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MERKERS OUTPOST

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Chapter 1

Tension in the mess hall was as thick as the goop from the freighter's shunt gate. Bets halted and silence settled uneasily in anticipation of the next move. A dozen figures composed of various species dressed in grubby work fatigues pressed around one of the tables. Even the few that were there for other reasons waited, pausing in mid chew or conversation, watching the backs of their fellow crewmembers.

The gleaner, hulking over his opponent and the gaming table finished his turn. He switched his gaze to his opponent to see the reaction from his bonus point move. A hard look in the unblinking eyes of the alpha female held him, and once again, he was uncertain. With difficulty, his eyes moved back to the game board. A large nervous hand wrapped around the control too tightly and moved his wizard's servant into the castle hall past a dead troll dog.

The female resisted a sigh, not sure if it was from relief or disgust. Her opponent wasted another move by taking out the dog instead of finishing her off with his wizard's crow, a shape-changer. Maybe he had an aversion to pets...or maybe he just didn't like her troll dog that had been leading him to false victories that cost him players to reach.

She moved a broom that turned into a black bird, and from there it flew through a wall, out of the hall and to the room where his wizard was hiding, then disappeared as it changed into another shape. "Bleep, bleep."

Some of the crew jumped from the pagers tone. The female's hand was a blur as she irritably slapped the acknowledgement button on the back of her wrist comm band. Careful not to touch the board or controls she stood, letting the parting crowd direct her to the communicator on the unevenly fading two-toned painted hull. Her wrist comm, as with most equipment on the freighter, was old and not working to its specs.

This had better be a 'Hello, hope you're enjoying some time off', she grumbled mentally. "Bridge, this is Lieutenant Montran," she reported in a low tone.

"Report to cargo bay seventeen, Lieutenant!" The order was crisp and unnecessarily loud.

She imagined a smirk on his blue face to match the mirth of his voice. His fourth antenna was probably twitching too, she thought disgustedly. What irked her was that his officer status, lower than hers was, was based on whom he knew, and not on battle or academy training. Either way she still outranked him no matter whose space they were in. With a struggle, she held back an angry retort.

"My shift doesn't start for another twenty stan hours – Ensign Desoto," she reminded him in a low voice.

"Those are your orders, Lieutenant." The audible click told her it was pointless to argue. She hit the wall communicator with more force than needed. After taking a few deep breaths to calm herself, she turned and threaded back through the restless crowd.

"I've been called back to duty," she informed them, stating the obvious. It was an effort to keep her tone even and noncommittal. She used to be able to detach emotionally from small annoying things like this but her time aboard this freighter was changing her.

"This game is closed for further moves. Game two thousand four-four is a draw," the computer-run Gaming Master declared.

The sounds of outrage mixed with jubilant voices from the crew rose to a din as the lieutenant stepped through the hatch grateful she would not have to break up the fistfights that were sure to ensue. She would have enjoyed punching someone herself...like the committee member responsible for 'commandeering' her back into Committee service...and sticking her on this disaster-waiting-to-happen tub. Quickly she strode away from the noise.

Rue Despario. Damn that clause! It was supposed to be just a courtesy concession between two galactic egos. It's a typical political wormhole. No one had ever used it!

Miserably she thought of her grandfather, a voice she sought comfort in during her three months of solitude on the freighter.

Harry, your dearie could use any influence you may have in fortune's way to get me off this cursed ship...safely and very soon...like today.

Yep, m'dearie ah sure will use me influence fer whatever it can get c'ha.

Her grin dropped into a puzzled frown. How did she get herself in this predicament? She was to rendezvous with her cousin/brother, Lord Hadrian DeMonte on Z3, a busy but small outpost near a jump gate used primarily for switching shuttles. From there, they were to travel together to their home planet aboard his private liner the *Alborak*, a ship that had all the protection and trappings to fight off pirates or any trouble short of a battle cruiser or a swarm. There wasn't thing political about the meet and she didn't see why anyone would be interested in her return.

For the umpteenth time she tried to figure out why he had sent for her. It wasn't militarily or politically motivated, otherwise Commander Hailbrun, head of security on the Centurion flagship *Ziggy*, would have told her before she left...or she hoped that would be the case. The commander had informants for all intelligence, including gossip in both Committee and Collective space and her commander of seven years would never knowingly send her unprepared into danger.

So, what did that leave? A family reunion?

Not my cup of tea...but long over due, huh Harry? And given the choice of being here to there, I would rather be there! But, I don't think a family reunion. Not the season for one. It would be winter. Though, I do miss the winter weather there, Harry. So...what's so important that he requests me to come home, but needs to talk to me face to face before I get there? Marriage? I know he's not arranging mine. He wouldn't dare...A big grin lit her face.

She had telepathically sent him a brief image of her 'emergency draft' orders from the Committee's Galactic Central Command. Hadrie's answering thought was puzzling.

She grasped the red harrier, the pole that would drop her quickly down to the next deck without having to use the stairs or elevator.

He knows I can't figure out feeling messages. Give me an image, Hadrie! Now, I'm just about dying of curiosity.

Her boots thudded solidly on the lower deck, jarring her head. With a slight pause and a curse under her breath she continued toward the hatch, trusting the sensors to open the hatch covering before she reached it.

This assignment was supposed to last less than one stan month or whenever they delivered the cargo. By Hydra's breath, it has been three months and I'm still here along with the cursed toxic gasses I'm supposed to be watching over! At this rate, I'm ready to dump it out the tubes like a bad case of gastric upset.

The image of the consequences brought returned the smile to her face.

What a hell of a cosmic blow-out that would cause!

She took a deep breath to ease the ache in her head and rotated her shoulders. She turned her thoughts to something else...the purpose of the call to the loading bay.

Well, it'sn't about docking preparations. There are no docking possibilities around here. No incoming and outgoing freight movement, unless some passing ship is suicidal and wants to link for supply transfers. On the other hand, maybe they've dropped their load and ran before Spinners Tale got too close to mate-up with them. Naw. Helm would probably run the packets down either knocking them into the nearby jump gateway to travel way out into another part of the galaxy, or smashing the load open. They would then have to send some fool out there in a suit to recover each floating load. That fool would undoubtedly be me...so, no more of these silly thoughts, Lieut. No tempting the Fates, huh? So, what could this call be about? What service compartment needs me to be squirming into to fix that my reactivation of the ship's diags found? Or what other virus is running through the systems that their own officers couldn't nail and purge? I'm learning way too much about a freighter's maintenance, Harry. This is not the direction I had in mind for a career move. And definitely nothing in this part of space!

The hatch to her destination swished open.

There was a small party dressed in their A'mort Environmental Garb, AEGs, assembled around covered crates. She nearly tripped over someone's gear heaped in the entranceway. Annoyance flashed in her eyes. She had been drilling the crew since her arrival on the proper handling and storage of life-sustaining equipment. But after three months with her own health deteriorating she was no longer interested in saving the crew from themselves.

No more helping those that don't want to help themselves. Didn't I say I was turning over a new leaf, Harry? Look at me! I get back into Committee space and back to old habits.

Ya do have this magnetic quality about ch'ya, ma'dearie that seems to attract the slow and dysfunctional in this part of the galaxy.

Commander Martinez, the only one not dressed for outside work, looked her way just long enough to gesture toward the heap. "Dress up, Lieutenant." His back was facing her by the time he finished his order.

Picking up the upper part of the AEG, she read her name across the back. So, they had gone into her quarters and snagged her suit. That was too considerate. She was hoping the joints and pacs were not damaged from lying on the deck. These AEGs were the oldest version the ship's owners could legally carry.

Commander Martinez was focused on the group moving unmarked crates onto the transport pad. If they were at a legal toxic dumpsite she would be hopping with joy that her pseudo official duty was completed. In her peripheral vision, she studied the commander's body language. Lieutenant Montran wished she could hear the conversation because he looked more irritated than normal.

"How 'bout hurrying it up, Lieutenant," Commander Martinez raised his voice.

By now, she was used to suiting up without assistance. She snapped the fasteners, ran her sensitive fingers over the lips, cinches, and holvens to ensure the suit was secured, and tapped the wrist gauges, more as a habit than for any remedial reason. Covertly she studied the crew in the room, identifying them, ranking them, and then classifying them by their known specialties and coming up with an ill suited group for any away mission. But for that matter, no one on *Spinners Tale* was qualified for any ship duty, and that was her assessment only after a few days on the ship.

"When the lieutenant is ready, move out. I don't have all day, so brief her." He turned on his heel and stepped past her without a glance.

Harry, I should return the attitude. Heh. Undo all the fixes I did on this junk heap, and then make sure I'm in another galaxy when she blows. They're lucky I have better scruples than that. Helgas moon! This situation is the abysmal pit of all pits.

She snapped her utility belt in place and pulled a sidearm from the secured weapons locker nearby, all the while keeping her hands steady and movements smooth to belie her inner feelings. Deep inside a sense of foreboding was growing. The feeling reminded her of another time...a time seven years ago she had yet to forget.

"First group, prepare for descent!" Petty Officer 3rd Class Decker barked in his helmet mouthpiece, bypassing the chain of command for debarkment.

Ignoring the insubordination that she had become accustomed to on the freighter, she continued to look for something out of place. Though highly unlikely, she hoped it was the cursed toxic canisters they were removing - and then quickly changed her mind. She realized her aging AEG might not withstand the exposure and that it would be safer to shuttle the canisters to the dumpsite than move via the molecular transporter. The crew had a bad habit of mishandling cargo.

They can't possibly be that stupid!

M'dearie, those sireens goin' off'en yer head aren't there just ta be keepin' ya company.

"Where and what are we transporting, Chief?" Lieutenant Montran asked. By the tic reaction in the chief's shoulder, she knew he heard her, but he continued to order the next group into position with more unmarked boxes and canisters. The second group was ready and assembled on the pad waiting while the lieutenant remained to the side, letting her irritation bleed off.

"We're taking supplies to an outpost," Chief Decker finally replied in a churlish voice.

Lieutenant Montran noticed he had not named the outpost or addressed her, but it appeared her presence was required because they were waiting for her.

Best have yer sidearm ready and check to see if yer got the ol' lucky charm on ya, m'dearie. This has the scent of an overripe fruit.

What do they need me for? They have their own officers for this...and for ship systems repairs, maintenance, etcetera, etcetera, and etcetera, yet here I am again... called when I'm off duty. How bloody subtle! If they don't want me here, why don't they just let me off at the next available station instead of working me around the clock?

Suddenly it dawned on her where they were dropping.

"Merkers Outpost?" Curiosity replaced irritation. *So, what is Spinners Tale doing, taking supplies down to a supposedly deserted planet? And what kind of supplies?*

The chief's lips almost curled up in contempt, giving him a rather grotesque look when viewed through the helmet visor. The chief had a rather unpleasant face to begin with. A sarcastic voice came over her speaker, "I only obey orders, Lieu-ten-nant."

If she had not already abandoned any kind feelings for the dead-beat crew, his taunting voice would have been the final deciding point.

That's it, Ma'dearie. Ya lettin' go of coddelin' uns that don't even know when they got it good. It seems that seven years of self-imposed exile have done yer a sense of good.

You think? It's a bloody damn way to find out. Some less extreme and closer to home experiences would have done the job. And I don't mean closer to my birth home.

As was her habit with anything this crew did that involved her life, Lieutenant Montran checked the work. She moved to the transporter console to verify the settings and made one minor adjustment unnoticed by the console operator, C-man J'wtms who was busy at the shimm monitor. Stepping on the remaining available dais, she noted her inner warning alarms lessened. She attributed it to her setting adjustment.

The usual disquieting sensation of being moved in molecular form from one space to another paused in the midst of the transportation process. Lieutenant Montran felt a momentary fright that something had gone wrong, but then the restructuring continued. When the transportation sequence finished she found herself surrounded by open space, alone, and with nothing to grab onto as a heavy blanket of weight settled over her body, causing her to bend her knees to keep her balance. She could hear the suit kick in to compensate for her out-of-kilter bios. She choked on the first deep breath of air, as it burned her lungs. If the gravity were not so dense and difficult to move in, she would have let herself fall.

"Now don't panic, Lieut. This is workable," she whispered to herself, struggling to squelch paralyzing fear. She had experienced this gravity load a few times in recent military training engagements, compliments of Lieutenant Commander Nelson on the flagship *Ziggy*; however, at that time she had reliable equipment and support in case of a problem.

M'dearie, yer lost a few minutes into both of those military games, too. Good news is, ya been separated from that lot of fools.

Thanks, Harry, for that bit of a reminder. I hope that is good news, because being alone on a deserted and hostile planet dressed in a damnable AEG may have me wishing to be back with that flaky crew.

Impatiently, she pushed the thought out of her mind and concentrated on the immediate problem ...surviving.

Now what were the lieutenant commander's suggestions when we went over my disastrous run in the simulator? Don't panic. Let my suit adjust. Check my bios. Take stock of where I am while the bios stabilize. Make plans. And above all, don't drop to my knees unless it's life threatening, because it will be a strain on me and the suit's regs to get back up. Right, right. Take things one at a time. Oookay.

Ifn' problems happen in that order, everythin' will be fine, eh m'dearie?

Dragging her left arm up she looked at her air and suit status from the gauges on the wrist of the sleeve. Everything read normal.

These regs can't be right. What else? Hey. No more alarms in my head. "Can I be so lucky?" she muttered disgustedly, and then stifled a cough.

Aye, m'dearie. At last peace en' quiet to think. What's next on our list of 'to do's'?

"Hail to Spinners Tale. This is Lieutenant Montran..."

This time the cough caught her by surprise. Her chest constricted in a cramp. Now would be a good time to cast away caution and use the meds. She felt along the suit controls for the emergency medic packets but nothing happened when she pressed the button. Alarmed she moved to look in the pockets for a first aid kit. Nothing. She activated her water refresher. Nothing.

Somebody emptied my suit! I had this suit fully functional yesterday! When I get my hands on whoever messed with my equipment, I'm going to dump him out the airlock in his AEG. I should have spent more time checking this suit.

"This is Lieutenant Montran to *Spinners Tale*, come in," she repeated thickly and slowly. *Are you out of your mind, Lieut? They're the ones responsible for you being in this situation.* Looking closer at the gauges, she noticed her communicator failed to register her voice.

Saved from my own foolishness.

Now, m'dearie that is truly a statement of wisdom. If ya call for fools it's fools ye'll get.

She mentally reviewed her readjustment of the transport coordinates. *How could they have done that, though? I reset the COs to be behind the crew not out of sight of them. I should have checked to see if they calibrated them for the planet's harmonics! I wonder what happened to the crew...I have to find out what's going on here. This is a deserted and privately owned planet so why are they visiting...with supplies? I wonder what type of supplies. Damn, Lieutenant. You're acting like something unlawful is going on here. It could be lawful...Yes, right. Like I need all this now. If the freighter was doing something illegal, why haul me into it? Maybe I'm making too much of this. Oh, Lieut, they have been playing you for a fool. It's staring you right in the eyes. They drag you off a transport, stick you on a freighter, and then dump you in the middle of nowhere. What does that tell you? It tells me that maybe Hadrie had something important to tell me and he waited too long!*

Lieutenant Montran tried to focus her eyes on what was before her. The sky above was azure but inches above the horizon line were thin streaks gray. Turning slowly, she could see the same flat land in all directions. For a while, she studied the surface, letting her eyes adjust to the different lighting.

Looks interestin', doncha think, m'dearie?

Shading her eyes from the reflected light that managed to get past the visor screen, she squinted, hoping to see something more.

Is Merkers Outpost above ground, below ground or both? Let me make a guess here...because of the density of the atmosphere, I would say below ground. Okay, that means I Got to look for a service plate to get below...provided there is one around here. Where is the rescue bot? Remote possibility or not...I should have checked out this planet in closer detail.

M'dearie, ah know how much ya like this self-floggin', but ya should put it off fer another time.

There were no landmarks or anything that caught the eye except the dark line along the horizon in one direction, which appeared to be inching higher. That was where she would head. Slowly and with effort, she pushed her legs forward, barely lifting them above the dull red ground. She was already tired from her long shifts on the freighter.

Don't even think about that, Lieut. It's self-defeating. Just move your feet forward. Right. Like I can ignore the pounding in my head that's rattling my eyes. That mess in the drop didn't help. I checked the coordinates myself. No one on that ship has the skill to change them in mid-trans. There are safety protocols...I reinstated them myself. But I didn't check to see if the system calibrated to this planet's harmonics.

M'dearie, yer spinnin' yer wheels like that little mouse in the child's tale, and drivin' me to beach me boat on the rocks like them sailors hearin' the sirens.

Okay...right. I need to do something useful here. So, what do I know about being dropped in a hostile environment...with a faulty suit and no supplies? And the air has a faint smell of a contaminant. That's just great. She laughed to herself, feeling the dark humor of it. The familiar circumstances threatened to bring back unpleasant memories.

Okay, think. Step one...look for my shipmates. I think I'll skip that part. Two, look for shelter. Hm. I haven't the slightest idea where the access plates are. Okay. Not good odds at two out of two. Last but not least, three...wait for the Auto-R to rescue me. That's got to be working because the charts were recent updates. What if they changed the rules in Committee space, and privately owned planets don't have to provide auto-rescue bots for crash victims? No, the chart shows it was cleared, so nothing has changed on that front. So, where's the Auto-R?

Okay, okay. So, I'm here alone...no back up...whatdoido? Pull out a flute and make music while I wait for the dependable model A Super Swift Auto-R by Jamerio Corporation to show up? Whoa! Hold on here... Okay. Think of something to take your mind off how miserable you feel.

Sharon should know by now that I changed the beneficiary of the life insurance policy...the one she insisted I take out. Geeze! Now where did that come from? I mean it's not like she said to make her the beneficiary...she was surprised.

Before she could censor her drifting thoughts, a subject she had been avoiding for over four stan months came up. Sharon. She could feel a great mental sigh escape her.

Why do I feel so...lonely? I don't feel lonely. I'm a loner by nature and I didn't feel lonely when we split. I was okay with it. I was relieved. I couldn't be waking her up with nightmares and not talk about it...and I don't want to talk about it or even think about it. Just this bit of thinking about it and my stomach cramps. I thought I worked this stuff out with the counselor. I don't need this. I'm so mixed up here. It's got to be from sleep deprivation. It's making me crazy...and this bad air isn't helping any.

Lieutenant Montran realized she had stopped walking. Automatically, she started a mental check on her physical condition. Slight tremors ran up and down her legs. She could feel sweat trickle down her neck and imagined her clothes soaking it up. The AEG was laboring and the visor was collecting condensation on the inside.

That's all I need is sweat in my eyes and not being able to wipe it! That alone is going to drive me to the wilds of Arcus.

Aye. And even if'en ya found the Mound of E in Arcus, ya wouldn't know it!

Harry, what am I going to do with a mythical treasure? Give me something I can use. Just keep moving, Lieut. Talking to your dead grandfather is bad enough. You don't want to add hallucinations. Maybe that's what all this is about. Huh, Harry? You think they're trying to drive me crazy to get back at me for resigning on my terms...those military types...they would do that. Harry, I think I'm losing it here. Where in helgas moon is that rescue bot? Sooner or later, the Auto-R has to send out a bot, or something. I wonder what that something would be.

As her eyes fixed on the distorted view through her visor of the dark line, she failed to notice the rise in the ground near her feet. Her world went careening at an odd angle and suddenly her faceplate was down in the dust.

For what seemed like long moments she laid where she fell, letting the tremors in her legs lessen. Then Lieutenant Montran started the arduous process of getting up. Rolling onto her hands and knees took an immeasurable amount of time, effort, and racking coughs, as if the very atmosphere outside and inside of her suit was working against her.

Lieutenant Commander Neilson, you are right again. Not a good idea to fall. Stabbing pain radiated from her lungs to her chest and back. For a few moments, she braced herself with closed eyes to let her heart stop pounding so hard, while savoring the victory of being upright, though it was only to hands and knees.

She was thirsty.

Sweating too much and the suit'sn't recycling it into my water pouch. The view from in here isn't too good either, Harry. It's as bad as being in a steam room.

The inside of her helmet was weeping with condensation, while the outside was covered with a fine iridescent dust. She coughed again wishing she could hold her head as the throbbing pain increased. Sitting back on her haunches, she lifted a trembling arm to wipe the exterior of the faceplate. Now she had streaks from her dust-covered glove, making her view worse. The faceplate acted like a magnet to the glittering flakes.

Like dung balls on a lamb's hiney!

She avoided the temptation to shake the dust off her gloves since she knew she couldn't raise enough vigor to have any real effect, besides the jolt would only make her head ache more. Let's see what this fall is all about. Hopefully not something that I wished I hadn't stumbled across.

She slowly moved back onto her hands, patting the ground around her knees. She felt the unmistakable form of a cylinder attached to something she couldn't lift.

Well, Harry, it feels like a maintenance pipe.

Angling her visor for a better view, she saw two bright arrows pointing in opposite directions stamped on the pipe, one larger than the other.

It's not the Mound of E, Harry, but I'll take this as a treasure just the same. The large arrow usually indicates a city and the smaller a maintenance entrance. I think right now, the maintenance would be advisable. I'm not in the mood for socializing, especially if I run into my crewmates.

Minutes later, crawling on her knees to keep the pipe in view, she came to the lip of an expected elevator plate. It was a standard maintenance entrance that operated on weight distribution. Crawling gratefully into the center, she pulled the operator bar out and moved it into the 'on' position. Small lights lit up around her and her decent began with a noticeable jerk. She remained on her hands and knees in the center of the plate exhausted, and laboring for breath.

Air must be at the bottom of the reserves.

She heard a sound above her and the pressure around her body relaxed.

Breathable air? Don't have much choice. The suit tank is out.

She released the faceplate safety with shaky fingers. The air that cooled her face was scented and breathable as she reflexively gasped for air. As the clean air filled her lungs, coughing fits expunged the toxins that had been cycled through them. When the coughing fits lessened and her eyes focused, she weakly leaned against the wall in a sitting position. Her throat and sides were sore but she was now able to

breathe deeper and without pain. She removed her gloves grateful to be able to wipe away the sweat that stung her eyes. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on breathing in the fragrant air that she could now appreciate.



Startled, green eyes shot open.

How long was I out? Okay, Lieut Got to get it together.

The muted light in the pale blue room made it easy on her eyes, but they still watered. A soft tone sounded, and she could hear seals release.

Time to rise and get them wobblin' legs underneath ya. Helgas moon, they're like a newborn foal's. Don't have ta worry 'bout the air. Can't see why the air in here won't match what's on the other side of the elevator door.

Unsteadily she rose, using the wall for support.

Harry, if I have to defend myself, I'm going to be a real disappointment if someone's looking for a challenge. Wher's the door?

A whiff of air from behind her had her craning her neck to look behind her, not ready to let go of the wall.

Yer instincts are not workin' this shift, m'dearie.

Both sides look like a door, Harry. I would love to have some meds about now. If I must kick some knees out, it would be nice to be able to lift my own. She laughed softly to herself. Right. As if that's all I need to find the strength.

Without stepping out, she studied the room, holding onto both sides of the doorframe. It appeared to be a small waiting room with two corridors leading from the elevator. There was a comfortable looking circular couch in the center of the room. Art covered the walls. What thrilled her eyes was the sculpture in a corner of the room. It was a dramatic life sized portrayal of a pair of intense Polo players riding their mounts toward an imaginary goal post with one trying to steal the puck.

Looks real inviting, like this is where I'm supposed to be going, huh, Harry?

No sense in finding things yer not prepared to handle.

Ah, like the tale of Black Beard's Wives, huh Harry? You know, each time I hear it, I get a different meaning... Harry, I'm losing it. Next I'm gonna start thinking about Messia and the three Cronies...or was it the three bears? It seems it's been a lifetime since I've heard your stories. Her thoughts trailed off as she realized she needed to focus. Taking a few breaths, she concentrated on her situation.

What if I'm being led into a trap? She snorted to herself. Anyone on Spinners Tale being a threat to her was laughable. Unless they have weapons.

Remembering her own she patted it reassuringly. She was too exhausted to pull it out and carry it. *I think you're over reacting, Lieut. They didn't drop anywhere near where you did. You would have seen them or traces of them...like shadows on the horizon or tracks in the sand. Come-on. Let's focus on finding a place to rest and a moment or two to gather some strength. I haven't felt this awful in a long time.*

Cautiously, she put one foot out to get a better look around the room. The light in the waiting room brightened, with one of the three corridors coming alight. The scent in the air became stronger. She released her grip on the doorframe, stepping completely out of the elevator with the doors swishing closed behind her.

Well, that hallway looks inviting.

It seems ta be a clear invitation. If ya should decide to explore the darker side, I presume that I don't need to point out to ya that yer not exactly working on a full set of thrusters if n'ya run into trouble.

Don't worry, Harry. I'm not even tempted to explore for anything more than a place to rest. If I don't sit down soon, I'll be laid out flat like a lumpy carpet. Right now, that water fountain looks very good.

Now that she had a better view of the room, like most waiting rooms, the water refresher was tucked in a corner. She wondered if it would work. Her throat was parched. She leaned against the wall and pushed the small activate button. The green light came on and a stream of water arched into the bowl. She sniffed it for contaminants. Her thirst got the better of her and she sipped then gulped her fill.

"Harry, this stuff tastes a little like lemon water," she muttered as she stood up wiping the back of her hand against her lips. "Well, I guess I'll just follow the light." She snorted at her joke. The lights in

the corridor revealed ten strides in front of her and dimmed to a low level behind her. The corridor could go on forever, the way she felt.

"Hm. An emergency cart. Wonder if it works," she remarked to no one. The button she pushed turned on a small indicator light.

"EC is charged and ready to go. Press R to release it from its space," a genderless voice reported. "The amenities of home," she chuckled and pressed the R. As weak as she felt, if a free ride was offered she would be foolish to not accept. Otherwise, she was concerned that she would collapse where she was and that would leave her too vulnerable.

The wall panel slid up and a cart moved out. A light flashed on its console. It was voice activated. Lieutenant Montran sank into the seat gratefully. "Take me to..."

"Destination Guest Quarters on Green Deck Alpha O Seta. Please place both feet flat on the floor boards in order for shuttle to become active."

"Oh." Lieutenant Montran quickly complied. *Harry, how does this thing know what room to take me? Does that mean all the others are taken? Is this some kind of hotel?*

I think ma dearie, this is what an adventure is about.

Well, it better get on quickly because I don't think I'm going to make it through another ten minutes.

Along the long hallway, pictures, paintings and sculptures decorated the wall space, giving Lieutenant Montran the sense she was in a private art gallery, and that they were still well cared for. She couldn't see a spec of dust anywhere. The contrast between what she had been staring at for the last three months and this was like comparing a wasteland to a jungle...which meant there was still danger, just of a different type. Her head rested on the cushioned seat back staring at the strange surroundings.

The cart moved at what she would have called a fast jog and faster than a cart should move in a crowded corridor...but there was only her. It began to slow and then stopped in front of a room. The door slid open with barely a sound.

Well, Harry, looks like I've arrived at my stop and a good thing too. I'm fading out here. And things went black for her.

When she opened her eyes, a bot leaned back removing the oxygen mask. She was lying on a couch.

"Guest Lieutenant Montran has recovered consciousness. Recommendation is a full nights rest after a soak in an herbal bath of remedial salts to rebalance her bios and to remove the last of the toxins in her system. Have you any questions, Guest Lieutenant Montran?"

Lieutenant Montran blinked at the bot trying to bring her scattered thoughts into some useful order. "Who are you?" she asked stupidly.

"I am the medibot assigned to these quarters."

"Where am I?"

"Guest Quarters on Green Deck in Alpha O Seta."

Lieutenant Montran blinked a few times, feeling half witted and at loss in what to do. "I don't feel so good," she muttered.

"Guest Lieutenant Montran's bios"

The lieutenant didn't hear what was said as she again blacked out.



Captain Montran was shaken awake to a pounding headache. Her eyes opened to bright sunlight and awareness of an oppressive heat that bore down on her. Her eyes felt raw and her mouth swollen from heat blisters. She was tied as the others to a cross bar waiting her turn to be tortured to death. As the bright sun dropped below the horizon, Captain Montran struggled to open her swollen eyes to see who was still alive. She could only make out three, but there could be more somewhere out of her view. Thirst was just another torment. Fire burned through her shoulder joints and barely conscious of the effort, she struggled to bring her feet underneath her to bear some weight, only then realizing that she couldn't feel her feet. Panic at that realization had her taking in deep breaths...and that brought pain that sent her into a swoon. A punch to her broken ribs brought her eyes open again. Before her a figure was dressed in ceremonial garb holding something out to show her and once he had her attention, he stepped up to Cpl. Wen and ran the wand over a portion of his body, starting at his neck. She realized he was naked...they were all naked...and as the wand moved over his body, his body started to seep blood. They were skinning

him alive. Wen's hoarse voice let out only a whimper. Staring at him horrified she realized they had broken most of his bones and the bindings holding him fixed to the cross was what was holding him upright.

Captain Montran wanted to close her eyes at the horror but each time she glanced away she was beaten.

"Gawds hear me!" she screamed silently. Only she didn't know what to ask for. Delirious with physical and mental pain a part of her reached out for someone she knew from childhood...a mentor who had sacrificed herself for the continuation of her species evolution. Before her stood Kela. She fluffed her feathers and then laid them down smoothly. Her dark bird eyes studied what Captain Montran was seeing.

"Well, my child, what are you going to do about this?" she asked as if it was a glass of spilt milk that needed cleaning.

"I can't do anything!" the young initiate wailed.

"Of course you can. Step back and look again," Kela suggested.

"Please, Kela, help us!"

"I am doing my best, child. But you must too. What does this situation need from you?"

Captain Montran didn't dare to think of anything violent for the DeNaJa, birds on AltaLa, were not a violent species, but rather mentors for the young emptah adepts, that were learning to open up their channels of sensitivity.

Through blurred vision she could see Cpl. Wen's spirit hovering near his physical form, looking confused and lost at what to do. The ceremonial figure must have seen it too for it smacked the skinned body and shook something at the spirit. Captain Montran reached out to the spirit and whispered a prayer of guidance to the young soldier so he could move on without getting caught up in the angry violence these people were creating. Montran felt something slap her body, bringing a fresh wave of pain. Her eyes opened wide in startlement, causing her to lose her thoughts of helping Cpl. Wen find a peaceful ending.

"They don't want you to help your charges. They wish to trap the unhappy souls and use the anguish, fear and hate the energy will generate to continue their wars against their neighbors," Kela explained dispassionately.

Captain Montran refocused on Cpl. Wen's spirit. It wavered between her attempt to protect it and the continued torture of the physical body of the corporal's that was barely hanging onto life. Another dressed in similar ceremonial garb had a whip with many long strips attached. With this he slashed Montran across the face. From the burn each slash across her skin gave she guessed there was something on the strips.

"Kela, what can I do?" she pleaded in anguish.

"Love."

What other advice would a wise teacher of the DeNaJa give, a part of Montran asked. Again the corporal's body was slashed. It was difficult for her to open her heart with the violence heavy in the air around them. It made her want to cringe and hide from it.

"Help me, Kela," she pleaded. Montran felt the love her mentor had for her and as it filled her Montran seized it and sent the same love to Wen, magnified. Captain Montran was beaten unconscious.

When Montran came to she found Cpl. M'summa was next on their captures list to torture for her viewing. Awareness that they wanted her to witness each of her soldiers tortured death gave her a determination to help the soldiers the only way she could, wrap them in love and help them to escape the violence of their deaths.

How many days passed was lost on the captain. The two that were running the torture show were furious that they were not able to prevent her from touching the souls of her soldiers. When Sgt. Coo was left, they cut her limbs off while the captain watched. The Sergeant's eyes were locked on Montran's as body parts were hacked off. One of Captain Montran's eyes was swollen shut, but her other was what she poured all her heart energy through as the terrified soldier implored her with her eyes for help. Sergeant Coo's spirit didn't stay long. Perhaps because of the prolonged torture of the others she was more than ready to leave. When Coo died, one of the enemy soldiers delivered a blow to the captain's jaw that broke it. The pain sent her into oblivion and what she thought was surely her death...or she was hoping they had tired of their gruesome games. But they were not. She was the last and her days of pain seemed to go on forever.

Awareness that she wasn't hanging in the sun, and that whatever she was lying on, was hard and cold came to her slowly. It surprised her that she noticed discomfort that was outside of her body, because the wounds inside her were raw. She forced herself into oblivion.

Images before her weaved in and out and she couldn't tell the difference between physical and spirit. A droning became loud and then it stopped. Captain Montran opened her eyes, conscious that she felt no pain.

"It is good to see you," an elder of her clan greeted her.

"Where am I?" she whispered confused.

"Not Mutteyalamma, the Land of the Dead!" he chuckled, and then added softly, "though, you probably wish you were. You've been rescued."

She closed her eyes, not knowing if she could believe what she was seeing and hearing.

"We're on our way to a hospice. You're on the mend physically...but you'll need a lot more than that, Captain. Take it nice and easy." With that he rose and another took his place.



Lieutenant Montran opened her eyes slowly, not sure what she was going to see, just knowing that she wasn't in intense physical pain; therefore, she just had another bad dream. She was still wearing her AEG and she was lying on a couch. Rising slowly she studied the room.

Beside the long couch she was seated on were two matching armchairs, and a low oblong table within fingertip distance from her. In one corner were shelves with books, a workstation and throughout the room was artwork hanging on three walls and on a few scattered tables. It was someone's quarters that was still maintained though it didn't feel like anyone lived here at the moment. *Presence...that what's missing. Whoever had quartered here had good taste.* She sniffed the air.

Scented. But not canned, stale or something someone would wear on their body...or, no one that I know. And all this space. Since I've been in uniform I've never quartered with this much room, Harry. Even a kitchenette...with a bot! After three months of living in a closet with myself as maid...this is looking more than nice. It's downright decadent.

A bot about her height came active at her movement. It patiently awaited her acknowledgement. If it was more than a service bot Lieutenant Montran was in no condition to do anything but surrender. However long she was unconscious, it only took the edge off her exhaustion and illness from the tainted air in her AEG. She still felt tired.

"Yes?" she queried the bot.

"I am Bach. Would you care for some tea and a light snack before your bath?"

Lieutenant Montran stifled her snicker. "I'll take some tea..." Her stomach queued her at that moment with a grumble. "And cookies or crackers," she added, not trusting anything heavy at the way she was feeling. She knew it was from the tainted air in her tank.

Keeping the bot in sight, she rose from her couch and went to peek into the adjoining room. The bed started to move out of its wall storage and settled quietly over the carpet. There was still plenty of space around it. The thick off-white carpeting was the second thing she noticed. Stepping to the bedroom control panel, she checked out what options were available. She whistled softly in surprise.

Look at this, Harry. Besides the usual adjustable bed size, it has mood settings. Oh, joy, it even gives time periods. You can also choose the season and on which planet. I guess whoever lived here didn't get much chance to travel off-planet. After my brief experience topside, I wouldn't want to go strolling on the surface even if I got the 'screamies' from being down here too long.

The movement of an ankle-high bot emerging from a wall station had Lieutenant Montran looking behind her. A trail of glittery dust led right up to her dusty boots.

"Whoops," she muttered, guiltily. "Chair," the lieutenant ordered. The expected chair materialized from the wall next to the bed. Gratefully, she sank down with the chair forming a comfortable bench, allowing her the maneuverability to remove her AEG while sitting. The small bot moved forward to assist, helping to pull off her dusty boots. As she struggled with the removal of her suit, the bot extended itself to assist her.

I forgot what it was like to have help with the simple things. It sure adds up in the long run.

The bot folded the discarded suit in its proper configuration and then waited.

"It doesn't work so if you've got something that works better, I'll swap with ya," she joked. "If not...just fix it. Oh, the gloves." She dropped the gloves onto the pile. The bot rolled to the wall where a compartment opened, set the clothing in it and then rolled back into its wall space.

Hm. Handy to know where things are kept.

Looking down at her feet, suddenly aware of the soft carpeting, she wiggled her bare toes in delight. She pulled the small console on the chair closer to her and studied the dials.

"Hm. This is the closet."

With that discovered, she pressed the closet button and large double doors folded back, revealing an empty closet with plenty of drawers, a full sized mirror, and an automated butler. Once the doors were completely opened, the butler came out and the chair, unbidden, moved so that she faced the new bot. Both she and the bot studied each other.

"Nothing to unpack," she replied holding out her arms. After a few moments, the bot returned to the empty closet and the doors closed. She returned her attention to the buttons and pressed the Icon for bathing room.

"Your tea and crackers, Lieutenant Montran." The genderless voice of the bot startled her. Just as quickly as her thoughts focused on the voice, the chair turned, causing her to grab the armrests so as not to be unseated. Suspiciously, she glared at the bot.

"How did you know my name...and the medibot?" Her voice faded as her eyes spotted the layered crackers. Her mouth watered.

"It's on your uniform."

"Oh, right." If it were possible to be embarrassed by a bot, she would have been, but her attention was on the refreshments. Taking the tea and crackers from Bach, her face creased into a smile at the familiar name of Establol stamped across the cracker face.

Sweet outside and tangy on the inside...highly nutritious. Hm. What a life! Harry, maybe I will be trying those dials for mood settings. Do you think it comes equipped with a metradame companion?

If that's what ya be needin', ma dearie. Couldn't hurt ta be testin' it out. But, ah wouldn't be tryin' their wine menu. Never heard of any wines from this place.

I'll keep that in mind when I order dinner, Harry. Nothing with squeezed berries, just fresh water and companionship with someone that knows how to carry on a nice conversation, give a good back rub, and then we'll just see where it leads. Just like any other stopover for a weary soldier, huh Harry?

Abruptly she turned to see from where the earthy and fragrant smell of blossoms was coming. Her teacup wobbled as her eyes tracked to a doorway that opened to a tropical forest.

"Bloody moon!" She jumped up from her comfortable seat. *What is this place?* She gulped some more tea and hurriedly handed the cup to the patiently waiting Bach. Feeling more energized, she walked around the bed and peered through the doorway.

Hm, the necessities of life. Well, Harry, most wilderness areas I visited didn't come equipped with a shower, flush toilet and something to clean up with. If this is a dial-a-mood, this is the best I've ever seen. Nope. These plants look like they've been here a while. She gently touched a damp leaf on a vine near the entrance. For a moment, she believed she felt the life force from the plant, and then quickly discarded the feeling as her imagination.

A long two-sink counter separated the shower area from a trellis that supported scented flowers only giving the viewer a hint of what was on the other side. Lieutenant Montran slowly walked toward the trellis, looking around for anything that may resemble wildlife. The plants didn't appear to be carnivorous or poisonous, but she wasn't a botanist. On the other side of the trellis was a large tub.

"It's big enough to have a bathing party!" *Sharon would like this.*

A small bot hovered expectantly in front of her. "My name is Ald. Your bath has been drawn, Lieutenant Montran. Is it to your liking?"

Lieutenant Montran stared at it with an opened mouth, then clamped her jaw shut.

Ooh. Harry, this is plush. I haven't had this much service since I left home. I take back anything derogatory I had thought or said about the planet's Auto-R system. Lieutenant Montran gave an inward sigh. *However, if this is what a supposed deserted station has for people stranded here...there's going to be many crash landings on this side of...Harry, this must be the Mound of E. Maybe I'm unconscious...dreaming. Well, let the dream continue. It's the best I've had in the last few years, come to think of it.*

She sniffed the air apprecitely. "What's in the water?"

"Elesa balm and oil. Good for tired muscles, frayed nerves and dry skin," Ald supplied. Ald's diagnosis of her bios was what the better quality bathing room attendant bots offered in the way of services. The aroma that filled the air was fragrant and eased her headache.

Looking around the bathing room, she noted a door a few steps on the other side of the lattice that surrounded the tub.

Another room?

She stepped up to the door to test its sensors but nothing happened. Walking back to the shower Lieutenant Montran stripped down, tossing her uniform and other articles of clothing into a pile which was quickly picked up by Ald.

"Phew! Oh, joy! These cloths are ripe! And so am I. If anyone gets a whiff of me they would be giving me plenty of room and a free bath."

She stored her sidearm in a niche in the shower wall, probably there for something related to cleansing and not for a weapon, but it wasn't like she had something on her body to attach it to right now, nor would she want to.

Freshly scrubbed clean, she padded over the warm cobble-stoned floor to the steaming tub. Kneeling at the edge, she cautiously sniffed, alert for any caustic elements that may have her skin peeling from the bone. She risked dipping a finger in the rising swirling waters to test the temperature. Satisfied the water wasn'ting more than what it appeared to be, she laid her sidearm within easy reach and stepped into the bath. Sliding down until the water was up to her neck, she held her breath for a moment as the heat went from hot to warm. Closing her eyes, she let out an audible sigh.

This is very nice.

Idly, Lieutenant Montran caressed the surface of the rising water.

Is this why Spinners Tale is using this place as a stopover? Hm? No. It would be too difficult a secret for anyone to keep...however, it would explain one of the reasons why the crew is kept isolated. No. No. There are too many ships passing this place because of the jump gate. They would note that Spinners Tale was making frequent stopovers here and would come for a look-see. It would be too tempting for one ship not to muscle in on another's good providence. It has to be something else...like smuggling.

She sighed.

That would mean I have to change my opinion of them that maybe they aren't so bungling and inept. Darn. I just hate changing my opinions. It means all those nice neat categories I set up have to be redone. It's worse than spring-cleaning at Amouish.

Now, now, m'dearie. Yer ruin' the mood.

Lieutenant Montran touched the back of her ear.

No humming or buzzing. So, which came first? The headaches or the humming? Well, both are diminishing, so that's good.

She ran her fingers through her damp hair then massaged her temples.

"Would you care for a back massage, Lieutenant Montran?" Ald asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"Please, and thank you." She rose to her feet and leaned forward, holding onto the rim of the tub.

The sound waves from the bot started at the small of her back and gradually moved up.

"Oh. Yes...that really is sore." The pressure shifted and she heard a small pop. She sighed at the immediate relief. From now on she wasn't going to accept service on any ship that didn't have a bot that gave massages...or even a person...that would be much nicer.

"Ald, are there other residents here...guests or visitors?"

"Here in this compound you are the only resident," Ald replied.

"There are other compounds?" Alertly, she turned in the water to face the bot. *So!*

"Yes."

"Where are they located?"

"I have no information on them. The information you wish may be accessed from the computer in the sitting room."

That's just what I'll do...

M'dearie, after a nap! Yer brain isn't exactly as sharp as an Amorialian blade. Besides, ya need ta take advantage of this hospitality while ya got the chance. No tellin' what yer gonna run up against in another day.

Right, right. She leaned back and closed her eyes, forcing her body and mind to relax.



A small beep startled her. She glanced at her hands and they were puckered as if she had been in longer than 30 stan minutes.

Eee gads.

Standing up, she grabbed the rim and hoisted herself out of the tub. Decidedly relaxed, she dried off quickly with the towel Ald provided and headed back to the bedroom. The bed covers were pulled back on the left side for her to slide in, with sleepwear lying at the foot of the bed, consisting of shorts and a brief top. Nothing to get tangled in during a restless night of sleep and enough to give the appearance of being modest, should she get a visitor.

Now how did they know I slept on the left side? Coincidence?

Not really interested in the answer just yet, she crawled into a very inviting bed and fell fast asleep. Three months of light sleeping had finally ended.

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Chapter 2

"Hey, Cadet! Wait up!"

Cadet Montran cringed inwardly as she struggled to keep a polite smile on her face. She stopped and turned to face the civilian clad figure of a man she detested.

"Alan. I thought diplomatic classes were on a semester break..." and you would have been long gone by now for your vacation.

"I have some business to finish up." Even in the dark his eyes were disturbing. They rested on her briefly then glanced around.

Something doesn't feel right, Cadet Montran worried.

"So...where have you been? I checked your quarters and you weren't there." He looked back at her briefly, then took another quick look around.

Cadet Montran withheld her first reply of indignation. "Now that you have found me, what is it?" Who let him into the women's quarters? Or for that matter on Academy grounds?

"The problem with you, DeMonte, is you're too impatient."

DeMonte? Is that a slip of the tongue or was it deliberate? "Just tell me what you have to say so I can continue my quiet walk back to the barracks – alone," she returned, hoping her voice didn't give away her apprehensive feelings.

"I want to see you."

Even in the dark, she could see his smirk. Her internal alarm intensified. She had never experienced a fear for her life this strongly before, yet so far there was no physical sign of danger.

"I want you to come on over to my place for some socializing, a drink and a bit of talk..on family politics."

"No!" She blurted that out in surprise and then annoyed that he should chose this time to bother her...and why her?

"What – am I not good enough for you?" His voice was low and held a tone of menace.

"I'm not interested Alan. Period. End of conversation. Now let me by!"

Alan remained blocking her path, his hands resting on his hips, as if to prevent her from brushing by him.

"Get out of my way, Alan." She didn't recognize her voice. It was coming from so far away. Suddenly heat radiated from the center of her forehead. A link shot out to her Dancer...a soul...a warrior's soul...a woman with so much passion it burned her very essence to touch her. Why did the Dancer choose to bond with her?

Images of the tall athletically built woman dancing under the moonless night came back to her in an unreal replay of what she had once witnessed. The dancing woman's eyes had been so dark and expressive. They had only once seen each other in the light. It was in the bar...over the heads of a crowd...and then she was gone.

Lieutenant Montran's sleeping mind struggled to make sense of the overlapping memories.

Alan! Her thoughts quickly flashed back to the scene with Alan.

Don't panic, Cadet. You can get by him. Wait! He's not alone! Where did they come from?

The other men, all larger than her, were on either side of her blocking off any escape should she find her feet and flee. Distracted she missed Alan's fist headed toward her face. His movement was so quick and without warning she failed to defend herself. She was further immobilized by a stunner. Unable to protect herself, her face was slammed onto the hard ground. Partially conscious, more than one set of hands pulled at her and dragged her off somewhere. She remembered no more of the attack...or of her rescue.



Lieutenant Montran woke briefly in a sweat and trembling. Another nightmare! Why did they keep reoccurring? What was done was done! *Let it go, Montran!* she implored her sleeping self. Her heart was beating rapidly and her breaths were shallow with fear. Her eyes blinked shut with exhaustion. Mumbling something unintelligible, she rolled to her other side, and quickly dropped into another dream.

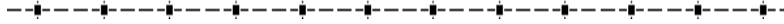
Harriet read the brochure on metradames. Her eyes scanned down the manufacturer's more than glowing and exhorbant claims of their product. At the bottom of the brochure was the name of her life

insurance company as one of the backers of the metradame model she was looking at. Turning to Sharon, her lover she nudged her. "Look at this? Why would a life insurance company invest in a toy few have the wealth to possess when all they have to do is go to a House of Aphrodite and work off their sexual frustrations.

"Not all metradames are for sale nor are they toys to be played with!"

Harriet closed her opened mouth with a snap. Sharon had never gotten angry before. And what did she mean? Did she not think it odd a life insurance company would get involved with sex toys?

Lieutenant Montran woke up suddenly with a familiar cramping in her stomach. Tiredly she glanced at her timepiece. She had slept only four hours. Flopping back down she closed her eyes, quickly falling back to sleep.



Chapter 3

Chief Petty Officer Decker of the freighter *Spinners Tale* shifted his bulky shoulders in the AEG that ill fit his overweight shape. His feet were planted squarely as if he needed to hold his balance in the heavy atmosphere. The inability to move freely was more than irksome, evidenced by the beads of sweat that rolled down his face. More times than what he could count, he turned to look back at the entrance to the underground city as if to make sure it was nearby in case something should happen.

He was blamed for the missing officer, Montran and it incensed him. To his way of thinking it was either the ship's faulty equipment or someone kidnapped her. The someone being the smugglers or the Spartan soldiers to make him look bad. His suspicions leaned toward the Spartans and made sure his boss, Alan Fermin knew that. Which meant that there should be no reason for someone of his status, a chief petty officer, to wait outside of the city for a transmission from the search teams or the circling ships above the planet. The two 'rabbits' could relay the necessary information. It didn't take all that much skill, he thought with disdain. However, his fear of the Spartan captain won out so he remained at his station.

A bleep that only the CPO heard followed quickly with the voice of Captain Largo from *Spinners Tale*.

"Decker! Did they find the body yet? Where are the hourly status reports! They've been at it for seven stan hours with no updates!"

