

## Chapter 20

### *Promises Kept*

Cot woke up slowly, taking pleasure in not having anything scheduled to be up early for. Mentally, she rechecked her list. They had made three stops at various gizmos suppliers and *Star* was happily updating their purchases. Other supplies, including an interesting statue *Star* asked her to pick up, had been completed. Her reports to HQ and correspondence to her SID-mates she was caught up on.

Staring at the overhead, stars twinkled in the pseudo nebula. The view changed subtly, giving way to gaseous clouds with sparkling galaxies, suns and black holes. It wasn't the same as standing outside the ship and being present in the real thing, but at the moment she wasn't interested in waking to see herself suspended in space. The reality was, if the ship was moving at normal gs in a travel corridor the scenery would have been strings of lights which had its own wonder to behold.

"Greetings, *Star Chaser*."

"Greetings, Cot."

"What's our status to the nearest gate?"

"Two hours and 15 minutes from Flaming Chronos Gate. There is nothing that needs immediate attention," *Star* said. "However, you will need to prospect a meteorite for cell juice soon."

"I noticed on yesterday's scan the cells were low. Isn't that rather sudden?"

"The quality depreciates at a higher rate as its level lowers. I am investigating why since this is not mentioned in the shipyard specs, nor have I noticed it in our previous travels."

"The differences in our recent travels to now is that we're taking travel corridors, we're traveling at higher gs, and we're in constant motion. All three are probably contributing to that drain, unless you missed a leak."

"I have no leaks in my cell chambers. I am investigating those three factors. I will send my observations to our SID-mates and see if they are experiencing the same drain."

"Maybe we'll come across a supplier," Cot said.

"Their quality is not guaranteed. It must be unprocessed and fresh," *Star* said. There was a pause. "Our extractor is more than adequate," *Star* said.

"One of the bots can't operate it?" Cot asked.

"Creating an automated extractor is not a priority," *Star* said, without appearing to be affected with Cot's teasing.

The extractor was seldom used but not so trivial that it didn't get *Star's* attention to upgrade as much as possible for that model. If it were to become automated *Star Chaser* would have to design a new model. It would take her focus away from her primary duties, such as: upgrading and designing better defenses; processing everything she came across; and keeping track of her pilot and her as they moved through fluid space. *Star Chaser* was a vacuum for information and Cot wondered again, where *Star* stored everything she took in.

"Carry on, then. If you find a meteorite that meets my criteria of nothing dangerous, living or.... "

"You want it to be safe with minimum effort," *Star* said.

"Thank you, *Star*. If replenishing our supplies becomes more often, we'll add stopping on a meteorite a regular chore, that way we won't be surprised with suddenly having dry cells."

"That is a potential problem," *Star* agreed.

Cot, dressed in ritual clothing, knelt in front of her sacred space to begin her daily salutations. A flat stone was lying at the base of her altar that she didn't notice when she was standing. Its hue was unknown in her color spectrum, thus giving off an odd appearance. Without fear, she placed her left palm on top of it.

*Queen Ereschkigal's Book of Travel.*

*Chapter One – Preparation and Rules to Follow for Passing Each Gate.*

*Work with whatever you encounter, engaged fully in the moment, it began.*

## Chapter 21

### *Mortliege*

"What's this?" Cot tapped the screen where there was an indication of an explosion and a noticeable gap between information.

"It needs further analysis," *Star* said.

"When did it occur?" The information *Star* provided was adequate for her, but normally such happenings were meticulously recorded to share with the other SID-ships.

"Four hours ago."

"Was it a planet going nova?" Cot hadn't seen any broadcast warnings that there was a white dwarf soon to go nova in this part of space. Cot turned around at the scratching sound. "Did you lock our guest in the storage closet? Is there something I need to know about you and the bot?"

"No."

"Have you two decided on a name yet?" Cot asked.

"No."

The relationship between *Star* and her bot friend was getting more curious as their journey progressed, but Cot didn't see any reason for her to insert herself into their link yet. They needed to find their own way. As she had learned in dealing with various species, not all relationships followed the same stages or could be measured by the amount of trust you placed in your partner. Depending on the situation a sudden meeting could cause people that would normally not form relationships become caught up in what could be likened to an intimate relationship. It was common sense that if you knew someone was not good with secrets you wouldn't tell them something you wanted to remain a secret; however it didn't mean a friendship was impossible.

"There will be no abusing guests, *Star*."

"I will follow protocol," *Star* agreed.

"What pro..." Cot jumped back in astonishment as *Star's* friend zipped out of the closet she was opening. It buzzed two circles around her then came to rest over her shoulder. When nothing else happened, Cot returned to her seat, determined to not laugh aloud. She called up the star charts and the bot settled close to her.

"This gate will take us past a section of space that has heavy commerce activity. Rizon Space." Cot had to admit her tone sounded wistful. She could feel *Star's* interest perk. "They have more service space stations and shop stations along that travel corridor than planets. There are food vendors worth their stall placement on all the stations that can accurately gage your eating tastes and keep you there tasting new foods for months. Clothing, toys, ship repair, entertainment, and anything you want to buy is along that travel corridor, but you have to watch yourself. If you stand out like a mark, you'll have every crook hitting you up for something."

"Do you want to stop there and shop?" *Star* asked.

There were stories and secrets for *Star* to find at Rizon's Space Corridor and plenty of potential trouble to get into should *Star's* delving into people's secrets without asking be found out. It was bad enough that at every stop at an arms dealer, *Star Chaser* was able to get into their private files and pick them apart for information. Even if they were legitimate dealers, their suppliers weren't. As with most information *Star* gathered, Cot reviewed it and sent it to HQ.

"No. I was just reminiscing. I was doing escort service for an ambassador's family. They loved to shop there."

"Are you bored, Cot?"

"I'm not bored, *Star*" Cot said firmly.

"We are within distance of the gate to send a gizmo forward to scan for any ships within the area," *Star* said.

"SOP, *Star*."

"Standard operating procedures, Cot. Releasing six monitors. Transmitting test signals. Test returned good. Monitors are away."

When within the right distance from the portal *Star* sent the pass code and the portal opened for their entrance. *Star* drifted in with enough momentum to carry them at a good speed before power was shut down to drift, leaving little disturbance of their passage for someone to trail. Unless there was a need to hurry, the currents in the corridor could carry them along at sufficient gs. After all the travel corridors already cut travel time from one destination to another sometimes by years, months, days or hours, depending on the point of entry to destination.

While they sailed through the corridor, Cot reviewed reports *Star* prepared for her. *Star's* progress of recovering the information from their visit of the *Murdellie* was not completed. *Star* couldn't explain why the information kept deleting at different points of the recovery. Cot had her suspicion that maybe their visiting bot had something to do with it, which would explain *Star's* treatment of the bot.

Her eyes lifted to a movement on her screen. One of the forward monitors was sending images back of weapons fire.

"Cannon blasts from a midsize ship," *Star* said. "Information is now coming in."

"Send predators for back up. Bring up speed. Prepare defenses...remember no weapons fire in the corridor."

"Two armed predators released," *Star* said. "The forward monitor is not equipped to defend itself from cannon fire."

"How long until the predators are in position?"

"Three minutes."

If *Star Chaser* increased her speed by too much it would cause energy in the corridor to change and they would probably miss the exit by inches which would put them somewhere else in the galaxy.

From the images the monitor sent, a ten person yacht was faced off with five larger ships that crewed fifty. Now on first sight this would seem as though the civilian yacht was outgunned and needed to be rescued, but if that were so, three of the larger ships would not be listing as if they had lost helm power. Two mobile ships were maneuvering to get a clean shot past their drifting comrades.

"Five ships and one civilian yacht, called the *Glass Eye*, Cot. The five ships have no identifiers."

The civilian yacht that had fire power most private yachts wished they possessed continued to make good shots at her attackers' defense grids and defending her hull against the sporadic shots from the only two moving ships. *Glass Eye* made a direct hit to one of the two still mobile attack ships, leaving one active that slid behind one of its defenseless comrades. A small explosion to the yacht's port side. It ran into a mine.

"Pirates in the five ships are hailing the *Glass Eye* and demanding the mortliege to heave to for boarding and seizure. It is their repeated message."

"A mortliege and pirates?" Cot never met a mortliege and hoped one would not have reason to come looking for her. "Do you have information on the yacht yet? How many on board?"

"One biological on board the *Glass Eye*. I am in the process of accessing the ship's records," *Star* replied.

"Just copy them. Translate later," Cot said. "We need to prevent detection of the gate from the pirates, if they don't already know of its existence."

A shot to the yacht sent it spinning toward the gate so even if the pilot tried not to reveal its presence, it was going to happen.

"When the predators are in position, blind the five unnamed ships, then tow that yacht in. Leave no trace of this place in their ship's memory or the crews...and send their ships to the nearest military outpost."

"I will in the future locate military outposts wherever we spend more than two hours in a sector," *Star* said. "Clev R16 will clean the area of any trace of ships in this area."

*Star Chaser's* predator defenders sent coordinated shots to disable the remaining ship. *Star Chaser* reprogrammed the five ships with new headings to the nearest military outpost. Then *Star* towed the yacht through the gate.

"Pilot in the *Glass Eye*, don't shoot your rescuer, please. We're towing you through the gate. Ready yourself for a hatch-to-hatch connect."

Cot hurried to welcome the pilot, concerned when *Star's* scan of the yacht showed a toxic leak in the interior. In case the pilot was injured, *Star* felt an umbilicus was unsafe and chose the hatch connect where *Star* could control the environment.

Cot donned a face mask and *Star* had the hatch area encased in a bubble. As soon as the hatch cover was open, a tattered body fell through with alarms sounding in the *Glass Eye*.

*Star* promptly cleared the air around them while an SE closed the hatch. A medical bot immediately came active and attended to the battered figure. From her appearance, she spent some time in the company of unfriendly people and escaped without shoes or much clothing.

"I will send out a team to inspect *Glass Eye*, Cot. Shall I begin immediately with repairs?"

Should the ship be repaired? Towing it around until they found a suitable place to drop it off may leave them vulnerable to attacks which they've seen a lot of lately. Cot studied the unconscious woman, thinking of how disruptive her presence would be until she found a place to drop her off. Would *Star Chaser* forget that she was classified and chat with the stranger as if it were with a friend? She certainly had a story to tell.

"Yes."

After the medibot made certain the woman was stable enough to move, she was lifted and moved to the guest quarters. *Star's* bot hovered over the injured pilot.

"Since you're no help, wait out in the corridor," Cot said.

What little there was of clothing, was removed carefully, reopening cuts where the clothing had become part of the clot. Under all the damage, body tattoos covered most of her skin. She heard a mortliege's tattoos were to honor the patron the mortliege took at fifth level.

As cuts and bruises were administered to and her skin cleaned, repairs to her skin was done, restoring the tats and their story.

*Star Chaser* moved them to a place where traffic was least likely to occur, with *Glass Eye* in tow. Sensors were scattered around to warn them of anyone approaching their position. Once their passenger was settled for medical sleep, Cot went to change into her AVEC suit to make a

visual inspection of her own of the *Glass Eye*. *Star* estimated four days to finish the repairs on the exterior hull with the interior a big question mark. The interior had been stripped.

As Cot walked through the ship it was gutted of everything but the captain's station, but a chair. Bare bones of the hull surrounded her with tubes and connectors being replaced by the SEs. One console and chair, supplied from *Star Chaser's* supply, was all there was on the bridge.

"It looks like this ship was stolen from a salvage yard. How was it able to defend itself and how was the pilot able to manage so much as injured as she was? If she's an example of all mortlieges, we're certainly lucky we haven't had to face any."

"I will research what the profession requires," *Star* said.

Cot returned to her ship. She stopped to see how their injured passenger was. *Star's* guest bot was hovering outside of the opened hatch.

"Let our guest wake up on her own," Cot said.

"Would you like her hatch cover locked?" *Star* asked.

"No. Until she wakes up, she's no danger...unless you believe otherwise."

As Cot studied her she wondered what was familiar about her. She was sure she had never met her before.

In the cargo bay Cot lit her incense sticks and set up her circle. She called her guardians. Before her the altar stone disappeared and a blank background appeared. Cot drew runes in the air designed for intuiting a soul's intentions. A slice of tattered clothing with her passenger's blood on it was lying before her and that she used to get more than one level of reading on the woman. Waiting patiently the images from her passenger's life began to flash before her. Finally, Cot made a gesture of thanks to those that had assisted her and reopened her circle of protection.

"How is our new guest, *Star*?"

"Healing. Sleeping."

"She's a Star Force agent." Cot frowned, realizing how complicated this rescue had become. "Let me know when she does awaken. What's the progress on the repairs of *Glass Eye*?"

"What are your expectations for the ship?" *Star* asked.

"It's that bad?" Cot asked.

"I can fix what is broken but not replace what was removed. With the exception of the chair my supplies do not cover redecorating or replacement of consoles and sleeping quarters."

"Fix only what will get *Glass Eye* to a safe port or if that's not possible we'll tow the ship to the nearest ship repair and be done with it all. Were you able to get anything from the yacht's records?"

"I copied everything before it was wiped clean. If I had not done so, everything would be gone. There is no backup."

Where had the pilot been that she needed to wipe the ship clean so there was nothing to recover? "Any chance of a backup being hidden?"

"The program was very efficient in wiping all evidence of previous programming," *Star Chaser* said.

Cot's eyes narrowed as it occurred to her that maybe this mortliege had plans to commandeer *Star Chaser*. SF agent or not, that wasn't going to happen.

"Maybe she knew you copied over the files," Cot said.

"I copied encrypted information. I have not decoded the information yet."

"If you don't have it by the time she awakens, we'll ask her for it," Cot said.

It had to be a good code if *Star* was unable to translate it, but then, *Star* was stumped with not being able to recover the missing *Murdellie* files, she thought. Now that they were out of the

space *Star Chaser* knew, she was encountering new challenges that she couldn't solve as quickly as she once had. Cot believed it was good experience. She would discuss it with her SID-mates, to see if they were encountering similar challenges, though she didn't think the other SID-ships were as confident in their knowledge as *Star Chaser* was.

"How did she maneuver the ship without a console?" Cot wondered aloud.

"ReaT helmet," *Star* answered. "There were remnants of it in the compactor and the compactor's memory was erased with everything else so there isn't anything to salvage."

"*Star*, locate the nearest supply depot SF clears us to visit for supplies. See if they also do ship repairs. If it works out, we'll tow *Glass Eye* in and let her pilot make arrangements while we replenish our stores. Maybe SF will have some new gizmos for you to test."

"Do you want me to halt further repairs on *Glass Eye*?"

"Is it possible for life support and minimal flight power with what is there?"

"Maneuvering and life support is possible. The engine is too damaged to pull any g's."

"Then go ahead and do what you can, just in case she wants to save the hull and refurbish the interior. Some people are very attached to their ships. *Star*, I want you to be able to clear *Glass Eye* at the first sign of trouble. I want to be able to jump out of trouble before it closes on us."

"I will have plenty of advance warning if anyone approaches our position, Cot."

"If she wasn't a SF agent, I would suspect she was lying in wait for us with a staged battle, knowing we would rescue her and her ship."

"How would she know we would be there?" *Star* asked.

"HQ can track us through the kiosks I send my reports."

Before Cot retired *Star* informed her HQ did not clear her to stop at any ship repair station even if it was an emergency. SF would send a repair freighter rather than risk anyone from seeing *Star Chaser* up close and personal, and *Glass Eye* wasn't a SF ship so it wasn't considered an emergency.

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On the second day when Cot was warming up for a workout *Star Chaser* made an announcement. "The mortliege has awakened. Her name is Diana Rue."

"Is she on her feet yet?"

"Physically, she is still gathering strength. She asked me who I am, what year, and sector we are in. She would not give me the code to restore her ship's programming."

"Maybe she will when she gets to know you better," Cot said amused. "When I'm finished with my workout I'll have a visit with her," Cot said. "That should give her enough time to refresh herself and test her legs." And by then, *Star Chaser* would have plenty of background information on her, Cot thought.

"Why would she not answer my questions? We have rescued her," *Star* asked.

"Maybe because she thinks you're interrogating her. What would you have done with Ara if she didn't answer you?"

"I had gathered information on Ara to know what information to exchange with her."

"You're classified. Communicating to Ara would have been revealing classified information," Cot said. "Offer our new guest some refreshment."

"Ara and Diana both have a high security clearance."

"Ara isn't Star Force. Just how high is Diana?" *Star* must have begun her search the moment she learned Diana's name. There is no stopping a curious *Star Chaser*, Cot thought humorously.

"She is classified and under another name I can not repeat."

