

## Chapter 5

### *Knowing How to Retreat*

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

*It's too still. This doesn't have the feel of a dream.*

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

"Star?"

Nothing.

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

"Star! Report!" she called mentally.

There wasn't any connection with *Star*. She dropped to the deck barefooted, touching the sides of the bulkhead until she found her emergency suit. Dressing in the dark under stress was a well-practiced routine for spacers so that it was second nature. Once her helmet was engaged it activated readings on the visor, but they were only of her bios and of her immediate surroundings. No connection to her helm, her ship.

It took an emergency override to exit her quarters. There was no breathable air in the passageway but there was still gravity. Thumping her way to the bridge she glanced along the passageway noticing the maintenance panels and exits that the holographic program usually hid. The entrance to her bridge was locked down, as it would if the ship was under attack. Cot cracked the hatch open with just enough space to grasp the edge and pull open enough for her to pass. Her helmet light increased intensity as it swept the darkened helm interior. The two monitors were active with the screens blinking on and off. If the passenger's seat monitor was on it meant the ship system had crashed and came back up, waiting for the alarms to be cleared and systems tests ran by a person. Where was *Star Chaser*? When the screen blinked on she could see messages scrolling too fast to read. Leaning over her console she tapped in her access code.

Nothing.

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

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

Silence.

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

Nothing.

"Come on, come on, initialize."

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

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

Cot rapped the console in irritation. No repair bots could be activated. She was on her own. At least she had gravity. Cot felt a stirring from her ship.

A mental connection.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When was this installed?" She was pleased, but also annoyed that *Star Chaser* didn't tell her about the change. "Yes, it's a nice surprise but I told you to let me know of what you upgraded.... Oh, this doesn't count because it was done while we were at POATA?" *Star* was being humorous, she recognized. Pulling the AVEC suit closer to her, she dropped into the lower half. Her injured arm floating where movement took it was throwing her off-balance. She tucked that arm into the suit first, then finished dressing. She wiggled the fingers on her left hand in the gloves. They were painfully tingling but they were moving.

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

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

The ship continued to turn with her walking upside down and then sideways. Her injured arm needed to be immobilized until she had more control over it or it would be a hazard. It was strapped to her side. Retracting the EB shell she began her progress to a repair locker and secured a general purpose repair harness. One handed the harness was secured around her waist, and then she headed to an exit. Cot continued flexing her fingers on her left hand, willing usefulness to return.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why would anyone not create a thicker layer hull where a ship was vulnerable? And who shot and them and why? And was this an example of *Star* testing her shield? Cot mentally shook her head. *Star* would not take action like this without her being at her console.

"Time expired?"

Twenty minutes flashed on her helmet faceplate. Too much time worrying about something better left for later. Securing her lines and boots to the hull, she began the repair. With the numbness gone from her arm and hands she was able to work faster. Finished she secured her tools.

"Time expired?"

An hour.

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

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

She needed to look at the ship's logs after this situation was handled.

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

The heat from her torch activated the chemicals at the edges of the plate to mold itself to the ship's outer hull, morphing into the original outer skin and becoming part of the ship's hull. Cot watched the chemical action on the third side blend into the ship's outer skin, fascinated with the technology that could cause the exterior of a ship to be repaired like a scratch on a person's skin, and not have ship movement in space undo the repair. Suddenly her position was shaken.

"Aieeee!"

Her sore elbow hit the hull hard. It didn't numb her again, but needle like pain from her elbow to her finger tips was nearly paralyzing. She dropped the torch and grabbed onto her tethers to stabilize her sudden knock off balance. Another jolt to the ship was felt through her boots, nearly disconnecting her from the ship's hull. The ship's outer shield was holding but not if the shots kept leeching energy.

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

Flicking the torch back on, she began the last side. Another jolt to the ship nearly shook her boots loose again. She turned on a clamp for one glove to secure her on three points so she could finish. Done, she slid the tool back into her pouch, unclamped her left glove and began her journey back to the hatch. The next jolt sent her spinning from *Star Chaser* as ship and her went tumbling into a space tide that pulled them quickly along in its flow. As she rolled, Cot caught sight of a white streak that missed her and *Star* by inches. If the tide had not been pulling them along they would have been hit again. It was a pulse

cannon. Just the kind that would put holes the size she found in the side of her ship, provided the shot could get inside a ship's shield.

