

Leona Bristolie – Traveling

Part II

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Chapter 4

Leaving Amant Forever

Muto and Lonnie hurried off the shuttle as soon as the exit hatch cleared their heads.

"This place is like a deserted city," Muto said as they passed the security check post that was not staffed.

The civilian waiting area they moved through was also empty, a stark contrast to when they had first arrived weeks ago. Lonnie caught sight of a symbol painted on many of the bare walls they rushed past to the only ship left in the terminal. The symbol reminded her of something but their rush put it out of her mind for the moment.

Betrad Mafun stepped out of the shadows of the civilian shuttle as they approached. Muto continued up the ship's ramp as if he didn't see him, while Lonnie stopped. For a few moments Betrad stood saying nothing. Something Lonnie had heard long ago triggered by the symbol had her realizing the likelihood of her seeing Cornol Caline or her family again in her lifetime was nil. Caline would not have mentioned it for many reasons and all of it was related to species loyalty. The transition was not discussed with a nonRudian.

"Good Pass Through to you and your family, Betrad Mafun," she said, trying not to cry or show sadness. It was the safest thing she could think of that would let him know that emotionally she would miss Caline and still not impose familiarity on another's mysticism.

"Good sailing to you, Leona Bristolie." His hands that clasped hers gave a squeeze and through the connection she could feel a trembling. Was it from the impending transition or something else? He let her hands go and nodded to her. Lonnie picked up her belongings and followed Muto up the ramp not looking back least she do something that would mar the memory of her visit. Species memory with Rudian's was shared even through a transition.

The AA, Automated Attendant at the ship's entrance hatch checked their passes.

When the two foreigners disappeared inside the ship Betrad walked past signs proclaiming the time of changeover. Nimbly he climbed the tower to watch the last foreign ship leave. When the ship no longer registered in their air space he picked up the communicator for what he hoped would be the last time in this life.

"Elder sister, they have safely left our sacred space." He listened to his sister's reply and hung up the line. A nod was given to the tower guard and they both descended the tower to join their families. There was no more worry about the transportation space terminal. All physical things Rudian's created would phase out as Amnat's energy changed. In a Rudian's life time, provided one remained healthy, a total of ten changeovers would be experienced. Time for a Rudian was not measured in the movement of stars and planets across their planet's surface but in the number of transitions, a crossing into another dimension and back again.

Chapter 5

Goodbye to Caline

Lonnie followed the AA that was leading them to the only available seats at the back of the ship. Passengers were squeezed in their seats with packages that normally an AA would have the passengers store in the luggage area. Lonnie didn't recognize anyone from their trip to Amant; in fact, they looked like just the type of people planets discouraged if not outright refused to allow within their air space. She was curious how they came to be here.

Muto and Lonnie stowed their clothing bags under their seats. Above each seat was space for passengers to put their extra luggage and these Muto opened to store Lonnie's musical instruments and his flute. Someone had appropriated their space.

"Hey!" a passenger nearby said. "Thief! Let my bags be. Attendant! Thief!" He could not get out of his seat due to the amount of bags he had on his lap already but he made enough noise to draw the AA.

Unimpressed with the accusations Muto pulled out the bags and dumped them on top of what he already had on his lap. "Use your own space," Muto told him.

The AA moved quickly to the site of the disturbance. "Is there a problem here?" AA waited for the complaining passenger to make an official complaint.

"No. There's none," he grumbled, glaring at Muto but not able to hold his stare.

"Do you need assistance with stowing your luggage?" AA asked.

"I don't need you to touch my belongings. I can do it myself," he gruffly answered. The AA waited until he admitted he could not store all his belongings in the allotted space a regular fare was charged for. Once he paid the additional fee his bags were stored and the AA moved on, giving the passengers and luggage one more check before take-off time. Additional credits were collected from other passengers with too many possessions on their laps.

Muto settled next to Lonnie and whispered, "These aren't the seats I reserved. But on looking at what's on this flight I rather keep the solid bulkhead at our backs."

"On one hand, these people look like prison releases, yet on the other they look like they were on a shopping spree vacation."

"I recognize a few from wanted posters," Muto told her softly, "Some others I wouldn't trust with my eyes open. I don't see an agent aboard to keep anyone in line except the Auto Attendant."

"I thought with your charm and connections you could have at least gotten us a ship with private rooms," Lonnie teased.

"Thank you for saying charm first. This was the only ship with seats. I don't know if you've been listening to the news, but all foreigners are being expelled. I hope your friends are going to be okay."

"Me too." Lonnie appreciated his restraint to not speak of the event further. "Where are we going?" Lonnie asked to not think about Cornol Caline.

"W12C3. It's a major transportation hub this side of space. We can book our next flight out. Have you thought of a destination?"

"No. Hopefully you don't have too much more time watching over me."

"I don't mind. It hasn't been boring so far."

