continued further away. Cpl. Stead must have been rolling bombs down the side of the mountain, not knowing exactly where they were. He was destroying a lot of the environment.

“All those explosions will alert our army,” Mouse said confidently.

After a long interval, Mouse finally gave the okay to roll the capstone back. Peering out Calose could see huge sections of the mountain were rearranged with splinters of trees and brush everywhere. No living thing seemed to be about.

Mouse sniffed the air. *“We will go to the Westmun's Retreat.”*

Calose slung the backpack on and gingerly tested her ankle. The support was enough for her to walk on her own, or in this case scramble over debris. She followed Mouse who scurried ahead to check that it was clear and waited for Calose to gingerly climb over the debris of

recently moved vegetation, dirt, and rocks. They entered another cave entrance further down the mountain whose capstone was rolled aside as they approached. What she was expecting was another holy site but instead it was a well-lit city of civilians of various species going about their businesses, glancing at them but not finding her and the AIHs presence unusual enough to interrupt their business.

The ceiling to the city raised high above them, reinforced with arches that were carved with images of guardian beasts she remembered in stories from her readings when she was recovering from war injuries. Being stuck in a recovery hospice for a year with access to a library saved her from extreme boredom and allowed her education to expand into cultures she had never imagined existed. Her eyes squinted to catch some of the details of the carvings as the characters melted into the mountain's stone ceiling. Around her live vegetation and trees grew into the mountain structure. How they could grow what normally needed light from outside was beyond her knowing but if spaceships and space cities could support their own arboretums it shouldn't be a surprise that cities below ground could do the same.

“Another city below a mountain,” Calose said softly. “How many are there?” she asked Mouse.

“Enough space to keep us all safe until the volcanos subside,” a scratchy voice said.

Calose turned to where she thought the voice came from. A brilliant-colored bird was perched on a rock statue of a dragon.

“Greetings, and welcome to Nell part of Westmun's Retreat. I'm Alturo, from the Ha Gathering, and the mayor of this underground city.”

“Only until we get back to the surface. Then I'm the mayor. I'm Laluro, from the Ha Council,” another bird announced haughtily, sitting on a statue of a being Calose didn't recognize.



“Oh, stop it you two. To hear them you would think they do more than welcome visitors,” another voice chimed in. This bird was brilliant green with one gold painted claw on her left foot, sitting in a tree. Calose felt she was someone important. “I'm Muen, Guardian of Westmun. Welcome all.”

“Greetings,” Calose said finally as her senses adjusted to the brilliant colors. “Mouse,” she began.

“Oh, yes we know,” Alturo interrupted. “I'll show you to your room until the Lady Pau is ready to receive you.”

“*The* Mouse will notify Lady Pau you have arrived safely,” Laluro said grandly.

“My name is...”



“Oh, yes, we know. Right this way.” Alturo waved a wing in the direction she was to take.

Calose glanced at Muen as she stretched her wings showing a brilliant red underneath as she rose to fly off. Calose watched her as she soared close to the ceiling's carved arches, where she disappeared.

The room Alturo escorted them to was a comfortable one room suite. Considering all the excitement and little restful sleep, the bed looked inviting. The AIHs sat on the couch leaving the bed for Calose to sit on. Mouse had disappeared on his assigned mission and with nothing better to do Calose fell asleep.



When Calose woke, a nurturing energy surrounded her like a warm blanket.

“Good, you are awake,” Mouse said.

The mindspeak reminded her of her past days on Modifi. Calose sat up slowly, expecting some sort of protest from her body on her physical exercise the previous day. Nothing. Looking at her ankle, the support was gone. She flexed her ankle to see if it was still sore.

“*You had a very healing sleep. Monk Juilo suggested another day of rest.”*

“How long have I been sleeping?” she asked alarmed.

“Well, by the planets time, a day and night have passed. It is early morning. By galaxy space time...hmmm. Can't say.”

“Geesh,” she cursed under her breath.

“No worry! Our troops neutralized your assassin. The troop ship that was observing their dispatched troops were above the clouds and recorded the soldier with us, ah, Steads, shooting the nice scientist Benji, after he pushed you down the mountain. You both are lucky his weapon's accuracy was off because you are both alive to complain.” Mouse twittered and stroked his twitching whiskers. *“Whoever smuggled it to him didn't check to see if it could shoot straight.”*

“So, what am I to do now?” Calose asked. She noticed the two AIHs were sitting on the couch exactly where they were when she fell asleep.

“Wait until Lady Pau finishes her meeting with one of the Special Force Captains. Each SF soldier under his command is being examined by our council and the monks for other soldiers that are agents for any cartels as Steads.”

Calose's stomach growled.

“Ah, it is my good fortune that you are hungry! I shall show you to the eating hall. I will keep you company.”

“Do you have a name?”

“I am your honorary guide LeLa, at your service, that is until reassigned.” LeLa glanced at the two AIHs. They stood.

The four left the room, following a brightly lit corridor of a smooth stone floor, and emerged in the city center. Many species moved purposefully through the streets that branched off between shops and tall structures that reached the ceiling. Balconies overlooking the busy streets below had plants hanging, some with bright flowers or fruit. LeLa led the group up two steps and through double doors into a hall. Further inside, workers at a food counter prepared dishes for those waiting. The aroma filled the air with an inviting mix of herbs, spices, and other aromas.

LeLa led them to a table. “*We shall be served very soon,”* he said with relish.

At the counter a server filled two dishes. One large plate and one small. The waiter placed before Calose a morning meal exactly as she liked. She stared at the server suspiciously.

“Your stomach is easy to read,” LeLa said. *“When your stomach spoke, Mouton knew just what you would like. Our chef is exceptionally talented. She serves at all the diplomatic dinners. Eat up! Others will be arriving soon.”*

LeLa was right about the dining hall filling up with others. It reminded Calose of her training days when they ate in shifts, and it impressed them to eat quickly so the next group could sit down.

“We still have time,” LeLa said when Calose finished her meal. *“What would you like to do now? We have a very good resource library, music room, exercise...”*

“A music room? I would like to see that.”

LeLa, Calose and the AIHs followed, entering a street outside the eating hall, and walked down and up and down again until they came to a doorway that was surrounded in carvings of different musical instruments, some Calose had never seen before. Excitedly Calose followed close behind LeLa, as the door automatically opened at LeLa's presence.

“Do you have instruments I can play? Would anyone mind?”

“That's what the library of music is for. We have many visitors that don't have their favorite instrument with them and borrow one of ours. It's very restful and helpful for people that have difficult decisions to make to play or listen to music. It transcends problems.”

Calose nodded and entered the library of musical instruments to borrow. She read the list of instruments that were available.

“Oh! You have what's called a piano! I would like to play this one. Is it available?”

“Press the VID and a room it is in will tell you if it's available. Yes. I know the way. Follow me.”

In the room was a magnificent piano with bench. It was a grand piano concert in size and style.

The AIHs pulled out seats from the wall and sat out of the player’s sight and LeLa found enough room on the piano bench seat.

Calose sighed. She hadn't played keyboards on a real piano for months. Closing her eyes, she began warmups and with only a slight pause began to play piano pieces her first teacher taught her to further warm up her hands and wrists. The music filled her as she moved to more difficult pieces. The vibrations opened her up, knowing as she played, the music vibrated into higher dimensions. When her fingers grew tired and too many notes were missed, she stopped playing. She sat still in meditation; her eyes closed and enjoyed the peace the music brought to her.