Cot unhooked one of the tethers and pulled herself back into the protection of her ship. The next shot sent *Star* tumbling in another direction. She slapped one magnetized glove on the hull to prevent herself from being jettisoned away from *Star*. If she reached the end of her line it would jerk her with enough force to give her either a headache or a broken neck. A redesign of the safety harness crossed her mind.

With effort she grabbed the two bars along the hatch and pulled herself onto the platform and locked her boots. Cot could feel *Star Chaser's* systems coming back on line. Until her pilot was back inside any evasive maneuvers by *Star Chaser* were out of the question. Her heart was pounding with the knowledge that they were under attack and she was outside of the ship.

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

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

Struggling to move quickly in the suit she clomped her way to the bridge all the while trying to get *Star* to disengage jump. Her mental orders were being ignored.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Star Chaser* flipped around to chase down their attacker.

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

The scout ship realized the tables were turned, veering off and heading back to where it came from.

*"Stand down, Star. We're not chasing baby when mama is out there somewhere with perhaps the tribe. Give me our location and plot three possible routes to... here."* Her finger poked at a spot on the star chart showing on her console, just to the left of a black hole. That would give *Star* a charge. She loved to explore the mysterious.

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

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

*"I can't see any official convoys or battle cruisers along this route. Even if he was attached to CFS pirate patrol there should be a fleet listing."*

*"Why do you need to see this? We are leaving them behind," Star asked.*

"Because I want to know why he fired on us. Did your shield fail?"

"My shield was not activated."

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

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

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

"I will run tests."

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

"There are ships appearing before us," *Star* said.

Cot stared at blips beginning to fill her screen.

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

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

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

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

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

*"Not far. I got a good shot right to the dorsal," the ensign continued excited. "Just follow its trail."*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"Yes, Captain."*

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

*"On your orders, Captain."*

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

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

*"Yes, Captain. What about Ensign Warner?"*

*"He'll be taken care of."*

*"Right, Captain."*

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

Cot had never heard of CFS ships charging for securing an area for ship testing, but it could be possible. However, it would mean everyone involved in protecting the area would know about the ship and its specs and knowing from experience that hot scuttlebutt was prized among the ranks below decks; it would be known in all the popular spacer bars once they hit port.

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



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

"*Star*, you have the conn."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

Cot rose from her seat and went into the cargo bay to work off her aggravation. She spent two hours sweating through each of the levels of kata, finishing off at 8<sup>th</sup> level in one form that emphasized kicking and punching.

Next were her breath exercises, and after that, she was looking forward to a light meal and then reading a good story or taking a nap, not caring which order it was in.

## Chapter 6

### *Knowledge Isn't Everything*

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

A buzz crashed through her dream.

"I'm awake," she groggily informed her alarm. She took a few deep breaths for further mental clearing.

"Greetings, *Star*. Anything needing my immediate attention?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Explosive Scatter Damage is unknown with these new instruments."

Cot waited for *Star* to make her point and was surprised when nothing else was offered. The two SU010s were ejected out a tube and disappeared behind the distortion.

"Are you suggesting we test them by exploding them?" Cot asked.

"Yes."

"Have you thought about this?" *Interesting that she doesn't feel protective of them as she does with the SEs.*

"I have thought about it. Do you doubt the merit of my suggestion?"

"I'm surprised you're offering up something that you've integrated into your systems to be blown apart."

"Every soldier has to make sacrifices," *Star* said.

"These are not sentient beings and they are not making a choice to sacrifice themselves."

"Soldiers obey their orders and I was not referring to them. Doesn't a senior officer feel a loss when she dispatches her soldiers to their death?" *Star* asked.

"I did. But I can't speak for others. We'll test them in the future but not in a travel corridor." Cot snickered at the realization that *Star* was teasing her...or was she testing her? She knew that one of the rules of traveling in a corridor was that no explosives were to be set off.

"Do you have something against the SU010s?" Cot asked.

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

"We're to test their capability and report on it. Because one of your soldier's can't walk, talk, and chew at the same time doesn't mean it's a total waste. We don't throw our specialists out because you can't make them multifunctional. Before we go through the corridor, how safe is our outer shielding?"

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

"Good work, *Star*. By the time we reach L'Gsta Outpost, we'll have everything tested and redesigned. Not even the shipyard engineers will recognize you as one of their own." Cot grinned as she waited for *Star* to make her characteristic comment that it was not a "we" but "her" that did the testing and redesign; however, *Star* made no comment and nor was there a whisper of a thought in their connection. Perhaps *Star* was beginning to see that they did work together.

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

"Yes, Cot."

"All parts."

"Including your medallion?" *Star* asked.

