

## Chapter 18

### *A Blast From the Past*

"*Star*, is there a way that you can see if this is really happening?... I know it sounds odd, but there are a multitude of dimensions and time lines as well as...this just doesn't feel right."

"I know of dimensions and time lines," *Star* said irritated.

Cot let out an exasperated sigh. *Star* could be very annoying. When she retired for sleep ten hours earlier, as far as she knew, *Star* was content, running scans and tests on whatever caught her interest. When she was awakened abruptly from sleep and made it to the bridge, she found *Star* was annoyed with everything. It sounded like someone interrupted her from doing what she would rather do. Did the other sid-ships have this problem?

"Incoming!" Cot warned.

Another squadron of military ships flew out of the gate while a squadron of war birds flew out of the cruise liner's bay. None of the ships had identifiers that *Star* could trace to a planet or star system. It was not surprising, considering how expansive space was with all the planets and other large chunks of rock that could be turned into habitable homes.

"*Star*, can you tap into their communications?" She was surprised *Star* had not already done it.

"No."

One of the ships exploded, kicking out a life pod. It was ignored as the other ships fought the liner that was over-whelming the remaining ships with her droves of warplanes and her own cannon fire.

Then it was over. All the ships, including the liner, went back through the gate, leaving the life pod. Cot waited for someone to pick up the life pod whose beacon was flashing for someone to find it.

"Did you get a reading on the lock for that gate?" Cot demanded.

"I did," *Star* said.

"Then send the last code that worked."

Cot stretched her back then shifted position, feeling the seat reshape to fit her. *This does not make sense, so why am I trying to?*

"Just state what you're seeing not what you think is happening," she reminded herself. "How's the passenger in the pod doing?"

"Starting to panic."

"That's not good. He'll never be any good to anyone if he survives this. Let's bail him out."

"Shall I send a medbot to escort him to the bridge?"

"No. Leave him in the pod and move it into your cargo bay. Put him in hibernation and play something that will calm him."

If anything, the life pod and its occupant were real or *Star* would not be able to register it as a life form. Cot rose and headed to the cargo bay to wait for *Star* to pull the life pod in. There was debris from the war games making it dangerous for the life pod that did not have that much energy to deflect debris -- provided it was real debris.

The cargo bay doors slid open and the power beam drew the life pod up to the doors and then released it. Automatic cargo handlers secured it and drew it inside.

The face that was staring at her through the transparent portion of the pod was scared and hyperventilating. Cot released the pod hatch.

"Ensign?"

He leaned over the shell and threw up on the deck. The medical and cleaning bots immediately detached from their kiosks.

Cot waited, picking up more from watching him than conversation would have told her. He was not a species she was familiar with but it was not difficult to see that he was terrified. His one eye was blinking frantically and his mouth was opening and closing like a creature gasping for air. The atmosphere in the cargo bay was comfortable for his bios as they were for hers.

The med bot administered a sedative.

"I'm Lt. Col MacDiarmid. And you are?"

"Ensign Puke, Colonel."

"Do you want to run that by me again, Ensign?"

"I... it's Ensign JeGar, Colonel."

Cot nodded to him to get out of the pod. "Is there a reason why you've been left in the pod?"

"The captain's going to kill me himself, Colonel if I don't return in the pod."

"Why do you want to return?"

"It's to be a Kleiter, Colonel. It's one of the toughest troops..." his eyes spotted the gold Gibbon on her flight suit. He gulped.

"Who is your captain, Ensign?"

"Captain Mohar, Colonel."

Cot had heard of him from way back. He was known as a soldier's last chance to redeem her or himself in not only the military's eyes but the legal system. It was that or go to prison for the rest of their lives.

"What are you in for, Ensign?"

"Killing." He stopped abruptly. "Murdering a family in the Defur Region," he added.

*The historic Massacre on the Gladimore in the Defur Region is my guess. That explains some of this.* "You were with the military that boarded the ship, *Gladimore*?"

"Yes, Colonel."

"Whose uniform were you wearing, Ensign?"

"I can't say, Colonel."

Cot leaned close to him. "Why?"

"I can't remember, Colonel."

The massacre on the civilian passenger cruise ship in the Defur Region was in all military training manuals with what went wrong on all levels of discipline and morality. Two military powers boarded a passenger liner out of boredom. The crew and passengers were treated as captured booty and subsequently, many died from the abuse. Squadrons of SF troops rescued what was left of the crew and passengers. Both planets whose military were involved, were prevented from traveling the stars for another ten decades. This incident was one of many that brought Star Force to its prominent position of power, according to the Star Force documentation.