"Captain Miller has no updates," he replied defensively, and then added, "Sir." His tone was just short of being insolent, but he had to give some recognition to his captain because he would decide when he could return to the ship, something Alan Fermin, both their boss, was too far away to intercede for him.

"Get one now or you're going to be out there for another day! Out!" The disconnect with the ship above hurt his ears.

"Frinkin' officer," Decker muttered, "getting in a panic about nothing. I told him her tank hasn't enough air for over a stan hour and it's already been eight. Frickin' idiot doesn't know how to count." He didn't bother to turn to his two companions, whom most of the time he scorned. They couldn't hear his conversation so he felt free to speak his mind. If the crew knew he was handing the ex-Spartan captain over to the smugglers for metralab destination they would probably freeze him out. But, they would get over it after a few weeks of extra duty.

The CPO glanced at his timepiece. Five stan minutes ago he had beaconed Captain Miller and still no response. Decker also tried the five-team leaders of the search parties and they too ignored him. Obviously, the Spartan captain didn't care about updating Captain Largo. Alan Fermin, owner of the freighter *Spinners Tale* was no doubt heating up Captain Largo's feet for news.

Captain Miller's curt message eight stan hours ago was that he would let Lord Chaney know if he found anything. Lord Chaney seemed unconcerned and to CPO Decker's consternation, his boss Alan Fermin often deferred to him. Rather than deal with those he no influence over he turned his thoughts to figuring out a more important problem - how to get back into the city without anyone with authority noticing. However, with most of the residents out looking for the 'be-dammed' ex-Spartan he calculated that there would be no one but his people in the city. He thought about the consequences of getting caught returning without a direct order and the chances of him being caught. He needed an excuse to be in the city. Irritated that he couldn't think of something good, he cursed the person he felt was responsible for his present predicament...Lieutenant Montran.

"Where in the bloody moon did she drop to?" he muttered. "I hope one of those cursed wind storms blew her right off the face of this damnable planet." Nervously, the CPO looked around, worried that the lieutenant may be nearby, waiting to take each one of them out. She used to be a captain of a recon group and they were reputed to be good at being dropped behind enemy lines and killing lonely sentries. 'Once a Spartan, always a Spartan', a small voice taunted him.

Startled, he looked toward his companions, wondering if they heard what he heard. Instead they were keeping an eye on their suit equipment and monitoring for messages. It was because of their substandard AEGs that they were not out in the desert, scouring for another whose suit was just as ill-equipped to handle this harsh environment. If he had his way, they would be inside playing in the game room or...

That was it! He switched his mic on. "Move inside," he decided suddenly. "There's a broadcast to get ready for." If he were to use the excuse of the broadcast for leaving his post, then he needed someone to make it look like work was being done. Normally the smugglers didn't like anyone not from

their group involved with their business but most of their members were out planetside and Decker knew the broadcast had to go on as scheduled. He would offer his two *rabbis* as helpers.

As the outside hatch swung shut and locked, clangon alarms sounded in their helmet communicators and in the small chamber they were in. They could do nothing until the chamber filled with breathable air. The CPO's anxiety level rose as he felt trapped in the small area, crowded with two too many people and bombarded by shrilling noise. His suit kicked in to compensate for his critical bio levels. Before the suit blinked red, the all-clear light came on, and the inside hatch unlocked. Decker quickly stepped into the city's corridor, roughly pushing past the two men. He recessed his helmet into the suit collar, taking deep breaths to quiet his rapidly beating heart. He ignored what the panicky voices that flooded the suits comm link were saying. Instead he was focused on his own fear, that Montran had been spotted inside the city. He pulled his illegal side arm out ready to fire at the first sign of anyone with orange hair. His hand trembled as he looked up and down the corridor.

"Shut up, all of you!" he barked into his comm. "What in bloody moon is going on?" he finally asked. "And turn off the frickin'alarms!"

"We...we don't know, CPO," a hesitant voice spoke. "It...it may be one of the room's got gassed...or something," the voice faded out and the clangons stopped.

"Where the bloody moon is that arse, Nixon? I left him at the frikin' console!" he snarled, relieved to have something to take out his anxiety on.

"We can't find him, CPO," the voice admitted.

"Well, where did you last see him, you moron deadhead?" Decker asked sarcastically.

"Master Alha Bahna ordered us to help prepare the cargo in Alpha Sea for the auction, CPO" C-man Fletch reported.

"Since when do you take orders from a frickin' smuggler? You work for Fermin, you dung patty! Who took his place at the console?" he demanded heatedly, while subconsciously he was fitting in the smugglers request for *his* men to encompass him as well since he was their CPO.

"No one, CPO. We were all ordered to get the merchandise ready. Everyone else is out on that search for the lieutenant, and..." Fletch's voice trailed off.

"Damn her body to the sin trade! Trouble even in death!" he shouted angrily. He turned to the two men that nervously waited just out of striking range of their CPO. "Well what the bloody moon you two waiting for? Do I have to do everything myself?" Without waiting for a reply he stomped up the corridor toward the room Nixon was supposed to be checking out.

The two men trailed. Decker stopped in front of the room. The door didn't open when he pressed the controls. Both men cringed when he attempted to open the door when the indicator light was amber instead of green.

"Damn! Who's got a bloody sensor?"

Neither of the crewmembers said anything. Like Decker, they left their heavy utility belts in the command room.

"Get a frickin' COR, Sams," he barked over his shoulder.

Minutes had passed and the amber light flickered to a bright red.

"Blast!" His gloved fist slammed against the panel. It was the wrong thing to have done he realized almost immediately. The door beeped and the seal hissed open. Frantically, he and Edison struggled to get their faceplates back into place before the door opened a crack. A green florescent gas rushed out of the room as if the corridor was a vacuum. The collapsing man's body slumped against the back of Decker's legs, knocking him forward a few steps.

Bloody hell! Decker's heart was racing wildly at how close he had been to his own death. *I got a story to tell for this one! Wait until the guys get together. I got me my own story!*

Of course, his story would be embellished. Everyone did it...and there would be no one to refute his version. He gripped the doorsill to give himself something firm to hold onto until he was sure his voice and nerves were steady.

"All hands, now hear this! We have a broken seal to the main passageway. Secure all hatches! I'm going to have a look inside," his voice deepened with self-import. This was going to be his moment. Master Alha Bahna's voice boomed in his ears, "What the tritons dung is going on there? Where's the cargo I ordered to be...?"

Disdainfully the CPO shut his communicator off. No one was going to steal his moment. Taking a deep breath, he held it momentarily, wondering what he was going to do now. Uncertain, he peered through the crack in the door trying to see if there was anything in the darkness. Taking another deep

breath, he firmed his resolve to face whatever may be on the other side of the door, and then gave a push on the lever to manually open the door.

No response.

He took a step back as if to leave, relief giving him a rush of energy; but suddenly, with a sickening high-pitched whine, the door opened further...enough for him to fit through. There before him was an inky blackness with the light from the hall going no further than the length of his boot.

I Got to do it. The frickin'ass holes will know I didn't do it. He forced one foot to step into the room. *Come on moron, get the other foot in there!* He dragged his leadened leg beside the first one. *Almost in. A little more you frickin' coward! Move!* He was now completely out of the light. Thankfully, a part of him detached so he felt partially safe. This part of him watched far enough away from the AEG figure that there would be no danger of being hurt. He dispassionately viewed as a physical body that he didn't even identify as himself, stood unmoving in the darkness. Then suddenly he was back in his body, betrayed by some unknown curse that he had to witness his own fear intimately. He not only could see blackness before him and to the sides, but worst of all he could feel it crowding him and pushing against him.

What if I bump into something? There's no telling what's in this room. What if it's a trap? Those frickin' soldiers would leave a cage opened. I...I can feel it! Something is in here!

He backed frantically into the corridor, bumping past the partially opened hatch in his haste and nearly tripping over the body of his crewmate. As he stood shaking, he realized that if he had moved further into the room and the hatch closed behind him, he would have been in complete darkness with whatever was in there. He pressed his back against the wall desperate for something solid to connect to. The AEG made small whining sounds as it worked hard to keep up with his run-away bios. His faceplate was fogged up, giving him no view of the outside. Jerkily, he somehow managed to get up the hall to safety, using the wall to guide him. Salvation was before him: the command room. The gripping around his chest eased. It took him a few moments to register that the hatch wasn't opening.

By the bitch's blood moon! The damn hatch isn't going to open until the freakin' room is sealed!

He could only see the inside of his faceplate covered with condensation from his rapid breathing and that only increased his heart rate and panic. He flattened himself against the wall as the flashbacks started. Once again, as his almost nightly dreams recounted it, he stood in front of the tall dark haired, lean muscled Black Rose Spartan, ready to stun her into submission when the room went dark. Just as **he** had staged it. However, the face before him wasn't that of a frightened woman. She laughed at him! She said she knew of his plan, and found him incredibly stupid and a pitiful example of his species. But he had the upper hand...he had the weapons and he had the goggles to see in the dark! He was the smart one! However once the treacherous darkness engulfed them he felt the agonizing pain of each strike her hands and feet delivered to him before he could reach his goggles and weapons. His salvation was the lights that came back on. Bile rose in his throat and then rage filled his thoughts.

Black Rose bitch! he screamed silently at the cocky grin his nightmares kept replaying, and now, even his waking hours were being taken over with her face.

"Captain Miller here, Decker. What did you find?" The cool voice broke through his darkness replacing it with a different type of fear.

"No...light...to...see...anything," he panted, struggling unsuccessfully to keep fear out of his voice.

This was Captain Miller's undisputed territory and he didn't fear Alan Fermin. He was also the bitches CO. His fury moved to Alan Fermin who would not challenge the captain's authority on this forsaken lump of dirt. The Black Rose captain didn't take carelessness lightly, especially when a life was lost. If the captain knew he was responsible for unsealing the door to the contaminated room he would find himself abandoned surface side, and his last moments of life would be face down looking through a visor crusted over with the shimmering dirt that he had been introduced to on his first transportation down to the surface. As memories of this humiliation - falling to his face in a screaming panic when the unfamiliar weight descended upon him - overlapped his fear of abandonment, his knees shook so hard he slid down the wall.

"We've sealed the room from the other side of the maintenance panels," the voice went on. "The corridor should be breathable in about twenty minutes. How's your air?" he asked in a mild voice.

Decker bumped to the floor, jarring him to alertness. He lifted his arm to check his gauges. He couldn't read out of the fogged faceplate.

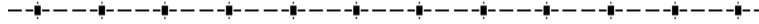
The captain didn't wait for an answer, but continued. "As soon as we get the corridor secured, we'll send a team to you. Out."

If I were one of his Spartans he would have found a way to bring me a fresh tank! He'll not win this one!

When the hatch finally opened, Captain Miller, accompanied by a small group from security, found him lying on his back. By his gauges, he was still alive.

"Get him back to *Spinners* sickbay, Sarg. Corporal Anders, check on the other one up the hall. Lance Corporal Drewer, call the teams in. We have some damage control to do before the auction."

"Yes, sir. Sir, Commander Martinez is on his way down for a conference with Lord Chaney." "Thanks for the information, soldier." Captain Miller nodded and walked back into the Com-C to look over the control room one last time. A smug smile formed on the captain's lips. The way things were developing, they were fitting nicely into his plans.



Chapter 4

The cold stiff breeze from the direction of the tall mountain spires blanketed with snow sent Alexandra's long orange tresses that were not weighted with beads and ribbons, into her face as she turned her head to listen to the faint sounds of chanting. With practiced skill, she caught the wayward strands of hair with one hand while holding her position on the rock with the other. Her grandfather sat next to her.

"M'dearie, now pay attention. This is very important," he urged her.

But Alexandra continued to look for the source of the chanting.

"All right then, Alexandra," he nodded at his distracted granddaughter, "listen to the music, but focus on the sound in here, m'dearie." A finger touched her below her navel, at her dan tien. An ice-cold energy vibrated through her from the point he touched and up her spine, and then shot out through her head. It took her breath away.

"Breathe deep, m'dearie. Ya need to breathe deeper." His fingertip touched points on her stomach, her chest, her throat, and forehead and then rested gently on her head. A painfully bright light flashed between her eyes, while a loud pop sounded in her ears. Beneath her, the earth moved, and she lost her balance.

Lieutenant Montran woke instantly, throwing her arms out on both sides to stop the fall. The room light brightened as her bios leaped from sleep to an awakened state. Disorientated, she lay with her arms splayed at her sides and her body firmly pressed into the bed. The intense humming in her body receded to a tingling in her fingers and the bottoms of her feet. As awareness of surroundings penetrated through her sleep-fogged mind she remembered she was on Merkers Outpost. Rising on one elbow, she glanced at her timepiece. A little over eight stan hours had passed. This was the longest she had slept in ages!

Slept! I'm on a strange planet...alone!...and I went to sleep! I'm lucky I didn't wake up to a weapon stuck up my nose.

M'dearie, give yerself a break. Ya hardly could pin one lid back while ya let the other droop, now could ya? Yer eyeballs would have rolled back inside yer head.

True, Harry, I would not have been able to stay awake...but..."

M'dearie, why are ya bein' so hard on yerself? Don't ya think ya deserve some sleep in a nice comfortable bed? Would ya rather have slept on the couch?

A thin smile formed on her lips. Reluctantly, she let the self-recriminations go. Stretching, muscles absorbed the rush of blood, giving her a charge of energy. Lying still for a few moments, she let fragments of her dreams turn over in her mind. She sighed and closed her eyes.

Nightmares mixed with strange dreams. What is my lesson?

Most of the times she couldn't make any sense of what she remembered.

Patience, m'dearie,' her grandfather's voice reassured her. Yer time is not yet.

Time. I'm not so sure I want it to be my time, Harry. Portentous news like that can be likened to a siren's howl.

Ahh, yes, m'dearie. The question for the wary: is it a warnin' or a cry of what has already come about? There is no harm in yer wantin' ta know the full picture. No harm indeed.

Well, at least I'm off that freighter.

Indeed, it's a good riddance. That place was like havin' a flock of them carcass birds studin' ya. And with ya not getting' enough restful sleep...it didn't do yer soul a bit of good, m'dearie.

And no remembered dreams, Harry. For me that's unusual. However, with the likes of the nightmares, maybe I'm better off not dreaming. I'm gonna have to talk to a shri. I don't want to go back to a counselor...too much work and it hasn't stopped the dreams.

Dreams, m'dearie, are like a maze. A guide is handy if ya can find the right one. So, what's yer plan fer taday?

A maze? Like a labyrinth, huh, Harry? What sort of monster is at the center? Myself...that was the answer I was taught. I don't see myself wearing any horn between my eyes in this life. Eh? Yet...the characters in my dreamscape are supposed to represent different aspects of me. Gawds! I don't even want to go there. And that's about what a counselor is going to point out, Harry. Now a shri, they usually just give you the short version of what needs to be done, and that's it. Either you do it or not. No difference to them. Gawds. I'm rattling on here like a brainless twit. Got to get up and get moving.

She rolled out of bed and glanced around her sleeping area for a place to begin her morning exercises.

Looks like there's enough room to do some warm-ups and see just what three months of inactivity has done to my response time and stamina.

"Store the bed," she ordered aloud. As an afterthought, "Open the bathing room door." It would be nice to smell the healthy vegetation as she did her morning workout.

With the bed retracted into its wall space, she had plenty of room. Standing very still, she centered herself with her breathing. She then opened her eyes and started to move slowly into the first pose, greeting the spirit of T'ai. She was halfway through the Qi Quong breathing meditation when she felt another's presence...nothing solid that she could put her finger on. Was it next to her? No, it was all around her. Sensing no danger, she accepted its light touch. The consciousness had the feeling of...constant flux...chaos...and dimly she was aware that it monitored, maintained and...

It's the consciousness of the planet!

She chuckled to herself. She had not done this for a long time. Too long. Breathing in deep, she let her surprise settle into a passive observation, believing that her own need to reconnect with her home planet may have triggered this connection. The reconnection was a species compellation that she had been putting off for years. It was her cousin/brother's official dispatch for her appearance that was a partial excuse she used for her request for a month's leave. The request certainly wasn't new in a galactic military where some members home planets were more than a month's travel from where they were stationed for duty.

Lieutenant Montran moved her arms and legs into the next stance breathing in and out. If the touch remained, she didn't notice as her attention returned to her breathing.

Her prayer mantra signaled the ending of her meditation followed by five breaths, where she remained still, letting the peaceful feeling absorb her; something she had missed for more than three months. Slowly, she opened her eyes to the jungle in the bathing room. Again she breathed in the smell of the moist dirt and blooms. Realizing she had been living on ships and space stations for too long.

This is sooo, very nice, she admitted to herself, and then laughed. I don't think I've ever heard of anyone sharing their bathing facilities with their arboretum, but I guess in limited space, fertilizing... All right, Lieut you don't need to go there. Get yourself into gear.

For the next standard hour and a half, in a more rigorous workout that called for strikes, kicks and spins in the air, she tested her stamina, balance and flexibility, moving from one degree of kata to another. She was disappointed that before she got to the eighth degree, she was feeling breathless, her muscles were burning and they were tight.

"Oh, joy!" she bent over panting. *Three months and I've fallen behind. Lieutenant Commander Neilson will have me running with the new recruits. And I'll bet those greenies will be dying to embarrass a ranking officer.*

Aside from that, she was happy to work out again...and happy about the space...and the bathing facilities, and being off the freighter, *Spinners Tale*.

She used the toilet facilities, and while taking a quick shower, planned what she needed to do.

Okay, clothes and food. Then I will check this place out closer. I need to find out who runs this nice hotel and thank her, him, or them. Then...find out just what Spinners Tale is doing here. It can't be legal. Oh, and contact my CO and let him know I'm not AWOL but that I've been...kidnapped, and then crash-landed on a deserted outpost, and don't know when I can get back. I bet he never heard of that excuse. And if he asks if I can bear up under the hardships of living on the deserted outpost until a ship arrives, do I tell him that my quarters are the equivalent of a luxury room in a seven bud rated hotel? Naww. Best to leave that part out. She chuckled aloud.

Ald handed her a towel as she stepped out of the shower.

Back in the bedroom, she eyed the apparel the butler held up for her. "So, that's what all the sizing me up for was about, huh buddy? I sure hope you only did it for clothing and not for a tree-suit or any other unpleasant surprises that I might find confining."

She reached for the gray material so sheer she thought it would tear if she didn't handle it carefully.

"This is a Second Skin and is to be worn while you are here on Merkers Outpost," the butler explained in a genderless voice. "It will act as an emergency blanket until help arrives should you encounter a breach without wearing an outersuit or if the suit you are wearing becomes damaged."

"How do you know this is going to work for me?" she asked suspiciously. "I just arrived and you already have something..." she held up the pants gingerly, letting the light shine through it, "that is tailored for me." *Some tailor.*

"The faulty equipment you discarded was analyzed and your bios have been monitored and anatomized since your arrival. This is a bioengineered suit made specifically for you. Breaches are a possibility, therefore all guests are issued a suit of their own until they depart the outpost."

Bioengineered? Breaches are serious anywhere where the exterior environment is alien to one's own. I certainly agree with that precaution. Hmm. And they want it back. Souvenirs limited to toothbrushes and slippers...if they have any. What was this place before its closure? Got to love this bot service.

M'dearie, if this place has guidelines that entail insurin' yer safety with a nice bit of whatever that is, best take it. No sense in fussin' over how or what it's made of.

Harry, you can say that because you aren't putting this close to your skin.

Aie. This is not my version of an adventure.

Lieutenant Montran smiled, thinking of what her grandfather's version of an adventure would be. It would entail an excursion into an unexplored wine cellar or walks among vines heavy with grapes meant to be eventually corked for wine. *Yes, I can see me trying to walk down the vineyard trenches. I would probably slip on some rotten grapes and hurt my backside!*

She thrust her foot into the second skin and wiggled her toes into the slots provided for them. It was amazing that the skin just poured around her toes as if it were liquid. When she had the skin on, her body picked up energy.

Wow!

The sounds and smells around her became stronger. Without effort she picked up differing scents from the plant life in the bathing room, the dirt, various herbs and other smells she couldn't identify but knew they were there. She also could hear the butler's movements and the movement of the clothing it was retrieving out of the closet.

"Second skin, huh?"

What's so different? Ahh. No ship movement or the sounds a ship makes. Should I have noticed that sooner? Lieut, you've been in space so long you should have noticed. What else? Hmm. Besides smell, movement and room space, uh...service is better than what I'm accustomed to. Well, let's see what there is for food. I am sure the nutritional suppliments here are going to be better than on that demon freighter.

Regarding herself in the mirror, she wasn't pleased to see that her three months stay on the *Spinners Tale* left her looking too slim for her normal active life. But then again, their menu was sadly lacking in her choice of palatable nourishment so she had eaten little. Damp orange hair curled around her face emphasizing her dark green eyes. Impatiently, she pushed a curl off her forehead. *I need a haircut.*

"I sure hope it's not going to be a hassle when I have to relieve myself," she muttered to the waiting butler.

"Your biological waste is recycled by the skin, thus sustaining your energy without nutritional supplements for a standard day; however, it's not advised to wear the suit without removing it for more than a standard week at a time. It is better that the body not rely too much on artificial means of regulating itself. Your species and gender experiences a monthly cycle of menstruating; when that time comes, the suit will absorb the discharge of old tissue and recycle it into energy. Furthermore, you should be feeling more energetic than normal due to the excess of energy. Remember to adhere to your species observances of that time."

Lieutenant Montran harrumphed, and then offered. "Women of my species that spend a lot of time in space don't ovulate much." Then she frowned. It reminded her that her ability to have children had been taken from her. She shook her head to rid herself of unbidden images, loosening a few tears as she did. Grimly, her lips tightened into a straight line. She was acting too emotional as if she were cycling, which her body continued to experience even if the reason for the cycles was no longer there.

"It is strongly suggested when you travel about the city you wear this suit," the butler reemphasized.

"I got'cha," she grumbled, not liking her moods swings.

She took the dark green two-piece suit with boots that the butler held for her. The pant legs fit snugly into the boots. The boot ankles were padded, the toes were tough and the heels were hard enough to hurt someone if she kicked back.

Nice boots.

Her growling stomach told her that the second skin didn't take care of everything. Checking her sidearm, she carried it with her into the kitchenette. A bowl of various recognizable fruits, a steaming smaller bowl of cereal, and a warm aromatic beverage awaited her.

Her stomach growled again. Beside the table, Bach produced a chair for her.

"Is the breakfast selection suitable, Lieutenant Montran?"

"Yes, quite. Thank you." She laid her weapon on the table within easy reach.

Now, how did they know what my eating preference is? Should I get nervous that someone has a profile on me? While thinking about this, she mechanically cut up some of the soft fruit and added it to her cereal. She ate quickly, as was her habit, keeping her eyes moving around the area, searching for anything that would indicate she was being monitored, though without a hand reader, HR, it would be difficult to really know. She didn't even bother thinking about the antiquated Catu's Ortual Rstr, CORs as they were called. That was all *Spinnners Tale* carried. As a veteran soldier, she knew the most updated equipment to read and translate the environment and diagnose and prescribe treatment for an injured person was a life and death necessity. However, maybe freighter crews were more expendable. Impatiently, she shrugged her shoulders. She was worrying about someone else's problem.

When she finished her meal, Bach removed the empty dishes. Picking up her tea, Lieutenant Montran decided to take a closer inspection of her quarters before she ventured out into the rest of the structure. Eyeing the furthest corner of the room that was the private library, she decided to start there.

"Real books."

She pulled out one and turned the pages. She wondered what the thin material was that created the pages and how long its life span was. She felt the cover with sensitive fingers and even sniffed it. It reminded her of her uncle's library that contained information from all over the galaxy stored on tapes, discs, books, and in holographs. His books didn't smell like this one. Nor did the pages feel as fragile. Sliding the book back onto the shelf, she perused the titles. A wide variety of subjects from authors with opposing views filled the shelves. The collection offered a compelling study for someone with a lot of time on her hands. She laughed to herself. What if she could only leave this place after she gave a summary of all the books?

Pausing at the coffee table, she admired the detail. Beneath its transparent top, the base was a carving of a wilderness scene, surrounding a small village. There were small grass huts that blended into the landscape, and a scene right from a primitive village housing seven different types of species, working and playing together. In reality, those seven species were contentious when in close proximity of each other. It had to do with their biological makeup.

Someone is really dreaming or tampering with genetic codes.

In one corner sat the detailed porcelain statue of Quan in her meditative state. With both palms open, one held the holy measures and the other remained empty, representing another world. She sat on the hold flower of pa with her eyes half-lidded focused on the unknown. The holy flower rode on ocean waves, surrounded by the twelve holy leaders in the time of Ges. It was unusual to see her depicted with her eyes opened. Her clothing, depicted the ritual garb, down to the knotted sash and the way it was tied. At one time she knew what each knot represented and the prayers that went with the knotting...or were they called spells?

Lieutenant Montran's eyes moved to a painting of the sun. It set the tops of trees and mountain peak ablaze with light. Quickly she glanced around at the other art pieces. Even the animals in the art were depicting serenity. *How nice to have the time to gaze at these works and enjoy them for their aesthetic qualities; however, I have things to do.*

She settled in front of the screen.

Hm. Let's see what information it's willing to impart.

The chair adjusted its shape to fit her form, and when the chair and her were comfortable, the viewing screen came on.

"Your request?" a neutral voice asked her. No hologram appeared beside her. She noted by the icons on the screen, that the option was turned off. Usually room comms were personalized to suit the resident.

"Show me the history of this workstation's use."

"The history has been cleared and this station is awaiting the new resident's input for preferences, Lieutenant Montran," the voice informed her.

Nothing. Someone had cleaned the files. Okay. Something more to the point. Hm. Where do I start? "Where are there other life forms, such as myself?"

"In Century City. Would you care to contact anyone there?"

"NO!" That would certainly ruin my stay here. But I do need to find out more information about what they're up to and where exactly on this planet they are.

"Pinpoint their location in yellow and mine in green." Wouldn't that be disappointing if they were on the other side of the elevator?"

On screen a planet appeared with hexagon shapes overlapping the globe, which quickly faded. Then on one side of the sphere, a yellow light flashed and then revolved around until a blinking green light appeared.

"Show me the entire planet and any other cities."

The screen continued to revolve slowly, giving her a view of the entire planet and the underground structures that looked like separate cities.

"Show me viable habitation for my species and others of like bio-makeup."

Century City appeared in three colors, green, red, and gray. Her location on the other side of the planet was in two colors, green and gray. The green portion in Century City covered a larger area than where she was, enclosed in a thick red barrier and then the area beyond the red was in gray.

Green is livable, gray is not activated...and red is...what? Not negotiable?

She studied the other grayed-out cities. One was just a ghost of an outline as if it had been erased. *"Give me a detailed engineering image of my location, with entrances and exits marked in red."*

A three-dimensional image detached itself and became a hologram. For a few moments, she studied the levels, noting that the three elevators from the surface had three possible access entries onto their decks except the seventh level. The seventh level had only one elevator giving her the impression it was a secured area. Looking back at the third level where a red dot was pulsating, an entire corridor from the elevator was green. The other corridor she noted on her arrival was closed off, and gray. Which meant she either could exit back the way she had entered the underground city, or head over to Com-C. Any other place she wished to visit would require an AEG and hers was non-functioning, to say nothing of the fact that it had not been returned.

I'm stuck here...unless I can get my hands on an AEG that's not faulty. Then where do I go? Lieut, I think it's time to check the place out and determine what options there are. And...don't forget to call home, soldier. Don't want them to think you're AWOL. I'm sure they have communications somewhere around here. Like in Com-C.

For a few more moments, she studied the planet frowning over the puzzle. "I wonder how I got here?" she muttered more to herself than the computer.

"The emergency system was activated."

Lieutenant Montran blinked at the unexpected answer. *If I activated the emergency system, why did I have to find the emergency hatch myself? Besides, I was referring to being dropped from one side of this planet to here. Let me start with basic questions. "How does the emergency system get activated?"*

"When a life form that is within the influence of this planet is in danger, an alert is sent to Guardian. Guardian determines what action to take."

"Who is Guardian?" Influence...just what parameters does 'influence' cover?"

"Keeper of Merkers Outpost."

"What is his or her species and location?"

"Guardian is not a biological entity. Guardian's location is everywhere."

Sounds like a supercomputer left to care for Merkers Outpost. Not unusual. "What business goes on in Century City?"

"I do not have that type of information."

"Where could I get that 'type' of information?"

"In the Command Center. It is the last room at the end of the hall." A holographic image appeared of her walking to Com-C.

Lieutenant Montran tapped her fingers on the console as she thought. *I feel honored. I'm on the same floor as Com-C. This is easy...in fact too easy. If the computer is called Guardian, wouldn't it also have some form of security against unwanted occupation? Or maybe putting guests close to Com-C is to keep a close eye on the guest.*

"Does Guardian protect the outpost from hostile or unauthorized occupation?"

"Yes. For further questions on the security of this planet you will need to speak with Guardian, via communications in the Command Center."

She would indeed. She rose from her chair and took one last sweeping glance of her oh-so comfortable quarters. As she stepped out into the hall, the lights came on, indicating the direction she was to go.

This is one city where I don't have to worry about getting lost. I wonder what happens if I don't chose to follow the light? Another question for Guardian.

As she walked briskly toward her destination, she glanced at the continued display of paintings and sculptures, and noted the amount of rooms she passed. Taking in a deeper breath, she sought to detect the usual stuffy smell that an artificially maintained habitat usually had. Nothing.

The life support systems for this place are commendable. I wonder if they ever turn this place down. What is Merkers Outpost these days? What's going on in Century City if this is marked as a closed and private planet? Maybe it's being rented out with all the amenities I've got to experience, but who would want to stay here? Someone running and needing to hide out? And who is taking care of the maintenance? Maybe whoever is doing the maintenance needs supplies and the freighter is bringing them those supplies. Yes, that could be it. That was only a small part of Century City that showed activated. That red line was a clear indication that no one gets beyond it.

She was five strides from her destination when the door slid open with a sibilant swish. Lights came up slowly revealing a typical Com-C room. She stopped just short of entering, peering around the room cautious and curious. It was circular. Two levels. Four sets of steps up to the second level. It was handy to have two stairs designated as up and two down so that during shift changes or when there was a general alarm it assisted in traffic control. Screens of various sizes covered all the available wall space. From the ground floor, Lieutenant Montran could see through the transparent floor the same scattering of screens on the second level. All Com-Cs in both the Collective and Committee's territories were designed pretty much the same, for both civilians and military. In the center of the room was the Command Chair. All had a command chair that exuded an energy of its own which the person that sat in it became part of. It was an interactive connection between computer, people attending the monitoring, and the person in the chair.

This chair doesn't feel like it's on.

No alarms were going off in her head, but she felt as if she was being watched. Was it part of the second skin?

You know, Lieut, you could be imagining this feeling. But then again...this is a Com-C area and there are always security monitors...and this is where Guardian is supposed to be.

Walking around the dais, her eyes swept across the inactive consoles and blank screens. Like everywhere else, the place was clean of dust and smells of living biological occupation. Corners were inspected and closed doors tested. Nothing yielded to her inspection other than the room she was allowed to enter. Warily she looked back at the Command Chair.

I haven't been in a Com-C since I was a cadet but I'm sure they have not changed much or someone would have said something in the rumor pipeline. That means I have to sit in that chair if I want to get the power on. Well, Harry, looks like I'm in for a new experience...one of those 'druther not' types.

With one foot on the dais, a light above the chair came on, causing her to pause before turning around and timidly sitting in the chair. The form of the chair slowly fit to her and then... a panicky feeling sent chills along her arms and a shiver up her spine. Other than experiencing her own trepidation, nothing further happened. She let out an exasperated breath of air.

"Now what?" she muttered irritably.

"You must sit back," a voice near her elbow, explained.

Lieutenant Montran leaped out of the chair and spun around in a low crouch to face another bot.

Bloody moon, what is that? Her hand went automatically to her sidearm and found none. What a time to go slack! Where did that bot come from? How could I have missed something that bright?

Before her was a bot striped in brilliant colors with more appendages than she ever could image a bot would need. The bot before her didn't look like a few hand chops or well placed kicks would put it out of commission much less knock it off balance.

"My name is Charles. I tend the Command Center and Guardian. To engage the chair and communicate with Guardian, you need to sit back with your head resting on the headrest. And relax. Guardian wishes to communicate with you."

"Yes?" she asked suspiciously. "Why don't you just relay the message?"

The appendages gestured at the consoles, "My connection would not bring up the monitors you wish to view or give you access to the information you need."

Now, that is a sorry explanation! And how would a bot know what I need? The image of the bed being turned back on the left side where she normally slept, and the breakfast selection she would normally choose came to mind. She glanced up at the chair, then the monitors, and then back at the bot. With reservation, Lieutenant Montran climbed back in the chair, keeping an eye on Charles. The moment her head rested on the back of the chair, the screens came up and the chair moved to the left, giving her a view of the first row.

This feels so odd...

Her awareness expanded to...it was difficult to explain since she had no comparisons...however, her attention became focused on the scene the first monitor played...soldiers and civilians moving around live cargo crates. Because Spartans were involved she assumed it was an official bust until she figured out what she was observing. Her eyes hardened at what she was seeing.

What's in those containers? It...they look like people. Since when have cages become the standard for detaining prisoners? Hadrie and his committee cronies would never allow something like that to become standard in law enforcement ...they would have to change the whole Galaxy Charter and Commander Hailbrun would have heard of it...we would have all heard of it. Something is not right here! I knew if those idiots from Spinners Tale were involved it would be illegal!

As her eyes moved, the chair moved, from screen to screen, giving her scenes out of people's lives. *I recognize a few from the freighter.*

Spartan uniforms had troop affiliation patches on the left shoulder. There was also a group dressed in military issued AEGs weighted down with full weapons trappings, looking every bit like a group on a hunt and destroy mission. Unlike *Spinners Tales'* equipment, these suits were the latest in technology, though looking well used. She guessed it was from the atmosphere on the surface. Her eyes moved to an arm patch on the AEG and the screen zoomed in focusing on the arm of one of the soldiers.

What are they doing here? Lord Chaney's pets, the Black Rose! Are they still sponsored by him? What is going on? Is this a new Committee outpost? No, no. It was marked as privately owned. Does Lord Chaney own it? No. Committee members Can't own a planet. Is someone trying to take over this place? A part of her scolded her for being too cynical.

'They are trying,' a thought came to her.

That didn't come from her. The timbre of sound and thought were way off what she was used to hearing in her head.

"Who are you?" she asked cautiously, though suspecting it was the main computer or Guardian.

'I am.'

"What's that?" she asked not quite understanding.

'I am who you think I am,' it reiterated.

"Guardian," she affirmed.

'Yes,' it confirmed.

"What are all these people doing here?"

Images flooded her mind, threatening to upset her stomach.

"I don't quite understand," she mumbled more to herself than the computer as her thoughts attempted to keep up, sorting and categorizing what flashed by her.

"You mean everyone is here for different reasons?" she asked finally. She felt an affirmative.

How would the computer know what each person's desires are unless they are hooked up to it? What did everyone do, fill out a questionnaire before landing? Or maybe sleep on a wired pillow.

Suddenly she was alone. "Is there something wrong?" she asked guiltily. *Maybe I'm being too insensitive to the computer; after all, it's an interactive system.*

An image flashed of a communication line with two calls. A question was asked of her.

"Is any of this business legal?" she asked abruptly.

'No.'

"So, this is a thieves or smuggler's haven," she guessed. Images from the computer appeared as if a story was being shown her. Following an indeterminate amount of time, there came a pause.

She pondered what Guardian had played for her. "Okay. Whatever groups they belong to, they deal in stolen goods. So who owns Merkers Outpost?" she asked puzzled.

Before her an image of a young Copoc appeared. First dressed in a business outfit and then older looking wearing a lab coat. The last image was of another person pointing a weapon at him. He collapsed

to the floor with the perpetrator turning and running. The image that flashed back was of the younger version of the Copoc smiling at her.

Lieutenant Montran's breath caught in her throat as her thoughts imagined the Copoc's brain being part of the computer. "**You** are Guardian!"

Lieutenant Montran leaped out of the chair feeling her skin prickle with an irrational fear. The Computer or Guardian was a dead person! She had heard about experiments with the brains of some highly respected scientists that had died. Commingling with someone, or something, without some sort of an idea of what she was touching – or that was touching her, gave her the shivers. There was another memory that was so far from her consciousness that only ominous pinpricks on her arms were proof that something more was bothering her about the computer connection. She stood staring at the chair at odds with herself.

What difference does it make hooked up to a computer or a person's brain? her pragmatic side asked.

A lot, her horrified self replied.

The screens were still on. Rather than get back into the chair, she stepped closer to the screens to try to distance herself from Guardian and to regain her composure.

Civilians were feeding the captives in the cages. In another room, a small group of soldiers and civilians were eating, sitting separate with more than space distancing them.

They don't like each other. Now why do you think that, lieutenant? Ahh. Body language. Well, it's odd to see the two working on something together...hmm. Spartans and smugglers. Goes against the grain of all the subliminal indoctrination a Spartan is subjected to. Unless they aren't smugglers. Am I jumping to conclusions? What do we have here? A lot of containers in some of these rooms. Contraband? The captives in the cages. Kidnapped for ransom? It's Guardian's interpretation of their business here, but why would a computer lie or mislead? So if not smugglers...than bandits? Maybe the Spartans are getting ready for an uprising on one of the planets. No. Too many civilians. So...maybe they are smugglers.

Something nagged at the back of her mind but rather than struggle with it, she continued slowly moving along the row of screens, feeling uneasy at what she was witnessing. She needed to get word to her CO...and find out what they wanted her to do... However, her boss was in Collective Space, this problem was in Committee Space, and she didn't trust anyone in Committee Space to go to them about this discovery. Her present situation was a result in trusting Committee orders ...whom she had no allegiance to.

So why did you willingly leave the shuttle when they presented you with Committee orders? Because it was unexpected, and they did have sidearms with civilians around...and, geeze. All right. It didn't occur to me to challenge it then. I was in shell shock...we all were in shock or angry. It was business class. Interrupting their flight schedule would have meant a lot of missed connecting flights. Lieutenant, do you realize you sound just like a helpless victim? I thought after seven years there would be some backbone in you.

Disheartened at how easy it was to waylay her she returned her attention to the screens.

"Who's that?" she asked Charles who quietly remained at her side. She pointed to the screen where a shadowed figure moved with purpose. Something about the figure looked familiar. She was hoping it wasn't a colleague from her Spartan days, because those were the only people she knew when she lived in Committee space.

"Maud on an assignment," Charles replied.

"Who is Maud?" *Maud? I don't know any Maud. So why does she look familiar?*

"Guardian's assistant."

"What is she doing?"

"Guardian can tell you, but you must sit in the Command Chair to communicate with Guardian." *I don't think so.* "What can you tell me about Century City?" she asked Charles instead.

"I only know about this part of the city, and that information is limited."

"But you identified Maud," Lieutenant Montran pointed out.

"She visits here often."

"Is she a bot, is she human, a besian, Guardian's rabbit...what is she?" the lieutenant persisted.

"She is not quite like you," Charles stated carefully.

"What do you mean?" Lieutenant Montran was getting impatient. She felt an urgent need to do something. Her adrenalin was pumping and her heart was pounding as if she were getting ready to jump into action.

Hold on, Lieut. Why this urgent need? Where is it coming from? Military training or influence from sitting in the chair...or just because I need to do something? There are no warning alarms in my head. So, no personal danger to me.

Deciding it wasn't a manipulated impulse she turned her attention back to the figure that stepped out of the dark tunnel and was now in one of the well-lit city corridors. She was wearing an interesting suit that covered her from head to foot.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you," Lieutenant Montran realized Charles had continued to speak, "What did you say about Maud?"

"She is composed of the basic bios as you; however, she is different. What the difference is, I can't tell you."

Ahh, the infamous 'can't or won't' ploy. Just what does Maud, Guardian's assistant, do? Dust and keep house? she thought dourly. "Betcha Guardian knows," she muttered to herself.

Ya need ta get a grip on yerself, m'dearie. Whatever these bein's are, yer the stranger here. If ya gonna do somethin' yer gonna have ta decide just what it's yer gonna do, and that's gonna require gathering some information.

Right. Well, I know it'sn't me going over there like a one-woman army. The odds of me arresting them are not even worth putting on an odds board.

She looked back at the chair. She needed to separate from her fear about sitting in the chair. So what was it about the chair that was getting her so nervous?

There is no way I'm gonna let a dead person in my brain.

Yet...she was going to have to get over it if she wanted to know more of what was going on and how to contact her superiors. "Helgas bloody moon!" Lieutenant Montran slapped her forehead in exasperation. *Rear Admiral JoCastaos has the Tanjmi forces searching for a group of smugglers that escaped from a raid about two stan years ago. They were part of a group that ran a slave trade ring! I'm not privy to their progress, but...one of the many rumors in the pipeline was that some of them fled into Committee space. Would the admiral send the Tanjmi into Committee space to arrest them? If Lord Chaney is involved...oh, damn. The problem is, I don't know anything of what's going on in this sector...but, do I want to? All right, first things first. I need to find out if I can get a message out and then I Got to let the admiral know about this place. I hope I'm not listed as AWOL and then the comm dopes hang my message up in bureaucratic protocol escalations.*

She shook her head at the last thought. She needed to think positive here, but not ignore the reality...like what if she needed to free the captives before help arrived. Should she free them? She still didn't really know why they were in cages, and even if she felt this wasn't legal...this wasn't her territory to run a one woman rescue operation...if she was crazy enough to attempt it. Her eyes refocused on the screens this time looking at the rooms with a more critical eye.

Where would I keep those I freed and if any were injured what kind of medibot does this place have? The one that served me when I arrived seemed to know what it was doing. She could bring them back here.

Oh, right! This place is NOT a secured place. Besides, how would I transport them here...or me get there? "I wonder how Maud travels from there to here. Can't be too long of a journey," she spoke to herself softly. She sighed heavily. "You got yourself in another sticky mess, Lieut."

Whether to get back into the chair or not wasn't an option. Duty, either under the auspices of family, school, or military had been drilled into her throughout her life, so she couldn't remain inactive when she suspected others were being victimized.

I have to be crazy here. One person against over a hundred that will want to kill me because I'm the enemy is not good odds for someone that is neither heroic nor suicidal. Besides, how do I know what is really going on around here. I saw Guardian's version. There's as many versions to a story as there are people willing or unwilling to listen. So, what I need is a plan...and Guardian has the information I need. A familiar aroma caught her attention, and she turned to the brightly decorated bot that held a mug of steaming tea.

"Perhaps a cup of tea would help? Maud usually has one when she has things to think about," Charles suggested helpfully.

All right, so Maud is not a bot. And, she thinks for herself.

She accepted the tea and continued to study the screens, counting the number of personnel that wore uniforms and of those that wore uniforms how many different patches.

Hm. Not enough of one group to make up a troop. How many regiments does the Committee have? There used to be about one hundred twenty-two to a planet so, how many planets belong to the Committee these days? And why so many groups on this outpost?

"I'll bet they're rogue Spartans," she muttered to herself. *But the Black Rose? There are enough to make up a healthy squad. I've never heard of a rogue Black Rose. They pride themselves on being independent -- owned by no one, not even their sponsor Lord Chaney. So, maybe in seven years a lot has changed. Lord Chaney. His name sure has been coming up a lot lately. He signed the blasted orders to drag me back into Committee service!*

She took a deep breath to stop the anger.

Refocus, Lieut. Got to make a decision. You need information and the computer has it. Think about it. You talk to your dead grandfather! It can't be much weirder than listening to a dead Copoc. He certainly has more pull on this station than Harry.

Lieutenant Montran handed Charles the empty cup and stepped back onto the dais. She sat in the chair with her head firmly pressed against the headrest, and her fingers curled over the arms so tight her knuckles were white.

"Are you still upset with me?" a soft voice spoke to her.

"I...just find it uncomfortable to be inside someone else's thoughts." She didn't add that that someone being dead had unpleasant associations, but it was foremost in her mind.

"I don't think that is all that is bothering you...but we shall move on. What is it you need?"

Lieutenant Montran distrusted the change in the computer's approach; though, using external words rather than subliminal images was more within her comfort zone. He was also asking her what she wanted. Since he asked...

"I would like to send word to Collective space, to Rear Admiral JoCastao on the Collective's flagship *Ziggy*, of my whereabouts and of this...business."

"What **word** would you like me to send?"

Lieutenant Montran let out a short laugh at the emphasis on 'word'. "The word is Multin and the message should be marked for her eyes only...from Lieutenant Harriet Montran of the flagship *Ziggy*."

"Ah. Multin...a code name to an operation in the Collective's sector. It had taken place two years and four standard months ago...the cause and effect of the smugglers' unwanted company here."

"So...they are part of the same smugglers group," Lieutenant Montran spoke softly to herself and then louder to the computer, "You heard about it from the smugglers?"

"I heard about it through the grapevine and picked up a word here and there from the smugglers. Seems they have a dread of Tanjmi operators hunting them down in Collective space so they have taken to hiding in neutral territory...here."

"I had thought it was classified information," she stated warily, thinking Guardian knew too much for being on an outpost mislabeled 'deserted'.

"Perhaps it's. I have access into many places and a label of 'classified' doesn't impress me much." Lieutenant Montran could hear amusement in the voice.

"Did you hear if *Spinners Tale* was involved?"

"Yes and no; they are not involved directly. Their flight schedule is limited to Committee space in the Zed sector. They are but minions without any real sense of their own creativity or purpose."

That is an interesting description – very fitting.

"The agents of this smugglers' group deal in commodities that can rise in price if taken off the market for a short time. They also supply private zoos with species that are considered intelligent, and procured from closed planets. Some of what you see in those cages are headed to private zoos and those red tagged have been selected for the metralabs. Does that answer your next set of questions?"

The mention of 'labs' had her wondering if the copec's circumstance was linked to the illegal activity. She brushed it off as a big leap of her imagination.

"My company's sales manager thought he could sell my laboratory discoveries on the black market without my knowledge," Guardian supplied. "We had a falling out. The end result was that he left Merkers Outpost with knowledge he thought he could sell and I was left without a functioning body."

"He killed you? Where is he now?"

"Dead."

"Oh."

"Old age." Guardian replied with compassion. "He had been a good friend to me and others in my cities. He had become unwittingly involved with a group of thugs through gambling debts, and,"

Lieutenant Montran could see an image of the copec shrug his shoulders, indicating it was beyond the handling of his friend. "When he left, he tried to hide from my agents. He thought they would kill him for what he had done to me. I do not kill, though I will not prevent others from doing themselves in. My agents were to ensure that he kept our research and discoveries to himself."

"So this was a research facility," she repeated thoughtfully. *The environment topside certainly curtails unwanted visitors. Does this tie in with the delivery of bodies for labs?* "Just what kind of research did you do?"

"It is an ideal setting for research," he agreed with her unspoken thoughts. "The second skin you are wearing is one of the products from my laboratories."

"I haven't seen anything like it on the market."

"It wasn't my intent to put it on the market. I created it for my staff and their families to move topside and throughout the various cities without too much worry of a breach. It is composed of the wearer's own cells and a mixture of other bioforms from this planet. Forgive me if I don't share the secret. Our other research was in small things that when added to other things already made, created something better."

"Oh." *That was vague. But it's not my business...or I hope not.* "Well, the idea of using something like your second skin on a ship has its merits."

"That would take a different type of composition of which I am not interested in these days. My interests have changed since I have taken up residence in a computer."

"I guess they would," Lieutenant Montran said quietly. "Did he keep your secrets?"

"One he passed on to his son. That is why one group is here."

Lieutenant Montran continued to watch the screens as she listened, hoping to see Maud again. She wanted to ask Guardian about her.

"I noticed you are interested in my assistant, Maud." Guardian broached the subject for her.

Lieutenant Montran smiled, feeling embarrassed.

"She could use some assistance. She has no military training and Sheila, a metradame, is proving to be more than she can handle."

"A metradame? What is Maud doing?" Lieutenant Montran's interest was piqued. Metradames were procured for sexual pleasure by those with lots of credits. She wondered just what problems Maud was having with a metradame.

"To the first question; Sheila is a metradame trained as a personal bodyguard to one of the smuggler chiefs. To the second question; Maud was able to free a few of the prisoners, but they were easy since they were quite sick and didn't have guards around them. She's moved them to a secured infirmary on the other side of Century City where the interlopers have not been able to breach. Our aim is to rescue all of them before the smugglers can ship them to their new owners. I am sure with your training you can create believable diversions while Maud frees each group."