Connie could hear Caline laughing at her and the echo of what she had said to her. "*To a Rudian, it's boring to not have adventure in one's life.*"

"Please, Muto. Don't curse me with an interesting life," she sighed. "Caline told me that to a Rudian, an interesting life is good."

"I wish I had met her. Instead, I was assigned to work with Igor and he had no sense of humor."

"Everyone please take your seats and prepare to hit hyper. No food or beverages allowed," the AA announced once it finished its final inspection.

The sudden increase of speed on most flyers was not noticeable, but this was a cheap flight so everyone felt some unpleasantness from upset stomachs to headaches. Usually it lasted a short time and passengers accustomed to traveling on such ships carried their drug of choice, but many of the passengers had no such preparation. The AA was busy dispensing aid.

"Why don't you get some sleep," Muto told Lonnie.

"I'm too wound up," she told him. "They have no reading or listening devices."

"No, they don't," Muto told her. "Close your eyes. It'll make the trip go faster."

Lonnie leaned back for a more comfortable fit in her seat. Closing her eyes to disconnect from those around her, her thoughts returned to Caline.

Did Caline feel it was her responsibility to rid Lonnie of Br'Mon's threat? Maybe it was part of a Rudian's preparation for the transition to clear all obligations. Lonnie tried to remember what she heard about this life changing event. It was not something that was written about because most civilizations didn't survive long enough to keep something like that recorded.

Elowanqs. That's where she had heard of it. It was a song a child sang on a planet she and her family had visited. Lonnie was given the care of this child as the adults attended a dance. In the child's innocence, he had told her a story of beings that metamorphosed from water to land without dying. Children's stories were seldom taken seriously by adults and that was how truth was passed on.

But Caline did not owe her anything, she thought impatiently. Risking her planet to pay a debt that Lonnie didn't feel was owed made her uncomfortable because she would never be able to pay Caline and her people back in this lifetime.

You didn't have to do that Caline.

Lonnie fell into a light doze. In her dreamscape she was with Caline standing at the edge of the lake near her house.

"What do you see, Caline?" Lonnie asked worriedly.

"As I stare into the waters I feel something akin to me stir in its depths," Caline said.

Lonnie blinked herself awake, fighting the urge to jump into the water when there was no water.

"There is a quickening that beats like thunder in my skull," Caline whispered in awe. *"Fear is not what arises as I move to what is familiar in the water's darkness. It's like a drum roll through my soul as I slip into the cool liquid. Mystery is not what beckons me to move into the unexplainable. It is what it is."*

Lonnie felt a sigh escape her as if it were Caline. It seemed a long time passed before she heard Caline say, *"I feel a disturbance of a thousand ripples from rain falling on me. I surrendered and became transformed from dense to diffuse. There is nothing I don't touch as I'm a part of everything. Only you can break our connection."*

Lonnie blinked a few times as her heart that felt heavy with the loss of Caline and her family lessened with each beat. Taking a deep breath, Lonnie realized the sadness was gone.

Caline.

"Think of me. I will of you."

Lonnie smiled. There was so much strangeness and mystery out in space, so why would she want to settle down before seeing more of what was out there? HQ didn't give her a specific time to be debriefed. Besides, she had Muto hanging around.

Chapter 6

A New Direction

After four hours of space time a buzz warned the passengers they were arriving at their destination, W12C3 transportation hub. The AA kept everyone in their seats until the landing. There were two exits, one in the back where they were seated and one in the front where they entered the craft.

"Move to the front," Muto told Lonnie, handing her the guitar case. He gave her a firm push forward, not feeling comfortable with the passengers crowding around them. They squeezed by some of the other passengers that were slow in getting themselves ready to depart. Lonnie's instruments gave both her and Muto plenty of space around them.

"Aren't they the ones that were administered a space sickness drug?" Lonnie asked as she looked at the slack face of one of the passengers that clumsily dropped his luggage a few times.

"Two things to remember on this type of transportation, you don't exit out the back and you don't let an AA administer meds to you."

As they filed out, law enforcement bots were scanning everyone disembarking. Cameras were everywhere and monitors, providing transportation information were just as plentiful. There were no shops or shop keepers and if anyone was looking for refreshments, there were automated kiosks.

"Do you have a destination yet?" Muto asked Lonnie.

"Tanzinia. I have friends there."

Muto moved through the crowds to a monitor. The flight board was blinking with updates. There was a six hour wait for their next flight. "We can purchase passage when the ship arrives," Muto said looking around. "It'll dock over that way."

A commotion had them looking at two people from their last flight surrounded by real people dressed in police uniforms.

"Slow down. I want to know what they're saying." Muto laid her sitar case and his clothing bag on the floor and pulled out a small instrument from his pocket. Picking up the luggage he resumed his pace. It was done so quickly, Lonnie had a chance to only take a few breaths.

"Can you understand what they're saying?" Lonnie asked.

"We're being accused of all sorts of arrest able things. It's a common con game. Our belongings are confiscated and somehow get lost, while we're charged a lot of money for new papers, tickets and so on. My worry is that these law enforcement officials are bribable."