"What was your rank?"

"First Lieutenant. Colonel, I have to go back," he pleaded.

"You still want to be returned in the pod?"

"Yes, Colonel." He said it with so much conviction she knew it would not be worth arguing.

"Say this...Ara Kara... Say it."

"Colonel?"

"ArrraaaaKaaaarrrra." She had him repeat it five minutes. "You don't have to say it out loud. Use it whenever you're worried, frightened or angry. Okay?"

He nodded.

"Alright. Get in."

The pod closed and sealed.

"*Star*, put the pod in the shuttle. I'm going to change uniforms. Wait out of sight."

"What do you hope to see?" *Star* asked.

"His captain."

The shuttle, *Reflected Light*, could be deceiving if you didn't do a deep scan of it, which would be rather difficult. The new emitters on her counter any energy beam sent her way to scan her. *Reflected Light* was fully armed with the newest in technology for a shuttle and enhanced greatly by *Star's* tinkering. It could carry up to four people comfortably and had a cargo bay that the rescued pod was stored.

What were the odds that Cot would run into a member of the disgraced group? Especially since this happened over ten generations ago.

A shuttle marked with a captain's logo came out of the gate. It flew close to hers as if knowing what Cot wanted – a meet. The fact that the captain himself was coming over to see why she was holding the escape pod was saying something about the captain.

She sent the customary hail and received an acknowledgement with an invitation to come aboard. Cot accepted, not wanting to show too much of her shuttle's interior. Four SEs were on her suit and since the suit was a new design, she was sure this far out in space the captain would

not be aware of what the SEs were about, though she was not going to gamble her life on that. *Star* was her backup. She turned abruptly and spotted the bot she was now calling *Star's* friend. "You stay here and watch the shuttle," she directed.

A light on the exit hatch notified her that the umbilicus that connected the two hatches was secured. When her hatch opened, she could see Captain Mohar waiting. He stood parade rest, hands clasped behind his back. His uniform was dark kaki, battle ribbons proudly displayed on his chest, and his uniform worn in the old ground trooper's manner, with creases sharp. He wore a beard trimmed with artistic arcs and without being bushy. His eyes were shiny blue, blending in with his pallor. He was a Yoll. That meant he had fangs and claws that could kill a person. *Star* didn't tell her what his species was. It was good she had not. Anticipation could get twisted when prejudice overshadowed the experience.

The energy he projected came toward her; an intentional attempt to intimidate her. She was too fresh from POATA to let it affect her, or maybe it was the medallion. She touched it momentarily then walked over.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?"

"It's just a shuttle," he said. His eyes studied her closely.

"It's the captain's shuttle and protocol does give a common metaphor for a relationship." It was taken right out of the class textbook from her first season in the diplomat academy. It was quoted from a young Lieutenant Mohar who had a weapon pointed to his head by a rebel group leader not big on protocols.

The captain laughed, with his whole appearance changing. He bowed to her. "I'm Captain Mohar. Welcome aboard. Colonel?"

"Lt. Colonel MacDiarmid, Captain."

"I believe you have something of mine. Shall we talk about it?" He waved his hand for her to step further into his craft.

"I have no intention of keeping him if he wants to return."

"Then?"

"I was curious. Am I taking up any of your valuable time?"

"I believe you know you're not. I'm just as curious of you as you are of me. Not many passing ships see us."

Cot settled in one of the seats. All seven of the seats were comfortable and functional.

"I see you're a graduate of POATA," he said.

"Yes."

"Is that the blue flower of Peal?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Does that mean something?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "I lasted one week. Not enough time to memorize the little details."

"You were at POATA?"

"I was asked to teach the first year it was opened."

"Oh."

"Found too many pampered idiots."

"They didn't think outside the box enough?" This Cot found surprising.

"They were too well behaved. Nothing to challenge me."

"So you like breaking the bad ones."

"No." He was so firm in the reply Cot was surprised. "I assist them to redeem themselves."

"Your ensign looked like he was about to break."

"Life pods don't allow the occupant to suffer mentally or physically *too* much."

"How am I involved in this?"

"Unfinished business."

"For who?"

The captain smiled. "The web of life doesn't limit itself to one reality or dimension, nor does it know time or space in the same reference as some species do."

"I have no regrets of my past actions. In all my military skirmishes I knew who I was shooting at."