"Why does someone so important have no backup?"

"We have no backup," *Star* said.

"We have CBIS, your defenses and our SID-mates, *Star*. They may be hours away, but they are there. I thought I read in the manual that when an agent is on a mission, there has to be back up within minutes."

"Maybe she is all that's left of her team," *Star* said.

"I'll ask her," Cot said.

"I have already asked her if she is on a mission. She returns my questions with questions and does not answer me," *Star* said.

"You didn't say anything about our mission did you?"

"No. Though her security clearance is above yours, protocol only allows me to pass on that information after I have cleared it with you."

"You've gotten better at keeping yourself a secret, *Star*. You can acknowledge information she knows already."

*Star Chaser* arranged for Cot's self defense teacher today to be short and fat, who liked to throw his weight around. For one hour she was kept busy defending herself with non lethal counter punches, tempted at times to deliver a lethal blow to stop the relentless attack that she was sure was leaving bruises on her torso and appendages. Suddenly the holograph folded in on itself and stopped.

Solitary clapping had her looking up startled.

"Good workout, Captain. Thank you for the rescue."

Diana Rue looked fully recovered from her injuries; in fact, she looked very healthy and fit. It was interesting what clothing *Star Chaser* produced that she chose to wear. It was a civilian's version of a flight suit and on her feet were spacer work boots. That wouldn't be something Purser *Star Chaser* would add to a closet without being asked.

"I'm glad to have been able to assist, Diana Rue. That was good shooting for a civilian yacht."

"It was a good program that came with the weapons, captain."

"Call me Cot."

"Diana is fine for me, and thank you for the clothing."

"You're welcome. There wasn't any luggage on the *Glass Eye*."

"It was removed along with everything else." Diana looked at the bot that moved past her and settled near Cot's shoulder. "So, this is a Caronda Fighter and *Star Chaser* is a sentient ship, aye?" Diana continued.

"Yes."

"This is a friendly ship for a military investment. For all the secretive business about these ships why am I conscious?" Diana asked.

"Are you hungry?" Cot wanted to laugh but kept her face neutral. Diana obviously didn't realize how much information they had on her.

"Famished." Diana gave her an odd look.

"I'm surprised *Star* didn't offer you refreshment."

"I was offered. I'm not prepared to be questioned relentlessly than offered a beverage without having some suspicion about my host's intentions."

"*Star Chaser* is curious. When she has the advantage to gather information she takes it. We'll share a meal and talk...and see if you want your ship repaired."

"Who do you plan on repairing that much damage?"

"Do you have any suggestions?" Cot asked.

"None. Are we near a ship repair vessel or... you're joking, right?" She reacted to Cot's laugh, who was thinking of HQs message to stay away from any ship repair places. "Just how long was I out?"

"Two days. Was the attack personal?"

"That last bunch wasn't into conversation so I don't know."

"How long were you being pursued by them?"

"Not long. You should teach *Star Chaser* to ask questions along this line. I may have answered them not having all my wits about me."

"We have different agendas, though not too much different. Here's the galley. Order up something. I'll be a moment to clean up and will join you. *Star* will keep you company. *Star*, for whatever question she asks, you get one from her. Keep in mind, you're classified."

*Star's* bot friend watched Diana from the corridor.

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When Cot returned Diana had a glass of something half full in front of her and was listening to music with her eyes closed. The bot was sitting out of Diana's reach on a shelf. Though Cot was sure she was quiet, Diana's eyes opened the moment she was at the hatch.

"Did the drink take care of your hunger?" Cot asked.

"It's a recommendation by your medibot before I eat something solid."

"Do you have a palate preference, Diana?"

Diana gave a preference and a SE prepared two plates. Conversation during their meal was limited to compliments on the meal and music. When they finished their meal, the SE removed their dishes and Cot looked at Diana in askance.

"So, you were asking why I didn't move you to a sleep pod to be delivered surreptitiously to a medical station."

"Yes."

"You're mortliege, you know of a travel gate that's seldom used, you practice QuaDom and you're Star Force." She gave the hand gesture that she had practiced with *Star* on how to be recognized by another SF agent.

Diana gave the return sign.

"How did you find that information out? That information is classified."

"*Star Chaser* is very good at finding secrets out. What time or place did you think you were in?" Cot asked.

Cot had the distinct feeling, that Diana wasn't pleased with that information, though her body language didn't change.

"Sometimes racing across space in a ship that is out of whack can put the passenger just about anywhere. My brother Ati's not going to be happy with me when I return it as stripped as it is."

Cot led her to *Star's* bridge, gesturing for Diana to take the passenger seat.

Diana sank into the seat and sighed at the comfort. "I know this isn't military furniture. Not even *Glass Eye* had this much comfort. And the service bots and medibot...are they SFs latest?"

"I like being comfortable given the chance. What time are you from?" Cot asked.

"The same as yours," Diana said. The two consoles unfurled before them coming active when flat. "Just how much damage to *Glass Eye* was done? I wasn't too conscious of her condition."

"*Star*, show us status on *Glass Eye*, please," Cot said.

Both screens for each chair began to fill with information. Cot watched Diana as she studied the report. She looked like she understood it.

"This is showing it has a crack in the engine plant and needs a new one." Diana looked annoyed. "And everything but the engine, one console and the weapons were all they left. I was lucky they were greedy and wanted the software and armaments intact."

"You're right, so just how did you manage to fight off those pirates with you as injured as you were and with a stripped ship?"

"I don't give away my secrets." Diana smiled at Cot then turned her attention to the scan of *Glass Eye's* interior. "I see you found me a pilot's chair. Thank the gods. Piloting without something soft to sit on or lay on was rough," Diana said.

"What does your brother do that needs all that armament?"

"He's a gambler. The people he gambles with can get nasty about losing or collecting their wins."

"*Star* found a GRF seal on your hull. She pulled the repair logs on *Glass Eye* from Geminess Repair Facilities, where a month ago she was given a clean bill of health. GRF would never allow a ship they did repairs on leave with the potential for the engine blowing up so soon without recording their warning. Have you been time jumping?"

"I might have."

"All that we can repair is life support and give you enough thrust power to dock. *Star* will need the code so she can reload the system software."

"She can download the information back where she found it. I'll handle the rest," Diana said. "You can leave me and my ship near a ship repair yard and we'll call for a tow."

Cot felt a stir in her connection with *Star*. She glanced at the monitor. "*Star*, to your starboard! Give me a reading!"

Diana looked at her terminal. "Something's coming through hyperspace. It's a big disturbance maybe the beginnings of..." Diana said.

"A squad. Twelve ships I count and maybe more behind them. *Star*, we're leaving."

"SEs are back on board at the first sign of a disturbance. I have released *Glass Eye*. We are underway."

"What are you going to do with *Glass Eye*?" Diana asked.

"Nothing."

"Where are we going?"

"Away from here. We'll return when they've cleared out. *Star* has left a monitor so we'll know if they find the *Glass Eye* what they'll do with it. They could be just a normal patrol looking for pirate activity."

"If this is a normal patrol, I hope they don't have some techie that loves to collect abandoned yachts and fix them up during his spare time," Diana said.

"Unless it's the captain's passion, I doubt room will be made for a hobby of that proportion. The captains I knew liked neat and tidy bays without something that complicated taking up space."

It was in a matter of moments and then there was only space around them with nothing threatening.

"So how did you end up being surrounded by pirates?" Cot asked.

"It's a complicated story," Diana said.

"Just the kind *Star Chaser* is interested in. You can leave off the secret stuff."

"I was returning from a mission when I realized *Glass Eye's* navigation kept recalibrating. A ship appeared before me without the usual space displacement registering. Morgan, an old acquaintance, greeted me with all the usual pleasantries people who haven't seen each other for a while do. He came over to the *Glass Eye* with wine he procured from some unmemorable planet and proceeded to drink himself into the usual stupor while regaling me with adventure stories. When he started to repeat stories I suggested he return to his ship and sleep it off, and when he's feeling better he could tell me where we were. He was quite amicable about it and toddled off to his ship.

"I woke up to alarms on *Glass Eye*, his ship was nowhere on my scans, and I'm being attacked by ships I wasn't able to identify. I installed on *Glass Eye* a program that would automatically go into attack mode if threatened. I was sadly out numbered and was going to go down in fiery glory when Morgan shows up again, draws the attackers to him, and he disappears with the ships. I was almost out of that part of space, when a pack of pirates netted me. While I was aboard the pirate chief's ship, her crew boarded *Glass Eye*, and proceeded to gut her. Morgan again drops in and gets me out of the pirates clutches. I flee in a ship that even my brother's interior decorator wouldn't recognize. As soon as he leaves, I find myself near a gate I happen to have a code to but...there's a new group of pirates whose ships I don't recognize and they have their guns blazing my way, blocking my escape through the gate."

"Is Morgan mortliege or a..."

"Whatever strikes his interest is what he's about. He's an adventurer crossing paths with whatever travels space. However, I've never known him to dump trouble in someone's lap unless he meant to," she said.

"Don't you think it's rather suspect that the pirates removed comfort items and not self-defense items from your ship?" Cot asked.

"Not for a pirate. They won't waste something that they can turn around and use. They'll strip her battery but it's useless without the firing software and they'll try and recover that before destroying her, or keep her shell and battery and redecorate to their liking. Without communication I didn't know who you were so I ran the destruct program. Normally, there's no recovery from that wipe. I'm impressed that *Star Chaser* copied the entire system."

"I only copied what I could not duplicate from a shipyard's detect and repair program," *Star* said.

"There you go," Cot said amused. "So, whatever special software you have running in addition, as soon as the ship is operational, you can see if your special equipment that's still attached can be restarted with *Star's* assistance."

Diana shook her head in disbelief. "Are all the CFs like *Star Chaser*?"

"No," two voices said. Cot grinned. "Sentient means they have their own characteristics and attitude. That's what makes them SIDs."

Diana looked thoughtful. "I was briefed on the project with a dozen others. I don't think any of them realize how fluid and advanced this project is."

"I think more than a dozen do realize it and that's why we keep running into squads of fighters and such looking to shoot us down," Cot said.

"I'm sure it was expected by HQ. After all, the rest of the galaxy military commands have all said no to the grand sentient experiment," Diana said.

"Approaching a meteorite that has SRL44," *Star* reported.

"*Star* needs a chemical compound to replenish a cell. It's usually found on a meteorite and not always on the surface."

"Just what do you plan on doing?" Diana asked.

"Would you like to come along and see?" Cot asked.

"Is it something that will get me shot at?" Diana asked.

"No. Just a necessary chore *Star Chaser* has trained me for."

Diana looked at her puzzled.

"*Star* has an AVEC suit for you that has been upgraded from the manufacture's specs, like all her equipment. Would you like to see what being taken care of by *Star* is like?"

"Just what can you do with an AVEC suit?" Diana asked.

"It's nothing like military armor. It's for working in space so everything about them is mobile, light, and strong."

"Mobile and light sounds good." Diana watched the crane descend with a suit, then the arms of the automatic dresser move to assist her with dressing.

While Diana tested out her suit, Cot dressed quickly and waited while her suit's seals were tested. She noticed Diana had not tested her suit. She gestured for Diana to move toward her so she could check hers out. Cot never let another person dress for space without someone or something testing that everything was sealed and air pacs were clean and full.

"Thanks for the check. I'm so used to relying on myself, I forget the number one safety rule," Diana said. "You're right about these suits. It's so light and mobile I may forget what I'm wearing. I know these aren't standard SF equipment or they would be on the thieves markets."

"I only know of 12 pilots that have these suits." Cot checked the equipment to make sure the extractor was in its holster. She checked the battery pac and then the needle. It was ready for work.

"What is this?"

"A juice extractor. If you want to know the exact chemical compound it extracts, you can ask *Star*."

"Is it something I need to know to survive?"

"No."

"Then I'll just take your word."

## Chapter 22

### *Nightmares*

"Are you sure this place is deserted?" Diana asked, looking around as if expecting company.

"I'm not. We're only protected from what we know about which leaves us with dangers we feel by the prickling of our skin."

"Ain't that the truth," Diana muttered. She kept looking all around her for whatever was causing her to want to run.

"I've heard of a lot of spacer stories of ghosts on space rocks," Cot said.

"What place doesn't have a handful of stories?" Diana said.

Cot planted the extractor into the hard surface and said a few prayers, hoping it would appease whatever spirit lived on the meteor they were mining. The light blinked it was not a good extraction.

"It's not working. We're going to have to find a tunnel to take us closer to the core." Cot retracted the needle and slung the extractor onto her shoulder holster.

"I'm reading some blank spots to the left. Could be tunnels. I hope *Star Chaser* knows how to leave false trails, just in case we were followed," Diana said.

"I hope she stays alert and focused on leaving false trails," Cot said. "Her curiosity can become her primary interest if not reminded that there are responsibilities that come first."

"It must be difficult to go from a military mind set to this...less structured way of handling assignments," Diana said.

"Even military skirmishes have fluid and unpredictable moments. Working with *Star* is a fluid and unpredictable assignment. Working with her is a relief after all the military posturing that went with duty."

"Here's a cave entrance. Shall we go in?"

Cot felt the hairs on her head rise. "No."

Diana back peddled as quickly as she could in the AVEC suit, but even as mobile as it was, moving in weightless space in a suit that was working to keep at least one of its boots firmly planted on the surface, made quick escapes nearly impossible, unless the boots were released and the jet pacs ignited.

Cot turned and fled back to the shuttle and up the ramp. The hatch wouldn't open. Cot thumped back down the ramp and to a panel on the outside of the hull to force the hatch to the emergency space to open. It was drained of energy.

Breathing heavily Cot pressed herself against the shuttles hull trying to control the fear that was driving her to panic. Her panic was using up her air.

"I...had... I had a dream of a place like this. I was covered in corney beetles," Diana said. "I was being consumed by them."

"I dreamt of a place like this too. I was covered in worms," Cot said. "They were sucking the life out of me."

"That's some relief that we've both dreamt of this place. Dreams like that have meaning," Diana said.

Cot shuddered, and glancing at Diana nearly screamed in terror. Diana's mouth was opened in a silent scream. Turning away from an unnamed terror Cot stumbled over the uneven surface. He boot caught the tip of an outcropping, and she fell with enough force to take her breath away. Gasping for air she forced herself to her hands and knees and scrambled from what was after her. At some point she made it to her feet and stumbled into a tunnel. There were many branches in the tunnel but the one she chose had the rune *hagalaz* marked on it. Abruptly she came to a dead-end. Turning around there was only darkness and a sound that terrified her in her dreams.

The sound was from hundreds of worms heading her way. When the first touched her she had a flash of recognition. Enas. Cot felt herself broken up into thousands of tiny bits of light, life cells connected by one purpose - survival

Cot stood before the gate of Queen Ereschkigal. She didn't have to look down to know she was in her best dress uniform, minus her cover. Using the hilt of her sword, she tapped two times on the heavily carved door. While waiting for it to open, her eyes glanced at the inscribed words above it. "Separate not yourself from the mystery of being."

"Attention and presence," Cot murmured to herself.

"And that is the key to opening this door," Queen Ereschkigal said.

Cot blinked at the sudden change of scenery. There was no door, only the cloaked figure of the Queen. No horrible stench and no overwhelming energy surrounded her this time, but that's not to say there wasn't something felt from her presence.

"Little sister, you are once more before me," Queen Ereschkigal said in a quiet voice.

"Yes."

"What lesson is between this gate and the next?" Queen Ereschkigal asked.

"To not ignore or dismiss what I experience as I experience it."

"To be present in the moment," Queen Ereschkigal agreed. She waved her forward.

Cot found herself back in the cave with every inch of her body covered with crawling worms looking for a safe and nourishing place to begin their next cycle. It seemed a long time passed before Cot let her barriers down, feeling each tiny beings fear of the new life they were about to begin. Mentally, Cot chanted the same chant she did to the chrysalis on the *Murdelie*.

The feeling of elation, connection, and anticipation thrummed throughout her body from each cocoon as it prepared for its new life. It was an experience of life becoming, which filled every cell in Cot's body, energizing her more than what she thought she could feel, bursting and sending out tiny atoms. Cot lost comprehension of what it all meant, but she knew she was still a part of the physical.

Cot could hear her breathing and then became aware she was lying on her back.

"Adjust vision," she whispered. A porous ceiling was above her. She was in a tunnel on a meteorite rock. Using the wall for support she rose to her feet.

"Time left in air," she asked in a stronger voice.

Ten minutes.

She must have been unconscious for a long time or she had a leak in her life pac. She checked her bio readings. They appeared to be normal, but the medical pac was low. That explained why she wasn't feeling any physical side effects of being unconscious for so long.