A light tapping on the door brought her out of her reverie. Sighing loudly, she turned to the door. It was opened and a canine bowed to her.

“Lady Pau reluctantly is interrupting your time of peaceful meditation, but she has a limited time to speak with you before moving to another meeting. I am Moutou your guide.” The Canis Lupis smiled at her. “You play wonderfully. Thank you for sharing your music.”

“It was so inspiring!” LeLa said. *“She shimmered as she played! So beautiful. Show us the way. We mustn't keep the Lady from her appointments!”*

Moutou was a fast walker for LeLa's short legs, so Calose reached down and gave him a ride in her pocket. Alas, nothing to munch on was the thought Calose picked up from LeLa.

“Has the volcano erupted?” Calose asked Moutou.

“More than one. Lilin's expressed concern about the AIHs and were told they performed excellent bodyguard services. The scientists you were with reported the theft of your belongings and worry for your safety. We assured everyone you were being well cared for with minor injuries.”

Calose felt a strong tremor shake the room they were led into.

“Ground shakes to clean the land and waters,” Moutou assured Calose. “The walls and structures within our underground cities are secure.”



Another Canis Lupis entered the room. “Greetings, Captain Calose Rabino. I am Lady Pau of the 2nd Dynasty of Dinty. It is good to see you are relaxing and thank you for sharing your musical talents. It lifts the energy of our underground city which everyone enjoys immensely.”

“I know you,” Calose said.

“Yes. I was a pilot whose ship was brought to Asamble, your spaceship repair port, during the war. In the military I went by the name of Major Eu. Your staff did an excellent job of repairing it.”

“Are you from Modifi?”

“Yes. As a member of the royal family, it was my duty to be part of the galaxy war effort. I was dismayed at the false information given about Modifians. It was me and others that traced the report to a member of a traitorous cartel. They were taking advantage of the war to carry on their own plans of gaining more power and wealth at the expense of those not strong enough to defend themselves. They identified and then isolated the planets they wanted to take over and began to undermine and destroy the governments and the cultures on those planets.”

“And the space station Merlota?”

“Merlota is safe with our agents the Duduk overseeing it's security.” She nodded to the two AIHs. “Not many know of Duduks as sentient beings, only that they appear as robots or AIHs. Not all robots or AIHs are Duduks.” She grinned and continued. “Merlota is privately owned and produces the most updated hardware and software in security and in ENV suits and

masks. And that's just a little bit of what Merlota and her sister businesses throughout the galaxy produce."

"I noticed Merlota is part of the gamblers tour. That must bring in some interesting information from around the galaxy," Calose said.

"It does. Very perceptive of you. Gamblers, both professionals and amateurs, pass on good galaxy gossip without realizing it. Their partners or spouses that tag along aren't bored as Merlota has entertainment of many interests, short of abusive entertainment. Visitors have a lot to say of their travels."

"So why was I sent here and why am I being attacked?"



"You are being attacked because you attracted the attention of a cartel, one of the few consortia of evil," one of the Duduk's said.

Calose turned to him surprised at his voice.

"They've been watching you too closely since you went to Dysta Space Station and ended up on Merlota," the other said. "They witnessed the failed attempt of capturing you on the Space City Cronas, which increased their need to assassinate you as they expected to do to the reporter, Merde Hue. They originally wanted to question you to find out where you fit in with their business. Because of that you and your crew weren't told of the reason for your new assignment or the reason your freighter was installed with Lilin's most updated software, the Shroud."

"Who was this reporter?"

"Merde Hue. He *is* an undercover agent now and during the war, acting as a reporter for a newsie. You were spotted by a cartel's agent having a drink with him 20 standard years ago. You had been released back into active duty after months in rehabilitation. He tried to interview you, as a war hero and you had poured your drink on him."

Calose's face reddened. "Oh. That was Merde. I never got his name. I was supposed to meet someone in the bar, and I thought it was him."

Lady Pau smiled. "We all had a laugh about that. The person you were to meet was a person you met in the hospice. An agent of the cartel. It was good you didn't meet him. He was arrested. His injuries were superficial, and his job was to find crucial people to latch onto and spy on. That was you."

Calose laughed in disbelief. “I was one of thousands flying space fighters and more than a dozen were recuperating in the hospice besides me. And I remember Jolosco. A storyteller of funny stories which is what I needed to hear. I don’t like bars. After dumping a drink on Merde I returned to my quarters, packed my kit and took the first shuttle to my new assignment.”

“Well, the agent who was following Merde Hue during the war, had another assignment on Dysta Space Station. He recognized you when you arrived at Dysta Space Station for a supposed minor ship upgrade and then you got involved with Relic Hunters. He thought you were too smart to be just a freighter captain when you evaded the Hunters from trapping you. So, a barnacle was placed on your ship, with someone following you at a distance. All the situations that your ship became involved in on your way to the space city Cronas were reported by their tracker. For you to have arrived at Merlota in time to attend Merde's funeral AND get assigned to be part of the scientists’ group to our planet was enough to escalate the need to assassinate you,” Lady Pau said.

“You mean I have to worry about more than the Knabs?” Calose meant it as a joke.

“Yes. You are a part of something more than disrupting a cartel from poisoning our planet or overrunning Merlota.” LeLa said.

“Let’s back track a bit. It’s good that you arrived early because it caught the Hanmels off-guard with their plans and allowed us to use your talents to help stir the plot to keep them off-balance. We moved a science team that does not work for the Hanmels quickly to oversee their plan to further destroy the natural life on our planet. And the scientists gave us the proof we needed to send in the Ground Troops and of course there would be an agent of theirs among the squads. Professor Abbot is one of our agents. He could only do so much without getting marked as a hinderance to their plans and eliminated but he did get Fiv and Tre assigned to assist collecting data in more ways than one,” Lady Pau said.

“Oh, Fiv is #5 and Tre is #3 in Lilin's shop.” Calose smiled at the two Duduks. “What about Steads and Benji?”

“Steads and his family are known cartel soldiers. Steads’ father was caught early in his military career for pilfering supplies and after serving his time in prison, was released. Re-educating him wasn't in his sentencing so he was sent to hard labor. On his release he was given probation for ten standard years. Steads’ mother was suspected of passing information onto the cartel, but it was suspicion with no concrete evidence since someone higher up was letting her

know when to lay low. It wasn't until she asked to be assigned to a post that was classified that she was caught with the file and the spy in the command's office was identified. Unfortunately, the spy was assassinated on his way to prison. She retired before JAG brought charges against her before the military court. The Steads are now operating an information gathering place in a bar that off-duty military personnel have been warned that is off-limits. Even WVETs know it's under surveillance so their business is more of a meeting place for scaggets who don't mind the surveillance and use it to boost their reputation among the petty criminals. This last month we've been picking up the people on the fringe and working our way up the ladder. There have been more assassinations in their ranks which are mixed blessings, but it doesn't stop what has already been put into action by their leaders. They are losing a lot of their soldiers at the lower ranks which are usually used for fodder or sacrificial distractions. As for Benji, he was shot by Steads before he pursued the four of you. Benji was rescued and taken to a hospital."

"And Lu? He's such an odd one."

"Lu was being his usual rebel self and was disrupting everyone's plans. His cynicism and sarcasm are his methods of handling his PTSD. It makes him an unreliable agent, but if the situation needs stirring, he's the stick to do the stirring," Lady Pau said.

The ground gave another shake.

