

Chapter 9

Lost and Found

"Captain has the conn."

"Captain has the conn."

"Report?"

"An observatory above Reun has been found. Nobody appears to be on board, Captain."

"Send out the robotics to secure for boarding."

"Dispatching robotics to secure observatory for your inspection, Captain."

"I'll be in the shuttle preparing for flight. Transferring the conn back to you." The Captain's rise from her seat had a slight hesitation. Something didn't sound right but it was too brief to register anything other than a hesitation.

"Conn has been handed over, Captain."

The shuttle's ramp was extended, allowing her to enter without hesitation. At the shuttle's helm she prepared for flight, running systems checks.

"The observatory has been secured," the ship's security reported. "Your presence is awaited, Captain."

The shuttle approached the observatory without challenge and glided into the cargo bay, settling in a well-marked spot. The cargo bays doors boomed when they closed. The shuttle's exit hatch opened. Standing at the top of the ramp she looked over the interior. Nothing caught her attention or would be recalled because there was nothing important here. Her footsteps down the ramp were solid thumps with no echo sounding in the cavernous bay.

The hatch cover into the observatory's work area opened soundlessly. The tube from the cargo bay to the next module had just enough lighting to show it was clear. The next modular unit was also empty. It was unnecessary to linger for a closer inspection. In the command center where she needed to be, a quick visual inspection was made. All consoles were dark, and there was no overhead lighting. Sitting at the master console she brought all systems on line, and with it the other consoles began to scroll messages of systems coming on line. The lights in the command center came on. The message light blinked incessantly, reminding the captain of a small creature's heart when it was caught in her grasp.

"Messages from the planet Reun are queued up," the computer voice reported, bringing the Captain's attention back to task.

"Read first message," the Captain ordered.

"Translating.....Translation complete," the computer said.

"Members of the research team are ready to return to OBE."

"All messages are a repetition of the same," the computer noted. "Do you want to hear them?"

"No. Who is the sender of the first message?"

"Team Leader Lt. Celese Angul."

"Contact her."

"Contact made. Her message - Her job is completed. She is waiting to be picked up."

"Send the shuttle to bring her aboard. Prepare the operating room. Locate the others."

"Shuttle dispatched. Operating room is online and ready for the transitional operation. Locator devices have been activated. Signals to locate have been sent."

Captain rose from her seat and walked to the shuttle to wait for its return with Team Leader Lt. Celese Angul.

The shuttle resettled, the ramp came out, and something moved out of the ship. Captain followed it to the observatory's medical lab.

Time must have passed, but it was unnoticed by Captain. The transitioned agent stood before her. The agent's mission was complete; she was retrieved and transitioned back to her own form successfully.

Team Leader Lt. Celese in a body more suitable for the observatory's habitat, stood before her, and saluted.

"Lt. Angul, Team Leader for the Second Team, reporting back. Mission accomplished."

"Welcome back. Very good. Write up your report, Lieutenant. When you're finished --unless there is something you need to say now," the pause was slight, "then file it and get some rest. The others will be coming up shortly."

"Right, Captain. I have nothing to report out of the ordinary or that needs to be attended to right away. I'm looking forward to greeting the others."

Turning the captain walked back to her shuttle.

A teeth grinding buzz broke into Cot's dream. It was the type of sound that could not be worked into a dreamscape to let the sleeper dream on.

"Uhhmup." It was hard to interpret what she said and what she meant to say. It was just as difficult to open her eyes and impossible to lift her head. Something stung and her slow moving mind knew it should have been something that would wake her up. It was as if she had been heavily drugged.

"It is difficult to wake you," a familiar voice in her head complained.

"Trying." She grunted as she struggled to sit up. It occurred to her to take deep breaths; however, the thought got no further than a thought. Even the effort to open her eyes got no further than rising her lids to slits.

A shock had her suddenly sitting up with her eyes opened wide. Reflexively, Cot took heaving breaths of air, hoping that would continue her move to wakefulness, thus avoiding another application of a shock.

The medical bot supplied her with a warm liquid. It loosened the tightness in her throat.

"What happened?" Cot panted.

"Your brainwave patterns are unusual," *Star* informed her.

Cot steadied her breathing and gave her heart a few minutes to settle into a normal rhythm.

"When did that start?" she asked.

"Eight hours ago. You were not acknowledging me during that time but you showed no distress; however, now it is time for you to report for duty. Was it an important dream?"

Cot's hand went to her throat where her medallion was. It was gone.

"Yes, it is."

Bua?

Her legs bowed when she dropped to the deck. Hanging onto the bed frame for support, she stared at her locker—a destination, and then moved to it on unsteady legs. The lethargy in thoughts and limbs lessened with movement. The smooth feel of her feet sliding into her boots and the solid heel thump on the deck reassured her she was not in a dream. Cot made her way to the cargo bay, relying on another sense to take her to her talisman. There in the protection of her sacred space lay the medallion as if it had been carefully placed there. Her fingers wrapped around it as if it was a life saver, and her belief gave her more energy and a clearer mind.

"Gepacks?" Cot whispered. There was no message from the talisman, but how the message would present itself was something she still had yet to discover. Turning, she hurried up the passageway to the bridge, touching the bulkhead to prevent herself from falling off balance.

"I have the conn, *Star*."

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

"*Star*, where are we located? I want to know everything we've passed since my brainwave pattern changed."

Cot looped the chain to the talisman around her neck and Bua settled warmly against her skin. That was more than reassuring as her senses flared, with lights and sounds taking on a different texture.

"At the present, we are just out of my scan reach of an abandoned university observatory, *IV New Prospects*. The cause of your brainwave pattern disturbance is originating from there. I have dispatched four Wringers to gather information."

"On the course I selected there were no space structures reported in the area." Cot glanced at the star chart, surprised at what she saw. "We haven't gone far from our exit point."

"As Star Force Headquarters suspected, the star charts we are using are not accurate. The disturbance started five minutes after you left the bridge. While I monitored your health, I searched for the cause of the unusual brain wave patterns. Once I identified the cause, I remained near to further investigate the why."

"Investigating is what we're about, *Star*. What have you found out about it so far?"

Gepacks. Similarities don't mean this has something to do with them. Focus on the present. You don't need to think about them and bring that energy here.

It had been a long time since she experienced their type of attack. Her practical side "to be prepared for anything" fought the side that wanted to practice "experience everything as if it were for the first time." Her hand moved to cover the medallion, wondering what got her to discard it, and in a safe place. She recalled leaving the bridge to get in a workout before her meditation, and then sleep. By *Star's* time account, her brainwave patterns changed when she would have been changing into her workout ghee.

"The observatory eluded my first scans, but using your continued brainwave disturbance I was able to get an approximate area it was coming from. I have adjusted and reset particle recognition patterns. It mimics time displacement. There is also a beam of energy that is disrupting particle flow in its area."

Two schematics of the observatory appeared on her screen; one from the manufacturer and the other what *Star's* scan showed. As with most remote outposts, changes were made over time by convenience and necessity and usually with what was on hand.

"I am seeking further information on its past," *Star* said.

Cot's eyes fell on *Star's* visitor. She wondered how immune it was to whatever had attacked her. Cot let out an exasperated sigh.

That wasn't an attack. Shaking her head, she reminded herself it was a message in a dream. *What made me chose the word 'attack'?*

The underlying emotions behind the dream. Anger? Betrayal? The only person that could have been angry was Celese.

But captains could have a lot of suppressed anger too. Duty meant handing down some assignments to the troops that were sullied, while those that thought up the dangerous and sometimes unrealistic deployments were safe in their offices.

"What university does it belong to?"

"University of Chole. At one time it was considered a thriving and innovative campus."

"Where was that information pulled from?"

"From the nearest kiosk's archives. The university no longer exists. The observatory's purpose is unclear due to it is not mentioned in the first or second layer of information on the university. In a separate search I found the observatory's name in a joint project from the University's seven science departments and the Investigation Agency of the now disbanded Union of Planets, IAUP," *Star* said.

"What were they studying?"

"Reun. The third planet below us. The atmosphere would be difficult on your bios."

Star pointed that out, Cot suspected, to prevent her from making an excuse to take a shuttle down. What did *Star* find that would warrant her to consider that, she wondered?

An image of the sphere as a projected hologram appeared over her console. It had a blotchy and unhealthy appearing surface.

"Reun had petitioned to become a member in the Union of Planets. Agents were sent to see if the planets citizenry were species tolerant to be able to interact with galaxy neighbors," *Star* reported. "The scientists were to observe how this anticipation would affect Reunians. That was in the Amalgamated Year of 200c00265. In the Amalgamated Year of 200c00327 the Union of Planets was dissolved to reform under the name of Interplanetary Counsel. The petition of Reun is on hold. In the same Amalgamated Year of UPs disbanding, the university declined to further support studies on the observatory and a year later the university closed. There is no mention of why membership has been held up or why the university abruptly closed. There also are no reports filed on Reun from the university research team or the agents from UP for all the time the project was active."

"They just left the observatory in orbit around Reun," Cot said softly, knowing that every official organization knew the rule not to leave structures unmarked and abandoned in space. Infractions were dealt with harshly, letting the damage and potential damage fit the punishment.

"The particle flows from Reun are pulling the observatory into its atmosphere. It will fall out of orbit in two months, entering the planet's atmosphere with the potential to impact land mass at 60% chance."

"We need to move it out of its declining orbit so it doesn't crash to the planet below. Move it beyond the pull of the four planets. Have you dispatched any monitors to study the observatory closer?"

"I was waiting for your authorization. It is considered a residence and therefore private property. I have two Clev R16s and Simms ready to activate. All Wringer monitors are behind the Imaginary Line."

The Imaginary Line, the IML was really a joke to space scrapers, who would lay claim to any space object they found even if it had someone's name on it. It was an imaginary line with specific distance around a civilian space residence that images, deep scans, as well as physical intrude could not pass. Military or law enforcement were permitted to infringe on personal rights but with a good reason given in a detailed report.

A scraper was someone that made a living finding lost or abandoned manufactured objects floating in space. Scrapers ran between lucky in finds to the unlawful methods of securing a finding, making the IML not applicable to them. Who would be able to take them quickly before a judiciary committee before the object was scraped? No one. Matters before the judiciary committee that were not life and death were moved on slowly since they had a lot of cases brought before them.

"No one is onboard?"

"No life forms."

"Dispatch four SEs to prepare the observatory so I can board. I want to see what else was left behind before I flag it for a wrecking trawler. You checked the registry?"

"The registry has lapsed and the university did not sell it with its other assets. It is on the Lost and Found List. The LFL Board does not list the date it went on the list."