Looking around her she located the extraction tool nearby. Picking it up, Cot checked the battery power. It was fully charged. She thumbed the switch and when ready, scanned the sides of the tunnel then the floor, moving slowly to find the right spot. The scan picked up a hot spot

and Cot began the extraction. It took two minutes to fill six tubes, though she only needed one. A cell didn't need much juice, though it was a major component in the ship's systems.

Finished she slung the extractor over her shoulder and looked for a way to the surface. The runes carved in the tunnel walls would show her the way out. A small view of stars in a nebula appeared before her and the scene expanded as she neared the exit.

"Time in air?"

Five minutes.

The shuttle had not moved. No sign of Diana. She opened the shuttle's panel and inserted a tube of the juice. It only needed seconds for the fumes to accelerate the other chemicals in the cell. The panel lit up that power was restored.

An alarm light was blinking in the corner of her helmet. She was on her reserve. That was two minutes if she didn't breathe deep.

"Identify me *Reflected Light*, and unlock the hatch. Bring life support back up."

The hatch slid open, allowing her into the first chamber to clean any foreign contaminants and provide fresh air. Once cleaned, she swapped out her life pac and hurried to the controls. She ran a scan over the meteor looking for Diana and came up with nothing. "Diana where are you?"

Dreams.

"I dreamed worms. She dreamed corney beetles that made a racket and stink. What sound does a corney beetle make?" Her fingers tapped out the question then multiplied it by a swarm.

"Rerun the scan. Yes!"

Picking up an extra life pac Cot quickly left the shuttle. The reading of Diana was aft and should be within her sight. "Diana! Can you hear me?"

"Yes?" a hoarse voice answered.

Cot turned around and found Diana falling through a doorway in space. Cot grabbed her before she hit the surface. Diana's life pac was red lining. It was empty. Diana held onto her as she swapped out her empty pac with a fresh one. They stood there as fresh air wafted into her suit, reviving her enough for her to open her eyes.

"We have what we need so we can go, unless you want to stay and sight see," Cot said.

"No," Diana whispered. "I've had enough visiting."

Cot supported most of her weight up the ramp and held onto her as the hatch closed and the cleaner began. At the buzz of completion of the decontamination cycle the containment hatch slid open and a medibot quickly attended to Diana. While she was being administered to, Cot began running a check on the system to make sure everything was back to normal levels. System was nearly at the top, but it was safe enough to leave the meteorite's surface. They didn't have to rise very high to be back in space. Cot sent a signal to *Star Chaser*.

An alarm on the console notified her that they had been picked up by something. The shuttle identified it and destroyed the satellite honing in on them. It was as good as notifying the owner where they were.

*Star Chaser* swiftly arrived.

"There are a dozen ships searching this area," *Star* reported. "The *Glass Eye* is being towed by another group."

"What exactly are they looking for?" Cot asked.

"The pilot of *Glass Eye*," *Star* said.

As soon as *Reflected Light* settled in *Star Chaser's* bay Cot helped Diana onto a cot the SEs provided. "You don't look well so I'm insisting you follow the medibot's instructions."

"I think I'll do just that." Diana closed her eyes as she was transported to her quarters.

Cot ran up the corridor to the bridge. "I have the conn, *Star Chaser*."

"Cot has the conn," *Star Chaser* said.

"Set a course for the *Glass Eye*. Let's see who all is so interested in this ship that's ready for the shipyards."

Cot checked *Star's* logs. They had been on the meteorite for two days while *Star* dropped passive scans and zipped around space, leading their pursuers on false trails. By the amount of information *Star Chaser* gathered on the ships chasing her, she put together a profile on the crews, captains and ships. They must have figured out that *Star Chaser* was running tests on them because they suddenly became more cagey in stalking her. They should have given up and left.

"These ships aren't from any of the sectors I'm familiar with," Cot said, "and they're not accustomed to working together. By your scans, *Star* you're not able to get a complete composite of their hulls or crew. They're scanning on different wave lengths so how sure are you we aren't being tailed?"

"Even the ones I can't scan to my satisfaction, they leave a trace for their associates to contact them."

"I wonder what brought them all together, and why some followed you and some followed *Glass Eye*. You don't happen to know, do you?"

Diana dropped into the seat next to Cot.

"No. They assumed I was listening to their communications so they said little to each other."

"How long did it take them to realize you were baiting them?" Cot asked.

"One day."

"Did they gather any information on you?" Cot asked.

"They believe they are facing a seasoned captain who is leading them on and making fools of them. They have left monitors scattered about but I disabled them." *Star Chaser* sounded pleased at the respect her pursuers showed her. Cot was pleased *Star Chaser* remained unidentified.

"Their crews are going to be in a foul mood with all the hardware they lost if they don't gain something worth selling on this mission," Cot said. "They'll be looking for a payback. You're looking a lot better," Cot said.

"I feel much better."

"We're going to see who all is interested in the *Glass Eye*. They have three days on us, but *Star* can cut their lead time down." Cot leaned back in her seat, the weariness of the day catching up with her.

"Hey, Gemini. I was wondering where you disappeared to," Diana said.

Cot opened her eyes, startled that she had dozed off. "Gemini?" She looked at the bot that settled near her console.

"Gemini," *Star* said, "is acceptable."

"Finally it has a name. I'm going to get some rest while it's quiet. *Star*, you have the conn."

"*Star* has the conn."

## Chapter 23

### *It's a Matter of Perspective*

Cot woke from a restful sleep.

"Greetings, *Star*. Anything that needs my immediate attention?"

"Diana received a message from Star Force HQ an hour ago. She's been reviewing information I've gathered since we left POATA."

"Did she say why?" Cot asked.

"No."

"My reports must be in question."

"She is reading my reports," *Star* said.

"Where is she?"

"On the bridge."

Cot dressed quickly and went to the bridge. Diana was sitting in the visitor's seat reading what was scrolling across the screen rapidly; too fast for Cot to read consciously. Gemini was sitting above the console watching Diana.

"I have the conn, *Star*. Greetings Diana."

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

"Greetings and health to you, Cot." Diana leaned back and stretched. She didn't look like she had been awake for hours reading reports.

"Are you searching *Star Chaser's* database for something specific?"

"Did you know the SE you left with Rear Admiral Zieda of the *Emerald Isle* had a tag on it that's traceable to a prison planet?"

"*Star*, did you put the tag that was on my medallion on the SE?"

"It is a non functioning tag, Cot. I put it on the SE."

"Why?"

"I returned to Commander Xulu what he was responsible for," *Star Chaser* said. "It was not difficult to find and would have been recognized by him immediately."

"That is what happened. That was easily explained," Diana chuckled.

"What does that mean?" Cot asked Diana.

"Commander Xulu's previous assignment was Commandant of AmDeRa Prison Colony," Diana said. "The prison population works their debt off to the society and victims of their crimes in the prison shops. They produce gadgets, jewelry, household items, etc. They sell them at a reduced cost to any company that wants to buy them. To avoid any misunderstandings from the public anything AmDeRa touches, even if it's merely packaging, it has to be stamped with ADRP or PP for Prison Product."

"Why do you think he's responsible for my tag, *Star*?" Cot asked.

"By the ADRP, and manufacture date on the chip, which is also on the medallion, I traced it to when Xulu was managing the prison."

"The prison produces the medallions the school purchases?" Cot asked, "That's suspicious considering the tag was in the medallion."

"The arrangement for AmDeRa Prison to produce the medallions started two years ago," *Star* explained. "The arrangement was made by Vice Academic Dean Holfer. Vice Academic

Dean Holfer and Xulu are from the same graduating class in business management. The school and all records had been destroyed in the Incursion Wars, so it is not possible to verify their claims of schooling. Their university was on space station Batun IV, which no longer exists. Shall I continue?"

*Star Chaser* never asked Cot that, so it must be because *Star* thought Diana was losing interest in her research.

"What about all those that had earned medallions produced from the prison?" Cot asked.

"Three people have won medallions and two of them have been charged with espionage. Perhaps you should return yours, Cot," *Star Chaser* said.

"I worked hard for it...we worked hard for it. Send that information to HQ immediately, *Star*."

"Buyer beware," Diana said. "*Star*, why did you put the tag on the SE instead of reporting your findings to HQ?"

"Commander Xulu ordered the Quartermaster of the *Emerald Isles* to give us inferior and non functioning equipment in exchange for my upgraded equipment."

"Why didn't you tell me? Is any of what he gave us upgradeable?" Cot asked.

"I have been running extensive tests to validate my findings. Nothing is worth the dump fees."

"Commander Xulu dumped his waste on us?" Cot asked.

"Yes."

"He saved his ship the fee for dumping unusable material," Diana said.

"That's not going to go without a comment from me to Rear Admiral Zieda," Cot said irritated. "And they're questioning...wait a minute. Does the Rear Admiral know that her trade was poor quality equipment?"

"I'm sure she'll know now if she doesn't already suspect. Xulu was assigned her ship for her to evaluate. My involvement with this situation is to look in your records about the SE. I thank you both for your explanations and information."

"What has Star Force to do with prisons?" Cot asked.

"Commander Xulu has been under review for membership. His career has been monitored since he petitioned to join Star Force ten years ago and as you'll find, everyone is evaluated from the moment they make the request."

Cot's eyes opened wide with a sudden thought. "You mean when someone expresses a desire to join, it's taken as filling out an employment application?"

"Or as you had done, put it down on your education profile so it's recorded. Your career had been guided since then to see that you had experiences that would test you and help you develop your talents as much as possible and hopefully, into Star Force substance."

Cot's face flushed at the revelation.

"Everyone's request is taken seriously but it takes more than a desire and showing talent. At the onset you had your aunt vouching for you which meant you jumped to the front of the applicants. A case manager was assigned to you and gave recommendations and assessments as you moved through your tasks."

"So my training for the SID program was part of my SF training?"

Diana smiled widely. "No. You and *Star Chaser* did that without SF intervention, though, you being on that base was for something else that SF had in mind. Career wise, I think you did well."

"Why do you know so much about my career?" Cot asked.

"As a practitioner of QuaDom I was asked to examine you on another level by another master. Your case manager at that time, didn't want you in the SID program and challenged the decision. He had other plans for you but, as QuaDom teaches, we all end up where it's best for us to learn something. You were assigned a new case manager that was experienced with SID-ships."

"My aunt was in Star Force?"

"She was a woman with long vision."

Cot noticed she didn't answer the question. "I don't believe she was," Cot said.

"What difference would that make in your feelings for her? QuaDom takes us to places we wouldn't normally have chosen for ourselves, and sometimes, we spend a moment of our lives working with others whose mission we oppose. It's not working for the greater good, or working to improve ourselves, it's being present and aware that we are part of something greater than ourselves. In our working to expand ourselves to understand meaning we do great things and even greater as we become more than what we started out as. It's a journey for becoming and as we grow or expand ourselves, so does everything else."

Cot laughed. "Is that explanation supposed to help me understand the journey?"

"Why must you understand it? To understand you use your physical senses which make sense of only what you already know. That would mean you only notice what you already recognize. That is a basic tenet of QuaDom. What do you do with what you don't understand?"

Cot nodded. She felt Diana was saying this for *Star Chaser's* benefit; however, she had already brought this up to Star on many occasions and didn't feel Star was interested in what was categorized under spiritual teachings.

"My aunt was my mother in all ways but giving me physical birth. It amazes me how no one on Mari knew how extraordinary she was."

"You mean in a power sense?" Diana asked.

"No. I know people with power can cloak it so others can't see or feel it. I mean her personality. Thinking back, I don't remember anyone giving her any honor, not even as an elder."

"Perhaps, she appeared to others in a different manner than she did to you. When a QuaDom master appears on her home planet, her vibration will be so different than others on the planet, that even a person not sensitive to others will know she's different."

"A Brounder would have," Cot said thoughtfully.

"A Brounder is master of the energies of Maridoileag, no further. Your aunt was beyond a Brounder. She controlled their response toward her for their sake, and all others that came in contact with her. Even you, at this time in your learning, if you visited Maridoileag, those around you would know you are different than everyone else."

Cot laughed. "If that were so, my SID-mates would have made a comment."

"I don't know their feelings on that, but I can tell you, both of us have changed from our visit to the meteorite. I can feel a change in me and I can feel it in you. Since you have a talisman, that might be shielding others from the energy you carry, but there are people and some species who will be able to see you as you are, a woman of power, and not all these people are practitioners of a spiritual way.

Cot was quiet as she acknowledged that she had been feeling changes in herself, especially since Bua came into her possession. She would meditate on this later.

"Is the Rear Admiral registering a formal complaint against *Star*?" Cot asked.

"You tagged your gift to her," Diana pointed out. "I'm responding to her inquiry as to why."

"A nonfunctioning one which I'm sure she ran tests on it and knew. It also won't cost her a dumping fee," Cot said.

"What a pair you two are. I'm not sure if you're making friends but you're sure influencing people." Diana chuckled. "The only thing you have going for you is that the equipment exchange the Rear Admiral made was in good faith and her Exec and Quartermaster undermined it."

"Should I send her an apology?" *Star* asked.

"No," both women said.

"It's best to let it run itself out," Cot said. She sighed. "Rear Admirals have a very long memory."

Diana finished her report and sent it off.

"So what are you going to do about the *Glass Eye*?" Diana asked, clearing her screen of the report.

Cot gave a short laugh. "I could be sensible and point out that there are more of them than there is of us, so we should just leave and consider ourselves lucky for getting away with what we have..."

"If you were just another captain," Diana said. "However..."

"What is it about that ship and you that so many people are chasing you down, and some crossing the time barrier for?"

Diana looked thoughtful as she shook her head. "The ship has been stripped down and they have it. I didn't bring anything from the ship. What I'm wearing is what you've provided. I doubt it would be me, personally or for that matter, for what I do."

"And across time?"

"I don't know what that would be about."

"*Star*, what do you have on the *Glass Eye's* location?" Cot asked.

"An hour away."

Information began to scroll across both of their screens and then a visual of the *Glass Eye* being towed, surrounded by dozens of ships spread out.

"I'm sure HQ would like to know more about the ships *Star* is barely able to pick up the presence of. Be vigilant *Star* for nets. We have some hungry hunters here."

"So, all the equipment HQ gave you is upgraded?" Diana asked.

Cot hesitated for a moment. "Yes."

"The Rear Admiral should consider herself lucky neither of you were upset with her," Diana said.

"She's a Rear Admiral," Cot said. "We'll be lucky if she doesn't put our names on her bad list."

"Have you done a background on her?"

"*Star*, have you done one on her yet?" Cot asked.

"It is not complete," *Star* said. "She has missing spots on her record."

"Let me know when it's finished." Cot glanced at Diana. "I've been finding a need to know about a lot of characters we've come across lately."

"It's a good idea, on many levels. Let me know what you find out...about me," Diana said.

"Would you tell me what you've found on me?" Cot asked.

"We'll compare notes one day," Diana said. "Knowing how you appear to others is important as a Star Force Agent."

## Chapter 24

### *Separating the Pack*

"I recognize two of those ships," Diana said. "*Gumo* and *Telema*."  
"Pirates?"

"Chimoc Ho and Lars Mn are petty thieves. I've never known either of them to partner-up for anything or to be this far away from busy travel corridors in Tuead Sector. What could they want with the *Glass Eye* and so important that they join a gang in another space sector...and how did they get here? I wouldn't trust their ships going past 2 gs under any condition."

"*Star*, can you get a scan on those two ships?"

"According to a one week old shipyard maintenance record, their ships are capable of traveling 6gs for six hours without system failure," *Star Chaser* said. "They have two cannons with an electromagnetic pulse capability, fore and aft. They were installed recently with little testing. Their ships logs are on automatic and haven't been accessed for any information. The manufacturer's password hasn't been changed."

"Interesting. Do you think someone stole their ships or they sold them? If it's them, it looks like they've changed a lot since you've last seen them," Cot said. "This group isn't into small players and I know a few of them wouldn't help their neighbor even for a fee."

"Can you for a fact say that Chimoc Ho and Lars Mn are in those ships, *Star Chaser*?" Diana asked.

"I can read the logs but I cannot read what species is on the ship. They have sonic deceptors on the outer hull preventing a scan for a clean biological read. The ships are still registered under Chimoc Ho and Lars Mn of Tuead Sector."

"Then they may well have lost their ships to theft or a bad gamble. Whatever the case, I know ship maintenance wasn't done unless something broke," Diana said. "That's a petty thief for you."

Cot called up a tactical standard plan on her screen. "You in *Reflected Light* will be here.... *Star* and I will be here. There's a dust cloud they'll have to readjust their formation to pass up here. We're just going to observe and see where they plan on taking *Glass Eye*. Are you sure there's nothing on board that ship?"

