

Leona Bestolie #7 A Shake Down Cruise

Chapter 1

A Shake Down Cruise

Lonnie released the security locks of her passenger hatch cover for Crackle and Cookie.

"This is a fantastic gift!" Crackle said as she grabbed Lonnie and gave her a hug. "Is it as big on the inside as it looks on the outside?" she asked excited.

"You can now stop hinting about getting something in case we have to make an emergency evacuation," Lonnie returned. "Cookie? What are you doing so far from home?"

Crackle stepped further in to let Cookie greet Lonnie.

"A cooking seminar." She gestured at Crackle. "Her relief came just after you left and when I said I wished I could go to see the Great Chef in person at the Space Mall, whoosh. She had us both packed and out of there! I think it's called cabin fever, only in our case it's mountain fever. Ang didn't even have time to make up her mind if she wanted to come along."

"I need real practice at being a bodyguard. I'm getting rusty at doing mundane stuff and you know it's important to keep my skills honed. It was a good thing we were off planet. I received a call from our friend Ridy, asking me where the hell I am when you're in trouble."

"Did he forget to mention that I was in *his* ship, and it was on auto pilot? I didn't interrupt your seminar, did I, Cookie?"

"No. Great Chef is older and isn't as good as he used to be. He had bots for assistants and a recording of what was going on. So, are you going to give us a tour of this corporate luxury liner you've taken on? Have you figured how you're going to fit it in your private fortress?"

"*Belgium Queen* already has a slip at the new space station. We can use *Belgium Queen's* shuttle, *Little Emperor* to go back and forth between home and the space station. You know, I couldn't find a way to refuse Ridy and it would be insulting to do so. I wouldn't be invited to any more family picnics and he gives good parties." She looked at Crackle. "Wait until you see what this ship has for power and defense weapons. And Cookie, can you program its refreshment queue? It needs help."

"Well, then," Cookie said. "After we have a tour, I'll give it a review."

They started in the passenger section, which is where most of the obvious luxuries were. Cookie was impressed with the virtual reality bubbles each passenger could travel in, effectively isolating the viewer from fellow passengers.

“Come-on, Cookie, turn it off so we can finish the tour,” Crackle said.

“Hang on. I want to pause on this lesson. I never heard of these cookies. So, what else do you have on this ship?”

“Let’s check out the storage bay, where besides life pods and a rescue vessel-otherwise known as a shuttle, the *Little Emperor*, they have an exercise gym with a bot that can tailor a workout for you and monitor you, a sauna, pool and hot tub. Did you know it doesn’t need a pilot?”

“No kidding, Lonnie. How many private yachts do you know that do need one?”

“What I mean is that you can program this ship to do all the piloting *and* maintenance.”

“I’d rather have some sort of oversight on it, especially its maintenance. Nothing is that perfect,” Crackle said.

They sat at the controls and Lonnie showed Crackle what she discovered on armaments and safeties against anything that would constitute a surprise boarding by uninvited guests.

“I’ll be in the galley,” Cookie said, noticing that the two were too engrossed in what the console’s menu was displaying.

After reviewing menus and gizmos the two felt ready to take a cruise to test it out.

Crackle rubbed her palms together then made a sign over her console followed by taps on the screen for its various menus and submenus, humming her favorite marching song from her military days. The yacht alerted the automated docking master that *Belgium Queen* was ready for departure. *BQ* was assigned a departure slot.

Cookie appeared. “I can feel the beast rumbling. Are we taking off?”

“We sure are. Let’s take a hop to Darian’s Star System. Luthma in Borik’s spread is pretty to see from space. Unless you have another place to visit,” Lonnie said.

“I’m just the passenger,” Cookie said. “A tourist, to be exact.”

“I may have a place,” Crackle said. “I’ll send my father a message and see if he or the family would like a visit from daughter number eight, and a spin in our new yacht. The family home is just an hour’s hop from Darian’s Star System. Do you have any other special place in mind?” Crackle asked.

“No,” Lonnie said.

While they waited for the three yachts before them to launch, and a few incomings to dock, Cookie searched the beverage menu. “What kind of ship was this? They don’t have anything worth drinking.”

“That’s on another menu, Cookie. You pulled up the ship’s liquids not beverages.” Lonnie said.

“Oh, this one. This is an improvement. The wine list is commendable. Are either of you hungry? I can fix something around this wine list.”

“That sounds good. I am hungry, though nothing heavy. That reminds me. I have the gizmos I purchased at the spy shop.” Lonnie led Crackle and Cookie to the lounge where from a cupboard she removed each of her new gadgets and laid them on the meeting table. She pointed out the small security spheres the girls had thought were good additions. “I’ve put in a special delivery order of one for each room to backup what we already have.”

“Nothing for me here,” Cookie said and left the two to inspect the new spy toys.

Crackle and Lonnie programmed a few while waiting for their turn in the launch queue. When their turn came, the ship moved smoothly out of the waiting queue and away from the planet’s outer circle without a pilot’s intervention. When they were in the safe jump zone, the transition was so smooth no one noticed it.

Chapter 2

It’s Not As It Seems

They arrived at Darian’s Star System when the three women’s biological time clock said it was bedtime. As much as they wanted to stay up, only Crackle stayed up longer than Cookie and Lonnie, and just long enough to recheck the security envelope around them. They had a one-hour warning should anything approach the yacht.

The next day, they spent hours admiring Luthma in Borik’s mass of stars in Darian’s Star System. Images were captured and forwarded to friends. Cookie expressed her delight by baking small cakes with swirls the colors of the planet and the star system. The other half of the day they visited Ri, a planet where half the population lived in cities underground. Cookie stocked up on souvenirs, not knowing when she would get another chance at being a tourist in a strange star system.

The next morning, Lonnie was sitting on the bridge admiring the expanse of space on the screen. She turned at the sound of someone behind her. Crackle entered, walking slower than she normally moved.

“You have two messages,” Lonnie said.

Crackle’s hair was wet from her morning work-out in the pool. Lonnie grinned when she groaned sitting down.

“Had a rough night?”

“Laugh now. The next time it’ll be you.”

Before they retired the previous night, they had a workout on the mat. Crackle wasn’t up to her usual form and a few surprise tosses had Crackle landing harder than she was used to landing. That’s not to say Lonnie didn’t spend some time upended on the mat, but she was used to it.

“Father is traveling and has an auto reply to his mail. I wondered why I didn’t get a reply sooner.”

“Maybe because you were being a tourist or sleeping?” Lonnie said.

Crackle made a face at her. She went on to read the second message also from her father.

“He wants to know if I’ll pay a favor back for him and visit a family friend to check out his security system around a family's property.” She accessed the planetary charts and located the planet of his friend.

“The Planet of Fantasy, Cosmo,” Lonnie read out loud. “That’s a place to not visit alone. Good thing you have us along.”

“Hm,” Crackle agreed. “Hom Unsler lives on the owner’s island and wants the house checked for security weaknesses. Obviously, he wasn’t expecting father to do the inspection. That isn’t father’s forte.”

“Are you the only one that does security in the family?”

“No. One brother and one sister. It looks like they’re busy and it’s fallen to me to honor father's obligations.”

Lonnie knew with Crackle’s family, paybacks were important so she cleared it with Cookie and sent a message to her Mountain Castle that they would be making a stop at the Planet of Fantasy for business.

"Cora is going to have fun with us when she gets this message," Lonnie said.

On their way there, Crackle and Lonnie spent their waking time familiarizing themselves with the ship, and their new security equipment Lonnie purchased. When Lonnie tired of Crackle's memory and skill drills to keep each other occupied, she researched the planet Cosmo. Crackle became absorbed in trying to understand a gizmo Lonnie didn't remember adding to her purchases. It may have been something Ridly added without telling Lonnie, they both thought.

Cookie spent her waking time between the bubble where she was running a Cooking with Famous Chefs Around the Star Systems program and testing out some of the recipes in the ship's galley.

"Are you sure this place is safe?" Lonnie asked, looking up from the planet's advertisement. "It's promoted as a wild kingdom with pleasure palaces for any delight. That's an invitation for troubled people to flock here."

"That's the truth. But we're not going where the tourists go. Father sent me a follow-up with more details. Hom Unsler is the caretaker on an island that the owner, B'rup Nunne and his family stay at. None of the tourists visit there. Hom has been asking father if he can get one of us to visit and test out the security on the island. He thinks it's not all that the seller of the security system claims it to be."

"We should have brought the girls," Lonnie said.

"Leuwig and Herling wouldn't let them on *this* planet. They would have too much fun dismantling not just security but messing with the dream suites and fantasy rooms it runs."

"I hope you told him we're coming," Lonnie said.

Crackle grinned. Cookie chose that time to come in with small snacks, more results of her testing the menus her favorite chef program demonstrated. Both women selected a tasty treat and hummed their approval.