Lonnie stared at the milling group around the officers. "I can't believe it," she muttered under her breath. "I recognize a face in that group from *Earl Gray's* crew."

"Come on. Let's move further out of this area," Muto said.

"Muto, you don't think someone's still looking for me, do you?"

"Someone must think so or I would be on vacation."

Lonnie thought Muto a bit odd as he walked around pillars and then moved quickly on to another. He glanced back at her and explained, "I'm looking for a private elevator to the next level. I can use my ID for access."

"Ah, for the elite that don't like to mix with the commoners," Lonnie said. "Who would have thought an elevator would be hidden as a pillar, but it makes sense."

"Can you blame them with what's going on here?"

Their images popped up on screens asking for them to report to a local security kiosk. Security bots became active as if an emergency was declared. Muto paused at a column and pulled something from his coat. Using Lonnie to shield him from any one watching, he applied a disguise that molded to his face. "Your turn," he told Lonnie, handing her a change of face.

"Aren't you worried the wall sensors will spot us?"

"I always carry gizmos to hide my presence and disrupt my image on cameras. Don't you?"

"Not while I was on Amant. I'll take this as a good lesson to never rest my vigilance." She dug into her bag and slipped on a ring that changed the energy around her so that her image couldn't be captured.

Muto finally found his elevator. The door shut with them on it just as a police officer was turning to see who had opened the private elevator.

"So who do you think that was from *Earl Gray*?" Muto asked as they were transported to where Lonnie was hoping was a comfortable couch. Both removed their masks and adjusted their clothing so they didn't appear too travel weary when they sat among the privileged.

"I just saw him around. He might have been a floater, working where he was needed. I never saw him with anyone. He was always walking somewhere."

Muto nodded thoughtfully. The elevator stopped smoothly and the doors slid open. Before stepping off the elevator, Muto looked around then nodded to Lonnie it was clear of trouble.

"On this level you won't see security people unless they're from a ship that's docked in one of those hangers. Those that can afford this level use this stop to attend to private business that is meant to remain private."

"By the looks of this place an expensive designer that isn't into comfort or useful furniture designed it. I bet no one sits on the seats or eats from these kiosks." Lonnie caught Muto's serious stare at her. "Muto, I get it. I see nothing and recognize no one. What happens here, stays here."

"Good. There's a waiting room for the hired help over there. The reason for the uncomfortable furniture is a reminder that loitering isn't condoned. If we can't get a lift from someone going in our direction I'll send out a message to a friend for a lift." Muto studied the ships docked as they passed. On each docking post the name of the ship, captain and owner of the vessel was posted. The color code identified how long the berth was rented for.

Stepping into the crew's waiting room was a familiar scene to Lonnie. There were hundreds of people dressed in uniforms identifying their job with an arm band showing what ship's crew they were part of.

"I see someone I know. I'm going to leave you here for a few moments. I'll keep you in sight."

"Muto, I'll be fine. Leave the stuff here at this couch. I plan on claiming it."

Once Lonnie was comfortable Muto went to speak with an acquaintance.

Lonnie closed her eyes and let the healing vibrations from the couch do their work. The scan determined what she needed and began once she became still. Healing couches were on all levels of transportation terminals.

A voice asked her a question.

Lonnie looked up at the young woman who pointed at her sitar case.

"Yes, I play it."

"Can you play it for us?" she asked in the language Lonnie answered in.

Lonnie looked around at the others who were all looking at her interested. "If no one has an objection I don't mind."

The woman smiled. "No one would dare to object. Some of us have been here for a few days waiting for our connection. Music is just what we need."

Lonnie pulled out her sitar and tuned it for a few minutes. When she felt ready she began a Rāga, intending on lifting the mood of the room. With her eyes closed she was better able to shut out what was around her and touch a memory when her teacher Gaholi played beside her. He was another person in her life that she missed dearly.

Muto watched the room liven up. People got up and danced. One person used furniture to beat out a rhythm to go with the sitar's music.

Muto turned back to his comrade listening to why he was here. Ambassador of Peied's wife, Ella, was his employer. Her sudden departure for a conference left her guards and staff behind and they were hurrying to catch up with her for her flight back to the embassy. There was a delay of her return from the conference and it left them stranded. That didn't sound like good news. Muto agreed with Weig that something was not right for her staff to be left behind and the delay was suspicious.

His eyes moved around the room again, catching the eyes of people he spotted as bodyguards. Their eyes never rested. He counted five groups waiting for their ships to be ready.

"All crew hands for the *Evermoor*. Your ship has arrived. Be ready to board," the announcement cut through the music.

However, Lonnie continued to play. Muto watched half the group prepare to leave. *Evermoor* was a large ship owned by the Eling family. Their travel seldom was for personal pleasure. While staff moved out the door a non uniformed woman entered and senior guard, Lt. Weig excused himself to speak with her. By his body language she was his boss.