"I need to go. I have others to visit. The three of you can rest safely here. If there is any danger, Tre and Fiv will continue watching out for you. Sleep well, Calose," Lady Pau said.

"I have questions!"

"Another day."

"I'll stay with you too," LeLa said.

Calose found herself stifling a yawn, as if she was really tired.

Chapter Eleven

An Assignment at Last



After a short nap Calose met with an SSO agent, Lt. Lucas who had arranged a meeting for her. Her three companions accompanied her. Maybe now she was going to be told why she and her crew were sent here. The room they were shown to had wall maps of the continents on Modifi with blinking dots in various colors.

Agent Lt. Lucas sauntered in and gave a tired smile. “I hope you haven't been waiting long. I just arrived. It's busy above ground.” He handed a flat screen to Calose. “Here's a message the JAG office asked me to deliver to you.”

Calose sat up straighter in her seat when she read the message on the screen. Mouse was leaning over her shoulder on the chair’s wingback and nearly lost his balance giving a startled squeak.

“Kidnapped!” She stared at the two VIDS of what looked like her as a child and the other of her in a dress uniform, freshly graduated out of flight training with her space fighter wings pinned to her collar and ribbon bar indicating her honors earned in training. Where had that VID come from?

“Drue Bartel says I kidnapped his daughter! Who is Drue Bartel? Oh, wait, Louis Bartel was who I was bequeathed to marry, and would have if we hadn’t been conscripted. We both chose to be drafted off-world,” she recalled with scorn. “My sister was married off to Drue? Drue was a lazy, mean-spirited bully in our group. If the village was invaded, I would suspect him of colluding with the enemy. I had hoped she survived the village's curse of arranged marriages to those that should not reproduce,” she said continued with vehemence. “Saints of my ancestors! My reputation on the docks is damaged! He's attacking my reputation and my earning potential!” Her anger and dismay nearly had her forgetting her years of training to maintain control of her emotions. It reminded her of her pilot training years when everyone was taught to focus emotions on eliminating their enemies in space battles. And then, there was her last battle’s aftermath, years spent in a rehab hospice where anger and emotional outbursts were managed differently. From that memory she calmed herself by recentering. Family was an issue she had

avoided thinking about and had thought with Sasha's influence and her conversation with Bout and Kaving, childhood memories of bitterness and anger, were dealt with.

"We were surprised since by your planet's records, Lois Bartel, is of age and can go where she chooses provided, she doesn't break any laws."

Calose looked startled. "This is a picture of Lois Bartel? My niece?"

"Yes. Astonishing resemblance. Did you know your military records and belongings were being stored in your mother's name, in a Rabino family barn in Caribrie?"

"I have them stored in Federation secured lock boxes at an address on another planet, far from family reach! Since I was drafted, I've not communicated with anyone in my village or planet."

"That storage business is under fraud investigation. Under new management, it raised the rent, and since you didn't answer their notices, cleared out your storage area as deceased, and sent everything, including your mail to your planet's mail center, and they forwarded it to your mother on the Rabino farm."

"I didn't get any notices!" Again, she contained her disappointment in being sucked back into issues of the past.

"Exactly. When the local police were sent to investigate complaints about this storage company, they were shown by the manager the addresses they sent notifications to before they emptied lockers and rented them out for higher prices. All the names were WVETs and the addresses were incorrect. JAG was notified. As for your belongings, since everything was sent to your mother, on arrival per the postal bureau's officials in the capital, due to the Federation's security locks, they added their own and sent them on their way to the Rabino farm."

"This VID of me, isn't from civilian records. It's my graduation picture for military records. How did he get this?"

There was an audible sigh from Lucas. "That is another problem under investigation, which landed on the SSO's chief's desk. Coincidental with that was a Galaxy search on a medal won in an operation under the secrets act that is still classified. The inquiry was traced to Caribrie, your hometown on Mo'da'ho. When two investigative agencies found they were investigating you, so-to-speak, SSO took ownership of the three inquiries. SSO had the combination to access your storage bins and found two boxes had been opened. One had your military information, a collection of medals and documents pertaining to your service for the

Federation's military. From that box one of your medals was missing, the one related to the unmentionable assignment. All your other medals were left. You were busy during the war," he said impressed. "Anyway, the second box caused even more concern. It was due to the traces of a molecule that isn't found on most planets, in fact it was related to a secret operation no one is supposed to speak about. We think this false kidnapping bulletin went out because someone wants the contents of the box. What was in it?"

"The Triskele Box! I had forgotten about it." For a few minutes, Calose was quiet touching her forehead as if it had a painful memory. She shifted in her seat uncomfortably. "If the box is opened, it sends out energy that some sensitives can pick up. It's a relic that I was entrusted with." She looked at Lucas, seeking an answer in his eyes or thoughts, if he knew what the relic was about.

"I need to reclaim that box. I must find my niece before the unscrupulous as well as Relic Hunters go after the box and her." Calose shook her head exasperated. Dark memories she had thought were locked away threatened to trickle to her consciousness. That was another war memory she wanted to forget, and she had.

"We can't let you do that. Besides, until public relations clear your name of this false accusation and fake reward, it's best to wait before rushing about. We have agents watching over her, keeping her safe from herself and what is in the box. A relic, you say?" Lucas asked, not masking his interest.

So, he didn't know, Calose thought.

"The more immediate problem is why you are here," LeLa said to bring the subject back to why Calose was needed where she was. "In less than a week the Schatian Travel Corridor is going to be forced open against the recommendations of the Meto Galaxy's Collective of Scientists. That's why you, and most importantly your ship is here. The corridor's energy is disruptive to most species, and it hasn't in the least been neutralized as was reported by a fictitious science team during the war. It's in direct line to a living planet."

"Modifi is targeted?"

"No. Yerboti," Lucas said. "The beings on that planet are 5th dimensional and up. It will implode the physical elements of the planet with the eventual cause of a black hole. Do you know what that will cause to the space around it?"

“So,” Calose said, suddenly remembering about an unusual number of space stations around Modifi, supposedly an insignificant planet which caused talk among her space pilot group. “That's why there were so many space stations near Modifi during the war! How many people knew about that?”

“The Meto Galaxy's Committee of Ten. Beings from Yerboti informed the Committee of Ten of the Gepaks intentions and how they would help win the war against the Gepaks and their allies if their planet was protected afterward. The cartel doesn't *just* want to control Merlota and Modifi but also the portal. They believe the energy from the portal will bring them immense power to succeed in taking over this small part of space. Controlling space station Merlota and their manufacturing and research facilities would give their cartel not just a physical home to consolidate their power with owning the planet below as their servants, but intel into every known planet worth owning.”

“Isn't that a bit excessive and impossible in believing a cartel can take over that many planets and space stations in such a large galaxy?”

“A good propagandist can get many to believe in the impossible. As you know the Gepaks and their allies used brutal means to control, not much different than the cartels.”

“I don't want to go through another 200 or so years fighting that type of energy takeover. What is it that I'm supposed to do?”

“Your ship, *Quen,* was designed to go through different types of energy Gepaks created without its hull being penetrated.”

“That's why the new design, MDCLR was preferred by the Medosa class,” LeLa explained.

“Specifically, the Lycosidae from another galaxy. They were one of the species that was able to investigate and deactivate the artificial travel tunnels created by Gepaks,” Fiv explained.

“Whatever happened to the Lycosidae?”

“They agreed to help the Federation only until the end of the war. The agreement was that they were to be left alone afterwards. There are and were many classes of beings and planets that made such an agreement.”