"No. We're going to test his security," Crackle said after taking a few more bites of the pastry. "The best test is surprise. If someone tipped off security, we wouldn't get good test results. I'll test some of these gizmos you purchased, and this one that you don't know where it came from."

"Whoa!" Cookie said. "I'm not an action seeking adventurer beyond cooking. Dropping in on family friends... unannounced, is like serving a vegetarian dish to a ChuLa, a true species with raptor tastes," she said.

“You’re so right, as the girls would say. No way will I risk your life, Cookie. You can rest here and watch your programs. We won’t be here long. I learned a lot from the girls that you won’t see most security companies paying attention to.”

“You’re not dragging me into this,” Lonnie told her. “I had my adventure already.”

Crackle’s smile grew wider. “No problem. I need this to test my skills to see if I’ve lost my edge. You two can sit up here and watch. If I get stuck where I can’t escape, you can rescue me, or better yet, we’ll see how well BQ’s security works. However, I believe I’ll be in and out without them even knowing it, and with a list of what needs improvement in six hours.” Crackle took another pastry and smiled at Cookie, then returned her attention to Lonnie’s screen.

“I’ll set up everything to monitor me, just in case you two get tempted and visit some of the pleasure sites. I’m going to cover all bases. See this? This is set to my bios. If I disappear, which I doubt will happen with Ridy’s software, the bodyguard bot will look for me. This is a great opportunity to see how this new stuff works.”

A ding and a message scrolled across the screen.

“We have arrived. Let’s set this on an orbit of the planet and look over its security and traffic,” Crackle said.

When Crackle was satisfied with the planet’s security wasn’t going to interfere with her unannounced visit she parked the ship outside of the planet’s secured zone.

“I’m going to be very hungry when I get back, Cookie. I’d love to try out one dish with the little do-dads you serve before the main meal.”

“That’s a spicy affair,” Cookie said. “Your stomach would never forgive me after a fast to dump on your system. Don’t you worry. I’ll have a good welcome back meal.”

“Lonnie, let me off right here.”

Lonnie glanced at her friend. “What do you mean, let you off? If I set this ship down on the planet it will be tracked.”

“The pod, silly. It’s too small to be monitored and you can recall it.” Crackle tapped in a code then coordinates. “There, all you have to do is push this button when this light turns green.”

“Are you going to disable the beacon? What happens if you want to bring someone back?”

“It has the option to turn off the emergency beacon. When I’m ready to come back I’ll turn on the beacon for *Belgium Queen’s* retrieval only, and presto, BQ will haul me back. If I need more space, I’ll send for the shuttle. Everything will be fine,” she said.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Lonnie asked, feeling one person going on a reconnaissance without proper backup was asking for trouble. She forgot about this side of Crackle. An action person like her was probably finding it difficult to run security and not face anything more dangerous than neighbors that crossed over her land to hunt wildlife that Lonnie was protecting.

“Lonnie, I did this before I went to work for a cruise liner. I’m ready for a challenge. You both will be nice and safe up here and Hom will get a thrill that his request is finally being answered.”

Cookie had disappeared and returned with a plate of cookies. “Very nourishing. Take some with you in your pack.”

“Cookie, how much influence do you have over Crackle?” Lonnie asked.

“Just her stomach. Let her have fun. There’s not much you can do to stop her anyway.”

“See?” Crackle smiled. She pulled out one of the packs, checked it for supplies, adding Cookie’s contribution, then tightening it up and slinging it over her shoulder.

“Take four of those bodyguard bots with you,” Lonnie said.

“Four? How generous. Thanks. That gives me great odds to be back in time for supper.”

Lonnie waited until the light on her console showed the pod was ready for flight. She jettisoned it toward the planet. This was not a good idea she kept thinking.

While the pod was monitored by the ship, Lonnie researched the planet to see what the public had to say about the place. The newsies she read were the gossip ones that liked to report shady goings on. From her own experience among the trashy stuff there was some truth to be found.

It was an hour later that the pod beacons it had landed. The recording device on Crackle activated. They were getting panoramic views around her. The small bodyguard bots, BGBs spread out scanning everything.

“Now that is a beautiful plant. Cora would love that in her yard,” Cookie said.

“It’s a security plant,” Lonnie said. “It’s not real. It is deadly to many species when activated.”

“Really?” Cookie enlarged the view for a closer look, but Crackle had moved on, so her view went blurry. “For sure she’ll want one of those.”

According to the ship’s security board that was monitoring Crackle, the plant she walked by noticed her passing and sent a small insect to follow her. If it registered a danger to her the BGBs would have disabled it.

Lonnie sent a scan for a place to station keep closer to the planet without being challenged.

“Oh, M’boto would love that valley,” Cookie said.

“*Those* plants are real and are killers. I wonder if they’re native to this planet or someone planted them there for a reason.”

“What difference does that make?” Cookie asked.

“Because when someone takes that much trouble to stop someone from entering an area, when the planet is designed for visitors, I get suspicious.”

“Oh.”

“Crackle, do you read me?”

“Loud and clear. I haven’t seen anyone yet. How are the cameras doing?”

“Panoramic views. We noticed some interesting plants you’ve passed.”

“Yeah. Bubania is used for planting security monitors in and at the base a mobile dart gun and the Trizona I passed eats what it stuns. It didn’t register me passing. Nothing of interest along this path. No recent passing by anything alive.”

“The Bubania did notice you. It moved after you passed, and a small fly bot is following you.”

“Oh, yeah. I see it.” Crackle considered killing it but if she did, it would send a message back to the plant and a swarm of mechanical flies would engulf her, smothering her to death.

“Distract insect,” she told the BGB. In seconds it flew off, toward the Trizona plants.

“Love these BGBs. Smaller than the usual civilian stuff they sell,” Crackle said.

“I have more information on this planet. From what the newsies say, some people that have visited this place have disappeared. There’s a lot of rumors about the people that have disappeared. Either they had some shady dealings about ready to be exposed or they were running from shady dealings. Of course, no one has proved it, but the rumor is, if you want to get rid of someone this is the place to take them.”

“Lonnie, every vacation place has people disappearing either because the person arranged it or someone else did. If this place was getting a lot of reports, it would be investigated by newsies with a better reputation than the scandal rags,” Crackle said. *“Though, forewarned is forearmed. Rumors have a kernel of truth to them.”*

“Exactly. Be careful,” she said though she knew that was redundant. Crackle was careful by nature. With that said, Lonnie started an in-depth scan of the area inside the valley. Once the scan was started, she returned her attention to Crackle. She was making good progress and so far, she passed two potential traps without incident on her part.

Crackle took a surprised inhale, then collapsed.

“What are you going to do?” Cookie asked Lonnie.

“One of the BGBs will administer an antidote.”

It seemed like a long time before Crackle stirred. Weaving to her feet she stumbled as she turned around to see what was about her. From her hand she pulled out a thorn.

“What the blazes is that?”

One of the BGB's gave a warning, sending an image of something slithering on a branch near the path Cookie was on. Cookie gulped. It dropped from a tree branch on to the path and moved toward Crackle.

“A python. I just upped the security on her BGBs. They *were* set to intervene only in life threatening situations. If that python gets too close to Crackle, it will get a shock.”

It took only one shock and the snake slithered back up a tree.

Crackle’s head turned at a sound from behind her. *“Someone’s coming. It sounds like a cart.”*

“Take the left side of the path,” Lonnie said.

The BGBs showed it to be clear of traps. Crackle moved off the path, mindful of what could be hidden in the grass, besides snakes. A BGB went before her, clearing her way of anything that may be harmful with sound waves.

The rumbling became louder and two men, dressed in bright colored clown suits, appeared. One pulled a cart while the other followed. They were arguing in a foreign language.

Lonnie started the translator to find what language they were using.

When they passed Crackle, they all got a view of what was in the cart...a body or a dummy? When they were further up the path Crackle let out a sigh of relief. *"They're Bonzops. They're bottom feeders in the assassins' union."*

"I've never met one," Lonnie said.

"I have. A few came by Cora's Clinic and asked a lot of personal questions. She asked them to leave and called her security bot to escort them out," Cookie said.

"I'm going to see what they're up to," Crackle said. One of the BGBs moved higher to get an aerial view of the area. A laser shot was fired at the BGB which it evaded and fired back.

"Well, they now know someone is in their deadly garden," Lonnie said.

"I hear shouting coming from where the Bonzops were headed," Crackle said.

"Are you sure you're recovered enough from the drug?" Cookie asked.

"I feel better already," Crackle said.

"How well do you know this family friend Hom?" Lonnie asked.

"I haven't seen him for over 300 stan years. He can't have changed that much."

Lonnie looked surprised.

"She's exaggerating," Cookie said. "Crackle isn't over 150 stan years."

"Whatever the age, people do change especially if they've lived long," Lonnie said.