"In all your past actions? And it was *the* enemy? The golden gibbon you're wearing isn't earned by just participating in a dozen battles or leading war parties...unless times have changed its meaning. Does the end justify the means?"

"Of course not. The journey *is* as important as the end. What has that got to do with this meeting?"

"It's been replayed so many times we all know the rules and our roles without thinking, and thinking is exactly what makes us different from the machines that we want to believe we control."

Cot let out a sigh in frustration. She was missing something. "So, does this mean that there's something in my life that I need to replay?"

"Do you feel absolved of all your kills?"

"I removed people whose intention was to do the most harm they could against those least able to defend themselves. Their deaths were not lingering or painful."

"If I were taking a life, I would want to know each person personally. It's a heavy responsibility to make such a profound change in so many people's lives. You know, killing one person has a ripple effect."

"They were brutal and mean spirited people who felt nourished from the anguish they suffered on others." She was angry he was questioning her motives when his reputation was sullied with brutality.

"There is always an alternative to taking a life. When you see none, ask for help."

"Even if they're shooting at you?" she asked in disbelief. "There isn't time to do anything but react..." She paused, now understanding part of what he was telling her. "I have a responsibility to my squad, to my commander, and to myself to stay alive."

"Righteous anger. Then, if it's not in the past it may be yet to come, or will never come." He smiled and rose from his seat, gesturing Cot to the back of the shuttle where the two maneuvered the life pod so it was in the captain's possession.

Finished with that, Cot was anxious to leave. The moment her shuttle's hatch locked she could feel the vibration from Captain Mohar's ship as it started up.

"*Star*, this is another strange trip."

Once back aboard *Star*, Cot pulled up all the information she could on Captain Mohar. There was no death listed for him. If he were alive, he would be 500 standard years old. His species averaged 150 SYO at the most. There were so many puzzles and mysteries yet to be solved or just revisited to be reminded that the possibilities of life were endless.

Her eyes moved to the bot that was roosting on her console. She needed a break.

"The conn is yours, *Star*."

"*Star* has the conn."

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Cot felt herself spinning out of control. She was still alive. Where was *Star*? Firing her suit equalizers she was able to stop the spin. Looking about her she could not see anything that could rescue her. Her homing device was activated. She had two days air if she didn't breathe heavy. Testing her limbs she was grateful to find no injuries. The vastness of space was all around her, including moving space debris. She was just another spec of chemical components moving about in space. Not closing her eyes, she retreated inward, touching a part of her that was in harmony with space and she moved out of her body, searching for her friend, *Star Chaser*, not considering how odd it sounded.

*Star* was a lonely ship flying in a wild spin with only her protective buffer preventing her from colliding with space matter. Cot moved onto her deck.

The small bot, *Star's* friend hovered near her. Looking over the damage Cot determined what it would take to get the SEs activated. Cot focused on the main console. The lights came up and activated the SEs, which began to move around the bridge finishing the repairs.

Cot could feel herself drift out of the ship, her task accomplished. She was tempted to visit other places but a stronger need to return to her floating self had her back just as the thought occurred to her.

Time was difficult to tell when there was nothing to use for a focal point. It was startling to see four of her SEs materialize in front of her helmet. They towed her toward a ship that was quickly growing in size before her.

"*Star*, am I ever glad to see you!"

As she moved into the safety of her ship, *Star* was giving her a report of what had transpired. *Star* said nothing of her help to restart *Star's* system but she didn't expect it.

## Chapter 19

### *Hopping Through Fires*

It was dark and smelled of dust...and something else. Straining her ears she could hear movement. A lot of movement. She tugged at the shackles around her wrists, knowing it to be futile. It only caused the cuts to reopen. Shuddering, she could feel many things crawling up her legs, then to the cuts on her body. She would have screamed but remembered orifices and open wounds were what these creatures settled in.

Cot rolled out of her bed, entangled in her bedding at the first warning *Star* sent her.

"A gate?"

It was a relief to be awakened from her nightmare. She was drenched in sweat from her struggles. Cot dropped her soiled bedding in the cleaner and tiredly made it to the shower, setting the temperature to cold. It took a few minutes under cold water to clear her thoughts. She finished under a warmer temperature. In a cleaned uniform, and in a better frame of mood, she stopped long enough to grab a cup of juice in the galley.

"*Star*, I have the conn." Cot dropped into her seat. Looking around she didn't see the bot.

"Where's your friend?"

"Resting."

"Do you have a name yet?"

"It has not given me a name to call it."