When Lonnie finished with a flourish, those remaining let out a yell and one clap. Muto lent his yell and clap to the applause.

Lonnie opened her eyes and found the crowd had thinned. Standing near the door was a woman she would never be able to tell her age. Some species were like that. From her peripheral, Lonnie could see Muto moving toward her as the woman did.

The woman gave a polite nod to Lonnie, arriving just as Muto did. "I understand you two need a ride out toward Tanzinia. We're not headed near there but we will be stopping at a major space port where you can get better flight service. In return, we would love to hear more of your music when we get aboard our ship."

"That sound's like a fair deal. I'm Lonnie," she introduced.

"I'm Commander Lyan."

Lonnie smiled. "This is my companion..."

Commander Lyan held up a hand, smiling. "Not hardly. Kudhitea Muto did not gain his colors as a companion."

"If my name is spoken of so openly then I haven't been doing a good job. May I present to you, Commander Lyan, one of the greatest dancers of our time, Leona Bestrolie."

"I was hoping you would not keep that honor from me of knowing your name. I've seen you and Diva Kali Maxine dance. However, I am curious why you're stranded way out here?" Her eyes moved to Muto, asking a silent additional question of -- with him.

"I'm between dancing contracts so I'm taking a break from dancing. A specific destination is not as important as going somewhere. Tanzinia is an eventual destination."

Commander Lyan's attention moved to her group. "The *Slininder* will not be docking here to pick us up. A shuttle will be sent to fly us to her in two days. Captain Artx wants to make up the lost time by not taking a detour to pick us up."

Lonnie looked over at Muto wondering if he caught the change in the commander's voice. She began another Rāga while Muto moved closer to the commander for a conversation.

"Commander, may I have a private word with you?" Muto asked.

"Certainly," she answered. "Step into the privacy of the lobby. Will that do?"

Muto followed her out the door, giving a quick glance toward Lonnie. Her gaze was focused inward as she played.

"If you're going to tell me that something is wrong with the pickup arrangements, I already know that," Commander Lyan said.

"I was thinking, Commander, that if you can find a fast ship to meet up with the *Slininder* instead of waiting for her, you would be better off, no?" Muto asked.

"And where am I going to get such a ship?"

Muto smiled. "If you don't mind a bit of piracy, I noticed there's a private yacht and no crew hanging around."

"The *Englander*. I noticed her too and asked. According to the harbor master, she has a malfunction in the environmental plant and parts aren't going to be delivered until next week. The owner and crew transported to Ori until then." She raised her eyebrows in mild reprimand. "You're not thinking of stealing her are you?"

"Borrowing. Forget my poor use of the word piracy. You can fly to your ship and exchange crew, and they can fly back in the *Englander* and wait for their transport."

"What about the part that's damaged?" Commander Lyan asked.

"I've flown enough yachts to know other ways to keep the temperature within at a safe level. Just how far away is your destination?"

"Depends on how fast that ship can be squeezed. Do you know how we're going to commandeering that yacht and not have anyone object to it being gone?"

He looked at the wall clock. "Give me ten minutes."

Chapter 7

Slininder

Twenty minutes later everyone soon found that the two hour ride to *Slininder* was going to be uncomfortable. There were twenty-seven of them all crowded forward where the environment was maintained. Muto was wearing light clothing and was still sweating as if in a sauna within twenty minutes. He kept his eyes on the controls, willing the temperature to stay low. Their speed was the fastest the ship could be pushed without damaging anything. The idea was to borrow it and return it without further damage.

"Temperature is beginning to change aft ships," Cpl. Wieimerter reported.

"Let me know if the alarm goes off. We'll have to close the hatches and let it heat up, before venting again. Commander, what should we expect when we approach the *Slininder*?" Muto asked.

"I don't know."

"What happened to make this conference different?" Lonnie asked. The commander didn't respond immediately. "Something had to have occurred for the ambassador's wife to attend a conference she was not expected to attend, leaving her staff behind, notably her bodyguards," Lonnie added.

"She has a valid point, commander. Is it a secret that can't be shared?" Muto asked.

"The Ambassador's eldest son Elgan was to be one of the participants at this conference but an on-going illness kept putting off his attendance, thus delaying it a dozen times. When I reported for duty three days ago, I could not locate Ella. Her entire wait staff didn't know of her whereabouts. It took considerable arm twisting of a minor fop to find out Ella left in Elgan's stead. No one notified me that Ella was even considered."

"So the people surrounding her are her son's guards?" Lonnie asked.

"That would never happen. They go where he is. Guards from the barracks were sent with her. It may not be anything, but there are too many irregularities in this business that gives me a headache. I'm not saying the guards will not be good protectors of Ella, because all embassy guards are highly skilled at protecting anyone they are assigned to... but guarding Ella is our job."

"Thirty minutes until we are in sight of *ICC Slininder*, Commander," Cpl. Wieimerter reported.

"Reduce speed and come to all stop just out of her scan range, Corporal," the commander said.

"Aye, commander."