Calose nodded, familiar with such entities from both before and after the war.

“There was a spy within the councils' aides, and they passed on the names of the planets and their locations to the cartel, who are using that information to keep pressure on the

Federation's agents with distractions, as they go about trying to take over planets and space stations. We believe the corridor is a major part of their plan. So far, we've stopped them in their plans for Merlota and this planet. Our next big move is neutralizing the corridor."

"So, just what is it you expect of me, my crew and my ship?"

"We need *you* to enter the tunnel and drop energy emitters along the way. They will weaken the corridor and cause it to disintegrate in this dimension and close off any remaining connections to the Gepaks' dimension. We know this will happen because the Lycosidae have documented their successes in doing this and left with us seven of their ships should we need them."

"Why is it important that I be part of this operation? I'm not a Lycosidae."

"You are the captain of a ship that was created for this type of work, and you personally are capable of sensing the energy outside of your ship. Your ship has been further enhanced at DSS with the Shroud, and Lilin is adding further devices to help neutralize any energy that may enter the hull that will cause you illness."

"We are also going," Fiv said. "To assure harm doesn't come to you."

"So, what's going to happen with the box that my niece is carrying around? Can you guarantee it from..."

You have no need to worry about it. It has guardians that will direct it to where it needs to be.

Calose looked around the room cautiously for where that unfamiliar mental message came from as Lucen went on.

"It will be safe. Your friend Belig has given her a ride. With your introduction to her on relics, I'm sure she understands how important it is to keep possession of it secret," Lucen grinned.

"Oh," Calose groaned.

"She will surprise you. Belig has learned enough these past five years from trial and errors that will keep them from making fatal mistakes. You also found on your travel with her recently, she has good instincts."

Calose nodded, reminding herself to handle one problem at a time, then she'll catch up with her niece and Belig.

"So, when do I move into position?"

“Your next meeting is with the scientists that will brief you on what you're to do.”

Chapter Twelve

After her briefing with the Federation scientists, Calose meditated for an hour. The plan sounded straightforward: the emitters would deploy at measured locations, and her crew would monitor both their release and the return scans for energy changes, and as captain she would monitor it all. Right, simple as that. In fact, *Faithful Friend's* alter ego, *Quen*, would oversee the process, as it had during the war. Apparently, her freighter's programming had layers she had never known existed.

Her crew, Kaving, Moya, Heru, and Bout, had been fitted with new ENV armored suits designed by an engineer on Merlota. When Calose tried on her own, she found it fitted close to her skin yet did not restrict movement at all.

Her thoughts returned to the relic entrusted to her, now carried by her niece. How she'd acquired it was unclear. Had the Fey who entrusted it to her for a future job obscured her memory? Even the military operation that brought her into contact with the Fey—and earned her a medal—was hazy. After so many space skirmishes and hospital stays, she preferred not to think about them.

What was the relic for? It had something to do with...

Until she read about her sister's husband putting out a wanted poster on his daughter, Lois, she had forgotten about what she had among her stored possessions. Now she remembered. The relic came into her possession by way of a Fey, DunLeCo whose life was ebbing away from being so far from her tribe. She had a mission, to deliver a crystal, sculpted and programed to undo or correct something. DunLeCo left the crystal with her with the promise that it would protect her until it was delivered to where it was to fulfill its destiny. At that time, Calose wasn't in any mental condition to say aye or nay. To her it was a drug induced dream.

When she was released from the hospital, among her things was a box and in it was a crystalline stone. Calose had other things on her mind and forgot about the box. She was reassigned to another flight command and back to the battle front.

In her astral traveling she returned to the same vision she often saw when she meditated



in *Calypso, Faithful Friend,* not understanding what it was about. In the past when she asked her guides for the meaning, they told her the meaning would come when the time was right. Was that now? The all-seeing eye. She had thought it meant that she was being watched over and though she had gone through many soul-searching moments in her life, she had always felt she was being guided. Her soul searching was often on why horrible things happened to good people, until she finally let her heart tell her physical death wasn't the end. Without the difficulty good people went through, there was no soul growth, and those around them affected by sadness wouldn't question life, which everyone needed to do to grow themselves. Being spiritual in a world where three dimensional lives operated wasn't as difficult as it once had been since she came to that truth.

Her thoughts moved back to her niece. Lois was more than capable of taking care of herself and Belig. She grinned. She guessed the relic would meet its destiny through Lois. That was a relief.

The mouse, LeLa nudged her back to consciousness.

“It's time.”

LeLa and her were transported to her last meeting in the sacred mountain of Ma. This meeting was with the spiritual leaders, and her crew, Kaving, Bout, Moya and Heru. Monk Ozi and a group of people present and in spirit were sitting at a polished obsidian table that had a large bowl of water sitting in the center of the table. The bowl was made of a crystal that when touched made a sound that the water resonated and increased the energy of the sound encompassing everyone in the room. The room was surrounded by crystals of different sizes and shapes and any sound made in the room resonated with such high vibrations that it could heal, clean, or lift a soul higher than the 5th dimension.

Calose was able to endure the high energy with the help of others that surrounded the table. All communication was done via telepathy. It was a short meeting, due in part because Calose would be harmed if it went on longer. Calose was sure her crew could have remained longer, as they took their time leaving the room, speaking at length with some of the members that were physically present.

It was time for them to meet their destiny in the Gepaks' corridor, Schatian Travel Corridor.

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Calose did her usual pre- light ritual for starting out on new voyages. She and her crew smudged the entire ship and offered prayers and thanksgiving for what was to come and what had passed. By the time they had finished, Moya moved to recheck all the changes made to *Faithful Friend* by Merlota's scientists. Heru ran through the check list of preparations to get underway with Kaving and Bout sitting in their places on the bridge in their new armored ENV suits. They said it was to get used to wearing the new designs, however, Calose suspected they wanted to wear them just because.

Tre and Fiv saw to provide what they would need for survival and made sure Calose's food supply was protected from any outside energy contamination with a monitor designed by Lilin's shop. Added to her wardrobe were her two additional new ENV suits from the famous Bershi's Costuming and Dress that had a store in Merlota. She normally just wore a mask or used her military issued ENV suit for anything that required her to work in a foreign atmosphere as well as working outside a space ship. The additional ship upgrades Lilin's shop added along with DSS's that she didn't know about in detail; she was hoping to test out before they entered the Schatian Travel Corridor.

As Calose strode onto her bridge, she noted two new seats and a pod of some sort attached to her headrest. The extra seats were occupied by Tre and Fiv who were running their own tests on the upgrades Lilin's scientists made. Did they know about Zooey who sometimes joined them on the bridge? Did they sense spirit? According to Zooey, if she didn't want to be seen by people, she wasn't seen. However, some could sense her presence.

Where was Zooey?

"Well, where's my station?" LeLa asked, rushing in behind Calose and climbing up the captain's chair. "Oh, I do say. Very nicely done." LeLa inspected it closely, his whiskers twitching.

"Have no worries, LeLa. Duke Laramar reminded us we are to make sure you are well-taken care of." Fiv turned to watch LeLa climb onto the captain's head rest.

"He even told us what food to pack for a wee thing like you," Tre said. Both Duduks chuckled. "You eat a lot! Hopefully, you clean up after yourself, so the cleaning bots don't feel overworked," Tre teased.

“Are you implying I'm not housetrained,” LeLa made high pitch squeaking, that could be laughter. “Mother trained us to live anywhere without leaving our presence noted.”