"If there is, I don't know about it."

"If I call for your return, return with no questions asked. Agreed?" Cot asked.

"You're the captain. Yes," Diana said. Diana studied Cot for a few minutes, and then added, "You're taking a lot for granted; like, what your scans are seeing and not seeing you can handle. I hope you have a backup plan. I've been talking to *Star Chaser* and I think her attitude of believing she has everything covered, leaves vulnerabilities in your armor."

"We both are learning as we go, but this is a military operation and we follow protocols," Cot said.

"I'll tell you what I told *Star Chaser* -- prediction is a shortcut and doesn't give you the opportunity to learn about a situation in depth. The details are where failures of a magnitude happen."

"*Star Chaser* is very good with details. Good partnerships are developed over time where strengths and weaknesses are discovered and tested."

"Partners also become over-confident that they know what the other is going to do given any situation."

"What's your point?" Cot asked.

"Don't rely so much on each other," Diana said. "Be ready for anything."

"Your warning is taken. It's time for you to go...and don't let anyone gut our shuttle!" Cot said to the departing back.

"I won't guarantee anything," Diana said.

"Send an SE with her, *Star*. As soon as the shuttle is out of your back draft, come about so we'll be facing the group that has *Glass Eye*."

"Dispatching SE," *Star* said.

While waiting, Cot began to run various scenarios through her mind. The waiting was the hardest, she thought. A sudden insight had her laughing.

"What's so funny?" Diana asked over the conn.

"The instructions of a master are merely words until internally experienced," Cot recited.

"And?"

"Let all resistance to external experience drop."

"Isn't that what I just told you? I'm coming up to my coordinates. Shuttle coming to all stop. Thanks for the SE backup. Ready to observe."

"Acknowledged, *Reflected Light*. Comm off."

No sooner than they were positioned than additional monitors sent out to expand their scan area began to send readings of a dozen new ships from an area Cot didn't expect visitors from.

"Looks like we're having a party and I don't recall seeing any invitations going out," Cot said.

"I am unable to get clear readings on these new ships," *Star* said. "The only thing they have in common is a transmission code - Der Jägers.

"Der Jägers – The Hunters. That explains the mix of species and origins of interested parties in what the *Glass Eye* may have. We're outsiders and won't be welcomed at all. *Star*, was there anything unusual on *Glass Eye* that you haven't mentioned?"

"Gemini found an object attached on the outer hull of *Glass Eye*," *Star* said. "It poses no danger. It's part of an art object from a planet no longer open to off-planet visitors."

Cot let out an aggravated hiss. "Get us out of here before we're spotted. Bring *Reflected Light* back as quick as you can."

*Star* moved to intercept their shuttle. Cot watched on her screen the cargo bay doors close with the shuttle back in the bay. *Star* accelerated out of the area. Minutes later Diana could be heard running up the passageway to the bridge.

"What's going on? What happened?" Diana asked breathlessly. She dropped into her seat scanning the terminal to see what she could not see on the shuttle's monitor, the reason why they were leaving so quickly.

"Gemini found something on *Glass Eye's* outer hull. *Star Chaser* identified it as part of an art object. Those are Der Jägers out there. That means there's going to be a situation we have no business getting involved in. We as in *Star Chaser* and I." Cot meant that comment for *Star*.

"The Hunters? An artifact? If they know we're here, they're not going to let us go without inspecting us. It won't be a pleasant experience, especially to *Star*. Where is it?"

"We need to dump it somewhere. Do you have any ideas?"

"If you want to get rid of it safely, I have an older brother who can handle it. We can leave it with him and not have to worry about his welfare. He hangs out in the New Frontier sector."

"So you're not interested in keeping it?"

"There's no fun in having something I have to keep hidden in fear of it being stolen or worst yet, lug around with me. I don't like getting beat up, shot at, or chased out of space sectors for an art object... unless it was part of my assignment." Diana grinned at Cot. "Have you heard of Murphy's Dinner?"

"Why Murphy's Dinner?" Cot asked. She had heard about Murphy's Dinner. One of the student officers at POATA described it as a franchise dinner found in every out of the way corner of the galaxy whose claim for fame was its customers that dealt in everything. Another added it was where Hunters stopped to pick up messages and make deals.

"Anything you want to know, someone at Murphy's Dinner will know....for a fee," Diana said. "My brother likes the eclectic atmosphere."

"How far, *Star*?" Cot asked.

"The New Frontier Sector is a week's journey from here - taking all of *our* shortcuts," *Star* answered.

Cot frowned at her hasty decision to get rid of the artifact. "*Star*, you have the conn. Diana, would you care to join me on the mat? Then over a meal we'll talk some more about this art object."

"*Star*," she thought to her ship, "*send an update to the High Commander and let him know about the artifact. Send an image. If he has something to say about it, let me know immediately.*"

"A bit of practice with someone that bleeds and bruises like you is a good reality check, aye?" Diana said.

"There's no better satisfaction then hearing a real grunt when you get a good hit in, yes."

Cot practiced her breathing exercises with Diana following suit. When finished they began their own warm ups on the mat, preparing for a physical contest they both were anticipating with eagerness.

Two hours had passed, according to *Star* who reminded them that they should take a break. Nothing was happening that *Star* couldn't handle, so Cot ignored her suggestions. To *Star*, the two women were taking the sparing too seriously.

Cot was limping as she circled Diana, and Diana was favoring her right arm. If they were really injured neither admitted to it and the medibot didn't register the injuries as serious enough to stop the contest.

Cot suddenly went into a spinning wheel, snapping two quick kicks at Diana, nailing her with one. However, the second kick was knocked aside, tossing her onto her sore leg. Diana was already in the air with both feet aimed at Cot's midriff, but Cot rolled out of the way.

A warning bell sounded, breaking both women's concentration. Diana landed on empty space and Cot was rolling onto her hands and knees, breathing heavily.

Cot got up and steadied herself from the sudden cramp in her leg. "Report!" Cot said as she hobbled to the bridge. It was only out of courtesy that Diana let Cot lead the way to her bridge. A medibot trailed the two women.

"A flotilla with one capital ship off the starboard. All war birds have been launched," *Star* reported. "Weapons are hot on all ships."

Diana looked over at Cot. "You're not upset because I was winning are you?"

"You weren't winning. You were getting tired. A few more minutes and I would have taken you down," Cot answered. Relieved, she rubbed her leg.

Diana laughed, sitting gingerly in her seat. "You were on your last leg. No way could you last that long."

Cot looked over the scans then went further back. "*Star*, why didn't you notify me that you had two unidentified contacts?"

"There is no danger. I am out of their scan range."

"Danger is identified on a multiple of levels, *Star*. You identified the art object Gemini found as not dangerous but those that are hunting it *are* dangerous. There are protocols that are set up to prevent oversights. These passive beacons could be more than what they seem."

"I was out of their range," *Star* insisted.

"How do you know?"

"The manufacture's specs do not extend beyond four hours from its position," *Star* said.

"How many such devices do you have that have been modified beyond the manufacture's greatest expectations, *Star*?"

"Not to change the subject but, what do you plan on doing about those ships heading our way with their weapons armed?" Diana asked.

"What have we out there, *Star*?"

"Two independent rovers. I've upgraded two Clev R4s into independent mobile tactical sniffers."

"Once they began maneuvers, will they be spotted, *Star*?"

"They have not been tested yet," *Star* said.

"Then this is RT testing," Cot said. Cot was amused by Diana's worried looks at the ships showing on their screens. "If you're interested, we can watch the results of the test on our screens."

"If I were interested, but right now I'm worried about those ships that are getting closer," Diana said. "Do you have something that makes your invisible?"

"They're eight hours away, so even if they do spot us, we'll be out of this area by the time they get here with nothing left behind to trace to us. *Star*, stay out of sight but keep an eye on this fleet. I want to know if they belong here or if they're from somewhere else." Cot turned to Diana, "Let's go see what that artifact is about." Cot realized she was being too smug on *Star Chaser's* abilities to keep everything under control.

The artifact was sitting in the middle of Cot's bed.

"That is downright ugly," Diana said.

"Gemini, what is so interesting with this artifact that you brought it aboard?" Cot asked, not expecting a response from Gemini.

"It is radiating energy that I cannot record," *Star Chaser* said. "It is not the entire artifact. It is the base the statue would rest on."

"How do you know it's radiating anything?" Diana asked.

"If we were in an asteroid dust cloud, the emanations would be evident. A green aura would surround it that I could measure," *Star* said. "I would attempt to radiate the same rays here but it would disrupt the life support."

"*Star*, did Gemini give you that information?" Cot asked. The pause from *Star* had Cot wondering just what *Star* was trying to figure out. For a fast thinker, this was ponderous for her. Did Gemini communicate on a level *Star* didn't know what to call it?

"How does Gemini communicate with you, *Star Chaser*?" Diana asked, as though reading Cot's thoughts.

"On a frequency I am unfamiliar with," *Star* said.

"So you are...inferring this information from Gemini?" Cot asked. If *Star* was inferring, then her argument about her intuition as not reliable would have to be replaced with another argument - if *Star Chaser* still insisted Cot's response to some problems using her intuition were not valid.

"We are in communication but how I have not identified yet," *Star* said.

"So you're getting messages in your database and you believe them to be from Gemini," Cot said.

"They are from Guest Gemini," *Star* said.

"Has Gemini explained to you yet, why you can't recover a particular file?"

"No."

Diana looked at Cot and was about to say something and then just shook her head. To her knowledge, HQ had programmed the SID ships with the most advanced and untested hardware and software and they had great expectations in results. If the SID ship couldn't decipher what this strange being was, then it wasn't from any known dimensions or galaxies that HQ was aware of. By Cot's expression, Diana thought Cot was leery of the bot too, but instead of treating it as a threat, Lt. Col. Cot was letting her ship handle it. Thinking of how much intelligence was programmed in the ship, she would too.

Cot thought that Diana didn't know how unconventional and unmilitary it was to work with *Star Chaser*.

## Chapter 25

### *Conversations On Different Levels*

"They've been combing the area for two hours and they haven't seen us," Cot said. "We've recorded enough of their transmissions for HQ to be satisfied that *Star Chaser's* reprogramming of her defense systems is undetectable and her ability to hack into CFS's communications system without their knowledge is still unchallenged. *Star*, how long to go around and continue to Murphy's Dinner in the New Frontier Sector?"

"One day to go around," *Star* said.

"Make it so."

Cot leaned back watching the ships disappear off her screens as *Star* picked up speed. No one should have known they were here since Cot hadn't updated HQ of their position. However, by the communication the CR4 picked up from the ships spread out to sweep the area, they were sent to this area expecting *Star Chaser* to be here. Cot didn't know if SFHQ had tipped off CFS patrols that an unregistered ship was in their patrol area or if a monitor *Star Chaser* failed to register had caught them. Cot wasn't completely convinced that they weren't unseen nor was she convinced that *Star Chaser* was able to hack into the ships communications without any of their techs noticing. She didn't want to take anything for granted because the advantage of using the SID ships was too great an advantage for only a dozen to be out in space testing their limits. What if someone wanted SF to believe the SID-ships were clever so that once SF committed to invest in more, they would easily be defeated?

"Hanging around that close was nerve racking. Do you do that often?" Diana asked.

"Everything about *Star Chaser* is experimental and needs testing and retesting," Cot said.

"Are you hungry? I'll prepare something special," Diana offered.

"Will my stomach be safe?"

"Your attempt at Barouche Stew put mine in jeopardy," Diana said.

"I was missing ingredients. I adapted and you did say it tasted good."

"That was until it came back to haunt me."

\* \* \*

"How long have you been practicing QuaDom?" Diana asked. They finished their meal and were back on the bridge relaxing to soft music.

"Since I was a young girl," Cot said.

"Who was your first master?"

"My aunt. And you?" Cot said.

"I stumbled into it in my second life stage."

"Where you a mortliege then?" Cot asked.

"Yes. I noticed you have a mixture of affiliations on your altar."

"I pick up things that are meaningful to me," Cot said.

"Souvenirs."

"Artifacts, ritual objects, things that are more than what they seem, but nothing a Hunter will be interested in," Cot said, "and nothing if lost or missing I would feel I've been wounded."

"Collecting physical things is not practical in my life at this time," Diana said. "Right now my altar is up here." She tapped her forehead. "I collect special objects, sometimes people,

and on my altar I arrange them in their places of power. In more ways than I can count, having the altar in my mind has protected me."

"Just what is a mortliege?" Cot asked.

"What have you heard?"

"I've heard that a mortliege is an assassin," Cot said, knowing there was more to it than that from her short association with Diana.

"A mortliege is a messenger. My messages have ranged from giving life to dealing death and all sorts of things in between."

"You've killed, yet you don't have that black energy around you," Cot said.

"And for all the battles you've been in, you don't have that energy around you." Diana smiled at Cot. All Diana's previous observations of Cot had been from a distance. Interacting with her and her new assignment, *Star Chaser* gave her a different perspective.

"Like you, I chose the more righteous anger to dip into. When my assignment is to deliver death, I make sure the recipient is given the opportunity to prepare both spiritually as well as physically for their physical end. It doesn't do one any good if an evil person is not given the chance to repent and ritually prepared so they don't reenter their next life angrier and more dangerous than what they had left. Do you prepare yourself before you enter into combat?" Diana asked.

"Before I became a Star Force Agent," Cot said, "I would sit before my altar and ask for guidance in my hunt that no innocent die as a result of my actions. It was naïve to think that absolved me from any kill I made during that time. Working at QuaDom hasn't completely eradicated my dreams of seeing the dead floating about in space," Cot said.

"Wars are not for the weak," Diana said softly. In Cot's eyes she saw shadows of the horrors she experienced. She was aware that Cot had been captured by the enemy and sent to a prison camp called the Cone. She had risked her capture to send out a transmission. Though it was a short imprisonment, interment for any period of time was intended to be torturous by Gepack standards.

"There are some things that are worse," Cot said. "I could have stayed on my home planet and been forced into a life I had no say in, though, I would like to think I would have run away. I was lucky though. Auntie helped me escape without too much damage to everyone." Cot looked thoughtful. "I know she helped others but she didn't talk about it. If the clan knew she would have been shunned. That wouldn't have made any difference to her so they would have killed her or forced her to leave the planet eventually. There is a saying amongst the clan that without a clan you don't exist. I believed then and now, that there are greater things outside of the clan for me. How did you get out into space?"

"I was an orphan," Diana said, "I was being transported with hundreds of others to an orphanage on a far away planet and escaped. A couple that traveled across galaxies made it a practice to pick up and help abandoned children. They found me on a space station, as if they knew where to find me. I stayed with them for most of my youth and learned a lot from them and my adopted siblings."

"So how big is your family?"

"Vast is a good description."

"How many is vast?"

Diana looked thoughtful. "It's hard to say since my adopted parents are still moving about the galaxies, picking up abandoned or lost children, and when their adopted children have children, it adds to the family."

Gemini's movement had both looking at it.

"Where did you get Gemini?" Diana asked. "I didn't see anything in your reports describing this bot."

"You read my reports?"

"Yes."

"What reports are those?"

"The one's I have authorization to read."

"I haven't sent a detailed report about our guest to anyone. It came aboard while we were restarting the *Murdelie's* systems. The freighter was lying right in front of an exit corridor, all but one system down. A day after we left I found we had a hitch hiker, Gemini. *Star Chaser* insists it's a guest not a vagabond or stowaway."

"So, *you* found the *Murdelie*."

"You know of it?"

"Every pirate and dock plebe heard about the vanishing of the *Murdelie*. There wasn't any broadcast along the usual channels but all the wrong people knew about it."

"When I stepped aboard it had been cleaned of all traces of previous occupation. It was because of a new bio-engineered chrysalises that was on board."

"Bio-engineered chrysalises? What happened on the *Murdelie* that a chrysalis would become such a strong symbol of transition for you?"

"I found a chrysalis left behind in an incubation chamber."

"A chrysalis left alone? A bodyguard must have been somewhere. Perhaps you missed..." Diana said.

"I found two adult Enas unconscious. One was dressed in a security uniform but without any physical weapons and the other..." Cot paused wondering if the young woman was part of the bodyguard services, "had been attacked by someone or something."

"The *Murdelie* was to carry important people with statues of ambassadors that represent peace to the Peace Garden. No one on board would be carrying weapons. The entire ship would be cleared of any negative energy to honor the Peace Representatives. What better environment to process chrysalises."