The feeling she picked up from *Star* was that *Star* was curious about the bot that she knew nothing about. It was an oddity that *Star* ran into something smaller and smarter than her.

Cot began to read the ship's log that *Star* provided her, already forgetting about the bot. A tapping noise from a storage cabinet had her turning to see what it was. Getting up, she opened the door stepping back reflexively when the bot shot out.

"You locked the bot in the closet?"

"It was to prevent it from wandering while you slept," *Star* said.

"So it's not an obedient bot that will stay in one place when you tell it. I feel better. I thought I was losing my touch with machines." She returned her attention to her screen. "By my calculations, we passed the entry point. Why?"

"The gate has drifted," *Star* said.

"You've recalculated then?"

"I'm still calculating. There are many possibilities," *Star* said.

"Let me know when you've finished. This is the first gate we've encountered that has drifted."

An alarm sounded. A protective shield went up automatically, protecting Cot from being thrown about. *Star* banked to the left abruptly and the bot scurried into the closet that Cot had just freed it from.

An unfamiliar warship materialized before them. They were so close she was sure they would not be noticed right away. There was no time to increase their speed without being noticed.

"*Star*, tag that ship. All stop. There may be others coming through. Let's wait and see what's developing. I don't recognize that type of a warship and no identifier is coming up. See if you can find something on it."

Cot settled in her chair studying her screen split into four squares, filling up with different data in each square. The warship was mining the area with drones. As each new drone was activated, lines on her screen became green indicating the connection between each was enabled. It was fast work and in ten minutes the ship continued on its way with a broadly stretched mined area.

"Usually warships have support vessels around them, both forward and aft. Why is this one acting different? And they're mining their path as if expecting trouble. Nobody, not even in war, mines a gate. The chances of destroying it would be too great. Remember the last gate we were at?"

Cot glanced down at the information on her screen that had *Star's* results of a scan of the war ship. *Star* had accessed the crews' logs. That was no surprise.

The ship was returning from a skirmish. It was not a profitable foray. The tag *Star* placed on the ship's hull would keep a log of the ship's travels and hopefully identify which star system they belonged to before the tag was discovered and destroyed.

Space was as vast as the unknown number of dimensions that travelers could pass through. That was one of the reasons why to set aside a portion of space and claim it as one group's territory was considered naïve. But it didn't prevent it from happening, since the representatives of planets were practical and saw it as something to cover in their dealings with other planets, should their neighbor become unreasonable. Therefore, it was a necessary duty of those patrolling space to log any unusual ships and send it to their superiors in HQ.

"Send the profile to HQ when we're out of their range. How are you coming with a signal to deactivate a few of them so we can slide through the gate?"

Suddenly Cot sat up in her chair, feeling alarm at the movement in the space before them. Ripples across her screen showing space with its dark background, scattered lights in various sizes, and swirls of purple dust, gave the impression that a breeze moved a curtain of space right where the gate opening was moments ago. Whatever was exiting was causing energy displacement before it. The exit aperture began to open and information filled her screen too fast for her to read.

"Give me a wide visual of the gate."

A nonCFS zip ship popped through the gate, then more. A squadron spread out to engage the drones which came active immediately.

"Bring up low power. We can slide through while they're occupied. They'll expect something like that so be careful of passive satellites."

Cot's eyes darted from her console with technical specs to the screen showing a panoramic view of the battle.

Once they passed through the aperture, the gate closed.

"Can you pick up readings on where they entered along this corridor?"

"I am picking up evidence of their passing," *Star* said.

"There's a mother ship those ships came from. I don't want to run into her. This gate is the busiest of all the other's we've been through. I would think it would be in our official charts. Add it to the list we'll send to HQ."

A displacement began to materialize before them and *Star* veered to the left and increased speed. The energy in the corridor changed, causing Cot's surroundings to lose their consistency and become a blur. Cot forced herself to let *Star* stabilize the bridge without her participation. Even after two years of working with a ship that managed the maintenance, repair and protection of itself and its pilot, Cot found it difficult not to take over the controls when there was a crisis.

When she had taken on the role of a sid-pilot, her trainers had told her reviewing the connection between her and the sentient-ship should occur often to insure a cohesive working relationship existed. The *Coronda* Fighter was a more sophisticated ship known at the time it was assembled and needed less outside maintenance. The pilot was the ship's anchor point in reality and responsibility to whoever owned the ships. That confirmed Cot's belief that it was *Star Force* from the beginning. Their rumored influence and power would give them the ability to transfer quality fighter pilots, train them in sid-piloting, and send them for finishing touches at a prestigious school as *POATA*.

