

NOTE: There is no rape, sexual situations, descriptive tortures, and foul or fowl language that would offend most. It's a first draft to a Science Fiction Fantasy that features women as main characters.

I hope you enjoy the story.

Namaste,

JA Bard

Cot of the MacDiarmid Clan on Maridoileag

By JA Bard

Chapter 1

Alliances and Favors

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

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

"Thank you, Dean Eimhir."

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

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

Ducking through a side door, she exited near the outskirts of the graduation revelers to distance herself from their mixed energy of excitement and anticipation at their next posting. New posting meant starting over, though as a graduate of POATA, more will be expected of their performance. That group nervousness put her nerves on edge.

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

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

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

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

"Is that a new pip, Lieutenant Colonel? And look at that medallion. A blue wreath for top score in overall achievement. I'll bet *Star* had a hand in that, keeping your nose to your studies and no weekend partying. I heard only one other person came close and won the green. This was a good year of graduates." Then his eyes darkened. "Only disgrace this year were those fools in that secret club. I hope their commanding officers are embarrassed they didn't see them for what they are. It serves them right for getting the heave ho from POATA with black marks in their official records."

Cot nodded, thinking of her secret part in revealing a group of officers that abused their power of authority. According to their official records, they were model officers, which was why their command sent them to POATA. At the first formation of all new students, Cot noted each student with a dark cloud around them. To give *Star Chaser* something to do, she had her do a background check on them.

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

For every incident they caused, Cot left a clue with the name of their group. The authorities investigating the incidents didn't share their information with anyone, so they were able to move their investigation forward without interference. *Star Chaser* kept tabs on the members, while Cot, in trying to keep a low profile, assisted the people the group was targeting. When the group realized Cot was helping their targets, they plotted against her, which was a mistake on their part. *Star Chaser* took issue with that and on her own, sabotaged their assignments, making sure they looked foolish in front of their classmates.

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

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

The three designers that pushed their concept of a sentient ship, nicknamed SID, would be astonished how fast and far the partnership had progressed. SID was a combination of the three designers' initials, and reworked to Sentient Intelligent Design, by the ships themselves. The pilots referred to themselves as SID-pilots and their ships as SID-ships, as did the techs that worked on them.

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

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

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

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

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

"Greetings, *Star Chaser*."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's tagged," she said.

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

"Rescan me," Cot ordered.

The rescan was clean and the security envelope disengaged.

"And the games go on," she said.

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

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

At the beginning of their partnership *Star* kept everything that intrigued her. Cot had no doubt *Star* would do as she had ordered and destroy the tag, but the question was when. Rach, Cot's mentor for this integration program, had explained to her she was the cautious partner and *Star Chaser* was the daring one. He assured her that because of this, they would make a good team. Cot had her misgivings then and still did.

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

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

Had she lost her edge? She didn't believe so. What changed was her focus was not single minded, and she didn't feel exhausted on all levels when the hunt was completed. So far, at POATA, she had a perfect score for tracking and apprehending the target, and none of it was done in *Star Chaser*.

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

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

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

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

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

"Prepare for flight, *Star*."

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

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

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

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

Once settled comfortably in her custom made chair a thin translucent tube extended to her then arched and unfurled in a thin sheet, morphing into a screen. It came active with a check list for her to verify all systems tested "good for go."

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

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

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

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

A SE arrived with refreshment. The service bots, SEs, were a new model that did everything: ship repair, cleaning, valet service, medical care, military functions and whatever else came up where Cot or *Star Chaser* would need assistance. They had them already for a year and a half to evaluate. *Star's* way of handling it was to integrate the SEs into her system and make improvements where she could. Technically, it was tinkering and upgrading, though Cot privately thought it was more like a mother teaching her young how to better themselves. This ability was what she used to give SMSgt Mack a going away gift. She had upgraded his equipment that could be upgraded. Mechanics were very touchy about their tools. Cot wasn't sure how he was going to take it that *Star Chaser*, though well intentioned, messed with his stuff. The good thing was, they weren't going to be there when he did find out.

It had disturbed her when it first occurred to her that *Star Chaser* could be likened to a person in a ship, but she had been assured it was not like that at all...yet the Caronda Fighters were still referred to as sentient ships. Her question was, just how sentient was the ship and what was sentience to the creators of this ship design. Rather than the designers answering her questions, they asked the pilots if they thought they could try out this new type of ship for a

number of years before making a judgment. They all agreed, each with doubts, though for different reasons. At the time Cot primarily saw it as a way to get out of the business of war.

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

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

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

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

"On audio."

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

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

Welcome.

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

Congratulations.

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

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

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

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

Your squad has been assigned the following sectors:

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

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

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

You are still squad leader and should receive updates of their progress as well as HQ. If at any time you feel you need to offer them more assistance, do so.

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

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

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

There are information buoys as well as public kiosks throughout space that are on FSO frequency. Your ship has been given the pass codes. Prepare daily reports as you have always done and dispatch to the buoys and kiosks that have the proper frequency.

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

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

Another thing I want to mention, Lt. Col.

It didn't escape our notice on how you identified problem officers at POATA and dealt with them in a lawful manner, without calling attention to yourself.

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

Carry on.

The message ended on an abrupt note.

"Star, verify the authenticity of that message," she ordered excited. *Star Force! They're the most secretive and powerful force in the galaxies. They're also known to be arbitrators to messy situations.* She forced her racing heart to a calmer pace. A new world was opening up to her.

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

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

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

"This is Cot, Ara."

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

Cot could feel *Star's* interest in what Ara was calling her for. *Star* was interested in Ara because she was trained to operate some gizmo that was as classified as the sentient Caronda Fighters. That was another bonus to attending POATA; new technology was tested by some of the privileged students and most were still classified when they graduated and moved to their next posts.

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

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

Those days of needing to socialize to know what those around me were about are past.

"That 2nd Lieut had been promoted with orders to be elsewhere, Ara."

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

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

"Kar has a seat available, and is going in the direction she wishes," Star informed Cot mentally. "He does owe you a favor. He can be persuaded to give her a ride since he has a month off before he has to be to his next posting."

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

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

"I do."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cot could feel *Stars* disappointment that she turned Ara down.

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

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

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

"Not all. It would have been a fair trade."

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

"If HQ really did not want to share they would have not brought so many people together in close proximity to a SID ship."

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

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

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

On her own, *Star* found that Ara was in CFS Special Forces and it wasn't public knowledge nor was it something Ara had shared with her, which there was no reason to. Cot had no intention of getting caught between *Star's* curiosity and Ara's. No matter who Ara was, there was no order to allow her to board a CF and no one in HQ letting her know that Ara was in special forces.

"Tower is signaling."

"Cot, here, Tower. Go ahead."

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

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

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

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

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

The planet receded to a small dot after ten minutes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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