"These chrysalises are part of a new genesis...with a royal emblem on the young male's clothing. They are highly evolved. They can be persuasive if you have an opposing opinion to the point that you wouldn't know you're being influenced. With all those important people scheduled to be traveling on the *Murdelie*, doesn't that open it up to possible interference?" Cot pursed her lips in thought. Was there a war faction within the Enas?

"Were you influenced?" Diana asked.

"I offered my assistance should they need it in the future. I may have overstepped myself. I should have Okayed it with HQ."

Diana looked at her curiously. "Star Force members have made personal pacts in order to broker or manipulate a situation. If HQ didn't trust your judgment, you wouldn't be in Star Force piloting an experimental sentient ship. How sure are you that your offer wasn't manipulated?"

"Because I have no residue of regret and my dream body would have marked the change."

Diana shook her head. "I'm not one to judge since I wasn't there. I've liaisons that I can't explain and only hope I use them wisely. I have to admit, though, *Star Chaser* is the first sentient ship I've connected with."

"*Star Chaser* is one experiment I've never expected in my career."

"Working with sentient beings comingled into a space ship has been going on across galaxies for centuries to different degrees."

"I had heard we're not the first," Cot said.

"You're the first self-sufficient star fighter, one person crewed. A crew of a dozen was the smallest I've heard of. There's an explorer ship, *Ebze* that is about a century old and still going strong. Every so many years it comes back to its home port to pick up a new crew and goes back out to parts few know about, exploring who knows what."

"I heard about the ship, the *Ebze*, when I was in the diplomat academy. A visiting ambassador from that ship gave a lecture on a species since officially recognized as self-determining. But he never mentioned the *Ebze* was sentient," Cot said.

"It's not advertised, especially to the military types. They tend to see any space duty to be in their sphere of influence, even if it's escort service for diplomats. It's about control and power."

Cot thought about her aunt and wondered if she had escort service to the places she had visited. From what she learned in the diplomatic school, her aunt was considered among the most favored to emulate. She was grateful no one knew they were related. Living up to a legend would have been more difficult than learning to live with so many different species while simultaneously adapting to her own change of circumstances. She had gone from living a near solitary life in the woods with her aunt and wild animals, to living in a city packed with more strange species in crowded living spaces than she had seen in books her aunt had provided her.

"Who are you thinking of?" Diana asked.

"My aunt Keli."

"You look like her." Diana's smile looked wistful.

"No, I don't." Cot felt taken back. Age was difficult to gage with some species. Diana was one of those people. Just how old was she?

"In her middle years you both could be mistaken for each other."

"How do you know her?" Cot asked.

"We've crossed paths many times."

"Where?"

"The last place was on the *Finhorn*."

"The *Finhorn*? Where all those people were killed?" Cot was stunned. "Many people came to speak to her of it, but she wouldn't. She said what is done is done. She was very firm in that. I thought that odd since..." Cot pursed her lips as if to remind herself that she had promised her aunt she wouldn't speak of it.

"It was one of those events that required a skilled negotiator like Ambassador Keli and a powerful group like Star Force to see it was done correctly - discreetly. No lives were lost because of the power SF exerted to resolve it."

"No one died?" Cot asked. "I must have misunderstood the situation then."

"You have the clearance with Star Force to look this up, so when you have more time, you can read the details. But remember to repeat this to no one under the threat of death," she warned Cot.

Cot held up her hand, "I wish no mortliege looking for me. I will tell no tales. So..." she said expectantly.

"So a brief rendition: A group of escaped prisoners had made it to *Finhorn* with the purpose of having Ambassador Keli negotiate a legal release for them and others that were held as political prisoners or were kidnapped for one reason or another. Star Force had been

investigating the rumors for some time so this proof was what the agents were looking for. It took swift and quiet planning to raid the prisons many were scattered in without a mass slaughter taking place."

"Then why did she leave the service if she was so good?"

"She was retiring. She felt she had something important to attend to at home while she still could."

"Why do you think you and I were brought together?" Cot asked.

"Why's are important to you?" Diana asked.

"Auntie would say that asking why and then listening on different levels gives ears where eyes are blind. Did you arrange for our meeting?" Cot asked.

Diana laughed. "I did no engineering for this meeting. I would rather a casual meet in a bar than roughed up by pirates. I think eventually we would have met since our lives were touched by Ambassador Keli. That happens, you know?"

"Predetermined?" Cot asked.

"Common interests draw a lot of strangers together," Diana said.

"I'm going to meditate for a while. If you need something to do, *Star* likes to act as a Cruise Ship Events Planner. *Star Chaser*, you have the conn."

"*Star Chaser* has the conn."

"Would my working out bother you?" Diana asked.

"No. I hope you want a challenge."

"I did very well on two of her workouts."

"*Star* was being nice to you." Cot tried not to blink the double vision away or shake her head as her senses altered. Suddenly an egg-shaped luminous ball appeared next to Diana while at the same time Cot could still see her physical form.

The two women split up at their quarters with Cot taking a longer time to dress in her ritual robe. The moment she thought to meditate, her body obligingly put her into a meditative state, yet keeping her present in the physical.

When Cot walked into the storage bay, she was already phasing between the physical and nonphysical. The privacy envelope that was activated didn't close her own sensitivities of her surroundings, but it did close out her sacred area from the ship's scan.

Closing off her sacred area from the rest of the ship, intensified her energy, as if the physical structure of the ship was containing her.

Sitting *Āsanas*, she took a few moments to feel the energy as it hummed through her body. Energy from her lower spine whirled up and out through her head in a whoosh. From the center of her forehead energy gushed out, though the envelope and out the ship's hull, as if that type of energy wasn't to be hampered by the physical energy. It was in a matter of seconds. Cot felt she was part of the light that moved through space and faster than thought, she was standing before an old carved totem of the original Clan Committee of Forty-four, with the subclans represented by their shields.

Looking around her, Cot sought something or someone that brought her here. There were children playing below the mound of the Clans where the Clans Meeting Hall stood. Turning to look at the building it was in flames. Through the flames Cot could see the people who had built it, they were watching the building burn, yet it wasn't consuming the structure. They weren't Mulands.

Before Cot could put together what she was seeing, the scene changed. An old man, dressed in the ritual clothing of a Brounder, walked through a forest that evaporated around him and became a city with towering buildings.

"Return home," a voice near her said.

She turned to see another Brounder whose face she couldn't make out. "We need your help." In a brief time, images of Mari passed by too quickly for her to know what she was seeing.

When it stopped, Cot knew she was back on *Star Chaser*. Memory of what just occurred was fading like a dream; the more she tried to remember the faster it faded. It reminded her of one of the Gepacks agents, and how they manipulated dreams.

Cot remained sitting, breathing in and out, and concentrating on her breath. At some point, she realized she had enough of that. She cleared her space and opened the isolation chamber. It was so sudden, the attack, she only had time to brace herself. Her body was lifted and went flying into a corner of the storage bay.

Cot rolled to her feet and saw a small ball of light heading to her. Cot didn't consciously summon energy, but her put her palms up and blocked the small ball from hitting her. It bounced away from her and would have attacked again, if Diana hadn't suddenly appeared.

Whatever it was, disappeared.

"What happened?" Diana asked.

"*Star*, there was an intruder on board, did you get a read on it?"

"I detected no intruder on board," *Star Chaser* said, then added, "however, something sent you into the hull."

"When I finished meditating I disengaged the privacy chamber and I was attacked."

"What were you meditating on?" Diana asked.

"Nothing."

"For two hours it was nothing?" Diana asked surprised. "Sounds like you went visiting somewhere and brought a spirit back that took issue with what you witnessed or experienced."

Cot shook her head. "I don't know."

Diana gave her a disbelieving look. "Well, I hope you don't have nightmares about it. *Star* woke me out of a dead sleep. I didn't realize I could sleep so soundly. I'm going back to sleep."

Cot nodded, not sure of what had just happened but something did. She touched Bua and realized, she wasn't wearing it. Glancing back at her alter, it was resting near the cushion. What had her taking it off? This was the second time since Bua came in her possession that she had removed it while meditating. Did it have to do with the energy the talisman radiated?

More questions. She would ask Diana but it didn't look like she wore any personal affects and considering her last encounter with pirates, she could see why she kept her own sacred objects in her mind.

## Chapter 26

### *Assignment to the Unknown*

Cot woke from a restful sleep. She had no recollection of her meditation the previous day.

"Greetings, *Star*. Anything that needs my immediate attention?"

"I have renamed our remaining SEs so Diana can keep them separate. And Star Force HQ sent a communiqué. Diana is waiting to discuss it with you."

"Renaming them will help me too. I'm assuming when I tell one of them to do a job, you're assigning the one most able to do it. Do you know what the communiqué is about?" Cot asked.

"It's classified."

"You're amazing me, *Star*. That used to not stop you from knowing the contents."

"I have not been able to break the code," *Star* said.

Cot dressed and went to see Diana on the bridge. She was curious what was in the communiqué that had *Star* upset, or was it like she said and she couldn't break the code?

Diana was sitting in the visitor's seat with the hull transparent. It could be disorientating walking through a forest and then suddenly stepping out into space, but it was familiar to Cot, as she stepped on the bridge.

"I have the conn, *Star*. Greetings Diana."

"You have the conn, Cot."

"Greetings, Cot. I wouldn't mind traveling like this now and then. It's a magnificent sight to witness."

"That's the truth. What does HQ have to say?" Cot sat in her seat and her console began to unfurl.

"We've an alleged traitor to locate. We're the closest, so we've been given the assignment."

Cot shifted in her chair, not liking the sound of it. Becoming part of an assassin's team wasn't something she wished to be part of. "What did this traitor *allegedly* do?" Cot asked.

"Allegedly, he leaked Star Force business to outside parties. My assignment is to find the source of the leak, stop it, and clean up the loose ends. You and *Star Chaser* are to accompany me. This is the fastest ride I've ever had to any of my missions."

She leaned over and tapped Cot's screen where a message marked private from High Commander Er of Star Force blinked for her attention. *Star Chaser* and Lt. Col Cot of Star Force were reassigned to accompany and assist a mortliege, Diana Rue, to complete an assignment from HC Er, without hesitation. There was no mention of Diana Rue as being SF.

"Star Chaser, *ask for a confirmation from HC Er. FHEO.*"

"*For his eyes only,*" *Star Chaser* confirmed.

"A tip was that he's headed to the New Frontier, so it's not out of our way," Diana said.

"I read that too."

"There are guardians along the New Frontier boundary that won't allow anyone with murder in their hearts to cross it. No one's been able to figure out where or who these guardians

are, but there's plenty of buzz on the docks about fugitives and pirates that tried to cross and ended up in a ship without power, drifting away from the boundary."

"I've heard."

Diana leaned toward her. "So what is bothering you?"

"I don't know yet."

"Did you rest well after that last bit of excitement?"

"It was just another day in space. The unmapped part will intrigue *Star Chaser*. I didn't see a name in my brief. Who are we hunting?"

"Boyton. He's the son of Rear Admiral Boyez, commander of special operations for Star Force."

To the feeling she couldn't decide if it was bad or good, a fluttering feeling in the pit of her stomach started at the name.

"I'm going to identify and neutralize a leak. In the end, he'll determine what action I'll take," she said.

"But you said no killing if you cross the boundary."

"I will detain him. Killing people isn't a large part of my business. What messes up this assignment is an anonymous tip that was in my mail. It said he was responsible for that mess you rescued me from. You know how annoying anonymous tips are? They rank pretty low on reliable and high on distractions. The fact that someone took the time to send it to me the same day I'm assigned the job of hunting him down, is messing up my sense of tidiness."

"There must be a lot of people who read our updates to HQ," Cot said. "Could it have been someone in HQ that wants to slow things down? I'm sure they know you like things orderly."

"I report to two people: the Commander in Chief of Mortliege Assignments and High Commander Er. I've been mortliege longer than I've been a Star Force Agent. When I became part of the organization it was with the agreement that my identity be kept secret. Outside of those two, a few QuaDom master practioners know."

"So, *Star Chaser* and I are among the few that won't lose our life because of what we know."

"You and *Star Chaser* are in a category I haven't even created yet." Diana glanced at Gemini. "And Gemini...I have a feeling it knows more about our business than we do."

Cot didn't offer anything more than a nod, thinking Gemini knew too much about her and *Star Chaser's* business. However, if *Star* could lock it in a cabinet, that was saying something about one of them having some control over the guest bot.

"Cot," Star mentally signaled. "*High Commander Er has replied with an added note. Diana is the lead of this assignment.*"

"Are you sure HC Er said that?" Cot asked suspiciously.

"He added that Rear Admiral Zieda would like to come visit me but he would rather she not until after we have reported to General Or. Why is that?"

"She has enough authority to commandeer our services since we haven't reported for duty yet."

"Why would she do that?" Star asked.

"There's always power games going on but it doesn't mean it's bad. We're a tool and you, *Star Chaser*, have a talent any smart CO would like to have at their beck and call. Have you been corresponding with Commander Rog?"

*"He is now Captain Rog of the Milescent. He patrols the Rizon Corridor where you would like to shop."*

Cot smiled at her humor. *"Do you still correspond with him?"*

*"He is preoccupied with his new duties and hasn't sent a message since he took over his new assignment."*

"So what's your plan?" Cot asked Diana.

"Before we cross the border, I want to see a person that offered testimony of Boyton's action."

"Do you have a file on Boyton?"

"Yes. Do you want to read it?" Diana asked.

"I would," Cot said.

"Have at it."

After reading the list of charges - petty is what she would call the majority of them, and no reliable evidence to support the one charge that was serious, Cot closed the file.

"It is not prosecutable," *Star Chaser* said. Cot appreciated *Star's* restraint in not saying anything until she had finished.

"There is nothing convincing to substantiate the main charge, and all the others are more like harassment. Why did SF justice department look into it? I would think they would investigate the individual whom leveled the charges to see what the motivation is."

"The charges were leveled by a supervisor of Boytons, who witnessed his actions against the girl." Diana was looking out at space, with a thoughtful look on her face. "The girl would not back the supervisor, and has disappeared. These accusations shouldn't have been taken to this level," she said slowly, "however," she turned to Cot, "they have been. I feel this is politically leveled at his father, Rear Admiral Boyez, to distract him from his duties. He was on a fast track in promotions in SF and that usually creates jealousy from powerful people both within SF and without."

"Admiral Boyez. I took part in one of the theatre's he had led against the Gepacks. He was Admiral of the Fourth Fleet of the United Fronts," Cot said. "He is cautious before committing the lives of people under his command."

Diana studied Cot, watching her gaze turn inward. She was sure she was remembering that hard earned lesson.

Cot was remembering such a lesson. It was about a pilot fresh out of the academy that hadn't even taken time to unpack his grip. He eagerly stepped forward to take the place of a seasoned injured squad leader of a squad of new untested recruits. His wing commander realized his error in promoting the flyer when he didn't acknowledge his return to base command. Cot was sent to find him and his squad to bring them back. Why her CO thought she could talk the arrogant youth out of his kill wasn't her place to question. She arrived too late and found floating body parts amid the debris of ships. She also found the enemy using the escape pods for target practice. Cot had not been able to save anyone, but she did use her skill to kill the enemy before they fled back to their mother ship.

Her wing commander dishonored the squads name so it wouldn't be used again, holding it up as an example of what the consequences of disobedience in war was about. The star student once held as the most likely to succeed in his military class, failed in his first command.

"Wars aren't for the romantics, but there always seems to be enough to ruin a good battle," Diana said. "Admiral Boyez had reached the top of his promotional ladder on his home

planet and with the United Fronts Alliance, without going directly into politics," Diana said. "It's logical that his next step up would be to transfer to Star Force."

"So what does a mortliege do about this?" Cot mocked.

Diana smiled. "Investigate. Balance things out. All sorts of organizations, besides individuals, hire a mortliege to take care of loose ends. Star Force included, which is why I was approached to become a Star Force agent. Boyton's love interest is the daughter of an agent of the SF's Internal Investigative Committee."

"Then wouldn't that alone set off another investigation to see if all this is out of line?"

"Exactly. Because of the conflict of interest the SF Secret Service has been called in to investigate everyone involved."

"What happens if the investigation shows that there are members that are less than stellar and more morally challenged than a common military hack?"

"Looking for justice, aye? Would you like to see them made examples of SF justice?"

"You're playing with me," Cot said.

Diana returned her gaze out at the passing nebulas and planets. "Not necessarily. It's not a good sign that one of the executive members didn't bow out due to personal involvement with the accused. There are a lot of SF agents that resent someone so highly placed giving in to self-indulgent interests. "

"I hope whatever the punishment is, doesn't degrade the organization," Cot said.

"Would you lose confidence so quickly in Star Force if in less than a year you see something about it that disappoints you?"