"Can you think of a reason why you were left behind?" Muto asked.

"No. Well, yes. Ella is a romantic. If she thought she was saving someone or thing with her own sacrifice she would leap at the chance."

"Leaving those she was concerned that would be harmed behind?" Lonnie asked.

"No, not at all. Ella feels that guards are perfectly capable of handling themselves in most circumstances. However, if those around her know her they may see what she is up to and prevent her from doing something that may harm herself. I wish I knew what this meeting was about."

"Coming to an all stop, commander. We're just out of reach of the *Slininder's* scan."

"I hope this venture doesn't get us all branded suicidal," Commander Lyan said.

"They'll see you as a dedicated bodyguard, Commander," Muto reassured her. "If you arrive first it will be taken as a threat until the usual formalities are gone through. We'll see what's going on board and give the safe signal if you can fly on in."

The yacht's shuttle was packed with everyone's luggage. The intention was to use it as a decoy, just in case there was something wrong aboard the *Slininder*. If anyone scanned the shuttle they would only see two biologicals and luggage, which was a good lead into why they were there.

"This is not fool proof," Muto told Lonnie as she looked over the unfamiliar controls.

"Nothing is fool proof," she agreed. "Can you tell me what I'm looking at?"

"Everything is automatic or verbal command." He touched a spot on the screen. "If you need to know what you're about to engage, touch the upper right and a menu appears. If you need lessons, upper left will tutor you."

"Audio and voice command is on," the shuttle's computer acknowledged his touch.

"Approach the *Slininder* from midships, reduce speed to drift, do not power down."

The *Slininder's* image began to fill their viewing screen adjusting the view as they drew alongside of her without any challenge.

"How are we going to get in?" Lonnie asked.

"I'm asking the *Slininder* to send an umbilicus over." He gave a short laugh. "There is no proper security on. It's doing as I ask."

"Is anyone on board?"

"No biologicals. Life support doesn't read any abnormality." He sent a message to the Commander. "I'm asking the Commander to send her group over. We're going to need to board the ship and it is her operation technically." He looked over at Lonnie. "Are you disappointed?"

"No, not really. I already tried a career change of putting myself out as bait. After this second adventure of the same, I want to change roles."

"I'm all for that. I feel overworked watching your back," Muto said.

"If that were so, you wouldn't have volunteered us to finding an ambassador's wife."

Muto was silent.

"Oh, I see. Another secret. I'll leave you to it," Lonnie said.

The umbilicus clanked as it attached to the exit hatch. The umbilicus was not like Lonnie had thought it would be like. There was no weightlessness and no instability to the tube. It was first class equipment. Once they were aboard the hatch closed and from the sounds, the umbilicus was retracted.

Lights gradually brightened. They were in a cargo bay where four shuttles were tied down as if the ship was being prepared for a long mooring. Muto looked at each ship closely as they passed.

"This place feels abandoned," Lonnie whispered to Muto.

"Let's get to the bridge and make sure it doesn't decide to get aggressive with *Englander*."

It was eerie jogging down a corridor that had lights turning on as they went. They had not gone far when the ship's PA came on.

"Switching command to Commander Lia Lyan. Change of command is authorized and completed. Security has been reestablished. All hands, Commander Lyan is on board and Captain of this ship."

Muto stopped with Lonnie in the corridor as feet pounding behind them alerted them they had company. Commander Lyan was leading her group of bodyguards and the rest of the staff. They halted along side of Muto and Lonnie.

"I want this entire ship searched for anything or anyone. Stay in twos. You all know this ship blindfolded so do diligence." She pointed to Muto and Lonnie. "You two are with me."

Lonnie and Muto followed the commander to her bridge. Her identity was acknowledged by the ship's automated security and the hatch slid open.

"COB on Deck," the computer noted.

"I was able to log into the ship's database from the *Englander* as if it was intended for me to do so, but there's nothing in the ship's logs from the date it started this flight."

"Have you ever captained a ship this size before?" Muto asked.

"Only in emergency drills. However, I'm one to take my training seriously so like my team, I know this ship stern to bow and everything in between so the unordinary we would spot." She sighed. "But I don't know anything about repairing it in space."

"Well, I know minor ship repair and I do know how to run diagnostics and dig out missing files," Muto offered.

"And you? Besides entertainment?"

"That's it," Lonnie said.

The commander's attention moved to the console where she watched codes being sent to the captain's chair as various parts of the ship were investigated and cleared by her teams.

It took two hours for the ship to be searched. No one else was found on board but them, though personal belongings were still there.

"Captain, can we unload our gear from the shuttle?" Lt. Brigm asked.

"Yes. Find quarters that are vacant. We're going to have to decide who will fly *Englander* back if we don't find anyone in five hours."

"I'll let the others know. It's easy enough to fly with two people."

"In an hour I'll want the squad leaders to meet in the captain's ready room."

"Will do, Commander." He nodded to her and left.

"Find anything yet, Kudhitea Muto?" the commander asked.