“Ah, yes. Duke Laramar told us that's the excuse you gave for eating the entire round of cheese you stole from the storage room,” Fiv said.

LeLa tittered. “I didn't want to tell him our family rolled it behind a statue so he wouldn't find it and take it before we finished it off!”

Everyone laughed. Kaving, Moya, Bout and Heru were seated in their seats and began they check list of that *Faithful Friend* ran for her sentient bridge crew.

“Ahh, you have quite a seat,” Kaving teased LeLa. “Don’t forget to fasten your seat belt. I’m sure you don’t want me to catch you in flight.”

Calose giggled at the image of a feline catching a mouse as it flew by her.

“Certainly not! Oh, here we go!” LeLa announced his paws tapping Calose's console excitedly.

“*This is the Harbormaster Honmul.* Faithful Friend *has been given clearance to leave the dock. Please wait for the dock tugs to move you out of your berth and into the dispatch lane. There are four ships ahead of you. Over.”*

“Who are the other ships, if I may ask,” Fiv asked in a good imitation of Calose's voice.

“*You may ask as they asked about you, your destination and time of departure*,” the amused voice of the Harbormaster said. “*However, I'm not sure they believed that you are heading to GravJunction for a delivery.”*

“Thank you. And they are?”

A list appeared on her monitor. “That many!” Calose asked in alarm.

“Thank you for your courtesy, Harbormaster,” Bout responded.

It seemed a long time before it was their turn to be towed to a safe distance from the space station in their flight zone. However, they were heading in the direction of GravJunction. Tre and Fiv wanted to test out the various upgrades as much as her crew and what better way than in a part of space where there were no speed limits and a vast area to test weapons.

For a few hours they played hide and seek around meteors and planets to see how many were following them. Only half of what were on the Harbormaster's list tried to keep track of them.

“It means they guessed where I'm headed and are waiting there,” Calose said.

“Of course, I would do the same,” Kaving said.

“We make a turn here,” Calose said, pointing at the star map. “We can then enter facing the entrance right at the coordinates we were given. How long do we have before we can arrive at our destination?” Calose asked.

“Two hours. If you have something to do, we'll keep track of things here,” LeLa mocked.

“We're targeted,” Heru announced. “You had better strap in your seat, Captain. LeLa to your pod for safety.”

Calose mentally activated the ship's weapons just as Heru made the announcement. *Faithful Friend* scans identified the ship, its crew and who it belonged to. No successful freighter ship was without protection and teeth for its space flights.

“Weapons have been activated,” Moya said.

“Incoming,” Heru said softly.

“I've got it,” Bout said.

“Let's not let these provocateurs know just how sharp our teeth are,” Calose said.

“As you say, Captain. Sending out a sidewinder,” Bout said.

“My thoughts,” Calose said.

Tre shot a look at Calose. Calose grinned and pointed to her head. Tre nodded.

“Excellent. Old but just as deadly,” LeLa said. He had moved to the captain's console instead of taking refuge in his pod. He studied the display intently. “I do believe there is one of our allies coming out of hyper space.”

A detonation shook the freighter. Their counter measures deflected most of the blast's energy. Bout moved to release bots to check for any hull breaches, however, the ship's safety had already responded. Bout glanced at Calose. “Just what are you going to leave me to do?”

“Make sure our defenses are operating smoothly,” Calose replied.

“Looks like you've kept up your ships maintenance,” Tre said.

“It may be costly sometimes, but in the long run, it saves lives, most notably ours,” Calose said.

“There's a cloud around that meteorite that one of our attackers hit instead of us. We can go behind the blasted material and redirect our course there,” Fiv suggested.

“We can activate the Shroud,” Moya suggested.

It was a turn which would take them twenty important minutes to complete, but behind the meteorite they disappeared. With their coordinates set for Schatian Travel Corridor's entrance their speed increased.

“Our speed will get us to the corridor faster than our adversaries expect.” LeLa looked at Calose. “The rate of g's may cause nausea in some species. I will take refuge in my pod. Wake me when we arrive at our destination.”

An hour later, as the freighter neared their coordinates, their scans picked up a slew of ships of various sizes gathered around the calculated place it should open. Apparently, the entrance/exit point of the corridor wasn't all that secret.

“Before we reach their scan range inactivate the Shroud,” Kaving said.

“Looks like we have a gauntlet to go through,” Calose muttered.

“Newsies and then some with ill intentions are crowded for a show, but many will be ill equipped for the blow back,” Tre said. “Lilin's shop of surprises has created a sound wave that will blow open the gate, sending those too close away from the opening and some of the energy in that return wave will penetrate the hulls of ships not prepared. While we, with enough momentum and the exact trajectory, will slice through the reflective wave. We will start the opening of the corridor five minutes to impact.”

“Has this been tested beyond a theory?” Calose thought to ask. There was a familiar upset in her stomach that she would get during her fighter pilot years as their assignments were handed out. It was as she asked the question that she became aware of Zooey's ghostly form watching from the ceiling.

“Am I too late?” she asked Calose. No one seemed to take notice of her so Calose gave a slight shake of her head.

“That's what we're here for,” Fiv said. “It has been done before by the military of the Medosa and in ships like the *Quen,* renamed *Faithful Friend.* These ships that were constructed for such duties, only their species took on that role,” she glanced at Calose and gave her wink.

Great, we’re test subjects. At least you're here Zooey.

“I wouldn't think of letting you go on this voyage without someone you can trust to watch your back,” Zooey said.

LeLa peered out from her pod then returned to its safety.

“The energy blast has been released. Prepare for anything,” Moya said.



“The Schatian Travel Corridor is open, and we are moving into our target corridor,” Fiv said. “Brace for the impact of the return energy.”

Calose felt the sound wave as it was sent out from the freighter, but it was the return of the wave as it hit a barrier and some of it in an altered state came back at them causing a slight hesitation in their forward motion. The vibration shook Calose to where she felt it in her bones and teeth. She would have slid out of her seat had she not been in a safety harness. Part of her was aware of their passing into an energy tunnel because though her vision was blurred, she knew the screen was showing no planets or space as she knew it. In the tunnel the ship changed its momentum. Calose's senses had her feeling as if they were floating along an energy wave ahead of her ship.

“*I know of this place,”* Zooey told her. *“The ancestors spoke of it.”*

“Emitters are releasing as programed,” Kaving said. “Moya how are the barriers holding?”

Calose felt something furry rubbing up against her cheek.

“You need to focus, Captain. You need to sense if this is the same corridor and not a false one branching off to a null point,” LeLa said. “You can see the reflection in your mind's eye, but you can also see what is behind it's reflection.”

Calose could feel her breath was not moving well through her body. Her eyes were blurry and gritty. If she thought she could, she would empty her stomach over her console, but there was no spare energy in her body.

Her ENV suit kicked in and cleared her breathing and sight, and her stomach settled. Her mind floated before the freighter, as if it were a forward scout. She was aware she mentally held the freighter on the course she believed was correct.

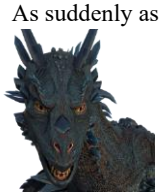
“Third emitter released down other tunnel,” Kaving said softly.

A few minutes later they were bounced around as if they were in a farm wagon on a rutted road. This brought Calose's floating spirit back to her body. She realized LeLa was in her own ENV suit and was secured to Calose's pilot head rest. She blinked her eyes several times to bring to focus where she was and then the mental why.