"Are they asking for the Admiral to step down while the investigation takes place?" Cot asked, ignoring her jibe.

"Yes. And there's the rub. There's an important conference that will be taking place in a month and the Admiral is one of the key members on the committee as well as many of the people that are being transported by the *Murdellie* to the dedication of the Peace Garden."

"What would happen if he's not there?" Cot asked.

"He was specifically requested."

"Is that a fact?" Cot said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Diana said.

"You said our destination is C48MC22. That's far over the border, about a year from here."

"HQ has some gates we can use. Chances are the pass codes will be changed once we pass through."

"With all that's at stake, how trustful are you of using them?" Cot said. "*Find alternate travel gates for us,*" she thought to Star.

"*They expect us to,*" Star said.

"*I know. Let's go about life as though we are naïve but keep a few hidden moves. Too many coincidences. Be more careful than normal about anyone accessing your system or coming on board. We have fail safes in place. Use them.*"

"I don't trust anyone with my life. That's a mortliege for you. We don't rely on anyone else's intelligence reports but our own. I have an alternative gate that will put us deep inside of the New Frontier, but on the other side of C48MC22. It's a day off our mark."

"How do you know he'll be there?"

"I don't. I wish to speak to a person who gave HQ his location. We should be there in a few minutes."

"We are one clip out of range of Space Station H's buoys," *Star Chaser* announced.

"Cot, dress in your Star Force uniform," Diana said. "We're going to visit the Commander of this station. It's important we make a good first impression. Asking about residents is a breach of etiquette and we need to be very proper in our asking."

"Come to a stop, *Star*. Stay out of sight while we're gone. No one is to board you without my authorization. Prepare the shuttle. What are you intending on wearing?" Cot asked Diana, not believing she would disembark wearing spacer overalls.

"I'll meet you at the shuttle dressed for duty," Diana said

Cot dressed in the dark SF uniform. Wasn't an SF agent supposed to be unseen in business? It was annoying that she was just a passenger on this assignment. Cot set her cover at the proper angle and went to join Diana in *Reflected Light*.

Diana was sitting in the passenger seat, dressed in a Star Force uniform. Her rank was 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant. She stood and gave the slight nod of her head a lower level officer would give to a senior officer.

"A uniform?" Cot asked surprised.

"You don't think I look acceptable?" Diana asked. "Is something askew?" She moved her cover to another angle.

"I don't think a uniform or rank is what you're about in Star Force," Cot said.

"You're right. Not all of us wear uniforms. But a civilian around a SF officer attracts more attention. The Commander is very observant. I don't want her to focus her attention on a mystery or something that is out of place. I want her focus to be on locating a person for us."

The docking bay they were assigned was in a sheltered bay. It was not a place Cot felt comfortable with. This was an unfamiliar station and what the politics were she didn't know. The moment the shuttle settled, all power was cut and her connection with *Star Chaser* ceased.

"Someone initiated a kill switch. I hope we're not walking into a trap we can't handle," Cot said. "I'm not familiar with this side of the galaxy and its protocols." She didn't want to let Diana know that her contact with Star was also cut. There are some things best kept to herself.

"This is unusual for this station. But we're here, so we might as well see what it's about," Diana said. She was calm as if this was a normal occurrence in her life.

"I would say the commander has some serious problems that she's making sure she's got the upper hand," Cot said.

"Captain of the shuttle *Elusive Shadow* open your doors for boarding," a gruff voice demanded over the com channel.

Diana looked over at Cot surprised. "*Elusive Shadow*?"

"We're undercover," Cot said. She chuckled at *Star Chaser's* disguising the shuttle's origins. Cot glanced at the SEs that were accompanying them. "If this is a station take over, it makes sense for them to cut the shuttle's power. It's interesting that they didn't neutralize the SEs."

"That tells us something about them," Diana said. "They can't penetrate the hull."

"Pirates or a military takeover?"

"It does sound like a band of common brigands," Diana said. "Let's exit out the emergency hatch and see what's going on."

"SE 1, 2 and 3, guard us," Cot directed softly. "SE 5 and 6 you're backup."

Diana opened an escape hatch and dropped to the deck. She peered between the shuttle's struts. She signed to Cot there were two and two. Cot nodded and gestured to Diana to creep

toward the other end of their shuttle. It was odd if this was a space station invasion that the shuttle wasn't surrounded with invaders.

The bay looked as if a windstorm had blown through it, leaving the contents of the cargo containers tossed about. There was no telling what may be hiding in the debris, including citizens of the station taking refuge or dead, Cot thought.

One of the creatures placed something against its body. "Captain of the shuttle *Elusive Shadow*, open your doors for boarding immediately or we will destroy you."

Sticks were pointed at the shuttle as if they were weapons. They were smooth with no handle or marking on them from what Cot could see. Thoughtfully she mapped out her next move and was about to run to hide in the scattered debris when liquid from the sticks shot out over the shuttle's exterior. Cot leaned into the shuttle's protection field as the self defense system of the shuttle repelled the liquid, sending it back to the attackers along the same trajectory as it was shot out; however, the structure of the liquid changed, turning it into something that looked like a black wave, rolling in slow motion toward the four figures. The four men stood facing the wave of energy while some invisible force moved them rapidly away from the wave. The black wave changed into a large mouth, yawning wide to swallow up whatever it moved over. If *Star Chaser* was manipulating the energy wave via the shuttle, it was a good method to disguise from where the defense was coming from, making the shuttle appear to be more than what it was. The four invaders turned and ran up the stairs to a control tower. She still didn't feel a connection with *Star* but it wasn't stopping *Star* from protecting the shuttle.

Cot turned slightly to see what was moving behind her. Diana knelt next to her. "I've heard about the nightmare sticks but I've never seen one used," Diana whispered. "Do you recognize this species?"

"No. You?"

"No. Do you have a plan?" Diana asked.

"I want to get to the control center to see what's going on. Can you create a diversion?"

"There are alarms on all decks. I'll start there. And while I'm at it, I'll see if they have any hostages in lockup and try not to release the dangerous ones...or maybe I will," she said amused.

"I don't want to panic the legal residents just the pirates. Shall we meet back here in an hour?"

"That's making it a short excursion. I'll let you know if I need..."

"SE1 protect and assist Diana."

"With all this excitement, maybe next trip Gemini will come along." Diana and her bodyguard disappeared around the other side of the shuttle.

Cot watched the stairs for a few moments to see if the pirates were going to return. "Set up an image distortion for me, SE2," she directed. When she felt a change in the vibration around her she broke her cover and headed straight for the stairs up to the control tower.

Normally, the control tower in each docking bay didn't have elaborate security because it was believed once the illegal entry was made in the docking bay then it was better to lock the whole bay down and isolate that section from the rest of the ship or space station. Space stations were set up so that each docking bay was a separate structure that could absorb most catastrophes and be released into space from the main structure. So why was the space station intact after this take over?

Maybe it was an inside job.

Hiding behind a post, Cot peered into the room. The four characters from the docking bay were hanging over a terminal that had another one of their kind making sounds she couldn't

understand. It wasn't possible to determine if the communication was upsetting or if it was just an order being delivered.

The four made a noise and the screen went back to the logo of the station.

"SE2, neutralize the five," she whispered.

SE2 buzzed then trilled and the five fell to the ground unmoving. Quickly, Cot entered the room. A dozen people were lined up against a wall. They looked frightened but very still, as if frozen in place.

SE3 darted forward and emitted another tone. All the people collapsed to the ground. While most of them remained on the deck, two rolled to their feet and staggered toward Cot. One of them grabbed her elbow for support while the other disappeared out the door.

"I'm Lieutenant Cosmo of Security. We've been attacked," he croaked. It looked painful for him to move. He lurched to the communication terminal.

"I need to send out a broadcast. One of their ships is heading to the space port Lankersham."

"Why?"

"They're bounty hunters."

"What if they're already there?"

"Then when I open up a communication, you can do whatever you did here to give our comrades a chance to turn the situation to our...advantage."

The translator hesitated an unusual amount of time before coming out with the word 'advantage' which could have been understandable if a new slang word was used, or it could be that Lt. Cosmo was hesitant about telling her more of the story, which in itself wasn't unusual.

"Who are they looking for?" Cot asked.

"Someone by the name of (unintelligible). He's a lawbreaker." His slurring of the name and adding in a louder voice "lawbreaker" was setting off mental alarms in her head. Was he trying to set off an audio security alarm?

"What's the reward?"

On some stations all that was needed to get security back up was to say the name of a wanted person and a code word in the same sentence and an alarm would go off in the Security Office. Since they were in the office already Cot wondered what the security defense would be.

The lieutenant looked at her suspiciously.

"You think I'm going to be competition," Cot laughed mockingly. "Maybe I'll tell you that the reward sounds too good to be true."

"It's a worthy enough reward," Lt. Cosmo said defensively.

It had to be big for him to be this evasive. Was it just a coincidence that bounty hunters were on the same space station as the person who Diana was looking to question?

"How did the bounty hunters take over your station?" Cot asked.

"Our mayor thought he could delay them while he looked into their claim that such a large reward is for such a worthless person." Lt. Cosmo made a contemptuous noise.

"So you've seen this person they're looking for?"

"He passed through." His lips tightened. "You are not going to help us," he commented.

The lieutenant suddenly fell to the ground unconscious. Startled Cot looked around her then back at the unconscious lieutenant. Everyone lying on the floor looked like they had fallen asleep.

She looked around for the other person that had staggered to his feet. "Where did the other guy go?" Before Cosmos had fallen unconscious he had activated the console. Taping through the menu she found the security cameras.

"Diana," she called over her com link.

"I'm here. Go ahead," she replied.

"I think there's a reward out for Boyton. Did you know about it?"

"Did someone tell you that?"

"He didn't give me a name but did say there is a reward for someone. When he's conscious again, I'll get a name."

"What else did you find?"

"These people are bounty hunters, not pirates. Another interested party is heading your way. You might want to question him. Did you find any more people?"

"Yes. They're all unconscious. I can't wake them."

"Would it be worth our while to wake them to question?"

"No. It's easier to suspect whoever is unaffected as a person of interest."

"I'll keep an eye on things from here since I have the security cameras of the entire station. How long are you going to be looking around for your person?"

"You said an hour...that gives me thirty more minutes. Can you see anyone beside the person heading my way that's awake?"

The screen flickered quickly through images of the space station, pausing when a person was found then moving on. Cot suspected *Star Chaser* was manipulating the space stations security via a SE.

"Deck 3, 6 and 9 have what appears to be 2 or 3 unconscious people in the public corridors. They aren't dressed as security."

"Space stations are always busy. There should be more people caught in the corridors if it was a surprise take over," Diana said.

The next set of images were the inside of rooms and personal quarters. "The scan is now going through public and private quarters. I have a live one. D2 L3 S9. The guy that was up here is dragging an unconscious person in the corridor. SE1, neutralize the person on D2L3S9 until Diana gets there."

The SE that accompanied Diana moved quickly to its new assignment. At that moment SE3 buzzed and exploded. Cot jumped to the side and turned to defend herself. She was knocked off balance by something she couldn't see. A blow sent her in the other direction and over the center console. SE2 appeared active but remained still as if it didn't register any danger to her.

Not knowing what was knocking her around, Cot rolled and jumped as well as zig-zagged in the small area, avoiding whatever was in the control tower with her. Cot thought she saw a dim outline of something larger than the doorway move toward her, cutting off her escape to the docking bay. She moved again, feeling a flow of energy pass her. The exit was opened to her, if she wanted to take it. Moving one way and then toward the exit she felt something touch her heel, knocking her legs hard into the door frame. Pain laced through her legs as she fell onto the stair landing. Cot dragged herself through the stair railing, dropping to the deck below. As soon as her feet touched the deck she was flinging herself sideways. SE2 didn't follow her.

Another energy blow hit her as she struggled to move. It took her breath away. For what seemed a long time her vision cleared. Moving slowly she tested her limbs. Everything moved. Looking above her SE2 was hovering near her.

*"Cot, they have left the area," Star Chaser's voice sounded in her head. "I have dispatched a recon bot to follow."*

*"Good. What's the damage they left behind?" Cot asked.*

*"Diana was following the employee you warned her about but she too was disabled. He escaped in a private escape pod with the unconscious person he was removing. We lost SE1 and SE3."*

"Diana, come in," Cot called.

"I'm behind you. What happened to you?"

Cot was sitting against one of the crates while SE2 repaired the bruises she sustained.

"We met something we weren't able to handle. I'm sure *Star Chaser* will be ready next time. We lost two SEs."

*"They adapted to my devices. I have gathered information on this species and will have protection from them on our next encounter," Star said.*

"They aren't any species that I've met," Diana said. "Their weapons are invisible to my senses and I'm sorry about your gizmos. They're handy to have around."

"Me too. We're going to need to stop somewhere and get replacements that *Star Chaser* can upgrade. Let's see what's happening upstairs," Cot said to Diana.

"I would like to know where they're going and if they have the person I wanted to question," Diana said.

"*Star* has a bot following them. HQ will either have a new species added to their list if they don't already," Cot said.

As they climbed the stairs people started to gather on the platform, looking anxiously down at them.

"Halt!" Lt. Cosmo pushed aside those in front of him. He held a nerve destabilizer pointed at them.

"Lt. Cosmo, I'll handle this," a quiet voice from behind him said. "Everyone, return to your duty stations. We need to assess the condition of the space station and its residents."

"Princess - Commander Era," the lieutenant turned quickly, and bowed respectfully to a child. As the others filed back into the control room the princess waited for Cot and Diana to reach the platform.

"Thank you," Cot said to her and bowed her head slightly. "I didn't see you earlier," Cot said.

"I will say, I was doing as a child would, hiding until adults made it safe again."

"My name is Lt. Col. Cot MacDiarmid. I am a representative from Star Force Command. This is Diana. She is seeking someone." Cot instinctively knew this child would know she was lying when she introduced Diana as a second lieutenant.

"Greetings, Princess Era. Commander of Space Station H. I came here to speak with Logomedesomolmon," Diana crossed her hands and laid them over her chest.

"Greetings, visitors. I will say, my name is Princess Era, 5<sup>th</sup> daughter to the Queen of Montagu and King of Standingfield. I will stand as spokes person for Space Station H. I will say, Logomedesomolmon who is a favored traveler of our planet and but a passing mark in our long memories, left while we all were occupied with the Modas."

"Who are the Modas, Princess Era?" Cot asked.

"I will say, that requires a long story that will take more time than you have. I will say, in short, the Modas missed their point of arrival by 100 eras. It is a miscalculation that brought

them into this part of space for which they will be regretful for many life times," Princess Era said.

"They were your guests?" Cot said.

"I will say, all are welcomed who respectfully request a visitor's pass to either the space station or our planet. The Modas chose to not be in that state of grace," the princess said.

"What were they looking for?" Cot asked.

"I will say, a name, a person, a time that is 100 eras ago. I will say again, they miscalculated."

"Longomedesomolmon left with them?" Diana asked.

"I will say, he chose to leave with another - adventurer. I will speculate, his adventurous self will have many stories to recount though not within your life time. I will say, he is beyond your reach. I will ask, what is your business with him?"

"We would like to question him about a sworn statement he made about another," Diana said.

The child's face broke out into a wide smile, showing blunted teeth that were made for mashing rather than tearing and rending. "I will say, Longomedesomolmon doesn't comprehend what a sworn statement is. I will say, it has no value in his world."

"My observation of those on Space Station H is that your guests are discreet and respectful of other guests and do not bear witness for or against another," Diana said.

"I will say, you have correctly observed," the princess said. The princess stood in silence as if listening to someone speaking out of their hearing range.

"You have one more question to ask and I will confirm or deny," she said.

"Is Boyton a traitor to Star Force?" Diana asked.

"No."

She then turned to her lieutenant. "Their visitor's pass has expired. They will be leaving."

"Thank you, Princess Era. May your long life be filled with adventures and quiet time of equal interest," Cot said.

"May I say, Lieutenant Colonel Cot MacDiarmid, that your life is filled with adventures that move in strange and unusual places. I will say, the Uden will protect you." She looked intently at Cot as if trying to impress something on her. "Follow your original destination and you will find the one you're looking for." She then turned and walked a few feet before disappearing, as if she walked through an invisible door.

Cot and Diana exchanged looks and turned to leave.

"Where to now?" Cot asked Diana.

"C48MC22 and into a probable trap. So, tell me about your connection with the Uden," Diana said.

"I'll ask *Star Chaser* to search for information on Uden. That's the first I've heard of it. What do you know of them?"

"Nothing."

"And the princess?" Cot asked.