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

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

"Are you keeping any parts?"

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

"Can you produce one of your own?"

"I have."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was silence.

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

"Nothing."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It will if an SF agent's life or ship is not in danger."

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

"No authentic agent will claim to be an agent, Cot, so I have devised many cross checks to draw a composite of the object before it reaches the target area a common monitor begins to collect information in."

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

Star Force was getting more than they could have bargained for with *Star Chaser*. Cot learned to adjust and work with what she had when it came to *Star Chaser* but Cot wondered how much SFHQ was willing to bend.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about the stories you like to hear?"

"They have information I can use."

"Would you like to develop intuition?"

"It is not reliable, Cot."

"Instrumentation isn't reliable, *Star*. It breaks down. Its programming gets corrupted and parts fail, and instruments only report or record knowable things."

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

"Take us through."

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

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

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

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

Tapping the screen Cot sent an inquiry to the gate's logs. "The *Murdellie* exited the gate three days ago."

Cot thought about things that could go wrong with no backup if she should decide to inspect the ship's interior, and that this could become something bigger than one pilot and ship to investigate; however, the feeling to board her increased as she stared at the ship's cargo bay.

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

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

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

That was a legitimate excuse on why she was going to board the freighter and bring up its power, before calling for the proper authorities.

Frowning Cot tapped her finger on the edge of the console. "For a ship not showing any systems running, why is it not drifting?"

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

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

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

"Who's the captain?" Cot asked.

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

"I've heard of him."

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

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

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

"Find out what port this ship last stopped at. Notify SFHQ of our find."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There were information buoys or kiosks throughout space along the well traveled corridors that acted as libraries, newscasts, and mailboxes so that everyone passing was kept updated with information that space travelers would be interested in. *Star* was especially interested in the libraries considering the number of species that utilized its services. After ten minutes a drone *Star* had sent out to the nearest kiosk returned.

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

"What destroyed them?" Cot asked.

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

"That's interesting the gate exit was not affected."

"Your tone of voice indicates you find this surprising," *Star* said.

"I would think that the blast of energy from the changes would carry out this far."

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

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

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

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

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

"It is an interesting idea, Cot."

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

"Twenty standard minutes," *Star* said.

"How much can you extend that time?"

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

"Yes."

"How much time do you need?"

Cot frowned as she ran through probable problems and the time it would take to resolve them or leave them in order to restart the ship, supervise the move from the gate exit – and maybe get in a quick

look around. "An hour lead time." That was a long time to do a recon on a deserted ship by a squad trained for that but for one person it might not be enough.

"I will work on it."

Cot smiled at *Star's* tone. "Dispatch three SEs for recon."

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

"I'm sure you can, but I wish to look around...just to see what we're powering up. We need to be sure that's not a contagious ship." That was not a good excuse, she thought as soon as she said it.

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

"You upgraded my AVEC suits?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Every time you tap into another ship's computer, you risk bringing over something that could infect your systems, yet you still do it. As sure as you are that you'll not pick up anything in your connections, is as sure as I am that whatever we run into on the *Murdelie*, we'll be able to handle."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly the information stopped scrolling on Cot's screen.

"They must have hit a dead spot."

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

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

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

*Star* was anxious to send the other SEs board the *Murdelie* to reclaim her missing three...and continue *her* exploration of the ship. After making another inspection circle around the freighter, to verify exit hatches, *Star Chaser* stopped alongside of the open cargo bay that her three missing SEs disappeared into. Her lights revealed the cargo bay's interior full. It was a horrible temptation for even a honorable person to not try to steal the ship, except the practical matter is, where would one hide something this big

without the most notorious of pirates cutting your head off and stealing it from you? So how did the *Murdelie* manage to stay unreported for days?

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

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

"Good idea but with no power the time it will take to access the bridge, one of the most protected areas of a ship whether it has power or no, could be better spent locating the one area that has power. From there, *you* can access the ship's logs while powering it up. It's important, once the power is initiated, that the ship has its security fully engaged. *Murdelie* won't be missed by other ships with her power back on."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Report from SE4?" Cot asked.

"SE4 has nothing to report."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

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

The other two missing SEs were not in sight.

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

"SE4 has no information, Cot."

"The memory has been wiped?"

"I am investigating."

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

"This is like a dead ship."

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

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

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

"On ISS."

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

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

"Show accesses to deck 6."

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

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

A body.

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

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

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

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

"Yes, Cot."

Cot could not tell if the body was intended to keep the hatch open or if it caught when the power went off.