Abruptly, the freighter was out of the corridor and floating in space as if *Faithful Friend* had no power in her thrusters. Before them was a squadron of military ships that looked like they

were ineptly trying to maneuver into some kind of formation for a standoff. It was chaos for a military squadron.

As suddenly as she noticed the physical presence of the ships, a dragon form appeared on her deck. Calose's first read was that it was arrogant, and as solid as it appeared to her, her crew didn't take note of it's presence.



"Ah," Zooey said. *"I know his clan. They are all like this. Take no offense at his tone and posturing. Treat him in a friendly manner."* Zooey chuckled at that. *"That will take him off guard."*

Calose rose from her seat in spirit form and faced the dragon that was showing disdain for those on her bridge that didn't show any sign of seeing him.

"I'm Captain Calose from the Metro Galaxy's Federation of Planets. And you are?"

"Lord Durick Fedaka! State your business in our sector!"

"Lord Durick Fedaka, I'm here to remove this travel tunnel created by the Gepaks, an enemy of the Federation and it's galaxy of planets. Have you any business with this corridor?"

"I am here to make sure whatever uses this offensive energy tunnel will use it no more, Captain Calose."

"We have similar purposes then. May I ask why you haven't destroyed the corridor?"

"We have been unable to since it's energy isn't within our influence." For a few moments his image wavered.

"Since you have taken care of this mutual problem perhaps you can help us with another, Captain Calose." He turned and waved at the ships showing on her view screen.

"They arrived to make war. They say they are here to help by destroying those on a planet that are mistreating others. How would they know since they have never been in this part of space or know of the culture of the many lives that exist on the planet? We have enclosed them in a protective bubble, so they harm no one. Perhaps you can talk them into returning from where they came?"

"Yes. There was a war that lasted 200 standard years in our section of space, but it has been over for five years. By the looks of the battleships, they are from that time."

Lord Fedaka waved his hand dismissively. *"There is no passage of time as you understand it here, Captain."*

"I will talk with the Admiral of this fleet and see if I can convince him that the war is over, and he should return to his launch port. Will that suffice, Lord...?" Calose asked.

It was instantaneous. She and the dragon Lord appeared in spirit on the command deck of the Federation Flag Ship *Jerissa*. On the deck spirits of the crew were wandering aimlessly around. In chairs around the deck in front of consoles were physical forms, frozen. Their military uniforms brought back her memories of the war. Some of the spirits glanced her way but kept up their pacing. One small group of lower ranked officer's bodies were huddled together looking at their consoles, frozen with mouths open as if they were caught arguing. Their spirits weren't wandering but instead hovered close to their physical forms.

Calose walked among the physical bodies. She recognized some members of a cartel that brazenly operated at cross purposes with the Federations war against the Gepaks and their allies. The cartel's families outing as traitors must have happened after the *Jerissa* sailed. The cartel was entrenched in the officer's corps and the war committees before they were identified, arrested and many sent to prison planets until the war ended with the intension of dealing with them then.

Five years after the war technically ended and they were still dealing with them, she thought irritably.

"There is so much discord among these beings, that the chaos they created made it necessary to suspend them in this bubble. It is for the planet and their own protection. In spirit form, they can speak to us, but they are too angry to hear us. When they arrived, they insisted on speaking only with one species, and not a very knowledgeable one, as they were still working their way to their higher purpose. We stepped in when their ambassador confused those they came in contact with. Their harmful thoughts caused strife even among their own."

Calose stared at the Admiral's spirit walking around his chair and his captain shaking his head and looking frustrated. She peered at the name on the uniform. Admiral Ben'De.

Calose moved to block the Admiral's spirit's path, but he merely walked around her.

"Admiral Ben'De? You're going to need to stop pacing and communicate with me," Calose said this with as much force as she could muster in her nonphysical form.

His spirit's head shot up and he spun around. "*Who are you?"* He demanded. Even the captain's spirit looked at her. In fact, all the spirits on the command deck looked at her.

"Captain Calose. I would like a word with you, in private, Admiral Ben'De."

He looked her up and down, no doubt dubious of her unfamiliar uniform. However, he nodded and pointed to the Briefing Room. The spirit of the captain followed.

"I am glad to inform you that the galaxy wide war ended. It has been over for over five standard years, and the Meto Galaxy is at peace," she said.

"I don't believe you! Who the blooming frikas are you!" The captain was angry.

"Do you know where you are?" Calose asked, directing the question to the admiral.

"No! Those devils put us in suspended animation. They froze us! We can't go anywhere or talk to anyone to get off this ship!" the captain continued hysterically.

"*Admiral*?" Calose focused on him, sending out calming energy.

"I'm not sure. Not anymore. We followed coordinates but found out we had a traitor on board, who changed our destination. We managed to get back on track and arrived above the planet we were to rescue from their oppressive government, or so we were told. However, I found those orders to be subject to suspicion. Our ground troops and first contact representative, JobaSoTo went to speak with their leader and no good came of that. On the second day, dragons surrounded our ships and demanded we return to where we came from and..." he sighed.

"They attacked our people! No provocation!" the captain shouted his thoughts.

"JobaSoTo is a member of the outlawed Dubain Cartel," Calose said. *"They aren't interested in peace and were ruled as traitors to the Federation days after your fleet entered the travel tunnel to this part of the galaxy. Everyone assumed your fleet was destroyed, no survivors when no word reached any of the outposts you normally would leave word of your progress."*

"They are an honorable and a well-established family!" the captain said.

"What is your name?" Calose asked.

"What's it..."

"Captain Browm, hold your rancor," the Admiral ordered. *"I am sorry for our poor civility, Captain Calose, but we've been here for I don't know how long. It seems like minutes ago but then..."*

"What are you here for, Captain Calose," Captain Browm demanded.

"My job is finished and so is the corridor the Gepaks', our enemies created. For your sakes and the dragon guardians of the planet you are threatening, I am informing you that you can return to Federation space to a galaxy at peace. You will find the world has changed as have friends, acquaintances, families as well as enemies. I will provide you with information on how

to return using safe travel corridors if you need it. Before you return to your physical bodies, know that you have active cartel members scattered in your fleet that the Federation has identified as traitors, and outlawed due to their undermining the Federations war effort as well as a peaceful co-existence with planets that didn't want to involve themselves with the war. The cartel agents were marking weak planets to be divided up as their spoils of war." She looked directly at the admiral. *"I'm sure by now, you know who most of them are."* She then turned to the captain, *"I don't know where or what you're going to return to, but it would make things easier for you to seek help from the Monks of Peace, to be debriefed."*

"Monks of Peace!" Captain Browm sputtered. *"Those traitors to the war effort!"*

"Traitors? They provided medical attention to all, and still do, without judgement, going on battle fields and into villages decimated or under attack. I was one of those casualties and would have died without their help. Mind that you keep that vile propaganda to yourself when you return to your part of space. You captain, will have to decide to work toward being a Federation Captain under the command of the admiral or to an outlawed cartel, traitors to the Federation."

She glanced at the admiral and in the admiral's species language said, *"If you can't trust your own command staff, scaggats they are, then you must put them in sleep stasis until you reach a Federation space port for your safety and your fleet."*

"It will be done," he replied in the same language.

"What?" demanded the captain.

With her completed messages she willed herself back on her ship, leaving behind the angry energy of the captain.

So, was it up to her to get these ships back into Federation space?

"Was your meeting satisfactory?" LeLa asked. She was sitting on the captain's console.