Lieutenant Montran felt relieved, and then frowned. Something didn't sound right, yet she didn't know what it was exactly.

So, something was already being done about freeing the captives. However, what had the bodyguard...the metradame, to do with this directly? Bodyguards usually stuck to the person they protected. Was the smuggler taking the disappearance of a few sickly prisoners personally?

"Guardian, I need an idea of what I'm up against before I feel comfortable giving you an answer. The ideal would be profiles on the people, weapons they have, a detailed plan of your facilities..." This was going to be a first for her...running interference for a two person operation. Well, soldiers and smugglers usually had falling outs and by the way they were sitting in the mess hall...it looked like there was a wide chasm already. If she found what would further divide them, and then keep them busy with their differences until help arrived... And the metradame? That made for an interesting image of...foreplay.

Ahh, Lieut! I can't believe you would stoop to that type of humor. You need a visit to Aphrodite's House of Pleasures when you get off this planet. You really need to work off this frustration before it gets you into trouble, like consorting with the enemy. She couldn't prevent a smirk from appearing on her face at that last thought.

"Easily provided," Guardian replied, ignoring her straying thoughts. "It should fall into your own plans quite nicely, since that was what you were planning on doing until your help arrived."

"What's that?" she asked startled, suddenly remembering that she needed to be careful of her thoughts while hooked up with computer.

"Finding out what my unwanted visitors are up to and releasing their captives."

"I may have been thinking of releasing them...but in reality...well, let's just see what I can come up with that won't get either of us killed or captured. What about this metradame bodyguard? How does she fit in?"

"Yes, well, let me brief you on the present situation and where she fits in will fall into place. Right now, the smugglers and the soldiers that are providing them security have two priorities. One is to locate you. The second is to prepare for the private auction."

Lieutenant Montran was at first surprised and then nodded, understanding what a lone wolf could do to an operation that on a moments notice could be collapsed and packed away for a hurried escape. She could also understand the need to find a buyer for their contraband, which would mean, if they had to break camp, their contraband would have a destination other than their next base, thus overwhelming their pursuers with so many scattering targets.

"Of course. I hadn't thought of me being a major concern, which means they're on alert...but...by these scenes they don't look like they're too concerned about security."

"They have already done sweeps throughout their living space and have guards at the two entrances they know of. Right now they are on stand-down due to the winds above their part of the planet. When the winds abate the smugglers will start the auction and the military and available smugglers will resume their search for you. Captain Miller is head of the security for this group and sends his special group, composed mostly of Black Rose personnel, topside to make sure there is no interruption from unwanted visitors. He is the son of my ex-employee and spends a lot of his time searching for other entrances to my cities."

"So I won't have to worry about the soldiers breathing down my neck when I set up something to keep the city residents occupied. Good." She was silent for a moment thinking of what would happen to the captain's priorities once she added her mischief to the mix of Maud removing *their* property. "Well, they won't be out there for long. How many personnel on this outpost?"

"About five hundred. There are ships nearby should they have to pack and leave quickly. After two years of keeping them contained and providing difficulties in their daily lives, I am hoping that stealing from their business will cause them to take it elsewhere."

"Maybe they like your accommodations."

"Perhaps."

"So about this metradame...how much of her programming do you know about and who does she guard?"

"Lord Chaney."

"Lord Chaney! So...he's here," she muttered darkly. *So am I a pawn? Against who? Hadrie? Admiral JoCastao?* She shook her head. *That doesn't make sense. I'm not that important for Hadrie to be influenced on a vote or ignore something important on Committee Counsel business. It can't be revenge against Admiral JoCastao for her actions against smugglers, because I'm not that important in the ranks. I'm not even regular staff on the flagship...well, not until I sign in.*

"Damn politics."

"It is deeper than that," Guardian responded. "It is because he couldn't get rid of you during your tour of duty as captain of the Degas troop. He started out doing it as a favor for the Fermis and when you refused to die...you became his personal issue. Alan Fermin has a different reason for your presence here. He wants you as his personal metradame...but not quite in the caliber as Lord Chaney's Sheila."

"Alan!" *I'm gone for seven years and I walk into this? What has been happening around here? Is this why Hadrie wanted to see me? As if the nightmares aren't enough.* "Wait a moment! A metradame?" she shook her head confused. "Me? You've got to be kidding. Those are...glorified sex toys! They're not real." A shudder shook her frame at the thought.

"You have been misinformed. Metrapeople are ninety-nine point nine percent people that have had a behavior modification chip implanted, face changed and personalities wiped. They are remodeled to fit in a place their new owners have for them for the rest of their unnatural lives."

Guardian flashed Lieutenant Montran pictures of many different faces. Some looked familiar but the pictures were going too fast for her to consciously identify them. What little she knew of metrapeople, she couldn't remember anything that mentioned they were — recycled people. A small residue of her dream resurfaced, and her insides turned cold.

"It is not something you would find in their advertisements," Guardian continued, "but two life insurance companies are behind the body collecting. They say they are using the bodies for medical research. The people who donate their bodies for the large refunds, do it to give their beneficiary a chance

to start a new life after their supposed death. They may hesitate if they knew that they were still alive. Since it's aimed at low income people, they have little if any resources to investigate if they did suspect something was amiss."

"That can't be! The Galactic Scientist Union and the Galactic Science Academy would prevent something like that from happening," Lieutenant Montran insisted stubbornly. A memory of her signing a life insurance policy made her uncertain. Lieutenant Montran shook her head impatiently. She was getting paranoid with this new information. "It's not ethical or moral, any more than slavery is. Slavery is certainly not necessary in Collective and Committee space...even the new settlements have rules for the use of people against their will and selling people." Lieutenant Montran was overwhelmed. "What proof of this do you have?" she demanded.

"There is plenty of information on the subject. If you wish, I will give your room console access into my library and you can research it for yourself."

"Yes. I would like that." *Hadrie would hit the ceiling if he heard of something like this to say nothing of the Collective. How could something like this not be known?* "You said various occupations?" It suddenly occurred to her that maybe *Spinners* crew were drones. That would explain their low functioning. "I find it difficult to believe *Spinners Tales'* crew has the intelligence to be involved in a smuggling operation."

"There is a suspicion that there has been a subtle form of manipulation going on with the *Spinners* crew. We're working on uncovering just what it's. You appear to be unaffected, so perhaps it's not in the air or the food." Guardian waited for a comment but getting only a deeper frown on his recruit's face, continued. "Because of the customer base of the metrapeople business and the security around the business of producing them, we have to move slowly with our investigation."

"Our?" It finally dawned on her that he had been eluding to there being more than just he and Maud.

"I am a member of an organization called Neboths Vine. I'm sure you have heard of them. They work to change the mindset of the..."

"Yes, yes. Hadrie once told me about them," she admitted impatiently. "Really unrealistic. If these committee members are not morally upright in their representation of their constituents without an incentive outside of themselves the Vines peaceful conversion of them is not going to work." "Unless we catch them in the act, red-handed, so-to-speak."

Lieutenant Montran cast back into her memory for the understanding of what 'caught red handed' meant. *Ah, caught in the act of slaughtering someone else's cattle. Ugh!* "So, you catch them bidding...on forbidden goods in this auction," she translated, "then what? The committee has too many members that have been reluctant to censure their own, either because they have been coerced or from lack of interest. They won't point fingers...and since you're into these euphuisms, remember 'for the one that is pointed forward, there are three pointing back'...give or take a digit or two." *I'm getting loose witted again.* "None of them wish to have their businesses aired or want to risk suspicion of wrong doing."

"Yes, yes. Very good. I have not heard that euphuism for a while. It is not just the members who will see the auction and who is bidding...it will be telecast to major stations, reaching every planet that receives transmissions from the INet Corporation," he informed her in a tone of voice that she took to be smug.

"Ah, a public outcry," she returned in a cynical tone. "Well, that will certainly get them to resign if not be arrested. That particular public sin does carry punishment even for a Committee member; however, the Committee's Judicial System usually dishes out the punishment for a Committee member, as I'm sure you know. What if some of those that are the offenders hold positions on that board, which I'm sure they would have put themselves in that position for this very reason...and therefore, will vote on their own sentencing...What then?"

"There is an understanding between the Committee and the Collective that when it's business concerning the closed planets, planets whose population is too violent to be allowed to travel in space...the Counsel of Rings will judge the case. Over half of the occupants in those cages are from closed planets. That is what makes possession of them desirable for those that have everything...or want everything their peers don't have. A sickness few seek a cure for."

Lieutenant Montran started to laugh in disbelief. "Well, the purchaser is going to have to hide them in a closet because someone that sees them will know they come from a planet that is a nonmember of either the Committee or Collective." She didn't believe it would happen, but who was she to pop a group of

idealist's bubble. "Okay. So, the plan is: they transmit, and before they ship the captives to their new owners, I create diversions while Maud releases them. Did I leave anything out?"

"That is the plan, unless you have an alternate. I will monitor the whereabouts of Sheila, Lord Chaney and the Black Rose and keep you posted of any other danger heading your way." There was a pause. "As I've said earlier, Lord Chaney deems you a high level threat, not believing you're dead. He has given orders to his smugglers and Spartans to take you alive; however, in my recent monitoring of communications, I'm not certain what the Black Rose or Spartans will do should they find you. There is this code of membership where they meter out justice to 'their own' and I do believe they consider you part of their membership."

What 'code of membership'? She sat quietly as she thought of what this would mean in the plan to ruffle feathers among the smugglers' and their cohorts. It didn't change anything. She shifted her thoughts to the metradame. What would keep a bodyguard off-balance? She was an unknown threat.

"In addition to the layout of Century City and pertinent information on the personnel over there, I'd like to know how you've been handling them since their occupation, as well as how they've been reacting to whatever you've done, or Maud. I also want to get something understood here. If I think I'm in danger...I'm getting out of there. I'm not suicidal these days, nor a hero. I'm agreeing to go on over there and stir the pot because if you and Maud have been doing it for two years and you're both still around, you must have an advantage."

"Yes. The advantage is knowledge of the outpost and having equipment that takes advantage of the planet's own chemistry. I have a subliminal of the information you need to know. You will find my profiles are quite detailed and precise."

"I guess after two years of studying them, you would..." her voice trailed off as again she wondered why the smugglers were staying here for two years. It didn't fit their MO, if they were the same group. Then again, where she was billeted was something she would find difficult to give up if she didn't have to pay for it.

"It is quite amusing to...play with them. I've had excellent suggestions from various behavioral scientists to run tests on their reactions to different stress situations and stimuli..."

Lieutenant Montran sat up suddenly and waved her hands, "Stop! Wait a moment here! They are study subjects? Isn't that a bit...unethical?" She began to feel like she had been sold on a mission that had more going on than what Guardian had presented to her. Perhaps she was a bit too trusting...again. Was the admiral really going to be notified? She should demand to speak to her in person.

"It is dishonest for them to use my facilities when I have not invited them and for what they are using it for. This is a scientific outpost even without my plethora of scientists that once resided here..."

"What do the scientists that have you running these tests say?" she interrupted.

"They don't know where these tests are being conducted. There are some experiments where the identity of the test subjects is never divulged so that the behavior is observed without ethnic or species prejudice coloring the recorder's observations and conclusions."

"Jeesh! Then how are you going to know what is...never mind! I'm not going to be part of this mental game of..."

"Of course you are, just by you being here!" he interrupted her soothingly. "You are really rescuing those people in the cages, and this really is a smugglers' den, and Maud really does need assistance. I am simply taking advantage of a situation with occasional annoyances presented to unwelcomed visitors...but it's to make the infidels go away. I do not take lives and I do not use anything that will cause physical pain. Any psychological discomfort is of their own making."

"Infidels...I have not heard that for a while," she responded slowly, wondering if she was in any position to object. Merkers Outpost was by some crazy stroke of territory splitting neither in Collective or Committee jurisdiction, so she couldn't use the argument that due to the activity on the other side of the planet it gave her the authority to...do what? If anything, the Spartans were also law enforcement, and closer to having jurisdiction than she had...however, by what the screens were showing, they were working for the smugglers.

"What is showing on those screens is RT...actually happening, and not staged by you or anyone else?"

"Yes, it's real time, and I'm merely recording what is happening."

"Two years is a long time for this group to stay anywhere...you're not just toying with them, are you?"

"It is their choice to remain and be miserable. However, hiding stolen goods is not the same as auctioning off kidnapped persons or victims of some unethical barter. It has become imperative to end this operation. After two years of studying them and their responses to various circumstances, the data will be put to good use and made available to you."

Lieutenant Montran raised an eyebrow. "When did they start bringing the live cargo?"

"Two stan weeks ago," Guardian returned. "I understand there was a surprise raid at their main base by the Collective's Centurions, called the Tanjmi." Guardian didn't miss the young woman's look of triumph. "Your admiral's special team," he acknowledged. "There wasn't even a ripple in the rumor pipeline of the raid. I understand only half the smugglers escaped, and most had spotters on their tails. Lord Chaney is not a happy man nor are his customers. Since this is near a jump gate and a heavily traveled corridor, they were able to elude their tails and eventually landed here where they already had a small operation going. They need to continue on with this auction to settle the nerves of their suppliers and customers to say nothing of Lord Chaney's stockholders. He also is losing credits shipping his live cargo around."

Stockholders? I hope he has a list of them because I want a copy.

Guardian paused. "Maud has just reminded me not to spend so much time socializing, as there is work to be done." There was an audible sigh. "She knows me too well. Make yourself comfortable. I do not use the same technique as the Spartans. Their heavy use of drugs and forcing images is too invasive. I use no drugs. My technique is slower in making its way to the surface of the mind; therefore Maud will be making sure you don't shoot yourself in the foot, so-to-speak, until all the information makes its way to your awareness." He chuckled at his joke.

Lieutenant Montran easily slipped into the necessary beta-state when her eyes closed.

Chapter 5

Delorita was born to Yeva in the Healers House of Jeborhara on Velta V. Delorita's father was the nefarious Lord Chaney of Dlephae who had raped her mother, Yeva, a midwife intern. In shame and fear, the twelve-year-old Yeva changed her name to Masha and scrubbed floors in the Healer's House, terrified to leave its protective environment. Masha dedicated her newborn daughter to the House of Athena to become a warrior to avenge her unwilling deflowerment.

Delorita learned her lessons of recompense well, determined to fulfill her mother's expectations of retribution. When Delorita was ten, her mother took to her deathbed and in a profound state of peace, removed the obligation from her young daughter's shoulders, much to everyone's relief. Masha chose the name Leor to pass through the lighted gate of Amattas, to find peace with her ancestors. However, the loss of purpose left Delorita adrift.

Delorita's second mother, Aglauros, redirected her energy into athletic training for the Galactic Games. Until her twelfth year, the year of her first menses and welcome into the House of Women, she found contentment in this different world of discipline and camaraderie. At twelve, her life took on added meaning as she prepared for her Vision Quest. At thirteen, she had her Vision in the Sacred Temple of Hekate. In a dream-like state, her life purpose unfolded and those whose web of life she would touch were revealed to her. Her guide wrote it out on parchment from the sacred Trees of Ossark. At her coming of age naming, she chose Zohra, distaining the name Delorita and the burden it carried.

A week out of the Temple, she lost the clarity of the vision, but her guide didn't. She was initiated into Hekates Inner Circle, and ascended to the next level of Athena's warriors. Her guide, teachers and mentors steered her toward the training she would need to help her in her future tasks and lessons. Under the guise of traveling as an athletic competitor for the Galactic Games, she met many teachers that gave her more arduous lessons to work at than her competitions in the games.

When Zohra was of the right age, she enrolled in one of the galactic space academies in Committee space. While in her first year at the Academy for the training of space and infantry officers, the Brothers of the Shadow approached her and a few of her sisters with an offer to join Naboths Vine, an undercover operation to undo the abuses of the Committee. Her Mother House cleared it.



Cadet Zohra looked over the grounds of her new home for the next four stan years. Her athletically trim figure threw a long shadow behind her, down the deep blue grassy slope shading some of her fellow cadets. They were at ease, laughing and comparing notes. They had been at the Academy for three standard months and were still adjusting to their new life before the academic regiment went into full swing, a stan week away. The returning upper cadets, the Pugs, had taken over most of the training and recreational facilities and as Plebes, the first year cadets found it safer to remain out of their way.

Zohra's dark eyes scanned the group of buildings, looking for the flight-training tower. She heard Cadet ChaTak approach before she felt the long thin fingers on her shoulder. The meltian was one of her roommates. She had bonded well with ChaTak, though she wasn't at all like anyone she had grown up with. ChaTak gave nothing away about herself, a curio Zohra wished to explore. Usually she was able to read a person no matter their species within a quarter of a stan hour, through body movements, voice intonation and the eyes. She had made a game of it during her competitive years as a galactic athlete. And though she couldn't figure the meltian cadet out, she felt they did have a friendship.

ChaTak nodded toward the short row of buildings to their left. "The elder said that is where the simulators are."

Cadet ChaTak and Cadet Zohra were to report there in the early morning hours for testing on their piloting abilities. Cadet ChaTak, to Zohra's amusement, could undoubtedly teach the Academy staff more than a few tricks, but she knew ChaTak would only do what the task required.

Finally, we're going to do something other than slough through the mud lugging enough equipment to supply a village...So, it's not a tower after all. Cadet Zohra shaded her eyes as she studied the low buildings. Four entrances, two exits, and a lot of traffic even now before classes begin. Many of the classrooms must be underground. I hate underground facilities and their stagnant air.

"It will require us to get there early," Cadet ChaTak continued speaking softly. "There will be many others to compete for available practice time before the testing begins."

Cadet Zohra glanced at her roommate, her dark eyes glinting with humor. Early to Cadet ChaTak was shortly after midnight. "By your time or mine?" Cadet Zohra asked.

Cadet ChaTak shrugged her thin shoulders, delighting in her stoic friend's unusual display of emotion.

"I shall be there at o-six hundred hours, standard academy time," Cadet Zohra told her firmly.

ChaTak grinned, uncharacteristic for her species, but something she had picked up in her adaptation to the other expressive species she roomed with.

Cadet Zohra's first year at the academy was difficult as she tried to adjust to the strangeness of a permanent residence and the unfamiliar regimes. She missed traveling around the galaxy and the tough physical workouts each cell of athletes provided to rival members. The camaraderie that existed until the official games began, was also something she sorely missed - their presence and support each gave to the other without forming emotional ties. That was what she grew up with and was comfortable with, whereas in the social arena of the academy, cadet friendships required more than what she was willing to offer, with the exception of ChaTak, who accepted her boundaries as they were.

To alleviate the edginess of her new restrictions she found a glen a short walk up one of the slopes that formed a wall at the back of the Academy. Here she practiced her more rigorous exercises late at night, enjoying the privacy as well as the physical exhaustion that followed.

When the first year ended and broke for three stan months, a taller and more mature Zohra returned to her Shield House. Her Shield Mother was pleased with the changes she felt, and sent her for advanced training with Naboths Vine. Zohra's three months were spent honing skills she had learned as a child when she was planning vengeance in her mother's name. The old heat and fixed obsession gave way to a challenge to master skills she previously learned.

It was in Cadet Zohra's second year that another type of challenge came her way. Cadet Jaymai. She had enough curves showing under the genderless uniform to stop any roving eye for at least a moment. Her slate gray eyes once fixed on Cadet Zohra became wary to anyone around her target who may thwart her goal of ownership. For the stoic Cadet Zohra, Jaymai became a passionate spot in her otherwise studious life. In a year the relationship became intense and for two long months, Cadet Zohra was thinking of committing to this person, but her strong sense of obligation to the Vine was her anchoring point, and the subject wasn't broached.

Zohra was looking forward to the three-month break where she would be able to get some relief from the tension Jaymai created within her.

"What are you doing out here alone?" Resentment tinted the familiar pouty voice.

Cadet Zohra turned reluctantly from the double moons. She had heard Jaymai's noisy approach but had hoped she would not see her in the darkness. It was her nightly ritual to work out in her part of the glen. By now the regular night visitors had set their mark of ownership over certain spots. In the glen, rank wasn't an issue.

"I'm watching the moons," she replied to her lover, stifling resentment at having her private moment disturbed.

The thin figure dressed in clothes meant to accentuate her form, moved in front of the stronger figure, her hands taking possession of what she considered hers, jealous of the moons that drew the attention of her prey away from her. Jaymai's eyes slitted in anger. The object of her charms was still showing signs of independence and not pining away her time when she wasn't in her presence. Most of her past romantic victims succumbed to her complete domination by the end of one stan month. This one was proving to be a challenge, which made her even more determined to have her will prevail.

"How romantic... moonlight and... two interested parties," Jaymai growled seductively, pulling the taller woman's face toward hers. Her kiss was deep, hungry and rough. Long thin hands ran down the slim muscular form, tugging the body urgently into hers, knowing how to ignite Zohra's lustful passion. Both sank to the ground behind the tree where Jaymai aggressively showed Zohra how the two moons affected her.

Two days later Zohra and ChaTak finished a session of *Ch'I Mae* in one of the seldom-used dojos of the old section of the Academy. ChaTak had been teaching Zohra for two years a method of moving in silence that shielded a person from even the most intuitive persons. Zohra was finally feeling the change within herself and ChaTak was pleased, but she could see lines of strain in her friend's eyes, strain not caused from this work out session. She studied the dark warrior as Zohra drank deeply the water the bot provided. ChaTak made a noise that passed for a chuckle at her companion's tuckered appearance while she felt refreshed. ChaTak playfully flicked her towel toward the athlete to get her attention.

"She's pressing you for a commitment again," Cadet ChaTak stated matter of factly. By the rolling of the dark eyes, she knew she read her right. "Would you really commit to her if you had not already become involved with another responsibility?"

Zohra hesitated, surprised, "Well...I...haven't really thought on it."

ChaTak looked at her friend through her light eyes, the golden line in the centers opening wider. She knew that Jaymai was psychically manipulating the stanch warrior for a commitment out of pride. Jaymai's friends had worshiped the star athlete since childhood...to say nothing of many of the other cadets attending the Academy. ChaTak didn't think Jaymai worshiped or liked anyone beyond herself. Why Zohra had not looked into the woman's background was due, she suspected, to Jaymai's very delicate touch at mind influence. Zohra merely needed a nudge to start asking herself the right questions to break from the influence. ChaTak gave what would pass as a smile as the dark eyes of her friend looked into hers puzzled.

"You are still very young and have many species to experience," she patted her friend on her shoulder.

Zohra regarded her thoughtfully. "ChaTak, in my travel in the galactic competitions, I've met more species than we have here at the academy. So, tell me in other words, what you're meaning for me to hear."

ChaTak sighed inwardly. Her elders always said if assistance is offered then the consequences should also be carried. "What are the most meaningful experiences of your life?"

Zohra pursed her lips in thought. Meltians were considered one of the wiser and cooler tempered of species in their part of the multiverse. So, when ChaTak asked what seemed to be a question that was far from the subject they were discussing, Zohra suspected there was a connection she was missing. "You sound like the admittance counselor," she returned, failing to know what to say.

"Be honest with yourself..." ChaTak told her.

Zohra plopped wearily on the chair against the wall and wiped her face again with her towel. "Well, aside from birth and death in the family..." As if called for, the memory of a dream came back to her. She had met her soulmate in dreamtime. Unfamiliar with the feelings it elicited in her, she had mentioned it to no one, wanting to think on it before admitting to it. Frowning, she wondered if ChaTak counted that as a meaningful experience.

ChaTak, once her message had created the desired effect, resumed collecting her belongings. Zohra hurried to follow her back to their barracks.

That night as Zohra waited for sleep to come, she reviewed her relationship with Jaymai and decided it was too intense for the short amount of time they knew each other. To strengthen her resolve to put more distance between her and Jaymai, Zohra planned to increase her workload of extra duty, suspecting there was something more to the attraction than what she was able to see. However, Jaymai redoubled her efforts and Zohra found the sexual attraction to Jaymai intoxicating and difficult to give up, not realizing she was a fly in a spider's web. Jaymai's hints to commitment increased as they moved into the end of Zohra's third year and Jaymai's graduation.

As the sexual tension increased, Zohra found herself mentally practicing the sacred Dance of Attraction at night. She imagined the steps in segments. The Teachers warned if practiced together in any form, it would generate the sacred *qi* for passion and life bonding. However, the more Zohra practiced the Dance mentally, the more her body needed to feel the rhythm in physical movement. The urge created more tension in Zohra which caused her to be short with her friends, including Jaymai whose knee jerk response was to put more pressure on her for a commitment. Zohra's only release from Jaymai's influence was her studies where neither would run into the other since Jaymai was following an administrative course while Zohra was infantry.



It was the night of Elwin's second moon, when the two moons were on the other side of the planet, thus turning the night into complete darkness and necessitated most cadets to use night lamps while walking outside. Zohra planned to practice one segment of the Dance under the glitter of stars to release some of the built up energy. Jaymai was off-planet on the student ship, *Quasar* for an exam. Her other friends would be preoccupied with test preparations for the weeklong pre-exam burdened days. The glen would be absent of others for at least two hours. It was enough time. As long as Jaymai wasn't around she had no worry about making the mistake of connecting with her.

Without Jaymai's presence, it was as if a miasma lifted from her. Zohra shook her head in amusement. Was that all it took to influence her?

Cadet, you are going to research the attributes of her species. And ChaTak warned me. She groaned in wry amusement. She knew. It is so like ChaTak to let me learn from my own mistakes after a very subtle warning. So, just how long was ChaTak going to let me stumble in this sexual haze? I shall be talking with that woman.

Feeling better already, she relished the pull of the climb on her legs. The glen was unusually still, and in the darkness she carefully placed her feet so as not to run head on into a tree. She refrained from taking a night lamp as it intruded upon the naturalness of the environment she was tuning into. Pausing at one of the trees that ringed the glen, Zohra touched its rough bark feeling a slight change of energy from its life force. Then she stepped into the glen fifteen paces, knowing that that would give her enough room to move.

Inhaling slow and deep, she stilled her thoughts. Breathing in again, she concentrated on bringing the breath to her dan tien, and then releasing it down her legs and into the ground. Her silent mantra began within her heart, expanding as a pulse throughout her body and then into a steady throb. Every cell vibrated as if in anticipation like an athlete before her performance. She focused on her body energy that swirled about her, letting it build before bringing it to a focus back to her heart. Inhaling, she connected with the planet's *qi* through the soles of her bare feet.

There was no stillness in the night as all cells of all things around her were alive and breathing. The planet spirit showed what life there was around her. The night dampness, the vegetation, the richness of the dirt...it all was sharp and clear to her senses. Taking another deep breath her fingers began to tingle – her signal to begin.

Calling the Guardians of the Dance as witnesses, she prayed for rightness of mind, attraction and attachment to the one she was meant to bond with. Still intent on practicing one segment of the Dance, she reminded herself that the brief exercise was to get rid of the energy she inadvertently built up. Respectfully she made her bows to the guardians in each of the directions they ruled. Finished, she brought her outspread arms slowly up above her head, palms facing each other, and then drew them down over her heart as she thanked all the powers that surrounded her. Breathing deeply into her lowest chakra, she held her breath for the appropriate length of time and released it. She then breathed in and out in studied rhythms meant to build strength while holding her hands in a proscribed mudra pose.

There was another presence, faint, but it was there. It was this presence, her Watcher, which gave the Dance its purpose. She didn't seek to identify it. She was too focused into the ritual to wonder how the Watcher got there.

Slowly she stretched out in the first motion, feeling arms and legs move and hold and adjust to the position. She held the stance until she felt her mind and body comfortably settle in the pose. She moved to the next step exactly as she had done in her mind, and then slowly lessened the rest between each movement, intuitively knowing where the ground rose and where it dipped. The energy of the Dance intensified as she increased her speed around the darkened edge of the trees. She could see sparks of vibrant colors from the energy about her. So intoxicated with the various changes in herself from the Dance she forgot her original intention and moved through the next segment of the Dance.

After the first segment was completed, she realized the added energy was from her Watcher as their spirits joined, just as it was meant to. Cadet Zohra could feel her Watcher's excitement, curiosity, and a strange familiarity. Of course. She had touched this person when they both were younger. The energy from her Watcher was more subdued than when they had first come together as youth, but it still gave Cadet Zohra a rush of exhilaration, indescribable and beyond her wildest imagination. Excitement and desire burned in her body as the dancers moved into the last half. The differences between her and her Watcher were blurred as steps she didn't remember were moved through. Both their hearts were on fire. Both their bodies trembled from the commingled energies, familiar yet unfamiliar

In the final leap, suspended for a moment in time and air, reaching and stretching arms high overhead as if to pluck out a star from the night sky, the dancers were intimately aware of the other. When Zohra dropped back to the ground, she finished in a perfectly executed spin, held it for a brief moment, and then dropped to her hands and knees, bowing in respect of all who were witnessing the Dance. Cadet Zohra held her pose as the Master had instructed, allowing the throbbing energy to dissipate into the ground, and give her heaving lungs a chance to oxygenate her body. The pulsing in her veins, loud in her ears, beat against her yoni bringing her to a sweet climax, one like she had never before experienced, even under the skilled administrations of Jaymai.

Cadet Zohra knew her Watcher shared in these feelings, and was weak from her own climax. In that instant, she understood the power of the Dance, and that she had fooled herself into believing that she could practice it even in her mind without being effected. Still connected with her Watcher, she could feel a combined realization that this meeting was more than coincidence.

Was it? Was this their destiny? Was her soulmate – to be her lifemate too?

Approaching voices broke the spell and the link dropped abruptly. The voices were unwanted noises that clashed in her head, grating against the energy she was charged with. Her acuity faded immediately, leaving her blinded. Cadet Zohra moved behind the tree, using its rough texture to ground her. The presence of her Watcher was gone but her desire for her didn't fade. Questions of who and where crossed her mind as she waited for her legs to become steady enough to walk back to her quarters. Cadet Zohra took a deep shaky breath. She didn't regret performing the Dance and she didn't regret drawing in the stranger.

Lifemate? Here?

It was what the Dance of Attraction was about, she reminded herself with amusement at her own naivety. As she walked toward her quarters, she realized she had been carrying a heavy load on her shoulders. It wasn't Cadet Jaymai and making a commitment to her that had her restless and mentally practicing the Dance, it was the energy of her lifemate being nearby! It was nice to not feel the edgy energy that had been running through her for...three years! Cadet Jaymai's affections had only served to heighten it and give it focus.

So, either my lifemate is a senior or a junior, like me.

She would have laughed aloud except for the time. Instead, an uncharacteristic smug look graced her face as she remembered her Teacher explaining to her young students the sacred energy behind the long and intricate ritual of the Dance. She and the other students had danced the first Dance in class under the supervision of their Teacher. It was to open them to the energy of their soulmate, who well may become their lifemate. She had danced it only because everyone else did. Smothering her nervousness, she remembered how she was terrified for months after briefly touching with her soulmate, that this person would drop out of nowhere and claim her, and her life again would be under someone else's vision. That fear gradually went away as did her memory of her dance. Now, it all came back to her.

Who are you? Soon! You Can't hide from me now, no more than I can hide from you.

Cadet Zohra was happier than she ever knew she could be.

She is near! Goddess! I feel...different.

For the next stan month of Cadet Zohra's third year, she dreamed of her Watcher when the twin moons were on the other side of the planet. On dark nights she stood at the edge of the glen looking up at the sky's canopy of sparkingly stars, feeling the connection to her Watcher vibrating especially strong. Once she had tried to compel her to show herself but her soulmate resisted. Cadet Zohra's thoughts of Cadet Jaymai no longer came to her mind as Jaymai's influence dissolved. Her cooled contact with Jaymai ended when Ensign Jaymai left the Academy for her first tour of duty on an outpost near the jump zone in Juan sector. Following her talk with ChaTak she found that other students had complained about Jaymai's abuse of her powers. Apparently, her species was able to influence romantic encounters if the other person was interested.

A week after Jaymai's departure Cadet Zohra received a communication from her asking if their relationship was truly over.

She must have found another to be asking, or so Cadet Zohra hoped as she reread the communiqué.

CuDas tapped Zohra on the shoulder. "Well, are you going to turn into stone in front of the door or are you going to move?" she asked impatiently, as her stomach rumbled its need for food.

"Huh?" the tall dark haired woman responded.

"What's the news?" ChaTak asked as she picked up her cape near the door.

"Ensign Jaymai is curious what my intentions with her are," she replied dryly.

"She's probably got another strong, silent warrior type wrapped around her gloved hand and wants to make sure she is leaving no loose ends!" Clea teased. "We shall drink and celebrate to her new liaison."

"Clea!" CuDas reproached her. Everyone knew she desired Jaymai.

"While she was in her 'rutting season', she left many a heart strewn on the field, and I might add, she didn't look back to even take count, nor did she take prisoners," Clea pointed out.

"We all should be grateful we don't have that particular impulse," Zohra muttered.

"Hmph! You can say that now, but I noticed you didn't seem to mind when you were the one she directed her passions to," CuDas retorted.

"You, my dear, feel that way because you were hoping she would move on from Zohra to you.

Your insatiable desires are well talked about in Aphrodite's rooms. Jaymai had a biological reason, what's yours?" Clea's playful digging in her ribs lightened CuDas mood.

"I'm lucky, I guess," CuDas replied.

They all looked at Zohra.

"What?"

ChaTak shook her head and gently tugged at her friend's elbow. "Come on. We all need to eat something palatable and relax in friendly conversations with fellow cadets."



They were laughing as they walked into the bar. Zohra felt the presence of her Watcher the moment she entered the room. Her heart paused in mid beat before resuming at a quickened pace.

Yes!

ChaTak watched her friend closely, amused at the sudden change in her bios. This was something she had never witnessed from her.

As the group found a place to sit, Clea continued to tell stories and keep them laughing. Zohra's attention was elsewhere as she scanned the room. Her senses heightened as she felt her Watcher link with her tentatively. The Watcher was surprised and...unsure?

Laughter from the other side of the room became louder to her ears as those in her immediate vicinity faded out. Her eyes locked on the deep green eyes of her Watcher. Both were aware of the strong desire to connect, reflecting in their eyes. A shy smile turned up the corners of the woman's mouth. Then her Watcher broke the connection...reluctantly. Zohra watched the cadet as she casually, or was it nervously, toss her cascading orange hair back over her shoulder in a well-practiced gesture. Others moved blocking her from Zohra's sight.

Conversation at Zohra's table stopped unnoticed by Zohra, as her companions studied their usually unreadable friend showing interest in another. Her cheeks reddened with...what? In her relationship with Jaymai, Zohra let her make the overtures and merely followed her lead...until one day she decided she had enough of being led around...or so most of her friends thought. This was a different side of Zohra.

"That's Lady Harriet Montran and her friends," CuDas sniffed. Megan CuDas, Zohra had found, didn't like the upper class of any society.

Clea looked steadily at her dark-eyed friend and saw something that she would remember many years later.

ChaTak hid her grin as she realized what Zohra was feeling. It wasn't the same feeling she had with Ensign Jaymai – *thank the Holy Guardians. So, this one has changed her. It is her soulmate and they both know it. Interesting. Both are a mix of species, perhaps that is why.*



Zohra and her friends passed the Pub two nights later. Zohra found herself drawn to enter it. She could feel the presence of Lady Harriet and wondered how to talk her friends into relaxing there instead of their usual place.

"Looks like some of our friends are here. Why don't we stop in?" ChaTak suggested.

Zohra had no doubt that ChaTak knew Lady Harriet was inside.

"It can't be because of the brew because they don't carry Cadet Zohra's favorite...but then again..." Clea teased and the others, with the exception of Megan laughed.

They glanced at the party that was going on in one of the back rooms, then back to a table where someone hailed them. Friends were settled around a table and waved them over. Zohra's eyes found Lady Harriet quietly sitting near the back of the party, as if she didn't want to be there. Zohra felt her mood was distracted and wondered what preoccupied her.

"Well Cadet, is it the ale or is it something else that you intend on ordering?" Clea continued to tease.

"I'm not in the mood for a drink, but..." Zohra rose as she caught sight of Lady Harriet moving to leave.

"Hey, you just got here!" CuDas complained.

"Cadet, she is from a different class...she would only be polite," another told her.

"You need to concentrate on your studies. You just got one airhead out of your..."

"Hey, come on, Cadets. We're not leaving her alone. She may say something that gets her in trouble. Wait, up, Zohra!" Clea shouted as she dragged a reluctant Megan to her feet.

ChaTak was only a footstep behind Zohra, fascinated at her concentration on this orange haired woman.

For a few moments Zohra had thought she lost her, and was walking quickly toward the barracks assuming that was where she was headed.

"There she is. Can we slow down now?" Clea huffed.

"Isn't that, that jerk Alan Fermin with her?" Megan spat out. He was a good example of why Cadet CuDas despised those that bought their way into the upper class and then abused anyone they could. They had all heard the rumors that Alan was physically abusive to his girlfriends and was expelled from the Academy for it, but he had simply enrolled in the Diplomatic Corps next door. That had a lot of irony to it.

Zohra's adrenalin raced at the sudden fear she felt for Lady Harriet's safety. Their link was vibrating with terror.

"She's in trouble!" Zohra announced as she broke into a run to close their distance. She could hear a voice behind her questioning her but her friends followed hard on her heels. When she saw Alan joined by others drag a collapsed Lady Harriet between two buildings, Zohra let her lungs release the call to arms for all cadets. The others echoed her as they descended on the group that looked up surprised and then fearful as they saw the fury in their victim's rescuers' faces. They held their weapons up unsure whether to use them or not and then were overwhelmed by Zohra and her group.

"Zohra, no!" ChaTak grabbed Zohra and Clea assisted her as they restrained her from plummeting the now unconscious Alan Fermin to death.

The cadet response was incredibly fast, but not fast enough to save her from a beating. By then the swollen face of Lady Harriet wasn't recognizable but when Cadet Montran's nametag was recognized, many became angry with the two that were still conscious. Cadet Montran was well liked by many because of her geniality to anyone that spoke to her.

Zohra cradled the bloodied head of Lady Harriet until the medics arrived. Her face became more unreadable as her fury against the Fermins increased. The Fermin family was one of the families Naboths Vine was targeting for abusing their social and economic status.

ChaTak squatted near her friend with a supportive hand on her shoulder, worried about the change she felt taking place in Zohra.

For the next week while Lady Harriet was the main topic of conversation, Zohra withdrew from those around her. She spent every spare moment working out alone, trying to rid herself of the rage that was burning a hole in her soul. At the end of the second week she got a glimpse of Lady Harriet at the court hearing for Alan Fermin.

Cadet Zohra was shocked at the change in her Watcher. As she stood before the court and removed her cap, many wept at the loss of her long hair. Gone were her laugh lines, replaced with dark and cold eyes that carried no spark of interest in what was going on around her. The change painfully gripped Zohra's heart adding to her resolve to bring the Fermins, and people like them, down.

With the added testimony of Alan Fermin's associates, the court found Alan Fermin had willfully assaulted Cadet Lady Harriet Montran with the full intent to inflict pain and death. The stunner found clutched in Alan's hand confirmed he had physically immobilized her leaving her conscious while he attacked her. The extent of the brutal beating at his hands confirmed his desire to kill his victim. His background of assaulting women was also exposed, as further proof that a mere reprimand wasn't just inappropriate but didn't address his future victims. The court ruled his actions were a heinous crime against the Galactic Committees Charter.

News agencies blared... it was a political attack by a wealthy psychopath against a member of one of the oldest and most respected clans in the Galaxy. The news agencies blasted pictures of a youthful Alan at his coming of age party where he had declared Blood Right against the DeMonte clan and all their related cousins. Though it was a laughable claim considering the Fermis were not a clan, nor even politically mentionable at the time, it was a serious declaration. It called for clan war, an outlawed practice.

Demands for immediate retribution by the public – exile to Hinterweild and stripped of personal belongings – fell against the deaf ears of the criminal board. Zohra knew that though the DeMonte and Montran clans were powerful, the votes on the criminal hearings board had already been bought by means of blackmail and other dark methods. The markers were cashed in. Zohra's consolation was that Gustaf Fermin was planning to use that card for another reason, and now it was used up. All Gustaf Fermin bought was time and one more chance for Alan. He would be sent for reeducation at the Adjustment and Decontamination of Disturbed Minds facility, also called ADDM. The wealthy could afford to pay for the four star years of behavior modification, chip implantation – to enforce the behavior program, medication – to lessen the side effects of the chip, and career training. This was to produce a rehabilitated productive member of society. Zohra didn't believe ADDM would help Alan and wondered how long it would take the Committee to realize that. Naboths Vine on the other hand, would be keeping an eye on him.

The day after the hearing, classes broke for the summer.



Returning from her three months of summer training at Naboths Vines Compound, Zohra heard that Lady Harriet had switched her course of study from a bridge officer to a more physically demanding tract – infantry training. From Lady Harriet's tanned and hardened features, she realized she had been working hard for three months to catch up to the level others in her tract were at. Zohra understood her need to physically work off the fear of being rendered powerless. Zohra was relieved Lady Harriet's room was moved near the guardroom. Naboths Vine knew the next step was for Gustaff Fermin to hire an assassin. It was standard practice when one family publicly declared Blood Right against another, though if it had not been broadcast by every news media it would have been something only a drunk and those around him had heard. From a military standpoint, it had been a bad move for Alan to attack her himself.

Zohra kept her distance from Cadet Montran and tried not to link with her. Though both of them were on the same tract, Zohra's classes were more advanced, so chance meetings were unlikely.

At the end of their senior semester, Ensign Zohra left the Academy and disappeared as she was promptly moved into covert operations where her appearance was changed as well as her name. She took the name Jina Gari or JG. She became a bodyguard to a political family and then formally transferred as a noncom in a Spartan infantry group. JG started out as a private and quickly worked her way up to corporal before she was reassigned to the target group, the nefarious Black Rose. Ironically, Lord Chaney, her unacknowledged father, who was the alleged head of a major smuggling band, sponsored the Black Rose.

She heard news now and then of Lieutenant Montran through the Spartan grapevine, and then of her promotion. She knew what a quick rise in infantry ranks meant and her heart felt heavy for the once tenderhearted woman.



Chapter 6

"Captain on deck!"

"At ease, soldiers! Gather round!" Captain Miller looked toward Lieutenant Ninian who nodded that the place had been cleared of any monitoring devices that were not theirs.

"Our comrades aboard the *Spinnners Tale*," he paused as the jeers and catcalls echoed eerily through the cargo bay. "As I was saying, *Spinnners Tale* crew was actually given an important job from Lord Chaney. However, true to form, they screwed up." The contempt in the captain's voice encouraged lewd comments from the group. "We're being asked to assist in locating and delivering this person to Lord Chaney who has been visiting while we were on leave. Lord Chaney thinks she's still alive."

"Since when does Lord Chaney personally get involved with kidnapping people?" Sergeant Vanster asked.

"Yes. Usually his goons handle it," another soldier added.

"That's not showing too much sense to have anyone on *Spinnners* kidnapping someone!" a voice in the back remarked.

Again laughter and rude comments followed.

Captain Miller hesitated a moment. *Now comes the hard part.*

"He got it up his big arse that Captain Montran as a living, breathing, freely moving citizen is bad for his reputation. He had her kidnapped and brought to Merkers Outpost for some of his fun n' games at the hands of his metradame before turning her over to kid Fermin's metralab people."

He waited. This was where his soldiers were going to recall that Captain Harriet Montran was a legend among Spartans because she had survived Lord Chaney's two years of determined no-return deployments along with a Spartan group he detested. The Degas troop didn't survive his final death assignment coup but Captain Montran had.

And then there was the point that Captain Montran was a survivor against all odds making her an unofficial Black Rose member. Once a Spartan, always a Spartan and once a Black Rose...even into death, was a Black Rose.

"Captain...?" queried his Sergeant Major.

He could see in their eyes, that to them, she was still Captain Harriet Montran of the Degas troop. All Spartans saluted a drink to the troop on dark moon nights when they remembered fallen comrades.

"If we find her...we'll treat her as we do any other Spartan." There. He did it. Silently he cursed Lord Chaney for his arrogance on ignoring military culture, and his ignorance on understanding a troop Chaney highly valued. But then again that lack of understanding was why they were here, which was an advantage to Captain Miller.

"If she's alive what do we do with her?" Sergeant Major JG asked cautiously.

He glanced at his sergeant major. "We'll deal with that when and if we run into her." He looked over his troop, studying them closely. They were uncomfortable with this new assignment. He tapped his sidearm getting the familiar sound that told them he wanted their attention. "This also gives us a good reason to search on the other side of the planet without Lord Chaney becoming too suspicious. All right, Lieutenant, get 'em mounted."

"Sergeant Major, ya heard the captain. Let's move out," he told her quietly.

"Right ya are, Lieut. Ya heard the orders! Mount up, ya ugly hairy arses!" Sergeant Major JG hollared.

Windstorms that frequented the planets surface on Merkers Outpost brought a halt to the Black Rose deployment on the far side of the planet. That was the location the teams recon tactical specialist pinpointed as the most likely place for Captain Montran's disappearance. During the storm's duration Captain Miller had his team return to quarters and rest. It was two stan hours later when the clangons sounded, waking everyone up. While Sergeant Major JG had the troop scattered to secure and lock down the city access doors, Lieutenant Ninian monitored damage control. Captain Miller was aboard the *Spinnners Tale*, involved in an unsolicited and unwanted call from the kid Fermin.

"What is going on?" Alan paused in the middle of a one-sided argument with Captain Miller. The alarm on the captain's communicator was buzzing annoyingly.

"This conversation is over and out." Captain Miller ended the transmission with a satisfied thump on the table with his fist. His voice command deactivated the link, bringing up the Fermin Business logo and then the *Spinners Tale* registry ID, signifying the link was indeed broken. He turned the alarm on his communicator off and waited for the communication link between planet and ship to sync.

As he waited, he stretched his long legs and eased the tension from his shoulders. The conversation with kid Fermin wasn't totally a waste of time. He was able to interpret from the kid's posturing that he wasn't aware of Lord Chaney's presence on the outpost. It meant his spies were not as informed as he would have the captain believe. The captain detested the immature pretentious youth who had no value in his world and therefore would never rise to any formality of address other than 'Yes' or 'what do you want'. His lips curled in a snarl that he had managed to hide when the kid had ordered *him* to make sure no Spartan was to participate in the search for 'that Montran.' Captain Miller didn't waste his time pointing out to Alan that he had no authority in anything pertaining to the outpost and most of all over Captain Miller. He had no worry about Alan loosening his small army of metrasoldiers on the base because so far in every confrontation with his army, the Black Rose won. Of course, it had a lot to do with the kid not wanting to give any control to his little minions so when a skirmish was fought with changes, his army kept to his original battle plan. If it were a battle to the death, he would have lost many of his expensive toys. He shook his head disgustedly. People with too much money should be given a babysitter with power to keep them from interfering with those that have something to do in life. He had warned Lord Chaney many times that the kid was too unstable to associate with, but Lord Chaney liked to play with fire.

His communicator indicated the sync was complete. The captain had a grim smile on his face as he tapped in his code for a secured communication link. A bubble surrounded him, blocking out any interference or unwanted listeners.

He sighed as he assessed what the kid's meddling would do to his current plans. The kid wasn't getting what he wanted, which was the undisputed ownership of Captain Montran's remains. What the captain was hoping was that with both Lord Chaney and the kid distracted, he would have more time to reach his objective. Impatiently he watched the indicators on his communicator as it displayed the progress in passing the encryption coding on a secured line to his staff on the planet surface. The soft tone announced the connection was complete.

"Lieutenant Ninian, report."

"Lieutenant Ninian here, Captain. That braindead cretin..."

Captain Miller cursed under his breath.

"...opened a contaminated room into the main corridor. All rooms feeding into that corridor have been successfully locked down and secured. We were damn lucky. One causality, a crewmember from *Spinners Tale*. Sergeant Major checked on Lord Chaney. His metradame reported he was sleeping and didn't want to be disturbed with anything that wasn't important. The natives are getting restless as showtime nears. Since Chaney is here, we could go about our business and let him worry about the transmission."

That wasn't surprising news. The smugglers being a suspicious and jealous lot didn't want the Black Rose troop around when they did their business, as if they were rivals...which technically speaking, they were. However, Captain Miller's pulse jumped when he deciphered the underlying message that the winds had finally died down over their target site.