"I see some buildings and a house," Crackle said.

"We have a topographical of the island. The scans are also showing what's below the surface. Apparently, there are tunnels that go from the house to the mainland and to different parts of the island," Lonnie said.

"If you can scan them that is a breach of their security." Suddenly the visuals from Crackle's helmet changed to the back of a broken-down cart with trash piled around it.

Lonnie and Cookie watched as the BGBs watched from various vantage points.

Four Bonzops were standing outside of the house shouting at whoever was standing in the doorway to the home. Their cart was turned over and the mannequin they were carrying in the cart had parts of the cart and the mannequin's body parts scattered.

A purple Helicom, larger than the Bonzops, had its arms waving wildly, with shiny knives in each of its eight hands. The Helicom's angry voice boomed and shook physical structures around them.

Crackle guessed the building structure was no more than a fake structure made to look solid.

“There’s a tunnel below the cart your hiding behind,” Lonnie informed Crackle. “It has branches to a barn, that fake house, to a lake shore and a tunnel to an underground chamber. It’s big. I can’t see clearly what’s in them.”

Crackle pushed passed stacked boxes and discarded clothing and found a wooden cover in the ground under the cart. Peering out through the junk she looked for anyone that may be looking for her. Convinced no one was, she slid her hands under the lid and pulled it up just enough for one of the bots to give her an image. When the BGB moved forward it dropped into the hole and made a thunk as if it did a free fall onto the bottom of the hole.

“I’m not getting any reading from #2,” Lonnie reported.

“It conked out,” Crackle reported.

“Get moving to wherever you are going,” Lonnie said. “They’re headed to where you are.”

Crackle tucked two bots into her pocket leaving the other two to monitor the area. Opening the lid high enough for her to slip in, she got a quick glimpse of stairs that led to a darker interior.

When the cover closed her connection to the ship broke.

“Damn! This is supposed to be able to operate even under ground,” Lonnie said.

Cookie shook her head, not looking concerned. “Lonnie, you worry too much. She’s good at what she does. Always reading up on the latest spy gizmos and running tests on this and that. We’re just going to have to trust she knows her business.”

Lonnie thought Cookie’s experiences with failed cooking efforts were not comparable to Crackle’s risking her life out of boredom and then remembered her own pursuits when she was stuck for months onboard a cruise liner with nothing challenging to do.

“Well, I know what that is,” Cookie said. “Trouble.”

A light was blinking on QB’s console.

“We’re being hailed by the police authority and they have armed themselves. They want us to allow them on board for an inspection,” Lonnie said.

“What do we do?” Cookie asked.

"I'm not too sure these people are legitimate. There's nothing in the advertising that says they have space police, and this is open space."

"Pirates then?"

"In all likelihood. This place is somewhere people with a lot of credits would visit."

"Does this ship have anything to prevent us from being shot to pieces?" Cookie asked worried.

"It does, but whatever I use, that information will be passed on to all the wrong people in a quick transmission." Lonnie was looking for something that would block the other ship's transmissions, however, what they did have was something a civilian ship usually didn't have.

"Jammer?" Cookie asked.

"That's it. But unless we plan on killing them all to prevent them from telling others we have such a tool, it's not what I would choose."

"Well, just what do you plan on doing?"

"Run." Lonnie ran a scan on the suspected pirate ship to see if it would give her an in-depth scan of who was on board.

Another demand to board *Belgium Queen* came across their communication channel. They could see a dozen small pods jettisoned out of its bay.

"What are those?" Cookie asked alarmed.

"People. Pretty stupid, considering all we have to do is leave this orbit."

Lonnie engaged the engines and they left the suspicious ship and its pods behind quickly.

"Let's see if there are any other ships around here. They would have to be working with others if it's a pirate group."

"I hope Crackle doesn't need us," Cookie mentioned.

Lonnie glanced at Cookie who had previously voiced that Crackle could handle herself alone fine. "She has the four bodyguard bots, and a message buoy that if she should need us, it will beacon us. The two bots she left behind will use BQs scans to find her when she surfaces," Lonnie reassured her.

"I know it sounds a bit unbalanced of me to sound worried for her after all I've said, but we're not going to be watching over her now." Cookie sighed. "That woman has grown on me and I'm very fond of her as another daughter. I know that if you weren't here, she would have gone down there alone, without all those gadgets. She's one of those people that has this urge to

risk her life periodically or she doesn't feel right. I keep reassuring myself that she is exceptionally good at this type of thing, sneaking in and out of places, so I shouldn't worry so much, but I do." She chattered as if to reassure herself.

"We both will worry about her, and I know she likes testing herself. Chances are the captain of the *Wanderer* is going to wonder what we were doing there. He or she will scan the surface. Since Crackle is underground, it will only register the people above ground. The good thing is that there's a lot of surfaces to scan."

"What if they have as good equipment as you and can see the tunnels? And how is she going to get a signal to us if we're so far?"

"If they did, they wouldn't have dispatched personnel to latch onto us. They would have sent them all to the island instead. The island has a relay to the mainland probably to all the bubbles of fantasy where all the visitors are heading. Her signal will use that to get to us."

Lonnie watched the results of the scan of the ship, *Wanderer*, scroll across her screen. "They don't have any shuttles. Their bays are empty." The bio readings were broken down to species. Lonnie sent an inquiry to see if *BQs* defensive gases would neutralize the various species should they board *BQ*. Then she set *BQs* security to detect any intruder that wasn't the three of them, and friend or foe, would be treated as an intruder and neutralize them.

"It's busy out here," Cookie said.

Lonnie looked at the screen showing their surroundings. There were plenty of ships parked in orbit around the planet. Shuttles were taking off toward the planet's surface. If the planet got any busier, the owner should think about arranging for a space port, Lonnie thought.

Lonnie parked *Belgium Queen* amongst other ships. All the ships looked like they were on autopilot for station keeping. The two watched as shuttles were sent from the planet to yachts that didn't have their own shuttles or didn't want to use them.

"We'll sit here until we get a message from Crackle."

"The planet can't be as bad as you think," Cookie said. "It says here all celebrations are accommodated, weddings, divorces, birthdays and anything else."

Lonnie glanced at the screen where Cookie was reading from. "I'm sure there are people that have harmless fantasies that visit here. It's the attraction it will have for people that have darker fantasies that are harmful to living creatures that I fear for. I wonder what they have to protect the innocent from being victimized."

“Well, if those were pirates, it attracts them. But they’ll be wherever they can earn a living.”

While they watched ships arrive, Lonnie logged onto the arrival board to see just who was disembarking. Apparently, it was open to anyone to view.

“That’s some impressive list,” Cookie said.

“It sure is. The discomforting thought is that bodyguards and any recording devices are not permitted, as well as anything their security considers spyware that will breach anyone's privacy.”

"Look at all the weddings they're having!" Cookie said.

"Hey!" Lonnie exclaimed.

The advertisement that she brought up was on a wedding for E’lis and Conquel, both celebrities that had a fortune that would last them a lifetime. The guest list had Kali Maxine’s name on it.

“Looks like you were expected,” Cookie said.

“What?”

“Your name is on this wedding guest list.”

Lonnie went further down the list. “How come I never saw the invitation?”

“Probably because you need a full-time secretary to keep up with your correspondence. You can’t expect Sheri to do it. She has enough work to do with her own businesses.”

Lonnie glanced back at the guest list. She knew many of the people by name but not personally. She had met E’lis on a river raft campout. She didn’t think they had bonded that close, though they shared intimate moments when they spent a few nights in the same tent. That was before E’lis made a name for herself and when Lonnie was still being mentored as a Ghost, for a private investigative organization.

“There’s a message coming in.” Cookie’s voice brought her back from her memories.

“It’s asking me if I plan on...” Lonnie frowned. It was from E’lis asking her if she was going to join them or stay aboard her ship.

“How did she know you were here?” Cookie asked.

“I don’t know. The ship is registered to my business not me personally and the ship was just signed over to me...well, has it been a week?” It wasn’t that difficult for a determined person

to find out who was behind PCom Consulting, she reminded herself. It did concern her why a person from over twenty years ago who she met only once put her on her wedding list.

“How well do you know her?” Cookie asked.

“We met on a three-day group camping trip over twenty years ago. I went along as a favor for a friend that was leading it. His partner got sick.”

Cookie glanced at her smiling. “I heard you were a wild one when you were younger.”

“I wasn’t that wild. I didn’t do half the things attributed to me.”

“Well, you better answer.”

“Do you want to come as my guest?” Lonnie asked.

“No... well, yes. I’ve never been to a party with celebrities. How upscale do we dress?”

“I’ll check my mail.” Lonnie scanned her mail and found the number in her queue was too many, which was why she didn’t spend much time reading through them.

“Two events to attend, the wedding then dinner. We can wear something that is adaptable to the events.”