"File a Discovery with Star Force as the claimant to the LFL. As a previous residence it allows a challenge, so post the space infractions. That way no one can file a challenge without putting up the credits for the fines. I don't want a deluge of scrapers circling the area and messing up any clues before we get a clear picture of why it was abandoned."

"Shall I update SFHQ now or wait until we have more information?"

"Update now so they can follow-up quickly. Include your observations, *Star*. Send out warning buoys to anyone entering this area of space that there is an investigation in progress. Give the demarcation line bells and whistles, *Star*, so when they ignore it, what they get for trespassing will be no surprise. Prepare a grid to defend the parameter outside as well as within. This isn't a busy travel corridor, but I like to be prepared and it will be good practice for us."

"Would adding six Storm Troopers around the planet be over-doing it?"

Cot chuckled at *Star's* humor. "Do it, just in case we need to chase someone down."

Star's next holograms were the designs of the observatory from the shipyard and what *Stars* sensors showed it as presently. The shipyard diagram disappeared. It had the characteristics of a small military outpost designed over fifty years ago with additional modular attachments, eventually enclosing the command area between layers of modules.

"The communication dish has been dislodged. It looks like something hit it. It would have to have been something with a lot of mass and weight behind it."

"Most of Reun is damaged with radiation that came from a toxic discharge. By the pattern of first strike, it looks like intentional release from a weapon. The energy from the dish on the observatory did not cause the damage," *Star* said.

"Send out seekers to see if there are any disabled ships or debris around the planet. Check public records for insurance collection. And, give me an exact map of the planet's radiation damage."

"I am sending out a swarm of SU010 to support the monitors already in place."

"Very well, *Star*. How's our arsenal doing?"

"It leaves us with 25% of what we were supplied with," *Star* reported verbally and gave Cot a screen list of what they were when she received them and their upgrades, and their performance statistics. Considering how *Star* was reluctant to share the information earlier with CBIS it was surprising how the information was so forthcoming.

"The energy emission has been deactivated," *Star* reported.

"Move into position, *Star*, so we can commence towing *IV New Prospects* to a new position. Put enough distance from her and the planet should someone attack the observatory. We don't want any debris falling onto the surrounding planets or shot's fired go wild and discharge in a planet's atmosphere."

Chapter 10

Who Shall Recall the Forgotten?

"It will take two hours to secure *IV New Prospects* in its new position. The SEs on board the observatory have commenced with upgrading what can be upgraded to Star Force specifications in order for you to safely visit. No further message from Star Force."

"All the message said was SA and SBFFO?"

"Secure the Area and Stand By For Further Orders," *Star* confirmed.

"I think we found something important, *Star*. They're looking up all the information they have on this before they tell us there's some unfinished business here."

Cot stopped her pacing and dropped into her chair. There was nothing else she could do about the observatory until it was secured. There were communications from the others she needed to catch up on. All her SID-mates were having adventures and she needed to keep up on the others, looking for patterns or useful experiences. What one SID-ship discovered, the others soon knew about.

"Hallie ran into pirates that thought she was too close to their hideout," Cot said to *Star*, though she was sure *Star* had *Gallant Soldier's* version. "They sustained damages that required a visit from a specialized ship repair crew. That's good to know when I can't fix something on you I can call HQ for a repair ship. She's on her way to catch-up to her team mates."

"*Gallant Soldier* left a dozen upgraded Clev R4s in the area," *Star* mentioned.

"We'll have thorough testing and reporting on the equipment by the time we get to our destination," Cot said. She tabbed down to Wimsey's communication. The opening was an animated holographic image of Wimsey doing a jig. He had not sent that character for a while.

"The only time he can dance," Cot chuckled.

He brandished the Macnab's clan ceremonial sword and did grand strokes in the air as he hopped around.

"Holographs are so much safer than real life. He would have cut his head off by now. Look at the way he's waving that broadsword. It takes a strong forearm and wrist to do twirls like that. He's got the typical physique of a spacer. He wouldn't be able to hold a broadsword above his head for more than a minute." She laughed at the next maneuver. It was new.

Cot realized she was babbling. The energy that was around her was disturbing. Holding Bua she concentrated on peaceful images that would dissipate the disturbance. The giddy feeling finally left. Wimsey's holograph was still dancing, waiting for her to open up his message.

"Get to the message, Wimsey."

"Greetings Group Captain and Star Chaser," his voice message went. "I ran into a few tails that made my fingers itch to knock out their systems. I don't know what's worse; to run from being shot at or to detail how clever I was able to hide from them. Two years in combat makes it difficult to not return fire. Your way of handling it, to find fun in stealth, is not quite ingrained in me. Maybe at the end of three months I'll feel less stressed out about running."

"Did you sneak in a program to my Mistress Q while I wasn't looking? I ask because, this bit of information may cheer you up, GP, Mistress Q has taken to remind me daily to write my reports and send them to HQ. Sadly enough, there isn't enough business out here to give me any excuse to not complete and sent them on time."

"May adventure be your companion, Group Captain."

"Wimsey and MQ"

"Wimsey and *Mistress Q* have been busy too," Cot commented.

"*Quiet Quest* was also chased by brigands into another sector," *Star* said. "Our assistance would make a difference in her next encounter."

"Is *Quiet Quest* asking you for assistance?" Cot found this interesting. Would the SID-ships ask for help from each other independent of their pilot?

"No."

"Knowing when to ask for help is part of our eval," Cot said.

"Would you ask for help, Cot?"

"It would depend on the situation. Would you?" Cot asked.

"All situations are fluid and no outcome can be assured."

"You're right. There aren't guarantees of outcome, *Star*. So, would you ask for assistance?"

"Is searching for information outside of my databanks asking for assistance?" *Star* asked.

"Yes." *So why didn't I ask for backup when I saw the Murdelie? Was the same subtle manipulation that drew me there responsible for me not asking for backup? It would have taken a lot of manipulation, considering I didn't know what gate I would be taking and that I would end up there...*

Was being open to any experience responsible for....

No. And it's not like I ran into anything life threatening. For that bit of foolishness I came away with treasures...

She smiled as she thought of seeing her aunt again and claiming the medallion. And, if her feelings were right about it, she had a strong liaison with the Ena youths. That, she felt would be important sometime in the future.

And we have taken on a mystery passenger.

Cot rubbed her forehead in irritation. "Go with the flow," her auntie would say. "Stop trying to make things turn out the way you want it to. You miss out on too much."

Cot's attention moved to the other communications and sent her replies. She was careful to not taint her recounting of her dream with her own fears of who had once used the same method with devastating results.

"Cot, the observatory is secured in its new position and ready for your boarding. A malfunction was in a control board, causing the mid phasing."

"I'll go dress for my visit." Cot eagerly headed to the cargo bay. From her locker she pulled out her AVEC suit. An SE assisted in checking for any leaks or potential problems with her suit and then cleared her. She thumped her way to *Reflected Lights* ramp with SEs secured to her suit.

Smoothly *Reflected Light* lifted and soared out of *Star Chaser's* cargo bay. Before her was the observatory with no identifiers or warnings emitting from the structure to warn an approaching ship of its presence. *Reflected Light* headed to the bay the SEs left open.

On the cargo deck two spaces were marked for shuttles with mechanical maintenance gutters located on each side. *Reflected Light* took up less room than the previous shuttles, settling down. A maintenance light came on that its space was occupied.

"Did you disengage the maintenance bots for the shuttles, *Star*?"

"I am accessing the observatory's maintenance support now," *Star* reported.

As soon as *Reflected Light* settled, the metal cargo bay doors began to close, booming on contact with a brief shake felt in the shuttle. Overhead lights came on in the interior bay, leaving no shadows. Cot watched from her shuttle's bridge, looking for anything that would pose a problem.

From the recon bots, Cot knew to the left were crew's quarters that could quarter 36/9 in a squeeze, meaning they could rotate sleep assignments on a 9 hour sleep shift, allowing a working crew of 144. However, it wasn't a military outpost staffed during a war. It was a civilian operation so the 4 bunks per cabin were in all possibility not rotated in shifts; everyone would have their own bunks. The SEs could not find any of the Emergency Escape Pods that were required by the Space Safety Code at any of the escape hatches. The crew quarters had been searched and scanned by the recon SEs so Cot left her own inspection if needed, for later. For now, her priority was the command center and medical laboratory. The medical lab was the newest addition to the observatory.

The shuttle exit ramp extended and Cot descended, looking around her. Her helmet visor showed the same readings the recon scans showed. The landing bay had been stripped clean of everything. Cot

could feel remnants of emotions from previous residents. There wasn't anything traumatic that she picked up on.

The first hatch silently slid opened. It was eerie to walk through another deserted space structure. "*Star*, is there anything working in the observatory?"

"I have disabled all robotic maintenance to prevent unnecessary distractions. I am accessing the databanks now for further information," *Star* reported. "After I review all records I will be able to give you a report and assessment of the observatory's suitability for residency."

"Thank you, *Star*," Cot said.

The next area was for tool storage. See-though panels showed every space for a tool was occupied. The wear on the handles gave her an idea of what was used more often.

"They secured their tools here rather than the landing bay," Cot mused. "They must have lost tools in space when the shuttle bay doors were opened."

"I have given you Captain Pernov's clearance, otherwise you would not have been able to enter this area," *Star* explained. "The tools were locked up here to prevent losing them for another reason. The Emergency Escape Pods have been located in the module after the command module. They are all accounted for."

Cot studied the panels and tubes that ran through the area as she walked through; noting that maintenance was kept up. The next section was the command center. Console screens showed the progress of *Star's* initiating startup for life support.

Only one seat would accommodate her size and from the looks of it, it was recently installed.

"*Star*, is this seat your installation?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

She felt like a giant in a child's play ship. Sitting down she watched several exterior cameras rotate with test results displayed for her to view. Lights on the console let her know which button was responsible for which camera.

"There are messages queued for reading from the planet Reun. They are encoded."

Symbols and distorted faces came up. Several refreshes were done and still the information was not clearing up. The symbols remained coded.

"I will decode and repair as much as possible. Large gaps in the data stream will make translation uncertain," *Star* said. "Do you want me to change the environment so you can disengage your helmet?"

"No. We'll investigate under the former residents' conditions. Maybe there was a virus that necessitated the residents to leave." Since IAs, Intergalactic Agents were involved, Cot suspected something more sinister.

While *Star* downloaded the observatory's database to her own system, Cot continued her exploration. Pausing in the mess hall, Cot found it more telling about the residents than she had learned so far. Pictures covered both sides of the bulkhead. They were taken in the observatory, in space, and on land. Comments were under them all but the images were all faded, not showing details on facial features.

"Has this been recorded?" Cot asked *Star*.

"Yes. I would need to know the species to affect any reasonable repair. I will search the universities archives of students."