"Ships are coming online," Kaving said. "Message directed at you, asking for directions to the nearest travel corridor to Shou Space Station? I don't think that's a good destination for them, considering those are battle ships," Kaving said.

"It used to be a launch station for major ship deployments. It's now a civilian space city. Much larger than it had been," Fiv said. "I think if they suddenly appear from any travel corridor an emergency broadcast will be put out and..."

“Yes. All those new Space Police ships would vaporize them into space dust,” Calose said.

Calose thought a few moments. “Can you send out a message, Tre warning whoever is the proper authority that the lost fleet of Admiral Ben'De is returning with 24 war ships? I think the safest place for them to appear is at the outpost ElZoe. Yes. They have a small monastery on the outpost and a cloister on the planet below. The planet will allow them to decompress off their ships.”

She smiled, remembering her short stay at the outpost with a two-day visit to the cloister as it was being constructed. She oversaw the delivery of building material and life sustaining



pods for various species planetside. What species were planetside she couldn't say since many were in ENV suits made for construction workers. Mentally, she had *Faithful Friend* send a coded message to the abbess who was a no-nonsense manager that any master sergeant would love to serve with to further their leadership careers. Calose chuckled at her memories of her encounter with the abbess. It was memorable because it was embarrassing. In that two-day encounter the Abbess Newughter taught her how to hone her intuition. Prejudices contaminated one's intuition, was her lesson.

“They've been here for a longer time than five years and they still have cartel agents aboard that are wanted by the Federations SPs. I'm sure since my last visit three years ago, they've constructed a mixed planetside environment should any of the fleet’s crews wish to get off a ship, even if it's for a short time.”

“ElZoe it is,” Heru said and transmitted the information to the Flag Ship.

It took four hours for the last of the fleet’s twenty-four ships to disappear into space.

“Do we have a new destination?” Calose asked.

“Yes. Sig 7s4 then on to Clover4. Sig has supplies for Clover4. Have you ever heard of Clover4?” Tre asked.

“I have,” LeLa said in a puzzled tone*. “It's a prison colony the monks were given control of. Not like ElZoe's colony of monks where it's more of a retreat and teaching colony. On Clover4 the prisoners aren't hardened criminals and are believed that all they need is re-education to be directed into being responsible galaxy citizens.”*

“We're delivering them supplies?” That wasn't what she got from her ship's communication.

“We are also picking up two passengers to be delivered to another space port,” Kaving said. She frowned over the message.

“So, I'm assuming, the three of you will be my crew for a bit longer?” Calose asked the Deduk and Mouse.

“I don't mind!” LeLa said.

“What has Clover4's success rate been?” Calose asked suspiciously.

Everyone was silent.

“I don’t think in the five years there has been any released,” Kaving said.

“I see. Still a plan in progress. Hopefully, the monk isn't a prisoner in disguise.”

“It would be an interesting prospect,” LeLa said.

“I'm going to unwind,” Calose said. “Full speed to our next destination. We might as well continue using our top speed when no one's around to run into. We do have a hijacking protection in place just in case a group of pirates want *Faithful Friend*?”

“All ahead. Full speed to Sig 7s4,” Moya replied. “I’ve been wanting to see *Faithful Friend* race through the stars.”

However, they all knew *Faithful Friend* had executed the order when Calose verified their next destination and Heru, acting navigator was just confirming the change of direction and speed.

Tre said. “Lilin's is the consummate in all forms of security. *Faithful Friend* is not a good hijacking prospect.”

“And you have us!” LeLa said.

“We have updated one of your supply rooms as a repair facility, should any of Lilin's tools need fine tuning,” Tre said.

“*And I have space on the repair table to keep up my skills,”* LeLa held up his small paws to show he could work on small parts.

“What are you going to do?” Moya teased.

“Why, I can turn some of the cleaning bots to look like little mice!” His squeaks were making his whiskers twitch.

“Is that what all that junk was about that you had brought aboard,” Fiv asked.

"It's not junk! They're my tools. I'll have you know I can make very tiny spybots."

"I can't wait to see mini mice scurrying about after any passenger that tosses their clothing on the floor...or would the infraction be dropping crumbs on the deck?" Calose teased.

LeLa groomed his whiskers calmly. *"You shall be surprised what I learned in Lilin's workshop."*

"Right. How about a hijacker or hijackers that come aboard? Just how exactly would you do to neutralize the person or persons, until we reach a port that we can turn them over to?" Calose asked.

"Where is your brig?"

"No brig in the sense of the military definition. Our last threat of being hijacked by passengers on board, they were billeted together on the second deck so it was easy to induce deep sleep in their cabin. IF and a big if, any passenger tried to hijack this ship, they would get ejected out into space. Of course, they would have to penetrate the ships security before self-preservation would kick in and out the exit hatch perpetrators go."

Mouse's whiskers twitched. *"I shall think about that. I'm sure I can come up with something to keep us all safe from harm, without ejecting anyone out into space."*

"And think about all the different species you would have to neutralize."

"Why would anyone want to hijack a large freighter? It's too difficult to hide once hijacked. But of course, it does have the Shroud," LeLa said thoughtfully.

Calose headed to her music room. There was something that was annoying her and playing music usually gave her enough peace from a busy mind to work it out. Repetitive exercise also did, but she wanted the peacefulness of the music.

From her collection of instruments, she rolled out a piano made for storing in spaces with limited room. It was her mother's brother's favorite musical instrument. He played it at all the family gatherings. Other family members would join in after a while with their instruments. She had studied his hands as he played and memorized the music. It surprised her when she was convalescing in the Healers Hall that she could play some of the pieces on the piano. One of the staff nurses offered to give her lessons, which she accepted. She never wondered why she could pick up so quickly any instrument she put her hands on. It would be like wondering why all Lycosidae arachnids learned to play the Syss before they learned to spin a web. They just did.

Calose relished the feel of the keys as she warmed up and ran through her drills. Then, with a deep sigh, she began the song her Uncle Zixth used to play. Memories came slowly from a time when she was too young to understand how devastating the culture was to developing minds—especially those who saw the world differently from people who hated change. This face, then that one. Who was who? Children picked up some things quickly, but few took to music—or were allowed to. She learned the reed flute, though no one encouraged her because the family she was pledged to disapproved its members playing music. Calose could see in her mind's eye a face that she recognized from childhood. How could he be on the *Jerissa?* A seer from her village. He was one of the few that walked freely through the village. Even those that believed they ran the village, were careful not to insult a seer. When the seers set down a law, even the head of the village followed it.

What was he doing on the *Jerissa?*

She retired to her quarters for a nap.

Chapter Thirteen

The Hondutians

Calose rolled out of her bed cautiously. There was a presence in her quarters. The ship didn't alert her, so it was something it didn't sense or didn't see as a threat.

"*I am Captain of this ship. Who are you?"* she asked in mindspeak.

Calose took a deep breath as the spirit of the person on the *Jerissa* materialized into a more solid form before her.

"Calose Rubino," he said slowly as if listening and sensing his spoken words on more than one sensory level. After a few more minutes as the energy of the form steadied to a pleasant glow around the physical body, he continued. "I know one very like you." His words sounded stronger. "But not with that name. Mia from the village of Muba on the edge of the Faulo Desert. She also used music to soothe the restless."

"I've never heard of that person or place. You look very much like a seer from my village Caribrie, only he was much older walking with a cane, though I doubt he needed it."

He nodded, smiling. "You are the third person that mistook me from the village of Caribrie and given me the honor of addressing me as a seer."