“I haven’t dressed for something nice in a long time. This is going to be like a luxurious vacation. If I weren’t worrying about Crackle, I would be looking forward to all this frilly stuff.”

“I hope she stays out of trouble,” Lonnie said. Mentally, she was thinking that of Kali too. What was she doing on place like this?"

“You’ll have to show me how the techno stuff works for producing clothing.”

To both their clothing, Lonnie programmed the usual hidden pockets for things that could be used for survival. Lonnie was realizing more and more how right Coline and Muto were about her needing to keep up on her spy skills.

“How long is this going to last?” Cookie asked. “Maybe we need more than one change of clothing.”

Lonnie looked at the design Cookie settled on. “It’s fine. This is a one-day event.”

“You and Crackle are a pair. Always prepared for trouble.” Cookie patted the pocket hidden under her coat that had a knife. It blended in with the design of the fabric so she would pass through any scanner for weapons.

The two settled in for a trip to the planet. Lonnie hated to leave *QB* in space when the suspicious ship was lurking about. The fact that her new ship had a lot of protection hardware didn’t change her worry that *QB* was safe from someone boarding her.

Their shuttle, *Little Emperor*, gracefully settled on a moving pad that transported them into an underground chamber where dozens of shuttles were parked. A hissing sound could be heard as a containment shield settled around them. The ship's sensors read the air outside the ship was safe for them to walk without any breathing aids. As they stepped out, there was another transportation belt that moved out of the underground chamber into an enclosed environment. They were joined by a mixture of people for different occasions, some wearing environmental suits that allowed them in an atmosphere not suited for their species. Ground carts awaited them. They chose a cart with the name of the castle their wedding was scheduled at.

Cookie's eyes were looking over everyone that was flocking to the carts. There were dignitaries dressed down and elegant people dressed up for a celebration. She smoothed out her own clothing, feeling satisfied she wasn't going to stand out as a peasant among royalty.

Lonnie studied everyone. She was curious about the type of people coming to this planet regardless of its dubious reputation accorded it by rumor magazines.

"Hey, did you see that woman? She got into that pinkish cart. She could be you if she didn't swagger so much," Cookie said.

Lonnie turned to see who she was referring to, but the woman and cart were speeding off. "Looks like she's heading to the same place we are."

Their cart fell behind other carts that were headed up a steep green slope. On both sides of the path were plants and elaborate statues. Looking up through the dome's ceiling, Lonnie marveled at the night sky with all the stars.

"Hello. Hello." A voice piped next to their cart.

"Well, hello there. Isn't this a lovely ride?" Cookie asked the tiny creature.

"Yes, it is. And which side are you here for?"

Cookie looked blank.

"I know them both, E'lis and Conquel," it continued. "It really is inspirational of them to have it here. We are all curious at just what this place is like. The newsies have so much to say this way and that, not really giving one an idea of what it's really like."

"I never heard of this place," Cookie said.

"It's been the talk for months," it said dramatically. Tiny eyes, a dozen of them popped out of its head and arms and studied Cookie in minute detail.

Chatawans, Lonnie thought. She heard of the species but hadn't seen one until now.

“Just who are you here for?” it asked warily.

“Her,” Cookie said, nodding toward Lonnie.

The dozen eyes moved to Lonnie and then melted back into the small body unseen.

Lonnie wasn't interested in conversation. Since Chatawans traveled in open space, their interests were only in attending events they considered important. What merits importance to them wasn't understandable to anyone that was willing to admit to it. They didn't trade, buy, or sell anything that could be factually verified. Rumors abounded about Chatawans because of their unknown interests. What one could say about them is they were conversationalists but if you were asked what you talked about, the details evaded you.

“Leona Bestolie, the dancer. This should be very entertaining party, along with the clowns and other circus performers,” it said disdainfully.

The path narrowed and the Chatawans cart sped ahead.

“I didn't even get a name,” Cookie said in annoyance. “Was it categorizing you with the circus?”

“It's name is on the bag in the back. Mora Chuchu. Traveler Extraordinaire. That puts it in the category of circus performers' agent, though, I'm sure it has other clients.”

Cookie looked at her surprised. “How did you get all that bit of information so quickly?”

“I keep up with the Major Stars Galaxy News. It lists entertainment agents and rates them. Traveler Extraordinaire is rated as questionable. I didn't know the name or species, but after today, I'm sure there will be a lot of people that will love to call in with their scoop. However, it may be a group and not an individual.”

Their cart stopped in front of an arched bridge that was decorated in colorful lamps, showing just enough light for people to see where they were stepping. Others before them were walking over it and up another well lighted short flight of stairs with heavily loaded baggage bots following close behind.

“We could have brought more clothes,” Cookie said. “I would have liked to try out a lot more styles.”

“I'm sure each sleeping room has a fashion kiosk. However, we're not staying overnight, Cookie. I want to find out why I was invited and how I ended up here right on time! I hate coincidences,” she said.

As they walked over the bridge, Lonnie noticed their footsteps made no noise. As they got closer to the castle Lonnie was getting a feeling that she should run the other way. She glanced at Cookie to see if she was feeling the same. Cookie was humming her appreciation at the decorations and settings. When they stepped on the threshold to go into the castle, Lonnie's trepidation went away.

The entrance into the castle's foyer was visually enormous with a grand staircase that had people stopped at various points in mid conversations or pointing to something they could see below them in the foyer. Bots were everywhere offering beverages, food, and information. Some guests had colored tags, and some didn't.

Lonnie accepted a beverage and asked the bot if Kali Maxine had arrived yet and where the host E'lis was.

"Where are you going?" Lonnie asked when Cookie started off toward a long table with edibles on it.

"That table of food looks just like Chef M set out on her teaching VID."

Lonnie didn't want to be separated from Cookie, so she followed her. Chef M was dressed in her uniform, standing off to the side speaking with whoever wanted her autograph. Cookie made a beeline for her as others were gathering around the table and eating too much to be healthy.

While Cookie spoke to Chef M, Lonnie looked around to see who was attending. A bot stopped near Lonnie and after scanning her, gave her a tag to wear. Blue and it had E and C's Wedding Guest. Lonnie watched as it stopped next to Cookie. A tag with a blue and white stripe was given to Cookie. Curious, Lonnie started over to see what the stripe was about. A hand on her arm stopped her.

"Leona Bestolie?" a familiar voice asked.

Turning, Lonnie was surprised to see an old friend, Elimie. She had an official badge on her, identifying her as castle security. While one head smiled at her the other was keeping an eye on the crowd.

"Elimie! How nice to see you! Is Dirmar here?" Some of her worry left at seeing her old friend.

"Yes. He's bartending on the second level. We didn't think we would be seeing you again. I see you're here for the C&E party."

“You left Carobs Corner?”

Elimie waved a hand. “New owners. You know how that goes. We wanted to travel, and this gig came up. It’s supposed to be for one year. It’s been interesting. We’ve been here for two months now, and it’s not been like some of the newsies say. But then again, we’re assigned to this castle only for the celebrations.”

“What do workers do in their spare time?”

Elimie looked puzzled and then smiled and shrugged her shoulders. “This-that-and-the-other. We’re looking forward to our next posting already. We have an agent that is supposed to book us in interesting places for a short time. Dirmar and I decided we don’t want to work in boring places and not in too exciting places that I have to worry about my life or Dirmar’s.”

“Cookie, this is Elimie, a friend,” Lonnie introduced when Cookie joined them. “Elimie, this is my friend and exceptional chef, Cookie.”

“Nice to meet you, Elimie.”

“You have a personal chef, Leona?” she teased.

They all laughed.

“I see you work here, Elimie. Can you tell me if they have cooking conventions coming soon? I didn’t get a chance to ask Chef M.”

“They have a list of conventions in the foyer, in the elevators, in the restrooms and on the back doors of every room, AND all the bots have a list. I just keep track of what goes on in this facility. Too many conventions and shows go on at one time for me to memorize.” She snapped her fingers and one of the bots appeared next to her. “Get me a reader with the list of conventions at the other castles that are going on now.” The bot held out a hand reader.

“I see you have a guest of a guest badge,” she said to Cookie. “There are some places you won’t have access to. The badge will let you know what you can’t enter. Like the actual wedding ceremony because of the limit on seating is to the actual guest list and you won’t be able to attend the dinner afterward because that too is based on the actual guest list.”

Lonnie and Cookie looked at each other.

“Unless you’re willing to pay for her attending the main event and dinner afterward, she’ll have to wait down here, or she can visit the other castles. When we have celebrity weddings, a lot of people bring their own guests and the wedding couple ends up having to pay extra expenses, so the celebrants put a limit on the Guest of Guest List.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Lonnie said. “I wouldn’t want unplanned expenses when I’m just starting my marriage off.”