Cot thoughtfully tapped the supplement containers wondering why the meal dispensers were still running.

"It is not something you would appreciate," *Star* warned her. "Your digestive tract would have a difficult time breaking it down."

The next module was a large supply bay for laboratory supplies, twenty five lockers with names only on four of them, and the missing escape pods were neatly and safely secured, making the area difficult for Cot to move through. Cot was interested in the names on the lockers. One was the person in her dream, Celese Angul. The other three: Bolent Mo, Cholen Suwette, and Dun Kel. All twenty five lockers had a few personal items as if they were still stationed on the observatory. Why were twenty-one without names?

With one boot through the exit hatch to the medical section, Cot felt a change in the pressure around her foot. Hastily she withdrew, grabbing onto the hatch rim.

"You set off an alarm. I am adding your name and biological trace to this section's security."

"The captain doesn't have security clearance in the laboratory? Find out why, *Star*."

"I will see if there is anything mentioned in private logs. You can try again, Cot," *Star* said. "Do not try to activate anything in this structure. I have not been able to decode the layers of security. The method of protecting the information here is not what I am familiar with."

"I'll be sure to keep my thumbs in my belt," she agreed.

Standing at the hatch opening to the large area in the medical compound, Cot realized this was the only image that was in detail in her dream. It was as if this was so important to the person that sent her the dream that she had to commit it to memory in the minutest detail.

That and the sound of the cargo bay doors closing. That has some sort of significance to her.

The laboratory was a fully contained surgical medical center. It had a sterile containment chamber, two healing tubs, six beds, and a separate control center from the observatory's access. The healing tubs, though outdated, were used for deep tissue repair, an expense normally not spent on small space outposts.

Cot leaned closer to look at the control console. "Was this on when the SEs inspected it?"

"Yes. By the data I can interpret, the moment one of the names in its database enters, the entire medical area with security comes active. You would not have been able to enter this area without being in the medical database."

"It looks like they do biological remodeling here." That was the impression she had in her dream. She turned to leave and was startled when *Star's* friend hovered near her shoulder.

"Couldn't stay away, huh? Remember not to touch anything."

It remained in the medical lab as she returned to the control module.

"*Star*, what is there on Celese Angul in the database?"

"I am working on decoding and repairing the personnel files. Under Star Force Rules of Operation, since this is an Investigation in Progress the details of what is found here is a virtual update," *Star* said.

"Yes and requires we send HQ information as it's discovered and unaltered. No further communication from HQ?" Cot was curious at why they had not received word yet.

"No, Cot."

"We need to find out if any of these twenty-five people are on Reun. If so, then we may be looking at a nasty secret. No one leaves their agents or members behind unless they have information that someone wants to suppress. And then, why abandon the observatory with a fully functioning medical lab?" *And if that's true, my publicly registering the find will bring all sorts of people out here. It's going to be a mess to sort the usual scrapers from the people that may have something to hide here. Thank the gods I don't have the Hunters to worry about. Nothing here is old enough to warrant their type of interest.*

"There is a possibility that they are students that went home for a break and did not return," *Star* suggested.

A small beep sounded from the main console. Cot read a log *Star* accessed from the observatory's files.

"This file has one portion intact," *Star* reported.

"Play what you have on holograph."

Cot was instantly in the medical center's operating area. Two nervous people and one very confident person stood around the operating table as the surgical bots worked on someone on the table. Cot studied the people closely, not recognizing the faces, and studied the contents in the compartment. There were anatomical charts on the bulkhead along with detailed pictures of the three Reunian species. It confirmed her suspicion that agents were being altered to fit the species on Reun.

A feeling of disorientation had her grabbing onto her seat when the program released her back into the present.

"I have information on the University's Department Head of the project, Professor M'se," *Star* said. "He died from an unknown cause in his sleep one day after returning to the campus from the observatory, as well as four students that returned with him. Their names are not given. I still have not found any mention of who the lead agent on the observatory for UP was or the captain. One of the four names on the lockers I have traced to a supply space station a month from here. Dun Kel."

"Send a message so see if this is the same person and if he or she is willing to talk about this project."

"The energy from the observatory is affecting your bios. You will need to return for a few hours. The energy is set for the original resident species to be able to live for long periods of time in space."

"Leave one SE to patrol the interior. I'm on my way back."

Chapter 11

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Cot meditated before retiring to sleep. She didn't suspect, she knew that there were people from the observatory that were left on the planet. The general fear of soldiers or agents of being left behind in a foreign situation motivated comrades and friends to make every effort to bring them home. Her prayers before she closed her circle were for those abandoned on Reun and for those who suffered from the damage to the planet.

When Cot went to sleep her thoughts were on what answers would be in her dreams; however, she had none.

Seven hours later she woke clear headed and energized.

"Greetings, *Star*. Anything to report?"

"I have reports for you. Nothing that warrants you from breaking your waking rituals."

Cot moved through her morning exercises and meal, then took her place on the bridge.

"I have the conn, *Star*."

"You have the conn, Cot. You slept very deeply. Did you dream?" *Star* asked.

"Nothing that I remember. Are my brainwave patterns back to normal?"

"Not to what they were when we started out from POATA."

Frowning, Cot did a quick internal inventory and found nothing that felt off. Whatever the change was about was not something that was clearly affecting her. She expected her brainwave pattern to change in some ways due to Bua, but the side effects from the energy the observatory was putting out may have changed something too. "I feel fine. What information do you have for me?"

"Dun Kel has picked up our message, but there is no reply. My search for background on the others is progressing."

While *Star* continued her search, Cot read what *Star* was able to find.

After an hour *Star* reported, "I have located, Celese Angul on Reun. She is underground and alive. It appears that most of the residents live underground due to the poisons that are making living on the surface near impossible."

"Can you get an image of her?" Cot asked.

The image was distorted then cleared. Cot couldn't remember how she looked in her dream. Did that mean that Celese Angul couldn't remember what she looked like before the surgery? Did the dream come from Celese Angul or the captain?

"Are you able to send a verbal message to her?"

"On a directed beam. She will be the only one to hear it. You may proceed when you're ready, Cot."

"Greetings, Celese Angul. I am Lt. Col. Cot of Star Force. Are you part of the team stationed on the observatory *IV New Prospects* above Reun?"

Celese Angul looked startled and it seemed a long time before she responded.

Over the comm a garbled voice came across. *Star* cleaned it up and then replayed it.

"Yes." the voice quivered.

"Are you in need of assistance?"

"Yes!"

"What can I do to assist you?" Cot asked.

There was another long pause. "I know ... to clean ... toxic contamination." The voice was distorted, fading in and out, making it difficult to hear everything.

".... do so." Cot plainly heard a deep breath of relief. "The last I heard from anyone on OBE..... few weeks..... happened?" she asked.

"Professor M'se died fifteen years ago, a day after he returned to the campus from unknown causes along with four others. When was the last time you heard from anyone from the observatory or your group?"

"Voice modulation stabilized," *Star* announced.

"I've been leaving messages for fifteen years with no replies. Why would they leave?" There was another lengthy pause before Celese continued. "Maybe they caught a virus the visiting parties brought with them."

"What do you mean by visiting parties?" Already Cot was relieved she had stayed in her AVEC suit.

"Officials from Reun demanded to come aboard the observatory to see for themselves that the observatory was not military. From there they were taken to the UP to present their case for membership. From that group, two remained as guests of the UP to keep Reun's efforts for membership moving along."

"Do you know who they are?"

"No. We were more concerned with Turner Mest, a known intergalactic weapons dealer that turned up and was doing business here."

"Star, red flag that bit of information to SFHQ now."

"How many of you were dispatched to the planet?" Cot asked.

"Twenty-one. I was originally a neutral observer for the project but Agent C'Rona Dom transitioned me in with a military grade, since it was a military operation." Cot heard a shift of emotion in her voice but was not sure if it was due to the translation of sounds.

"What was the project?"

"Officially, to escalate the planet into eligibility to become an interplanetary member of the Union of Planets. We all suspected it was for political reasons but we were just subordinates following our orders. We never knew what the real objective was."

"Do you wish to be removed from the planet?"

"I've become poisoned by toxins released in a tribal war. I don't believe I can be transitioned back. Turner Mest sold both sides the weapons. Surely Agent C'Rona Dom said something to the administration before he left the project or died. By the rules of our charter we are responsible for fixing what our presence caused."

There was bitterness, resentment and at the same time resignation in her tone. Celese knew she had been betrayed and was not asking for help for herself.... She was the one that dreamed of being rescued. How many were left behind and still alive? Cot asked herself again.

"How sure are you that Turner Mest was the cause?"

"My leader, Herber Equa, an ex-IP, Intergalactic Police, spotted Turner Mest speaking to the leader of the group that started killing two days later. Herber said he sent Agent C'Rona Dom the information. A few days later I received word from one of my group members that Herber was ambushed and killed when attending a council meeting. That was the same day the mass killings began."

"I was able to track one member that was with this project, Dun Kel. He's working on a space station weeks from here. Do you know who that is?"

"No. I never heard of that name," Celese Angul said.

"Star, began a comprehensive report on what needs to be done to rebalance this planet. Check university records for any studies done on the consequences of an outsider normalizing a toxic environment if there are so many deformed as a result of it. I'm sure some university will have a study of that somewhere," she mentally directed *Star*.

"So, what are you going to do?" Celese Angul asked.

"If what is poisoning the planet was neutralized, what would happen?"

"With a cleaned environment we can plant healthier food for all to survive on. We found in underground radiation proof vaults millions of seeds being stored. We have the means to spread the seeds planet-wide."

Consciously Cot rested her hand over the medallion under her uniform, setting her intention to assist. How desperate were the people? Would they allow the seeds to develop into eatable food? What

were they living on now? Was she getting involved in something that was more complicated than saving a planet from becoming a toxic wasteland? She remembered the spider's web that her aunt used as an analogy to teach her about relatedness. The only person she had direct control of was herself. What was right action?

Star signaled she was getting a message. It was from High Commander Er of Star Force. No images...all text.

"*Another strand on the web,*" Cot thought to *Star*. *Star* flashed her a question of what that meant and Cot pictured a spider web for her.

"I will get back to you, Celese. I will confer with others."

"I hope the delay doesn't run into years, months or even days," Celese Angul said.

"Me too."

Quickly, Cot scanned the information SFHQ sent. The deaths of the professor and four students were still under investigation. The names of the agents involved were not released from IAUP to the original investigative team, who believed the files were destroyed. At the closure of the university what little information they had gathered had been turned over to Star Force. The new Interplanetary Counsel did not wish to disturb its sitting members with an investigation that was not popular when it was first launched. It was noted that the new head of the Interplanetary Counsel's Investigation Division was an agent of the defunct IAUP, C'Rona Dom.