"I figured out how they were able to cover that missing time frame. They changed the time on the ship's clock and removed the overwrite safety on the logs so from the time it started to record again it wrote over the missing time. I'm picking out bytes of data that are nonsensical and when finished, I'll run it through with probabilities so that maybe it will fill in what went on."

"How long till I can see your results?"

"Five minutes. The program is running now. What do you know of Ella, personally?" Muto asked.

"Ella's a new wife of six months with no allies within the ambassador's household staff or among the ambassador's older children. Isolation was her treatment, typical of what any new comer faces in any organization. All her staff, including me, have been with her for six months. She's very quiet and even her eyes give nothing away. I've never met anyone that I can't get some sort of read on them, within a week at least." She let out a puff of air, annoyed. "Most of the time she reads. The ambassador's library is her favorite place when not in her own rooms."

"What about the children from the previous marriage, like the son that kept delaying the meeting?"

"I doubt it was him but rather the ambassador's staff, using him as an excuse to delay an official visit. All members of an ambassador's family and staff are used in whatever manner a situation calls for."

Muto thought about the process of making deals. Valuable relationships were cultivated slowly. Strangers didn't make good business partners; therefore, in some cultures, the whole process started with visits between lesser members of the two organizations. What changed about this meeting that went from a delay to a complete change of the messenger? It must be important if his boss ordered him to get the staff to the ambassador's wife as soon as possible. It was his boss's influence that gave him the use of the *Englander*.

"So everything they do is planned?" Lonnie asked.

"Yes," Muto and the commander said at the same time.

"If Elgen was the original representative maybe in his files would be why they are here." Muto listed names in the ship's database. "Here he is. Last time he updated this was when he was assigned to this meeting."

"It's coded," Commander Lyan said. "Try his name backward."

"How simple," Muto drawled, "I'm in."

"Everyone knows he forgets things so if anyone in his immediate staff is not available, he has no one to remind him of what he set his code to," Commander Lyan said.

"Here's a recording dated three days before the ship's logs were compromised," Muto said.

"Play it," Commander Lyan said.

"The matter of conscious has moved to the next level of negotiation," the message went.

"A new negotiator is expected before the Festival of Angor."

"End of message," the computer said.

"No reply," Muto observed.

"Is Ella sick?" Lonnie asked.

"Not that I'm aware. Why do you ask?"

"I heard of a story about a species that healed anyone that agreed to their terms of cure. The healing is done once a year on the Day of the Dead. That occurs around this time. If Day of the Dead is spoken in Gregot it almost sounds like the Festival of Angor. Do you know what Angor is about?"

"No."

"Let me look it up. Here we are. According to this information, this festival is due to start in a few hours." Muto tapped in coordinates and a map of the planet below came up. "Look at these coordinates. Right below us. This planet isn't even registered on the charts as habitable."

"Give me a view of the area and what the citizens look like," Lyan ordered. "All hands, this is the captain. I'm going to need seven of you to remain on board, two of you to fly the ship we borrowed back. Make the decision within the hour. Out."

"Just what do you intend on doing?" Lonnie asked alarmed. Her thoughts were still fresh on Amant and their secretive culture.

"You think she doesn't want us around?" the commander asked wryly. "It doesn't matter what she wants when it comes to her security detail. Both of us are bound by the requirements of her position."

"I can't see a thing," Muto said. They all stared at the screen as it scanned the area.

"These are the coordinates and there's nothing to pick up that's considered above domesticated or wild animals."

"Lt. Brigm, how long to ready a shuttle and a squad? No weapons."

"It's almost completed. Shall we send the *Roaming Eye* back to *Englander* with the two that will be flying her back?"

"Yes. Volunteers?"

"None, Commander. We had to flip the coin. We're all here to see it to the end."

"I like a loyal crew. Transfer what doesn't belong in the *Roaming Eye* off."

"Will do."

"Taking a chance, aren't you?" Muto asked.

"I'm not as young and inexperienced as I look. There has been no violence through this whole thing. For me to rush in blindly with weapons would be foolish."

"Do you mind if we come along?" Muto asked.

"Tourists? As long as you're not armed with weapons. Let's go. Lt. Weig, keep a sharp eye and ear open. We're going to be depending on you to watch our backs. The two should be flying the *Englinder* back in one hour if we're not back."

"Aye, Commander."

"Commander Lyan turning COB over to Lt. Weig,"

"COB is Lt. Weig," the ship acknowledged.

"Lt. Weig, is COB," Lt. Weig repeated.

Muto and Lonnie took the aft seats while the squad sat forward in a tight circle, listening to Commander Lyan's directions. Lonnie noticed Muto's and her bags were moved to the shuttle. Their stay was obviously not going to be long.

Muto leaned over and whispered to Lonnie, "So, how are you doing so far?"

"I feel like a tourist on a ride-a-long with star troopers," Lonnie returned. "Is there a reason why we're getting this involved?"