Elimie smiled from both her faces. “I can assure you, you won’t be bored out here, Cookie. The idea is to sell those waiting around on the idea of returning on their own credit, so they have free tours to the other castles and if you wish to participate you charge it to your room.”

Cookie looked thoughtful at the list she was viewing on the reader. “There’s a cook-off in Castle W. I would like to visit that.”

“You can press this button here and see what seats are available.”

“Nothing.” Cookie looked disappointed.

“The free seats are gone,” Elimie agreed.

“Where do you want to sit, Cookie?” Lonnie asked.

Cookie grinned. “Is this a paid vacation?”

“All expenses paid for,” Lonnie said.

“Nice working for you,” Elimie chuckled. She showed Cookie how to reserve her seat and then Lonnie put in her purchase.

“What’s this?” Lonnie asked suspiciously.

“It’s to prevent anyone from stealing your ID and charging other things to your name.” Elimie pointed to the front desk in the main foyer. “Sign up and put a limit on what can be charged and who can charge. That way, you won’t lose a fortune here. There are crooks everywhere,” she said when Cookie looked worried at Lonnie.

“Don’t worry, Cookie. I have your vacation covered. Let’s go and sign you up for some fun while I have to sit through this...where is the bride?” Lonnie asked.

“She’s having her pre-wed party in the Purple Room and the groom in the Blue Room. I see you’re a guest of the groom.”

That was news to Lonnie. “Thank you Elimie. I’ll stop upstairs and see how Dirmar is doing.”

Both Elimie’s faces grinned and then they both looked away in different directions. Then one turned back to her. “You stay safe. Say hello to the diva when you see her. She’s got some idiot draped over her arm and by his drink consumption he’s not going to last to dinner.”

“Thanks.”

Lonnie and Cookie headed to the foyer.

“I thought the invitation was from the bride,” Cookie said.

“So, I thought. I guess the blue means I sit with the blues.”

At the front desk Lonnie and Cookie went over what she would be interested in and Lonnie paid for it then closed off any more purchases under her name. She added prepaid credit for Cookie in case she saw something she liked to add. There were, after all, a lot of souvenir stands.

“The first tour doesn’t leave for another hour. Let’s go see Dirmar,” Lonnie said.

Dirmar had all four hands mixing drinks and both heads swiveling around to see if anyone was slacking off in customer service. Dirmar liked a smooth operating bar.

“Hey, Leona!” he hollered when he spotted her. When his drinks were sent off to their purchasers he moved over to where Lonnie and Cookie were standing.

He embraced her and lifted her off her feet. “You are a sight for sore eyes. Wow. Has Elimie seen you yet? I bet she has. Nothing passes her.”

“Hello, Dirmar. You’re right. She spotted me right off.”

He leaned in and winked one eye. “I saw the diva just a few moments ago. In the corner looking positively bored with her escort.”

Lonnie smiled. “This is my friend Cookie, Cookie this is Dirmar. He makes a drink that you can say is one of a kind. Delicious.”

“You weren’t drinking when we met, if I recall rightly,” he teased.

“I ordered one, just for show,” she admitted.

“How about a Hula Hoop La, Berevian Style,” Cookie said. “I read that it’s a one-of-a-kind type of drink.”

He grinned. “It is. The mix varies with species. I bet I can get this exactly right for you on first try.”

“I’m not betting against the bartender,” Cookie said.

In a few moments, her beverage was placed on the bar for her. Dirmar waved aside Lonnie’s credit.

“You going to dance?” he asked devilishly, nodding to the open space.

Lonnie smiled. Maybe, she thought. Her eyes sought Kali and found her surrounded by other dancers. Kali, as usual, looked like she was holding court. Her badge was purple.

Cookie took a sip of the drink and rolled her eyes. "This is suprema." She toasted Dirmar who had returned to mixing drinks. He nodded to her with genuine pleasure at her compliment.

Cookie looped her arm into Lonnie's and led them to Kali's table. It was full with no standing room.

Kali looked up at Cookie and then to Lonnie. She looked surprised. Her eyes moved to the blue badge Lonnie wore. Lonnie gave a small shrug and smiled.

Kali got up and waded through the crowd to Lonnie. She turned slightly to Cookie, "Save my seat, will you?" Then took Lonnie by the arm and led them to the center stage. A few people were dancing, some very well.

"Does this bring back memories?" Kali asked in a low tone.

"Yes. Hopefully, there won't be a replay."

"*Everything* is recorded here," Kali said softly, without moving her lips. "I don't really know either the bride or groom. The last I remember was Alie and I finished our work out and we were leaving the hall. I don't remember getting here. I think I was drugged. What about you?"

"I met E'lis once and don't know Conquel. I didn't know we were going to be here until yesterday. Crackle was asked by a family friend to stop by and check out the security here."

"I don't like this place," Kali said. "It's too pretentious and controlled. Where is Crackle?"

"Busy on the other side of this planet."

"I want off this planet as soon as possible. Do you mind giving me a ride back to the nearest space port?"

"Not at all. Come on."

"Let me untangle myself from these characters without raising anyone's suspicions that I'm leaving. They haven't left me alone since I got here."

"Meet me at the front desk in..."

"An hour. I don't want to cause a scene, and I want to be sure Alie is going to be okay. I hate having to train another dance partner."

The music wasn't anything that would put either of their talents on a grand display, but both felt a lot of eyes on them. When the music stopped, they parted and returned to Kali's table.

Kali introduced everyone at the table...all names Lonnie was familiar with. They were dancers that were on their way up the ladder of stardom...except a few. Lonnie was sure which

one wouldn't be going much further up. Already they were showing signs of addiction to a drug, and it didn't have to be that way, she thought sadly.

Lonnie and Cookie left after introductions were made. Lonnie left Cookie off with a tour group that was beginning to gather for the different entertainments at the other castles. Cola, one of the people that was sitting at Kali's table appeared at Lonnie's side.

"You want something?" Lonnie asked, suspiciously. The woman didn't feel right.

"No. Just getting a bit of air."

Lonnie went in search of the Blue Room to speak with the groom. His answer would determine whether they would be leaving before the hour she gave Kali. Cola followed Lonnie but she had a purple badge and held back when Lonnie entered the Blue Room.

Chapter 3

No Time Like the Present

Crackle paused in the tunnel. Her fingers felt the change in texture on the wall she was using as a guide. The BGB's came back to life once she was two yards into the tunnel, and neither were registering any danger. One followed her, guarding her rear and the other was an arm's length ahead of her. She sniffed the air, thinking it wasn't just the temperature that changed but the quality of air also. She shifted her pack and pulled from the side pocket a respirator. She looped the facemask around her neck, having it ready should she need it, then continued her passage. Where the passage was leading her, she no longer was certain.

Sounds echoed in the tunnel. Earlier when someone had dropped into the tunnel minutes after she did, there was a lot of noise from arguing voices. However, the voices faded as if they had taken another tunnel. These new sounds weren't diminishing.

If this tunnel was to the house, she knew she should have already been there. It was difficult to tell from what direction the sounds were coming from now, but the BGB in the lead registered it was coming from somewhere in front of them. As she continued, the noise level increased, and Crackle was beginning to pick out words, but the echoing cut off most of the sentence. Just as the air changed drastically, she dropped to the ground pressing against the wall, not recognizing yet what had alerted her.

Yelling, screams, and laughing hit her in a blast of air. She was on a cliff looking over a huge cavern filled with people in different stages of undress, though some species didn't wear

clothing. It took Crackle more than a few minutes to figure out that no one was being held against their will. There were cameras everywhere, pointing down to the activities on the stages. She thought how easy it would be to blackmail the participants sometime in the future, probably when they put this type of behavior behind them. It was hard to believe people could be so naïve. Backing from the rim, she moved along the path which dipped back down and was dark again.

Voices again from ahead of her were arguing. By now the translator was able to interpret.

“I want it now! I want it broadcasted while they’re still here.”

“They’ll never know what hit them!” another voice laughed.

“I can’t work that fast. If you want a professional...”

“I don’t give a damn about your problems. You’re being paid more than enough credits to do what I tell you. Get it ready to broadcast in two hours!”

“E’lis if it’s not done properly then they can point out it was faked,” another voice said with careful intonations.

“It doesn’t matter! The first impression will be enough. It will knock her off her high mountain and her agent will have to drop her,” another voice said gloating.

Crackle wished she could see who all this was.

“Then you get your chance at her and I’ll be stepping in to take her place.”

“Well, there’s your double for Leona Bestolie. Nice body. So, what naughty and nasty are she going to be doing and to who, just so I can get my cameras set right?”

“I haven’t seen her in years. Does the real one look that good? Where’s the real one?”

“Cola is keeping her busy worrying about her friend that was sent on a tour of Castles,” E’lis’s voice laughed. “Maybe we can arrange an accident of some sort, just to really upset her.”