Cot frowned at one notation: The location of the university's observatory was unknown until now.

"Why would the location of the observatory be unknown if Reun is the known planet they were studying? And why is the petition for membership on hold?"

"It was not a widely known fact," *Star* said. "Since the planet is contaminated the two staying as guests of UP would not return. By galactic law, as long as a representative is petitioning, they can remain in local hospices."

"Did you locate them?"

"No. Hospices do not keep records."

Cot reread the last paragraph.

"You are in immediate danger. A dozen Star Force agents working on this investigation are headed to your location with a fleet that will secure the area for their work. They will be there in a four days. Until their arrival, do what you can to secure the area, the observatory, and whoever is involved with the project."

High Commander Er of Star Force

End of Communication.

"*Star*, secure a wider perimeter around Reun and the observatory. We are now at Security Level 2. Deploy what's needed to shore up any break that may occur in our security grid."

"Deploying additional Wringers, Sub474s and Acoustic Mines. Testing will commence when they are in place," *Star* responded. "We now have 3% left in our arsenal of what we were given to test."

"Noted. How long will it take us to neutralize the poisonous toxins on Reun?"

"If I start the detoxification now I will complete the initial detox in 36 hours. It will require heavy rains in the poisoned areas. From there, it will be the forces of nature that will complete the change, but it will take many years for a climatic rhythm planet wide to settle in."

"It's a start. When the monitors are in place, do a topographical study of the planet and determine what the impact will be on the population. Begin the process as soon as you're ready. I see no reason to delay. Add something that will cause the first seeds planted rapid growth." Cot tapped the communication button.

"Celese Angul, this Lt. Col Cot."

"Yes!" In her voice Cot could hear the hope that she was putting in Cot's ability to fix the problems no one had for years.

"We have begun the first stage of detoxifying the planet. Heavy rains will follow in some parts of the planet. Whatever you plant and sow for the first time will be high yield. The rapid growth will only be this once so plant what you can store until your next growth cycle."

"Agriculture, I understand. For climate, we still have some people alive that know."

"I don't know how soon Reun will be back to a regular seasonal pattern," Cot said.

"It's the healing that's important right now."

"I'll be busy for a while, but I'll get back to you," Cot said.

"I'll be waiting."

Cot focused on how to prepare the observatory for an invasion and concluded it would have to be from without. The laws governing civilian science observatories that orbited planets said no weapons were to be mounted on the exterior hull. It was to prevent the military from taking over civilian funded structures at their convenience without paying the civilian business for their theft, for it was stealing under the guise of military use.

An alarm on her console warned a ship approaching the same time *Star* sent her a mental image.

"Are they receiving the message being broadcast?"

"The auto reply has signaled it has received the broadcast. It is a private yacht, *Quisental*. Owner is KouMar Red who listed it as stolen a century ago."

"*Star*, that ship's a newer model."

"It is as it is, Cot." By *Star's* tone she was impressed by the ship that was rapidly approaching their coordinates. "The core has the older model's design, which allows it to be identified as *Quisental*. The updates and modifications give it the present readings it has now. It is an impressive upgrade."

"*Star*, is there a possibility that we're being spoofed?"

There was a moment of hesitation and then she felt a more intense curiosity from *Star* for the ship's construction. New readings were scrolled across her screen on the ship along with details on its staffing and possible defensive capabilities. A holograph appeared before her, showing decks and outer hull, then minute details, starting at the bow and moving forward like a wave.

"Anything else?" Cot asked.

"I have located a dozen people with the name Celese Anguls living on the planet Bocu, two months from Reun. None on the surface appear to fit the profile of Celese Angul that spent time on a science observatory. I also found a Bolent Mo, located on the same planet with a job as a tractor technician. He has a large extended family that owns a lot of farm land; a Cholen Suwette, too young for being eligible to attend college. Dun Kel has returned a reply of not interested in speaking with you. I also have a name and connection on Turner Mest, the one that sold the weapons to Reun citizens. He is related to C'Rona Dom, the investigating agent that was in charge of the observatory and now heading a security agency."

A light activated on her console. Her screen switched to mirror the master console on the observatory.

"Our visitor has access to the command console," Cot said. "Security files are being scanned...code found... This is someone that knows the way in."

"All locks to the exit hatches have been deactivated. SE6 has been disabled," *Star* said. "Do you want me to reacquire control? If this person knew what he was doing, he would have only released the exit hatch he needs."

"Let's see what he wants before we lock him up. If this person suspected that there was someone aboard, he would unlock all the exit hatches to make whoever is aboard wonder which hatch was being entered."

"*Quisental* has left a suited man in space and is heading to us – *Quisental* is arming side canons."

The shot that was exiting the aft side cannon exploded a second after it was fired by a Sub474. The impact of the explosion rocked *Quisental*.

"Alarms are going off on *Quisental*. I have entered the computer that controls all its systems," *Star* reported.

"Get out of her systems," Cot warned. "That's what they would expect."

"I am under attack," *Star* announced surprised. "Closing down access...."

"Blast it!" Cot initiated a system shutdown quickly, though chances were *Star* had already initiated locking up all her communication links to prevent anything from entering until she wiped whatever had entered her system. It was amazing how *Star* had eluded something like this on other occasions and this one came where it should have been expected.

"While you shore up your defenses, I'm going to see who this character is," Cot announced.

Dressed in her AVEC suit Cot used her rockets to blast her way to the observatory that was not far from *Star's* position. In her periphery she could see *Quisential* powering back up.

Her skin itched as an energy beam covered her. *Quisential* had her in a tractor beam, pulling her toward its opened cargo bay. Two armed guards waited in the opening, pointing their weapons directly at her.

"SEs, neutralize whatever they fire my way. Sub474 neutralize *Quisential* again, now."

The tow beam immediately ceased as did the lights from the ship's interior, leaving the two guards hanging on as *Quisential* suddenly veered away.

That ship has a lot of backups for it to keep recovering so quickly. I'm sure Star is keeping track of all their recoveries to improve her tools, but I hope we don't have too many of these attacks.

"I am up and operating at full capacity," *Star* announced. "I was unable to prevent *Quisential* from sending out a coded message. I have disabled her communication so she will not be sending or receiving anything further for a while. I have embedded four viruses in her system. *Quisential* will be indisposed for an undetermined amount of time. I am sending a netting to prevent her from further interfering with Star Force business."

"I'm continuing to the observatory and see where their crewmate is," Cot said.

"He is located in the command module. He has been subdued by the security system of the observatory."

"There wasn't any security when I was there. Did you turn it on?"

"I identified you as the captain of the observatory. The only area you did not have free access to was the medical facilities."

As Cot drew near the observatory her impact with the barrier bounced her back and into a spin before she could cut her power.

"Why didn't you tell me the barrier was up," Cot muttered, as she struggled to stop her spin. Suddenly, her spinning and movement away from the observatory stopped.

"This is something to add to your training program," *Star* said. "The barrier was just activated by the observatory as a defense."

"What happened to my captain status? Can you disengage the barrier?"

"Four ships are coming out of a hyper jump," *Star* reported. "I will give you an opening in the barrier at the landing bay."

"I hope nothing goes off until I'm inside. *Star*, let Star Force know we're not alone."

Cot sailed into the bay just as an AM went off. The reflection of lights from the explosion in her visor let Cot know she had been lucky. The energy spread out in a wave, moving faster where there was least resistance and had she been in space it would have sent her speeding faster than her jets could have safely slowed her into the observatory's hull.

Cot ran across the deck as the cargo bay doors boomed shut behind her, shaking the deck under her feet. Whoever was on board would know where she entered.

The hatch cover opened without a challenge, since she was after all *the* captain again. The SEs went before her through the storage bay and into the command module. When the hatch slid open a Suveto held a weapon in ready position pointed at her. It was not a weapon a veteran spacer would use or be tempted to use in a space craft. It would blow a hole in the hull and everything would be sucked out.

"Put that weapon down," Cot ordered.

"Who are you?" the Suveto hooted.

"I'm Lt. Col Cot of Star Force. You're interfering with an on-going investigation. Who are you?"

"Dunkel."

Cot knew her surprise showed. "Why are you here?" Cot asked.

"The observatory was found."

An alarm flashed that the four ships were closer. The information scrolling down the screen alerted weapons were running hot.

"Who were those armed people on board your ship?"

"Interested people."

"The ships that just arrived, did you call for them?"

Dunkel's weapon still pointed at her. The firming of his finger on the grip was all the SEs needed before they neutralized him.

"Now what do I do with him? We don't have holding cells here or on *Star Chaser*. *Star* didn't you say the observatory had a security system that had neutralized him?" Cot looked around the command area for something to restrain him with and could see nothing.

"He is neutralized," *Star* reported.

"Then who is this?" Cot asked.

"The same person -- neutralized."

"Of course he is," Cot said impatiently. "Keep him unconscious," she commanded the SE near her. Leaning down she picked up his weapon and slid it in her AVEC utility leg pocket.

The idea of putting him somewhere out of sight was as disturbing as keeping him in the same compartment unconscious. He was an unknown element and had intended to use lethal force that would have killed them both.

Sitting before the master console she focused on the screen. *Star's* monitors were tracking the four ships' progress as they began encircling the observatory.

"Status on the four ships?"

"I have tapped into their communication. They are scanning the planet surface and believe that Star Force is responsible for the changes. The changes are not to their liking and they are looking for all the Star Force ships involved. They are not aware of *Quisential*. They are retired agents of UP. I am not sure of their intentions. They will see me in a few moments. If I interrupt my release pattern, it will slow the detox process down."

"What is your progress on the detox, *Star*?"

"I have been able to escalate my efforts with time release pellets. In 45 minutes I will be finished."

"Is the net you created ready for real time use?"

"It is dispersed and ready."

"Enable it."

"Net has been enabled." The satisfied tone of voice from *Star* had Cot thinking that she was pleased about turning a tool that had been used on her on someone else.

A noise from where the prisoner was had Cot reflexively diving to the deck. The console she was sitting at was destroyed with a lot of noise as it disintegrated and a hole in the deck was created, revealing cabling and other vital lifelines a system needed. Lights went out as sparks flew and smoke filled the area. Cot was sure something from overhead fired at the same time the *Suveto* fired.

Her visor registered Dunkel was recovering from what hit he had sustained. Cot jumped up and chopped the arm that came up to fire again. His weapon, another that should not be used on ships, went flying and bounced against the bulkhead. Cot and Dunkel wrestled and exchanged hits until a prisoner's neuronet was dropped on him by the two SEs. The console's destruction had shut down the observatory's defense system. Red lights were flashing on the remaining screens. Since neither the ship or the SEs were keeping him unconscious, Cot was tempted to dump him out into space, but then she would have to worry about where he would turn up next.