"Opportunity opens doors. Have you ever been to one of these festivals? Usually they're invitation only."

"In my travels I've met a lot of people that have visited festivals reveling in death on various planets, but I've only once heard the Day of the Dead referred to as healing."

"Do you doubt the people you heard it from?" Muto asked.

"No. They're trustworthy." Lonnie smiled at who had told her of this odd twist. "Leuwig and Herling are the people I've engaged to construct my home."

"So, you do have some place to call home," Muto teased.

"Right now, no structures to live in. It's still in the planning stages. They construct homes to blend in with the environment. You may have heard of Homes are..."

"Homes Are Us? I did hear of them. Construction nomads. Oh, oh. It sounds like you're buying a place that no one can be seen for miles around...until someone buys the land next to yours. Is it on one of those frontier planets? Godsbeblessed, but Lonnie, you should know better than that to invest in those places. Those places attract lawlessness, where crooks and outlaws run to."

Lonnie laughed. "Leuwig and Herling have already constructed a dozen homes on *my* frontier planet as you call it, and they say the planet's governing body is progressive with a good mixture of species so alarmists don't mess up the ecobalance."

"We're preparing for landing," the pilot announced.

Commander Lyan came to the back to speak with them. "I would like you two to wait with the shuttle. See, we even have jobs for the tourists." She looked at Muto. "We'll keep in touch. I was thinking, maybe these people live underground."

"Could be," Muto agreed.

The shuttle bumped a little and then before it was fully settled, the exit hatch opened and the guards emptied out.

Chapter 8

Seeking a Lost Soul

Muto moved to the pilot's seat to monitor the readings of the guards as they moved into a search pattern.

"So what are they looking for?" Lonnie asked, settling in the seat behind Muto.

"I don't know."

"Do you mind if I sit outside?"

"As long as you stay close." He tapped the screen, "I'll see you here."

Lonnie sat in the sun for a while until she got bored. "Hey," she called Muto. "How's it going with the search party?"

"She has them cross checking."

"Hm." Lonnie went into the back and pulled out her guitar. If she was going to wait around, she would keep herself entertained. Sitting on a rock nearby, Lonnie tuned her guitar and then played warm ups. The way the sounds bounced around made the guitar sound richer than what it was.

"Do you know a dancing tune?" a young voice asked.

Lonnie smiled at the small person. Without thinking, her fingers started to play something. Her audience grew to a dozen or more people. As she played another tune she was joined by other musicians that sat next to her and joined in. Jigs and dances that Lonnie had never seen before were interchanged with reels and hops that would ordinarily tire dancers out in a short time.

Lonnie finished her part and the others kept playing. From her vantage point she watched as the dances went on.

"You don't belong here," a woman said. Lonnie looked at a woman taller than most attending the dance.

"Of course she does," a stout little person told her. "It's music that brings her here. But, you can't stay," he added.

Lonnie looked at the young woman wondering if she was Ella. "I'm looking for someone."

"You have no business looking for anyone here," the woman said.

"The person you're looking for hasn't made up her mind about returning," the man answered.

"She's very young," Lonnie said.

"What do you know about her?" the woman demanded.

"Not much," Lonnie admitted. "But there's a whole galaxy out there to make a new life."

"What does that matter when there's a hole in your life?"

Lonnie looked at her surprised. "Who are you talking about?"

"Why are you here?" the woman demanded.

"To make music," the stout person said. "Lighten up. It's time for more dancing." He pushed the woman toward the dancers.

One of the dancers caught Lonnie's eye as something about him was familiar.

"Join me in a bit of sound?" an accented voice asked.

Lonnie turned about so quickly she nearly dropped her sitar.

"That's a nice instrument. Is it new?" Gaholi asked.

Lonnie's jaw dropped at seeing the legend of the sitar sitting on a glittering cushion next to her. His own sitar was beside him.

"Yes," she managed. She looked at the instrument she was holding and found it was her sitar not her guitar.

"It was gift."

"I wanted you to have mine but it was destroyed with all my things," he said sadly.

"Gaholi, where is this place?"

He looked thoughtful with the familiar far away look in his eyes as if what she asked required deep soul searching. He was like that even when she told him not to pull back on the hang glider bar when he walked off the cliff. It was as if he wanted to play it in his mind many times before doing it physically.

"I don't know if there are words or concepts you would understand. It will have to suffice for me to say we are in the moment."

His eyes stared at her instrument so she offered it to him. "Please play it."

Gaholi smiled at her in his dreamy way. "You can use mine. We'll play together, like we used to...but I'm sure you've improved since then."

Lonnie laughed. "I've practiced a lot more, that's certain." Lonnie curled her legs under her and picked up his sitar. There was no tuning strings or preamble as the moment Gaholi settled the sitar he began Rāga Adanā and her own fingers went into play.

Closing her eyes she felt peaceful playing the sitar with Gaholi. It was years ago that the young galaxy star, worshiped by many for his gift, was taking a break from the public on a cruise aboard the *Earl Gray*. They became friends and made an exchange. She taught him hang gliding and he taught her how to play the sitar.