“E’lis, let’s just keep to what we’re paying for. If you start adding accidents, we’ll be racking up bills we can’t pay for.”

“So, what do you have planned?”

“Kali Maxine and her secret sweetheart will be doing some bondage and stuff you have never seen before. It will bring back childhood memories for Diva Maxine,” E’lis gloated. “She’ll never be able to look at Leona Bestolie again.”

“Whatever did they do to you, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Nothing. It’s a hobby.” Two voices laughed contemptuously.

Crackle's eyes slit as she moved so she wouldn't be seen should someone leave the room they were in. Crackle was wondering if she should rescue Kali first or make sure the VID didn't record.

"We better get back to our party, someone might miss us," E'lis, said.

"Don't eat or drink anything," a voice reminded.

"As if I would eat anything I didn't see prepared in front of me," a male voice said.

Crackle now recognized the voice of Conquel Eu, from a recently released VID that raised him to stardom and put a lot of credits in his account. She remembered Conquel Eu and E'lis Dongel were reported to be getting married. The stories of E'lis's jealousy of other performers was legendary, which had Crackle wondering why anyone hired her.

First the VID then she would head to the orgy room.

Chapter 4

The Deed Comes Back Upon the Doer

Lonnie looked around the Blue Room, seeking out the groom. Everyone looked at her as if in a haze. She didn't recognize any of the guests but suspected they all had dubious backgrounds. Conquel Eu had a strong connection to the darker aspects of the entertainment industry. The groom was nowhere to be seen. Waitbots offered her beverages and small edibles. She found it easier to take one from one bot and deposit it on another tray, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to leave the room. Rather than exiting through the door she came in she left through the waitbots entrance. She was planning on having her name and image erased from any of the recording devices that the resort was making.

Her feeling of something bad was going to happen had her heading back to the entrance to speak with Elinie. She spotted Cookie speaking to the front desk bot. What was Cookie doing here? She went to join her, standing behind her to listen to what Cookie was saying.

"I know, I know. Leona Bestolie paid for them. But credit her account back and just let the cook-off stay in place."

"Why?" Lonnie asked.

Cookie turned at Lonnie's voice.

Cookie raised an eyebrow, her way of saying, don't ask.

“I wasn’t feeling well. I gave the ticket to the Chef’s Cook Off to a fan and I came back to see if just sitting still would make me feel better.”

Lonnie handed the person behind the desk her ID to re credit her account.

Cookie leaned close to Lonnie, “I saw that woman again that looks like you. I asked one of the people near me who she was, and I was told it was you. Something’s not right here. Are they into creating fantasy doubles of people?”

Lonnie decided to retrieve Kali now and leave the planet, after they made one more pick up — Crackle.

“Elimie,” Lonnie waved at the Aberlian. She moved over to Lonnie one face smiling and the other looking over the guests.

“I thought you left for the Bastilles Castle.” Her voice sounded disapproving.

“The only place I’ll be leaving from is this planet. I’m going to get Kali Maxine and we’re leaving. This place is too creepy for me.”

“But I just saw you get on a cart with the Diva.” Elimie looked worried. “This is happening too many times. Doubles of people popping up, and people disappearing. And we’re told to mind our assignments and nothing else.” She lifted a wrist and spoke softly. Her faces grimaced.

“Can you give us a lift off this place? Dirmar said the beverages are being switched again. This place is too on the illegal side of weird. I think we’re going to fire our agent from Traveler Extraordinaire.”

“When did Kali leave?”

“About five minutes ago.”

“Let’s go. You said she’s being taken to what castle?”

Dirmar joined them. He was looking everywhere with both his heads.

“Don’t get too obvious, Dirmar,” Elimie said. “Come on. A security cart is the only vehicle that isn’t controlled by computers. Get rid of those badges,” she directed Lonnie and Cookie.

They followed Elimie after dropping their badges in a recycle bin.

“Is this entire place covered with security cameras?” Lonnie asked.

“No. I’ve been doing some of my own sleuthing. We don’t have much to do on our own time but sleep or watch VIDs, so to keep up my skills I created some work for myself,” Elimie

said. "I broke into their computer system from a kiosk I saw the manager using when he thought no one was looking. They have areas where nothing is recorded. It's dead space for the observation cameras."

"I heard a guest for another wedding talking about an underground sex cave where what is against the law on all planets is done there," Dirmar said.

"That's where we'll start," Elimie said.

"That's good. We'll start with the worse-case scenario and work our way back," Lonnie said.

They weren't the only ones heading to the security cart station. A dozen people of various species were gathering around the area, listening to someone in the center of their group.

"That's not good," Elimie said. "Those are the new recruits. Each one specializes in a skill, hunting live prey, killing, delivering pain, and so on. The marketing department has been thinking up different types of fantasies to attract the big credit donors."

"We can wait here. No cameras," Ditmar said.

The four stood in an elaborate and decorative garden with plants and statues offering some protection from being seen.

"Donors?" Lonnie asked.

"Hillst Investments has a lot of their investors paying for a piece of this business. They invite different groups of investment brokers to visit here. Each group has suggestions and one of them was to issue badges that monitor all visitors' presence. The badges have been created but the computer, from what I know, can't monitor groups over twenty because there are so many guests. In addition, they focus recorders on specific individuals which is what takes up so much of the computer's time. So, each castle has its own monitoring system, and a cross-over of recording a target individual. They're going to need more processing computers and operators. Then once out of the castles, the carts are monitored but it doesn't know who is on them, yet."

"Holes in the security," Lonnie said.

Elimie nodded. "I think the holes are there to let some of these disappearances occur. Jok and Com were the latest that I know of. Newly married, in debt with both sides of the family squabbling over their family leadership positions in a supposed rich household. They disappeared. I think the Chatawans have something to do with that. They've been appearing here a lot lately."

“Our agent is a Chatawan,” Dirmar said.

“And more than weird,” Elimie said.

“That is so,” Dirmar said.

“They’re breaking up,” Cookie said.

“Come on. I know of a cart that is on the repair docket but all it needs is a checkup. It’s the manager’s,” Dirmar said.

Hiding two large people would be a problem, but the area they were heading to was darkened. Dirmar led them to the cart while Elimie stood guard.

“No lights,” Dirmar said.

“How do we get to this underground place?” Lonnie asked.

“There’s a tunnel entrance just outside of the shuttle lot. How convenient, no?” Elimie said. “We’ve been planning on leaving since we got here but hired help that want to leave before their contract is up, have the habit of disappearing.”

“Maybe they were debriefed about confidentiality, not speaking ill of their previous boss, and then whisked off the planet before they cause strife among the rest of the workers,” Lonnie suggested.

“Could be,” Elimie said, “but something is illegal about this place, and we need to leave before something happens where we’re caught up in it. It’ll go on our record and make getting a job at respectable places near impossible.”

“When we signed up for this gig, we didn’t read the small print because we had thought our agent would be looking out for us,” Dirmar said. “We were wrong.”

“You turned up at a good time,” Elimie said.

“If you signed a contract, aren’t you worried about what the consequences will be by you leaving?” Lonnie said.

“We do have an out,” Elimie said. “If we believe it’s detrimental to our health, or something illegal is going on, we can terminate our contract. That’s with all contracts in the galaxy courts.”

“Can you slow down a bit?” Cookie asked concerned when the bumps were getting more frequent.

“We’re almost...there!”

The cart suddenly left the road and skidded down a slope, the speed increasing.

“It’s not me! Jump!” Dirmar shouted.

Lonnie wrapped her arms around Cookie and leaped. They rolled and hit a few rocks but came to a stop without anything breaking. Lonnie activated her homing to their shuttle. It was to the left. Grabbing Cookie’s hand, she dragged Cookie behind her, trusting her night vision. The odd lack of sound had her other senses hyped up.

Lights were bobbing in their direction.

Dirmar appeared next to her. “Our route is cut off. Someone set the alarms off.”

“We’ll split up. Do you know where our shuttle is,” Lonnie asked. She needed to find Kali. The shuttle’s scanner could do that.

“We do.”

Cookie didn’t say anything but placed her hand on Lonnie’s back and followed, allowing Lonnie more freedom to pick a path to where the homing device was sending them.

It seemed like a lot of time had passed. Too long for Lonnie who was worried about Kali, but they had arrived at the shuttle lot. There were enough shuttles arriving for Lonnie and Cookie to not appear out of character. If an alarm had gone off, it didn’t stop the shuttles from arriving and some leaving. The customers leaving would wave to the new arrivals and tell them what a great place it was.

“Sounds like an advertisement,” Cookie said softly.

“Maybe they did have a good time,” Lonnie said.

“Where are Elinie and Dirmar?”

“I’m sure they’ll be here. Right now, I need to find Kali. The shuttle can locate her and Crackle. Then we’re out of here. I don’t care if we’re making this into something more than what it is, I don’t like being tricked into being somewhere.”