"*Star*, what's happening with the other ships?" Cot asked.

"Three left with some damage that will affect their speed and canon fire. They wish to speak with the Star Force Agent in charge of this investigation. Cot, you must get out of this structure. The discharge

of the weapon has released a toxin that will form a cloud in ten minutes that will downgrade your suit's efficiency."

"Can you fix it?"

"The damage is repairable. It would have not been if the observatory's security had not neutralized part of the shot," *Star* said.

Dunkel was stripped of his clothing and deposited into a life pod. The pod was towed behind observatory with a long tow line.

Chapter 12

One Person's Hero is Another's Fiend

Cot was sitting in a comfortable chair within a forest scene on her bridge. Forest creatures were making soft sounds in the background while over the speaker yelling back and forth were a dozen ex-IAUP agents. They were not listening to each other, nor did they care for her or her order for them to leave the area. They were here to destroy the Observatory.

"What if..." Cot started, when they took a collective breath, "there were agents or students from the observatory still on Reun? Don't you think they deserve to be brought back?"

"You know nothing of what went on here. It was an Operational Command with a need to know, and you don't need to know."

Then everyone began yelling over each other making no sense to Cot. What she did understand was they intended on destroying the observatory and all records of what it was about.

"None of you own this observatory. It's on the LFL and I filed a Discovery. Until the investigation is finished, Star Force is the sole owner and you are interfering. How did you know the observatory was found?"

"You filed a Discovery," one of the men said.

"You have one ship with systems down. That leaves 12 of you in three ships. Leave this area before you lose more ships and have to resort to your emergency escape pods," Cot said.

"We're not leaving this area until our job is done. We have reinforcements on the way."

"If you cross the demarcation line, your ships will be disabled."

Cot cut the comm link. *Others on their way?* "Star, who among our SID-mates is nearby?"

It was more of a feeling than a thought she received from her ship. *Star Chaser* missed her SID-mates. Cot smiled at *Star's* anticipation of them joining in this situation.

"*Space Cat*, and *Melody* are nearly an hour from here. *Gallant Soldier* could be here in minutes if given the password and coordinates to Stella Gate."

"Have you been keeping them updated on what's been going on here?"

"Yes."

"Send an ANASAP to Captain Allison Macalister in *Space Cat*, Captain Goudie Grant in *Melody*, and Captain Hallie Drummond in *Gallant Soldier*."

"I will send updates and scramble an Assistance Needed As Soon As Possible. You are asking for help," *Star* said.

"Yes. If we're to keep this place safe until Star Force arrives with its investigative team, we're going to need assistance."

"Incoming on the other side of the planet. A dozen disturbances coming out of hyper space. They are out of normal ships scan range so they intend on a surprise convergence."

Cot saw the dozens of blips on her screen that suddenly appeared. "They look like small gunships that were scrapped or auctioned off to military enthusiasts. Whoever had the idea to sell off old military vessels to the general public either had a private deal going or was naïve," Cot grumbled.

"It was a lucrative deal that lasted for a short time," *Star* said, "but when the public auctions stopped due to worries by planet representatives, the secretive selling of military items resumed. The actual misuse of the equipment is not as great as the representatives imagined."

"Where are you getting that information?" Cot asked.

"*The Yard Times*. After researching *Quisential*, I did an investigation of other such overhauls and found that decommissioned military ships are purchased by civilian corporations to protect their important officials and families, and go through upgrades to give them the appearance of a civilian ship but with all its armaments intact."

"Trace the ownership of these ships and build a profile. How long before they're close enough to loosen shots at us?"

"Five minutes. They are scanning the entire area...they will not pick up our equipment with their scanners. They may have new equipment but they have not fine-tuned their equipment to optimum performance levels."

"Where are the other ships that were here?"

"They are out of my scan area."

Cot pursed her lips in thought. Was this the changing of the guard? "Find them."

Six tiny Wringers were sent out to follow the trail of the ships that left the area.

Caronda Fighters were one of the few larger ships that could move from idle to jump speed in seconds. In the time it took the arriving ships to take aim *Star Chaser* was out of their circle, leaving them to fire at each other.

"They obviously haven't war experience. You never encircle the enemy and commence firing," Cot said disgustedly.

"So does that mean you don't need help, Group Leader?" Captain Hallie of clan Drummond asked, sounding as cheeky as always.

"Greetings and good tidings, Captain Hallie and *Gallant Soldier*. Did you get a chance to study the situation we have here?" Cot asked.

"Greetings and good tidings, Group Leader and *Star Chaser*. It looks like a cover up in a most secretive branch of the business," she replied. "Just the type of organization we now belong to, but they're not ours, right?"

"We have three days to find out what it's about and make sure that anyone from the observatory that is still on the planet can be retrieved and waiting safely aboard the observatory when Star Forces Investigative Service arrives. They'll unravel the mess that seems to have hit that planet."

"Righty. What about these midget fighters...shall we rattle their nerves?" Hallie asked.

"We'll do the bumble bee maneuver," Cot said.

For twenty minutes the two zipped between the slower moving ships causing sloppy formations, and missed cannon fire that hit each other or discharged harmlessly off into space. Nothing got by the ring of protection that was around the planet and observatory. While the SID-pilots were kept busy, a few ships attempted to break off unnoticed to damage the observatory. The mines took care of anything that attempted to enter the protective circle around the observatory and planet.

By the time the attacking ships withdrew, there was only one ship able to move on its own power. The small ships would not be able to pick up many survivors, though they could tow life pods or disabled ships. Cot was sure they could make it to the nearest space station. Had these pilots been battle tried, there would have been more damage to her equipment.

A message was dispatched to the OD, the Officer on Duty at the nearest Space Station. The ships and crew were to be delayed until a Star Force agent interrogated them. How the OD treated her request would let her know how a Star Force agent was seen. *Star Chaser* supplied the names of the ships and crewmembers.

Captains Allison Macalister and Goudie Grant arrived as Hallie was gloating that it didn't take much to drive the wolves away if you had more dogs.

"Now what would you know of dogs and wolves, Hallie dear, when you were raised in the city where the only thing that howled was you when you were caught by your grandmere doing something you weren't supposed to," Goudie said.

"There's some truth in that statement," Allison said. "I met grandmere Drummond. She's a short woman with plenty of power over the young ones. Reminded me of my own grandmere."

"And all of ours that hold the tradition of scaring you when you're impressionable so when you get older you'll do what she says," Goudie said.

"Greetings, Group Leader and Hallie," the two new arrivals said in unison.

"Are we too late for a fun game of tag?" Goudie asked.

"They'll be back and more will come, I'm sure," Cot said. "*Star Chaser* and I are glad to see you, SID-mates. We have a LSL that I posted a Discovery for *Star Force*. We've been since, getting visitors that want to destroy the observatory."

"We've gathered at a good time," Allison said.

"Let's all shuttle over to the observatory. It's empty so there's plenty of space for all of us. We have three days to run our investigation," Cot said.

With their ships and the monitors to keep watch, the four pilots gathered for a conference aboard *IV New Prospects*. Goudie, a systems specialist before the call of CF piloting lured him away, was excited to see an old command station.

"I see what's been done here, GC." Goudie had his fingers tapping through information on the screen to the console he had replaced. "The information isn't lost or corrupted; it's encoded then encrypted then parsed into different folders."

"You sure this isn't a pet of some kind?" Hallie asked as *Stars* bot friend followed her back from the medical lab.

"I'm not sure what it is. It's *Star's* friend."

"I hope picking up hitch hikers isn't catchy," Hallie said. "I don't even want to think of what type of pet *Gallant Soldier* will pick up."

"Nothing that is bigger than a hand and can clean up after itself," Goudie said.

"I'm not into pets on board," Allison said. "What do you do when you get in your AVEC suit and your pet hasn't one?"

"Can't put it in the closet," Goudie agreed.

"So, what did you find, Goudie?" Cot asked.

"Your guess is right about the profiles but there's twenty-five not twenty-one. The medical lab with its set up and backup system was meant to be automated so that if one of the agents that had been transitioned into a foreign species returned to the med lab, they would merely have to scan themselves and request a transition back and the auto surgeon takes care of it."

"By this information here, if there were any shuttles, all they had to do is call for one and they would have been picked up and transformed back to his or her original self," Allison said.

"Anyone come back?" Hallie asked.

"One person," Goudie said.

"Who?" Cot asked.

Goudie shook his head. "The program deleted all files referring to who it really is. To find out I'll need to do a deeper search. I'll check the backup to the backup, if the SIDs aren't already doing it. Cot, whoever set this up is good," he said, lowering his voice, "If our SID-ships didn't pick up on the double encoding and sparsing that means that whoever wrote this program knows how to embed code to confuse logical thinkers."

"Was it Dunkel?" Cot asked.

Goudie laughed. "Do you know what that means?"

"No," three voices said in unison.

"The Hunters use it to describe the dark side of their passion. Dunkel. There's a file here with that name. I assure you, it's not a person. It's a mental state."

"Someone with that name is here," Cot said. "He's unconscious in a pod at the end of the tie line attached to the observatory."

"Is he the one that did the damage to this terminal?"

"That's the one," Cot said.

"Well, there you go," Goudie said slowly as he thought of what could be playing out. "Death, destruction and all its friends." He let out a heavy sigh. "SID-mates, we have a problem. If someone in a group gets the name of Dunkel, then whatever the job handed to that person is Dunkel's until death or the job is completed."

"We need to get Celese up here now," Cot said. "She may be targeted for assassination. This Dunkel uses weapons that don't belong on a space ship."

"Allison and I can check out your prisoner," Hallie said.

"Just be careful. He's been escaping from traditional confinement methods. If he has this special assignment, he's going to be prepared for the usual obstructions."

Goudie tapped commands on the console. "Here we go. Shuttle has been deployed. I hope you don't mind that I'm using *Jumping Jack* but I'm more familiar with my shuttle."

"Not a problem for me. Celese Angul," Cot hailed.

"Yes! The toxicity meters have dropped around the globe and we can see things growing just like you said! People are changing too! This is incredible! It's like we're coming out of a bad dream!"

"Celese, there's a shuttle that will be landing outside of your bunker in five minutes. It's time for you to return. *Your job is done, Celese Angul. Return to base.*"

Celese's voice changed when she responded, "My job is done. Returning to base as ordered."

Chapter 13

Old and New and Some Forgotten

"Her favorite beverage is Soco," *Star* said.

Hallie made a face. "I tasted that once."

"It is not for Muland taste buds," *Gallant Soldier* said to his pilot.

"Some people like to find out for themselves," *Space Cat* said knowingly.

"Don't get distracted," Cot said. "We have some investigating to do, people to locate, and we still have those ships out there. They'll be back. We also have to find out who this Dunkel is."