"Who else?"

“Gunners Louis Bartel and Magnon Sleu, in the light armor ground troop division on the *Macon* in that group of ships you sent back to their part of space. They said they were from Caribrie.”

“Louis? And Magnon? They had been inseparable since childhood. They are still alive?” The happiness she felt at the news was surprising.

“Then I have the right person. Louis spoke of being saved by the war from marrying and being a farmer for the rest of his life.”

“I felt the same. Where are you from?” Calose asked to regain focus on the present.

“I'm a vagabond or observer that was assigned to a fleet of warships that meant to do harm to an entire planet of innocent people.”

“Just what is a vagabond or observer? From where?”

“*My* purpose is locating those who will cause a great change. The consequences of this person's actions are either setting back a species in their collective self-awareness or moving them forward in their spiritual journey.

“The players are those in the fleet trapped in a different dimension?”

“Not necessarily in a different dimension. They are betwixt and between but not really a dimension. It's sort of a spare place to store things. There are many such places like that.”

“So, your purpose is to watch events unfold but if someone fails to do their part, you step in with encouragement for them to do something or not to?”

“Yes. Within *Jerissa's* fleet are followers of a cult that would have wiped out an entire planet to eradicate what some of their crew saw as a threat to their claiming the planet for their cult leaders after the war. The dragons are the spiritual protectors of the planet and took what methods they had without killing, suspending the threat. It gave me a chance to 'whisper' in many ears that they were being misled into doing something terribly wrong. We, the dragons and I, have been trying for decades in your measurement of time to convince the crew of each ship and their leaders that the citizens on the planet can govern themselves and are no threat to necessitate outside interference. The citizens are frightened to see strange creatures from outer space dressed in war gear made to intimidate,” he chuckled.

“By the time you arrived, we had made progress with 85% of the fleet’s ships’ crews and most of its leaders. Those we reached disabled their ships’ weapons, angering the cult followers. Many cult leaders have been identified and placed in sleep modules until they can be dealt with.

Cult members befriended and brainwashed the captain you met to undermine the admiral and others opposing their takeover of the fleet. He struggles to distinguish reality from the illusions they have fostered. Sending them where you did was a noble and helpful choice."

"Thanks be to the gods. So why are you here in my ship?"

"You are my new assignment. You had encountered a species that controls the minds of others to do violence to others."

Calose laughed in disbelief. "You could be speaking of the fleet we just left behind, or Gepaks."

"I'm speaking of a military operation that you had been a casualty of in your encounter with them and are being asked to again step in and neutralize their attempts to escape their enclosure. You were given a tool to counter their threat should they again threaten others."

"The Crystal of Darkness and Light," Calose whispered. Was the Federations OSS involved, she wondered.

"Yes," he answered.

"It's no longer in my possession. Who is asking?"

"Another genetic replica of you has temporary guardianship."

"My niece?"

"Yes. I understand it's most unusual to have exact genetic copies in the same town, but it does occur. Your genetic code is what the Fey imprinted to the crystal. When your niece came into contact with the crystal it recognized her genetic code."

"But why me? And WHO is asking?"

"You, because one of your life purposes is to deliver it to the planet Hond for its inhabitants' healing."

"But...I," it sounded so familiar. *I had failed*, she thought dismayed.

Her assignment, with a hundred others, was to disrupt the thought energy from the inhabitants of a planet that was destroying the minds of many, so the security bubble could be placed around the planet again. This time it was stronger and had a more reliable warning should the security be breached.

"I had done what I could have," she said softly.

"You were selected out of the many that survived to imprint your genetic code onto the sacred relic and given care of the Crystal until it was needed to finish the healing."

Fear rose in Calose at the thought of encountering the Hondutians race again. Calose held her breath for a few moments then let it out, grounding herself to the energy of her ships deck to still the memories of being possessed with a murderous rage that not just surprised her with its force, but led her to almost killing herself rather than be a carrier of something so dark.

“What had saved you from doing harm to others and yourself was touching the crystal.”

Calose rubbed her fingertips, remembering the feel of a buzz in her fingertips and up her arms. She was in a military casualty center when she became aware that the darkness in her was gone. The Fey had touched her with the crystal.

She had lost most of her squadron. She remembered that. A dark cloud descended on the squad’s forward fighters and quickly engulfed the rest of them. A horrible dread filled her as she no longer had control of her space fighter whose direction in the darkness could have been anywhere. Her rehabilitation involved hours of fine tuning her nerves with exercises a new military recruit would bemoan. She also spent hours with the monks on her thoughts to bring her out of depression and into a forgetfulness, a blessed forgetfulness. Memories of her experience with the Hondutians and the battle that took her to their planet were pushed so far from her consciousness that nightmares of that experience weren't in her subconscious. What the crystal given to her was for and who by was forgotten also. It was just a relic in a box that she was to keep until...now. From that experience she was transferred to another fighter group to red irect the rogue pilots. That ended in disaster and two years of rehabilitation and any further fighter pilot experience.

“The Hondutians, what neutralized their danger?” Calose asked.

“Eons ago, when the Hondutians had been caught mentally enslaving anything they could, higher beings interceded and placed an energy force field around their planet until they learned to respect the rights of others. During the galaxy war the Hondutians had damaged or weakened the bubble and were back at their abuse of others, seizing military personnel trained by the Federation to set up their small armies. They were used like toy soldiers waring to their death by twelve Hondutian Clutches. A new force field was erected, and new monitors were installed. Lately, the Hondutians have again found a way out. The crystal that was created to be the Hondutians final punishment against their abuse is being called to be activated. The Hondutians are aware of it and have been sending agents to find it. All they know is that it has the power to destroy them. A misconception but close enough.”

“It's like a creator energy programed for sparking love and peace in living cells,” Calose said.

“Yes. You have felt it's power then?”

“I'm guessing that it's something like that.” Calose smiled embarrassed. “With all the myths and well, dreams I've had I felt it's something like that.” Yes, she felt the crystal, but it wasn't power as most would see it. It expressed it's creation in something more like influencing the critical mass consciousness of a specific species cell by cell that quickly replicated to others.

“That would scare people that are bent on doing harm to others,” Calose said. “Are the Hondutians the equivalent of Gepaks, only in this dimension?”

“Ah. I had not thought of that. Perhaps.”

“That puts a different slant on the allies of Gepaks in this dimension.” Calose felt mixed emotions, and guilt along with it. If the Gepaks’ allies were taken over mentally, did that absolve them of their atrocities? Calose shook that thought away. She didn't want to delve into that moral abyss.

“So, just what are you whispering in my ear?”

“Your crew has orders for your next destination?” he asked.

“To pick up supplies at S7u4 for a prison planet Clover4 and deliver it to them. Neither destination I feel comfortable going to since I know almost nothing of that area of space.”

“The crystal will protect you still and like all dedicated crystals to a purpose, it's power isn't diminished by space. With this crystal its set to a genetic code and a thought from the right biological person to connect with thought, thought is energy.”

Her visitor disappeared before she could ask more questions.

“Faithful Friend, who is the monk we are picking up?” she asked.

“Monk Horitu and a companion.”

The name sounded familiar, but she had met many monks in her life during and after the war.

“Do you have information on either the monk or her companion?”

“Yes.”

“Download them to my reader and information on both destinations including their part during and after the war. Clear all subliminal messages that are in the information packet.”

End of Destination to Merlota, Part 4. Next for Calose Facing Shadows From the Void #5