"Princess Era is 50 of your ers. The royal family lives a long time and has a biological memory, making them more knowledgeable at birth than you and I in our adulthood. Her older sister is usually the commander of the station. She's less informative and too cryptic with what information she does impart, so we got lucky."

"The lieutenant didn't look quite like her. Is he a mixed species?"

"I don't know much about the planet's species mixes. What I do know is that while the royal household tends toward longevity the rest of their planet's inhabitants don't live as long. Though they don't look that different, I think that has to do with their manipulation of appearance. Not even their servants that reside in their household live longer than the rest of the population. That's where belief in the "other" comes from. Unlike most species that face the prospect of falling from godhood amongst those they oversee should other species appear with greater if not equal power, they didn't hide the coming of other species. The planet's inhabitants' loyalty to them as their gods has been unwavering."

"So what we saw of the princess doesn't necessarily mean that's what she looks like," Cot said.

"That's exactly right, but then, there's a lot of species whose appearance is determined by how our senses interpret what is before us. I may see her with a horn and you may not."

Cot understood that from her own experiences. Her first off-planet trip to a space academy for diplomatic training was horrific. It was the first time she was confronted with the reality of sights and sounds from unspeakable shapes and figures to odors that had her gagging. In the end, she had to rely on what her senses presented and respond with common sense. As for seeing what others didn't see, it was that way on her planet so she had learned early not to point out such discrepancies.

"Welcome aboard, Cot and Diana. Shuttle diagnostic will begin when you disembark from the *Reflected Light*," *Star Chaser* said.

"Greetings. I have the conn, *Star*. Find the fastest route to C48MC22," Cot said.

"Using our gates?" *Star* mentally asked.

"We'll enter HQ's portal then where it's convenient, leave and find our own way."

"Cot has the conn. We will be at the portal in 10 clips."

"Noted."

"Would you mind if I used your exercise program?" Diana asked.

"Help yourself. If you would like, *Star* can create a program just for you," Cot said.

"Would you mind if I use yours?"

Cot laughed and Diana grinned broadly. "Try your best, but *Star Chaser* adjusts the program for the individual with surprises."

"Nothing a good trainer wouldn't do," Diana said.

Gemini hesitated as if in quandary as who to stay with. It ended up staying with Diana in the bay while Cot returned to her bridge. She had reports to attend to.

"Approaching first portal," *Star* said later.

"Acknowledged. SOP."

"Standard Operating Procedures, sending out forward monitors."

"Have you received anything from the monitor you sent after the space ship with the two people Diana was interested in?"

"It is returning home. It lost the ship at the second jump gate."

"How long will it take to reach us if we wait here?"

"One hour."

"We'll wait. Can you make a list of our remaining hardware? At some point soon, we're going to have to replace what we gave to Rear Admiral Zieda and what we've lost on our recent skirmish."

"I will make a shopping list," *Star* promptly said.

Cot smiled. So it was on *Star's* agenda too.

An hour later Cot's screen blinked that *Star's* monitor was approaching them.

"Verify that it's not carrying anything it didn't leave with. Download it's information to my screen."

They moved into the travel corridor smoothly as Cot's screen filled with information she didn't find enlightening about who was flying the ship and where it was going.

"*Star*, you have the conn," Cot said.

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

\* \* \*

It was an hour later that the ship's alarm awakened her. Automatically, Cot dropped to the deck and dressed quickly in her AVEG suit.

"Report, *Star*," but she didn't expect an answer since the familiar presence she felt from *Star's* connection was gone. When did she stop feeling her presence? She didn't even remember if she was dreaming. She always dreamed when she napped.

Diana joined her in the corridor dressed in her AVEG suit. No Gemini.

"What's going on?" Diana asked as they thumped to the bridge.

"I don't know. I lost contact with *Star*."

"Does that happen often?" Diana asked.

Before them was a closed hatch cover to the bridge. It only closed during emergencies.

"What is often?" Cot asked. She pushed the emergency release and was surprised when the hatch cover opened easily and even more surprised when four figures were on her bridge.

"Identify yourselves," Cot demanded.

The four disappeared.

"*Star Chaser*, identify intruders."

"I have been breached," was *Star Chaser's* dispassionate report.

It took a moment for Cot to register that this was not the voice she was used to.

"*Star Chaser*, did they download anything into your systems?" Cot asked.

"I have been violated. I have become non compliant with security regulations for a *Star Force* ship. I will begin to erase all..."

"Stop. On my authorization, you are to erase nothing until I authorize it. Do you recognize my command as Captain of *Star Chaser*?"

All systems shut down with their faceplates activating simultaneously. Their suit comms came on and the scans on their face plates began filling with information.

Both women looked at each other.

Cot headed to the storage bay with Diana close on her heels. This was where the CBIS would prove it's credits.

"What is that?" Diana asked as Cot signed on the CBIS.

"This is *Star Chaser's* backup and a security monitor. She was upset it was going into places she felt were her private spaces but she finally let it complete it's backup. Now is test time. It doesn't store her personality only files on the operation of the ship."

"I've never heard of the company."

"They were a small company that merged with a larger one to continue with their work on the CBIS. I was able to buy it from them when they were selling their test models for liquid credits. Since I knew one of the owners, he gave me a model he felt was ready for marketing. I understand the company that bought them out changed the name and other things so what is being sold now isn't the same."

"A test model, aye? Has *Star* upgraded it like she does everything else?"

"As far as I know, she wasn't able to access it." Cot was hoping with her warning to *Star* earlier that *Star* would be sure her important data was stored in the CBIS.

Cot activated the security mode and watched the alarms began to appear across the lines of code. She hit repair all and could see it move faster down the list of warnings.

The lights in the ship came on. Gemini appeared.

"Gemini, where have you been?" Diana asked.

"*Star, can you hear me?*" Cot mentally called.

"*I am here. I have never left.*"

Cot hesitated as she sought for anything unfamiliar in their connection. "*Star, are you functioning sufficiently to manage the ship?*" she asked aloud.

"I'm recovering," *Star* said.

"*Were we in the corridor HQ gave us?*"

"*Yes.*"

"What is our location now, *Star?*" Diana asked.

"I will have to exit the travel corridor to get a galaxy fix," *Star* said.

"How far are we from our exit point?" Cot asked.

"I have no information on that point," *Star* answered.

"Review your journal logs," Cot said.

"My journal logs have not been restarted," *Star* replied.

"Start your journal logs," Cot said.

"Sounds like a system wipe," Diana said.

"I hope CBIS can help with that," Cot said. She looked at the submenus for *Star Chaser's* private files then selected restore.

"I have an unauthorized attempt to access my system," *Star Chaser* warned.

Cot accessed a console in the loading bay and signed on. The captain's console appeared with the request from CBIS to logon to *Star Chaser*. Cot allowed the access.

"I have an unauthorized user in my system," *Star Chaser* said.

Cot continued to allow CBIS into various levels of *Star Chaser*. She turned back to CBIS and watched the progress, keeping an eye on both screens.

"All systems need to stop for new user's control," *Star* announced.

Cot tapped another menu on CBIS and selected copy files to system instead of allowing CBIS to take control. Lights in the bay dimmed.

"Now we wait," Cot said.

"Looks like you've been through this before," Diana said.

"The other time was a lot more complicated."

"Do tell," Diana said and waited, expecting for Cot to continue. "Wouldn't it be better if you told me than *Star?*"

"*Star* wouldn't tell stories about me," Cot said automatically, then wondered. If *Star* thought it was a harmless trade for information she wanted, maybe she would. That was something she would speak to *Star Chaser* about later.

Diana smiled.

"On a patrol during the Incursion Wars I was shot down and landed on a planet with a burn out. My ship wasn't the only one that crash landed on that planet's surface and in that same area. It looked like there was something that captured what it considered space debris falling to

its surface and directed it to fall in that area. Old and recent models of ships were scattered about, so I pirated parts from the wrecks to get my ship back into space."

"You make it sound easy," Diana said, "but I bet it wasn't."

For a moment Cot wondered just how much Diana already knew and then decided to tell her just what she was willing to discuss. "It wasn't. The parts I used were not recognized by my fighter so I had to get the system to register the parts as new and assign all the attributes I needed the part to do. When a new part is installed the ship's computer will test the manufacturer's specs. I had to turn off a lot of security checks to get that fighter back in space and hope I didn't burn up in the process. It was a learning experience I hope to not have to go through again."

"An engineer would have loved to have been in that situation. Do all pilots have to know how to work on their ships?"

"I spent a lot of time with the ship mechanics at the diplomatic school. They needed someone to test the ships they repaired and I was thrilled. First I was just a passenger and took notes from the test pilot. She taught me to fly too. Then she was shipped out and by then I was hooked on fighter piloting."

Diana smiled. "That's how you got into the space academy."

"Yes."

"So you got your ship off the planet and into space. Good thing you were rescued."

"Yes." *After a fashion*, Cot thought. It was what happened after she got into space she didn't want to recount.

Her fighter shorted out the batteries and all she had was life support. She was unseen unless someone passed by and happened to be looking out their proverbial window. Due to her situation she witnessed a meeting that would blow the spy-intel organization into a frantic frenzy. Who would have guessed the spy they were all looking for within the fleet was the very person that was the head of intelligence? Her last life beacon was fed the information with her location and dispatched. It was the energy required to send the beacon off that registered a blip on someone's monitor and she was captured by the enemy and sent to a death camp. She was lucky it only took a day to find her or she would have been executed with a dozen others.

Diana watched Cot's gaze become unfixated. There were a lot of stories not included in her file that Diana was curious about. She wondered if *Star Chaser* would fill her in.

"Shall I begin recording?" *Star Chaser* asked.

"You should always be recording," Cot said. *Star* was not up to her old self. "*Star Chaser*, all stop."

Both women held on as the ship came to an abrupt stop.

"All stopped," *Star Chaser* reported.

"*Star*, this abrupt stop would be an emergency all stop," Cot said. "Normally, all stop unless I say it's an emergency all stop, you can stop with less of a shock to the biologicals on board."

"*Star Chaser* is not performing to her specs?" Diana asked, unsure if she should be amused or worried.

"CBIS hasn't finished updating all her systems, so I'll wait before I make any adjustments."

"So, we've come to an all stop in a travel corridor and we don't know where we are or if we get out of it, how to get back in," Diana said.

"Not a problem yet," Cot reassured her. Cot logged into her personal logs and quickly moved through stories she collected. After an hour she found the Tale of Two Hags and the Tea Kettle. The information was in the second line. She typed in the code.

Space before them changed.

"That's an exit?" Diana asked as she leaned forward to stare at a portal into another galaxy of stars. It shimmered and undulated. Diana closed her eyes as her equilibrium became unsettled, waiting for them to exit.

Cot could feel a change in energy as they moved out of the corridor into another part of space. The results of the scans from all around them filled her monitor. She picked her way through them, looking for something that she could make sense of.

"*Star*, can you locate where we are and C48MC22?"

"Ten hours from our present position," *Star Chaser* answered. "Would you like a more precise measurement?"

"Ten hours is sufficient, *Star*," Cot said. "Increase speed to as fast as possible without injuring us," Cot said.

"Speed has been increased," *Star* said.

"How long?" Diana asked.

"My fastest speed possible without injuring my passengers is an unknown," *Star Chaser* said.

Cot suddenly gulped as her equilibrium and stomach lurched. Diana grabbed the arms of her seat.

A medibot was activated and administered something to each. Whatever it was left Cot's limbs so loose she would have slid out of her seat if the harness to her seat wasn't activated.

Mentally, Cot couldn't form a complete sentence or even remember who she was. How long the feeling lasted she couldn't tell but suddenly she snapped out of it. Cot looked at the medibot that moved from her to Diana. Diana's eyes opened instantly without assistance from the medibot.

Cot looked at her screen and could see they had come to a stop. "Where are we, *Star Chaser*?"

"We are at the border of the New Frontier. We must cross it to get to C48MC22. The warning buoys warn all ships crossing that there are no treaties or agreements between those that live in this space sector and the sector we are leaving," *Star* said. "Shall I resume course, Cot?"

"Is there any unusual danger we should be looking for?" Cot said to Diana.

"Be alert for anything," Diana said. "For a one year journey we made good time. I like the travel corridors and their shortcuts, just not the side effects."

"*Star*, continue course and send out scouts."

*Star* was silent for longer than Cot was used to. "*Star*, acknowledge my last two commands."

"Acknowledged," *Star* answered.

"Did you send out scouts and what is the course and are we on our way?" Cot asked impatiently.

"Scouts have been deployed. I have plotted the course. We are underway."

"All stop and shut down all but life support," Cot said quickly.

The bridge went black.

"I have come to all stop with only life support active," *Star Chaser* said.

"Why does she acknowledge some of your commands and not all?" Diana wondered aloud.

"Exactly. Something is interfering with our communication."

Cot got up and went into the bay to check on CBIS. Parts of the device were scattered about the deck.

"This is getting more serious," Diana said. She looked around for any evidence of what destroyed CBIS.

Cot studied the parts lying about the deck. It was dismantled without damage to the parts. "Computer, emergency down." Cot then gave a code in a dialect no longer used on any planet - handy to know if you wanted to set a code in case of a ship take over.

"What are you doing?" Diana asked.

"I'm putting the ship into manual over-ride. It will come back up without external over ride capability. I will be the lone captain of this ship."

"You think someone has been controlling it from...where?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm going to take over. Let's get your job done so I can get to my ship's issues."

Cot headed back to the bridge.

Cot selected coordinates and began testing what weapons she had and querying the equipment *Star Chaser* had upgraded. So far they were all responding. That was reassuring.

As they arrived at their destination, an awkward looking space monitor, Cot sent out two gizmos to inspect the monitor. It was above a dozen planets that could support life but not to her species.

"I can't get a reading on this hull," Cot said. "It's made of material not recognized by *Star Chaser's* data base. Why can we see it if our scans can't identify what

"It's an automated monitor. For an arriving ship, you can ask the monitor what each planets requirement for visiting are and chances are, you'll be told, there is no visiting. Once you land, that's your permanent home, so chose well," Diana said. She smiled at Cot and gestured to the monitor. "Are you planning on visiting the monitor? You can query it without visiting."

"I did but I'm not privy to the information. I want to see if anyone is on it. It's big enough to hide a dozen people my size."

## Chapter 27

### *Surprises Abound*

"In the New Frontier you'll find space monitors like this but of various sizes. I've only seen four and inspected two," Diana explained as they jetted over to the monitor. "They are space ships you would find in a ship junk yard. They appeared to be stripped down to the hull of all electronics and when you scan it you won't find anything to read. The two I entered had a power source I haven't been able to identify but I believe it's what maintains its place in space. All the monitors allow passing ship's the ability to leave a message that is delivered to a kiosk over the border. I tested it. I left two messages. One was for immediate delivery and it delivered it at the same time I was dictating. The second message was a two day delay and that's exactly when it was delivered. Whoever maintains these has left only one access hatch to enter. It's usually where the main access had been when it was an operating ship. That's over this way," Diana said. They fired their jets and expertly maneuvered around the slowly rotating monitor. They passed hatch covers permanently sealed. The docking extenders for a visiting ship had been removed.

One of the SEs attached to Cot's shoulder detached and opened the hatch cover Diana tapped in a code to. Cot could imagine an alarm light going off somewhere in the space monitor. The SE went in first, then Diana. Cot looked back out in space, searching for anything that was not *Star Chaser* before entering.

The station was smaller than *Star Chaser*, but not by much, which is why she was curious to visit it. It could be a meeting place where people that split up to flee, meet here and then continue their journey together further into the New Frontier.

"How do I activate this?" Diana asked.

"Tell it what you want it to do." Cot eyed the SE before her. "SE inspect the space before me." She turned back to Diana, "Just what do you want me to do with what I find, if I should find someone?"

"Hold him, her or it, until I get there," Diana said. "SE, lead to the right."

"Keep in touch," Cot told her. Cot moved slowly through the station, studying every shadow and nook. There were a lot of both. Her visor was showing that someone had passed and not wearing a space suit. The readings were fresh. A week at the most she calculated. She realized she hadn't looked to see how long Boyton was on the run.

"Cot, how are you doing," Diana asked.

"I haven't found anything that someone would use to stay alive here. No food dispensers, life pods or quarters. Just nooks for tiny people to hide in," Cot said.

"If you trust your helmet visor's readings, you would see that the interior has adapted to your life signs," Diana said.

"I noticed, but I don't trust it." Cot realized that she had come to depend on *Star Chaser's* assessment. "It changed from

Everything Cot passed showed part of a power plant. The only thing that was using power was the stabilizer that kept the ship from losing orbit, yet there wasn't any vibration she could detect.