When the two SID-pilots had searched the pod he was gone.

"I've never seen a person go through this transition process before," Hallie said. "But I have read a lot on the after affects, like how long it took an agent to feel comfortable again in her or his own body. Some of the returnees carried a mirror with them and were always looking in it. Some spend time in a mental hospital and have their memories erased to be able to move on with their life. Not everyone can do this type of undercover work. What I'm worried about is that she said she was supposed to be only an observer and she was rotated in by Agent C'Rona Dom. That could mean she was not given a psych eval to see if she was tempered for it."

"*Space Cat* hasn't been able to find any information on what C'Rona Dom looks like. Any personal information, like description or whereabouts is classified," Allison said.

The lights above the medical regenerator blinked that the patient's cellular patterns were back to her original template. None of them knew what the next sequence was but an alarm on their AVEC suits went off at that moment.

"Swarm approaching," SID-pilots and ships said in unison.

"Back to your ships. Protect the observatory and planet. It looks like this medical transition program is prepared to administer and protect the returning members, so our job is to prevent anyone from interfering with the returning agents from the planet," Cot said.

"I've got the observatory's command module programmed to do some pretty amazing stuff," Goudie said as they ran to the shuttle bay. "It's going to be really hard for someone to have a weapon on the observatory. I enhanced the already existing security."

"Then you and *Melody* are in charge of the observatory and its occupants," Cot said. "Allison and *Space Cat*, check the other side of the planet. You're the fastest. The word is out that the observatory is off the Lost and Found Listing so we're going to have every type of adventurer out there wanting to board her, besides those that want to destroy her."

"We'll be doing a bit of bedazzling then, Group Leader," Hallie said.

The bay doors opened and four shuttles shot out. Around the observatory ships were coming out of hyper jump, surrounding the observatory as if they knew where the structure was.

The four shuttles and SID-ships moved in and out of the attacking ships until the new arrivals realized they were being picked off by something else. The AMs and Sub474s that Cot took a liking to were knocking out communications, and disabling maneuvering rudders. So far, their use of superior technology was giving them the advantage and without taking a life.

"We have them regrouping out of the IMs, GL," Goudie said. "Connection to the observatory computer has been dropped. Permission to return to see what's happening to the central computer."

"Permission granted. Take backups. Keep an eye out for Dunkel," Cot cautioned. "SID-ships, run tests on the Investigation Markers to verify there are no openings. Allison and *Space Cat*, go on around the planet again and check them out."

"Will do, GL. Permission to add a few surprises to the perimeter. We spotted a few places that would be a good spot to add extras in case someone visits and needs a tail."

"Good idea, follow through," Cot said.

"Group Leader, someone is crawling outside the observatory," *Gallant Soldier* informed them.
"Hallie go over there with Goudie and watch his back."
"Right, GL," they responded.

Chapter 14

Opening the Can of Worms

Cot, dressed in her AVEC suit, tumbled out of *Star* to fly over to where the crews' quarters on the observatory were. As she got closer she maneuvered her feet to grab onto the bulkhead, taking the impact with bent knees. Moving along the outside she found the hatch that would allow her entrance. Before entering she ran a scan to be sure there was no one lying in wait for her. Not wanting any surprise attacks, Cot initiated a cycling at one entrance while entering through the emergency hatch below the shuttle bay. It seemed clear until she looked up. A weapon was pointed at her from the overhead. The SEs with her activated before it registered in her mind as well as the ship's security neutralizing the shot. Cot disarmed Celese easily and rolled them both into the bulkhead.

"Who are you?" Celese panted.

"Lt. Col Cot," Cot answered. Cot released her and stepped out of her reach. Cot pointed at a dark shadow that moved along the overhead and through a vent. "What is that?"

"The Terminator. My presence activated it."

"What is the Terminator?"

"A predator species."

"Let's move out of here and get over to the command center. Captain Goudie is working on the computer systems—upgrading them so they won't fail when everyone starts returning."

Celese stared at her for a moment. "Command center? I didn't see anyone when I passed." Celese started forward, lurching off balance. It probably would be a while before Celese got used to her new form.

When they entered the bridge Goudie was supervising the upgrade of a second console.

"Lt. Celese, that's Captain Goudie our systems specialist and Captain Hallie our medical tech. Everyone, this is Lt. Celese," Cot introduced. "Lt. Celese, we found only four names on lockers in the med lab supply modules yet there were twenty one that were sent to the planet," Cot said. "Do you know how many of your group is still alive on the planet?"

"Communication hasn't been reliable the last year. The atmosphere has worsened making long distance transmissions impossible."

"Was there anyone against this project aboard the observatory?"

"Yes, but I don't know who."

"Do you know who would sabotage the observatory's medical area?"

"No."

"How many people were stationed on this observatory?" Goudie asked.

"Thirty-six on board and twenty-one transitioned for planet-side duty. Four of the original twenty-one agents didn't make the transition so four of us were conscripted to take their place and their military rankings."

"That would scare the bejebees out of me," Goudie said quietly.

"It was scary. I kept thinking of the positive aspects, like when I return back I would be transitioned to the same biological age, in better health and with a bonus pay that I could retire on. We were only to be living like this for a year but things happen. I image it will take time...I didn't realize that three additional appendages would be so missed."

"*Group Leader, this is Allison. Come in,*" Allison said over the comm link. Cot was interested in the change of expression in Celese, though it was slight. Did Celese hear the comm link?

Cot stepped back so she could have a private conversation. "Go ahead, Allison."

"*The extra monitors I sent outside our normal scan are picking up another swarm. They're spreading out to surround the planet. I'm also picking up signals from the planet...twenty of them, but very weak.*"

"I read you. They're probably in bunkers or deep underground. Now hear this - all SID ships, investigate. Allison, monitor the pickups. If they're legitimate, pick them up. Use the shuttles. Hallie, stay with the medical facilities. Allison will be delivering people if they're the missing agents – move quickly. We don't have much time."

Cot moved back to speak with Celese. "We've got more incoming ships that are interested in this observatory so we're going to take up our positions to prevent them from getting too close. Are you going to be alright on the observatory?"

"I lived and worked on OBE for years. I don't mind getting reacquainted with this place and myself."

"Do you have an AVEC suit?" Cot asked Celese.

"You mean an outer suit? We stored them in the pods."

"I'd feel better if you wore one."

Chapter 15

Who's in Charge?

"Star, where is the *Quisental*?"

Cot had returned to her ship and twenty minutes had passed with the newly arrived ships staying out of normal scan range.

"It is wrapped in my netting drifting with a beacon that law enforcement will pick up as a dangerous criminal. Star Force sent a message that Special Forces has two ships that will intercept *Quisental* in twenty minutes," Star said. "There are agents in this area and they are giving an ETA of four hours."

"Jump gates."

"I have monitors that will give us that information."

"Very good, Star. A lot of unfinished business and slight of bodies," Cot said. "How is the transitioning going?"

"I will contact, Captain Allison," Star said. "Her shuttle has completed its pickups and is returning to *Space Cat*."

"Group Leader, Hallie here. We've been ordered off the observatory *IV New Prospects*, by the transitioned group. Lt. Celese quoted galactic law that if one of them returns from a covert operation and is owed back pay of a substantial amount, they can take ownership of the observatory and lab, the only assets left of the project."

"She is correct," Star informed Cot. "*The rule covers over 300 pages.*"

"Then we'll pull back and observe," Cot said to the others. "As long as no one attacks the observatory we can bide our time. We have a lot of data to sift through to figure out what went on while we wait for our replacements."

"You've got the right," Goudie said. "My brain is already tired. Profiles have been switched around in the observatory data bases and not as part of a code. It's like someone cut the profiles up into pieces then tossed them into a jar, mixed them up and pulled out the pieces randomly and fit them in a file, not heeding what it was being dumped into."

"Dunkel and Celese could be one and the same or for that matter the Terminator and Dunkel," Cot said. "I believe she's Carrion or belongs to a species that can morph into another."

"Celese?"

"Then why the surgery with the templates?"

"I don't know of any species that can morph for long periods of time," Hallie said.

"And they would be in trouble if their own species doesn't tolerate the environment well. I will not volunteer for any species changing assignments," Goudie said firmly.

"Why do you think Celese, GL?"

"The person that had a conversation with me from the planet was not the same person on the observatory."

"Do you think it has something to do with the Hunters? She's Carrion and Carrion Tribes have taken up that line of work quite seriously."

"No. I think whatever it is, it has to do with the reason the medical lab was brought in and military agents sent planet-side."

"But they were left behind. No self-respecting soldier will leave behind fellow mates if they're alive. So we're back to what is so important about the planet," Goudie said.

"I don't think it's just the planet," Hallie said.

"I agree," Allison said. "If it were just the planet, then why leave the agents on duty? No one told them they're job was done so they'll be continuing what they were told to do."

"Who was the speaker for the returnees, Hallie?" Cot asked.

"Lt. Celese."

"It could have been because she was transitioned first and has had longer to adapt back to her original self. It's the safest and most secured area of the observatory. Did you get the names of who were transitioned?"

"No. Names weren't mentioned."

"One professor and four students died...that's on record. What about the other students? Maybe the students and crew were against the twenty-one that came with the medical lab?"

"We have two more days before Star Force and all their agents arrive," Goudie said.

"I'm signing off, SID-mates. Get some rest. We start fresh either in eight bells or if someone starts something," Cot said.

Chapter 16

Regrouping

Those on the observatory and in the surrounding ships seemed to be at a standoff. Since the ships had the weapons and the observatory didn't, Cot suspected there was more to this power play on the unseen level. Whatever would tip one side over to violence was not at that point.

After her rest, Cot meditated then did kata. Both practices deepened her connection to other levels of consciousness. *Star's* monitors were showing the neutralization of the toxic chemicals was completed. The planet was what Cot meditated on, sensing on levels *Star's* monitors weren't able to. A quickening in the soil was affecting the seeds planted and survivors that lived underground were working hard to plant as much as they could to store for lean times until the weather stabilized into predictable seasons.

Twelve hours later Cot went over the records the others were de-encrypting. Once Goudie figured out the code the SID-ships and pilots were able to take on translating what had occurred. As of yet, the Star Force agents that should have arrived had not shown themselves. No further messages from High Commander Er, so the four continued monitoring from a distance and unraveling the story behind *IV New Prospects*.

"Group Leader Cot, to SID-mates," Cot said.

"Captain Goudie, here, GL."

"Captain Allison, here, GL."

"Captain Hallie, here, GL."

"Scramble communication," Cot said.

"Engaged," three voices said.

"Hallie what have you found in the medical database?"