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

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

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

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

Shining her light further down the passageway she didn't see any damage from a weapon discharge. Satisfied the SE had taken enough of a recording of the body she pushed the hatch further open. With one hand she held the door open least it shut on her and with the other guided the freed body

that rose out of the doorway. A gold coin floated clear of the body. She plucked the coin out of the air and studied the stamp on each side.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Enas are telepathic, she remembered.

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

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

"Time?"

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

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

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

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

"Where was your last reading on SE9?"

"Deck 4."

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

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

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

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

"Star?"

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

"Star?" she thought.

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

"Up magnification 50x."

Nothing happened.

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

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

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

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

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

Cot found herself on the couch. Someone brushed up against her. Turning to where the pressure was, she found herself lying prone. Leaning above her was a dark menacing shadow. If you cannot keep your private affairs private, then people taking offense should not be unexpected. It was the fact that this person took the offense to a violent act surprised her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know."

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

"Your life was not in danger, Cot."

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

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

Pirates and smugglers who were into stealing ships were careful what they damaged, but those that were only interested in stealing what was on the ship, small time thieves, did not care to what extent of damage they did, including to passengers and crew. She would have to wait until she returned to *Star* where she could run her own programs to analyze what could have occurred here. Certainly *Star* would be curious since there was a story to discover.

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

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

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

Was it a code?

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

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

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

"I show all scans are working."

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

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

Shinning her light further down the passageway Cot picked up shadows on the bulkhead. Moving closer the marks looked like flashbacks from weapons fire. Her light shinned further up the hall. The charred remains of a rifle lay on the deck. Any scans from her equipment gave her no readings. She would have to do her own work. Standing over the remains, Cot identified it as a standard CFS military issue. This particular weapon was used for boarding a hostile ship. Any damage to anything on the other side of a bulkhead was minimized as the rifle was designed to neutralize biomaterial. For the rifle to have been damaged, it would have had to overheat. Cot had seen many soldiers on their first hostile boarding keep the trigger activated which caused the barrel to backfire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you picking up on any of this *Star*?"

"I can not identify."

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

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

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

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

"The medical bay is coming on line."

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

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

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

"They are not meant to be on this trip," she whispered. "Unreliable...if you do pick up anything." Cot leaned closer to hear her.

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

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

The medical tube cover began to descend over the Ena, not giving Cot time for any more questions. Cot glanced at the control panel to the medical bed. No alarms she could understand.

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

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

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

"They are running on their backup, Cot."

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

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

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

"The manifest on Deck 4 shows Deck 5."

"How many?"

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

"I'm on my way."

SE6 pulled the hatch cover open to the cargo bay and gave her a clear. Unlike the hatch cover on deck 4, this one opened wide. As she stepped into the mammoth cargo bay Cot increased the light intensity on her helmet. Her light passed over the shuttles with their shipping orders stamped on their exterior. The SEs scouted above the cargo, giving her an overview of the contents.

"No captain would leave her ship fully loaded without at least a troop of her own security guarding the goods."

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

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

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

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

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

"Auntie," she whispered tenderly, "they have done a very good job on your likeness." Leaning forward Cot studied the medallion that hung around her neck. Her aunt never wore her talisman openly and from what she understood, not everyone could see it. It was to have been hers at her aunt's passing. She had wondered what had happened to it. It was a powerful talisman and if it were meant to be hers then it would find it's way to her, she was taught.

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

"This is real, *Star*."

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

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

Moving back to the shuttles she watched the SEs began their task while she listened to *Star's* information on Enas. The SEs made quick work of testing and then disconnecting the Life Pacs, and Cot

remembered to recharge her own. It took an hour to test the twelve pacs, detach, and deliver to deck 6. The switch was without a problem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am looking into it."

It was not something Cot thought *Star* could find the answer to, but she was curious how *Star* would handle a task she could not complete. As Cot moved quickly through the corridors and up the transport shaft to deck one, she kept expecting something to challenge her presence aboard the ship. Surely within three days someone besides her had to have stumbled on this ship?

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

Murmurings?

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

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

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

So just what was she doing here?

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

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

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

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

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

Minutes passed before the gray cloud slowly faded to nothing.

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

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

Backing away from the table she went back to her inspection of the room, looking for the passageway that led to the incubation room that the ships schematics showed to be connected to this

room. She found it hidden behind an elaborate cloth mural. Cot parted the silky drapery, getting a light headed feeling as her glove touched the drapes.