Though Lonnie was sure they played a long time, when she opened her eyes at the finish of a rāga she had no name for, there was only her and an audience. Standing up she looked over the heads of the dancers to see if Gaholi was anywhere to be seen. The audience moved into a dance as other players began to play.

Reaching down to pick up her sitar, she noted it was a guitar again.

"You can't stay here much longer," the stout man told her.

"Has she made up her mind yet?" Lonnie asked.

"Well, you see, it's not an easy decision, one that can be made so quickly; however, there is no time here so only you have to worry about leaving."

"Why only me?"

"Because you are here out of curiosity, not for a purpose." He nodded to the woman that had been defensive to her. "She came here with a notion that to redeem the honor of her father she could swap places with someone else who has her own reasons to be here. It doesn't work that way but she thought she could make such a deal...anything is possible...but not this time."

"Why not just tell her?"

His smile nearly overtook his face, his eyes becoming black shiny slits. "What is there to be gained for her if someone else does her work?"

"Why am I here?" Lonnie asked.

"Your choices brought you here and your music opened the door." He leaned toward her. "I'm speaking of heart choices."

He beamed as if he told Lonnie something very important.

Lonnie resumed her playing, finding it difficult not to. As abruptly as they appeared, they were gone.

Chapter 9

Waking Up The Sleeping

"Hey, Lonnie. Wake up."

Lonnie blinked a few times and realized she fell asleep leaning against a tree. She was hugging her guitar as if fearing someone would take it while she napped.

"What time is it?" she asked Muto.

He looked at the position of the sun. "Hours after noon for this planet. Way past your bedtime by your previous life." He grinned. "The commander is bringing everyone in. She didn't mention she had found Ella."

"What about the people with her?"

"I'm guessing by the number of life readings, that she's found some of the missing *Slininder* crew."

Lonnie walked up the ramp and repacked her guitar, taking a moment to check to see if her sitar was still there.

The people herded onto the shuttle looked dazed. Their festive clothing was ready for a wash but the oddest thing was, no one was wearing footwear.

"Where's the captain?" Muto asked Commander Lyan softly.

"The shuttle made a crash landing with four minor officers still strapped in their seats dead. But, I did retrieve the recorder so I'm hoping there will be some information I can use to figure out what happened. We found these poor souls twenty minutes away, just standing there."

The shuttle powered up and left the planet's surface, heading back to *ICC Slininder*.

"This is Commander Lyan, to Lt. Weig on the *ICC Slininder*, come in."

"Commander! Come in! Are we ever glad to hear from you!" Lt. Weig's huff of relieved air had them all in the shuttle wondering what was happening.

"We'll be docking in three minutes. Prepare to... What in the name of the gods is happening?" Commander Lyan demanded.

"That shuttle, *Guest Ride* just suddenly appeared before you called in. It's riding rough. Cpl. Weimerter's handling that. I'm really glad you're back, Commander. You're not going to believe what's happening up here. Out."

"Get this shuttle in the bay now," Commander Lyan ordered her pilot.

Guest Ride's erratic pattern was stabilized and settled in the docking bay right behind them.

"Watch them, will you?" the commander asked Muto and without waiting for an answer was out the exit hatch with her guards. They surrounded the shuttle and when the hatch opened, her people went inside.

"Lonnie?" Muto was staring at the people in his charge.

"Music...it's sound waves. If they're in a hypnotic trance, it could break it." She leaned over and was going to reach for her guitar but instead picked up her sitar. Just tuning it had eyes blinking as if their passengers were startled awake.

Commander Lyan poked her head in the shuttle looking surprised. Everyone in the shuttle that had been in a trace was looking around them bewildered.

"Just like in the other shuttle. They started to waken when you started to make music. Let's see what's happening on the bridge. Guards, you two remain with them."

As they hurried through the ship they found people standing in a trance as the others had been.

"You can play that thing over the comm," Commander told Lonnie. "Looks like your entertainment connection is a valuable weapon."

"Weapon?" Lonnie was alarmed at the thought.

"It's just an expression," Muto said as he hurried beside her.

"Words are power. I don't like my music to be called a weapon, even in jest."

Commander Lyan looked over at Muto, "Your friend is much too serious."

Muto smiled and glanced at Lonnie who made a face.

The bridge hatch opened and the five stopped in their tracks. The vanished crew appeared everywhere, and they were all in a daze.

"Lonnie, do your thing, will you? Captain Artx. He doesn't look so good, but he looks a heck of a lot better than when I last saw him. "

Muto offered a seat to Lonnie. Lonnie settled and began playing scales, nothing serious. Everyone began to move around as if coming out of a mental fog; alarmed where they found themselves and more so when Commander Lyan and her group was noticed.

It was decided in two hours, Captain Artx, Ambassador's wife, Ella who reappeared, and Commander Lyan would have a conference.

Muto and Lonnie were not invited.