"The medical lab was programmed with an agenda before it arrived here and with the information of the original twenty-one agents. Its systems are not in any way tied into the observatory. There's a subroutine that genetically identified each person that was transformed and it was to transition the individuals back to the same age they began their transition with added benefits. Allison researched the program."

"Allison, what did you find?" Cot said.

"That subroutine looked familiar so I went back to a report I read two years ago. It gives a person knowledge he or she never had or probably would never have. A musician, mathematician, scientist, dancer, artist, and so on. It enhances what is already there or places a seed of what was never there. It's one of the most invasive enhancements in programming a person that science has presented in a long time."

"That's quite an incentive to sign up for a risky mission that doesn't look too good about returning," Goudie said.

"Did you find any mention of the four they added?" Cot asked.

"Maybe," Hallie said. "Someone added a program called Dunkel after the lab arrived here. When the first person came back, the old program didn't recognize him or her so it defaulted to Dunkel. That person was given all the attributes and knowledge an assassin would have."

"And, the first person back wasn't any of the replacements," Allison said. "Another interesting find is that buried in another file are two templates for two people on the observatory. Captain Pernov and C'Rona Dom. I found both had visited the planet and only one returned."

"We can make a guess that C'Rona Dom returned, because he's the head of security for the reformed Interplanetary Counsel."

"How do we know that's him and not someone else transitioned to his template?"

"The captain and C'Rona didn't transition, they visited in a shuttle. They never went together."

"So, where's the captain?"

"Unfinished business with a lot of money due, that's not going to be a neat and tidy cleanup. I bet someone on the investment side already spent it."

"Write up your reports and have them ready before the end of the first watch, mates. If we can't figure out who is who and what is going on by the time our relief gets here, they can unravel it. Our primary job is to protect the observatory and returnees," Cot said.

"So you're not curious about who Celese is? You did say the person we met isn't the same as the one you first spoke to," Allison said.

"I'm curious. But I don't sense any danger to us or to her so let her and the others sort it out. Can you imagine if one template is messed up how others may also be? I'd rather not get involved with that. We'll be here for months."

"That's a fair and true statement," Hallie said. "You have plans for us?"

"When the fleet arrives, unless our CO gives us a change of orders, we're back to mapping space and poking at things that we find interesting."

"This getting together for a joint operation is a good break in our mapping work," Goudie said.

"Then you're going to like this," Allison said. "*Space Cat* is receiving multiple warnings from sensors we sent toward the jump gate a half a day from here. They're moving too fast for most travelers."

"Allison, see if you can get a better reading but don't get yourself surrounded. Goudie, start patrol on the other side of this planet. Hallie, find those two Star Force ships that were supposed to have been here by now. I don't want invisible observers when trouble maybe heading our way or maybe they were waylaid by those ships we sent limping away.

"Righty, I'm off, GL."

"I'm gone, GL."

"Beginning patrol now, GL."

"*Star*, I want to know just what's happening on those ships that are sitting out of what they think is our range."

"I can move two Su010 to the center of their group and begin listening but it will take ten minutes to position them."

"Get to it."

Cot rose from her seat and went to prepare for meditation. It was time to see beyond the obvious. Carefully, she picked her colors for candles, placing magenta to close her circle between the silver and gold. A bundle of herbs was lit and as it smoked she swept the area, saying a small prayer over each color. Magenta for speedy action for the higher good, gold to promote deep understanding, black to absorb negative energy, turquoise for awareness, pink for harmony, white for sincerity, purple for intuition, blue for devotion, green for healing, yellow for learning, orange for power, red for strength and silver to neutralize any undesirable vibrations.

Cot didn't need to touch Bua to feel its power as it built up energy within her. In her mind she pictured the observatory. Images from the observatory's past flashed by her. Emotions from the shipbuilders to the first crew members through the return of all the transitioned she felt; however, feelings about something didn't mean that's what they had acted on. Many of the people on the observatory were trained agents.

When Cot opened her circle, all the candles were burnt down to stubs. Four hours she had been out of contact with her team.

"*Star*, report."

"Everyone is awaiting your return."

"What is happening with the ships and observatory?"

"There have been several attempts to shoot the observatory down and they have attempted to board *IV New Prospects*. They have failed in all attempts due to problems they have encountered with their equipment."

"SID-mates, this is Group Leader Cot, requesting a huddle."

"Captain Allison, in the huddle," she replied.

"Captain Goudie, in the huddle," he replied.

Captain Hallie, in the huddle," she replied.

"Engage the encryption."

"Captain Hallie, did you find our Star Force comrades?"

"Yes, GC," Hallie returned sounding amused. "They ran into a group of ships that we turned away. There were some issues they were resolving with the group that they were not anticipating."

"And those are...?" Cot asked curious.

"Discovery of the observatory under Star Force protection."

"Any ETA?"

"Maybe in a few days," she said. "There's some legal haggling going on and I think there's going to be some sticky work to be done."

"Did they know you were watching them?"

"Yes. I gave them the information on the folks in the observatory."

"Good. Captain Allison what have you to report?"

"The planet is going through a fast track of recovering. I sent a few probes to the surface. No toxic evidence in the dirt, plants, or the creatures that are abundant. Surface wise, I believe whatever *Star* put in the rain or chemicals, not only wiped out the toxins from the ground, air and other life forms, but also propagated on a fast track all life forms in that area."

"That's incredible, even for *Star's* mix of chemicals," Cot said slowly.

"I believe so too. There should be some evidence of toxins," Allison said.

"What do you find, *Star*?" Cot asked.

"I have no past records to compare the formula I used. I used what I found in the university's own database that Celeste had pointed us to. The uncharacteristic regrowth and proliferation of all life forms in forty-six areas on the planet can be attributed to a common connection. The underground water links."

"Is there a consequence we should worry about?"

"Fights will break out between people who think others have it better than they," Goudie said.

"We pick up readings on weapons that have the potential to contaminate the area."

"We could do a minor interference and remind them that this repeat behavior will put them back into toxic poisoning. If they chose to use the weapons again, we won't repair the damage," Hallie said.

"That's a lesson they'll have to learn on their own," Cot said. "We'll let SF guide them if they feel it's necessary."

"What about those on the observatory?" Goudie asked.

"Now that is another story," Cot said softly. "The arms dealer, Turner, that we've been told is the instigator of the last calamity on this planet is in a sense responsible. Turner was trying to turn over a new leaf by taking on a new job that was not in the arms dealing field. His cousin, C'Rona Dom offered him a job doing maintenance on the observatory. He was a pilot on the shuttle that was taking down the negotiators of UP to the planet's leaders. The captain of the observatory had no problem with him doing the maintenance, but was not pleased with him being given shuttle duties when their normal pilot became ill. She didn't feel letting him intermingle with the planet's populace was a wise decision. She felt it was too much of a temptation too soon in his redemptive path. And she was correct. He was tempted to help out the weaker of the tribes negotiating for power in the new opportunities of traveling amongst the stars. It didn't occur to him that they needed to grow or mature into the responsibility of holding power over vast numbers outside of their tribe. Meanwhile the UP operatives on the planet were young and into following orders and didn't know how to adapt to fluid situations. They had been promised a lot to participate in a program to educate key groups on the planet to escalate the planet's move to become stellar travelers. The college students on the observatory would have been more appropriate and they were frustrated with the unnecessary mistakes made by the inexperienced agents on the planet."

Cot thought for a moment, trying to make sense of the last emotional feeling she felt from the parting students. Though relieved, they were reluctant to leave their work behind, feeling it was unfinished.

"The students were called back due to their professor's death and the three who were in charge of the overall running of the observatory. Once back, they had new assignments, graduated and moved on

with their lives, not realizing that the agents would be left behind. They had been left out of the operation after C'Rona Dom received word that it was a military operation and the students were not cleared for what was going on planet-side. It meant that the observatory as a university project had ended. The university filed a protest and dropped any support of the project when UP's Intelligence Department refused to compensate them for taking over the operation of their observatory. UP's Intelligence Department didn't want to tell anyone outside of a select few that they lost control of the project."

Cot frowned, remembering what she felt in her connection to the first transitioned person as she walked through the observatory knowing a little of what she was going to have done to her and then reconnecting to that person seventeen years later as she disembarked from the strange shuttle back onto the observatory. She had long ago given up hope of being rescued and had focused on helping those she had been sent to spy on. Seventeen years living as a species one isn't born as and adapting left the individual with a lot of repressed emotional dump sites that will take a long time to deal with. But she got her youth back so perhaps she would use the extra time to work on reacquainting herself with her body.

"C'Rona Dom," Cot continued, "had taken the position in the new Investigative Department, hoping somewhere along the line, he would be able to get those agents back. The agents in the attack ships were interested in covering it up. They're the UPID agents that retired with prestige, power and the funds of the twenty-one they abandoned. They can be taken to court for this and they will lose everything."

"What happened to the Captain?"

"She went down to help bring the agents back. She was the first and became Dunkel. The Dunkel program was a failsafe that none of the agents would return. When she realized what had been done to her, she left the observatory, hoping it would change her but it didn't. Turner is the dark shadow, the Carrion who returned with Dunkel to protect the returning agents. They weren't attacking each other, they were attacking us. We represent those who abandoned the agents. The observatory is of no consequence to Dunkel. The medical laboratory is."

After minutes of silence with the other digesting the information, Cot could hear Goudie sigh.

"Group Leader, what do we do now?"

"Just what our commander directed us to do. We protect the observatory and all those associated with it until Star Force can send their ships to protect those returning and debrief them. Hopefully, for all their sakes, they get their real lives back."

"Red alert!" all the SID-ships said at the same time.

"State the alert, *Star Chaser*," Cot said calmly. In her mind's eye she could see ships arriving from Star Force and from the Interplanetary Counsel.

"Monitors registering incoming from all sides," *Star* reported. "Interplanetary Counsel ships will be in normal range to announce their intentions in ten minutes. Star Force ships will be in communication reach in two minutes."

"We have armed fighters from Interplanetary Counsel coming in on my side," Allison reported. "NR in five minutes. I hope I don't know anyone on those ships, because it's going to be a waste of life if some hot-shot thinks they're going to get some points trying to knock me out."

"Star Force fleet on my side," Hallie reported. "They have sent forward buoys announcing to all that approach that this is a closed section to all until Star Force has wrapped up their investigation. The message is from Rear Admiral Zieda, Commander of Star Force squadron, Red Moon. That's got a bite of authority."

"The ships that have been here are coming active with their weapons," Goudie reported. "The new arrivals are sending their challenge, Group Leader."

"If you have replacement gizmos, send them out. By now the location of what we have out there has been pinpointed – move them about. AMs, Sub474s, Simms, and no more than a dozen nets, if you have them *Star*."

"Deployed," four ships responded.