Intuition refined by years of Spartan survival convinced him that the missing Captain Montran wasn't only alive and well, but had found the entrance to another city. He hoped it was the city he was looking for. With all the luck Captain Harriet Montran had, he would put his credits on her.

"Understood. Have the team geared up and ready to move out when the shuttle lands. Out."



The Black Rose team assembled in their shuttle, *Queen Bee*, quietly waiting for the officers to join them. Captain Miller and Lieutenant Ninian, under the guise of checking out Decker's disaster, were searching for the exact whereabouts of Lord Chaney. The sergeant major and her team had verified that regardless of what the metradame Sheila had said, Lord Chaney wasn't in his quarters. The captain spoke with an informant while the lieutenant stood guard.

After a stan hour, both men entered the shuttle geared up in AEGs and grim expressions. They determined Lord Chaney was up to mischief with Sheila left to deflect any suspicions. Lord Chaney never went anywhere without his bodyguard, which was why he left her behind. According to the captain's informant, Lord Chaney was negotiating a new deal with a rival smuggling group to exclude and eliminate one of his partners. The atmosphere on Merkers Outpost had suddenly become dangerously volatile and the captain was sure all it would take was the kid's arrival and the outpost would be a war zone. It was a hell of a time to have a cockfight.

"Take'er up, Sarg," the lieutenant gave the order once both men secured themselves.

"We'll pick up where we left off. Sergeant Vanster and Corporal Guilfo will monitor for winds. They are more frequent on this side of the planet, so keep sharp Sergeant."

They all gave mental sighs. After two years, they knew the weather on the planet surface. Their captain was anxious about something.

"Any hint, start the pick up. This is it! No going back! Do you have the sensor deflector in place?" Captain Miller asked Sergeant Major JG.

"Yes, sir." *So, that's why he's nervous. This is his window of opportunity and he will most likely not get another by my reckoning.* "Windstorm readings in this area with an occasional window of clearing...life readings are being sent out regularly for us on the Southern Rim."

"Good. Any of you find your seals or equipment failing, don't hesitate to call in! I don't want any accidents that can be prevented. Got that?"

"Yes, sir!" the group responded.

"Sergeant Vanster and her crew, as usual, will monitor the equipment and fill the tanks as they come in." He checked himself, realizing he was nervously repeating himself.



The team fanned out and worked until the sun dropped below the horizon leaving them in total darkness. They had replaced their tanks too many times to remember and even with breaks for rest and food, they were still exhausted.

"Call 'em back in, Lieutenant," the captain ordered disappointed.

"Right."

"Rose Bud to Queen Bee, come in."

"Yes!" both officers answered in unison.

"Marksen here, sirs. Sergeant Major JG tripped over something. She's out of range from your position."

"We're starting to pick up everyone. We'll be right there with the rest of the squad. Tell her to stay put," the captain ordered excitedly.

"Sergeant, giddy-up!" Lieutenant Ninian ordered.

"I'm on it, Lieut!" Expertly handled, the shuttle rose and skimmed the surface picking up the scattered members.

"Sergeant Major...JG, come in," the lieutenant called as they approached her position.

"Here, to the left of you, sir."

"She made good progress in this atmosphere," the lieutenant muttered. The captain nodded.

Sergeant Major JG directed the shuttle with a light.

Fatigued, JG shifted to reposition the heavy air canister as she watched the shuttle land. Normally the air canisters weight was negligible, but in this atmosphere, weight more than tripled.

"The rest of you, just stay here and rest," the captain ordered to his all too agreeable troop.

The lieutenant and captain were out of the shuttle the moment *Queen Bee* stabilized, and followed the shuttle's outdoor light to JG and the lump by her feet.

"Will you look at that?" Lieutenant Ninian whistled in his helmet, kneeling heavily near the pipe.

"What do you think the arrows mean?"

"Have you identified it?" the captain asked JG.

"Yes, sir. It's one of the old Bessmache maintenance all atmosphere cables discontinued from five standard years back. But it's in good shape and holding up to the elements, sirs."

"Just like they used to advertise," the lieutenant agreed taking his own readings.

Captain Miller snorted, "They should have elected a CEO with the same philosophy as the one they forced into retirement. They've been making junk since. Divide and conquer. That's what their main competitor did to them. So, what's your reading, Lieutenant?"

"She's right on. No signs of wear. Amazing for the winds that blow through here."

JG merely listened knowing that NCOs were not expected to participate in COs conversations, merely anticipate their desires and needs.

"Good work, Sergeant Major. Let's mark this place and get back to the shuttle. We'll get some rest and get back to it." The captain turned and headed back to the shuttle already planning the next day's activities.

JG assisted the lieutenant to his feet. Gratefully, JG headed back to the shuttle. Mentally she thanked her snitch for the coordinates, otherwise the team would still be searching. After two years, she still didn't know who her snitch was...but so far, whoever it was had not misled her, and he or she had the right pass codes.

Back in the shuttle the captain outlined the next day's assignment.

"In about five stan...."

"Eight would be better, Captain," the lieutenant interrupted softly. He knew the team would still be too tired.

"Right, right. In eight stan hours then, we'll split up in two teams, each following the cable in opposite directions. Now get some rest."

The captain didn't sleep for long. While the others slept, he went over his plan repeatedly, looking for flaws and trying to find alternatives if this or that didn't work, all the while keeping a wary eye on the weather indicators. Captain Miller rubbed his face tiredly.

So, when is Lord Chaney dealing out Master Alha Bahna? He better make sure he kills that guy or there is going to be hell to pay. Master Alha Bahna doesn't like to be out smarted...which means he probably has something planned to get rid of Lord Chaney. It's Got to be big because winner takes all and chances will be they'll only have a small empire left when the smoke clears. Damn these complications. Why the hell is Chaney keeping the operation here for so long? It gives me more time to find the city but...why is he still here? Does he know what I'm looking for? No. He probably thinks we're looking for entrances to the other cities to loot them. We've got to find the damn portal before the kid gets here. I can feel it in my bones that that idiot is heading here and then this place won't be safe for tourists and too hot for even a soldier.

He was right when he told his soldiers this had to be it. Once the transmission for the auction was finished, the hunt for the missing Captain Montran would go on and the maps of the planet they had been working on for the last two years would have to be turned over to Lord Chaney. It would only be a matter of time that the smugglers, if not Lord Chaney, would find the other cities his father had told him existed. So far, none of their equipment could penetrate the surface. The electromagnetic storms and heavy atmosphere prevented their equipment from working to their specs. It had been two years of slow methodical searching, hampered by the unpredictable weather topside and the unbreachable computer that kept them limited to a small part of the city. It also took some doing to keep a low profile from Lord Chaney's naturally suspicious mind. Then, by the chance abduction of a celebrity, everything has ended. He grunted softly. What made him so sure she was alive? Was it instincts? No. It was something real simple. Logic. He doubted that someone who had survived Lord Chaney's relentless pursuit for nine years could die so easily. It wasn't just luck. Captain Miller believed Captain Montran had telepathic abilities that had helped her and her troop to remain alive for as long as they did. This didn't lessen his appreciation of her military abilities. She still needed military expertise to bring her platoon of misfits back from purposely staged fatal deployments. It was a sound conclusion, considering Lord Chaney made sure they didn't have the proper gear or working weapons. So, his other worry was...what was he going to do when he came up against her? First off, he wasn't going to threaten her outright ...her ability to survive such attacks told him that was futile.

A smile curled his lips. So...he was going to finally meet Lord Chaney's demon. He tried to conjure up what this demon would look like today. An old picture of her in her Spartan captain's uniform showed little of what she was like personally. He had met her brother once. He was of average height for his clan and had no special physical attributes aside from his orange hair except that when you stepped into his sphere of influence you could feel his magnetism.

Until it was time to waken his troop, he thought how to seduce or sidetrack the orange haired captain until he took ownership of the portal. For a moment his blood turned cold at the thought that she

would find it before him. Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself that according to the research he had done on portals, it took a minimum of four or five people to take possession of it, though after that only one person was needed to be the guardian. There was only one of her. Once he was in command of the portal, he would send Captain Montran to another galaxy through the portal, somewhere where they didn't have space flight. As a guardian he couldn't take a life, for the energy that sustained the portal would turn him into a pile of cinders. In addition, as guardian of Merkers Outpost, he could prevent her return.

At the appointed time, Captain Miller woke his troop to continue the search. Those following the larger arrows found an elevator plate eight cubits from the mark. The group reassembled in the shuttle replacing seals, and loaded up on extra air tanks. They left Sergeant Vanster and two crewmembers to monitor the weather and the activity of the five ships hovering above the planet.

They all crowded together on the elevator plate, with the captain activating the lever for decent. The only light in the elevator was from their lamps until the elevator stopped and a light above the doorway lit up green. As the door to the elevator opened wide, the two front soldiers quickly moved out with the others fanning in front of them raider style, advancing three cubits at a time as they scanned the entire surface of the corridor. Eventually, they came to another elevator. There on the door was a homing device just like the one Sergeant Major left on the elevator they arrived on.

"Hold up, everyone!" the captain's aggravated voice crackled through their helmet comms. He checked his HR, just as everyone else did. It showed they were moving forward and yet here they were back at the elevator. It was another annoying trick of the guardian of the outpost. In their two years of trying to secure the outpost for a short-term haven for the smugglers they found they were not able to outwit or counter the measures the computer guardian took against their equipment. Since they were maintaining a low profile to passing ships, they were limited in the type of weapons they could use to secure the area. Using high explosives or sonics that might disrupt the city's life support system was simply suicide.

"Captain?" a voice inquired after a considerable lapse in time.

"My father told me something about a corridor with no doorways, it just went around. This is it! That means just above here are the laboratories and the portal! Let's go back over this corridor for any tiny crack that looks like it goes to a maintenance tunnel. They have them all over the city so I'm sure they have them here. You know the drill, find one!"

He was well aware of the time frame with the air. Having spent so much time topside, their seals were weak. A tank of four hours was lasting less than three and steadily less than that with each refurbishment.

"Sir! I found it!"

The others quickly gathered around Corporal Robert's kneeling form.

It was a faint line. As Robert leaned against the wall to change position, a faint click was heard and the crack opened into a crawl space for maintenance personnel.

"Right," the lieutenant and captain expressed together. The lieutenant shined his light through the opening. It appeared to be like any other maintenance crawl space on a ship except that it was high enough for the shorter members to walk upright. It was just like in the city and therefore, may have unpleasant surprises waiting for unauthorized personnel.

"All right, everyone, listen up!" The captain took charge immediately. "Check your air and temperature gauges."

Everyone gave the signal they were RFJ, ready for jump.

"Roberts and Bandio, forward position. JG and Smitson remain here. Let's move!" The captain followed behind Roberts, giving her and Bandio plenty of distance to let them check for the surprises. They made a complete circle and were back to the service entrance facing JG and Smitson who had drawn their weapons at their approaching lights.

"Sir, it's time to change over to the second tank."

"Right." The group climbed back into the corridor to comfortably change. While the group switched to their second tank, gratefully shedding the bulk of the empty one, the captain turned to JG.

"JG, go check with the shuttle."

Nodding she returned to the elevator to go topside. She knew he wanted a complete report from Vanster on what was going on topside and he didn't trust any of the other grunts to remember or know what was important to relay to him. She was relieved to leave the corridor. Something was causing the hairs on her arms to stand up and it was annoying not to be able to rub them. Whatever it was, it didn't register on the HRs.

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"How's the weather?" JG inquired.

"Fine, for the next two hours," Vanster replied.

The two glanced at the other crewmembers that were busily repairing parts to emptied tanks, working fast and efficient from habit, each tank marked for species differences in air mixture. Their banter reflected the competitive relationship the two had, covering any private conversation JG and Vanster might have.

"Most of the tanks are worthless now. I'm having to strip down others for replacement parts," Vanster informed her.

"I'll send up our discarded tanks," JG responded.

"Let's change yours since you're here. I can see a seam already forming at the stem. Check the others when you get back. We don't have any more stems to replace so the whole unit will have to be swapped out."

As they switched JG's equipment, Vanstar continued, "Mr. High and Mighty is upset about something. Sent word he wants to see the captain when he returns from his inspection. Said to check with his staff for his whereabouts." Both women smirked. Lord Chaney was suspicious of his partner so he kept his location a secret until his arrival.

"Sudden appearance of a windstorm over the city caught some of the search groups topside, so they were picked up and delivered to the two hovering freighters. We have a second windstorm forming over the rim. It should hit here in two days. I don't want to be a party pooper, but it looks like the same type of weather pattern from the previous year is shaping up."

They both exchanged meaningful looks and then gave each other the special Black Rose 'rally' sign. JG's decent back into the city was quiet as she mentally laid her own plans. When the elevator door opened the others were gathering around the elevator door.

"Where are the other two?" she asked worried.

"Placing a charge in the tunnel," Lieutenant Ninian answered. "Captain, why don't we wait in the elevator and give our equipment a rest?" he suggested.

The captain nodded and they crowded on the elevator to run checks on their equipment. The elevators were the only places the computer didn't threaten them. It became a standing joke that the elevators were the neutral zone. While they huddled in the elevator, JG passed on her information to the captain and lieutenant.

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Corporal Roberts, meanwhile, had found a place to wedge the charge. As she and her partner hurried back down the tunnel, they could see the exit panel closing.

"Helgas bloody moon!" Scout cursed. "Carson should be keeping that thing open!"

The two frantically pushed all around the panel area looking for something that would reopen their exit. In the city, it was to the right of the panel's top corner. They had to get out of there soon or the blast that was set with a five-minute delay would blow them out of their suits.

Angrily, Roberts slammed her gloved palm on the corner of the panel and fell through the sudden opening into the corridor. Scout scrambled over her, grabbing her wrist and hauling her to her feet. They had to get around the corner, away from the backlash. The last sound they heard was the muffled explosion. The force of the blast knocked them into the wall, leaving one stunned and the other unconscious. A green cloud of gas flamed out of the tunnel, the tendrils curling up into the air vents. The empty canisters next to the tunnel exploded.

The elevator shook from the explosions as each canister burst. The group in the small space looked at each other while activating their visors in an automatic response.

"Everyone secured?" the captain demanded.

JG tapped each helmet quickly getting thumbs up responses.

"Secured, sir!"

The lieutenant pushed the button to open the elevator door. The flameout had receded but bits of metal were strewn about the floor and a burnt object was stuck to one of the walls.

"The metal is from an air canister, sir," JG reported as she read the read-out from her HR. There was no evidence of any life forms or the remains. *This recon mission is not going well. We lost parts we*

badly need for our equipment and I'm getting no life readings. She learned over the last two years not to trust her equipment, so not seeing life readings didn't mean the two soldiers were dead.

The others also had their HRs out. No one mentioned the two missing members. They waited for the captain to give the order for them to spread out and search for what they couldn't see on their equipment.

"The charge must have hit something. Look at that green gas." The lieutenant shined his light on the ceiling. The captain stepped into the corridor. The lights in the area immediately came on. There was scattered shrapnel, and nothing else. The walls remain unaffected. Cautiously the captain walked out of sight of the others as he inspected the corridor up to where he believed the panel was located. The others hurriedly followed, careful not to step on the sharp remains of the tanks and maybe other things that they didn't want to think about.

"It's probably from the canisters," Markson quietly mentioned in his helmet to no one in particular.

"Watch your step, Spartans," the lieutenant cautioned. "You two, go on up the hall and see if you find anything." The lieutenant kept his eyes on the green gas seeping from the tunnel opening. They had seen many different shades of green gasses that the guardian released in the city but this one was new. The captain knelt in front of the service door careful not to let the gas cloud touch him. Some of the chemicals the guardian used ate through their equipment. His light revealed nothing except that the tendrils of the gas dissipating before they reached the ceiling. As the last of them curled upward, the captain stepped cautiously into the tunnel. He was too close to give up and return to the ship, and time was running out. His intuition was telling him that kid Fermin was up to no good. He felt that as sure as he felt Captain Montran was still alive...somewhere on this outpost.

Once in the tunnel, he hurried down the passage sweeping his light along the walls, ceiling and floor, looking for a mark of where the charge had been set.

"Lieutenant, there's an opening here in the ceiling." In his preoccupation with his discovery, he failed to notice the silence over the comm link.

The lieutenant decided to follow since the captain wasn't responding to his calls. He found Captain Miller attempting to move some cables in a space between the floor levels. Two of the cables were leaking something.

"Get one of the others to help."

The lieutenant watched the captain's lips move. He gathered their comms were not working. The lieutenant shook his head. Lieutenant Ninian wasn't going to leave the captain alone when they were so close to the portal.

Outside the service panel, JG realized their communicators were malfunctioning.

"It must be some kind of trick from the guardian," wrote Corporal Markson on a pad.

JG nodded. Markson was skittish about the computer. He was starting to give it mystical qualities, much to JG's contempt, which she was careful not to show. She motioned to two of the Spartans that just returned from the inspection of the corridor, to stay near the elevator and then to Markson and Bandio to check the tunnel out. Henderson remained with her at the service tunnel opening.

Markson and Bandio found the captain and lieutenant trying to push up a plate in the ceiling. Bandio squeezed in at the captain's direction and lent his own weight. The plate moved enough to show a space big enough for their fingered gloves to pass through. The captain gestured to use a charge but the lieutenant vigorously shook his head no. Markson was relieved. While the two continued to argue in gestures, Bandio leaned against the tunnel and looked back the way they came while Markson shined his light around further up the tunnel. Curious, Markson left the two arguing officers to investigate a movement. Ten steps further into the tunnel, his heart nearly stopped and a scream that only his ears heard filled his throat. His light revealed two yellow eyes before him. They blinked. He dropped his light and ran frantically back to the others. The captain and lieutenant stopped their conversation to see Markson frantically waving his arms at them and his light wildly swinging around his legs. The lieutenant caught him by the arms and tried to calm him down while the captain picked up his light and attached it to his utility belt. Both could see that he was frightened. His faceplate was forming condensation. The captain reluctantly signaled to return to the elevator so that they could hear what Markson had to say.

JG helped Markson out of the tunnel and they all retreated to the elevator. When the elevator doors sealed and their scanners read that the air was breathable, they retracted their helmets.

"What in blasting asteroids is bothering you?" Captain Miller demanded.

"Eyes! Two yellow eyes staring at me!" he gasped out, struggling to get his breathing back to normal.

The others were silent. They had not met any living species on this planet, only cyberbeings and small utility roBots. However, none of them had yellow eyes.

"I don't see any lifeform in my readings. Not even a micro," the captain started slowly. He didn't want anyone to panic when he was so close. "Check your breather mixture." It was the first thing to do when something like this happened, rule out possibilities.

"Yes, Yes," Markson mumbled. He had already done so before he entered the tunnel and they were just fine, however he looked again. The dials registered an imbalance, but that was expected since he had overtaxed the suit with his hyped up bios.

"There you go. You were hallucinating from an uneven mix. You should know the drill, Markson," the lieutenant pointed out relieved.

The others seemed okay with that explanation. They seemed to have forgotten that they all checked their gauges before entering the tunnel, Markson thought. The captain meanwhile gave the rundown of their situation to the others and the conversation turned to what to do about the jammed floor panel.

"We can't blast another hole. We don't know what's in those other hoses," the lieutenant objected to the captain's idea to use more explosives.

"Well, what have you to suggest?" the captain asked the lieutenant impatiently.

"Wedge something in there to pry it up. It feels like we just need the right leverage."

"Yes." The captain punched his gloved fist in his opened palm. "I can feel it's ready to give."

Sergeant Major JG pulled out a short metal bar from her leg pocket. It was used to open stubborn doors and such. It was also a handy weapon. "How's this?"

Both the captain and lieutenant made a grab for it.

"Well, let's go back and try." The captain looked at the lieutenant with wary eyes.

The lieutenant ignored the look and checked his gauges. The others followed suit.

"The lieutenant and I will return back up the tunnel. Markson, how are your gauges?"

"They're still off their mark, sir."

"If it doesn't clear up in a quarter stan, return topside and get new equipment. It could be a bad stem."

The captain looked at his watch. "If we're not back in an hour, JG get fresh tanks for everyone if you haven't already, and bring us replacements. Three light flashes means we're in. We won't need air once we're at the portal. We won't need air anywhere within any of the compounds. The guardian, that damn computer thing, will have to take care of us!" The captain took the guardian's defense against their illegal occupation personally. He looked around and got nods. He needed at least four people to make a claim for the possession of the Portal.

"Gear up then."

Everyone reactivated their helmets and waited for the doors to open. The light read green for the hallway but they ignored it. Markson's helmet still had condensation around the edges which was enough to convince the others that his suit was still malfunctioning.

As the door opened, the others didn't move. A light powder had settled onto the ground and there was an unmistakable smudged trail leading from the elevator to around the corner.

"It's us!" the captain suddenly announced relieved. The others heard it on their communicators.

"Those are our footprints," he repeated.

"The comms are working, Captain," Markson announced relieved.

"Let's go," the captain ordered impatiently.

Markson and Guilfo kept watch on the elevator and corridor, while Henderson, Bandio and JG followed the tracks back to the service tunnel, just behind the officers. The captain and lieutenant reentered the tunnel with Henderson, and left Bandio and JG to guard the tunnel entrance.

"I almost thought Markson's friend with the eyes was here," Bandio admitted to the sergeant major when the officers were well on their way into the tunnel. Dark unreadable eyes turned his way and Bandio held his breath. She merely nodded. The facemask didn't lessen the intensity of the stare and Bandio found himself nervously shifting his shoulders.

Markson's voice, sounding far away, interrupted the silence.

"Go see what he wants, Corporal. If he goes topside, stay with Guilfo."

Gratefully he nodded and shuffled off. The sergeant major gave him the chills, not that he didn't value her as a soldier. She was good and she made a point of getting her group out of combat situations and sometimes bar situations with minimal damage, unless she was irritated with you because you were the

cause of a stupid mistake. Then, she may save you but after her pummeling you, you thought twice about doing something stupid again. Personally, she was unreadable and too mysterious for him.



As the captain and lieutenant made their way into the service tunnel, they found that the hoses and partially opened ceiling were repaired and back in place.

"Can you hear me?" the captain asked the lieutenant

"Yes, I can."

"It's the maintenance bots. That's what Markson saw. With all of us in its small space, it probably went back into its cubbyhole to wait until we left. It's a wonder the explosion hasn't left any marks or life support breeches."

"Uh huh," the lieutenant agreed. "That green stuff is gone too." Yet neither man deactivated their helmets.

Three lights shined on the area where they had surveyed earlier. They once more wrestled it back open to a crack. They could slide the pry bar between the plate and the floor above them.

In the main corridor, unseen by any of the group, a panel opened and three small robots came out to clean up the dust and debris, sweeping away any trace of their presence.

"Bandio, come in." JG had her back against the wall where she could look into the tunnel and down the corridor. *Probably gossiping with Guilfo and using up air. Idiots. Now would be a good time for my snitch to send another message. Though, it may be rather difficult since this is on the other side of the planet.*



Markson nodded to Bandio who was coming to relieve him since he requested a release to get his equipment replaced. His faceplate was too fogged up to see now. Bandio's appearance was a relief for Guilfo. He was getting jumpy about the place and didn't want to be standing alone when Markson went topside.

While Markson took the elevator up, the two guards moved up the corridor in the usual patrol sweep.

Markson had no problems on his lift back up to the surface. The canisters were lying nearby with a note attached saying Corporal Clovus called Sergeant Vanster back to the ship.

"Runt to pack leader, come in," he called after dialing into the link Sergeant Vanster left.

"Pack leader, runt. How's the search?" Clovus replied tartly.

"Well, you're no pack leader," Markson snorted back.

"I've got it, Clovus. Go help out," Vanster's voice was heard nearby. "What's happening?"

"Markson here, Sarg. Search is still going on. My suit's damaged and I was ordered up for a spare."

"Ditto. Secured here, Markson. Clovus has been sniffing around *Spinners* systems wondering how the present we left was doing. Seems someone cleaned up the place and reinstated safeties."

"Bloody moon! I'll let the captain know when I see him. I thought we had them good!"

"It's not a bad thing. It made it easier to find goodies they're transporting for their next stop...some smuggler's base near Rhion. Brand new state of the art AEGs. Enough for us plus spares. Sure would bring a bundle on the underground market...Tell the captain, they look like they've been tested but not under live conditions. I'll bring them back with me. We can use replacements."

"Wow! I'll tell him. Not too bad working around the suck heads!" he laughed and thought about all the stuff he was able to steal or buy cheap from the smugglers that he would usually not see or even be able to afford on his pay going through normal channels.

"It's stolen goods no matter how we've acquired them," snorted the sergeant. But he knew she wasn't serious, because he had seen her buy something from a smuggler once. "Should be back within an hour if not sooner. Out."

"Check that. Out." Checking his timepiece he marked the time. On the elevator, he replaced his own air canister. By the time he reached his destination most of his helmet was cleared. He wondered what the new AEGs looked like. He also wondered how they were going to show up in them if they were

contraband and not even on the market yet. Maybe they would wear their old one's out to this side of the planet and change into the better ones. What a lot of trouble.

When the elevator doors opened, the hall lights were off. Thinking Bandio and Guilfo were still looking around Markson hesitated. He shined his light around the hall, not seeing any debris left by the explosion. Cautiously, he stepped out and the lights came on. The entire corridor was clean as if they had not been there. For a moment, he worried that he was on the wrong floor but the device that the sergeant major left was on the outside door. He decided against moving the canisters into the corridor in case there was another explosion.

"Sergeant Major, come in?" There was no return signal indicating an open receiver. He walked toward the panel but found no one. Returning to the elevator door, he again looked at the homing device, and touched it to reassure himself. He was on the right floor, so where was everyone? He stepped back into the elevator and decided to wait inside with the canisters.



JG saw a signal flashing. She signaled back and hurried to the elevator. The light indicated it wasn't available. Markson was probably topside getting fresh canisters and the two guards she had posted were probably doing a routine inspection up the corridor. One of them should have remained within sight of the elevator door. Irritated she glanced at her gauges...more than half full. That meant the captain and lieutenant must be near reserve. She hurried back to the service door expecting to see Guilfo and Bandio coming from the opposite direction. There was no one.

"Guilfo and Bandio, report!" she called over her comm impatiently.

Nothing. Not even a return signal, meaning their commutation was again shut down by the guardian.

"Bloody moon," she muttered as she changed channels. "Captain, this is Sergeant Major JG, come in." No voice response and no return signal.

"Blast." She headed back to the maintenance panel and climbed into the tunnel to chase the two COs down and see what they were up to. *I Got to be a damned babysitter for those two too. That's all a sergeant major is, JG, a babysitter. Gutless Henderson would rather die than say anything to the officers to check their tanks. Damn grunt!*

She found the two officers, with one pulling on the short jack that was wedged between the ceiling and a trapdoor. Her communication light went green.

"Where's Henderson, sirs?" she asked shinning her light down both ends of the service tunnel.

"Went to look for the bot," the lieutenant grunted while pulling on the bar.

"How's your air?"

The two quickly looked at their gauges.

"Blasters! I'm on reserve," the captain replied.

The lieutenant nodded that he was also. "Let's go back and get a fresh supply," he wisely suggested.

"If we leave it, the bot will come by and close the panel again."

"Sir, I think you're going in the wrong direction," JG commented as she looked at the panel. "The one room we accessed through a floor panel in the city tucked itself down under the floor space."

"What? When was this? Why was I not informed?"

"It was in a report Sergeant Vanster had prepared. She and Corporal Roberts went to the east side..."

"Yes, yes. I remember the scenario. I just don't remember reading her report," he testily replied.

"We departed after they got back," the lieutenant remembered.

The captain and lieutenant each tried to move the panel back down.

"We can go back and get new tanks, let the bot fix this like it did last time and then come back and start with a new plan of attack," the lieutenant suggested.

"Do you remember how she opened the panel?" the captain asked, reluctant to leave what he considered was close to a problem being solved.

"Yes. She said there was a switch boot level."

They all started to flash their lights around the floor.

"Hey! Look, right here. It's a push plate."

The captain pushed the plate but only the ceiling panel closed and opened. The floor panel to the room above them was jammed.

"Mac, I'm going to get my tank replaced," the lieutenant told him firmly and started back up the corridor.

The captain stared at the plate for a few moments longer, and then turned and followed the lieutenant. JG still had plenty of air so she remained a while longer hoping to see the bot and Henderson. A noise behind her had her spinning around with her weapon pulled out ready to fire. Before her was Markson's blinking yellow eyes. The bot had a yellow warning light blinking as it pulled the floor panel back into place. The bot then moved to its next job, tucking the hoses back into their space. With the above floor panel shut and the hoses back in place, the ceiling panel closed and the bot's blinking light stopped flashing. The bot reversed its direction and moved back down the tunnel. JG moved to the ceiling panel to mark it so they would be able to find it again.

All right, now let's go see what the others are up to.

Jogging down the service tunnel, she shined her light looking for the exit. There was no opening anywhere.

Went too far. The panel closed.

Shining her light on her gauges she studied the readings.

Losing too much air!

This time as she moved down the corridor she looked more carefully for the opening but still was unable to locate it. As she leaned against the wall, she could hear her suit laboring too hard.

Got to get to the upper room. The sensor reads it has good air. I sure hope it's not another one of the guardian's tricks.

She trotted back down the tunnel not hearing her feet as they thudded in the dark passageway, but she could hear her heart. She concentrated on finding her marker.

All right, let's see if this thing works.

The plate panel easily moved as she pushed it with her boot and two panels above her opened. The energy field that surrounded her was like the ones they encountered in the city. An air bubble enveloped whoever was within its area to prevent contamination of one level of space with another.

Idiots. If they had opened it right, they would have reached their goal by now.

Still, she left her helmet on. Vanster had said there was a switch for stairs next to the floor panel. After pushing the lever, she cautiously climbed the stairs. Peering into the darkened room, she fell forward as a painful cramp in her lungs told her she was at the bottom of her tank. She clutched her chest. She was going to have to trust her HR reading. Her eyes blurred and she rolled on her back, dragging her arm up to release her helmet before she passed out.

A shadow in the corner of the room detached itself and before the fresh air could revive her, an appendage reached down, and put a small patch on her neck.

"Sweet and rest filled dreams," Charles soft voice told her.



Lieutenant Ninian had gone past the place where the panel was supposed to be opened. He was good with spacing and he knew he had passed it.

"Ninian, where's the panel?" the captain asked irritated.

"I don't know. It's back this way though. We didn't come this far, I'm sure of that."

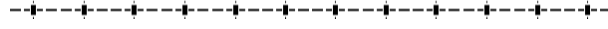
The captain started to cough. Checking his suits regulator, he tapped the low reading gadget from habit. He was at the bottom of his tank.

Rather than waste air on talking, the captain gestured to the lieutenant. Both carefully examined the wall for the opening.

Damn dickhead, the lieutenant thought irritably, if he left when we should have this would not be happening!

The captain collapsed against the wall where the lieutenant's light showed a crack. As he pushed against the panel, he too started to sink to his knees. Holding his breath, he pushed the panel open and climbed out. He pulled the captain's unconscious form out of the tunnel and left him near the panel. He thought he could make it back to the elevator but only staggered a cubit before he too slumped to the ground unconscious.

Bots rolled out of the walls and deactivated the helmets. They placed patches on their necks and the unconscious forms were dragged through a large door that appeared on the opposite wall. The bodies were then dragged into separate cells and stripped of their clothing. As luck would have it, the floor they were invading was used to incarcerate unruly residents.



Chapter 7

Alexandra felt a cool breeze on her face as she watched the birds on AltaLA glide effortlessly in the stiff breeze. Occasionally one would dive into the water and reappear yards from its entrance. It would then bob on the water while it ate its catch. Sometimes a companion would swoop close and try to grab some of its meal. Some were successful and a chase would ensue. Their swoops and angles that followed were exciting to watch for they had a large wingspan that created a draft and noise when they passed. The birds had no fear of spectators and would fly close as they tried to get their pursuer off their tail. Drops of water would slide off their naturally oily wings, wetting their spectators as they flew by.

Five-year-old Alexandra spread her arms, mimicking the gliding movements of the birds, as the excitement of the chase ran through her small frame. She felt the wind as it pressed against her feathers and the slight movement of her wing tips that changed the dramatic plunges into effortless glides. The joy of each bird she touched, whether the chaser or chased, sent shivers of exhilaration through her. It was a game for all of them. The birds, referred to as the DeeNaJa, were not given to violence or outbursts of anger. The DeeNaJa were the willing partners of the Monks of Hela in teaching unskilled empaths how to use and develop their gift.

Alexandra Harriet Montran, adopted daughter and third child to the High Lord and Lady of the Sacred Isle of Lelore on AltaLA, was in training for her second year at the monastery. Her mind touched the young bird thief who, like herself, was but a child. Kela continued her swoops for she was used to Alexandra. The child came often and joined Kela in her playful antics as she teased her serious father. He was fishing for his new hatchlings. Soon she would also be ready to bear eggs for her own nestlings while her spouse provided food for her and their young. But now she enjoyed her freedom. Alexandra didn't feel her older cousin/brother's protective arm around her waist as she leaned into the stiff wind ready to take off and follow her telepathic connection.

Lieutenant Montran became aware of someone demanding her attention. Reluctantly she refocused on the schematics on the multilevels of the city and location. Tedious. Her thoughts turned to AltaLA and her last visit.

She was on her way to start her first year at the nearest space academy, just two days before her eighteenth birthday. When Kela had died of old age, Alexandra was fourteen years old. The DeeNaja lived less than ten stan years, and the loss of her friend and mentor was unbearable to Alexandra. She closed a door to her telepathic and empathic side and refused to use her student name, leaving behind the monastery and its teachings.

Harriet turned to face the stiff wind and watched another young bird play the same game young Kela had played with her father. She felt the piercing pain resurface. Harriet cried again. She wanted to enjoy the play of the DeeNaJa without feeling the loss. She needed to take something positive away with her when she left her beloved LeLore Isles to join the AltaCom Academy for officer training. There may never be a return trip to AltaLa.

Lady Harriet, soon to be Cadet Lady Montran, went to the rock where Kela had waited for a predator to find an easy meal. To honor Kela's memory, she relived the silent vigil of her death, seeing again the predator pounce on Kela's seated form, shredding and mangling her body. Harriet picked up her flute and played a song in Kela's memory. She had thought her throat would be too tight to play, but she surprised herself. The music soothed her, echoing eerily and drawing the attention of some of the large birds. A profound sense of peace settled on her, something she had not experienced for a long time. After the last of the notes died away, she carefully packed her flute. Lifting her head, she paused and listened to the wind. It sounded as if Kela's voice caressed her in the breeze. Alexandra. She had not been called by that name since she left the monastery.

Lieutenant Montran's thoughts moved to another level of consciousness. A message kept reminding her to pay attention, which she finally yielded to. Faces to personnel files flashed through her mind. Some of the Spartan soldiers were recognizable, but from where? The information didn't match her memory.

Later.

The images moved on to Lord Chaney, Sheila, and Captain Miller. She recognized Sheila's face in the faces the computer had flashed before on metradames. One face out of the many. Then there was Captain Miller. Where had she read about him?

Later.

Gradually the images and information slowed down, and then there was only the silence...and the scent of Rotilla.

Sharon's favorite tea.

Lieutenant Montran's eyes fluttered open to see colorful Charles standing before her, holding a steaming cup of tea and a plate with something on it.

"Did you have a nice nap, Lieutenant?" He handed her the tea and a sandwich, not releasing either until she had a firm grip on them.

"Yes, thanks," she whispered. Mentally and emotionally weary, the lieutenant took the cup and nourishment.

"It's the equivalent of Rotilla," Guardian informed her as she breathed in the steamy vapors before sipping. "It's from our own garden so it may not have the same taste you are familiar with."

"Hm, it tastes good," Lieutenant Montran murmured. Its effect was immediate. It cleared her thoughts. She looked in the cup suspiciously and sniffed it. It smelled just as she remembered Rotilla smelled.

I wonder why Guardian would have gardens when he is...ah, of course, his associate, Maud. Hm. This is a Master Eaton lesson, no less. He had said the surefire way of getting in sync with a planet was to ingest foods grown in its soil. But I don't plan on staying here long enough to get in sync with this place, she reminded herself.

Lieutenant Montran's eyes tried to focus on the screens that showed groups of soldiers and civilians in a 'hurry up and wait' mode as if an alarm had sounded. The familiar sensation of her memories overlapping with the information gave her a unique sensory view of reality, making past, present and future absent. She knew the people on the screens intimately, but then again, not.

"So, what's happening?" Lieutenant Montran sat up straighter, attempting to get her blood to move faster.

"The message I sent to your admiral has a retuned response of 'Geomatria'. Lieutenant Montran, can you explain to me that phrase? I have not been able to locate it in any of my searches."

Lieutenant Montran chuckled, feeling relieved. "It's a word we use that combines, 'Good to hear you're fine' and 'hang on, the troops are on their way.' It could mean also, to 'tough it out because we're kind of busy here'."

"A bit confusing if the receiver is depending on a clear message. Well, let's hope it's the first. Time for the broadcast is near...and the windstorm above their city is winding down. Lord Chaney is attending a meeting aboard his ship to take out one of his smuggler partners." He laughed shortly. "This situation in the city is like a plump, soft vegetable in a pressure cooker. To further heat up the action, Maud has created some trouble. While their inhabitants were topside searching for your whereabouts she was able to remove a few more of the captives."

Lieutenant Montran sat forward. "We won't get that opportunity again. Chances are the Black Rose will be dispersed throughout the city to keep an eye on any more surprise visits. You said Lord Chaney...has programmed a metradame as a bodyguard."

"You find this hard to believe."

"I was wondering what her skill level is." The image of a seductive bodyguard appeared before her mind's eye and she had to struggle not to grin. The idea of taking from Lord Chaney something that would cause him a great deal of inconvenience had a strong appeal. She leaned back in her chair, flashing with impatience on her inconsistent feelings about this operation. One moment cautious and not really sure about jumping into the fire and the next looking at it with anticipation. Shaking her head with annoyance, she focused on the metradame, an unknown. The only information she had about metradames were sexual images from the advertisements. For a moment, she frowned as she remembered Sharon's anger when she found her reading the advertisement. *No, that was a dream, Lieutenant. They don't have metradames in Collective space.*

"I see you know Dr. Sharon Teal." Guardian picked up the vivid image of her previous lover. "She is one of the few metradames that has been able to override her program."

Lieutenant Montran's hand stopped in mid motion of bringing the sandwich to her mouth. A long quiet moment passed before her brain kicked back into gear.

Sharon...a metradame? "You have the wrong Sharon Teal. The one I know is a respected scientist and she isn't in Committee territories. Metratoys haven't caught on with the populace in Collective space. Not even the brothels on spaceports have them. They are considered too life-like. The company that attempted to sell them didn't do their homework on the attitude of the planets in Collective space." She nervously babbled. She knew she was babbling but couldn't stop herself. "They had made the mistake of

extolling the life-like bots as ideal for assisting the young and people with sexual hang-ups as training tools. Collective planets use the Monks of Hela or members of Aphrodite's House to address personal and intimate problems," she finished, feeling more anxious than she thought she should be. Did that mean she felt there was some truth in what he said. *NO!*

Guardian flashed images on the screen of a young woman recreated with an older woman's face, looking just like Sharon.

"No!" she shouted loudly, in disbelief. Then softer, "I don't believe it. How would you have tapes on something like that?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Security recordings at the metralab. My disclosing this information is to impress upon you that metrapeople are real people programmed with someone else's agenda."

"Sharon was real. Is real! She's not...one of those!"

"They are all real, as you call it. And that, Lieutenant Harriet Montran, you must remember when you meet up with Sheila, Lord Chaney's bodyguard."

"What?" Lieutenant Montran tried to refocus on Guardian's words. "What are you getting at? Oh!" she opened her eyes wide suddenly. "You're afraid I will kill her if we get into some sort of skirmish." Her insides were shaking and she was confused. Was it from the accusations about Sharon, or his feelings that she would blast away any life that got in her way?

"No. I want you to **know** that metrapeople are living, viable, though imprisoned, beings. I have faith in the effectiveness of your retraining in the Collective's methods."

"How do you know so much about me and Sharon...and what's going on outside of Merkers Outpost? Naboths Vine isn't in the habit of letting every member into the nuts and bolts of things."

"I'm a scientist in a computer. I gather information, extrapolate what I need for the moment, storing the rest, and experimenting to prove out what I've surmised from my stats. It's like a hobby, if nothing more than something to do to relieve boredom."

Lieutenant Montran's attention went back to the screens, watching the 'enemy' as they went about their lives. *Until I get into a heated fight where instincts take over...we'll all be wondering if all the retraining has worked. But, it's not something I want to be obsessed with or I'll be distracted in doing my job. The real problem here is that my back up consists of one civilian, so whatever I do it's going to have to be low profile stuff, just enough to keep them off-balance. Am I ready? Of course I'm ready! So...the next question here is...what can I do to effectively keep their attention on my annoying antics and away from Maud? And I'm not going to forget they shoot first and ask questions later. I sure hope Admiral JoCastao sends help soon. I wonder how she's going to get around the rules of engagement and glide into Committee space...oh, that's right, Merkers Outpost is neutral.* Lieutenant Montran smiled. *I think I'll let the big brass figure out the politics of getting a ship here because I know Admiral JoCastao is going to want to personally get these smugglers. They've been a thorn in her claw for a while now.* Lieutenant Montran nodded to herself. If the scuttlebutt was true, the admiral would have her special forces here, the Tanjmi. So, whatever she did it would have to be for short term only and she had better not get caught.

"Lord Chaney had Sheila trained at one of the best bodyguard schools, Bodshiva Avante Guard. However, I understand in your new job in Collective space, you have been trained by one of their ex-instructors, Ewep De."

Lieutenant Montran looked startled at this bit of news. "Yes? I...I don't believe anyone of the students knew that about him, at least not in my student track." She frowned for a moment remembering how a lot of the young officers grumbled at having to take the class, thinking his class in 'Awareness' was superfluous. The professor taught on two levels and if you were not aware, which was the whole idea of bodyguarding, then the class would be boring.

"It was a difficult class to pass, but it was interesting." *A lot of good it did me when I let those jerks remove me from the shuttle.* She paused a moment, remembering that everything had a purpose. Lieutenant Montran handed her empty cup to Charles.

"Everything has more than one weakness." Lieutenant Montran said that more to remind herself that she had faced adversaries that were better armed than her and she had managed to triumphed if not at least survive. However, that was a long time ago, she prudently pointed out, and right now, just the sheer numbers nullified her edge of having more experience in this case.

"You have the advantage of using the most advanced technology devised for this planet. Of course, there is nothing I have that is lethal," he mentioned. "Any weapon I give you to use will only knock them out for a while or put them to sleep for as long as the patch remains on them, which means they may come back for another foray."

It certainly will make me run faster once I knock someone down and steal his or her weapons so I don't get shot in the back. So, why his interest in how I combat the metradame? Does he want me to capture her and bring her here? Why can't Maud do it? *"Do you know the odds of my being able to keep them harried or occupied with other things before they take me out?" she asked, suddenly wondering if she really was being a bit too daring for her own good.*

"As long as you are on this planet you shall not become anything less than what you are." Guardian's voice was firm. "Believe me when I say there are a lot of places to play hide and seek in the city that they know nothing of, nor will be able to take advantage of. Maud has been doing it for two years and she has no military training," he reminded her. "I would wait for reinforcements, but players once on the fringes have suddenly taken an interest in what goes on here. The captives must be removed from the equation as quickly as possible and the intruders prevented from encroaching any further. Charles, can you get the lieutenant her new environmental suit and communicator? This equipment is from our lab, suited for this planet," Guardian continued as Charles handed the lieutenant her communicator. It consisted of two patches smaller than the tip of her finger. One was placed on the bone behind her left ear and the other on her throat.

"It can only be heard by someone with my equipment," Guardian explained.

The environmental suit was dull brown. Once sealed at the neck, the suit laid on her clothing as if it were part of it. When she activated the helmet her bioreadings flashed under her left cheek on the visor. As she moved her head, she noted that four new screens came up on the wall.

"As the screens are showing," Guardian explained proudly, "the suit gives a panoramic view around you, what you are seeing, as well as your bios. If *you* want to know what is appearing behind you, the small viewer to your lower left can be activated by asking for a view...left, right, fore and hind. For vitals...ask for vitals. For a reading on someone near you, simply hold your palm out toward the subject for a few moments or give the direction and distance, and ask for a reading. This suit was originally designed for monitoring my researchers. For the last two years I've been modifying the suit for other defensive needs. For example, it imitates the texture of what it leans against. When you have more time, you can study the extras, however, know that that particular ability is not something to be used lightly." Lieutenant Montran looked up at the hologram surprised. "You mean...I would disappear?" To prove this she leaned against the wall and looked at her hands. Nothing changed. She glanced at the screens and found she wasn't visible...except for one. She stood away from the wall and her form reappeared on the monitors.

"Now this is something to play with," she grinned at Guardian. "But, you're right. It's too valuable a tool to give away its existence."

"Yes. I am glad you see it that way. Maud has been using it to a great advantage. To deactivate it simply say 'blend off' and to reactivate it 'blend on'. I had thought of other words to use, however Maud had pointed out to me that the simpler the better. The suit will protect you from most explosions, heat, and some weapons fire."

Charles handed her an odd sidearm that fit snugly into her palm.

"This weapon," he continued, "is adapted for this planet's atmosphere and will only work for you. It doesn't kill nor does it give pain. It renders the person unconscious or if you want them conscious but noncombative change to the other color you see there on the bore. Now you are ready. Charles will show you to the lower level where the tube will take you to Century City. Maud will be at the other end. The trip takes about one stan hour, traveling at a very high rate of speed, so don't try to step out or slow it down. By the time you reach your destination, the subliminal information should be starting to surface to your awareness."

Charles was already out the door. At the doorway, Lieutenant Montran turned back to Guardian. The room behind her was already darkened.

"Good bye and good luck, Alexandra," Guardian's warm voice spoke.

Alexandra?

Lieutenant Montran turned to hurry after Charles. How did he know her by that name? She had left it with all that went with it when she was still a young girl. Ah, she must have thought of it while hooked up to Guardian... She will not fall asleep in Guardian's chair again, or for that matter, sit. No telling what information he was gathering from her for his games.

Charles was waiting at the familiar elevator with the polo players, only now they were in another pose, and still hard at play. The door slid open as Lieutenant Montran approached.

"Charles, why didn't this door open when you were in front of it?"

"Perhaps a minor glitch in the system. I will leave you here and wish you well in your journey and job." With that, Charles wheeled around and disappeared back down the darkened corridor.

As she suspected on her arrival, the elevator had more than one exit. Instead of directly behind her, it opened to the side. The room she was delivered to appeared to be a small waiting room with comfortable couches against the walls, and chairs around small tables. Tempted, she slapped one of the chairs to see if there was any dust. No dust, dirt or signs of wear.

Well the retailer's industry will be very disgruntled with the upkeep here...but then again...I don't recall if Guardian said how old this place was, and there is no one to wear it down...except in Century City. The thought of her going there gave an extra lift to her steps. She had not been on any missions for the last seven years that were not contrived. Though simulators seemed very real, a part of her knew otherwise.

She continued on to another entrance with a rail car Icon on the door. Though the interior was dark, the view from the helmet revealed a typical transportation station. Lights in the floor flashed in the direction she was intended to go. Further help came from a soft light on the inside of her transportation vehicle. The door invitingly opened. Two seats on each side were facing each other with plenty of legroom, which would make any copac with his or her four legs comfortable. Montran sank into a comfortable seat. The moment she settled a cushioned restraint slowly descended, securing her from movement in any direction.

"I'm lucky I'm not claustrophobic," she muttered.

"It is a very fast ride with a sudden stop, which needs the padded restraints. I don't want my passengers peeling bits of themselves from the interior," Guardian's voice cautioned her. "I will be in touch with you at all times, so if you need anything...I'm just a whisper away." Numbers changed on her visor next to her left cheek showing her bios as they escalated with the pressure from the build-up of speed from the car.