Cot would have linked with *Star Chaser* to see what *Star* was reading but the speed they were moving at to avoid the collision would have been too much for Cot's senses to absorb. Instead she watched the readings scroll out on her screen. It wasn't just the warship they were passing but the small ships that trailed. It was seconds but to her it was a long time.

As a fighter pilot she had come to near collisions without it bothering her and now she nervously twitched. A brief insight gave her the answer. Then she was piloting the ship and now it was *Star Chaser*.

When everything returned to normal she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Did you get a reading on that ship? It looks like the *Meekk*. Bounty hunters."

"It fits the profile of the *Meekk*," *Star* said. "There are no identifiers on it either."

"They turned off their identifiers. They're looking for revenge. No wonder that ship left drones behind. *Star*, we need to slow down or we're going to end up in a galaxy not on our charts."

The added thrust *Star* gave to miss the *Meekk* had them speeding faster than it was proscribed to travel in corridors that normally delivered a ship months or years faster to a destination than if just traveling through normal space.

The corridor curved but they were going too fast to take it. They burst through the corridor's energy wall like a shot out of a cannon. Cot whooshed in shock at *Star's* sudden deceleration. It took seconds for her sight to be able to focus. The bot was the first thing she saw, sitting on her console.

Cot's attention went to her screen. They were in a section of space she didn't recognize. Her eyes lifted to see what was around them. They were hanging in a strange backdrop of no stars but plenty of space ships. There were all sorts of ships, some so ancient she remembered them from her academy textbooks and others she thought were so bizarre in design she would have remembered seeing them. They stretched out as far as her eyes could see.

*Star Chaser's* curiosity was piqued. They hit an energy protective barrier, bouncing back gently and then held still.

"It looks like a graveyard where they store star ships decommissioned and no longer operable. Usually they break them down into salvage within weeks... We're getting a hail from one. Return hail."

Suddenly all ships turned, facing them. The speed was unnatural. Alarm fluttered in her stomach.

"Did we warp into something out of our space or time?"

Their comm channel squealed until *Star* shut it down. The bot had dropped from the overhead to the console and stared out at the ships.

"*Star*, this doesn't look like a good place to be."

"They would like to speak with you."

"Who? About what? Can you clear the channel so we get a clean broadcast?"

"They all are trying to send at the same time, overloading each other's communication systems which are causing the squeal."

Cot leaned back in her seat. "Can you single out one ship and bring up an image?"

"Until they stop with the multiple signals, I cannot single out one. At the intensity they are sending it will not be long till they loose signal strength."

"Then we'll wait."

After ten minutes a clear signal came through. *Star* translated. "They want you to help them."

"With what?"

"They wish you to present their request to leave this area to the Keeper of this space."

"Why can't they present their own request?"

"They have attempted to harm the Keeper's messenger and since then no one else has responded to them. They call this space the Dead Zone."

Cot thought reference to the dead zone by spacers was a metaphor.

"They told you that?"

"It is in their accusations to each other that I heard this."

"They're the types that would turn on us as soon as we give them what they want. Let's just get out of here."

Hours later they were still stuck in the dead zone. Cot held her head between two hands as if she had a headache. When the ships reenergized their battery packs they resumed their bombarding *Star Chaser* with their communication, ignoring the problem of too much cancelled them all out.

"Where's Captain Mohar when I need him?"

"Will Captain Mohar lead them to Xibalba?" *Star* asked.

"They want to go to Xibalba? Dead space is Betwixt and Between?" Cot took a deep breath. It was silly to believe in a child's tale especially when she had passed through so much of adult reality, but here she was remembering the Tale of Xibalba as written in the Popul Vuh read to her by a friend of her auntie. He was a Hunter of artifacts, he had told her proudly.

"Betwixt and Between," she repeated softly. "Are they same? What made me think of that?"

"It is also referred to as the Underworld," *Star* needlessly pointed out. *Star's* excitement was registered as strength of energy that was transmitted in the connection they shared that wasn't just through the comm channel, and this was something she was interested in... death in it's various guises. Or perhaps it was the portals to rebirth they led to, Cot reflected, since in a sense her consciousness was reborn in a ship's computer.

"The Underworld refuses them admittance," *Star* said. "That's why they are still here. They have no where to go."

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"You're the captain," *Star* said.

"Not to them. No way am I helping these people. Back up and let's get out of here."

"I cannot move," *Star* said.