Though the life support for an Ena was not up in this area, the passageway was not lifeless. She could feel emotions from many. Her own telepathy was not that strong with anyone but *Star*, so the impact of the fear mixed with anticipation from so many was surprising; and underneath all that was a sound that stirred up unpleasant feelings.

This was where she was being directed to go. Her steps faltered as it became clearer that she was being directed.

"Alright, I got the message. Now what?"

The sound underneath the emotions had a malicious intent. It didn't belong here.

Cot began her mantra, *ara kara*, while she continued down the passageway. She could feel a stutter in the negative waves of sound. Gradually the malevolent sound faded out. Continuing with her mantra she had stopped in the passageway as the ripple of change began to be reflected back at her from the walls.

***It is done.***

Turning back Cot stepped past the silky cover and out of the room as quickly as she could.

"Time?"

Over two hours had passed since she came aboard. Life support and security should be up by now. There was still no mental or physical connection to *Star*, and the SEs were littered in the passageway. She began collecting them and fastening them to her suit as she moved down the passageway and to the exit. Stepping into the transport shaft she dropped as if stepping off a high rise into space.

"On stabilizers!" she hollered. As she bounced against the walls of the tube the secured SEs were knocked loose. Her suit jets failed to activate. Suddenly the SEs came active and the suit's stabilizers righted her and slowed her free fall.

"Life support for Enas life forms is back on line," *Star* reported calmly. "Security is up with *Murdellie's* on board security bots beginning their security checks."

"What happened to our connection?"

"You entered a dead zone," *Star* informed her simply.

Cot wanted to check on the two in Medical Bay before security was fully up. There were questions she wanted answered and if not both than at least one should be revived by now.

She met no resistance to her return to deck 6. Both rooms were fully operational. Resting both palms against the bulkhead of the incubation room, she could feel the energy was chaotic. Was this how the strange energy in the medical bay would feel? Cot closed her eyes and willed her spirit to see if there was a chrysalis in the incubation chamber.

Cot looked around her, searching for something she could recognize. As spirit, colors were sounds and the discordant sounds surrounded her. Thinking the chant "*ara kara*," she took four steps to a shapeless form that looked as if it were having problems solidifying. There were brief reprieves from the sounds, and during that time the spirit would try to form, but the next sound had it loose what form it had developed.

Cot stood before the form and chanted *ara kara*, then wrapped energy around the undeveloped spirit, giving her protection, while the vibrations from the chant vibrated through both of them. The destructive sound stopped from outside of them and more soothing sounds began. The spirit quickly formed into an unrecognizable, but less distressed shape.

Cot returned to her body. She inspected what had been done by the SEs.

"That's my scanner. Couldn't you find some of their equipment to give the right tones?"

"I use what is readily available," *Star* said.

"We can't leave any of our equipment here."

"I am programming the same tones you gave to the computer so it will not go back to the off key vibration."

Things started to happen rapidly and simultaneously, with the deck vibrating as if something stronger than the ship's normal power was turned on.

"Six ships identified as belonging to a pirates group have hyperspaced off *Murdelie's* bow," *Star* notified her.

"Well, it's about time though I can do without them. Does the *Murdelie* have an anti boarding defense *Star*? Activate it if so and continue to stay out of sight. Bring up the schematic of the ship. Where is the engine room? I should be able to monitor the ship and set up a defense of some type." Now she regretted not sending out a distress call.

Deck 2 would put her just above the engine room and let her see what the area looked like. Cot ran into a security field.

"*Murdelie's* self protection has been activated. Everything has been locked down. I will see if I can allow you to pass as part of the crew of the *Murdelie*," *Star* said.

A SE opened an emergency exit panel and darted into it with three others following. Two remained with her waiting for an all clear. The moment the all clear was received she climbed into the maintenance shaft and let go. The tube swayed gently as they rapidly moved down decks.

Several cannon shots to the ship could be felt as it rocked.

*The shields are holding*, Cot thought relieved.

Cot tumbled out on a deck against a crate. She was on Deck 4 where she had entered. Using the cargo to conceal her she moved to where she could see the pirate ships.

"Gods! It's like a news flash went out to all pirates in the vicinity. There's a dozen out there!" *Murdelie's* shield shimmered as it absorbed the shots.

"They have to have weapons somewhere on this deck."

An image flashed of where on Deck 4 there was a gunner's mount.