"Now, we wait for our comrades."

"*Cot, you have a FYEO*," *Star* mentally sent.

"Go ahead and play it."

"Colonel Cot, this is Rear Admiral Zieda of Star Force Command aboard the battle cruiser *Emerald Isles*. Greetings. It looks like you could use some support with more weight."

"Greetings, Rear Admiral Zieda. Your arrival is timely. They're intending to take out our security ring around the planet and observatory."

The sudden simultaneous firing of canons from the approaching ships on three sides affirmed her estimation. It was met with a solid wall of resistance as the reinforced acoustic mines, Sub474s, deployment of nets beyond the demarcation line, and Simms did their jobs. The energy wave from the attacking ship was bounced back toward the attacking ships and Cot could see a few of the smaller ships not equipped to handle it go dark from their system overload.

"Warhawks and zips have launched. They should be hitting your area now. We'll exchange locations so we don't incur any FF hits."

"Our defense won't mistakenly hit friendly ships. As long as your fighters remember not to fire at our defense they won't shoot back. *Star Chaser* will send an encrypted message on the location of our defense."

"Colonel Cot, you've been in such skirmishes. You know there's going to be wild shots on both sides."

"Admiral, it's because I have that I know that a good fighter doesn't make wild shots when there's a chance of taking out a friendly. If you can't guarantee the accuracy of your pilots, then I won't send the locations of my defenses. I trust my group to not hit anything by accident."

There was a long pause and Cot wondered if her new alliance and CO would be putting her on a blacklist. Cot knew she was right in her appraisal of the situation. This was not a battle between pirates or smugglers. This was a situation where two law enforcement agencies had a difference of opinion and she knew who had the upper hand.

"My war chief has assured me there will be no wild shots," Rear Admiral Zieda said. "He is a man of his word."

"SID-mates, send to *Emerald Isles* our locations. We don't want to lose anyone on our side."

"As ordered, Group Leader," three voices responded.

"We'll get back to this conversation," Rear Admiral Zieda said. "Have you any further recommendations?"

"No, Admiral. Over and out."

"I have viewed the rules of engagement," *Star Chaser* said. "By Star Force parameters of who leads space battles, it is the officer that had first engaged a military force larger than itself. When a superior officer arrives, to avoid conflict of command, the first officer remains in command until an opportune break in the battle allows the transfer of battle flag. We are in command though we have no flag."

Cot sighed. "My first encounter with a SF flag officer and we have a disagreement in tactics."

"You are clarifying to a newly arrived officer the rules of engagement," *Star Chaser* said.

"Without notification there would be casualties that could have been avoided."

"The most annoying of this is that we're using shots to put the ship out of commission not kill anyone and they are intent on blowing that observatory to space debris, regardless that there are biologicals aboard."

It was hours before the new arrivals found that they were not going to get beyond the investigation's line of demarcation, and with the overwhelming numbers of warhawks and zips they backed out of shooting range.

Star Chaser had sent all the information the four SID-ships had found on the situation. The research was extensive and detailed from information on the ships and crew along with the university and the politics behind it. Cot had never been a captain of a ship so she didn't know how detailed information a captain or admiral received on a situation, but she was impressed with what the SID-ships had come up with.

While the SID-ships and their pilots waited for the Admiral to give them permission to leave and resume their own business, the weapons officers of the fleet were bombarding the four pilots for information on their tactical equipment.

"*Star*, as a gift to the Admiral for her timely arrival, earlier than her ETA, we'll give her one of your SEs."

"I'll be down two," *Star* reminded her.

"Pick out a mixed dozen of your upgrades to hand over to her Weapons Officer, Lt. BeBo. In exchange *Star*, you get to pick out what you want and how many from their weapons supply. She's being very generous. This is your supply depot, so trade well."

There was a moment of hesitation, then a list began to scroll down Cot's screen.

"I see you've been looking over their supplies. Send it to Lt. BeBo. She is very intrigued with your mobile Net. It's the right size for a zip to use to slow down its tag tail. If they can duplicate your results, they'll have their zips with more light-weight protection."

"I will give them one of each of my upgrades," *Star* said reluctantly. "They will find the swap more to their advantage."

"You're right. They'll have a tactical advantage no one else in any fleet has. Thank you, *Star*."

"You have an invitation from Rear Admiral Zieda to dine with her in an hour," *Star* said.

"I see. Mess dress uniforms. This will be my first occasion to try out my new uniform. Have you the SE picked out?"

"I have chosen an SE and added tactics for body guarding an Admiral to its duties. There are less protocols to follow when an Admiral's life is threatened."

Cot smiled. The Admiral was going to get more than what she could image a bot could do. A valuable lesson Cot learned was the small but genuine gestures paid off in the long run.

Chapter 17

Among New Associates

Cot, Hallie, Goudie and Allison chose to come over in their own shuttles, each bringing a dozen upgraded tactical gizmos from their weapons lockers. Considering the fleet was substantial, three dozen would not spread very far with the other ships that may have talented mechanics that given the right stimulus could create nearly as clever equipment as the SID-ships, though the SID-pilots doubted they could do as well as their ships.

"Well, here goes," Cot said softly. She tugged her tunic sleeves and walked down the shuttle ramp. The other three were waiting for her. Cot joined her pilots.

"Squad Leader Lt. Col. Cot MacDiarmid and her mates, asking permission to come aboard the *Emerald Isle*," Cot said to the small group from *Emerald Isle* waiting for her.

"Permission granted, Squad Leader Lt. Col. Cot MacDiarmid and to your squad mates," the First Officer said.

The four removed their covers and Cot introduced them to the officers before them. They all followed the first officer through corridors that were familiar to the four who had all served on various battle ships.

"The Admiral and some of her bridge officers are assembled for your welcoming dinner," Commander Rog explained to Cot. "I regret I will be unable to join you. I would have liked to know about your partnership with sentient ships."

Cot glanced at the Commander and could feel the quickening of a Peaceful Warrior.

"What do you know of it?" Cot asked softly.

"That your group is the 22nd try at mixing sentient ship and biological pilot and or crew." He glanced at Cot as they walked side-by-side with the others trailing.

"Are the others doing as well as we are, Commander Rog?" Goudie asked.

He turned slightly and grinned at Goudie, "Well, captain, I would say you're all doing an ace-up job. It's only now that Star Force officers are talking openly about it. Other space organizations have been trying it. For Star Force, you're the 3rd group. That's all I can say for now. Well, here you are, Officers' Dinning Compartment. Have a grand visit."

"I'll ask *Star Chaser* if she would like to carry on a correspondence with you, Commander. I'm sure you both could find a common ground."

His face beamed. "I would be honored if she would."

"She likes cultural stories. If there are messages or symbols embedded in them, you'll make a friend for life," Cot told him.

"I'm grateful for your offer," he said.

Cot was thinking how good it would be for *Star* to converse with people instead of just computers.

The four were ushered in to a large dining area, the Officer's Mess. All the officers stood as they entered, surprising Cot.

"I'll bet it's that slash on your cuff, Group Leader," Allison said under her breath.

Cot glanced at her.

"I agree. Those sailors we passed couldn't take their eyes off your arm," Goudie whispered back.

"Look sharp mates," Hallie said under her breath.

The Admiral herself walked over to Cot and her SID-mates.

"You have done a grand job of keeping those ships at bay until we could get here. We would all like to spend time talking to you about your ships and what you've run into since you've taken flight, unfortunately there isn't that much time. HQ wants you all to continue with your mission of stirring up the

muck, I understand. Lt. Colonel Cot, you have the seat to my left. It's not often I get the honor of sitting next to someone with the Gideon on her sleeve. Ensign Ri will seat the rest of you."

"Thank you, Rear Admiral."

While the platters of food were passed around and everyone ate hurriedly as most veterans learned to do, Cot noticed the Rear Admiral studying the SE that hovered between them.

"Lt. Colonel Cot, is that one of those multifunction gizmos HQ's engineering labs gave you to test out?"

"Yes, Rear Admiral." Cot leaned closer to her and lowered her voice, "I thought since you're letting us plunder your supplies, I would offer you your own personnel bot. It does maintenance work, serves as a bodyguard, works outside and inside a space ship, can scout ahead of your ship in travel corridors, and more. *Star Chaser* has set it to your bios so you're the boss."

"Do tell. May I test it?"

"Yes, Rear Admiral."

"Fetch my uniform dress cloak."

The SE immediately moved out the dining area with the hatch opening automatically, and a startled guard peering in and then looking after the SE that disappeared.

Five minutes later, with alarms going on over the ship the SE returned with the folded cloak.

"We didn't interfere with your ships security."

"Security, this is Rear Admiral Zieda, stand down. It's just my new PA fetching me my cloak." Admiral Zieda smiled at her new acquisition. "This will take care of HQ bothering me to get a personal attendant. Does it cook?" she laughed at what she thought was a joke.

"Once it learns your taste, it does deliver very good dinners."

"You do know, of course, that this puts me in your debt." The rear admiral didn't look like that bothered her.

"I'm counting on it. If *Star Chaser* doesn't cash in on the entire debt with her want list to your purser, one day I may have to call in a favor."

The rear admiral raised her glass to Cot, "It's the way of life. You always owe someone, so when you can choose, gladly do it."

"Because there are going to be some that you regret," Cot finished.

The rear admiral signaled dinner was finished and everyone rose as the admiral rose. "I expect a detailed report soon from all of you. Your thoughts on the situation are also expected. With all the equipment you've swapped with my fleet, you should be able to get by for a while."

She looked at the four SID-pilots. "You're doing in days what would take us months and with the use of resources we don't want to expend. Already we're getting reports back on the monitors your group has been leaving in areas we have never been able to get a monitor in." The admiral looked at Hallie and gave her a grin, "and it hasn't been detected as of yet. Captain Hallie, you were the first person that not only managed to drop off monitors in the den of iniquity, but you escaped alive."

Hallie grinned back. "It was a grand challenge."

"Welcome, all of you to our family," Rear Admiral Zieda said.

"Thank you, Rear Admiral Zieda," Cot answered for them.

"I would like a word with you, Lt. Colonel Cot," Rear Admiral Zieda said to her softly.

Cot nodded to the others to walk ahead.

"Just what was programmed in this bot? I understand how easy it is to find my quarters, since the ship is a standard built warship, but how did it know what alarms to set off so that I wouldn't be concerned with it knowing my security?"

"I'll have *Star Chaser* send you the details of its programming, if she hasn't already." Cot knew *Star* heard the conversation and was hoping she was sending the information now. Of course the rear admiral wouldn't understand the information and she would probably think for a long time about turning it over to her tech considering how much information may be in *Star Chaser's* programming.

Cot joined the three in the hanger and they quickly left, eager to get on with their own adventures.