Long hours passed and Cot remained firm. *Star* had been trying out various stories on her, reciting myths from hundreds of cultures. As if hearing different versions of the same story would change her mind about freeing ghosts that were sociopaths when in the physical plane and held no remorse for their actions in the spirit plane.

The bot moved so that it was even with her face. Cot turned her head to the bot and stated with firm conviction. "No. N.O. No. Why can't anyone take my no to mean no?"

The bot moved to the viewer, scanned the ships that surrounded their ship and moved back to eye level with Cot.

"If you're going to pick now to talk to me, don't bother. They aren't asking you to enact some crazy ritual that calls for you to go naked in some underground tunnel and say "Hi Queen Something-or-other..."

"Queen Ereschkigal," *Star* corrected.

"Alright, Hi, Queen Ereschkigal, I need to talk to you about these people who made it their soul purpose, and I use the term soul loosely, an agony for many people to live and die."

"They are moving," *Star* interrupted her conversation.

Cot craned her neck to see the outside. "What is that?" As she stood a dozen balls of glittery lights hit *Star Chaser's* hull causing an immediate sense of disorientation to engulf Cot, knocking her over. For a long moment Cot laid flat on the deck fighting panic at the emptiness she felt.

"Am I Dead?" she asked the overhead hoarsely.

Getting no answer, Cot struggled to her feet and dragged herself onto her captain's chair. That exertion left her feeling exhausted.

*Where's Star?*

Cot looked around her feeling light-headed and missing a level of consciousness of her surroundings that had become part of her waking awareness. She gripped the chair's arm feeling like her world was overlapping boundaries with others, as images, sounds, sights and pressure around her fluctuated and changed. The bot appeared in front of her...but it wasn't a bot. It was really a space ship.

Of course. She knew that.

"This is upsetting my stomach. I can't focus on anything."

Her hand went to her head where a sudden headache had developed. Then she vomited. For the first time the bot made a high pitch squeal as it barely made it out of the way.

Cot closed her eyes, shutting out some of the stimulus that was upsetting her equilibrium while the SE medbot administered to her. Though her stomach and head felt less tight, she still could not feel *Star Chaser*.

"Comm on. This is Colonel Cot MacDiarmid to whoever is out there."

"Well, it's about time! We've been trying to talk to you since you got here."

"What do you want?" Her voice was hoarse.

"Didn't your second tell you?"

"It's a strange story," she said, wondering how much *Star* had told them.

"Queenie's not talking to us. You know how those female types are. The demon herself, yakking and making no sense. Your second, he said you'd talk to her for us."

*Star* presented herself to them as male, which considering the type of crimes they had committed made sense, Cot thought.

"I'm not interested in being your go-between. I'm sure the Queen or her spokesperson already told you what she wanted in order for you to move on."

"She's running something that's holding us here. Some kind of machine. It's the only thing that she has over us. You're stuck here too, you know. She'll talk to you. She's curious about new arrivals. Just like a female, busy about other people's business. Well, are you going to talk to her or not?"

"I'll talk to the Queen. But I won't speak to her about your business."

"You think you're better than us? You wouldn't be here unless your soul was dirty. You don't help us then we'll make your life miserable here. And don't think we can't. We're all you got here."

"If I'm all that dirty, then why do you think she's going to talk to me?"

"Cause she's a female! She acts real nice just to find out how she can torment you."

"Just what do you think I can accomplish for you? You already know she's not going to let you go."

"Surely in that ship of yours you have some explosives. Drop off a few here and there. It'll be enough to knock out the machine that keeps us here."

Cot thought he sounded desperate. "What makes you think a machine is keeping you all here?"

"Are you short on brains? What else is there?"

"Magical power." She knew she should not have said that the moment it crossed her lips, and once it was uttered, there was no bringing it back....unless she could jump back in time.

"There's nothing here. It's a..." what Cot recognized as a death rattle came from the speaker, then in a fearful whisper he finished, "It's a dead zone."

"How do I get invited to speak to the Queen?"

"Ask." A loud click told her the conversation was ended.

Cot tried to engage the engines again, but not even a beep that she was doing something wrong came from the console. "Engage transparent bubble," she ordered.

Nothing happened.

She went through the menu and found the command on the panel. Suddenly Cot was sitting in space, and feeling exposed.

"Well, this is something to write to the others about."

Before her was a virtual haven of ships, more than what she had first glimpsed, looking every bit deserted. Staring hard at them she tried to determine what made them look abandoned. The good news was that they were on the outskirts of the captured ships.