"Now that's something I can handle." Moving through the rows of cargo she caught her balance as a cannon from the freighter went off. Hesitating for a moment, Cot resumed her progress. *I hope that's one of the people in the med.*

Pulling open the door to the gun pit she looked over the interior. It was not made for her species but she could manage. It just meant she would have to remember it was not an automatic reload. Sliding into the chair she strapped in, feeling the difference of stature with the tightness of the safety harness.

From the control panel that was lit up, she could read other weapons on the ship and their rate of fire. All were hot. Someone was controlling most remotely. She released hers from remote control and hit the button to locate a target.

The seat smoothly moved to the ships swooping in for shots on her side. "This is where side swipes have an advantage. Just to heat up the air."

Resting her fingers on the load and fire buttons, she began sending out shots that would cause enough of a concussion between the ships for them to back off. Maybe she would get lucky and one would explode causing a few others to be damaged.

A shot directed right at her was shot down with the antimissiles that most gun turrets had to protect their occupants. The connection of the two hit the turret and if she had not been dressed in an AVEC suit, she would have died from the charge.

After an hour of preventing the pirates from getting an opening to the freighter, Cot could see that they were taking another approach. Dressed in AVEC suits and holding onto rifles dozens of pirates were heading over to board the *Murdelie*. They must think they had a hole in the freighter's shell.

"Cot, I have deployed our net so that it is between *Murdelie* and the pirates. The woman you rescued has taken charge on the bridge and is bringing up the ship's defenses. Will that be counter productive to the *Ena*?"

"I think the time has passed for influencing the *Ena's* developemet. Your deployment of the net is excellent, *Star*."

Redialing the type of shot she sent out an electromagnetic charge that would hit the netting and arc out, shorting anything within a yard. Each of the pirates would act as a carrier of the charge as their suits would become disabled. Hopefully, it would arc over to their ships.

"We have more company," Star informed her. "A CFS troop carrier. It is thirty minutes away in the tunnel."

"I need to get out of here before that ship arrives." Cot released the harness and was jumping out of the gunner's turret when a boom from behind her sent her flying into the stacked cargo. Half unconscious, two SEs carried her through a tube. Cot rolled out and landed on another deck. Dimly, she could hear a message from the ship's PA system. The AVEC medical pac sent a shot of meds into her system, bringing her focus sharp and clear almost immediately.

"SE6 show me what's going on and stay out of sight," she ordered. Rolling on her back she tried to forget about the headache, focusing on the overhead. She knew she was on a cargo deck. On her faceplate the image of the *CFS Powder Keg*, a CFS troop carrier was sitting on deck with its bay door wide open. Beyond that, three disabled pirate ships were leaning off kilter. The SE expanded the view of a squad of Enas in armor at attention outside of the carrier. Two gunner turrets were manned on either side of the opened doors. Cot figured the woman wearing a uniform as bright as the dress uniform she recently discarded for a more somber Star Force uniform was the leader. Standing at a respectable distance, indicating a wait-and-see attitude was a captain of the CFS army and a first lieutenant. By the looks of the uniform of the first lieutenant, this was his first deployment. He was too tense, too alert, and no ribbons yet from active duty.

The length of time it would take to untangle out of this diplomatic mess was more time than what she wanted to expend. The CFS captain would use her as a training tool for his first lieutenant and not telling what the Enas would do. And then, she would have to ruin it for everyone and flash her new association, which was a last resort. Relying on the two Enas she had rescued to put in a good word for her was not something she wanted to do.

The group moved out of the cargo bay with the Ena captain, the CFS captain and lieutenant following. No guards remained on deck.

"SE9, check out the interior of *CFS Powder Keg*."

A few minutes later she was given a view of the interior. A CFS hoplite squad fully armored was watching the inside of the cargo bay and another group watching the disabled pirate ships. Two NCOs were discussing something and Cot guessed they wanted to take a trip over to the damaged pirate ships and declare them captured booty.

She needed to get off the ship as soon as possible. Her presence must be setting off alarms somewhere on the *Murdellie*.

Cot remembered that the troop carriers had a small two person pod attached. It served a dual purpose; for the captain and lieutenant to monitor their troops above the battle fray planet side, and as the captain's emergency escape pod in space. If a platoon, while in space had to make an emergency escape in AVEC suits the captain in the emergency pod would be able to keep the survivors together, offer added air, repair, and nourish until help arrived. The disadvantage in war situations was that the captain's pod was the first thing pirates, smugglers and other outlaws shot at, and then attacked the survivors. Depending on the captain, small armaments were added limited only by the imagination of who added safeties. It didn't matter to Cot. She didn't want to be stuck in one in the middle of a battle. Her squad had to protect too many of them during the Incursion Wars to give her any confidence that they had a useful purpose to anyone but the enemy.