While the small car sped to its destination, the lieutenant closed her eyes and reviewed her plans to escape the sense of confinement. It was a familiar routine from another life. In her present job as a flagship officer in training with the Centurion Corps, she served as an advisor for military operations. Situated far from the heat of battle, she watched plans unfold and determined alternate strategies on the fly. She was curious why an agent for the Collective Centurion Corps sought her out to sign her up in their neck of space before she was even released from rehab. The day she was rescued from enemy hands on Zed4Z44, where her troop was wiped out, she began the process of resigning her commission with the Spartans on the grounds of treason within her command staff, the Central Command. It didn't take long for her to get her release and an unofficial apology. For some obtuse reason, perhaps a mixture of guilt that she didn't finish her four-year contract and a feeling of loss that she would no longer be in a military atmosphere where she found some comfort in its rules, she accepted the offer to join the Centurions and retrain as a flight officer. That alone was a relief because she knew she would not be able to go back to infantry.

The Central Command of Committee space used drugs and deep subliminal training tapes on their Spartan soldiers to ensure that under most conditions, the mission would be primary. It was a practice the Centurion Corps abhorred as not only invasive but difficult to deprogram when a mission was over. Even now, Montran could feel her adrenalin flowing with the excitement of a drop into enemy territory. Yet she noticed she didn't have the intense will to survive, to beat the odds, that the drugs and induction gave to each soldier. It gave a false sense of invincibility. A sergeant or lieutenant had to keep a close watch on themselves and their team to not take unnecessary risks. She, like the others, was indoctrinated to accept this as part of a mission.

Lieutenant Montran pursed her lips at the disagreeable memory, then moved on to the immediate. *I can't shut down the smugglers here, but like Guardian, I can make their lives miserable. Two sticks stirring the bottom of this pond should make it pretty messy on the surface. Maybe...if they get a reading of me somewhere on the surface...I wonder if there's a real miserable place around here. Surely the entire surface of this planet isn't flat. Climbing would really wear down the small parts on the suits.* Lieutenant Montran started to chuckle.

"I see you are already beginning to enjoy the adventure." Guardian's soft voice startled the lieutenant.

"I was just thinking of a small annoyance for your unwanted visitors. Are there any slopes or terrain that would overtax their AEG's?"

"Yes. There is a place the Spartans refer to as the Southern Rim. The Black Rose have been scouting and mapping that area for almost a stan year and have only half of the area covered."

"Do you have a city there?"

"A lot of their scouting is exploratory. It can be rather boring with nothing to do and it's quite a climbing challenge."

"I think a sighting of their missing quarry over that way would give them a new burst of excitement."

"It would. I will send out a signal that was set on your AEG from one of my transponders."

"Sounds like the beginnings of a good old fashion snipe hunt." Lieutenant Montran closed her eyes and considered other possibilities to divide the groups.

"Guardian?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Montran."

"Why did you call me Alexandra?"

"I am most sorry to have taken it upon myself to address you with such familiarity without asking."

"It's a name that I don't use anymore."

"My apologies, I didn't mean to pry."

There was a space of silence, which Lieutenant Montran could have sworn she could hear the Copoc turning this over in his mind. Why? And then she thought of the idiocy of imagining she could know what a computer was thinking. *Gawds!*

"It is a rather strong name. Perhaps in the near future you shall feel comfortable using it again."

"Maybe." Another thing trying to drag her back to her past. She was going to remember not to sit in any more Com-C chairs. Taking a deep breath and releasing it, she concentrated on the present problem with more resolve.

The Black Rose...I would never have thought they would throw in with smugglers, regardless that Lord Chaney is their sponsor. They've had some pretty memorable skirmishes with smugglers leaving a lot of bad feelings on both sides...or, seven years ago they had. What's happened that the two put aside their hostilities? Or, were they only eliminating rivals of this group? Well, for whatever reasons, I'm going to have to escalate bad feelings between. Then there is the unknown element, the metradame. If she's trained with the Bodshiva group, she's going to be very dangerous. So, I'll just keep my distance from Lord Chaney...hm. Oh, Lieut. There you go again. You are going to get in trouble if you think about kidnapping her just to tweak Lord Chaney. Think of something else.

Well, it's going to be interesting to see just what my worth is under fire and just where my skill level is, so, this is my proving ground. A one-woman assault team? No. A one-woman pot stirrer. Yes. I like that description better. With no real weapon to use, assaulting is not in my vocabulary.

The other Spartans she would worry about as she met them. She had retrained many grunts in her two years as a Spartan CO. She could read people better than most, gauging their value. Her combat skills were pretty broad too. Lieutenant Commander Hayes, her immediate superior in the Centurions made sure she kept up her infantry skills, probably to see how much of her Spartan impulse training was intact. She shifted uneasily in her seat. Closing her eyes, her thoughts wandered.

Sharon, a metradame? What did she read in her? Nothing. There wasn't thing I picked up from her that was dangerous. A safe harbor? Maybe. I was looking for peace of mind. Sharon was absent of violence. She was ordinary and ...safe. Is that what a metradame does...make one feel safe? What did the advertisement say? Could Guardian be right? Is she a metradame? No. I...don't want to believe it.

Uncomfortable, she returned her attention to her duty...something she felt more competent to handle. The lieutenant reviewed scenarios, but without the schematics of the city, they seemed useless.

"I wish I had a map," she muttered.

"I have just completed downloading the information into your taxi's map service; however, you have reached your destination," Guardian informed her.

"I thought from one computer to another down-loading would be relatively fast and easy."

The sudden deceleration pressed her into the restraints. On the lower left of her helmet numbers appeared, registering her bios.

Now, that is real convenient to have within sight.

"Normally speaking the download would have been instantaneous, but the car is newly reacquired. It was running on bare operational services in case the Spartans or smugglers appropriated it for their use. It takes awhile for it to update when its in use."

"You mean, something like not being able to talk and eat simultaneously," she laughed. "This helmet will be a best seller. Much better to have the information in the visor."

"How's the suit doing?"

"I'm still assessing," she returned wryly. "I am getting some of the subliminal stuff on just what it can do. Some of this stuff is...ooofffff."

The final stop was sudden. It brought to mind many drops in her Spartan days. Seven years ago standard issued equipment wasn't so forgiving on its wearer. The disadvantage was that it left some of her squad staggering out of their seats making them easy sniper targets. Montran recalled she constantly pushed her new recruits to get in as many of those rough rides on their off hours so they could teach their body to adjust quicker.

The door to her cab swung open. Leaning back into the seat, the harness rose. Lieutenant Montran looked out the door to see a pair of feet booted in the same equipment as she was. Leaning out, she looked up at her welcoming party of one. Maud nodded her helmeted head, as if to encourage her to step out.

"Lieutenant Harriet Montran, welcome to Century City. Are you going to sit in there for long?" The voice sounded familiar to her ears.

"This area is not secured from Spartan or smuggler patrols," Maud explained as she stepped back and turned toward the opened service panel.

The way Maud carried herself was also familiar. Where could they have met? Lieutenant Montran started to follow Maud when a sound from behind made her turn. Her transportation disappeared into the darkness.

"It will wait out of sight in a side area. When you are finished here, you can summon it and it will take you back to the Lair." Maud waved her into the service tunnel.

"The Lair?" Lieutenant Montran asked as she stepped before Maud into the tunnel.

"It is what Guardian calls his place of residence."

"Do I know you from somewhere?" the lieutenant asked suddenly.

"Why do you ask?" Maud asked over her shoulder while securing the panel behind them.

"You seem familiar."

Maud turned back toward the lieutenant. Lieutenant Montran's helmet gave her a different vision in the dark. She could see trace elements and energy from living forms but little color, except when some gave off bright flares. Height wise, the tunnel was high enough for them to walk up right, but not wide enough for two people to walk side by side so when Maud stepped past the lieutenant they were helmet to helmet. Lieutenant Montran's breath caught as she gazed into the helmet and saw a shadowed version of herself.

"Is there something wrong?" Guardian's voice came through her intercom. Lieutenant Montran imagined her bios were going off the scale.

Montran gripped Maud's wrist holding her immobile as she removed her light from her utility belt and shined it into the mask. The faceplate darkened as it blocked the light from Maud's eyes. The lieutenant moved it to the side of the helmet.

"We do look alike. Is that what you are looking for? Similarities?" her own voice asked.

"You...your voice."

"I was remolded to look like you," Maud admitted simply.

"Why?" Lieutenant Montran asked aghast.

"I had promised Lord DeMonte that I would do all I could to protect you," Guardian's voice answered her.

Of course! Political intrigue all over again. You should have figured that out the moment they pulled you off that shuttle, Lieutenant. You're always going to be someone's pawn!

"You are too important to lose and too important not to use," Guardian explained. "Besides, you would not have remained uninvolved. Providing another image of you seemed a good way to confuse your adversaries."

"Yes, but...what if she is wasted because they think she's me?"

"It is a chance Maud has agreed to take," Guardian responded.

"You? You agreed to put your life in danger for me? I don't know you and you don't know me," Lieutenant Montran paused upset. "I don't think that was a good idea." She had experienced enough nightmares of guilt to know the makings of another. People in Committee space seemed to think nothing of involving themselves in other people's business without asking or thinking it as unwelcomed, she thought with aggravation.

"I am in danger for as long as Guardian's unwelcomed visitors are on this station. It doesn't matter whether I look like you or anyone else. I couldn't go back to looking like I was before, then they would know that I wasn't disposed of as I should have been and someone very valuable would be in danger," Maud told her.

Lieutenant Montran was still close to Maud as she peered in the darkened helmet seeing the all too familiar determined look. She even had her expressions down. She released her hold on Maud's wrist. "You're exactly like me?" she asked hesitant.

"No, not totally," Maud smiled. "That would be an impossibility, hm?"

"Oh," the lieutenant returned softly. She was feeling over scanned.

"We must move on, Lieutenant." Maud turned and started quickly up the passageway.

As they were moving along the dark maintenance passage, parts of the schematic on the passageway surfaced in Lieutenant Montran's consciousness, giving her a sense of familiarity. Years of experience taught her not to force the subliminals but think about something related and the rest of the image would come into focus.

Maud stopped at one point and accessed a ladder. An energy envelope engulfed them.

"We're entering into the first level of living quarters. The energy you feel surrounding you is sealing the air so that a breach doesn't occur and endanger any lives on either level," Maud softly explained as she climbed up into the next level.

When the lieutenant joined her Maud held up a hand to remain quiet.

"...another time," an excited voice came to her ears through the walls.

"I don't give a wild hornet's nest about what happened! I want, right now, the first group set up! We will worry about the rest of the problems after the broadcast!" an angry voice overrode the other.

"Yes, sir, but this may be important!"

"If you don't get you and your crew to their posts, **now**, I will personally execute you!" The voice was furious.

"Sir!"

She could hear his boots as he hurried down the hall away from where they were.

"Idiot!" the voice muttered as he moved on, in the opposite direction.

After five more minutes of quick travel, Maud stopped. A door opened, light seeped into the service tunnel and an almadarin's blue face appeared on the other side. Both women entered the room and immediately deactivated their helmets. The almadarin's eyes opened wide. Without their helmets on, it was difficult to see a difference between Maud and Lieutenant Montran. Unconcerned, Maud went to the center of the room and pushed on the floor. A hole appeared as the panel descended and tucked itself in a space under the floor.

"I have a train waiting for them in another transportation tunnel one level down from the one you arrived in."

Maud looked down the opened space and then dropped into its darkness.

The almadarin, as if prearranged, lifted one of the smaller species that appeared to be injured, and handed her to the lieutenant. She stepped into the floor space and handed the rescued being to Maud's waiting hands. This continued until the almadarin was left. Lieutenant Montran stepped out of the space to let him descend.

"There is someone coming," Maud's voice whispered in Lieutenant Montran's communicator.

The lieutenant quickly hopped back into the floor space and standing on the top of the ladder, pushed the button her subliminal directions said would put the floor back into place. It closed partially and stopped.

Blasters! Without a second thought, she climbed back in the room and activated the bottom panel, looking for the cause of the jam. She found something lodged in the mechanism, probably dropped by one of the captives, and then closed the floor panel. Quickly, she went back into the service tunnel and sealed it. She fumbled in the dark for the button to reactivate her helmet as she proceeded down the tunnel where the owner of the unfamiliar voice had headed.

Now it's time to do my thing.

"There it's again!" the same voice she had heard earlier shouted excitedly on the other side of the wall.

Am I going the wrong way? She accessed the schematics on her visor and found her location. She was going the correct way.

"You got to let it go," another voice admonished. "Wait until after the broadcast," he suggested.

"No! Look, it's registering a life sign too!" his voice rose in his excitement. "CPO to Security! I have a red alert in Sector Mim! I repeat, red alert in..."

"What in helgas moon are you getting hysterical about now, CPO?"

"I've got those strange readings and a life sign too, sir," he reported excitedly.

"Burn your soul in Agasta!" the translator politely translated. "You go looking for trouble at this time? Were you not just sent over to the staging area or to your quarters? Security!" He bellowed without waiting for a reply.

"Security here," came another voice.

"Where in Agastas hole is that captain of yours? Where in Agastas hole is he?"

"By your request, topside." the voice tersely reminded him.

"How many people do I have to block off that area and flood it with concussion bombs?"

"None, Master Alha Bahna. From the long hours topside searching for the missing officer we have people filling up the ships' sickbays. What you have now is what you get."

"I ordered everyone back for the auction! *Expletives not translated started and then abruptly stopped.* CPO, get out of that area now. Flood it with that acidic gas within 20 stan minutes." click!

"Gawds all mighty!" the CPO panicked. It meant he had to be real careful because he wasn't wearing his AEG suit, but the acidic gas would eat through that too.

"You seal that end and I'll do the other," his companion stated. "You do know how to lock the seals on the doors don't you?"

"Yes, Yes. I'll see you back at Com-C," he muttered while mentally reviewing what little he knew of sealing rooms. How difficult could it be? Press the button and let the computer do the rest.



Lieutenant Montran jogged down the dark passageway, her boots making soft thuds as she moved quickly away from the rooms to be gassed. Her mental picture of the occupied city indicated the Spartans' living quarters were one more level up.

Since the Black Rose is out on assignment I think I'll drop a reminder notice that Guardian would rather they move to another neighborhood on another planet, or maybe, just let them think the smugglers did it. This will give me a good opportunity to see just how good they are about securing their territory.

She found an access ladder easy enough. Carefully she crept up the ladder looking for any traps at the entrance to the next floor. She wasn't disappointed. Once deactivated she entered the long tunnel that serviced Spartan barracks on one side and Black Rose Spartan's on the other.

Hmm. So who is it going to be for my first victim? At the end of the service tunnel was a T&T's trap set in a standard pattern. Nothing tricky or impressive. It was simply to slow down someone with no attempt to hide the fact that it had a sensitive motion audible alarm which by the time the intruder got into the room someone would be waiting on the other side.

Her mental map of the place didn't tell her who occupied this room.

"Are you sure you want to go into that room?" Guardian's voice whispered in her ear.

"Why?" she whispered back.

"It's Lord Chaney's room."

A smirk appeared on her face. "Can you tell if he's in his room?"

"He is on his ship with Sheila. I will let you know when he returns. Maude is busy attending to our guests, so she Can't join you at this moment." There was a pause and then, "What do you intend on doing?" Guardian asked curiously.

"Mischief. Isn't that our business?" *Let's see, what we got here. Entering in through the service panel is too obvious and with my reputation at stake I don't want to cause anyone to think I've gotten soft after all these years of inactivity.* She mentally flipped through the internal maps at her disposal. *Hm. A service bot entrance to the bathing room. Well, it looks possible.*

She slid into the tight opening. *Helgas moon, it's as tight as a birth canal! All right, Lieut, suck it up and get on your belly like a reptile. Are there any T&T's?* She dragged her body further into the small tube. She suddenly realized that if she needed anything from her utility belt she was out of luck.

"Guardian?" she whispered.

"Stuck?" he whispered back.

"How does the panel open? I don't have access to the directions."

"There is a beam that the bot trips about two hands from the panel door."

She continued moving toward the panel and as her fingers crossed the beam the panel opened into a darkened area. Cautiously she looked around before getting out. The place looked clean.

"Can you see any snoops?"

"No. He has placed nothing in his quarters. He has them outside of the service panel you saw and outside the door to his quarters. I tamper with them so they are unpredictable, making them unreliable for any real use."

Well, looks like my place is bigger and better than his place, even if I share bathing facilities. He's got enough bathing products to stock a harem. I can see he's not used to traveling in crew's quarters. Blue dye. Who dyes their hair? Lord Chaney or his metradame? Must be Lord Chaney. He could have had ordered his doll with blue hair...unless he likes changes. No. He's not interested in women's fashions and his sexual preference is young girls...unless...Sheila is young.

Montran remembered a prank in school of putting dye in the shower spout. She found a sponge. *Goes to show you, the pranks that are the best are the simplest to do and just with everyday stuff lying about.*

Finished, she shuffled his bathing room articles around, including what she labeled personal toys. All cameras were reactivated and cleared. Finished with that project, she moved into the bedroom. Two beds. One was a cot.

Must be for the bodyguard. Hm. Well, I could short sheet both beds. She unfolded the bottom sheet and then folded it higher up. Finished with both beds she moved to the closet. Over three fourths of the closet had his clothing carefully arranged by color. She intermixed what was in the closet, pulling out the contents in the drawers and dropping them in the shoe storage locker. More surveillance cameras were reactivated. Guardian certainly had his interlopers well watched.

I'll have to make sure Guardian doesn't have any in my quarters activated. Though, it's not like I have a private life worth wanting to keep private.

She was feeling very satisfied with herself. Next was the sitting room.

"You'll have to end your fun. Lord Chaney and Sheila have entered the city," Guardian's voice informed her. "They will be delayed about thirty stan moments. His habit's to check status of the City before returning to his quarters, and most likely ask about the progress on the search for you."

As she squirmed into the bot tunnel and pulled herself back into the larger service tunnel, she decided to hit a few more rooms for good measure, notably Black Rose Spartans. She needed more information on them both for personal reasons as well as for strategic planning.

"What about the Black Rose? Are they still outside the city?"

"They always leave the city when a broadcast is being made. The smugglers get too edgy with the Black Rose around when they're doing their business," Guardian informed her. "Usually the other Spartans guard the city while the Black Rose take expeditions to other parts of the planet."

"Guardian, why aren't there service bots in any of these service bays?"

"Stored safely away."

So maybe that's why there are no traps set around the exits. I wouldn't know they were here myself if I didn't have Guardian's schematics and seen them in action in my own room.

The next two rooms she visited were smaller than Lord Chaney's. But it was still larger than what she remembered soldiers usually garrisoned in. The difference was that the sitting room was separate from the sleeping area and the two that shared quarters had their own small sleeping area. There were no decorations hanging or personal effects marking the place as being lived in. She only knew it was used because kits were neatly stored in the sleeping area. It was as if this was intended to be a short mission. Knowing the strong feelings Spartans have about their belongings being found in another's kit, she decided not to go that far in eliciting harsh feelings between the groups. Not yet anyway.

The third room was a different matter. This person didn't share and though it was as big as Lord Chaney's room, there were motion trips set about the three rooms, with a trap outside the service exit. This was the sergeant major's quarters. Her lips curled in humor. All sergeant majors had the same tough attitude. The good ones deserved to have that aura about them. They knew everything about everyone under their care as well as their COs. If any of their cubs did wrong it was a reflection on them personally. They protected their cubs as their cubs protected them. Loyalty was fierce.

This room required a different approach. The obvious wasn't going to disturb this person, Montran surmised as she studied the bedroom.

Montran undid the fastenings to a few shelves, switched the hot and cold tubes to the shower, and didn't activated cameras just to bother the occupant into thinking that somewhere there had to be another plant. In the closet, she rigged the clothing pole to drop when any weight was shifted on it.

Geeze, this woman is really a control freak. All her uniforms are hanging exactly two fingers width apart...hmm. Or maybe, this is her way of knowing when someone has looked through her stuff. Well, it certainly makes it easy to get the bar to drop when anything is moved on it.

The sound of someone trying to open the door into the sergeant's quarters had her frantically looking for a place to hide.

"Guardian?" she whispered.

"I Can't see who it's. However, it's not the occupant. The Black Rose squad has not returned to the City."

Can't go out the service panel. She has that rigged and I don't want her to know anyone has been in here until something drops on her. The bot exit's too small for a fast escape.

Her first place to hide was the obvious, the closet.

Great. I'm going to be the proverbial recipient of what I sowed. I think I may be in trouble here.

Try as she might, she couldn't ignore the scent of the owner that clung to the cloths next to her. It was distracting on different levels...the foremost...why was it bothering her?

The intruder didn't waste any time in the foyer, but came directly into the sleeping area. She could hear breathing. Whoever was in the room knew exactly where he or she was going. Either this person wasn't familiar with the owner's traps or not worried. Was this person expected and welcomed? Or, were the traps new and just for this visitor?

Instead of capturing the metradame, why not this person? Anyone snooping around and in Black Rose quarters has to know more than most or is incredibly stupid.

Lieutenant Montran's back was getting tired from her bent position. Shifting her weight slightly caused the clothes pole to drop, just as she had it planned. She leaned forward to avoid being entangled in the mess and inadvertently knocked the closet door open. There was no way to dignify her surprise entry and roll free of the clothes, but she did get herself to one knee as a white haired figure was pointing something toward her. She was already changing direction when the fired shot went too wide. He didn't get a second chance to shoot before she knocked his weapon from his hand with a roll forward, using one foot to kick his wrist and the other his midsection. She jumped on him to render him unconscious, but it became more involved, both rolling around on the floor, each trying to get a grip on the other.

Breaking, they quickly rose. The white haired adversary got his hands around her neck, but she broke his grip easily and kneed him in his midsection bringing him to his knees. She stepped back to kick him in the shoulder but he had a stunner. She reached for his wrist to snap the spring that held the weapon in place, but he pulled her off-balance. From his knees, he pushed against her, and used his shoulder to slam her against the wall. Both of them fell with the white haired intruder wrapping one arm across his chest as if he was injured. The second skin and suit absorbed the blows she sustained with little damage to her. Another point for Guardian's suit.

She reminded herself that she had to end this wrestling match soon before they attracted spectators.

The man bunted her again knocking them both back, while the lieutenant used the momentum to flip them. Landing on top of him, she knocked the wind out of his lungs with two knees slamming onto his chest. Rolling free, she grabbed up a short ceremonial saber that came loose from the sheath on his utility belt. He was awkwardly bringing up his side arm again when she tossed the saber toward his head. She was drawing her weapon to stun him when the man gave a terrified shriek, moving sideways and bringing up his arms in swinging movements as if to ward off a swarm of flies...the sword blade followed him hitting him between the eyes. With a groan he sank to his knees, and fell sideways, looking dead.

"What the bloody hell happened! I wanted a prisoner!" she breathed out explosively. She slapped her legs in frustration. This wasn't supposed to end this way. "I should have used the stunner in the beginning!" For a moment, she thought she was going to throw up, but she firmly reminded herself she was a veteran of battles, not a greenie.

"The blade is new on the market. It can be programmed to target a vital point on the person it's pointed at. Apparently, he had it programmed for between the eyes. It appears to be a newly purchased weapon for I have not seen it on him before. Lieutenant," Guardian's voice sounded surprised in her ear, "you've just eliminated a key player. That was Lord Chaney."

"Oh, helgas bloody moon!" One of the people she had concentrated hard on not seeking retaliation against and here she had nailed him... right between the eyes! She couldn't have done better if she had planned it...and in a sergeant major of the Black Rose's quarters. She rubbed her forehead where she was sure a headache would be forming if she were not wearing Guardian's clothing.

"I've never seen one before. I hope they're banned. That's all we need to have added to an assassin's arsenal." She slapped her leg again to keep her mind off her protesting stomach.

"On the other hand, we can look at the bright side of this," Guardian continued.

"What, that here we have Lord Chaney's dead body in the quarters of a sergeant major of the Black Rose? Nothing like spreading suspicion and conflict amongst the troops. However, everyone knows he likes, err...liked girls not women. Maybe his partner will dump his body in space and let some unfortunate space trawler find him," she muttered.

"Not so. I have activated the mortician's robot. It will pick him up and prepare him for delivery to his next of kin. He will be kept in a freezer until we're notified."

Did this mean she blew her first test?

Leave this for ater.

Like most careful law enforcement officers, the lieutenant went over Lord Chaney's body, removing his other weapons, concentrating on what needed to be done. In his utility belt, she found small deadly toys that recon specialists liked to use. Stars, tenja's and some buzzers.

Handy to have.

She found his identity card and a small device attached to it. She put them in her utility belt to study later. Maybe later she would really push her luck and pull a recon mission to his ship.

Montran, in your dreams. Let's not get suicidal because you made a mistake. But then again, what if I need to get off this planet quickly. It would be handy to have a ship at my disposal...and maybe to transport the captives.

The mortician-bot came in followed by small utility bots to clean up the mess.

"I see you've reactivated the small cleaning bots too," she mentioned to Guardian.

"To help you clean up the evidence."

"Evidence." She cringed. "I feel like a criminal here."

"You should not. He should have read the directions that specifically warn the owner to set the parameters of the sword right away. He obviously didn't. I don't like killing, especially on my outpost, however, I do know the difference between murder and an accidental killing. You need to get a grip on yourself, Lieutenant Montran."

Right. Geeze, I'm not a greenie. Okay, what have we got going on here?

The bots seemed to know that the clothes pole wasn't supposed to be balancing precariously in its slot and set it up correctly with the clothes separated by color and spaced two fingers width apart. Exactly as it had been before she tampered with it.

The mortician bot was a gurney with arms. It searched the corpse, removing the body jewelry and leaving the pile on the floor alongside of the corpse. Lord Chaney was hoisted up onto the gurney with the knife protruding between his open eyes.

I'm gonna have nightmares from replaying this incident trying to figure out how I could have ended it differently. This was supposed to be a well-earned vacation to visit the clan. You're starting to sound like a whiner, Lieut. Cut the noise and concentrate on what you're doing!

Lieutenant Montran went over to inspect the jewelry the bot removed. His ring of authority as a committee member was familiar. Hadrie had one. She found another ring that looked interesting. A horse with a horn between its dull black eyes. Odd. This was added to her pouch. She rose and turned her attention to the dresser drawer that was left opened by Lord Chaney.

Under clothing? He was interested in a Spartan's knickers? Correction...in a woman's knickers, she reminded herself. This is not his style...doesn't fit his profile. So, what is here that would be interesting to him? Uh, leather thong with a small triangular leather spot? Ohhh, I like these. I wonder what she looks like in them.

She brought up the subliminal on the image of Sergeant Major Jina Gari. The Spartan's features were hard, but other mug shots showed a plain face that would be easy to forget. Her boot kicked something. Leaning down, she picked up a small spray vial. No identifying label on it. She knew better than to smell it. It was added to her plunder. She resumed looking in the drawer, no closer to figuring out what may have interested Lord Chaney. This Spartan obviously had another life that required little fabric.

Lieutenant Montran held up another garment, letting it dangle between her fingers as she studied it. Turning it, the fabric brushed against her skin, eliciting a sensuous feeling.

The lieutenant's attention was so focused on the contents of the drawer she failed to hear someone enter the room, but she did sense a presence that made her skin prickle. Turning toward the doorway she found herself looking into the pale green eyes of a tall athletic woman, probably a jilish mixed with human descendants, leaning languidly against the doorjamb watching her. She had dark brown hair that was fashionably interwoven with colorful cloth ribbons reaching past her shoulders. Her stylish suit spoke volumes of quality and credits to purchase it. It was the product of one of Orion's better clothiers.

This must be the bodyguard.

"Lieutenant Harriet Montran," the voice cooed seductively, "you have the whole outpost looking for you...and...here...you...are." She approached the lieutenant in a slow and sensuous walk that revealed a different type of assault than what she expected of a bodyguard. In all her wildest imaginings this was what she pictured a metradame to be. In response her heart beat faster and a hot flush infused her face, to say nothing of the sexual attraction.

Zeus in a harem's pool! the lieutenant cursed to herself. *You'd think I was at my first brothel after a month of combat duty in a militarized zone with nothing but my own hand to entertain me. What a joke! And I was thinking of seducing her?*

"Are you the one that is responsible for those little," she leaned close to whisper in the lieutenant's ear, "tricks in Lord Chaney's room?"

A pleasant shiver skittered down the lieutenant's spine.

Sheila stepped back and casually let her eyes roam the lieutenant's body.

Another hot flush suffused Lieutenant Montran as she tried to control her erratic breathing and move her limbs that suddenly seemed to be unresponsive to her brain signals. *What is happening to me?* Lieutenant Montran's eyes were riveted on Sheila.

"I had thought Lord Chaney was here but I see he is not." She moved slowly around the room as if not in any hurry, disappearing out of the lieutenant's sight, but she could swear she knew she was standing just a hair's breath behind her because she could feel her body heat.

What do metradames do when their masters are killed? Or, rather, what do bodyguards do when their employer is killed! Bloody moon, soldier! Do something!

The tall figure moved in front of her, smiling. It wasn't threatening, but rather enticing. It sent another pleasant shiver down to Montran's very wet and swollen bud.

Lieut! Get your thoughts together! Bodyguards turn into avenging assassins if their masters or mistresses are killed. Think of something!

"Perhaps we can enjoy some pleasant moments together before Lord Chaney is done with you." Sheila ran a finger down the lieutenant's arm that hung motionless against her side, moving it just enough to study her sidearm. She circled her captive, lightly tracing patterns over her body and coming to a stop in front of her. Her hand cupped one of her breasts, tweaking an erect nipple, smiling at the effect she had on her captive.

Lieutenant Montran's chest was heaving from the passion burning throughout her body. Her body strained to come into contact with Sheila's hand that hovered close without actually touching.

"Yes. I can see you do too." She touched the lieutenant's cheek with the back of her hand, again sending chills of pleasure throughout her victim's body. "Why don't you wait right here while I go see where Lord Chaney could have gone. Then when I return, maybe you can think of what we can do. I shall not be long."

A puff of breath and lips just touching her ear whispered a bye, nearly causing Lieutenant Montran's knees to buckle. Another touch was all she needed to send her into an orgasm. If only her voice would respond so she could beg Sheila not to go yet.

No! She's a bodyguard! She'll kill you.

Lieutenant Montran couldn't get her eyes to inspect the area to see if the evidence of their fight showed or if the bots cleaned it up before Sheila arrived. That was the last sensible thought she had before the sexual fantasies took over.



Maud found the lieutenant lying on the floor shaking from repeated orgasms.

"I see you have met Sheila, the former Lord Chaney's goddess of lust," she laughed softly.

Maud placed a small instrument against an open area on Lieutenant Montran's neck. Moments later, the lieutenant was breathing normally. Maud helped her to sit on the bed.

"Goddesses and angels! What a nightmare!"

"Nightmare?" Maude raised an eyebrow, as she herself would have.

"I think I just had enough wet dreams to last me the year! Goddess, what am I saying?" she groaned.

Maud was trying not to smile but was unsuccessful. "What I have just given you will prevent the paralyzing result of the gas to effect you again. As for the rest...I've heard once bitten..."

"I'm surprised someone hasn't killed all the metradames, if this is their effect."

"No," Guardian's voice came softly in her ear. "Only Sheila was equipped with what they call a lust gas. If it makes you feel any better, she released enough pheromones in the air to set off an entire roomful of species sensitive to the chemical, whatever gender. Lord Chaney spent a considerable fortune on her. You two will need to get out of there. Once Sheila finds her former master's body and scans the retina for the killer, she will shut down momentarily, and come back up in assassin mode," Guardian warned.

Maud sorted through the pile of Lord Chaney's things the cleaning bot had dumped on the bed.

"You will need this ID card. Did you find a ring with a horse's head and a horn in the center?" Lieutenant Montran pulled it out of her utility pocket.

"Good. Keep it close to you. This ID card will render Sheila inactive for maybe a few stan minutes by pinching both sides simultaneously on these marks. She is in assassin mode so there will be only a hesitation in which to act," she cautioned.

"Isn't there a way to shut her down completely?"

"During that pause if you can press these two colors on the ID in front of her eyes, the pulse it emits will erase all duty, all commands of Lord Chaney. You are then her new mistress."

"That sounds just a little too easy," Lieutenant Montran suspiciously peered at the card, thinking of how easy it was to enslave someone to a new owner.

"Well, the directions say it's supposed to work," Guardian told her seriously. "After all you're talking about a select few who can afford such creatures. They certainly didn't want to make deactivating them too difficult. There is a fear among the owner's and their family that the *slave* may revolt so the dealers made sure they could easily put them to sleep by wiping their program. It also means the metraperson would have to be brought back to the lab and reprogrammed for a nice fee."

"So, you don't know if this is going to work?"

"It's not like I have a laboratory full of willing test subjects donated by their owners. You must leave! Sheila has found the body and has finished scanning the retina. She needs the saber in order to avenge his death as her program dictates. I had the bot hide the saber but they are not programmed to think creatively," Guardian sighed. "The bot damaged the homing device, so she will have to have a good aim to find its mark, but it's still sharp."

"So, do we continue messing with the troops or kidnap someone of importance?" Lieutenant Montran asked as Maud dumped the remaining belongings of the late Lord Chaney into a dumpster. Maud looked at her with an oh-so familiar expression of disbelief.

"This time I'll use my stunner first," the lieutenant told her embarrassed. "I was surprised."

"You were going to kidnap Lord Chaney with his bodyguard on the same planet?" Maud shook her head in disbelief. "You certainly don't believe in stirring a pot the easy way, do you?"

"I didn't know it was him," Lieutenant Montran objected. "He wasn't the image Guardian has of him."

"Lord Chaney likes to have a different persona, including face and hair change when he's with his smugglers. The man thought he was clever with his disguises," Maude informed her dryly. "Are you feeling better, ready to move?"

"Right." Lieutenant Montran tested her legs but they were still wobbly. She sank back onto the bed.

"We really have to move on with Guardian's plan and head to the broadcast area. We have fifteen stan minutes before the storm moves out, and then a two hour window before the next storm," Maud urged.

"Just what does he plan on doing again?"

"He's unlocked the secure keys to about seven hundred of the orbital satellites around the main broadcast stations, bypassing their firewall secure farms and going directly into the broadcast grid-streams."

"The ratings of some stations should go up." Lieutenant Montran took a deep breath and rocked to her feet. This time her legs felt better, however, her stomach performed flip-flops. Maud held her arm until she was standing taller and the flush in her cheeks wasn't as intense.

"The owner will have to watch her business prosper from a rehab colony," Maud returned, releasing the lieutenant's arm cautiously. "She's one of the stockholders in the smuggling business. We'll leave this way," she gestured to the maintenance tunnel.

They went back down a flight of stairs to the other side of the small area the troops and smugglers occupied. Movement settled her stomach and the lightheaded feeling left her. She dismantled traps as they moved along, removing some and taking them along with her incase she may find something to do with them. The majority of what they found were concussion bombs that would not harm the life support lines, but they could knock someone to the ground with the side effects being a headache and ringing ears. There were also poisonous gas canisters thrown in for mixture, which Lieutenant Montran, keeping in line with Guardian's beliefs, removed them and dumped them in trash bins for Guardian to find a way to neutralize them. Maud showed her to the rooms that held the captors for auction. The traps along the service hatch were deactivated but not removed so that Maud's escape route would not be noticed by a guard making spot inspections.

The two women moved back up the corridor, out of sight of the target room.

No Sheila, Lieutenant Montran thought gratefully. "Any sign of Sheila, Guardian?"

"No. She is avoiding the monitors."

Lieutenant Montran and Maud stepped into a corridor on the other side of the Command Center just around the corner to the room where the screening of the auctioned goods was being held.

"The broadcast has been going well so far," Guardian notified the two softly. "However, they are going to get a message that their broadcast has been sent to a public station soon. It's been six stan minutes since the feed has been moving to the various satellites."

The swish of a door opening and the sound of boots running told them that the relaying for the video of one of the auctioned was being delivered topside, to be transmitted to the ship above, which would then beam it to those dialed into the auction and thanks to Guardian, to other citizens of the multiverse.

All that running up and down has to be a lot of hard work! They must have an awful lot of credits or favors at stake. Probably once they get the live cargo out of here, they can breathe easier...hm. Except, their boss is gone. That's going to do something to the profits.

"It's time for me to move the captives so your business of creating a diversion is here," Maud announced in a whisper.

"Right."

"Just stir the pot this time," Maude chuckled.

Lieutenant Montran smiled. Maud laid the few captured traps she was carrying on the floor near the lieutenant's feet and returned to the service tunnel.

Well, let's see what I can do. This stuff should be enough to make a loud and painful bang, and rattle some heads.

She placed them so that the first one would set the others off on a slight delay, with the concussion knocking everyone from one side and then another. After a quick glance to see that the placements were right, she moved behind a corner to wait. The hairs on the back of her arms stood up and her pulse increased. Was something going wrong?

"Are we ready?" she asked softly in her mic.

"We certainly are," came the throaty voice of Sheila behind her.

Lieutenant Montran rolled out of the way of something shinny slashing down where she had once been standing. She lifted her foot to knock Sheila off-balance, but Sheila threw a kick of her own knocking the lieutenant's aside. Smoothly Lieutenant Montran whirled to the ground, taking Sheila with her. Both rolled apart and to their feet, looking for a weak point in the other's stance.

Uh, oh.

Sheila pinned her expertly against the wall and shifted her weight to whip her feet from under her. Lieutenant Montran instead kicked Sheila's leg out and pushed her back. Sheila's feet entangled Lieutenant Montran's, who fell against the wall. Sheila was back on her feet and tried to pull the lieutenant off her feet. Lieutenant Montran broke her grip, and knocked Sheila to the ground. Meanwhile the door to the broadcast room opened as another runner from the surface came down with bad news.

A short man came out of the room furious. Anyone near him was handed insults, slaps and yelling to evacuate the station, until the noise from the struggling women caught his attention. The smuggler and

his men came around the corner to see what the noise was concerning. They immediately recognized the orange hair of Lady Harriet Montran.

Lord Chaney had ordered his metradame to capture Lady Montran for Alan Fermin so it didn't look out of place for the two to be fighting. However, he was angry at the turn of events, thinking it had something to do with the orange haired woman so he pulled his weapon out and took aim. Lieutenant Montran spotted him and gave Sheila an advantage in their grip so that she would be between her and his aim.

"Blasters! Get the Sheila out of the way!" he bellowed, dropping his arm to gesture to one of his smugglers behind him. He wasn't incensed enough to ignore the value of his partner's metradame. He wasn't ready to challenge him openly.

The others would have done something but Sheila paused in her struggle to take stock of the situation, giving the lieutenant a chance to break free and activate two of the concussion bombs. It would only be a matter of time before the whole hall would be shaking with concussion bombs in a ripple effect. The first bomb went off and knocked everyone to their knees. Sheila was standing in front of her and took most of the shock as both of them bounced against a wall. The second one caused Lieutenant Montran's head to hit the wall but her helmet absorbed the impact. Stumbling over to the service panel Lieutenant Montran got in before the other bombs released.

"Guardian?"

"You can return to base," Guardian reported. "Lord Chaney's body has been discovered by the smugglers. And now with their broadcast busted they are under full evacuation. You have no need to risk yourself there. We will now wait, and see what develops. Hopefully, I shall have my planet back soon."

"Ok. How do I summon my ride?" she asked suddenly.

"Simply call for it."

Lieutenant Montran felt a little embarrassed. "As in, 'here, car'?"

"That simple," Guardian replied.

Lieutenant Montran stopped her jog and turned to look over her shoulder. Was that a sound her helmet's amplified hearing picked up? Not taking chances she exited out of the service panel. She ran quickly until she came to an elevator, and accessed another service tunnel. As she dropped down one level, she was hit from behind and the impact slammed her against the wall. Sheila lifted her as if she were a light bag and threw her into an exit door, knocking her out of the service tunnel and into a corridor. Unharmred, Lieutenant Montran rolled under Sheila's feet, entwining their legs and pulled her to the ground hard. Both bounced back up to their feet. With a good handhold, she bounced Sheila's head against the wall and moved away. Lieutenant Montran paused, grateful to see that Sheila wasn't immune to hard hits. During the brief pause Sheila was back on the offensive. Lieutenant Montran was able to knock her off her feet again. This time, without pausing, the lieutenant escaped through the panel and back up the ladder. The first chance she got she dropped a level to get to the travel tube and reactivated her helmet.

Sheila didn't take her unaware the third time. This time the battle was in the small confines of the tunnel, their grunts echoing along the passageway. Sheila suddenly changed tactics and surprised Lieutenant Montran with a punch to the head. The force drove her into the wall and the service panel door behind them came open, depositing the lieutenant's body in the middle of a dark area with Sheila on top. Sheila pinned Lieutenant Montran. With the knife in one hand, she used the other to reach for the helmet. The lieutenant knocked away her hand but Sheila was able to find the release button to her helmet. Lieutenant Montran needed to get her somewhere where the environmental gases would render her useless. She needed to get to the tube area. Lieutenant Montran twisted, breaking Sheila's grip. She kicked her in the chest, and escaped into the service tunnel and down a ladder to the tube area. She was exiting into the tube area when Sheila grabbed her from behind and both fell into the transportation area. Unfortunately, it had breathable air in it.

Sheila reached for the lieutenant as they both fell. Lieutenant Montran twisted herself so Sheila would take most of the impact of the fall. Once down, the lieutenant tried to get free, but Sheila rolled on top of her. Sheila leaned her weight onto Lieutenant Montran pinning her to the ground effectively.

Where is my backup when I need her? she huffed.

Lieutenant Montran continued to struggle as her helmet was deactivated again. Facing Sheila, she saw the short sword in Sheila's hand. She brought her knee up into Sheila's back and both rolled on the ground trying to gain control. Sheila struck the lieutenant in the head with the hilt of the sword. Stunned, Lieutenant Montran's grip on Sheila's wrist loosened. She panicked as a knife point flashed at her. Then the second skin kicked in flooding her system with adrenalin. Her eyes cleared giving her a larger than life

view of Sheila raising a short pointy object, the ceremonial sword of the late Lord Chaney above her forehead. Then suddenly the weight of Sheila was knocked off her.

Struggling to her feet, she swayed for a moment. Maud and Sheila were locked in a rolling combat. Lieutenant Montran pulled the deactivator out and held the button down. All motion from Sheila stopped.

Maud pushed Sheila to the side gently. "Please, Lieutenant. Shut that off," Maud implored covering her ears.

"Oh." Lieutenant Montran's fingertips were white from her tight pinch on the card. She sank to her knees taking the opportunity to catch her breath. "The cavalry arrived just in time."

"You can now reset her permanently," Maud suggested.

"How sure are we this is going to do anything?"

"We won't if you waste time asking questions, Lieutenant."

Reluctantly, Lieutenant Montran moved over to the prostrate form of the metradame and held the device near her forehead. A shiver ran up her arms as Sheila's darkened eyes locked on hers. With shaking hands, Lieutenant Montran pressed the reset. A flash of pain crossed Sheila's face before her eyes closed. Guiltily, Lieutenant Montran looked at Maud.

"Do you have the unicorn ring?" Maud asked.

"What ring?"

"The horse with the horn in its head?"

"Oh, Yes." Lieutenant Montran fished it out of her utility belt pocket.

"This is your homing device to her."

"Wait a moment here. Are you telling me that she was and is able to find me because of this ring?"

"Yes."

"She's been locating me because of this?"

"Yes." Maud took the ring from her palm and turning the lieutenant's hand over slid it on her finger. "You must wear it so she remains near you. It is for her safety until she knows how to manage on her own."

Lieutenant Montran flexed her fingers at the unaccustomed feel of wearing a ring.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was an observation Guardian made during her pursuit of you. She was finding you too easy. He narrowed it down to the ring. When she awakens...she is yours to program, rename, and command," Maud said in a mocking tone.

"I don't want a robot! I..." images from the sexual haze that Sheila had left her in flooded all her senses as if she were back in the moment. *Uh, oh. How do I ignore these reactions?*

Maud grabbed the lieutenant's arms and shook her for attention. "Lieutenant Montran, that was a joke. Seriously, you both need to get out of this part of the city," she repeated. "Guardian wants to flood the area with sleeping gas and clean up some of the debris the intruders left, and I have guests of Guardians to tend to. These feelings will wear off," she reassured her.

Lieutenant Montran nodded. Clearing her throat, she tested her voice, "How long is she going to be like this?"

"We don't know. Call your car and I will help you put her in it."

"Car?" Lieutenant Montran called hesitantly. This was just as ridiculous as her reaction to Sheila. *Oh, no it'sn't. Calling a car may be ridiculous but Sheila is NOT. She is lust at its highest level!*

The car rolled to a stop by their waiting figures. Stepping in first Lieutenant Montran turned to Maud who passed her the unconscious form of Sheila. The metradame's limp body was settled in and secured by the harness. Tiredly, Lieutenant Montran sat across from her, her own harness securing her.

"Good health to you, Lieutenant Montran," Maud whispered in her communicator. "Best to activate your helmet. One of you needs to be protected should the car be attacked."

"Right. Good health to you too, Maud. But, seeing as we have so much in common, I think we should be on first name basis, don't you think? And, thank you."

"You're welcome, Harriet."

The car moved out of the area quickly. The increase of speed pushed her into her seat. Hopefully there was going to be food, drink and rest at the other end. Suddenly a small screen appeared in the left corner of her visor.

"I hope you don't mind, but I would like to monitor Sheila's bios," Guardian explained.

"No. Not at all. I should have done that myself. Guardian, can the 'blend' feature work off this planet?"

"No. The ability lies in the suits composition to mimic matter that can be found on this planet. It affects many species visual sight, and all monitoring mechanisms I've tested so far, by altering the vibration of the object I wish to hide. What gives me hesitation are the possibilities of those in powerful positions who would use it over those who will not have the technology to counter it. Its use is something I wish to confer with others on."

"Sharon once told me, that even if we think we're the sole creators of something or maybe the first to come up with an idea, in reality, it has already been done or thought of by others somewhere. So maybe your idea could well be already hitting the galactic patent office wrapped up in another company's logo."

"No. It is already registered...or, the beginnings of what is now completed. As a scientist, I had also believed that. Now, with the search ability a computer can offer, I can follow the serendipity of an idea that is recorded by people, not all scientists, on a similar or the same vein. There are about forty-four companies in just Committee space alone that are working on such a suit; however, none of them have a finished product."

Lieutenant Montran leaned back in the restraints and thought about it. "Well, you're right about the corrupt getting a good grab on it. If the Committee hears of it and decides it's worth something to its security, your patent will be classified and you won't be able to sell it on the market."

"That is why my laboratory is in neutral space. Their scientists may attempt to mimic it, but they would not be able to have a high quality version without my full cooperation."

"You sound like you have your interests covered. Good for you. I like seeing someone win against the powers that be."

The lieutenant watched Sheila in the darkened cab, reading her energy level through the visor. Gradually her eyes slid shut. Her dreams were a mixture of guilt over Lord Chaney's death, and sexual images of Sheila.

The abrupt change in the speed and a sharp intake of breath from Sheila brought her out of her disturbing nap.

"Lieutenant Montran, welcome home and welcome to your companion." Guardian's voice came over the speakers in the car. "Lieutenant, I have a friend of yours in the infirmary that needs to be taken to her quarters. Would you mind escorting her and see that she is settled? Charles is busy with something else and I think when she awakens she would feel more comfortable in her quarters than alone in an infirmary. Don't you think?"

"A friend of mine? What's wrong with her?"

"Yes, Jina Gari, but, you remember her as Cadet Zohra."

The car came to a sudden halt, much like her thoughts.

Cadet Zohra? Images of a young athlete came to mind, overlapping with images of a dancer.

"The car wasn't meant for riding without a second skin. Your companion will need a few moments to recover," Guardian commented quietly in Lieutenant Montran's ear. "She will need your close support and supervision until we know more about her," he added.

Lieutenant Montran nodded bringing herself back to the present. She studied the readings on Sheila's bios. Since the lieutenant didn't know what to look for, she took Guardian at his word. "Yes. I don't think leaving her alone would be a good idea. You're sure she's no threat to me?"

"It depends what you call a threat. Whatever the chemical effect it had on you it's not so pronounced now. Just a bit of the 'afterglow' so-to-speak."

"That was a joke," the lieutenant stated in a flat tone. "It wasn't funny then and not so much now...maybe tomorrow it will be, but right now, I..." she sighed. "If I ever see someone in heat, I'll know exactly how they feel and how helpless they are to control it."

"Well, then, something good did come out of your...encounter."

"Hmph." Lieutenant Montran disagreed. "I can think of other things I would rather encounter to learn empathy."