"They look like flies caught in a web."

Leaning back in her chair she closed her eyes and went through the stories *Star Chaser* had been telling her about Queen Ereschkigal.

\* \* \*

Cot adjusted her dress cover. If she was going to visit a queen she needed to wear something impressive. For a few moments she studied her image. Her beret was just at the right angle with the right number of finger widths above her brow that Dress Code specified. Her hard earned POATA medallion was resting in the hollow of her throat, with her rows of ribbons aligned perfectly. Her Colonel's pips were affix where they were supposed to be, saber, white sash and clip, was gleaming freshly cleaned. Her boots were not as shinny as a new pair would shine, but they were comfortable and held a shine as any four year cadet's efforts could produce.

Cot frowned. Why was she looking at this like a cadet at the last official parade inspection? Shaking her head to refocus, something that was becoming more difficult the longer they stayed. She reminded herself that she was to appear before the gatekeeper dressed in her best. Then she was to recite a long winded request for entrance, answer the question written over the gate, then wait for entrance.

Frowning at herself in the mirror, she went over all her auntie's stories for something about seven gates dealing with the underground or death. Her aunt's teachings were on discipline and hard work. Nothing on death...except...

She had no time to go over any more stories. The bot was within an arms reach of her. "You're to stay here and make sure *Star* is not feeling alone."

She held onto the sides of the passageway as another wave of displacement hit. Their ship was stuck in some type of space displacement that disabled *Star* was her guess.

What did Queen Ereschkigal have to do with this place and was she going to be able to find a safe space that looked like the entrance to her den?

"Queen Ereschkigal," Cot repeated to herself again so she would not mispronounce it. The movement was so quick Cot didn't realize she had moved only that a massive door was before her. She hit the heavy wooden door with her fist but not even a thud resulted. Pulling her sword out she used the hilt, getting pathetic taps. While she waited for something to happen, she examined the door's carvings looking for the question that was supposed to be somewhere on the gate. There was a lot of dying in the panel scenes but no written text. Death was not something she wanted to dwell on, especially at this moment.

*Gods, but I hope this is not another reminder for me to think about all those murdering thieves I shot down. Thinking about what they did to others before I removed them from the physical equation, is sickening.*

A booming voice from behind the door asked, "Who knocks on Queen Ereschkigal's door without an invitation?"

"It is I," was all that Cot could think of to say. It was a terrible time to forget what *Star* had told her to say. She turned to see what was buzzing next to her shoulder. It was the bot. "You're suppose to be keeping an eye on *Star*."

Not expecting an answer she turned as the door swung open into darkness. Not one nebulae or star shined. It was like a black hole in space.

"Just stay close so you don't get lost," she told the bot. Stepping over the threshold was like walking into a space vacuum. Everything around her was dead... or perhaps, it was more like whatever feelings, sights, or sounds were so unfamiliar that it didn't register with her. It was then that she realized maybe she should have worn her outersuit.

Cot turned her head to see where the bot was. A gray outline in the dark environment set it apart. Holding her hand in front of her face she could not see even the outline.

"You lead and I'll follow," she told the bot.

Her steps were without hesitation and even stranger was that as dark as it was, she moved as if her feet knew the way. The smooth walkway suddenly changed to loose gravel and with it came a feeling of something unpleasant.

"Little Sister, why do you bang for entrance into the underworld?" The voice was so terrible that it grated on her nerves.

Cot stumbled, knocking the bot against the wall. Cot squinted into the darkness. "Queen Ereschkigal?"

"You have something to ask of me?"

"Yes." Cot gulped, hoping her upset stomach would settle down.

Queen Ereschkigal stepped out of the darkness and nearly scared Cot half to death, her rebelling stomach forgotten as her other senses were sending her alarming signals. Her fear rooted her to where she stood.

"Do I scare you little Sister?" She leaned close to Cot and a sickly sweet odor engulfed her. Cot tried not to gag on the sweetness. "Death is feared by many," Queen Ereschkigal said.

"Maybe they still have a lot to do in the land of the living." Cot was referring to herself, and hoping she was not offending the Queen. She never felt this type of fear before, where she could only take small breaths and her heart hurt as it beat.

"Death is a gate to further enlightenment." The queen leaned closer to Cot and studied her features that were deathly pale. "You are dressed as if in your funeral best, so I thought you were here for passage."

"No!"

"No?"

"No."

"Are you here for a loved one?" The dark spaces where her eyes should be sparked a tiny flame.