It was memories like this that interfered with Cot's concentration. Refocusing, she stared at the SE image of the troop carrier from the backside. She could access the pod from outside the ship that maintenance workers used instead of through the hatch that would drop her into the pilot seat that was normally accessed from inside the troop ship. How was she going to avoid being shot down by the *Murdellie* once she activated the pod?

"Star, I hope you identified me to the *Murdellie*'s security system as a friendly," Cot thought.

"You are secured," Star replied.

Cot checked her life support settings on her suit. She had ten hours if she didn't do any heavy physical activity. Sliding along the stacked crates, she moved to the open cargo bay doors, keeping an eye out for any monitoring equipment. Dropping to the deck she crawled around the *CFS Powder Keg*'s nose,

depending on the SEs to interfere with anything that may locate her as a threat. Hardly noticed was the expanse of space behind her as she looked for where she could reach. The shuttle had settled right on the edge of the docking platform, leaving no space to walk to the pod nestled like an implanted ball on the side of the ship. She would be dangling in space. Would it be tempting for a gunner in the disabled pirate ships to make that one last daring shot?

There were recessed loops looking like small knobs on the exterior that tow lines could be connected to, where the troops in their AVEC suits would be attached to the pod. Grabbing onto one she tested how well she could hold on. Dragging herself along the hull, she took great care not to let her feet attach to the side of the hull. It would make noise that everyone in the shuttle would hear.

SE9 sent images of the soldiers in the ship. They looked relaxed, but she had witnessed the quickness of hoplites. Their fast muscle twitch enabled them to move into action in a blink of an eye.

The *Murdellie* suddenly began to move, swinging around in a defensive position. Cot lost one hand hold as the environment around her created a suction, pulling at her. Her hand grabbed the communication array and held on. The buffer didn't protect her from the flow that was like a tunnel of air blowing by her. The suit's readings told her it was hot. Out of the corner of her eye she could see a SE work the maintenance hatch cover that would put her between the hull and deck of the pod. Pulling herself forward, a SE latched onto the side of the pod while keeping a tight hold on her. The hatch was opened and as she moved in the SEs followed her. The moment she closed the pod's maintenance hatch, she could feel the pod detach.

*Star* had to be flying it. Cot wasted no time, opening the deck cover and climbing out to strap in the pilot's seat. Only one seat was engaged so she had enough space to move.

Her visor showed that life support was set to another species. Not wanting to clue anyone in on who stole the pod she left it as it was. She was not going to be long.

*"Where are we going?"*

The voice in her head was not like *Star's* communication nor was the presence that accompanied it. It was a species presence, like Jobahians, Kiomatians and Dilitians. Cot looked around for the body that would go with the voice. Movement on the overhead had her looking into a shaded green visor.

Her eyes spotted a royal emblem on the shoulder pad but not of a house she knew of.

"Not far." Cot activated the second seat. "You need to drop down here and strap in for our safety." *Royalty? What is he doing here without a guard?*

"You were the one in the birthing room," he stated verbally. He dropped into the seat in a slow twist and turn as if he were in free space. Cot wondered if he had been practicing that while he was here alone.

"In a sense," she said slowly, studying as much as she could of the young Ena for her own information. "SE1 will assist you to strap in."

The young Ena watched the SE with curiosity as it detached from her shoulder and engaged a seat restraint that dropped over him.

She returned her attention to the console where a comm channel blinked at a steady rhythm. They were being hailed.

"Does anyone know you are in this pod?"

"All those that need to know."

"Why are you in the pod?"

"They do not wish me to mingle with the soldiers."

"It looks like they are frantic to get you back," she said. "What is your family name?" she asked for future reference.

"We have not decided. We are a new consciousness."

Not knowing enough of Enas politics to make an educated guess as to why a royal chrysalis was awakened on board the freighter, or for that matter on a freighter that was cleaned and shipping statues to a peace garden that was sure to be carrying the dignitaries that would appear at the dedication ceremony... That was too complicated for the moment.

"Why was the ship moved here and without crew?" Cot asked.

"We moved it here. It is in neutral territory. We sought you to help save sister. We are now helping you to escape."

Cot was thinking *Star* would not like her part in the rescue diminished. Suddenly she remembered the one coin she still had. Feeling around in her pocket she didn't find it. Her hand brushed against the medallion.

"Bringing you to the talisman of your kin is our thank you for helping us."