“You think Crackle tricked you into coming here?”

“When we find her, I’m going to ask a lot more questions about this family friend.”

Their shuttle was in a tie down. That meant it was expected the passengers would remain for more than a day. There were cameras that scanned the area and Cookie and Lonnie moved to where Lonnie could get another view of the shuttle without being spotted.

“The shuttle isn’t locked down,” Lonnie whispered. “It’s made to look that way.”

“How are we going to get closer to see?” Cookie asked.

“The camera tilts to the left and our shuttle leaves its view. I’m going to slide under her and see what’s real and what’s not.”

“You’re not leaving me here alone,” Cookie said.

“Okay, then you’re going to have to move fast and slide at the front end. I’ll be at the back. There’s an emergency hatch on the deck at the front. You can get on board there. Okay?”

“Okay and if not?”

“If not, we’ll rely on the shuttle’s security.”

They watched the camera that seemed to take a long time before it moved to catch the arrival of another shuttle. Both women darted to the *Little Emperor* shuttle and slid beneath it.

While Lonnie made sure the tie downs were only for show, Cookie opened the deck hatch and climbed aboard. Under the shuttle was an emergency console. Lonnie activated security aboard *Belgium Queen* to acquire their shuttle, the *Little Emperor*, and Crackle’s pod.

Lonnie crawled to the deck hatch and began to climb in when she realized the muzzle of a weapon was pressed against her forehead. Looking up she found a dozen eyes from the Chatawan staring at her and the person holding the weapon was Cola.

“Come and join us, Leona Bestolie. We’ve been waiting for you and your crew.”

Lonnie came in followed by Cookie. She closed the hatch at Cola’s direction.

“So, you don’t like our show for you? It’s a fantasy of two of our guests. Of course, I had to do some arranging of events and people to get this going, but it’s like a circus. So many things happening at one time.”

“So, what are you holding us here for?” Lonnie asked. Cola’s eyes were fluttering. Lonnie hoped that was an indication that the intruder security was working. The Chatawan suddenly dropped to the deck unconscious. Cola was fighting it and the way the weapon waved, Lonnie was worried something would be damaged if it fired.

Cookie pushed Cola and she fell without any resistance.

Lonnie sat in the pilot’s chair and quickly programmed the security to find Kali, Elinie and Dirmar.

“Hey, look whose here,” Cookie said.

The external camera showed Dirmar and Elinie arriving with guests.

Chapter 5

The Show Stopper

Crackle scanned the room for anything that could be a hazard to her before stepping in and neutralizing the two occupants. It was like any other drill. Assess, prioritize, and act.

"Anyone else?" she asked the four operators.

They all shook their heads. She didn't want to spend any more time with the four that she activated a net to embolize them in.

"They didn't hold back on funds for this stuff," she said softly. The room had to be destroyed and anything it captured had to go as well. This was something she had knowledge about. From her pack, she pulled out a device that was made for cleaning computer equipment. It was legally used by businesses that purchased used computer equipment and wanted thorough cleaning. She brought it along to see if the site's computers were protected from such sabotage. Accessing the console's monitor, she brought up the menu that would give her emergency commands.

"Ah, just like all crooks, here is the command for wiping out everything should law enforcement arrive." She tapped the submenus wondering where the safeties were. "They didn't want to take chances that should they be invaded the operator not be hampered with remembering the passcode. I just love these simpletons."

The VID coming in that the men had been watching wasn't Kali and Lonnie. It was of two prominent figures that shouldn't be seen in public together since they represented opposing groups. Crackle went through the menu and found a library with a list of members. She didn't have time to take names, so she added that to what was going to be wiped, deciding whatever the owner held information on was suspect. Crackle found a chart with names written on who was in the private rooms. She selected the button with Kali's name.

"Damn, what did they give her?" she whispered. Kali looked like she was drugged and unconscious. If they wanted to discredit Kali, they would have to wait for her to look more alive. Lonnie's double thankfully, in a voice not at all like Lonnie's wasn't going to do anything until her victim was semiconscious, so she paced uttering insults at whoever drugged Kali into unconsciousness.

Satisfied the wipe was well on its way, passed recovering anything, Crackle packed up her equipment. She made one more check to see if her command to have the master computer began its own wipe was working on another bank of computers. Glancing at the console a message appeared, asking her to confirm an all-emergency wipe.

"Getting rid of the evidence," she hummed. Wherever that command was sent off to, Crackle was happy it would ruin someone's day.

Peering up and down the corridor for anyone she closed the door behind her. Beneath the door, she packed in a glue bar to prevent anyone from opening the door.

The four operators were tucked into a cubby hole they used to relive themselves. She peeked in to be sure they were still confined in the nets. Though, the damage was past stopping, so even if they did get loose, they would be better off running for the fastest ship off the planet. Three of the men stopped moving when she looked in.

"Bye," she said, and closed the door and the repulsive smell of latrines coming from the room.

The private rooms were on the outer ring of the main hall where various sex acts were being played out. Nothing shocking, though some positions she hadn't seen before but nothing she would try. It was species impossible. People were just having an orgy.

Crackle paused just long enough to make sure the recorders were not working outside of the rooms. All cameras looked lifeless. The fifth room was Kali and the fake Lonnie. Lonnie was shaking Kali as if that would bring her out of drugged stupor.

Crackle stepped into the room. Lonnie's character turned around and seeing it wasn't someone she expected moved to attack. Crackle having the advantage of surprise, jabbed her in the neck to put her out.

"It took you long enough," a weary Kali said.

"You were expecting me?" Crackle said surprised.

"I told Lonnie this place wasn't right."

"I haven't seen her since I was dropped off. I didn't know you were here until I... we must get out of here. All their computers are down and there's going to be some very upset people."

Crackle gave one more look at the unconscious double and then led the way out of the room.

"That way," Kali said. "They parked the cart, but I think all the carts have trackers and are operated by computers."

"Lead the way. I'll see if they have an emergency override, should their computers go down."

There were many carts parked. They picked the closest to the exit. There wasn't any on/off switch. It did look dead. Crackle found a control box under one of the seats and switched it to manual.

“When you saw Lonnie did she come down by shuttle?” Crackle asked.

“I would imagine. She had Cookie with her.”

“Where do they park the guests' shuttles?”

Kali shook her head. “I don’t remember how I got to this place, only that I was suddenly here. Before that, the last thing I remember was leaving a practice session with my dance partner. He was going to drop me off at my hotel before heading to his.”

“You have bodyguards. What happened to them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they were following us.”

To Crackle’s alarm, the cart headed out of the underground facility at a fast pace.

“Should we jump? I would hate to break or strain anything. I have a busy schedule,” Kali said.

“Let’s see how far we go. Do you recognize where we are?”

Kali laughed. “I can’t see that well in the dark. I don’t even know if this feels like the same bumpy road we took to get to that dungeon.”

“That was good acting,” Crackle said. “We’ll get off here. Hold on.” The cart came to an abrupt stop when Crackle pushed the manual switch to off.

Crackle turned on her homing device that would locate the pod or shuttle.

“It’s just over that way.”

A noise from their left had Crackle pulling Kali behind her and pulling a stun gun from her belt.

“I know you,” Kali said to the Aberlian that appeared out of the dark before them.

“I’m glad to see you, Diva” Elinie said. “We were with Lonnie and her friend Cookie until the cart we were on headed into a ditch. They went one way and Digmar and I another. We got separated in the dark.”

“Where were you going?” Crackle asked.

“To find Diva Maxine, but I see you have rescued her already.”

“Where’s Digmar?” Kali asked.

“Behind you. We need to move quickly. I just heard they’ve called for backup at your shuttle, *Little Emperor*,” Digmar said. “This should be a worry, but all the computers are down and they’re using backup devices.”

“They have Lonnie?” Kali asked worried.

“I don’t know. There are different alarms going off that’s calling all agents to meet in the quad. They miss us, I think,” Digmar said.

The four moved hurriedly toward the shuttles, weaving a path to avoid any security guards that were running around.

“This way,” Crackle said, leading the way to their shuttle.

The shuttle's door opened for Lonnie to roll out two bodies down the ramp. She waved the four to hurry.

“We need to get out of here, now,” Lonnie said.

Crackle didn’t get settled in the pilot seat before *Little Emperor* engaged and was moving out of the shuttle hanger.

Warnings came over the communication board, but they were left unanswered.

Once above the planet they were all glued to the shuttle's screens.

“Oh, oh. Looks like trouble,” Elinie and Crackle said together.

Belgium Queen was defending herself as they approached her from the shuttle hanger side.

“What nut is firing weapons with so many yachts this close. If one explodes the rest will go up!” Elinie said.

“Looks like they’re going to take advantage of our approach to dock with *BQ*,” Crackle said.