"No." Cot shook her head so vigorously she sent her beret flying. She was more worried about her knees giving out than a beret.

Queen Ereschkigal caught her cover. The captain's emblem flashed from the light in the queen's eyes. "Very nice. May I keep this?"

"Yes."

"You are so willing to give something of yours to a stranger."

"It's the least I can do for bothering you."

"So, it's not a loved one.... Are you here for some kind of test?"

"No test." Cot gulped audibly. Now her stomach that was rebelling.

Queen Ereschkigal looked her up and down. "You don't appear to be as dim witted as your answers. You knocked for entrance to the gate yet you do not wish to pass through. Is there a reason for this visit, Little Sister?"

"The ships..."

"Ah. You have a cause."

Cot hesitated, as her face reddened. She meant to say ship, her ship.

"A reason for being here. A purpose outside of yourself. A selfless act. A sacrifice," the Queen hinted.

Cot felt alarmed at her thinking she was here for those criminals, yet she could not speak.

"You have nothing to say," the queen said, sounding disappointed.

Cot struggled to get her muddled brain organized. She was surprised when it came out sounding clear and not at all as garbled as her thoughts were. "My ship is snagged. I would like for us to be

able to leave. As for those other ships, there is nothing I can do for them." Did she sound regretful?

Queen Ereschkigal leaned away from Cot, giving her space but not of fresh air. "They are not your worry. As for you, do you intend to follow the same road only in the other direction?"

"I don't understand why I'm here." She looked up at the dark apparition and this time dared to look in the eyeless sockets.

"You can only pass through the gates for yourself."

"To see you?"

A rough laugh came from the Queen. "To know the sacred is to experience it."

It seemed to be a mocking answer.

"Are the gates to keep out the profane?" Cot asked.

"What is Sacred cannot be profaned. Its vibration is too different for the profane to know it."

"What are the gates then?"

"Between the gates is where change takes place."

"Why seven gates?"

"Each individual brings the number of gates they wish to pass and what each gate shall represent for their growth."

"Those souls in the ship are waiting to go through the gates?"

"Whatever is needed for them to move on, they must do themselves."

"So, I don't have any gates to go through?"

"What you seek, you will find."

Some things get lost in translating from languages or general meanings and in this case it was her. This had to be another dream. She needed to move on. Then she remembered those that she killed.

"Do you know..." Cot hesitated, not knowing how to ask.

"Yes."

"Do I have to make amends for their deaths?" she asked in a fearful voice.

The Queen laughed heartily. "Only if you think you should. Are you going to burden yourself with their misdeeds too?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you concerned with their deaths?"

"I wasn't until I ran into Captain Mohar."

"Perhaps he is looking for someone to take his place."

Cot eyes widened. "Not me."

"Every realm, dimension, reality, whatever you call it, has a set of rules. Learn them before you step into them."

"How? Is there some sort of book to read?"

The Queen smiled. "I'll loan you my copy. Do remember to return it to me when you've finished with it." She pointed to the medallion that Cot had forgotten about. "You shall travel through all sorts of unfamiliar places due to the pull from the medallion. You must learn to control it or you will be jumping from one adventure to another with not enough time to absorb any of the opportunities you're given, and attracting energy from these different dimensions that don't belong where you are. You are at the point where you must know that if you don't like the direction you're going, you don't go in the opposite direction, because you're operating under the same set of ideals and principles. You must step off into the unknown. Normally I don't give advice. It's lost on those that can't hear...however, I don't believe you're that type."

"My aunt called it the state of being," Cot said.

"It is living in the moment, breathing in and out with love, not avoiding, controlling or manipulating what comes before you."

"But don't I control what I experience?"

Suddenly she was back in her quarters, sitting before her mirror. Her aunt was looking out at her.

"You can. But before you learn to control, learn to yield, to trust in the process, love yourself and those that come to you with gifts, the unwanted as much as the sought after," her aunt said.

Cot touched her head where her cover should have been. She figured out what the hat and first gate were about.

"So, the first gate is leaving preconceived thoughts and beliefs behind. My cap represented keeping my thoughts in order. My hair represents my thoughts." Cot grinned at how clever she was. "That wasn't so hard."

Her reflection in the mirror showed her wearing a deep frown as she knew there was more to it than that. Her cap also represented that she was the captain of her ship. She gave up the symbol of her leadership. The insight was brief and then it was gone. It had something to do with *Star*.

And she thought her life got interesting since moving into the sid-piloting program. It was interesting since meeting her aunt.