The lights in the tube station were on when the car door swung open. After the restraints lifted, Lieutenant Montran took time to deactivate her helmet and remove her gloves. Sheila stirred slowly, eyes fluttering and breath shallow. Lieutenant Montran was trying to remember how she felt on her first shuttle drop, which the sudden escalation and de-escalation reminded her of. Collecting herself, she exited the car, then turned to see if Sheila would follow.

Give her a hand, Lieut!

Lieutenant Montran leaned in and held out her hand to Sheila. "Need some help?" she asked quietly. Sheila took it without hesitation and climbed out of the car. A slight tremor passed through both their hands as they made contact. Lieutenant Montran gripped harder onto the hand, feeling a firm grip returned. Her heart beat faster and her thoughts wandered to places she would like to be with the metradame... The lieutenant was startled with the intense feeling, embarrassed with the distraction.

She's got a name...Sheila. She's not a mechanical toy, Lieut.

The visual change from a dangerous seductress to a demure stranger had the nervous lieutenant confused with how she was going to handle the feelings Sheila's presence was doing to her senses and mental process. She closed her eyes for a moment, recalling something that could change her mood.

A disaster.

Hadrie and her were riding horses at the clan's summer residence. She was tossed into a water trough unceremoniously by her mount. Her brother Hadrie had knowingly given her Trickster, a retired circus pony to ride. It was his retaliation for a prank she had pulled on him earlier. What was that prank? Oh, Yes. She locked him in the outhouse at Soureige. It wasn't a hot day, but still the smells were bad. In return, she had to make a one hour ride back to the stables soaking wet bouncing on the back of a pony without a smooth gait.

Sheila stepped away from the lieutenant, waiting quietly for a word or something more from her new handler.

"Map to infirmary," the lieutenant quickly ordered, moving her eyes to where it would appear on the car's surface. Lieutenant Montran studied it and then turned, heading toward the door marked exit, acutely aware that Sheila was following. Their footsteps were soft echoes in the corridor.

The solution to this mind wandering is to work on a problem. Okay. A big problem is Sheila. So, who was she before Lord Chaney abducted her and turned her into his possession? Guardian must know for he hinted that she was a highly regarded choice by Lord Chaney. And just how vulnerable is she now that I've changed her allegiance? If someone gets a hold of the keycard could she end up back into a slave? I need to make her independent from further programming. Surely there's a way to program her to be her own boss. Geeze. I also need to figure out just what type of life values she has. I'll have to speak with Guardian. I need to find out just who she was and know what alternatives she has. I can't just release a trained killer out in the galaxy without anyone to take care of her?

"Infirmary," Lieutenant Montran softly spoke to the elevator. Standing in the close confines of the elevator Lieutenant Montran's skin pebbled as if Sheila's finger were moving over her arm again. *This is not going to be one of those easy endings to a long day,* she groaned silently.

The elevator opened onto a well-lit corridor that lacked any art or signs indicating where they were. As she stepped into the hall she could smell the difference from the level she was quartered. There was a lemon scent in the air.

Does he have an orchard around here? Is this where he cultivates his tea leaves?

The walls were transparent but without the room interior lights on it was impossible to see beyond their own reflections. Lieutenant Montran's focus shifted quickly to alertness, searching for what her senses told her was something to be alert for...but what was it?

No alarms in my head...but then, I didn't get any when Sheila was attacking me. I guess we were evenly matched or... That is not good if my sense of danger is not working. So, what is it about this place? Is this the laboratory area? It would make sense to have the infirmary on the same level as a laboratory...wouldn't it?

Passing one of the rooms Lieutenant Montran paused, surprised at the subtle change in the energy. Something different was emanating from this room. Curious about it, she placed her palms against the wall. There was a warm soft pulse. Reluctantly, she dropped her hands. There was something about it that tickled her memory...but not enough to bring it to light.

This bears some further investigating...but later. Right now... I have someone to meet. And that started her heart beating in anticipation. Cadet Zohra...Sergeant Major Jina Gari.

The infirmary was the last room at the end of the corridor. The double doors hissed open. It took a few moments for Lieutenant Montran eyes to adjust to the low lighting. Her eyes then easily located the gurney. Lieutenant Montran found the sergeant major's face grim with a bruise and an old scar that Guardian's image had not shown.

Well, aside from her battle scars, by the coloring on her eyelids and lips, looks like she's experienced bad air. Been there, done that. She's going to have a headache when she wakes up unless this

medibot has some powerful meds. A dip in the hot tub with Ald's remedies is going to be my recommendation...if she takes it.

Images of sitting in the tub with Sheila and not just relaxing had her shaking her head ruefully.

Oh, no Lieut...let's just not go there, huh? Stay focused here.

Clearing her throat, her eyes went over the unconscious woman. She wore a military issued AEG and by the identification on it, she was a member of the Black Rose.

Sergeant Major Jina Gari. Cadet Zohra. She doesn't look anything like how I remember her.

Suddenly she remembered the vial she had found and fished it out of one of the utility belt pockets.

"Guardian, I need this analyzed."

A robot, immobile in a dim corner, came active. It looked like a harnivan, a multilimbed carnivore from the mining colony near Alteria IV. Interesting choice to have working in a medical capacity. Perhaps the intention was to scare patients to get well faster. Lieutenant Montran placed the small vial in its outstretched palm.

Looking back at the unconscious figure Lieutenant Montran frowned. "A cadet on the Black Rose squad and as a sergeant major?" she wondered aloud.

"She's an operative for Naboths Vine. She has been undercover for about nine years," Guardian informed her through the communicator.

"I figured something like that. She was at the top of our class. Nine years...that's a long time. That means she's been working in covert since we graduated. When she returns to consciousness will she remember whose side she's on?" *Will she remember me?*

"She's been debriefed, however, she will remain unconscious for another eight stan hours to let her process her debriefing subliminals."

"And you're putting her next door to me?" Lieutenant Montran asked lightly, belying her anxiousness at the idea. She was unsure if it was because she had two people sharing space with her who that morning were targeting her for either extermination or capture and now... Would they both be able to just drop their previous role and take on this new partnership to save the outpost?

"She can be just as easily detained in her room as in a prison cell, as are her cohorts, but we must get her back to her real self," Guardian explained. "We will need her expertise until the military coalition troops arrive. You know how the military is. They want to be sure this outpost has been cleared of unlawful inhabitants. Major General Aglauros would not forgive me if something should happen to her."

"General Aglauros...I've heard of her. Cadet Zohra knows her? Have you met her?"

"We're only on a passing packets of information basis," Guardian returned amused.

"In Collective Space, her reputation as a warrior adept is spoken about. Like all rumors, I've wondered how much is true. Guardian, about Zohra and her membership in the Black Rose. Few survive to live long enough to retire in that troop and those that do limp though the rest of their life, and I don't mean just physically."

"Isn't that true of all soldiers that are in combat situations? It wasn't intended for her to be undercover for so long. She had elected to stay to see her assignment to the end."

Lieutenant Montran looked down at the unconscious woman. She didn't look anything like the woman she remembered...but of Cadet Zohra...or the young Galatic athlete, it would be her nature to guts it out to the end of a game. She expected the woman would not be without her psychological scars and wasn't looking forward to finding out first hand what animosities she would be harboring. The lieutenant looked along the sides of the gurney for some kind of a control.

"Mistress, may I help?"

Lieutenant Montran jumped from the unfamiliar voice above her. Turning to face the origin of the voice, Lieutenant Montran's face was so close to Sheila's that she could feel her warm breath. Blood pounded in her ears and she could feel her hands shaking from the sexual rush.

I will never make idle wishes after this.

Nervously she moved to the other side of the gurney. With the gurney separating them, the intensity seemed to lessen. Lieutenant Montran cleared her throat. "What happened to your voice?"

"Would you like another, Mistress?" Sheila asked innocently, her clear green eyes returning her stare without any malice or familiarity.

"I just didn't recognize it." Lieutenant Montran's hands gripped the edge of the bed disappointed more than she should be at the change of timbre in Sheila's voice. She distinctly remembered it as husky

and sensuous and now it was as normal as any other voice. With the distance between them, her heart began to slow down and the hot flush that reddened her face, diminished.

Distance. Okay, I just need to keep a distance. "I'm looking for the controls for this thing," she mumbled awkwardly as she went back to looking for something to make the gurney move, not yet focused on anything other than the receding flush on her face.

"It's already programmed for her quarters. You need to only follow it,' Guardian suggested from a speaker in the room so that both could hear.

"Good." *I should have thought of that.*

The two followed as the hovering gurney exited the infirmary and headed in the direction of the elevator. In the elevator, the gurney emitted an energy field protecting its cargo from any jolts. The ride in the elevator for Lieutenant Montran was bearable as the unconscious figure and the energy field separated her from Sheila.

She cleared her throat, "So, Guardian..." she took a deep breath, "anything we need to worry about?"

"None. The appropriate people have been notified in the Collective and Committee space, and the smugglers have vacated the premises. We have a dozen unwanted visitors with two ships above. It's a waiting game at this point, to see why the delay for the last group."

"I hope that means enough time to get in some down time," the lieutenant muttered to no one in particular. "Any word from my CO? Any orders on when I can leave?"

"You don't enjoy my accommodations?" Guardian asked with a smile in his voice. "No, I have not received any further messages from your admiral."

"I feel very spoiled, Guardian," she reassured him.

The gurney passed Lieutenant Montran's quarters and at the next doorway, the door slid open to reveal a living space similar to her own. The artwork wasn't noticeably different, with sports as the theme.

Another coincidence? I wonder what side of the bed her covers will be turned down on.

They were going to be sharing the bathing room and toilet facilities. Lieutenant Montran's heart fluttered at that realization.

"Okay, we need to move her to the bed," Lieutenant Montran said aloud, needing to fill the silence. Sheila moved in front of the lieutenant and lifted Zohra from the gurney to the bed. The gurney left and the butler was there to take the discarded clothing as the two women undressed her. In the low lighting, the lieutenant studied the scars scattered on the lean tattooed body. Some looked like she was lucky to be alive. One was recent and still pink.

Nine years. "Let's get her into the shower."

Effortlessly Sheila lifted her. The unconscious form of Zohra was set in the shower and both women stepped back as Ald moved forward to take over its business of cleaning. The Spartan reminded Lieutenant Montran of a veteran gladiator that competed in the galaxy competitions.

No one would recognize her now. *She felt a little sad at that.* I guess that's the purpose. I wonder if when all this is finished she'll want to have her old face back. *A fleeting and wistful thought on her part.* Who was that fem fatal that was hanging on her at the Academy? Will she return to her? Nine years is a long time to wait for someone. Right, Harriet. So why have you?

She took a deep breath at the realization that though she had fallen in love with Sharon, she would have had serious doubts about the relationship if Zohra appeared in her life when they were still together.

"Are these scars tribal or culturally desired?" Ald asked.

"No. They are not desired." Montran decided quickly. Battle scars were part of the Black Rose persona, certainly something the surfacing agent needed to leave behind her.

After she was cleaned, Ald applied a gel that soaked quickly into the scared areas. The scars began to fade as the gel disappeared. Ald moved back and a soft light glowed around her body for a few moments, excellerating the healing of the scars.

The unconscious woman was returned to her bed and Lieutenant Montran pulled the covers over her and leaned close to her ear.

"Sweet dreams, Dancer."

A need that reached deep inside her awakened a profound ache to connect – and then the intensity lessened, settling to a dull throb.

Just what I need in my life at the moment. Another distraction.

"My...our quarters are this way," Lieutenant Montran motioned back toward the bathing room. She felt exhausted, and suspected it wasn't just physically. What to do with Sheila was going to have to be dealt with tomorrow. The bathing room door to her sleeping area opened at their approach.

Guardian probably has it all figured out. Right now...a good eight hours rest is at the top of my list of things to do...after something to eat and a soak for my bruises... Gawds, I'm beginning to feel stiff. Harriet, do you realize that you're chattering to yourself because you don't want to think? Why is that? Surely not because I had two big shocks of my life...or is it three. This is they type of day I would like to sleep off and forget.

She came to an abrupt stop in the kitchenette. "Do you...are you hungry?" Lieutenant Montran turned to Sheila.

"Yes, Mistress."

Lieutenant's face turned bright red. The rush of heat through her body was sudden and took her by surprise. Maud's 'once bitten' comment ran through her mind. She swallowed a few times, realizing her mouth was dry, taking some time to collect herself. "Do you have a food selection preference?" she managed to ask.

"No, Mistress."

Lieutenant Montran turned to Bach. *Mistress. It's just a word.* Taking a few breaths, she found the heat lessening. The kitchenette bot patiently waited.

"Two meals, light, Bach," Lieutenant Montran ordered. Since the bot had picked her morning meal with efficiency, she expected it would be as proficient now.

"Would either of you care for a beverage?" Bach asked.

Sheila was silent and didn't look like she was going to say anything.

"I would like something that is good for sleep. How about you?" Lieutenant Montran turned to Sheila.

Sheila surprised her by asking Bach for a list of beverages. Her choice ended up the same Bach selected for Lieutenant Montran. While Bach buised itself there was a long silence that Lieutenant Montran was too tired to break with polite conversation.

"I'll be but a moment. Have a look around," Lieutenant Montran offered Sheila. She plopped down in the chair in the bedroom and attempted to pull off her boots, giving up when the butler offered assistance. Her clothes were taken from her, pockets emptied, and her second skin went into its own drawer. A soft blue light came on as the drawer closed. Her eyes fell on the items the butler pulled from her pockets and laid on the bed for her to peruse and put away.

What is this? Turning it over in her hand, she couldn't decide what it could be. *Oh, Yes. I remember where I got this. But, what is it? Later.* She laid it on the chair and stiffly headed toward the bathing room. Without the second skin she was really hurting.



In the shower her tired thoughts circled around the subject of Sheila. Being addressed as 'mistress' didn't help her resolution to not make Sheila 'hers.' What was even more distressful was her sexual attraction to the woman. Though not as intense as it was during their first encounter, she wondered how she was going to be able to look at the woman and not feel like an animal in rutting season. It was embarrassing. She nearly banged her head on the tiled wall in exasperation.

Ald had a towel and robe ready for her. She was just as annoyed as when she entered.

"Can you run the tub water and add something for bruises, Ald? I'll take a soak after I eat."

"My very recommendation for you both, Lieutenant Montran," he judiciously reported, breaking her train of thoughts.

Lieut, you are forgetting your manners. You could ask Sheila if she has any injuries or would like a shower. What will she wear after her shower? I'll let the butler handle that.

Back in the bedroom, she sat in the chair with her robe tucked around her, trying to concentrate on a solution to their sleeping arrangements. To keep an eye on her meant they had to sleep in the same area. That brought a mixture of feelings her imagination fired up. She awoke to Sheila's touch on her shoulder.

"Your meal is ready, Mistress. Though your bios say you are tired, you do need nourishment."

Lieutenant Montran blinked a few times, letting the image of the metradame become clearer.

"You can read bios." Lieutenant Montran wearily rose. *Great. Between Guardian and her, I'm going to feel over scrutinized.*

On the table was only one plate of prepared food. "Did you eat already?" *How long was I out?*

"No, Mistress. I will eat when you have finished."

"Unless you prefer not to, I would like the company," Lieutenant Montran forced herself to look at the metradame, noticing she looked like she had been in a fight. Embarrassed at not noticing it before, she glanced at Bach. "Can you bring another chair, Bach?" *Lieut, you are going to have to brush up on your courtesy skills. I can't believe you didn't notice it. Well, yes I can. I had other things on my mind.* She imagined what her grandfather would be saying. Cocking her head to one side, she wondered where his voice had gone.

Eh, ma dearie. I still be near ya.

Bach placed a steaming beverage before each woman and then stepped back. The lieutenant chewed her food thoughtfully, glancing across the table now and then at Sheila not sure where to start with giving back her own life.

"Do you have a name you would like to be addressed as?"

The metradame paused in mid chew, and then resumed, looking thoughtful. "I don't know."

"I want you to have a say in your own life. You are free to speak and to share ideas...and to go where you wish...though Guardian does have rules since this is his outpost. Selecting your own name is a good start." *Very good, Lieut. Order her to not be your slave. I wonder if that is all there is to this metradame thing. I Got to know more about these metrapeople. Guardian said he gave me access to his library. Tomorrow I'm going to have a lot of reading to do.*

Lieutenant Montran's meal was soon finished. She needed to soak in the tub before she had no more energy to care where she fell asleep. Thinking about the battering her body had been through, she was surprised that nothing was broken.

As Lieutenant Montran rose from her finished meal, she waved the metradame back into her seat. "Please, finish your meal at your own pace. I'm going to soak a bit and then go to bed. All the facilities are at your disposal, so if you need a shower or soak... before you go to bed, you know where the facilities are." *So, where did you decide Sheila is going to sleep? Not on the couch. The bed is rather big and can be made larger and that would make it easy to keep an eye on her.* She pushed the sexual feelings aside impatiently. "We can share the bed until...until something else is worked out," Lieutenant Montran offered. "That is, if you don't mind?"

Why not share? During her military career and as a child she shared many a cot and bed with strangers and seldom did it involve anything sexual.

"Thank you, Mistress."

The smell of the herbs from the bath was calling to her. A flush rose to her cheeks then quickly heated other areas as her eyes took in the metradame. Sheila could, for all intents and purposes, have simply been eating her dinner and looking up at Lieutenant Montran for but a brief moment, but to the lieutenant, it was a seductive tilt of her head, an inviting smile that curved the sensuous mouth, and the eyes...green as the ocean on Emery...

Ohhh, goddess...I am in trouble here. "Until the butler supplies you with clothing of your own, we can share what's in the closet." She forced herself to breathe normally, "Maybe we can later get over to the city and pick up your belongings..." Lieutenant Montran couldn't think of anything else to say so she turned and continued into the bathing room feeling foolish at the flush her body took on whenever she looked at the metradame ...Sheila. She needed to remember that Sheila was a live person that someone had enslaved and not a bot.

Gratefully, she slid into the hot water.

Oohh. This is nice.

She leaned her head back comfortably on the tubs padded rim, listening to the soothing music while bubbling waters massaged her bruised body with herbal essences. She groaned as she heard the shower running and imagined how the water looked sloshing over Sheila's body. Her memories of advertisements extolling the sexual cleverness of the metradames didn't help.

Keeping her eyes closed, she wished her mind would shut off.

The shower ended.

Moments later, the water level in the tub rose as another body slid in.

"Mind if I join you, Mistress?" a throaty voice whispered near her ear.

Uh, oh.

Here her desire and morals parted company. Resisting wasn't an option at this point.

"No, I don't mind," her voice, husky with desire, whispered in reply. Lieutenant Montran took in a shaky breath and then continued, not recognizing her voice. "Do you remember...?"

"Yes, Mistress. Everything."

"Ah, umm."

"Does your shoulder hurt, Mistress?"

Montran nodded, not daring to say anything more, not trusting her voice.

Sheila's hands rested firmly on Lieutenant Montran's shoulders guiding her to turn around, facing away from her. Skilled hands kneaded sore shoulders, working out one sort of tension, replacing it with another.

A groan nearly escaped Lieutenant Montran's lips as the fingers unhurriedly worked their way down to the small of her back, sending small electrical charges up and down her spine. She was definitely aroused. Did she have the energy to rise to the occasion? She said she remembered everything. What if she strangled her in the middle of...

Too late to worry about that.

Sheila's hands slid in a slow arch from her back around to her breasts, cupping the soft white mounds. After a long time had passed with both women discovering each other's pleasure points, Sheila picked the lieutenant up and carried her from the tub into their shared sleeping quarters.

Sheila's husky voice whispered her desire in her ear. In response, the lieutenant groaned and latched her lips onto the woman's neck. Sheila deposited the dripping Lieutenant Montran on the bed, straddling her hips to sit comfortably on her stomach.

"Romantic mood. The forests of Ameick. Summer. Warm breeze," Lieutenant Montran whispered huskily. *Maybe it'sn't so bad wishing for something like this and getting it.*

Sheila smiled, leaning over her as their surroundings changed. As Sheila leaned down to capture her willing lips, a beam of light filtering through the large redwood giants gave her a further breathtaking backdrop. Birds were chirping, squirrels chattering, and leaves were rustling in the small summer breeze that swept over both of them as two pair of lips hungrily remet. The last the lieutenant remembered was Sheila massaging her foot from a cramp she got while in the mist of their passion.

Sometime in the night, Lieutenant Montran awoke and stumbled in partial sleep to the toilet. A small light lit the way. When she had made her way back to bed the metradame was holding the covers open for her. Gratefully, Lieutenant Montran snuggled up against Sheila, feeling her skin tingle at the contact.

"I would like the name Carol, Mistress," she heard whispered in her ear.

"Carol," she repeated sleepily. "That's a nice name."

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Chapter 8

There were heavy cumulus clouds overhead. As she strained to see into the darkness that was moving quickly in their direction, she felt the atmosphere change. Small sparks were flying as her younger brother moved forward.

"Don't move!" their father warned.

Their guide had told them that it could happen, but probably not today. The sun was too bright. But it was happening! Movement in the atmosphere in combination with their electromagnetic body movements would set off small flashes that could incinerate their forms. Would the dark funnel also appear and pull them up into its whirling center?

"There, to the left!" Nanny called out.

The funnel was moving toward them quickly, pushing dark clouds before it. But the dark clouds had some mixed blessings for it suddenly showered large drops of water on their unprotected heads. It washed away the potential for the abrasive reaction their off-world bodies had in this electromagnetic storm. By the time the clear sky and warm sun was upon them, they were soaked to the skin, cold, and each experiencing mixed emotions about their new home. Their species naturally became partners with the spirit of a planet. Could they find a peaceful coexistence with the spirit of this wild planet?

In her sleep, Carol shuddered at the memory. She felt a comforting arm around her tighten reflexively from her cringing movement.



Cadet Montran was tired yet too twitchy to sleep. A glance toward her roommates told her they were deep in sleep. Not wanting to wake them with her restless pacing she gave in to the pressing need to take a walk under the moonless night. Cadet Montran stayed to the well-worn path so as not to come upon anyone by surprise. As she neared the edge of the forest, she could feel another's presence. It was as if she was expected. Curious, she moved further into the trees that surrounded the glen.

Nearly hidden in the shadows of the trees she spied the form of a woman. Cadet Montran intuitively knew it was this woman's presence she felt. Instinctively she reached for her, reveling in the warmth of the connection and excited at the unfamiliar sensuous passion that lay just below the surface of their contact.

She was waiting for her? Why?

The woman started to dance. It was familiar...something from her childhood. The meaning forgotten. She took a slow deep breath, realizing that though it was pitch dark everywhere, she could see her Dancer clearly.

Gracefully, the Dancer moved from one dance step to another, her hands tapering to fingers that gently curved into recognized mudra poses. As the dance progressed, the intensity of the energy heightened within her, taking her by surprise that she should be experiencing it. An ethereal part of her separated from her physical form. It was a surreal experience when that part of her merged with the Dancer, breathing the same air, and feeling muscles strain as if they were her own. The image of a dragon appeared in her mind.

Yes. I remember now. It's the sacred dragon dance. The ritual that binds lovers through sexual energy! But we're not lovers.

Cadet Montran could feel the weight of the braided hair behind her head, the cold air that filled her lungs, hear the leaves high above them rustling in the breeze. Time and separateness blurred as the Dancers moved in the energy of the Dance.

The Dancers called in their energy reserves for the final leap and the most difficult of the moves, the flying stag. The Dancers rose to an impossible height, suspended under the twinkling stars, arms rose like antlers, fingers fanned out, touching a pair of stars, and then finally, as the Dancer dropped back to the ground, Cadet Montran separated from her. The powerful surge of sexual energy that shot through her caused her to loosen her concentration, and not being able to sustain it or knowing what to do, their connection broke. Her body vibrated with such force, it shook her composure. Her yoni strummed to the silent scream of release. She weakly gripped the tree she collapsed against, looking for the support and strength her legs lacked.

Goddess! Is that what it's like? No wonder the old ones insist that sexual liaisons should be taken more seriously, the two simultaneously thought.

*Cadet Montran's body continued to pulse as the blood pounded in her veins and ears in the aftermath, leaving her too weak to respond to the pull to go out to **her** Dancer. The abrupt sounds of laughter shattered the mood. While she waited for her legs to stop trembling, she thought of what she was experiencing. Her emotions were a mixture of shame and excitement, wondering what it meant, yet fearful of the implications.*

After that night, each time the twin moons hid their faces on the other side of the planet, she could feel the pounding of energy in her yoni, demanding a sweet release at the hands of her Dancer. Uncertain, she resisted the pull. She wanted to know more of who she had shared this sexual connection with, and what it meant.

It was just before the summer break that she put a name to her Dancer. Cadet Montran, relaxing with a group of friends at an off-campus meeting hall, glanced up at the new crowd of cadets that entered the hall. One of the women explained the other popular alehouse had closed for two days. The bantering and noise in the room was higher than usual. She began feeling twitchy and her face became flushed for no apparent reason. Her gaze was drawn to the other side of the room. Noises around her became muted as dark intriguing eyes captured hers. Shivers cascaded down her spine. Time stopped in the moment of mutual recognition.

Someone leaned over and whispered the name of the woman that had captured her attention.

Merely saying the name to herself inflamed her desires. Images of the athlete in televised Galactic competitions, her life before she enrolled in the Academy, replayed in her dreams. They had met as young women in a shrine of Aphrodite on some distant planet. She had just started her menses and was placing the traditional offering at the altar. The only thing memorable was that that night she had an erotic dream of the young athlete. At the time, she attributed it to a flush of hormones. Now, she knew it was because she had witnessed the Dragon's Dance the night before in her dreams. Who had called who for the first dance of A Shunja, Dance of Invitation?

Turning restlessly in her sleep, Harriet felt someone next to her move to accommodate her movement.

The next dream started, though on another entirely different vein.

It was a long ago memory of a young first Lieutenant who stood in front of her new troop, wondering what she had gotten herself into. The Degas Troop had given up and didn't care about what happened to them. She was angered because it meant that they were putting everyone's life in danger as well as her own. She had been given two stan weeks to become familiar with them, not recommended in classrooms, and that should have clued her in that something wasn't right about the troop or her being assigned to them, an officer with no previous combat experience.

In Lieutenant Montran's sleep she restlessly moved into another position and would have awoken if the darker memories started, but a warm hand rubbing her back, encouraged her dreams into another direction, dreams that were not as disturbing



In the morning, Montran woke pressed against Carol, holding her as if in comfort. She had one hand draped across her hip, her fingers dangling near her soft pubic hair. She sensed that Carol was already awake, and with her senses awakened, so came the sexual haze that encouraged her to push closer into the warm body.

"Good morning, Carol," she whispered, sliding her hand down her thigh. Her fingers trembled from yearning, feeling the soft skin pebble under her fingertips.

When does this end?

Carol turned in Lieutenant Montran's arms, her face close to hers, and her eyes dark in the dim light. A small smile curled the corners of her lips. She picked up Lieutenant Montran's warm fingers and began kissing them one at a time. By the time she got to the third digit Lieutenant Montran's body was vibrating with lust. She knew of no desire this strong and urgent as she threw back their covers and straddled the equally aroused Carol. Once more, they willingly gave into the sexual heat of their passions.

Exhausted, Lieutenant Montran rolled on her side and pulled Carol into her arms and held her silently.

Lieutenant Montran sighed. She needed to ask Carol.

"Carol?"

"Yes, Mistress?"

The sultry voice drove her crazy. Lieutenant Montran sighed again. "How much of ...this...is from the effects of ...of ..our first meeting?"

"All of it."

"But you're reacting as if it means something to you," Lieutenant Montran finally managed.

"It does, Mistress. I am affected by you as much as you are of me."

Of course. She's not a mechanical toy! "Does it wear off?"

"Yes, Mistress."

Lieutenant Montran was quiet for a while.

"Do you mind me...?"

Carol regarded the serious green eyes focused on her own.

"You have been kind enough to return the pleasure which in the past it had been for the amusement of others with my own satisfaction of no consequence for me or them."

Lieutenant Montran felt a mixture of emotions. "So, we just..." She couldn't finish the sentence.

"We just continue on until it wears off," Carol stated simply. "Is it bothering you?"

Lieutenant Montran laughed embarrassed, "No. I just hope I can survive. How long does it last?" Lieutenant Montran was enjoying the warmth her partner exuded.

Carol kissed the tip of her nose and then nipped it. "I hope I can too. I'm not sure about the duration, Mistress. For some it's longer than for others."

There were so many personal questions Lieutenant Montran wanted to ask her now that the intensity of passion was somewhat abated. But instead, she found herself enjoying the warm body that was pressed against hers, and fingers rubbing her back in small circles.

A soft ding sounded. "Good morning, Bekke Donnas," Guardian greeted them in another dialect. "I hope I am not disturbing you two, but Captain Zohra, our JG, or Gina Gari, has been up for over three stan hours. I thought it would be good for all of us to get together. I think she would also like a live sparing partner to keep her reflexes sharp," Guardian chuckled. "You all, I'm sure, would enjoy the challenge."

"Good morning, Guardian. I hope you are joking about sparing partners," Lieutenant Montran returned, remembering the type of workouts the Black Rose squad was reputed to like. "She's a captain? *So, who is sending the troops?*

"Within her Shield House and Naboths Vine, that is her rank. There are many groups who are interested in what is happening here." The voice continued, "The Committee and Collective are assessing the change of power in Committee space and I am waiting to see what the two ships, *Merchants Wife* and *Spinnners Tale* that are nervously hovering above us, are going to do. I am also curious why some of the Spartans are remaining, while the smugglers have completely pulled out."

"Admiral JoCastao is going to be unhappy that she missed the smugglers," Lieutenant Montran remarked. *Spartans remaining? So that's why a cleanup crew is being sent...but from where? Captain? Does that mean she has been put in charge of containing those Spartans that are remaining? Makes sense since she would know them and the setup.*

"There are twenty small wolf packs from the Collective in pursuit of those smugglers. The wolf packs arrived twelve stan hours after I sent off your message to Admiral JoCastao. They were getting ready to net the planet when the smugglers' ships started arriving and quickly departing. The packs have latched onto the departing smuggler ships and are following them out of this busy corridor. By the messages passed between the packs and their commander, I understand they are herding them into a less traveled area. I image they plan a battle."

Lieutenant Montran imagined what the command center of the flagship would look like, busy with messengers and no sleep for the planning staff as they went over every angle of the capture of the fleeing smugglers ships. To her surprise, she didn't miss it.

Sighing, Lieutenant Montran sat up and picked up the robe that was lying across the foot of the bed. She needed to concentrate and lying next to Carol was too distracting. If things were busy for the admiral, then they would be getting busy for her.

"So, just what is going on that the Collective can cross through Committee space?"

"There is no Committee, to speak of. Those identified on the broadcast are under house arrest and their assets frozen until the outcome of their trail. The others that had not made any commitment to censure or admonish the unlawful behavior of their fellow members have resigned by an overwhelming

demand of citizens in this sector. Word leaked out that they knew what was going on and didn't take action. The biggest worry is Alan Fermin. The new Committee, once formed, will banish Alan to the HinterWield prison colony with no hesitation. The Citizens Advocate Court ruled against him seven stan years back. He has violated the rules of his probation on numerous occasions and without Lord Chaney's support there are no more obstacles to prevent the injunction from being delivered and acted upon."

Why am I not surprised? Lieutenant Montran shook her head in consternation. "It is curious that his father has not kept closer restriction on his civil disobedience. He had to know that it would act against his petition for the seat on the Committee."

"It is the madness that has given his father some of the large gains he has made in the business world," Carol informed them.

"How is that?" Lieutenant Montran asked.

"Alan has the ability to read patterns in little sticks he throws. He can only see the patterns when he is not taking his medication. From reading these patterns he is able to predict with great accuracy winning and losing business deals, and who is friend and who is foe," Carol explained.

"That is something to consider," Guardian remarked. "It would certainly give a reason why he has been a step ahead of the authorities in some investigations."

"Well, let's get dressed and ready. We don't want to keep 'the captain' waiting too long. Give us about a stan hour, Guardian. I intend on eating a hearty morning meal, since it may be my last for a while," Lieutenant Montran added, seriously wondering when they would get time to eat again. There was too many unattended ends left on the outpost, and since Guardian didn't mention any messages from the admiral, she suspected she was expected to carry on here...meaning tie up the loose ends. She was sure the captain had her own orders. *Let's not forget it's Guardian who owns this planet...you just need to worry about yourself, lieut until the admiral sends orders.*



Carol dubiously studied the second skin the butler held for her inspection. It patiently explained to her why it was necessary to wear it when she moved around on the planet. Lieutenant Montran chuckled to herself, wondering if that was the same expression she wore when she was first introduced to the suit. Carol finally agreed to wear it only because her mistress told her to, not because she chose to.

Lieutenant Montran left Carol to her dressing and went into the front room to order their breakfast. Carol joined her in a short time.

"Carol, I...uh." Mentally she shook herself for the fluttering in her stomach at Carol's near presence. "I would like you to make decisions about your welfare for yourself, but in the case of the second skin, I know from experience the butler is correct. The way you were bouncing me into the wall I would have been out like a light if I hadn't had this second skin on. So, even though I tell you...I mean encourage you to make your own life decisions, if I think I know better I'll speak up. If you disagree...tell me." She let out a breath of air in frustration. She had been in the military for so long she wasn't sure how civilians operated on chain-of-command. A light went off and she smiled. "Guardian is the boss on the outpost. We follow his rules." She chewed a few bites and thought about it. "But you don't have to do anything you feel is not good for you. Got that?" she told her firmly.

Carol's face was expressionless when she nodded.

"So, one of the rules of Guardian's is not to kill unless it's absolutely necessary. The other is that you defend yourself. Can you follow that?"

"Yes, mistress."

Lieutenant Montran was going to tell her to stop calling her that when it occurred to her that if they were going to be sharing a bed...and then her thoughts shut down because she wasn't ready to handle the idea of Carol leaving her. It made her hands shake. Silently she cursed the pheromone gas.

Lieutenant Montran was handing her emptied plate to Bach when they received their first visitor.

"It is Charles," the familiar voice announced.

"Enter," Lieutenant Montran called, curious at this unexpected visit.

"Good day, Lady Harriet and Ti Carol," he greeted them both pleasantly.

Carol moved quickly to her mistress's side, regarding Charles' brightly colored shape with uncertainty, looking perplexed at whether he was a threat or just a loud fashion statement.

"Lady Harriet, Guardian has received a coded message from Lord Hadrian DeMonte for you. You will have to go to the Command Center to access it." Charles turned to Carol. "I will need to take some

bioreadings of you now that you have your second skin on. Metrapeople have their own bioregulators and when we design an outer suit for you we need to make sure it's a harmonious blend." His many appendages were raised at different heights as if ready for something. Lieutenant Montran was almost as alarmed as Carol until he started explaining what each appendage would measure.

"Well, sounds okay," Lieutenant Montran told Carol, and then added, "Great!" She had been wondering how she was going to ask Guardian questions about Carol if she was always with her. "That shouldn't take too long with all those...arms. You can join me in Com-C when Charles is finished." Carol's eyes revealed her displeasure at her mistress's decision.

The Command area door swished open as she neared it. The dais was lit up with an interesting holographic image of Guardian's version of himself as a middle aged copec.

Guardian is getting more creative. I've never seen that style of clothing before.

"Nice outfit, Guardian. You are certainly coming out of your pod in style. You said Hadrie sent me a message?"

"Yes. Well...it's but one word." The holograph looked puzzled.

"Yes?" she encouraged.

"Mem."

Lieutenant Montran stood still for a few moments, letting the word sound in her mind. "Hmmm. Well, at this time, it has no meaning to me either," she laughed.

Lieutenant Montran's senses picked up someone else's presence. Her eyes glanced around the room, settling on a slight movement from the darkened conference room. She casually moved to the back of the chair to get a protected view of the darkened doorway.

Do I get one guess who this might be?

"Oh, permit me to introduce you formerly to Captain Delorita Jina Gari Zohra, from the Shield Maidens of Athena's House on Velta V. Captain Zohra, this is....."

"Lieutenant Montran," the lieutenant quickly supplied, not wishing to hear her long clan name and title sandwiched in with her military rank. She nodded warily toward the shadowed form.

What is all this hiding in shadows stuff? Must be some Black Rose form of amusing oneself.

Lieutenant Montran could have kicked herself. Her cynicism was from nervousness and she had nothing to be nervous about. The lights came up slowly revealing a livelier version of the figure she had tucked into bed the previous night. The captain's long legs appeared to be stretched before her, but Lieutenant Montran's wary eyes noted that they were not totally stretched out, giving her enough leverage if she should have to suddenly leap up. Scars and bruises were gone from her face, but there was no indication of recognition or warmth from her.

"Good morning, Captain. You're looking well."

The captain nodded not changing her expression.

Oh, Yes. The tough look. Big bad Black Rose. She certainly has had the time to perfect the pose.

Lieutenant Montran looked at Guardian to break the hold the dark eyes had on her. She knew the captain was making an evaluation of her also, and wondered what she used for measurement...probably Black Rose standards.

What does she remember? two minds asked.



Captain Zohra watched Lady Harriet Montran enter Com-C with natural assuredness. Zohra was accustomed to brutish military swaggering or wary posturing and took a few moments to enjoy the difference. Lady Harriet looked strong, indicating she kept up with her field training, but then, she already knew that from Guardian's recordings of her that she just started to review. For a moment, she thought of what it would be like to grapple with her; each testing the others strengths and weaknesses. One of the many lessons she had learned as a Black Rose wasn't to underestimate an individual's capabilities. She was looking forward to testing Lady Harriet's limits...and strengths.

Zohra felt a quickening in her as dark green eyes flashed with humor at the holograph of Guardian, and full lips curved into a bright smile, showing even white teeth.

Warmth. She is exuding warmth. The captain frowned. *She's showing too much trust that the room is secured.* But her attention quickly returned to the change in the room Lady Harriet's presence brought. *Where is this energy coming from? Guardian is right. She has some kind of power, more than*

what I remember when we were cadets. Is she aware of it? No. Otherwise she would not let it shine everywhere. Shine? What kind of a description is that?

Lady Harriet's hesitation as she thought about the message Guardian delivered was more than a pause for thought, Zohra suspected. *What is Lord Hadrian, one of the most important people in Naboths Vine, informing her of? Is it something I need to inform the sisterhood about? I don't think so. Lord Hadrian is not one to play his own game.*



As the lights were full up, Lieutenant Montran turned her gaze back to the captain's still figure. "I'm sure you both remember each other from your earlier days," Guardian remarked.

"Lady Harriet Montran," the voice was low, and curt. "How are you doing?" she added after a slight hesitation.

Now Lieutenant Montran had a voice to her Dancer, yet, she didn't believe this was the voice she used among friends. Lieutenant Montran nodded and then answered thoughtfully, "Well. And yourself?" she asked in return, wondering if the captain would answer. No, she would control the conversation, sharing nothing.

A slight nod was returned. The captain had moved her hands to her lap, holding them in a classic mudra pose for centering. A blush tinged Lieutenant Montran's cheeks when she realized her eyes rested too long on the hands.

Oh, helios' fires! Is this part of the lust gas? Is Guardian aware of the effects on my bios? She glanced at Guardian suspiciously. Were they all part of an experiment?

This can't be all from exposure to pheromones! The planet? Why would you think the planet, Lieut? It doesn't matter whether it's the pheromones or the planet; you have got to tone this reaction down. Maybe Ald has something to recommend. Why didn't one of the wolf ships pick me up before they chased after the departing smugglers?

Stories of how different planets affected different species or individuals both positively and negatively came to mind, as if to mock her.

Oh, right. Like this is my quasama, kismet... That is really stretching things. I joined the military to get out of that mystic mindset, Harry, and I still run amuck in it. This is more than I want on my plate. Now would be a good time for the admiral and her team to arrive so I can go back to being just a lieutenant among many. Lieutenant Montran resisted a deep sigh for the return of the uncomplicated last seven years of her life...though, the thought of returning to a sedate life at the moment was less than enticing. Things were just getting more interesting. Lieutenant Montran nearly choked on the thought.

"We have some issues to clear before moving on," Guardian continued. "The first one is about you, Captain Zohra. The JG personality you have lived for over nine stan years maybe difficult to erase with fifty six stan hours of debriefing. Though JG has an impeccable war record, off-base she was abrasive, confrontational and a nonconformist."

Lieutenant Montran was relieved at Guardian's directness, knowing that directness was a two edged sword, and she may be the next one squirming.

"I knew who I was during my undercover work. So there is no conflict about personality adjustment. However, I would not advise any sudden surprises."

Is that a joke or is she serious? "What about any of the operations we may have to take against the Spartans in the city, Captain? Most notably against the Black Rose." Lieutenant Montran pressed. Oh, right. Like whom are we going to take action against? Guardian reported the smugglers have left and only a small group of Spartans have remained. Who are they waiting for? Don't they have a ride out? Why can't Guardian arrange with his 'influence' to find them transportation? Rouge Spartans...maybe they have issues with the Committee. Now would be a good time for them to get out of here while the Committee is busy with other concerns.

After waiting for a long moment, the captain replied, "I think I can manage not getting you or anyone else under my command killed, provided you don't do something rash. And, you won't have to worry about the Black Rose. Guardian has them locked up tight until a neutral party arrives to pick them up for questioning."

Lieutenant Montran's face colored enough to be noticed. *Well, I guess that's the second indication that this operation is under her leadership. The 'Lady' bit was a damn good clue, Harriet.*

"That clears quite a bit up. The other thing is Carol," Guardian continued. "You have some questions, Lieutenant Montran?"

Lieutenant Montran hesitated as her thoughts shifted. She felt uncomfortable talking about Carol in front of the captain for some reason, but she was going to have to get it out now before Carol walked in.

"Who was she before she became involved in this mess and what can be done to give her back her life?"

"I have been researching it with others. But, we do need to know what type of personality we're about to let loose with all the new training she has received," he cautioned.

"Are you saying that Sheila, I mean Carol was something ..."

"Sheila! Lord Chaney's Sheila?" Captain Zohra sat forward in her chair. Guardian had told her that Lord Chaney was dead, and his metradame was neutralized, but there had been no time for details.

"Yes. Is there something you wish to contribute?" Guardian asked surprised.

"I need to confer with my superiors on this matter. Where is she now?"

"She's in my quarters. She'll be here shortly."



Neutralized.

Captain Zohra glanced at the holograph irritated and then at Lady Harriet but refrained from asking details. She wasn't sure at just how much information she could or wanted to share. Due to Sheila's closeness to Lord Chaney in his business dealings, she was now a hot commodity on the smugglers kidnap list, to say nothing of her importance to Lady Varina and Chaney's associates.

"I shall go forward with my plans to encourage her to become self-determined, unless you can give me a good reason not to," Lieutenant Montran informed both of them firmly. The glare she received from the dark eyes of the captain caused her to add, "I will not let anyone waylay her into a political game..."

"You have no say in this matter, Lady Harriet. There is too much at stake for an uninformed visitor to interfere with good intentioned overtures," Zohra returned more harshly than she intended. *Why did you return?*

"Don't give me the political yak crap or military dung about how one person or two or even a village is perfectly okay to sacrifice for the 'greater good'," Lieutenant Montran returned heatedly. "I've been there, done that, and will not be a part of it again! And nor will Carol! This is neutral territory. I won't let you and your backers strong arm her into your mess!"

An eerie overlap of reality had Lieutenant Montran pausing. She attributed it to the effects of the pheromone gas not having anything else handy.

"Self-determined you say? What if she agrees to be sacrificed?" Captain Zohra challenged quietly.

"No one is going to be sacrificed on my planet, Lieutenant Montran," Guardian's indignant voice interrupted her hard glare in Captain Zohra's direction. "That is NOT an option, Captain. And since you know that...my guess is you are testing the lieutenant," he offered in an attempt to break the tension. For a long moment, the captain was quiet as the two women stared into each others' eyes, neither's gaze wavering. Then Captain Zohra gave a slight nod to Lieutenant Montran.

Lieutenant Montran didn't believe the captain was testing her. In the heat of the conversation, Lieutenant Montran could see that the captain said too much.

So, is she saying Carol volunteered to be Lord Chaney's metradame? How did that happen? How can an operative slip up so easily after nine years?

"Lieutenant Montran, I noticed you like to work out," Guardian changed the subject hoping to clear the tension his sensors picked up.

Lieutenant Montran turned to the face the hologram, grinning at the sudden change of subject. She wondered where he was going with this. Maybe he was offering the captain a chance to beat the stuffing out of her. That changed the grin to a frown, and then a small smile. She held her own for a while, fighting with Sheila.

"I have down loaded all known fighting techniques to date with combatants from beginner to master levels so that you all will not be bored until others arrive. Until the briefing in five stan hours, there is nothing planned. I am sure the captain would like to keep up her skills. Perhaps after she has been debriefed by her own command, she will join you." Guardian decided it was time to separate the two

women. He needed to speak with the captain. After observing her for two years, he knew this was her usual manner, but he had hoped the subliminals would help her slide into a less aggressive stance.

Lieutenant Montran nodded to the captain, making sure she had a polite smile on her face, though she was sure the captain didn't really care one way or the other what she liked or disliked. *Damn, Spartan! Who am I kidding that she would be anything else but a hard-nosed grunt! And Guardian suggested we spar. I would rather face the computer simulators than the captain, though it would be interesting to see just what she knows. I would like to see her taken down a peg or two...by Carol, anyway. I'll just watch.*

The door slid open and Charles and Carol entered.

Captain Zohra noted Lady Harriet's flushed cheeks and quickly lowered eyes. It appeared she was trying to regain her composure. How the metradame came to be known as Carol was something she intended on learning quickly. Was that what Guardian called 'neutralized'? And what was Lady Harriet embarrassed about?

Carol felt the tension in the room the moment she entered. Quickly she spotted her mistress and stepped beside her, first studying the holograph and then fixing her eyes on where the tension was coming from. The unconscious woman from the previous night was seated, making an effort to relax. Carol looked into her dark eyes, assessing whether the tension was a threat to her mistress.

Lieutenant Montran could feel Captain Zohra's interest shift to Carol much to her relief, for she could feel her stomach tightening, and her sex swell at the sight of Carol. She cleared her throat and smiling at Carol she started in a steady voice that belied her feelings, "Carol this is Guardian who oversees Merkers Outpost, and Captain Zohra. Guardian – Carol, Captain – Carol." She hesitated wondering what else to say, then decided nothing else was needed. "Guardian has mentioned that he has a dojo setup for workouts with trainers at whatever level we can manage." Lieutenant Montran smiled at Carol, hoping her eyes didn't show what her body was going through. Their nearness raised noticeable goose bumps on her arms.

Abruptly a surge of energy rushed up Lieutenant Montran's frame increasing her sensitivity to her environment. Swirls of colors appeared around the captain and Carol with tangible emotions emanating from them and - attraction. More things from the past, Lieutenant Montran thought exasperated.

"Since you have no need of us for the moment, we'll go change into some workout clothes and be in the workout room," she informed Guardian and Captain Zohra.

When they left Guardian started to chuckle.

"What is so funny? And what happened to Lady Harriet?"

"Have you heard about the lust gas that Sheila was equipped with?"

The captain's eyes widened a little and she nodded. *Oh, oh! Who has not heard about Sheila the Crotch Nummer or in the guy's case, Blue Balls Specialist. So, m'lady, your crotch is humming for Sheila, is it?*

"Captain, we need to discuss your prickly disposition," Guardian started firmly, interrupting her thoughts.

"Care to elaborate, Guardian?" She leaned back in her chair and wondered how this computer was going to 'handle' her.



Stopping at their quarters for proper workout clothing, Lieutenant Montran found to her amusement that Carol could initiate jokes. It reminded her that she needed to do some research on metrapeople. Was humor an indication that she was becoming more self-aware?

Carol and Lieutenant Montran had no problem finding the dojo. When the elevator doors opened, there was no mistaking where they were. The artwork was magnificent with some life size statues depicting sport celebrities during their sport. Lieutenant Montran paused at one mural covering a door. It was of a young girl, human mixed with elf and probably something else, waiting pensively for her turn on the equestrian field. One hand held the looped reins of her tall horse while the other rested on the mare's neck. It was as if both horse and rider were gauging their competition on the field before their turn. It was her Dancer, the year she became galaxy champion in the steeplechase. Zohra of Prime V. It was the first year she competed with the adults. Lieutenant Montran looked into the room to see beyond the mural. It was a holographic room with various forms of sports that required a mount, from riding the wild winged creatures of Aden to the large land beasts. Steeplechase and polo were two of the many games the Gaming Master offered.