Cot stared at him but his attention had moved to the view of space, with its swirls, black holes, and planet bodies that vibrated at a wavelength that if not seen visually, then picked up with ship instrumentation.

"Does this end?" he asked.

"Not that I'm aware of."

A ding had her moving her interest back to the console. *Star* was changing their course. Predictably, they were being pursued. Ghost signals were sent out by *Star* to confuse the rescuers.

"Why was the *Murdellie* cleaned of energy?" Cot asked.

"To prevent a distraction to our formation and imprinting. We are grateful for your willing contribution."

Cot could feel his appreciation. "I'm glad I was in the area to be able to help," she said. "You said you are a new family, why is a new family being brought into existence?"

"It is the collective desire of the species for a new direction. A direction that is less devoted to aggression against others, yet not weak that they perish under others' wills."

"Why did sister have to be saved by someone other than an Ena?"

"There is always some residue of resistance to change in the most ardent of agents and to insure the direction does not become altered it requires an outside agent to make an important contribution...and not always will it appear to be a favorable intersession. In this situation energies were manipulated to the advantage of both our needs."

Cot felt an understanding of the term on a deeper level that brought her world to a standstill in wonderment. It was like being in a cosmic tornado funnel with worlds, words, species, and all sorts of things, spun around so rapidly that there was no separation in their existence.

"Your medallion is expressive," the Ena said. His head turned slightly as he watched SE1 move to his shoulder. He reached out and touched it. It was strange to see the bot stick to his finger as if stuck.

Cot took a deep breath to ground herself so she could focus on her immediate need, to reach her ship before their pursuers reached them. Pods were not built for speed and *Star's* interference with their pursuers could not be extended long since telepathy was an Ena's tool.

"If you should need any assistance and I'm nearby, call me." Her voice sounded far away yet she could feel the sounds she made in speech vibrate through her whole body, radiating out into the space around them, and pass through the pod's shell. It was as if she had uttered an oath with all its trappings of power.

On another level, it occurred to her that her unplanned offer to help would affect a lot of people.

"We appreciate the offer and accept. In return, we extend ours to you."

Cot felt in a daze from what she was experiencing. It was the strangest vibration that had her eyes watering. A buzz in her connection with *Star* brought her back to present worries.

"Your rescuers should be here in minutes."

He held out his hand with the bot resting in his palm.

"I will leave SE1 with you. SE1 you are to protect this person and obey his orders. This is where I get off. Blessings to you young Ena. I wish you great wisdom and courage to be who your heart guides you to be."

"Good travel and health," he replied. "Sister wishes you the same." He tucked the bot in a pocket, patting it gently.

Cot slid out of the hatch, then to the exterior of the pod, holding onto the maintenance grip, as a line shot over to her. If she missed it she knew the SEs would have secured it. She snapped the safety to her belt and pulled herself over as she was reeled in. The hatch was opened.

Cot thumped up to the helm. "*Star*, I have the conn. Send all our information on the Enas to the squad and SFHQ and the offer I made. That is going to be an interesting story to follow. That was a new royal line, *Star*."

"What does that mean, Cot?"

"Something that will shake up more than Enas' politics. Collect data from the SEs on our visit to the *Murdelie* and prepare it for my review. I'll need it with my report to HQ."

Cot remembered the medallion. Digging in her pocket she pulled out the medallion by its chain and laid it on her palm.

*Nothing happens by chance, Auntie would say.*

A quick glance at the console showed they were making good progress and from the trailing monitors covering their tracks, nothing was detected following them, which did not reassure her. They would be catching another gate in seven hours, heading to another part of the galaxy. Cot ran a diagnostic on her suit and an inventory on the SEs, expecting a quick clear.

"I am missing SE1, Cot," *Star* said.

"It's in the pod with the Ena. It will protect him and his sister until they are more mature. *Star*, call in the monitors. We'll pick up speed when they're safely aboard. I want all sensors re calibrated and tested. We'll use your full speed to get us out of here as fast as possible."

"I will re-number my SEs."

Rising from her seat to meditate, she added, "Let me know when you're finished translating what you pulled from *Murdelie's* logs. I'll read it after dinner. The conn is yours, *Star*. The same drill; keep me posted if you notice anything *I* want to know about."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

Cot left the bridge hoping *Star* did not leave too much of herself in SE1's programming. Why did she leave it with the Ena? Because she trusted it will protect the Ena. No mixed loyalties. She hoped that was the reason and not because she was manipulated to. Enas were not the most profitable traders in the known galaxies without a good reason.