Cot paused when a vibration did register on her visor, but it wasn't enough to power a stabilizer. Slowly, she turned around watching her visor's readings. Nothing but bulkhead, more cabling, nooks and shadows.

"Diana, did you get a reading of that vibration?" Cot asked.

"No. Not a darn thing. I'm done on this side and heading back to the hatch," Diana said. It occurred to Cot that somebody in Star Force may have sent them on a false trail.

Cot reached the end then began her walk back. She met Diana at the hatch.

"I found traces of someone but unless they're hanging outside until we leave, we're the only ones here now," Diana said.

"Let's go. I'd like to see what's going on with *Star Chaser*."

As they stepped out into space Cot could see *Star Chaser* moving away from them.

"Emergency shutdown, *Star Chaser*! All stop by my order! Identify me!" Cot ordered.

The ship continued to move away from their position as if her commands weren't heard.

"*Reflected Light*, identify me," she said in an untranslatable language. "Dispatch to my coordinates immediately," Cot ordered.

"Blasters!" Diana said.

A ship suddenly appeared. It fired a dozen shots their way and disappeared after *Star Chaser*. *Reflected Light* darted toward them. Since the shuttle couldn't disable the shots heading toward them without injuring them, the SEs moved to intercept and while they were engaged Cot and Diana boarded the shuttle. It was too late to help the SEs, they exploded.

Cot dropped into the pilot's seat and immediately began to start the process of locating *Star Chaser* and following her.

"Are you following *Star Chaser*?" Diana asked.

"Right now, she's more important than your assignment. Do you plan on overriding my decision?"

"Count this as mixed luck. I think my assignment is in your ship. Do, carry on."

"My consolation is, the SEs on board and the medibot are programmed to disable the unauthorized person or persons and the ship will come to a stop in twenty minutes. I just don't know what *Gemini* will do about this."

"*Star Chaser* is headed further in the New Frontier." Diana said.

"What can be in this sector that your fugitive wants?"

"To be anonymous, provided he can escape whoever is hunting him. I'm curious how that ship was able to cross over the boundary when they looked like they meant take out *Star Chaser*."

"Maybe destroying a ship is not the same as killing a person," Cot said.

Cot did another scan for *Star Chaser*. "*Star Chaser* is leaving behind gizmos to disable her tail and she's changing course without picking up speed. What is her pilot up to? I hope her arsenal of gizmos isn't emptied," Cot muttered.

"Just what is *Star Chaser* capable of doing to protect herself when she's attacked?" Diana asked.

"I don't know who's in command, her or her pilot but..."

Cot went silent as readings of the remains of a ship came across her scans. "I guess that answers our questions. She took out her attacker. This is not looking good for us when we do take possession of *Star*."

"There's no failsafe on *Star Chaser*?"

"Yes, of course. The ship will protect itself, which it just did."

"So when we catch up with *Star Chaser*, do you have any plans to get her not to think we're attacking her?" Diana asked.

"It depends on what we catch up to. Tell me about Boyton. What are his skills?"

"That's rather interesting but that part was left out of his files," Diana said.

"I don't think it has to do with his father. The person on the monitoring station we were at wasn't male," Cot said. "I wasn't sure then, but now, I am."

"Maybe Boyton's girlfriend. Where's that artifact?" Diana asked. "I can feel it."

"Probably in the shuttle's baggage compartment. I didn't put it there. Did you?"

"No. I thought it was in my quarters."

Cot tapped in an inquiry. "Here we are in unknown space and just like at home we're getting invitations. Right now I have 2000 businesses that have sent their destinations and advertisements. No Murphy's Dinner yet. The shuttle doesn't have the capacity to cross-check what danger these businesses pose to us in a reasonable amount of time."

"What do you consider a reasonable amount of time?"

"Two days. If we're lucky, we'll be here for less. We've been tracked since the shuttle left *Star Chaser*, so it's going to be interesting to see who does more than send advertisements."

"It must be a busy corridor then." Diana watched over Cot's shoulder for a few minutes. "I'm going to look over that artifact. Maybe I can figure out what the markings are. It will give me something to do."

"All right. If you should suddenly find a hidden pocket or a button on that thing, don't investigate it without *Star Chaser's* containment field around you. I've heard a lot of stories in spacer bars not to have some suspicion that the likes of such artifacts don't like being handled by strangers."

Diana grinned. "Aye. I've heard my share of stories too. I think we have enough to deal with now, without me adding to our list."

Diana went to the back of the shuttle and opened up the storage compartment.

Cot busied herself sending out coded messages to *Star Chaser*, monitoring the space around them, and querying the SEs that were still on board *Star Chaser*. So far she wasn't getting any return pings from anything *Star Chaser* controlled.

Hours passed without any disturbance. Cot kept herself alert and busy reviewing data as her inquiries returned. Cot became aware of a silence in the shuttle that was suspiciously too quiet. Without changing her demeanor she activated a security buffer around her, then tested the security in the shuttle. Something was in the shuttle besides them. Cot turned in her seat and looked for Diana and anything that was setting off alarms in her head. Cot engaged her AVEC faceplate. The shuttle wasn't large enough to lose someone yet there was no Diana. "*Reflected Light*, where is Diana?"

The storage cabinet opened as if someone was there. Diana rolled out unconscious.

"Activate medibot. Activate..."

A shape materialized moving swiftly from the storage cabinet to her, then it dissipated. Cot thought she recognized the species but too quickly it dematerialized. She didn't want to disengage the security buffer around her to see if she could help Diana so it was up to the medibot that was more qualified to see to Diana's needs.

"*Reflected Light*, how far are we from *Star Chaser*?"

On her visor the distance and location appeared. They were closer. *Star Chaser* must have slowed, nearing her destination.

"Show me all ships within one hour of *Star Chasers* location."

Four ships appeared.

Cot looked back at Diana. She was still unconscious. It was important that Diana be awake when they reached *Star Chaser*. A light blinked on her visor. *Star Chaser* acknowledged

*Reflected Light's* signal. Cot mentally reached out to see if her connection to *Star Chaser* was back. Instead she sensed something else. Cot jumped up and grabbed the figure that dropped from the overhead. It wrapped its appendages around her and squeezed. The AVEC suit, enhanced with *Star Chaser's* changes, sent a shock to the outer skin of the suit. The energy sent the figure flying into the bulkhead. In a blink of an eye it zipped through the overhead out of sight.

Cot looked at the noise behind her. Diana was on her feet struggling with another figure. A ding from the console signaled they had reached *Star Chaser*. She turned her attention to their approach. The bay doors weren't opening. Her commands to the SEs on board *Star Chaser* were not being acknowledged. The shuttle continued progress and her screen filled with warnings of an impending crash. Cot kept over-riding the all stop. She was counting on *Star Chaser's* independent system to recognize its own shuttle and that she was captain and would open up. Cot kept sending out commands to *Star Chaser*.

"Hey!" Diana shouted near her ear. "Are you trying to kill..." Diana let out a huff as the bay doors slid open seconds before it was too late. Diana sat down and watched as they glided into *Star Chaser's* bay.

"It isn't over yet," Cot said. "*Star Chaser*, I hope you have a plan. Mine is to retake your bridge."

Before either rose from their seats, the shuttle or *Star Chaser* accelerated, pushing Cot and Diana into their seats.

"I hate going so fast I can't enjoy the ride," Diana panted.

"Your suit will adjust," Cot said. Her own suit was showing how hard it was working to keep her relatively comfortable. Her console showed a planet that *Star Chaser* had as destination. "I have a feeling, *Star Chaser* was waiting for us. That's a good sign," Cot said.

"If this doesn't knock us out, I'll be grateful to be able to see where I'm going," Diana said.

Cot tied the shuttle's monitor to *Star's* bridge. "We're heading to a planet that is looking like it's primitive. Small patches of inhabitants but I can't tell their intelligence."

"Ascer. I was there once. It's another planet of choice for those that want to disappear permanently. There's a dozen planets like that scattered a days journey from the border. But, I think Boyton will be heading in further. The bounty hunters will be determined to find him and his girlfriend. I have a feeling they've run away from their families."

"Permanently, as in there's no ride off the planet?" Cot asked.

"When I visited Ascer, I provided my own transportation but it wasn't easy to keep possession of it. The inhabitants were interested in destroying it. One-way-ticket was their practice."

"We've come to a stop. Let's see if we're allowed off this shuttle."

The shuttle hatch opened and both hurried down the ramp.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cot MacDiarmid, captain of *Star Chaser* on board. I have the conn."

"Lieutenant Colonel Cot MacDiarmid, Captain of *Star Chaser*, is on board. Cot has the conn," *Star Chaser's* voice responded.

"*Star Chaser*," Cot said, surprised. Her connection with *Star Chaser* was different. She hadn't recognized it until *Star* responded verbally.

"Yes, Cot. *Star Chaser*, explorer of galaxies and adventurer of wide open spaces. We have arrived at our destination. All guests have disembarked," *Star* said.

"Where's Gemini?" Diana asked.

"Guest Gemini is no longer on board," *Star* said.

"Let's make a visual inspection of *Star Chaser*," Cot said to Diana.

Though Cot couldn't see her altar, she could feel its presence. They were in an energy phase. Diana must have felt the same for she paused where the altar would have been.

"Energy is different here. How do you change the visor's scan range?"

Cot lifted the arm of her suit and opened a panel. "Up or down?"

"Every species is different," Diana said.

Cot jumped back when her manipulation of her scanner showed a person two feet in front of her.

"So, you can now see me," Boyton said. "Leave me alone," he said firmly.

"Why are you running?" Cot asked.

"When someone sends a mortliege after you, would you just wait around to find out what that could be about? Would you just hang around when your ship is blown up, or your girlfriend's life is threatened? I don't think you would just wait around for things to happen to you."

"So where are you going?" Diana said.

He smiled. "Where politics doesn't care who I and Ambe are."

"Why the New Frontier? Sooner or later, what you're running from will find you," Cot said.

"For now, no one can cross the border with the intention of doing harm to another. Soon, the reason for why we are hunted will be forgotten as new problems arise. *Star Chaser* has been helpful. I'm sorry if you find it offensive I borrowed her but, I helped put her together," he said grinning, "so it didn't seem so bad to borrow her. She's more than what I had dreamt of her being."

"You're one of her developers?" Cot asked. Looks were deceiving.

"Ailinn's consciousness was who I chose to embody this star fighter. She chose the name *Star Chaser*. I wanted a consciousness that had potential but no life experience. The others are older egos that had experienced life and everyone knew what they were about."

"You called *Star Chaser* to help you?" Diana asked, worried that the sentient ship had vulnerability SF hadn't thought of.

He sighed exasperated. "I wished for help. Some things are not explainable and are a waste of time to try."

Cot smiled, understanding perfectly. The SID-ships were telepathic with their pilots. It made sense that they would also be telepathic with their creators.

"So, why did you put the CBIS out of order and then put it back together?" Cot asked.

"Eri Som's invention. He had a good idea but it wasn't meant to be a back up for a sentient ship. As it was it would have shorted from too much information. As a thank you for the use of *Star Chaser* and for the loss of some of *Star's* defense toys, *Star Chaser* and I reprogrammed CBIS to be her back up, with the right information. CBIS should only be connected to her when her systems have crashed, just like on this occasion.

"You met the Corini's. They patrol some of the older travel corridors and don't want certain types in corridors they patrol. Sentient ships are one. I gave *Star Chaser* all the travel corridors I know of and their rules of travel, in exchange, she has promised me you'll leave us alone."

"She did, did she?" Diana asked annoyed.

Boyton chuckled. "She did. Since I'm no longer working on the sentient project, there are a lot of people that want me to work on theirs. I want to do something different."

"Star Force is after you for that reason?"

"There's a division in Star Force that develops weapons that are detrimental to the life force of various species. That's where I was transferred to. I told them if they move me to that area, I would try every way I could to shut it down."

"Star Force uses biological weapons? That's against their code. Is that why they put a price on your head, because you wouldn't work for them?"

"No. It's more than that. They transferred me to a high security space station anyway and gave me four projects to complete. The head of that department is a Creep. He was stuck on me like adhesive so I had to figure out a way to do just what I said I was going to do before he did something to me to become compliant to his wishes. No one would believe me when I reported my suspicions about him because once in his department, I was isolated from anyone on the outside of Space Station Uln. While the virus I set in his life support systems was shutting down all areas, and the clean wipe of all his computers and files was in progress, I escaped in his personal yacht."

"So who is this creep?" Diana asked.

"It's from one of those planets they closed to space travel. They have their own agenda to take over universes, as that department proved. I let the galaxy police know about Creeps working on Space Station Uln. Star Force knew Creeps were dangerous but someone in the Projects Department, thought he could control them. You don't control Creeps. They manipulate energy so you think you're the one in control."

"Boyton, you have one minute left," *Star Chaser* said.

"This is but a brief stop in our journey." Boyton smiled. "I'm taking two SEs and a few of *Star's* defenders that she upgraded. Until we reach our destination, I'll need something I can trust to watch our backs. I have some advice about that power base to an artifact. I put it in the shuttle because *Star Chasers* hull isn't enough to prevent the energy it's putting out to be felt by the Hunters. You should find some place to leave it otherwise you'll have every Hunter that can pick up on the energy, chasing you down."

Boyton's image faded.

Diana looked at Cot. "I can't detain transmissions."

"So, what do you suggest we do now?"

"Creeps," Diana said thoughtfully, "and in Star Force."

"Someone was manipulated into allowing a Creep to have their own experimental department."

"Your Enas wouldn't allow them to be within a days distance from any of their ships," Diana said.

"Because of the telepathic imprint they could make on a developing cocoon," Cot said.

"It's not discussed but yes. I'll have a word with my contact in SF to see why a Creep is in Star Force. I would hate to think the Creeps have infiltrated SF."

"It's disturbing that someone in SF knew *Star Chaser* would be involved because of their connection, and used us to hunt Boyton down. Boyton was lucky it was you that SF paired us with, because bounty hunters normally don't care why or what is going to happen to their trophy, they just want to collect. So where do you want to be taken now?" Cot asked.

"A Murphy's Bar. I noticed there's one on this side of the New Frontier, unless you want to be chased by Hunters."

"You don't want your ship back?"

"Glass Eye? The last time we saw it, it wasn't in the best of health. Ati is going to be positively furious unless I replace it. By now he knows I borrowed it."

"Locate the nearest Murphy's Bar, *Star*."

"It is one hour from our present position taking a travel corridor Boyton provided," *Star* said. "Do you wish me to use it?"

"Did the travel corridors we had intruders visit us have any warnings that we would not be welcomed?" Cot asked.

"Yes. I can now identify which are private and restrictive. I am going over the travel corridors that I have in my data base and adding this information," *Star Chaser* said.

"Is this one restrictive?"

"Not for us."

"Then we'll take it," Cot said. "SOP, *Star Chaser*."

"Standard Operating Procedures, Clev R4 sent in advance," *Star Chaser* responded.

"Who is unable to travel this corridor, *Star Chaser*," Diana asked.

"The list is long and will take longer than an hour. Do you wish me to begin?"

"No," Cot and Diana said.

"But you can show me a list of the one's I can't travel in," Diana added looking over at Cot. "Just in case I have the code to one of them."

"It would take less time for you to give me your list and I will tell you if you can't enter it without some consequence," *Star* said.

Diana grinned. "Hm. That's one way to learn my gates."

"But not the pass codes," *Star* said.

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Cot rechecked her readings to make sure there wasn't any shuttle crossing their path as *Reflected Light* glided into the dock they were assigned. The space port LandL was located in the New Frontier, two hours from the boundary markers. The space port was the size of a city. The port was busy. The traffic controller gave them five minutes for Diana to debark and *Reflected Light* to be on her way.

"Diana, it's been nice meeting up with you. May the space tides bring you glory and adventure," Cot told her.

"And you, Cot, take care of your partner, *Star Chaser*. And, thank you for the gizmos. I'm sure I'll be using them soon."

The moment the shuttle docked, the ramp was extended. In less than a minute, Diana was gone along with the artifact and some of *Star Chaser's* updated gizmos. If she was carrying the artifact, Cot and *Star Chaser*, felt she needed added protection. *Star Chaser* liked Diana Rue, and Cot thought with a smile, so did she.

Cot felt the influence of the artifact, as it moved further away. "If I can feel its absence, then it's good to get rid of something that I only notice when it's gone," she said to *Star*.

"The energy is of little significance to your bios," *Star* said.

Cot thought otherwise since she noticed it's presence.

*Reflected Light* was back in space, heading to where *Star Chaser* was waiting, giving the appearance of a well-armed yacht. Once the shuttle was safe in her cargo bay, they were on their way to their own sector of the galaxies.