"Guardian or previous tenants must have been the sporting type. Never knew a scientist that was athletic," she murmured, as an image of Sharon came to mind. "I shall have to ask Guardian about his art collection." She moved her eyes away from the picture and looked around at the rest of the artwork. "I have never seen so many different styles of art gathered outside of a gallery."

Lieutenant Montran pushed through the double doors to the workout room.

"Okay," she said as she glanced around. "I'm going to warm up with the holograph and then we'll..." she looked at Carol, "spar and see who will toss in the towel first."

Carol could feel the competitive spark from her mistress underneath the constant sensuous feelings that underlined their connection. "Toss in the towel?" she asked while watching her mistress step back to face her warm up holographic partner.

"Ask for mercy, call it quits, get beaten," she explained with a grin.

"Ah. I find that...commendable...that you prewarn me that you shall be 'throwing in the towel'." "Humph!" Lieutenant Montran snorted and then settled into the warm up. After an hour, her partner signaled the time she set was reached. A dojo bot appeared with liquids and towels for both women.

"Are you ready to spar, Carol?" She felt ready to take on a few Black Rose at the moment. She bounced on the balls of her feet and shook out her arms.

"Yes, Mistress."

"I would like you to find all my weak spots and keep after them." Unbidden, the image of Carol biting her neck came to her. Maybe taking on a Black Rose would be better.

"That sounds easy enough," Carol teased, and snapped her teeth as if taking a bite out of her.

Does she read minds too? I really am in trouble here.

Shaking her head to clear it, she moved to the center of the room and got into a ready position. Carol nodded with a smile, and for the next thirty minutes, kept laying her mistress out on the mat with a good sound thump.

Lieutenant Montran rubbed her sore hip while warily looking at her opponent as they slowly circled each other. At first, the distraction of touching Carol's body kept her off-balance. Her skin was still tingling from the last toss when both landed on the mat with limbs entangled, fighting for the top position with muffled giggles and startled squawks at the intimate grabs and pinches they both indulged in as each fought for dominance.

Lieutenant Montran laughed, not taking her eyes off Carol. *So, this must be the real Carol and not the metradame program. It's amazing how fast the character can change. Is she remembering who she was or am I just wishing? No, when I met her she had a warped sense of humor. So, Yes. This is her All right. So...she's fun. Well, duh, Harriet. Like last night wasn't a clue? How many funnies did she whisper to prevent me from climaxing, just so she could build it up again? Wow.*

Thump, bam.

"Ooff." *Focus here. Let's not get sidetracked with erotic thoughts. You're going to have to figure out how to avoid touching her to get past her defenses.*

Lieutenant Montran quickly was on her feet and in a defensive position, while Carol charged her to follow up on her toss. Lieutenant Montran intuitively responded with a fake to the right. Finally having the advantage, Lieutenant Montran prepared for the offense. Just as she was ready to attack, she realized they had an audience. Someone who had been in the room for a while. That momentary lapse of concentration allowed Carol to land a well-placed kick to Lieutenant Montran's mid section. After flying a good distance and landing flat on her back, Lieutenant Montran lay still, recovering from having the wind knocked out of her. Opening her eyes, she saw two pairs of eyes staring down at her...both, unconcerned.



"When will the effects wear off?" Captain Zohra asked Guardian, worried as they watched the two women from monitors in Com-C. They were expending more energy than was necessary for a warm up, beating up the floating bags that moved around like bodies.

"It has already started. With Lieutenant Montran, by the end of the week it should be completely out of her system."

"Good. Rumors were that it never wears off."

"For those who do not have the antidote that is true."

"How is Carol doing?"

"She is an unknown equation. Due to the chip that is still implanted...it's difficult to tell. Her bios are running along the same line as Lieutenant Montran's, given the species variation. Since Lieutenant Montran's directions to her have military overtones, coming out as directives and orders, it's not easy to tell if Carol's compliance is from a desire to complete an ordered task or her own choosing. From what I've observed on Lord Chaney's various visits here, he didn't like to feel his metrapeople were like bots, so he allowed more freedom in normal behavior than most owners. So, her humor and tastes in dressing are her own. That is saying a lot about the sophistication of the chip implants."

The captain nodded, as if agreeing, but not adding anything about her own observations. Guardian understood her refusal to share since she had no orders as of yet to do otherwise. In his two years of studying and testing the minds of military and smuggler types he felt he knew what her response would be under military conditions. It was her reaction to Lieutenant Montran that had taken him by surprise.

"I believe Lieutenant Montran knows that you are in charge of protecting the outpost and its special assets, though I don't believe she knows all that is here. But it's only a matter of time. She is...sensitive to things like that."

Captain Zohra gave a broad smile, letting the amusement reach her eyes. "I don't think that is a problem, Guardian. I rule the land and she gets the sky...army...navy, ya know? So, you think she's sensitive, huh?" *Well, that bears some looking into. So, she radiates power of some sort and is sensitive to energy fields. Not something I'm personally familiar with.*

Looking back at the screen, she nodded toward it. "Is there a safe distance they can work without being so...distracted?"

They both watched the two women laughing as they wrestled around on the mat, then finished the engagement with a passionate kiss.

"Skin contact has the strongest effect on them."

It doesn't look like she is suffering much. "I thought you said your second skin will protect the wearer against most physical harm?"

"Yes. The second skin protects against an attack to the wearer's system, but I never thought of someone using a love potion. Since pheromones are a natural chemical reaction of lust and part of a natural prelude to sexual enjoyment, and in turn release other natural body chemicals which help heal and maintain the health of the host body, I thought to leave it alone." A deep chuckle followed that remark. "If satisfaction wasn't received, then that would be another story. A transmission. Good. You're major general is hailing us," Guardian announced. "It appears she is in flight," he mentioned as one of the screens started to change.

Captain Zohra sat up as the official seal of the Sister's of the Shield quickly changed to her much-loved and missed general. Zohra's demeanor changed completely.

"Daughter!" Major General Aglauros greeted her lovingly.

"Major General Aglauros," she greeted her formally, and then smiled with affection. "Mother, it's been a long time since I have said that," she added. For the first time in years she let the weariness of the job catch up with her, surprised at how seeing her mother brought her so much relief.

The older woman nodded, her eyes studying the captain closely. "Are you well?"

The captain hesitated, wanting to say something that had bothered her for a while, but the need passed, and she merely nodded. "Just tired," she allowed, knowing that the general didn't ask a question lightly.

"You have changed much," referring to her altered face, and the hard lines she could see around the mouth and eyes of this stranger. Even the eyes were more shielded than she ever remembered, and her adopted daughter had always been hard to read, even as an infant. She noticed the slight hesitation and furrow over Zohra's brow, and it gave Aglauros something to think about. But, there was still work to do. General Aglauros smiled for a brief moment and then turned serious.

"I was hoping that once we had Lady Harriet Montran and your team safe that we could be rid of this trouble and you could come home for a well earned vacation."

So, she would like the old Zohra's face back. I don't think I can do that, Mother. Not yet. Let me get used to being me...whoever that is.

"Alan Fermin is our chief worry. From what our informants have told us, he is planning on either taking over the planet or destroying it. Unless someone figures out why he wants the planet, because he certainly Can't use the portal himself...or any of his agents, we can only assume it's to create havoc in the other portals just for the sake of doing it." She paused again as she studied the younger woman's image. "His violence against others is increasing. And according to the psychtechs, his violence will continue to

escalate." She took a deep aggravated breath, "He is still obsessed with Lady Harriet and unfortunately, as his acts of violence increase so does his madness for her. Your assignment has two unfinished tasks."

Captain Zohra stomach tightened.

"I am pleased that Suzamni Takenya is well," the major general continued. "It would have grieved me deeply if our sister had not made it. I am sending four battalions. Two are on the *Moons Reflection*, and the others on the *Respite*. Healers will be coming through the portal within a day, depending on how safe the guardians feel travel at this time through them is. The ships are a little more than a day's jump from you. Send daily updates to the *Respite* so they know what they are heading into. You will get updates from the four corners as soon as we have something for you. I shall be there as soon as I can. Be aware that Naboths Vine has joined with the Collective's Centurion forces to keep order where necessary until the new representatives of the Committee are elected." She let out a loud harrumph in disgust. "The representatives that are not being replaced are already arguing that with a new group of representatives, the name should be changed. No telling what they'll come up with and how many years it's going to take for a third of them to agree on anything. Admiral JoCastao is the Collective's representative," the general continued. "I'm sure she'll be sending a representative of hers to the outpost besides Lady Harriet. We...are still getting acquainted...ironing out a plan."

Zohra didn't stop the smile that curled up the corners of her lips. It meant the two were in charge and evenly matched in stubbornness. She wondered who the other two members were. Usually military war forums were composed of two military and two civilians so that one personality didn't run the operation. Military egos have in the past run amuck with goals not always arrived at or the same as the people they had originally set out to defend.

"When the medic comes, get cleared quickly, so you can take the leadership of the troops when they arrive. Be safe, Captain Zohra, beloved daughter. Guardian, thank you for your continuing updates. Out."

Captain Zohra took a deep breath and leaned back in the chair. It was still up to her, but there was an end in sight and that really did help her morale. She had not realized how tired she was until she saw her mother.

"What does she mean 'continuing'?" she glanced at the holograph image of Guardian.

"I am a member of the Naboths Vine," Guardian explained as if that told her everything.

She studied the hologram for a few moments and then asked, "Were you my...?"

"Yes," he told her before she finished her sentence. She hated when people did that. "You had some most interesting test questions to see if I was to be trusted. General Aglauros was entertained."

"You had to ask her?" an uncharacteristic squeaky voice asked.

"Well, who else was I to trust with your life?" Guardian responded practically.

Zohra was now regretting her cynical questions she used to test her mysterious 'insider' with, like who was the first person she had romantically kissed, or had a crush on...all of which were none, to her way of thinking. She wasn't going to live some of her remarks down with her mother. "So, we still have the portal to worry about."

"Portals. There is a great deal of caution being taken amongst the other guardians in securing their portals. If one is disrupted it will cause a chain reaction to the others, and to each host planet," Guardian explained.

The captain glanced at the screen of the dojo. The two women were still working out. Carol was tossing Lady Harriet – more often than not and spending far too much time wrestling on the ground.

"I think I will go rescue the women from their hormonal surges." She pushed herself out of the chair. "They are having far too much fun."

Guardian's chuckles followed her out of the command center.



Captain Zohra entered unobserved by Lady Harriet, but the heightened senses of Suzamni Takenya or Carol, picked up on her presence. Until the chip was removed from her, Captain Zohra suspected Carol would protect Lady Harriet with her life, unasked, because the impulse was part of the chip implant. It explained why she was so protective of her when she had walked into Com-C. She was wondering if the two would allow each other out of sight when they had to do some recon missions. It would be necessary to break them into one-person pods. The recon missions were a must for her to find out

what was going on in the City. Zohra laughed silently as she thought she would also continue what Guardian did so well, drive the unwanted visitors crazy. It would be nice to be on the other side of the rude surprises for a change. When her reinforcements arrived, she wanted to be able to give an accurate assessment of who was still on the planet. Between Guardian's assessment of the soldiers and her own knowledge, she would have a comprehensive report ready for whoever was captain of the *Respite*. *Now leave it to the general for leaving out just who are the officers in charge of the two ships and who will be among the troop personnel. She did that on purpose. So, who would she like to surprise me with? I hope not an old girlfriend or girlfriends.*

She decided it would be less stressful to study the two women from a technical standpoint and leave speculation for another time. The two women put up a good demonstration, even with the laughs, teasing and passionate kisses preceding the takedowns. But then, as she watched Lady Harriet, she thought back on her hesitation in accepting Guardian's word that she had been deprogrammed. She was right to worry. Though she felt consciously that she had no problem recognizing whose side she was on, there was something buried deep that she had not been able to bring to consciousness. It was something that had been with her for three years now. It was about that time when her dreams started to take on a different tone. The more she attempted to wheedle it out, the more elusive it became. Many times, she had tried to discuss it with her contact, but for one reason or another, she never brought it up. She shrugged off the worry. When the healers arrive, she would mention it to them.

Thump, bam.

I bet that hurt... Hm, nice reward...but for who? Wonder what it would feel like to take her down?

Her dark eyes studied Lady Harriet with a critical eye. Her reflexes were not what a Black Rose would call impressive, but she didn't have to be a one-woman killing machine. Her balance was good and she had the right moves. She didn't let thinking get in her way as she responded to some of Carol's moves. She guessed Lady Harriet was controlling more of this game than what appeared. She didn't need to study Carol, for she had seen her in practice when Lord Chaney visited. He didn't want her to train with anyone that could later use what they learned from her against her, so he had a special program designed for her. The entire Black Rose squad on Merkers had a copy of it. She smirked to herself as she remembered the others were incredulous that their sergeant major really worked to the highest level of the holograph program. Some of them thought it was a joke on them. No one could train a metradame to that level unless she was an assassin before a metradame and then they got silent. No one was supposed to know where metrapeople came from. There were assassins that eliminated people who knew and talked about it. Which was why the knowledge had not trickled down to the masses yet. However, she and four others had decided to work up to the same level as the training holograph, just in case someone would need to take her out, the captain had said. But, each of them had their own selfish reasons to train at that level. Captain Zohra did it because it was a challenge.

Her thoughts returned to the problem they were facing. Since Alan was on his way, his little army of metrasoliders would also be arriving. Probably before he did, to make sure he would be safe. From what she had read, he had over a hundred soldiers programmed to kill, though she doubted he would send them all here, but even two troops, between the three of them, or four, if she counted Guardian, would have to hold them off if the two relief ships didn't arrive on time. Would Alan take advantage of this time when the protection of the outpost was vulnerable? Yes. So where were all his troops? Maybe they caught him off guard and his troops were scattered about. So, where would he have had them stationed. Lord Chaney's death certainly changed the power balance.

She had seen and competed against various members of Alan's elite group. They wore the black clothing almost like that of a *yobashi*, a well-organized and closed group of assassins; though she knew they were not part of that group. It was probably Alan Fermin's idea to dress them that way. It instilled fear of them on sight...and it was justified. The elite group had trained in the compound the Black Rose's troop used for their advanced tactical training, compliments of Lord Chaney. At first the Black Rose members were angry that Lord Chaney invited others to 'their' training compound, but when Alan's metrasoldiers were offered as training tools...most changed their attitude. Zohra wondered who else Lord Chaney rented it out to when they were not around. She was sure Naboths Vine knew.

Alan's group was good and trained in a fighting technique the *yobashi* used. It was meant to kill quickly and efficiently. She would have to teach it to these two women so that they would have a chance of surviving in a confrontation with them.

Her breath caught as she watched Lady Harriet spin in the air in a surprise move on Carol. She imagined what it would look like if Lady Harriet had long hair, loose and flying in slow motion like an orange wave about her head...without any cloths on. She sat up higher, startled where her thoughts kept going. She really needed to keep her thoughts on a professional level. She was an officer now.

Captain Zohra's movement caused Lady Harriet to look in her direction, giving Carol the advantage. Carol kicked to her stomach, sending her sailing a good distance. She ended up flat on her back. Guiltily, Zohra rose to her feet to join the two.

She stared down into dark green glassy eyes as Lady Harriet's lungs struggled to fill with air. She felt her heart warm over as she gazed down at the woman she had so long ago joined with. Did she see something more behind the green unfocused eyes? Did Lady Harriet remember watching her? Of course she did. The masters emphasized to all the students the power behind the dragon energy that was called into play with the Dance.

Oh, Yes. She remembers. The question is, what is she...what are we, going to do about it? No. The question is 'when'. As the green eyes cleared she could see an emotion behind Lady Harriet's stare, but it was gone as she took her first deep shaky breath.

"Good shot," Lieutenant Montran wheezed, as she rolled to her hands and knees, pulling herself together before rising to her feet.

"It was a sucker shot," Captain Zohra remarked unsympathetic. *She needs to learn not to be so easily distracted...though I can't imagine how difficult it's to remain aware when all her senses are wrapped up in sexual feelings.*

Lieutenant Montran felt a moment of irritation but let it pass. The captain was correct. She was too focused on Carol and when another noise intruded, she let it distract her. She merely nodded at the captain.

"Have you been working out daily?" she asked to be polite, though by the huffing of the two she gathered their fun was taking up a lot of energy. She was sorry she broke the game up, because she really did enjoy watching them.

"No." *Not that there is much room or anyone to work out with on Spinners Tale. Here are two women in top condition and me. I'm gonna be a weak link here.* It wasn't something the lieutenant was accustomed to.

"Have you ever studied ChoTaK?" Captain Zohra asked both women.

"No," they answered in unison.

"I will teach you some basics. Alan's elite team specializes in that particular form of combat, which is based on what the *yobashi* use. When I am finished teaching you, if a lethal blow is delivered, you will know the reversal. I will also show you how to recognize when it's delivered. Unless you are a healer...you can only do this for yourself."

Both women nodded. Lieutenant Montran was surprised that the captain could speak whole sentences and stringed together. Carol was being polite because she already knew the ways of the *yobashi* but not what the captain referred to it as. She was curious what the captain knew.

Using Carol first as an example so that she would not feel she needed to challenge her if she should hurt her mistress, Captain Zohra demonstrated each hit and informed them of its intention, and then demonstrated the counter. Her voice was soft, terse, and she used few words, letting the movements teach themselves.

As Lady Harriet countered her moves, Zohra felt a slight tremor from their contact. Pretending not to notice, Zohra grabbed her wrist to demonstrate another move, reminding them how to breathe and what to imagine.

I guess I don't have the same power over her as Carol, so we won't be rolling around on the mat; however...she does react to my touches. Ooooh. But I can have fun with this. *Zohra chuckled to herself as her victim struggled to stay focused on the moves.*

For an hour, Zohra worked with them. She enjoyed the contact with Lady Harriet. Each time they touched, she could feel her pulse quicken or feel a tremble in her limbs. It occurred to her that Lady Harriet may have confused feelings with the lust gas and with her touches, but she wickedly continued. When Lady Harriet had made two simple errors in a row, she decided to end the workout.

"That is enough for now. Later tonight, we can review. I believe Guardian wants to see us in a stan hour, so I suggest we clean up and get something to eat before we meet with him."

"I can go for that," Lieutenant Montran rubbed her sore thigh thoughtfully. The liquid from the bots was sustaining, but solid food sounded nicer. *So, the captain becomes less of a stranger in workouts.*

Okay. Well, I know by the string undergarments I found in her drawers, that she isn't all stone faced. Then the question is, how long does it take for her to warm up to someone? Lieutenant, you have enough on your plate without worrying about making friends with her. Just get a working relationship and when things settle, go on from there.

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Captain Zohra watched Lady Harriet as she tiredly took the towel from the bot. Her hair was sticking to her wet scalp and the damp outer clothing clung to her body. Captain Zohra pulled her eyes off her and looked at Carol. Carol was watching her expressionless, as she took a sip of water. As they exited the room, Captain Zohra stepped in beside Carol and struck up a conversation. Her ulterior motive was to get to know Carol and to see how it would affect the two women to be separated. She wasn't disappointed in their hand-to-hand drills. Her concern with the metradame was did she retain what she learned as Sheila to her new persona, Carol. It appeared that she did.

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Lieutenant Montran, deep in thought, fell in behind Captain Zohra and Carol. She attributed her physical reactions to Zohra's touches and the images they conjured up to the pheromone gas effects, as she did the jealousy incited in her when Zohra touched Carol.

All right...all the more reason to get Carol on the track to self-realization. Only, I have to do it so she doesn't feel like I'm pushing her away or abandoning her.

Walking behind the two women, she watched Carol as she politely interacted with Captain Zohra. The questions were military in nature, and Lieutenant Montran knew the captain was assessing another player she would use in defense of the outpost. Lieutenant Montran realized that leading was something Captain Zohra was comfortable with. She attributed it to her early training as a galaxy athlete, her four years at the Academy learning the basics of being a military officer and as her role as a Spartan sergeant major. All this gave her a working understanding of team play and the importance of knowing both your allies and enemies. She wondered if it fell into her personal relationships. After all, keeping tight control of all relationships for a covert operator was necessary. One mistake wasn't just your life that was forfeit, but all those connected to you, whether they were innocent or not. Lieutenant Montran understood that tradition of warfare intimately well. Her thoughts returned to Carol, worried she would be seen only as a fountain of information and not as an individual.

What type of a woman would Lord Chaney want to be his special metradame? If Captain Zohra knew about her past is she a sister from one of the Guild Houses? For a brief moment, she wondered if the two women had been lovers, but she quickly pushed that thought out of her mind. Jealously was an emotion she had little experience with and felt like a complete novice in knowing what to do with the disconcerting feeling.

"Lady Harriet, would you mind if Carol and I have a private chat?" Captain Zohra asked Lieutenant Montran as they paused at the entrance of Lieutenant Montran and Carol's quarters.

Lieutenant Montran flushed. "No, of course not! Carol, it's not necessary to ask my permission to do things away from me...just...just let me know where you are. I'll worry." She sent a glare toward the captain to remind her what she had said earlier.

The door swished shut behind a relieved Lieutenant Montran. She looked down at her hands and noticed she was nervously twisting the unfamiliar ring that would draw Carol to her.

Ah. You're now starting to think there is a sexual thing going on between them. Jealously is not pretty, whether from contrived reasons or not. You need to find something to keep your mind busy.

Lieutenant Montran took a cold shower and changed her clothes.

"Bach, I would like an Alterian Club sandwich."

"Three layered or two?" Bach courteously qualified.

"Two and lemon tea with a small dollop of honey."

She took a seat at the computer.

"Well, since metradames are a major topic in my life...it would be good to see what they are all about," she muttered to herself as she studied her reflection in the monitor. After long moments of wrestling with other thoughts, she changed her mind. "Computer, find information on Cadet Zohra, graduate class of..."

Chapter 9

The Wield worlds were all inhospitable planets for the majority of the seasons, except to the very hardy and stubborn. They were also called the Five Wild Outlands, because at one time they separated the Committee and Collective's sphere of influence from each other, acting as a neutral zone. When new planets joined one or the other it wasn't based on placement of the planet but on ideals and influence so it blurred the neutral zone placement.

The military, more interested in putting order to the cosmos, divided space into sectors, and the Wild Outlands ended up touching four sectors, Quan, Meto, Zed and Ectron. Thus giving the Outlands a new nickname, the four corners, oddly situated but still holding to their neutrality.

AbenWield chose to be a closed society and needless to say, didn't like visitors. They were interested in forming a perfect society and didn't want outside influence.

ChrysaorWield had a small group of independent loners living with the fierce wild beasts native to the planet. The Collective protected the inhabitants from off-world developers and hunters, per their request. In return, the Collective used certain areas as a training ground for their military and police troops, called the Centurions.

HinterWield continued to be used by the Committee for imprisoning their social failures, the psychopaths they couldn't control but would not put to death.

NeitherWield became a visitor's haven for viewing sunsets and sunrises that were spectacular with vacation spots aligned for the best views. Among many products exported, their wine had a great following in both the Collective and Committee space, and their olives that were cultivated underground, were considered unrivaled. The harsh life attracted artists and those that wanted isolation. Settling on NeitherWield for any length of time was difficult due to the weather, and their laws prevented developers from building mass underground cities. Native plants and animals that shared the planet were hearty and wild.

MageWield liked to think of themselves as a spiritual community. The harshness of life and their community spirit was the basis of their survival and pride. Though the inhabitants spread across the planet, they were tied into each other through telepathic as well as the common needs of the global community. MageWield found that by setting up vacation residences for all factions of the galaxies, it kept them up on events that even broadcast news groups didn't know about.



Rene came into the world of physical existence on MageWield to a family that was well prepared for s/her birth. The village of Mount Rayhan welcomed the two-spirit baby with celebrations. Two-spirit souls that were dual gendered, were looked for and often became the shamans, healers and sometimes leaders of their communities. These dual souls were either born into the gendered body of one sex while feeling inside as another, or they matured with the genitalia of both genders. A 's' was adopted before the pronoun of the gender they felt identified with to reflect their two-spiritness. At puberty, some decided on a physical body sex change to fit the inner view of themselves, while others kept their split identities, comfortable as they were. Due to their natures, their perspectives were unique and considered enlightened, thus they were all well educated and well traveled on MageWield.

At Rene's presentation to the community when s/she was six moons, the oracle directed s/her parents to send s/her for apprenticeship to Pilar under the mentorship of SH'a Grou where s/she was to attend school at the Monastery of the Monks. Rene was to learn the ways of the off-worlders to prepare s/her for s/her purpose in this life.

Rene saw many dimensions and the web of life with its interconnectiveness to all things. Both the visually seen and unseen were tangible living entities for s/her. By the age of five s/she knew s/her life path and had been working with the local shaman for two years, preparing to move to Pilar, where s/her formal training would begin.



SH'a Grou's head turned to his apprentice, interrupting a lesson in breathing. A telepathic call from a villager held s/his attention.

'A member of the Fermin family is ill and needs assistance quickly.'

Young Rene recognized the shift in consciousness within their link. Quickly s'she placed a cushion for SH'a Grou's body to rest on as s'his spirit left for a quick consultation.

Rene moved into the herb room, gathering up the herbs s'her mentor mentally requested. That finished, Rene proceeded to prepare their traveling ponies.



"Halt! Who dares to invade the residence of the House of Fermin without invitation?" a heavy accented voice called out.

"I invited them," a calm feminine voice informed the guard. A dark shadow waiting out of the wind stepped into view and raised her hand in greeting to the shaman and s'his apprentice.

The guard quickly stepped aside, looking unhappy that his intimidation of the locals was so quickly halted.

"I am Lady Artha, one of the guests in this lovely residence," she politely informed the two in their own language. She was careful to include the young apprentice for she had learned that everyone, no matter age or position was considered equal. An unusual idea on her own world, but she believed respecting another's beliefs was important.

Shaman Grou recognized a kindred soul and honored her with a raise of s'his hand in blessing. "I hope the house of illusions is to your liking," s'he translated.

"House of illusions? So, ileoceca," she pronounced badly, "means house of illusion?"

Rene smiled, "It actually means 'to dream on the hillside'."

The residence was cut into the side of Mount Eloise. If the Fermin family thought they were secure from any intruders because of the location, the MageWieldarians didn't tell them otherwise. Guests didn't need to know that there were many exits and entrances to their residences.

Lady Artha returned the smile, and nodded for she was one of the few that could see through illusions if she wanted to. Lady Artha turned, to lead them to a room located inside the mountain. *'Strange place for a sickroom,'* Rene thought to SH'a Grou.

It was important to have the proper atmosphere in a sickroom, including fresh air and a view of the outside.

The sick child was fourteen-year-old Tess, the third daughter born to Thordis and Gustaf. SH'a Grou laid s'his bag of herbs beside the bed and placed s'his fingertips lightly on the barely breathing form's limp wrist. Rene pulled the small pouches of each herb bag out of the larger bag and laid them out.

"We will need boiling water and cloths to bathe her," Rene informed Lady Artha, while SH'a Grou sat in trance reading the energies of the young girl.

Lady Artha turned to the servant that was waiting by the door and nodded.

SH'a Grou moved to the young girl's feet and pressed s'his thumbs against the bottoms, watching the girl's chest as it expanded into a deep inhale.

Rene pinched herbs into a bowl and ground them until they were a fine powder. Hot water was added. The steam from the bowl was passed several times under the sick girl's nostrils. When it cooled down enough, SH'a Grou poured the cooled mixture between the stiff lips. For an hour SH'a Grou and Rene administered to her, alternating between massages and the use of thin needles, carefully stuck in patterns across the bare body. As the blue color in her lips and eyelids faded, SH'Grou placed moxa cones at other points on the body. The smoke from the burning moxa filled the room.

'Rene, you must distract the young man who did this.'

Rene rose, nodding respectfully toward Lady Artha. S'she found Alan easily. He was leaning near the closed door, listening for any news on his sister's health.

"I would like to see where the food is prepared," s'she mentioned to Alan. Normally Alan would have simply had a servant take s'her down but there were no servants handy. His aunt's look compelled him to show s'her the way himself.

When SH'a Grou knew Alan was no longer outside the door, s'he turned to Lady Artha.

"This child doesn't just suffer from the poison. Her will to live is not there and without it she will not throw off the effects of the poison or what has touched her heart."

Lady Artha sighed. Sweet Tess was the only child whose pregnancy her mother was happy through out the duration. Lady Artha, a twice-removed cousin to the parents, had thought she put a stop to Alan's harassment of his siblings the day of her arrival. She ran the Fermin household and taught the

Fermin children the ways of the upper class. Life for the children had become more stable...and safer, Lady Artha had thought.

Thordis, the mother of Alan and Tess, was either busy producing the children her marriage contract required or recovering from them.

Gustaf, the legal owner of the children, busied himself with bartering his daughters and sons off, and whatever else it would take to get himself the coveted vacant chair of the BenHanna's on the Committee's lower floor.

Linette, the first daughter, had her genetic code passed by the Committee's Medical Board as capable of having healthy offspring, making her desirable for marriage. Her marriage at twelve bought Gustaf two votes for nomination to the chair.

Elli, the second daughter, whose genetic code was to be reviewed after her first menses, was shipped on a five-year trip to her new home on a colonial planet, Arnica, before her examination was due. For her participation in the colonization, Gustaf received shares in Gurken's Insurance Company, the backer for the colony.

Joey, the first son, died at his initiation into manhood. He refused to wear his armor when he faced the Aoroundas, a bull-like beast. He and Gustaf saw wearing the armor as a sign of weakness. Joey died after two days of suffering. Gustaf chose to ignore the pain of loss and moved on to the next son, Alan.

Alan was prone to rages, which were attributed to his mother's bouts of depression during her pregnancy with him. However, he also possessed a talent for picking businesses that bore fruit, which his father found beneficial enough to ignore his shortcomings.

"Tess has just been pledged to a distant cousin in exchange for a political favor." Lady Artha looked down at her young cousin's face. Gustaf's view of his wife as a brood mare, and her offspring as a means to insure the family line was wrong to Lady Artha. She believed that eventually nature would win out, as evidenced by Gustaf's inability to father children.

"Tess would rather become a singer. She has a lovely voice."

"The person who poisoned her will do it again until she is dead. He feels a transgression that is not forgivable has been committed against him personally."

Lady Artha knew the shaman was referring to Alan. Tess's transgression against Alan was mingling with the villagers. 'Like a common slut', he had angrily accused the surprised Tess. It didn't matter that the youth he had seen holding her hand was a palm reader.

"If I banish him to a reformatory school he will learn to manipulate a situation to his own advantage and will be out as an adult, worse than what he is now," she regretfully informed the shaman. "I can assign him bodyguards to make sure he will not do harm to others, but Alan is resourceful. If he wants to get rid of his sister, he will, whether locked away or not."

The shaman understood. As SH'a Grou picked up s'his herb pouches and returned them to s'his medicine bag, s'he gave instructions for Tess's care for the next ten stan hours.

At the gate, s'he turned to Lady Artha, "Dream well and dream deep. An answer shall come to you tonight," SH'a Grou told her softly.

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Chapter 10

Alan led the young girl through a maze of corridors, intending to confuse s'her. The apprentice acted unconcerned as s'she moved the multihued scarf, back onto s'her shoulder. The coloring of the scarf indicated s'her gender and marital status. S'she was the type Alan enjoyed tormenting. Nervously he glanced behind him, making sure his aunt wasn't around. Aside from his sister's sickness there wasn't anything else to interest him. Now he had someone to toy with. Intentionally he kept up a fast pace, leading s'her through corridors they had already passed through. If s'she noticed, s'she didn't mention it. He gave s'her his curled upper lip look, slitting his eyes so he looked mean...he was mean, he assured himself. The young girl paid him no heed. It wasn't going as he planned.

"You're with that dallier," Alan commented, in a disdainful tone. He gave a sly look toward the girl to see if his insult registered.

The expression on the young girl's face reflected humor.

"What is so funny?" Alan demanded immediately incensed.

"I am amused," the young girl agreed. "A dallier, by your culture's definition, is one that spends time with those much younger than himself or herself. That is true, SH'a Grou is with those younger. I don't understand why you use it as an insult."

"He has sex with them! Forces them to do things they don't want to do," Alan accused with a mean intent.

"Really? Whomever SH'a Grou has sex with is not my business. As for forcing s'his students to do things they should not do...what is that exactly?" Rene asked him interested.

"Are you taunting me?" Alan turned on her angrily. He wasn't even getting an irritated response from her.

"No. I am asking you for clarification. Has no one instructed you on the art of discussion?" Rene asked in an innocent tone.

"Are you his servant?" Alan changed his tact.

"I do serve s'him as a student to learn the shaman arts," Rene returned patiently, watching the colors around him become dark.

Alan snorted in contempt. "A girl can't do anything better than a man."

Rene grinned. "Men do have more serious issues to contend with, while girls are still enjoying their childhood," s'she agreed. "Age sometimes has advantages."

"Men do it better!" Alan snarled.

"Do tell. And what is that exactly?"

"You stupid bitch! All women can do is have babies!"

"Well, since SH'a Grou is both genders, s'he has the advantage of both."

Alan was appalled. "A freak! He's a damn freak!"

Rene smiled. "Freak means something different from the majority. Yes. Are you not also a freak in your society?"

Alan glared at her. In his frustration, he turned and left s'her in the hall sure that he had confused s'her in their wanderings. Undaunted Rene made s'her way to the kitchen. S'she found the place where Alan hid his poisons and replaced them with harmless, similar looking herbs. Alan would never know the difference.

Unable to contain his curiosity, Alan went searching for Rene. He found s'her laughing with the cooks. Rene took s'her leave and turned down the hall Alan was hiding in.

"Hello, Alan. Have you decided to continue our discussion?" Rene asked as s'she came abreast of him. Alan was pressed up against the wall a darkened hallway. "Walk with me to my pony and we can talk," Rene offered.

Alan suddenly felt shy.

Rene had made the choice to intersect s'her own line onto his web. SH'a Grou and s'her had talked about the implications and what would happen if they chose not to try to help this lost soul. The events were written before the Fermis rented the House of Illusions.

Alan listened to Rene's voice. He finally asked s'her what s'she was.

"I am?" Rene asked puzzled. S'she picked up his confused thoughts and laughed lightly.

"I have a body like yours, but I feel as a girl. We're called twin-spirits."

"You're a freak too!" Alan said triumphantly.

Rene laughed. S'she could see through Alan's ploy.

"We have something in common then. Do you want to learn to control those passions that take you into the darkness?" Rene asked. "If you don't you will be sent to HinterWield," Rene pointed out as he led them on a direct route to the outer courtyard.

"That will not happen. My father will see to it," he told s'her with a contemptuous air.

It was no secret that when Alan was younger his father paid retribution to the families whose children he had harmed.

Instead of leading Rene to s'her pony, Alan showed s'her to his favorite spot near a fountain in the inner garden. It wasn't for its beauty he chose this place but for its starkness and lack of any color, which to him was a neutral place compared to the rest of the residence, that was too colorful. Rene sent a mental greeting to Trotter, s'her pony, who informed s'her he was finding meager grass to chew on. Rene knew it was the sweet grass he found so little of, and gave him assurance when they reached home he would get an extra handful of corn that he also loved.

Rene touched Alan's thoughts.

The red-faced infant wailed and thrashed tiny bare feet and small fists until exhausted. The wails started up again when a sudden shake wakened it. A face appeared over the tall sides of the crib and then the wails quickly halted when nourishment was roughly supplied by a bottle thrust into his opened mouth.

At two, the toddler ragged against adults that ignored his tugging on clothing to be noticed. His beating fists on the legs of his father brought his world suddenly upside down, as this tall figure grabbed him and held him away from him in disgust. He was dangled by one leg and handed to his nanny who was furious at the attention her charge brought to the party for his older brother.

Older now, perhaps by five years, the dark haired lad with equally dark eyes watched as new victims headed toward his hidden trap. As expected, the toy monster popped out, scaring the nanny and her charge, his older sister. Their screams were not the polite and politically correct screams that young girls are taught to make at anything that was considered too strenuous for their weaker constitution. They were terrified screeches that hurt the ears.

Alan leaned back against the wall and let the feeling of satisfaction find a way to his almost nonexistent pleasure center. However, it was short lived. He was roughly yanked up and shook like a rug, rattling his teeth in his head.

"You worthless lump of flesh!" his father's seething voice shouted at him. When he was dropped to his feet, he landed off-balance and onto his back. Alan shivered from fear. "Get his nanny!" His father directed one of his men. "Get out of my sight. You disgust me." He told Alan who had not moved.

Alan rolled to his side to get up and saw his older brother, his father's favorite staring at him in contempt.

"You're no Fermin," Joey informed him in a low voice. "You have no sense of honor or loyalty to your own family. You'll be locked away before you even reach legal age." With that, he marched after his father.

Someone else grabbed him up painfully by his ear, dragging him toward the children's residence. It was his nanny.

"You sicko. You'll be locked up before long. The cook found a dead rodent in the flour and said it was you that did it. Do you know what a dead rodent will do to food? Your father has ordered you to QeLapand." She pushed him ahead of her and stomped behind him. "I'm not going to that place. He's going to have to get someone else to watch over you. You're a damn sicko. I knew it from the day they stuck me with you. Never a moment of peace."

She pushed him into his room and was about to close the door when he stopped the door from closing with his two hands flat against it.

"Well I'm not going!" he shouted back defiantly.

The woman pushed him back and slammed his bedroom door. He could hear the lock slide into place.

"Get packing!" she shouted through the door.

For a year Alan lived on QeLapand where he was observed by a medical staff. He was released back to his family's care under medication. But by then, Alan learned how conceal his harassment of others.

"Can I see you again?" Alan implored awkwardly. This was the first time he had ever reached out to another person.

"I shall be back tomorrow. Good dreams," s'she wished as they parted at the gate.

Alan left Rene at the front gate where Rene's pony was waiting impatiently to return home. Since he felt no threat from Rene he allowed himself to become fascinated at the novelty. His life wasn't so boring after all.

Alan's mother left late that night with her staff. Alan announced to her and to Lady Artha that he was staying with Lady Artha and the reduced staff, assisting the ailing Tess, who was too ill to be moved.

The shaman's herbs did their part, leaving the child exhausted from purging through the night. Alan believed Tess's pallor was an indication that she was sure to die. Village servants were entrusted with her care while Lady Artha slept on the cot in the same room. In her dream, Lady Artha saw a plan to keep Tess safe from her brother and Gustaf's plans.

The shaman and s'his apprentice visited the next morning to look in on Tess.

Lady Artha watched the apprentice and Alan in the garden for a while. She had never seen Alan interested with anyone before. Lady Artha was aware that Rene was a twin-spirit and she assumed that it was Alan's curiosity that attracted him to Rene.

The shaman nodded at the still form on the cot. Whispered directions were given to the young woman that was tending the form and then Shaman Grou rose from s'his crouched position, picking up the herb bag as if to leave. Lady Artha looked down at the unconscious figure. She could see the yellowish tinge to Tess's skin was gone, and in it's place an almost translucent look to her skin.

"Honorable One," Lady Artha bowed her head to the shaman. "I have indeed dreamed."

Shaman Grou held two fingers up and she nodded. The villagers would take Tess in two days to be raised by them. By her acknowledging the dream, she knew that she had agreed to the plan.

Two days later Tess's life as a Fermin ended and her new life began. She was still weak and in a delirium when she was moved into the underground tunnels to another village. It was a three-day journey under the mountain. If she survived the harsh life on the Wield world, she would become a singer. The village of Triton had an opening for the training of a storyteller and singer. Music and art was greatly honored during the hard winters when no one could venture out beyond the perimeter of their village.



Gustaf was furious when he learned of Alan's role in his sister's death. He banished him to the family estate in the desert of Kasam. During that time Alan focused his energy toward preparing for his rite of passage into manhood as well as studying the family business. He was unrepentant regarding his sister's death and only saw this exile as an inconvenience. When Alan returned to MageWield a year later he resumed his friendship with Rene.



"Greetings, Alan!" s'she signed then spoke.

Shyly Alan returned both the sign and a polite greeting he learned from Rene.

"I wanted to tell you that Lord Chaney has recommended me to attend a military academy." He felt important at this. It meant he would be wearing a uniform, and people would be saluting him. People that worked for the family business already did what he commanded, but the uniform and salutes were vestiges of power he could only legitimately get through the service, or if he formed his own army. Now that was a thought.

"I thought you were going to run your father's businesses?"

"Huh?" he looked at s'her distracted. "I am! I already do a lot of the business now," he lied. "It's nothing to go to one of those schools. Except maybe the physical workouts...but I shall get out of those."

"Alan, if you are not going to do the whole program, why go?"

"Lord Chaney thinks I need the discipline." He said in disgust as he slammed his hand against the wall. "I can control myself! Father listens to him because he is helping us get a seat on the Committee. It will look good if I graduate from a galactic space academy." That was Lord Chaney's argument and now saying it aloud, it did sound like a good plan. "I'm going to a school on Janu to start preparatory classes."

He kept from saying that his grades were not even close to qualify him to get on the waiting list of the academy and needed more than academic help, for his social graces were dreadful. If his father had not told him that this was his family duty, he would have found a way to mess it up so one of his younger brothers would have to go through this four-year drag.

"So when do your classes start?"

"Tomorrow. Father called early this morning to say Lord Chaney finalized the deal." He nearly winced at what he just revealed. His father was going to give Lord Chaney a metragirl, a new type of biobot, for pulling strings to get his name on the enrollment list. Lord Chaney's dalliance with young girls was becoming an issue with his fellow Committee members so the metragirl would be something less politically incorrect.



Rene saw Alan every year, sometimes only for a few days. Alan was serious about becoming eligible to attend the space academy. Perhaps that was why s'she was surprised to get a communication from Alan in his first year at the academy saying that he was booted out for behavior unbecoming an officer. Alan had struck a female cadet, though he insisted it was by accident. Instead of leaving, he simply transferred over to the Diplomatic Corps' Academy that shared off-campus facilities with the military academy.

Three stan years later, Alan arrived on MageWield in the early morning.

"Take a message to SH'a Rene. Tell her I need to see her now!" his voice was hoarse as he shouted at the young man who was barely awake.

"She always knows when I am going to be here! Why is she not here waiting?" he ranted as the hours dragged on without word from Rene. "Where is she?"

His bodyguards would not let him leave the premises in his rage. He knew that they had failed his father's orders to prevent him from hurting any more women, and while his friends diverted their attention, he had gone out to kill someone...or he tried.

Furious, he picked up a stick and beat a statue in the winter dry patio. "She lives! Damn the DeMontes! Damn the Montrans! Stinking clans! I'll get my revenge yet!" He continued to beat the statue until the stick was only an inch long.

For two days he ranted, escalating to high pitches until his bodyguards wrestled him down to administer a drug he otherwise had refused to take. He slept for a few hours and when he woke, Rene was in the garden.

"Where were you? I need you!" Alan shouted.

"I was in another village, Alan. Why do you need me?" Rene could see the wildness in his eyes. S'she could see that this was the time for s'her passing. Time for s'her to move into a new life. S'she watched as he implored with s'her for something, but s'she knew it was something only death could give him and that wasn't something s'she could interfere with. It wasn't his time, unfortunately.

Now was s'her moment. S'she looked up into his eyes. They were those of a madman. S'she held his eyes as he brought the club down. And then there was darkness.

"Oh, bloody moon! What have I done?" Alan dropped the club near the shaman's body. His body was numb and his brain stopped functioning. He was aware of the curses of the bodyguards. They thought that if anyone could, the shaman would be safe with him. He listened to what he thought was the small transport shuttle taking off. He sank to his knees and tearlessly stared at the crumpled heap of his only friend, Rene.

"Alan!"

His head shot up. Bewildered he looked around him. It was dark.

"Father," he started hoarsely. "Father I...I don't want her to die. Please father, you can make her a metradame. Please."

"Alan, this is too much! You nearly killed a Montran in front of witnesses, and now this!"

"Father! Rene is my friend! Please!"

Alan couldn't understand what the contorted expressions on his father's face meant but he didn't care. Rene was all that he was interested in.

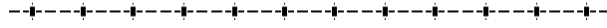
"IF you get on the shuttle with me and agree to volunteer to enroll in the ADDM program. If you don't, Alan...listen to me! If you don't...it will be the end of my plans to build this family into an empire. They will send you to Hinterweild. Do you hear me?"

"Will you take Rene's body to the metralabs, Father?"

"Will you do what I say?"

"Anything, Father. Just take Rene's body to the metralabs."

"All right." He turned to one of his servants. "Secure the body for the metralab. Do you have his meds? Give him a shot. I don't want him going nuts on the flight. Captain, contact my lawyer to take care of her disappearance," he added in a low voice.



Chapter 11

Rene's eyes opened and showed an uncommon liveliness when the first charge was sent delicately into her brain stem. Dr. Jus leaned over her to check the marks for the insertion of the chip that was the heart of the metraperson's new personality. It allowed the scientists to write over old memories stored in the brain. It also had the ability to send waves of pain into the pleasure centers if she refused to obey her new master or mistress. In the long run, it removed the pleasure centers. If the owners cared, they sent their metraperson back to have the center for laughter recharged, for some were more comfortable with a pleasant servant than one that couldn't enjoy a joke.

Rene could feel herself, from forehead to ankle, bound to the operating table. Her eyes held the eyes of the doctor for a few moments. Was the chip inserted? The doctor believed it was, for she had checked off all the important points of the operation as completed just as she did with all the metrapeople that passed by her. She was a metraperson herself, programmed to be precise under the force of pain.



Rene was sitting in the display room, where new owners came to check out their new toy. She watched Alan alongside of his father, walk quickly across the entranceway, up the long staircase to the showroom level. Rene studied Alan and noted how changed he was. Part of her abilities as a shaman was damaged by Alan's blow, but she had confidence she could undo it. She certainly could sense Gustaf's fury as he noted what Alan had her dressed in. Her face had been changed too. It was the face that haunted Alan when he was a child, his first nanny. Gustaf recognized the face.

"What is this, Alan?" His father's voice was controlled fury.

Alan cowered a little. "Well...she is mine, Father. I can do what I want with her."

"You had no business..."

"I am not yours, Alan. No one owns anyone," Rene interrupted the two calmly. She tried not to laugh at the two very shocked faces before her.

"You...you are supposed to wait until I program you," Alan stuttered, the hurt in his voice sounded like a child who found the fresh baked cookies already gone.

"Alan, shut up! Sit there with her. I will be right back!"

Rene knew he was going to see what went wrong with her programming.

"Listen Alan, you have to stop trying to control people. Isn't that what keeps getting you in trouble?"

"Rene, my sweet Rene. What happened to you?"

"What happened to you?" Rene was astonished at Alan's changed behavior.

"It's the programming. I'm on meds and ...I'm cool, Rene. I promised Father I would go to this reeducation school if he saved you."

"Ahh. So, I owe you thanks for this face?"

Alan's face reddened. "You should be thanking me that I saved your life," he reasoned.

"Alan, you are the reason I ended up having to have my life saved."

He nodded, looking contrite. "I'm so sorry, Rene. I...was off my meds for a couple of months and just...I just loose it when I'm not on them."

Rene shook her head at this version of 'Alan'. She guessed the scientists that worked on the metrapeople shared information with the scientists that worked on the behavior modification program Alan was on. He was changed but even with her sensitivity blunted, she could still feel the malignant dark force that was at his core.

"I can't take you with me!" Alan told her miserably, "and I'm not going to let father take you."

"Alan, why are you chewing on your thumb?" Rene asked curious.

"I don't know. Nerves, I guess. Probably another one of the side effects of this stuff they're giving me." He jammed his hands in his pockets. "Listen, Rene, I have an apartment along the river at Eldor. You can stay there until I get out of this place." He lifted his eyes to stare at her. She could see his fingers twitching in his coat pockets.

"I don't want to stay at your place. I want a life of my own. I can't go back to MageWeild."

At that moment, Gustaf was returning, red faced and looking irritated.

"Okay. Okay," Alan began to rise from his seat and then quickly sat back down. "Father! I want..."

"I don't care what you want! Shut up and let me get this mess straightened out!"

"No! Father! Leave her! Leave her!" Alan grabbed his head with one hand as if it hurt and with the other continued to grab at his father when the lab techs came to take Rene away. Rene realized what was happening and reached out to everyone's minds with the exception of Alan's who was too messy to get near.