“They shouldn’t do that,” Lonnie said.

“Go sit down,” Crackle advised. “It’s going to get bumpy.”

Little Emperor had its own weapons and didn’t hesitate to fire at the small ships trying to block its approach to *BQ*.

Once they were in the shuttle bay, *BQ* moved quickly out of the collection of station keeping yachts, leaving a few having to adjust to the backwash of their energy vapors.

Lonnie settled on the couch next to Kali.

“Someone is going to hear about my lack of protection,” Kali said to Lonnie.

“Did you ingest something?” Lonnie said.

“No. I learned from you to secure anything I ingest when I’m away from home.”

“Crackle, what do you think they used on her?” Lonnie asked.

“Bodeum air,” Crackle and Elinie said together. Both looked at each other and smiled.

“You should come work for me,” Crackle said. “I manage a security firm.”

“No way,” Dirmar said. “We’ve agreed to the lighter stuff. Elinie is pregnant,” he said with a grin.

“Congratulations,” Lonnie said, echoed by the others.

“Surely you have something in your business that isn’t too boring and has a bar job to keep Dirmar entertained,” Cookie said.

“What about the bar that friend of yours purchased?” Crackle asked. “Isn’t he looking for a trustworthy manager that won’t drink his profits away?”

Lonnie smiled and nodded. She purchased the bar under another name to get rid of the rift-raft that began to frequent the bar. Life couldn’t get any better, she thought.

“Isn’t your manager going to wonder where you disappeared to?” Cookie asked.

“I have no doubt she’s wondering what happened to me. I don’t even know how many days I’ve been gone.”

“Crackle, can you set up a private communication for Kali?”

“All you have to do is activate one of those bubble’s and you and your communication will be private.”

While Kali took care of her business, Crackle entertained Elinie and Dirmar with the various comfort items with Cookie interjecting her favorites.

Lonnie dozed off until she felt a nudge.

“Hi,” she said to Kali. “How went your call?”

“Yomatta is furious, though not at me this time. She said I’ve been gone for four days, and the bodyguards didn’t know I was missing. They thought I was holed up with some lover. She’s planning for me to be seen publicly as far away from the Planet of Fantasy on Cosmo so if there is any publicity coming from there, I’ll be elsewhere. I asked Crackle if she could drop me off at Port Laser. She gave me ETA of one hour. Just how fast is this yacht?”

“I’m sure she has codes to use through various travel gates. Is anyone going to meet you there?”

“A new set of bodyguards and transportation to the nice and private residence of Odia. Do you know of her?”

Lonnie’s eyebrows went up. “She was diva before you were born. Is she still alive?”

“Her species lives for hundreds of years. Yes, and she's teaching. That’s my cover. Practicing a new dance routine with a new dance partner. At least this one will be a partner that has a thorough background check. I know from here on, the last security company Erich has been using has been dumped with a bad review in all the professional rags. You don't fail the job Erich hired you for without severe consequences.” Kali smiled when she said that.

“For a dance partner, I don’t think anyone, but Leona will be suitable enough for you,” Ditmar said.

Everyone smiled at that.

“So, next stop, Port Laser it is,” Lonnie said. "Crackle will make sure you're surrounded by the right people. I don't want you to be dumped into another situation."

Crackle came to join them in the lounge area with a dish of finger foods.

"One of Cookies additions to the menu," she explained, sharing them with everyone.

"So, what did you do to make the computer's go down," Lonnie asked.

"How do you know I did something?" Crackle asked innocently.

"She initiated the Emergency command," Elinie laughed. "While you were napping, she told us about her adventure."

Ditmar nodded. "The rumor was that lately law enforcement has been looking at their business on Cosmo since some of their superiors have been receiving blackmail notes by someone in the management of the planet's office. The management was thinking of who the authorization should have to issue the command but I didn't think they had given it to anyone."

"It was there along with an ALL command to the main server. I was thinking that all evidence of past and present information gathered was wiped with that command. We can ask some people to see if even their backups were wiped," Crackle said.

"That would be nice," Lonnie said. "I don't want to have people knowing I was there."

Kali looked thoughtful. "All the people that were around me were so drugged I don't think they could with certainty know who was there."

"Drugs to make them susceptible to believing what they are told," Ditmar said. "I was serving those drinks. Not a good job for my reputation."

In an hour they arrived at Port Laser and by then all the newbies were reporting about the demise of Planet of Fantasy, Cosmo. It was in chaos due to complete failure of their computer systems. Law enforcement had quickly descended on the planet when important guests were sending out distress calls to be rescued.

Crackle delivered Kali and was back on board quickly. Yomatta herself with Kali's new bodyguards, one being Muto, was waiting.

"I think we're not the only ones with the names of travel gates to get somewhere fast," Cookie said.

"Yomatta hasn't changed," Crackle said. "Didn't even say thank you. Her first words were for Kali, informing her that Odia and she were going to do an interview together about their collaboration on a new musical. Kali had only a few minutes to dress."

"Getting to the newsies first, just in case news of Kali being on that island gets out."

"It won't get out. Where's the proof. No recordings," Elinie said.

"We'll keep an eye on the newsies, just in case your name comes up," Cookie said.

"No word to anyone about our visit," Lonnie said. "Did you wipe it out on the ship's logs? What about your father?"

"We can keep secrets," Crackle said. "I did get an encoded message from father. Hom never sent him that message. You can imagine how the family is reacting about getting fake messages that put family and friends in danger."

"That means someone is keeping an eye on me," Lonnie said in a low voice to Crackle. She nodded. "And sending you into danger."

Chapter 6

Home Again

"Being around you, life is never boring," Crackle said as *Belgium Queen* was docked in her slip. "I'll be a few minutes. I want to know who leaked the information that you were on *BQ*."

"Let it go for now. I just want to get home and sleep in my own bed. Let's get *Little Emperor* powered up and go home."

"I second that," Cookie said.

“You said they have a residence behind the bar? I would like to see if it’s comfortable for us,” Elinie said.

“See, we all want to go dirtside,” Cookie said.

They all moved to the shuttle, *Little Emperor* and Crackle began to hum a popular tune that the others joined in, though not in complete harmony.

When they were over Terrian 4S, Crackle began their descent. Elinie and Ditmar studied the planet from a screen.

“Doesn’t look like much from up here,” Ditmar said. “Oh! That is some dark cloud.”

“Storm clouds. We’re on the other side of the planet from Lonnie's mountain. The snowstorm that hit Lonnie's mountain should be melting so a lot of the wilderness trails will show like dark lines across a white wilderness.”

“Snow. Elinie, we haven’t been in snow for...”

“A long time,” she finished for him.

“You can stay with me until you are certain of the job or that the rooms behind the bar are satisfactory for you,” Lonnie said. "No pressure. If the job doesn't feel right, there are other jobs across the planet that may suit you better. I like the idea of you working in our bar and Elinie nearby, exchanging ideas with Crackle, just so she doesn't get bored."

“What a thoughtful employer," Crackle mocked.

“A castle in a mountain, huh?” Elinie asked Cookie.

“It's not what I had originally thought the inside of a mountain or even a castle would be like. The rooms are lavish in gadgets, cleaners, helpful bots so you never get lost, and it's just like being special! But I've found I do need a break now and then so I can see how others live. I have dinner gatherings, so let me know your favorite dishes,” Cookie smiled. "You don't have to feel obligated to attend. They are just so we all that live in the mountain get together for a social."



Their approach to the mountain wasn’t as dramatic as Lonnie remembered it but the effect was enough for Elinie and Ditmar to lean close to study the approach over the land covered in snow.

"What are those?" Elinie asked.

"Too far to see them clearly, but it could be horses, sheep, lamas, and or other creatures that roam Lonnie's land. I'm interviewing people for a ranger position that keeps track of all the creatures that are on her property. We've had some poachers that are bothersome," Crackle said.

"I'm trying out different species of animals the Terrian 4S committee recommends for repopulating the planet. Terrian is a terraformed planet so for the last ten standard years it's been monitored and protected. Recently the Galactic's Scientific Committee deemed it ready for repopulation and with whom and what laws to protect it from what had caused it's original population to be decimated," Lonnie explained.

"A whole planet under the control of a galactic committee," Ditmar shook his head.

"We know how that's been for a dozen or so planets," Elinie added.

"By the contract I signed to homestead here, I think they learned from their past mistakes," Lonnie said.

"It's up to us to keep our government on the level," Crackle said.

Cookie made a disagreeable sound. "When we left, Dr. Cora and other medical practioners were dealing in government officials that weren't following the laws." She glanced at their guests. "It going to be interesting keeping this planet's citizens on a continued enlightened growth pattern without bludgeoning to death those that want to run their towns and cities like their private fiefdoms.

End

Continues in Number 8 *Family, Friends, Acquaintances, and Enemies*