Two hours later, the three were in Gustaf's personal vehicle, stopping at the tenth clothing store so that Rene could have a decent wardrobe rather than the brief attire Alan had Rene dressed in for her coming out event.

"We've been at this for two stan hours. I have had enough!" Gustaf announced gruffly.

"Me too," Rene announced pleased with how things had gone so far. She decided to push a little further. "I wish to be enrolled in a science university. The woman in the store said the most prestigious is the one on Sintafie Prime."

"And you want to go there?" Alan asked in awe.

"Yes."

"Father can get you in there," he returned with a boy's confidence.

"Why in helgas moon do I want to enroll you in a school? You're a metradame. You do our bidding! Damn Mageweildians. Last time we'll take anyone from that planet," he muttered darkly. He was feeling all the more uncomfortable being in the car with two people that were supposed to be malleable to his control.

"I'll tell you what. You let me have my freedom, and I will send your way, via the insurance scam you are running, some impressive credentialed people."

"I got the insurance agents supplying people...I don't need you!" Gustaf yelled furiously. He paused for a split moment and then, "How the hell did you know...Alan!" he turned toward Alan who was squeezed into the smaller seat behind the autodriver. "I told you to keep your mouth shut about our business! I don't blab my business to my whores!"

A slight twitch of pain registered in Alan's eyes, informing Gustaf that that remark hit a nerve.

"Father, she's right. Even Lord Chaney says the only people the agents are getting are low class. You can use already educated metrapeople instead of spending all that time educating them in the labs. You can even arrange to have your own army!"

Gustaf was about to say something when Alan added.

"She is **mine**, Father. And the deal she is offering is a good one."

Gustaf looked at his son who caused him a lot of headaches and cost him a lot of credits. He had to admit that since Alan began participating in company business, he had contributed to fifty percent of the build-up of his business empire, which more than paid for what he lost. He just wanted to drop off the metradame that wasn't acting like one somewhere and get back to what business he did know.

"Fine. I'll set it up," he muttered. "You gonna keep that face?"

"For now."

That night, Rene spent her first time off a Weildworld in her physical body. It was different. And she was enjoying her first time in a very expensive motel, watching the watchers, and eating strange foods. Gustaf, at Alan's instance, had set her up in a nice apartment complex within walking distance from the university she would be attending. The clothing Gustaf paid for would be sent ahead of her along with a maid, whom Alan felt she needed to help her learn the customs of the wealthy. When on drugs, Alan seemed to be thoughtful, but Rene knew the truth behind the appearance.

She pressed her face against the window, looking out at one of the few natural rivers on the planet. Her thoughts went back to the span of time she spent unconscious. She had visited Grandmother of the Web. Grandmother Spider was the most important initiation a shaman passed through. If she had become tangled in her web due to the illusions she created for herself as she looked for Grandmother she would not have returned. But she did return...to find herself with this strange face. Rene stared at the reflection of her new face.

"So, new face, new life and new name...Sharon Teal," she murmured. "Well, Sharon, lets see just what this university is like, filled with scientists that Can't see past their theoretical noses."



Sharon attended the university for only a year. She knew too much for the professors to teach her and she was causing too much of a stir at the questions she asked. At the challenge of one of her professors, she took the tests for accreditation and passed with high scores. From there, she started her research project. It was completed and published within three months. At first it had been difficult to get a chair for her project. However, a strange creature that was more involved in research than academic teaching, approached her. He had provided her a subject, terraforming and the impact it had on the surrounding planets, and then left her to her research. He supplied the other four to sit on her board, all researchers that were more interested in their projects.

With academic credentials on file, Dr. Sharon Teal took a job aboard a science vessel that was studying the reseeding progress on a planet. Her chair had recommended her to the head of the project. The planet was out of Committee space, so Sharon need not worry about Gustaf's agents or Alan's sudden appearances. It had taken six standard months of travel to reach her new home aboard the science ship *Nettle*. The vessel was home to a hundred scientists, a light military security force and a maintenance crew, along with family members.

Dr. Sharon Teal's new life was busy. She worked both on her case studies and on her own projects. One of them was to mitigate the damages the metralaboratories were doing to souls that should either depart from the physical world or be revived and returned to their own lives.

Sharon worked with a group that opposed the use of metrapeople and other abuses of those that were out of reach of the common law. The most influential members of this secretive group belonged to the Council of Rings, Naboths Vine, Brothers of the Shadow, and Hekates Inner Circle. From amongst them, came volunteers to submit to the process of becoming double agents. In her dealings with this group, Sharon remained anonymous.



It was just short of a year that Sharon had been working on *Nettle*, and more than comfortable with her regiment, when her routine life took a surprising turn. Her dinners were usually light affairs, eaten late at night when most people were in bed. She liked the empty dining hall that was dimly lit, quiet, and offered a panoramic view of space around the science vessel. This particular day, she had finished another battery of routine tests with routine results. Hardly boring considering she was nearing the core of her hypothesis. She had finished her salad and idly was watching the small patrol ships change guard. They kept the area free of sightseers and mischief-makers. She nearly dropped her teacup when her senses registered a new energy aboard the ship.

Now what is this? Curious she set her cup down and tried to sense where this new energy was emanating from. It was like a cloud of despair that settled in one part of the ship. A new recruit. Civilian or soldier, I wonder.

The next day she checked the log for new arrivals. Her finger paused on the name 'Lieutenant Harriet Montran'.

"Hmm. How many Harriet Montrans can there be in that clan?" she muttered softly to herself. "Probably a lot, considering how large the clan is. How many would travel to another galaxy to get away from family politics?" She pulled up her picture. "If this is the same Harriet... what a cosmic joke this will be."

Large dark green eyes, framed by orange hair curled artfully around ears that looked almost elfin, stared back at her from underneath a military cap. The image was the face of a serious officer. Tilting her head a little, Sharon decided the officer felt uncomfortable posing for the image. "So, Alan's Harriet Montran is here." *I wonder if that's her energy I felt. If that's so...* She shut her screen off and paced. She needed to consult her runes.



It was months later that Sharon actually saw Harriet Montran in person. She was just getting off duty, dressed in a flight suit that showed off her trim figure. She was talking to Ensign Jimmy J'aimine in a low tone. When they finished, the lieutenant left and Jimmy spotted her.

"Hi, Dr. Teal. Had any interesting flares while I was off?"

"No, Jimmy. Nothing unusual. Where did you go this leave?"

"Fort Bragg, Prime IV," he responded smugly.

"I thought you said you weren't going to go there again. They robbed you in the casinos." Sharon enjoyed his youthful charm, and the light banter they shared without worrying about him misreading her friendliness. He was enamored with a mechanic in the hydroponics bay on deck two and very loyal.

"Actually, the new lieut asked me to take her there. She wanted to see if they really did rig the tables. A couple of noncoms in her squad were complaining about losing their entire pay there. Hell, she took them seriously." He gave Sharon a big smile, shaking his head. "She visited seven of the big casinos and took them for a lot of chips before they cornered her and walked her to the big guy's office. I don't know what arrangements she made with him," he chuckled, "but she didn't leave the place until she was satisfied there were more winners than when we arrived. I got a feeling she won't have to go back there for a while. You know what she did with the money she won? She dropped it in the fricking alms box at the shuttle station. They're rip-offs, I told her. You know what she tells me?"

Sharon shook her head.

"This one isn't. Now I'm not going to argue with her since she just busted seven of the big casino tables, but I have my doubts."

Sharon chuckled with him. "She looks pretty grim."

He nodded, the youthful look disappearing to be replaced by the serious face of the street-smart kid that he was. "She's All right, Doc. Rumor says she used to be a captain in the Spartans. Doesn't talk about it and will give ya a real cold stare if you ask. My uncle was like that after he returned from the wars in the Pedia Cluster, so my guess is she's seen more death than most. Sanous has quarters next to hers. Says she has nightmares. With my uncle, it just took time." He suddenly grinned. "Sanous's been requesting another shift for some time so this worked out well for her. Her down time is now when the lieut is on duty."

Sharon patted his arm concerned. "I hope for her sake she does recover. Moving people around won't always work. And drugs aren't the answer," she finished more to herself than to the ensign, who nodded in agreement.



That night Sharon set her candle out. Sitting comfortably on a small cushion, she lit the incense and sent a protective circle around her physical form.

Sharon's spirit form was above the *Nettle* observing it when she noted that a wisp of energy entered the ship at a fast pace. Curious, she followed it.

When she entered the smaller military quarters, she found the spirit sitting across from the naked form of Harriet sitting on her small cot with legs crossed and a flute case opened. For some time, the lieutenant just stared at the silver flute inside. The spirit form remained until Harriet Montran shut the case without touching the flute.

For four stan months she would witness the same thing. One night after she returned to her quarters, she sat pondering how she could meet with this spirit that came nightly to sit with the wounded woman.

"Well, since you asked," a voice said as if it were right next to her. Then the spirit took shape and sat across from her.

"I was wondering why you were taking an interest in Alexandra but I can see that your intentions are that of a healer." The face turned a little as if trying to see something else. Her eyes squinted and she stroked her wrinkled chin.

"You have also visited Grandmother of the Web. You walk between the two worlds, belonging to neither."

"I am referred to as a metradame," Sharon shared, "though I do not share the erasure of memories or the affects of the enforcement chip.

The old head nodded. "Your death walk was interrupted." The old woman smiled at her and then giggled like a young girl. "You...are Iwilla."

Sharon chuckled and nodded. This woman saw past her protective spells. She had to be very powerful in the spirit world.

"I am Gedaliaha, from NeitherWeild. You wanted to know about my Alexandra."

"Alexandra?"

"It's her student name. It is written that this child must go through the darkness in order that she develop into her true self." Gedaliaha sighed and waved a protective sign in the air. "She has watched

people about her die. This has profoundly wounded her." Gedaliaha's eyes softened as she gazed at Sharon. "Compassion is a difficult lesson to learn without getting caught in sentimentality. It is the precursor to learning the art of justice-making. She is wallowing in guilt but she will not drown," Gedaliaha chuckled. "Well I must take my leave now. Until we meet again, my heart to your heart." Gedaliaha's physical form vanished and only a small wisp of spirit trailed out of Sharon's room.

Gedaliaha continued to visit Harriet's quarters whenever she pulled her flute out. It was six months before she played and then only a note or two before she would cry herself to sleep. It was about a year after her assignment to the *Nettle* that Harriet was able to play a full song. It was about an hour long and the release it gave her was enough to open her up spiritually and dispel the dark cloud that surrounded her. That night Sharon saw her spirit rise to meet with Gedaliaha's. In spirit, Harriet was a young child that had long orange hair decorated with beads and ribbons, and she sat at Gedaliaha's feet as if she were her student. Gedaliaha sang her a teaching song while she stroked her hair. When the song ended, Harriet's spirit drifted back into her sleeping physical form.

Now that Harriet was able to play the flute, Sharon noticed more liveliness in her eyes when she would visit the cafeteria during her meal breaks.

Sharon read the runes, searching a pattern in the web, and finding Harriet at the center. Many lives were being pulled toward her for she was like a hub of a wheel, and they the spokes. But why? Sharon would have searched further for answers but she was tired. She was bone tired. There was so much to do yet, and adding her worry for Harriet was perhaps going to be more than what she could handle. How could she protect her and work on her projects? She would have to sleep on it. An early dinner and then rest.

The dining hall was empty, as it usually was at this time. Sharon picked up a tray and selected from the menu real food rather than the synthesized. She was deep in thought when she tripped over the leg of a chair. Her salad heavy with dressing landed on a uniform...Lieutenant Harriet Montran's, as the Ladies of Fate would have it.

"I am so sorry," Dr. Teal apologized as she looked at the salad dressing drip down the uniform tunic of her victim, hiding her amusement at how part of her question had just been answered.

"I...it's okay. I can change." Harriet wasn'ticing how bare her unfamiliar uniform looked without the ribbons she was used to having. She shook her head to forget. She had just returned from a week of training aboard the *Ziggy* and was emotionally and physically exhausted.

"I hope you aren't going on duty," Dr. Teal continued regretfully.

"No, I just got back. I have a few days to recover," Harriet managed a smile.

Dr. Teal returned the smile.

"Let me get you another salad, I can see you're tired." A revived Harriet was up quickly. At the food counter, she used what was on her uniform to pick out the choice of salad dressing.

Harriet had finished her own meal before Dr. Teal had entered so there was no rational reason to stay while Dr. Teal ate. Nodding a polite good night, she cleared the table of her empty dishes and returned to her quarters.



After their first meeting, they noticed each other more often in the mess hall. A few weeks later, Sharon, on impulse, asked the lieutenant if she would like to see one of the planet's flare-ups from the advantage of the science observatory. Her lab had all sorts of instruments visually recording the events and adding to the drama, or so most scientists felt. Harriet accepted, not mentioning to Sharon that in her small patrol ship she observed them quite often.



Sharon glanced at Harriet, who could barely sit still through the flute recital.

"Harriet, did she play that bad?" Sharon asked as they walked back to Sharon's quarters.

"No." Harriet laughed softly, her face blushing. "I think it was the choice of music."

That piqued Sharon's curiosity. Stopping outside her quarters, Sharon peered up into dark green eyes. "Why are you embarrassed?" she asked softly, watching the unusual energy swirls around the orange haired soldier.

Harriet shook her head. "Another time. It's been a very pleasant evening, Sharon. Thank you for inviting me." The blush increased in intensity, and then receded.

Sharon wondered whom she was thinking about, or should the question be 'what'?

Harriet leaned over to give Sharon a customary kiss on her cheek, but Sharon moved her face to tease her. Their lips touched, and reflexively, they kissed, moving closer as the kiss deepened.

Her lips are so soft.

Shaman's moon, but this kiss is igniting a harvest bonfire in me!

Sharon could feel Harriet's heart rate increase as her fingers gently wrapped around her wrists. *So was it I who you were thinking of?* Sharon slid her hands around Harriet's waist, drawing her closer, so the heat of both their bodies commingled.

Harriet cupped Sharon's soft cheeks in her warm hands. Her tongue explored the outside of Sharon's lips. She grew bolder as Sharon parted her lips and drew in her tongue for further exploration. *This is nice*, two thought echoed.

Harriet slid her arms around Sharon's waist, lifting her a few inches, and without breaking their kiss, entered Sharon's quarters to avoid any curious spectators. Harriet stopped just inside of the entrance letting Sharon down gently. Sharon pulled her further into the room, all the while, running her hands over the athletic body. Suddenly she wanted to feel bare skin.

Sharon's hands slid down to Harriet's waistband and tugged the shirt out of the slacks. The soft warm skin shivered from her touch. Sharon groaned and began to unbutton the shirt, wanting more.

Harriet broke their kiss, her lips and tongue leaving a wet trail along Sharon's jaw to her neck. Sharon's breath caught and then she groaned, pushing her body closer to Harriet's, needing to feel her more intimately. Harriet's top dropped to the deck.



Harriet Montran awoke in the morning, after a stan hour of deep sleep, disorientated in the unfamiliar surroundings. Sharon woke when she felt Harriet's movements. As memories of the previous night came back to Harriet, she wrapped her arms around Sharon and nibbled on her neck. Sharon softly groaned as shivers coursed through her.

"I need to get back to my quarters and check for messages," she explained as she prepared to get up.

"Just like a doctor, always on call," Sharon turned in her arms and drew her close for a soft kiss.

"You're right, Doc. You can always call me," Harriet returned with a grin. She slid out of bed and tossed Sharon her blouse that was draped over her cloths from the previous evening's frenzied disrobing. Sharon rose and drew on her robe from behind the bathing room door. She admired Harriet's athletic form as Harriet finished dressing.

Harriet moved to Sharon and held her for a few moments, sliding her hands between the folds of the thin silk robe, feeling the heat of Sharon's body. Sharon's nipples touched Harriet just below her breasts and Harriet could swear she could feel her heart beat in those pointed nubs. She realized she had to release Sharon or she would be pulling her back into bed.

Sharon walked her to the door and gave her a long deep kiss before she left.

Goddess! What is this going to do to the web around her? I never saw this! But...*she hesitated and sighed*, I'm not going to stop it. Not unless she wants to. I need a shower. Maybe that will clear my head...and cool me down!

Having a partner wasn't something she had ever thought about.

Why? There are shamans that have families and students and they still are able to carry on their duties. A partner would be less stressful than a family. I had lovers when I was younger. It's part of the lessons on making love, sex and intimacy. Goddess, what a body she has!

Sharon laughed as her body responded, leaving her tingly and flushed. It had been a long time since she felt this way. It left her giddy.

Giddy! That is an understatement! So, where do we go from here? Why spend so much time thinking about it, and just live it!

Sharon shook the water from her shoulder length hair as if to clear the quandary from her thoughts. Was the Great Spirit playing a joke on her? Sharon shook her head in disbelief. She had a lot of work to do and this had to happen...the potential for an intimate relationship.

Another part of her started to get practical. Sharon could imagine where this new aspect of their relationship was going. She enjoyed the woman's companionship and after getting an intimate introduction to her body, she most definitely liked the feel of Harriet's body against hers, and all the other things Harriet's body did to her...but she was mixed up with Alan's madness.

Sharon looked at the water dripping down from the shower door.

You're part of Alan's madness too. Didn't you just ask the Great Spirit for an answer on how to protect Harriet Montran from Alan's agents until it was her time to reenter his dark web? But is this a good answer? She laughed at herself. Who was she to ask if the Great Spirit knew its business?



Harriet Montran had left a message for Sharon when she returned to her quarters at the end of her workday. Harriet was on extra duty since someone called in sick, but had left something for her in her mail slot.

Sharon found a beautiful flower resting at the bottom of her mailbox, along with a note. Until now, the only mail Sharon received were deliveries for her laboratory. It was nice to receive a gift from the heart.

Both women were busy the next few nights but they had previously planned to see a movie on the fourth evening. Harriet Montran appeared at Sharon's door on time. She was dressed casual, in a loose fitting green blouse and dark brown pants. Sharon's eyes traveled over Harriet's body appreciating what she was seeing. Having spent too long in the lab, Sharon was late getting to her quarters and still not finished dressing. She let Harriet in, sensitive to the brush of Harriet's body against hers, as she leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

"I'll be but a minute more, Harriet," she smiled into eyes that were darkened with desire. Her own body throbbed from the brief touch. It made her wonder how long they were going to let this heat between them simmer before fanning it into a flame or putting it out.

She returned to her bedroom, to pick out a necklace that would hang so that the eyes of the observer would rest just above the v-cut of her top.

"Harriet, can you help me with this?" she called out exasperated. She couldn't get the clasp right. Her thoughts were too distracted.

Harriet stepped over to her, taking both ends of the necklace and waiting for Sharon to turn her back to her. Her fingers trembled slightly and kept missing the clasp as well. They both seemed to be having the same problem.

"There, I got it," Harriet sighed. It was difficult to keep her hands on the necklace and not wander. Sharon turned around to face Harriet and the clasp came undone. The weight of the necklace pulled it down into the cleavage of her top. Harriet made a reflex grab for it and grasped a handful of Sharon's breast with part of the necklace.

Without hesitation, Sharon pressed Harriet's hand up against her breast firmly and leaned to kiss a surprised Harriet.

Harriet heard a groan, which well could have come from her, as her fingertips pinched a taut nipple that her mouth watered to cover, and would have, if her lips were not being hungrily devoured.

The kissing turned into passionate grappling as cloths were loosened and two pairs of hands searched for bare heated skin. The movie quickly forgotten.



Harriet had the next two days off and Sharon had nothing scheduled at work so they both remained in Sharon's room, exploring their sexuality, playfulness, and listening to each other as they shared parts of their lives.

As a shaman, Sharon attempted to heal some of Harriet's dark areas when they were making love. However some places were shut tight, even when she was experiencing the heights of lovemaking. Sharon found that the only time Harriet opened up fully, was when she played her flute...in her quarters...alone. She made sure she gave that time to her for she knew Harriet would shut down if she invaded that space.

Gedaliaha was right about the darkness that Harriet needed to experience in order to understand despair and its levels. As an empath her connection with others was intense, no matter how much she

denied to herself that the emotional tie was there. It was a learning path that not all empaths took to develop themselves, but those that did, had on some level set this course for themselves.

Sharon used prayers and chants to push back the dark cloud that had engulfed her until Harriet was able to rebuild her own energy. Sharon asked the healers on MageWeild to add their support.

After a year of living separate, Harriet moved in with Sharon. Sharon had a large living space that could easily accommodate two people with separate careers, even when Harriet split her duties on another ship, *Ziggy*, spending weeks at a time away.

They had been living together for four years, and Harriet's duties off ship were lengthening. If she returned late at night, Harriet choose to sleep in the front room so as not to wake Sharon, but Sharon put a stop to that. She would rather wake for a moment, then snuggle into her arms before falling back to sleep. Such was the case of the previous night. Sharon felt her get up for a moment and use the toilet and then lay back down. She opened one eye and stared at Harriet, who was studying her.

"What is creasing your brows, Lieut?" she joked as she ran a fingertip over Harriet's brows in a caressing gesture.

"Your body," she responded in a husky voice.

"What about my body?" Sharon responded in a low and seductive tone.

Harriet's pulse point at her throat quickened. "You always keep it covered."

"Ahh. You want to see more?" Sharon purred as she rolled Harriet onto her back and straddled her. Their play was cut short when Harriet's alarm to get ready for work went off.

Sharon paused at noon from her work and while waiting for her food to heat, picked up her messages.

One was from Harriet reporting she had been called back to *Ziggy*, and that she would be away for a while. Sharon smiled, "Harriet, you're spending more time there then here. You should post *Ziggy* as your permanent station instead of *Nettle*."

Sharon held her breath as the meaning of her seemingly casual comment deepened.

"Fata Morga!" she muttered in exasperation at herself. "Of course, the change is near. I've been ignoring it...as if putting off what needs to be done will change anything." Sharon closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep pain-filled breath. "So, the time is upon us, Love. I'll have to shoo you out of our nest." She paused to wipe a tear from her eyes, "I'm sure you'll forgive me sometime in the future, but...I'll be missing you and worrying that you'll go into this dragging your stubborn heels all the way. You are so stubborn about accepting your role in this change, dear heart."

Sharon let the empty feeling of Harriet's absence fill her so she could get a handle on the emotions she would feel when she asked her lover to move out. She was going to have to come up with a good reason and...use some of her shaman abilities to ease Harriet's hurt...if she could.

Another difficult lesson in life for both of us, but not to be shared in each other's embrace.

Sharon slumped back in her chair letting the tears fall. Sobs tore from her throat as her heart and chest ached for what she had to do. After a while, she took a deep breath and tossed her collection of tissue into the waste bin.

Enough of this maudlin mood.

She sniffed and grabbed another tissue to blot her wet face. Glumly, she moved on to the next message.

"Oh, Fey! Just what I need, a message from Alan!" As she read it, she realized it had more vehement than usual. *Looks like his sticks are warning him of the change too.* Shaking her head, she moved onto the next message, not bothering to respond to Alan.

Three days later as she was again going through her mail, she found a coded message from one of her covert agents.

Hm. What's this? A message from Lee. Hopefully some good news. Sharon jumped up from her chair excited, "Yes! The time is now!"

The small changes taking place throughout the galaxy were a prelude, or perhaps part of the cause to a larger change that would affect more people than a light year would encompass. A paradigm shift in one galaxy's power structure would affect others.

Chapter 12

Lieutenant Montran laboriously treaded her way through the medical jargon on metrapeople. Guardian's medical library had extensive information on the subject but Lieutenant Montran found that only the medical write-ups had substance...almost too much. The four largest contributors wrote under pseudo names, Acronym, Iwilla, Maa, and Heartstone. When she did a biography on the names, she came up with no information. Shaking her head, she returned to the menu. With her limited time, she needed to concentrate on the meat of the information.



With eyes closed, her head propped up in the palms of her hands, and elbows resting on the table, a buzz disturbed her mental processes. Lieutenant Montran was trying to absorb the information on chip implantation.

"Yes?" She rubbed her tired eyes.

"Are you too busy to visit Guardian?" Charles's polite voice inquired.

Lieutenant Montran glanced at the time on the bottom of her screen. Two stan hours had passed. "Oh blasters!" Jumping up, she knocked her partially eaten meal to the floor. As she ran out of the room, the bot was picking up the plate and sandwich remains.

From her short research, she had enough information to suspect that the scientists working in the metralabs knew that the bodies they revived were living people with fully functioning brains and self-will. It explained why the metrapeople needed an additional chip to enforce compliance.

In Com-C she only found Charles and Guardian. Guardian's dais was lit up with a smug Copoc spinning a puzzle cube before it in the holographic image, moving each piece into a new position. Charles was holding a cup of steaming tea.

"I'm late," she stated flatly.

"No. As a matter of fact - you started early on your project," Guardian informed her happily. The cube disappeared and the Copoc holographic image leaned forward in its seat. "Captain Zohra is pleased at your initiative."

The message of Captain Zohra being pleased with her gave her the image of a dog getting a pat on the head. Irritated she responded shortly, "Could you be clearer."

"We need to learn as much as we can about metrapeople. I have the information and my own opinions, as do others, but another's view would be invaluable. So, what have you synthesized so far?"

"Well...uh." Disturbed by her show of prickliness, she took a deep breath to collect her thoughts. Gratefully, she sat on the edge of a chair Charles provided. He handed her a warm cup of tea, which she acknowledged with a nod, vaguely aware of taking it. *Why is my opinion needed? The captain worked with them and would have a better view. Oh, I hope he's not going to think because Sharon and I were lovers...or Carol. Egads. I'm starting a trend here.* Shaking those thoughts from her head, she refocused on the immediate. *Why is my input needed? All those specialists have piles of information on the subject.*

"Like you said, the victims were all signers of a document with two insurance companies retaining total ownership of their remains after death, provided it's within four hours of being legally declared dead. And they were all revived approximately four stan hours after the declaration and by the same company's team of scientists. They certainly can move their various teams quickly." She looked up at the holographic image of Guardian, frowning and then rubbed her forehead, "The ones placed with their new owners show no evidence of brain damage; however, they do not exercise self-will, even when their life is put in jeopardy, unless an override is part of the program. They are, in effect, people programmed to be mindless slaves." Lieutenant Montran paused for a moment sipping her tea. "However, from what the writers on this topic believe, even with all the programming, there is an awareness of self within the metrapeople, otherwise the pain inducers would not have to be implanted. These pain inducers also function to block certain memory functions. It's almost like the lobotomy some planets used to perform on their problem citizens. The big difference is that the metrapeople can be educated with different skills should the owner's needs change, whereas a lobotomized individual is permanently an idiot.

"Another important difference – according to Iwilla, one of the authorities on metrapeople, is that there is one tone that can erase all the previous programming, but she didn't say what it was. However, she did discuss the danger of using it, preferring the single tone that each metraperson is set to. In the case of

Alan's metrasoldiers, I can see her point. Captain Zohra mentioned they were all procured from planets that practiced genocide warfare. They were trained to kill themselves and as many of their capturers as possible. So the prospect of snagging one at a time will be a daunting task." She grimaced at the thought of trying to arrest a fighter that was rigged as a time bomb.

"The research I reviewed was on recovering erased personalities." She paused, taking another sip of tea, this time noticing the tangy taste. "It worries me that if there is that much information on the subject, why has it not raised red flags with the scientific community ...and not just in Committee space but the Collective's also." She glared up at the holographic figure of the Copoc that was watching her. Since he was once a scientist she was calling upon him to justify the moral depravity she found in a group she once thought had higher values than what was evidenced in the research.

"The documents are not available to just anyone. Most of what you have read was for private study by a select group of scientists interested in participating in the experiment when it first started up. These test subjects were cadavers in all respects."

"Right, right," she responded agitated. *Like willing your brain to science so they can hook it up to a computer and make you immortal.*

"The more recent work," Guardian continued, "is by a group of scientists that are gathering data to present before the Counsel of Rings on the immorality of this practice which will also carry over to the chip implantation in psychotic citizens to allow them to live in society as any other citizen. This subject has more impact than the indiscretions of the Committee members." He held up two of his hands to stall her angry retort. "I understand your additional charges against the members such as Lord Chaney, but to the public they are only charges that don't impact as many as chip implants. At least one in ten families have a member that is the recipient of such an implant. The last seven years it has become standard practice to insert a chip in citizens judged too violent for behavior modification."

"Helgas bloody moon! What has gotten into the sensibilities of the judicial system?"

Guardian cleared his nonexistent throat. "You."

"Me! What have I got to do with that?"

Guardian shook his head. "It's the craziness of those that have little and those that have too much, and when something that those who have too much is within reach for those that have nothing, regardless that it's rotten, they grab it up greedily."

"You mean...you don't mean about Alan getting a chip implant, do you?" Guardian nodded. "I had nothing to do with that! I don't even remember...I can't remember my last year at the academy. I can't even remember signing the contract for enlistment into the Spartan Corps."

"Well, it hit the galactic news of his history and that he had been on meds but still committed gross crimes against citizenry, so the commission sought to quell the riots and grant all citizens in Committee space the same chance at living with family. It was bound to happen anyway. The companies involved in the procedure and the companies that manufacture the drugs that go along with it, have been petitioning to move their business into the larger market. So in six stan months, two groups of scientists will present their arguments, for and against the practice. Media coverage would cause mass riots, or so those in the know believe. Any of the participants that leak it to the news media will be charged with any deaths that result from the news getting out...which will mean instant sentencing to the Weild prison colony."

Lieutenant Montran shook her head at the idea. "That means, if the rights of those with chip implants to live within communities is rescinded...they will all be shipped to the prison colony. Do you really think there is going to be room? And who is going to chase these people down? What a mess. Thank the goddess I don't live in this part of the galaxy. So, was there something specific the captain wanted me to study?"

"No."

For a moment, she was silent as she thought of what types of people the metralabs were enslaving. If Alan was using violent personalities from closed planets for his soldiers, what was to prevent others from purchasing that type of personality for their own bodyguards...or assassins, or worse yet...for forming a private army that no one knew about until a planned time?

"I need to read more of Iwilla's work where she talks about monitoring the dream states of her subjects. She believes it's in dreams where a hint of the erased personality still resides. However," Lieutenant Montran rubbed her tired eyes again, "dreams are in symbols and codes that are unique to the person, no matter their culture. Translating them to know what type of person each metraperson was or can be is time consuming and iffy at best, not knowing if it's anger, fear or the true personality that is shadowed

there. Even a psychtech will be on shaky ground determining what will the individual do with all that suppressed anger. And no matter how much psych intervention, cells and muscles have memory and once the barrier for all of them to interact occurs, there is going to be a lot of anger from the experience." Lieutenant Montran's eyes wandered to the monitors, trying to ignore the pain she felt for those that had been turned into metraslaves. "Where are the others?"

"Maud is resting. Captain Zohra and Carol are on a recon mission. Freight from *Spinners Tale* dropped far from its mark by nearly a days march from the original point. I've scrambled their locaters so it will be a while until they can locate where it's. We're grateful that you had given Carol permission to...be away from you."

Harriet cocked her head to one side. "A test of my morals, aye?" she joked. "My intention remains firm, Guardian. I intend on helping her reclaim her own ability to choose her future. It's one of the reasons I'm studying memory retrieval. I don't want to hinder her recovery and I don't want someone to be able to grab a key card and turn her back into a helpless slave."

She nodded to the holograph, changing the subject. "Why am I not surprised about the misplaced freight, or is that your doing?"

"No," Guardian returned chuckling, "Someone forgot to recalibrate the harmonics after the last wind storm. Captain Zohra wanted to see what was in the package, render it useless, and then harass whoever picks it up."

"Let's hope the captain has not bitten off more than she can chew, and find a troop surrounding them to lay claim to their toy." Lieutenant Montran smiled. "But, then, once a Black Rose...always."

Lieutenant Montran thought of the swagger in the captain's walk she observed on their walk back from the dojo. She was sure it was part of the Black Rose persona, which was part of her own personality now, or had she always had it? The memory of the dark figure performing the Dance, something that took a lot of athletic ability and endurance, made her smile.

She has a good reason to be so self-confident. She was in the Galactic Chronicles top ten list for the best in her class in both the junior and adult divisions. I wonder why she gave up the star life for academy life...And then to become a covert operator in a dangerous and suicidal group. Neither is like academy life. Come to think of it...there was a story of some of the athletes being addicted to the adrenalin rush and doing some really stupid stunts...but that was some years after she left. Is that why she joined the Black Rose...a need for an adrenalin rush? I hope not.

A thought suddenly occurred to her. If planting programmed people in sensitive places occurred to her, then it occurred to others too. That meant if Merkers Outpost became a place Alan wanted to prove a point, this would be where he would test such a weapon.

"Guardian, how do you make it so we don't appear on your screens?" Lieutenant Montran turned to look at Guardian's hologram. If she were not so serious about the question, she would have laughed at the expression on the copac's face.

"If Alan or an agent of his...got into here..." she held up her hand to stop Guardian's reply. "We would all be easy targets. You said that there will be a few troops landing soon...Alan will have a spy or two amongst them and if not, then there will be a handful of them that will look at your gadgets and see their future in riches."

"I have everything patented. I have thought of that," he told her, surprised that she had forgotten their earlier conversation.

"I'm not referring to patents. I'm referring to the illegal side...like theft...smuggling...selling information of what you have here...then the onslaught of thieves, buyers, adventurers..."

"I get the picture," Guardian told her unhappily. "It is the reason why I have kept the planet closed.

"So, you're going to have to think about what you want your visitors to know and what you want the three of us to pass on...and tell us how to render our suits unmonitored should we need to rescue Com-C or some other strategic place without anyone's knowledge."

"She asked the same question with the same reasons," Guardian admitted.

"Captain Zohra," Lieutenant Montran guessed.

"Yes."

Guardian gave a loud sigh.

"My, but you are getting some nice sound effects...do I take it to mean you told her?" A little disappointed he had talked to the captain first.

"I have not told her," he returned as if guessing what she was thinking. "She told me I needed to make up my mind before their arrival."

"Uh huh. So, is it you don't trust us?" *I can see why you don't trust the captain. There is some of the Black Rose mystique that clings to her and makes me wonder just how far to trust her.* "You do have my life on a dot in your memory banks. I have never..." she suddenly stopped, remembering her imprisonment over seven years ago by the enemy. Would she give up information if she were caught again? The last time they were not looking for secrets. They merely wanted to torture someone that invaded their hunting grounds to teach others they were dead serious about their territory.

"It is not just trust, Lieutenant Montran," he told her softly.

Her head lifted and she stared at the hologram, not seeing it for a few moments. Blinking a few times she was back to the present. Lieutenant Montran let out a short laugh. "I get it. Power. You told me that when we first met."

"Yes," Guardian reluctantly admitted.

"Maud knows. So I know that you trust someone outside of your computer environment."

"She is Merkers failsafe," he affirmed.

"I would not put you or her intentionally in danger nor would I give up information...*any*...least it put someone here in harms way," Lieutenant Montran swore. In her mind's eye she saw faces of dead Spartan's that had trusted her. Pain crossed her face.

Guardian read her as he pondered whether to give up his secret to another. In that split moment of Lieutenant Montran's remembrance he made his decision.

"The demise of that troop was already scripted. What you gave them was more than what they could ever have hoped for," he told her quietly.

"They died," she told him flatly. "And some not in a painless way."

Her voice made it clear she didn't want to discuss it. However, Guardian pushed on.

"They died with their dignity and pride in what they had accomplished. Everyone is aware that the Degas troop was once a proud though not shinning, example of Spartan fighting. They had nothing to be ashamed of. Their downfall was when Lord Chaney humiliated himself in front of them and they laughed. After that, every deadbeat, deserter and otherwise lost sheep in the Spartan corps ended up in that troop. He made them bait with no teeth." Guardian studied the gloomy face of the woman whom he and others revered.

"No one has the right to use others for fodder," she muttered

"But they were and because of Lord Chaney's position, he got away with it. You gave them, in the short time they served under your command, a reason to believe in themselves as a unit. You know and I know, they would have been losers if they walked away from the troop. The troop gave them dignity. And you gave the troop pride."

"That may be so, but I turned them into killers," she returned bitterly.

"Hm. On the records, it says they became raiders...stealing supplies from the enemy."

Lieutenant Montran gave a short laugh. "Well, the majority of them were thieves, which was why they were booted over to our troop." Lieutenant Montran sighed. "Guardian... can we talk about something more important than my past?"

"It is because of the loyalty you showed them that I trust you with Merkers' life and all those in her sphere."

"So, are you going to let me become completely invisible at my discretion?"

"Yes."

"Okay," Lieutenant Montran nodded. "Let's get down to how." She thought a few moments, thinking up various scenarios that could happen. "I want to be able to give false readings, but if someone should stumble on where I am supposed to be, I will need to be able to have a fall back plan. It needs to operate separate from your programs. I'm thinking the worst possible scenario, someone gets into your system."

Guardian nodded.

"I'll also need to be able to contact Maud without others knowing, including yourself, so we can use each other for getting control back."

"You intend on leaving Captain Zohra out of this, I take it."

"Like you, I think the best secret is the one that least know. I don't know where her loyalties lie, whether with NabothsVine or her Shield House."

"And what about your loyalty with your admiral?"

"Until she reassigns me, I'm yours. Since she didn't pick me up on one of the ships passing, my guess is she intends on leaving me here, perhaps as an observer." Lieutenant Montran grinned. "But this observer has a tendency to do 'hands on' observing."

Guardian nodded. He presented her with Maud's version of Lieutenant Montran suggestion and they tweaked the ideas.

"You're going to have to erase this conversation," she reminded Guardian when she felt they had a good plan in place. She moved over to the screens. "You might want to show that I was...studying charts or just watching these screens. Captain Zohra is not going to be fooled easily so...you better make it good."

"I have done this before, Lieutenant Montran," he told her reproachfully.

"Hm. Guardian. Don't tell me too much or I'm going to have to take the vows of a monk," she warned, humorously. "Not a career change I would be happy in."

Lieutenant Montran walked to one of the screens that showed a group of soldiers moving a weapon into position on an elevator. She noted there were fewer people moving around in the other screens.

"Looks like an almost deserted city."

"Except for the scattering of Spartans, Lord Chaney's ship that has returned, and Alan's small group of soldiers that arrived a few stan hours ago."

"So...just as I felt...Alan is interested in this place." Lieutenant Montran leaned forward staring at one of the screens. "That's a chantlin canon," she muttered. Figures struggled to set it on a moBot. It was deadly on the battlefield and in an underground city it would be devastating to the life support systems. It used sound waves directed at a specific target.

"Yes," Guardian confirmed in a grim tone.

"You need someone to know how to maintain it or you end up being on the receiving end."

"That may be Ensign Everett on the *Spinners Tale*," Guardian contributed. "Unless I know what sound wave will be emitted, I won't be able to shut it down before it does harm."

"Right."

"What do you suggest?"

"Lock Everett up somewhere, first off, and then whoever else looks like they know how to handle it," she returned, half-seriously.

"Getting to him is going to be a problem since he never leaves the ship."

"If he doesn't come down then there must be another tech. I mean, what does he plan on doing, call down the instructions? It's not that easy to sync them. They would be suicidal to have one tech. That elevator they're moving it down, where does it lead? I don't recall seeing one with that emblem on it."

"It's the primary morgue elevator."

"Ah."

She moved to the screen that showed the storage room next to the morgue.

"Strange that they would choose one place to keep all their supplies including weapons. But then, right now that's a good idea with so few guards left."

"The morgue area has its own life support system, like the laboratories in this section. It was meant to prevent anything that is being stored from contaminating the living spaces."

"So if anything goes off by accident, the occupants in the city would not be affected. I think a reconnaissance to the area is needed to do some inventorying."

The lights in the adjacent conference room came on. A detailed map appeared on the wall.

Lieutenant Montran stepped into the meeting room and studied the large map. "Nice detail. Do you have cameras covering this location?" Her fingertip circled the area she was interested in.

Enlarged shots of the area came up. The photos showed a pattern of traps laid and moved by various Black Rose soldiers. Absentmindedly she slid her empty cup onto the table behind her and crossed her arms in front of her.

"It looks like they left a back door open for themselves. Odd they would do that on a smugglers base. Most smugglers are always ready for a raid and focus on evacuation, not on defensive set-ups to recapture their den. This is where you sealed off their incursions into the rest of the city."

"That is correct. Is this good for us?" Guardian asked.

"I don't know. It could be that they wanted to be able to move as much of their supplies off the planet while they were being attacked and feared a back door attack...but if that's the case why not more muscle power on their side?"

Lieutenant Montran sighed as she continued to study the pictures. "They must have an advantage besides the morgue storage area being self-contained. Are there maintenance tunnels or transportation tunnels near?"

"Yes, to both."

"Hm."

Timed clips came up and she frowned as the patterns changed.

"At least they've been rotating the traps and settings on a regular basis, until this clip here. Whoa! Go back – Yes, Yes. Stop. Now, go slowly forward, I want to see who that is that changed the last one," she murmured.

"I did."

Lieutenant Montran jumped at the sound of Captain Zohra's voice next to her. Exasperation that someone had been able to get that close to her without her being aware was overlapped with the all too pleasant shiver that her nearness sent up her spine.

The captain flopped into a seat at the table. Fine powder from the planet surface dusted the top of the table, as she crossed her booted feet above its shiny surface. She leaned back in the chair, her fingers tapping on the chair's arm and then suddenly stopped. The energy in the room wasn'ticeably changing as if... Lieutenant Montran glanced at Carol and then back at Captain Zohra. The captain looked like at any moment she would pull out a thin dark brown smoker that most Spartan's favored. Lieutenant Montran squinted to lose the image of the captain sitting in a bar, with curls of smoke rising from the thin rolled leaves of tobacco, coldly watching those in the room through her dark unreadable eyes.

Carol's demeanor was quiet as she stood next to her mistress. The same dust from the planet surface coated her outersuit, as if she had been crawling or laying in the stuff.

"Captain Zohra, how did your job go?" Guardian asked amiably.

"You monitor this place, check it out for yourself," the captain returned shortly.

Lieutenant Montran image of her Spartan in a bar disappeared quickly. Watching the captain carefully, she asked. "Is there something we need to know, Captain?"

There was silence as Lieutenant Montran studied the dark veiled eyes, sensing a struggle. Her hands tensed and then relaxed. The dark eyes blinked, then blinked again, and some of the tension in the room dissipated.

"Recon went fine," a low growl came out.

"Is there something we need to worry about?" Lieutenant Montran asked again, noting that the captain knew exactly what she was referring to.

"We had no problems." She brought her feet to the ground with a solid thump smacking her palms on the table and sending the dust on the surface in different directions.

Lieutenant Montran imagined more red dust leaving an imprint on the floor where the boots dropped. Her ears caught the sound of a small bot scooting about. The tension in the room rose again.

Lieutenant Montran nodded, wondering if it was just attitude that was different about the captain.

"Can you tell us what to expect when we try to get into the supply room from here?" Lieutenant Montran nodded to the screen, changing the subject as a tactic to lower the tension.

"You can't," she returned shortly.

"There is always a way."

"Not that way."

"Studying another's defenses is never a waste of time," Lieutenant Montran tried another tact. *Or, is it just because it's your setup?*

"That's set as a permanent fixture." For a few moments she looked like she wasn't going to add anything more, and then she continued. "We have another worry. Alan's elite group of soldiers are here with explosives. Enough to blow out an underground city."

Lieutenant Montran watched closely looking for anything that would give her a clue about her changed demeanor.

"That means whatever Alan has planned for this place is starting now. We need to make our own plans. Alan's group must not get a permanent foothold on this outpost or be able to plant explosives."

"They moved a chatlin cannon down to the supply room next to the morgue," Lieutenant Montran informed her.

"So..." Captain Zohra's eyes narrowed, "that would mean at least twelve of his soldiers are here. Alan keeps track of his minions via a transmitter. I just so happen to have that code. It's in my quarters in the city."

"Carol would be a good backup to take along, since she knows the city as well as you," Guardian mentioned. "Meanwhile, Lieutenant Montran and I will monitor any more troop arrivals and their movements."

Carol hesitated and looked at her mistress. Lieutenant Montran nodded and smiled. *Well, looks like I'm back to the war table.*

Captain Zohra had already started out the door and Carol moved to fall in behind her.

"You aren't buying the captain's story about entering from that side?" Guardian asked.

"I believe nothing is as it seems." Lieutenant Montran turned from the screen and smiled at the holographic image of Guardian. "She's right about the time factor, but..." *Lieut, you're not thinking of trying to bust her setup out of pride are you? This is not a good time to get involved in an ego contest.*

"I don't believe she is hiding anything about that area. The life support systems monitor it," Guardian explained.

"It would be a lot simpler to approach the supply room from this side then from the side where we would run into guards that are alert to visitors," she reasoned. "I can handle traps, even those set for permanency. With your suits ability to blend in it would be even easier, but I'm not willing to give away that secret yet." *Well, that's one advantage in my favor. No one knows what I've been trained on for the last five years. Thank you Commander Neilson for your insistence I keep up my infantry skills, though, I didn't do so good on some. But I think I've proven I can be trouble.* She grinned. *Just a little rusty, but I'll get my rhythm back quickly.*

"Are you two going to be able to work together?" he asked doubtfully.

He must have picked up on the captain's bios too. So my sensitivity to others is picking up. Must be the heat of the battle or something...something meaning this planet? For a moment, she pursed her lips remembering her increased sensitivity to those in the room and then how it lessened. *Well, for whatever the cause of this increased sensitivity, it's fluctuating, so I guess it's here to stay. Should level out soon.*

She turned her attention back to the screen.

"I think we can," she told Guardian thoughtfully. "I can't expect her to suddenly drop a façade she's used all these years for survival. It's annoying, but I've spent enough time with prickly personality types to be able to adjust to it. It just caught me off guard."

"Two ships have arrived above my planet," Guardian announced.

Shortly, men dressed in uniforms that they now identified as Alan's metrasoldiers, entered into the underground city. They were carrying a case between them that was clearly marked.

"Guardian, do you see what I see? They set that off and you'll have firestorms within the city. They should be evacuating this place and instead, explosives and weapons of high intensity are being shipped down." She shook her head perplexed. "It would be so like Alan, all or nothing. But why? Is he exacting revenge for Lord Chaney's death? Is he storing these weapons here to use on someone else? And why his soldiers? Or, is he setting up this place for his base?"

Lieutenant Montran ran her fingers through her hair. It was so overkill, she found it difficult to believe that even Alan was behind it.

Maybe...the soldiers are planning on placing each explosive weapon in different cities of the outpost, rendering them unlivable for a long time. "Guardian, how many cities are there here?"

"Fifteen at one time; three that can be habitable now. Why?"

"Wow." *The holograph showed fewer than fifteen. Must be part of the security.* "That would make more sense where Alan is concerned. Leave something in each city. It would leave only the core of this planet...nothing habitable." *But why? The smugglers are moving out... He doesn't do something this big without a reason. Why, why, why?*

"Captain Zohra and Carol are still on their way to the city."

"Well, I'll be joining them." Lieutenant Montran left the room quickly to suit up. "Brief them and send a note to the admiral and whoever else you've been working with," she called over her shoulder.

"They need to know about the firepower being stored here."

We're going to have to neutralize the explosives before the soldiers move them to their destinations. And while we're at it, shaking up his soldiers would be rather fun. She smirked to herself. *I do believe you are getting a bit cocky there, Lieut. Perhaps some of the Black Rose attitude is rubbing off on you, eh?*



Lieutenant Montran was twenty minutes to her stop when Guardian contacted her.

"Lieutenant, the captain is going to continue to get the meter and will meet you on the second level for a conference."

"Guardian, did you get a reading on that vial I left with you?"

"Yes. It is a derivative from a highly toxic and addictive drug. I didn't find anything in her bio readings that would indicate that it's in her."

"So, you think I got there just in time?" Lieutenant Montran laughed shortly. "I'm just suspicious of Lord Chaney's presence in her room with a highly addictive drug and her sudden snappish behavior. It's just a thought."

"I did a complete scan on her bios," Guardian sounded doubtful. "There wasn't thing that looked like a trigger for that drug."

"There wasn't thing that looked...?" Montran thought about how she knew another scientist that left so much out in sentences like that. "What was in her system that you couldn't identify?"

"I have not quite been able to identify what is different only that there is a change in her chemistry than what it was when she was in the academy. If the captain is addicted to something what do you suggest we do with her?"

"If she is on something, I somehow don't think she has been on it for long. She would have needed a fix sooner. Let her work off the effects, if that is what her sudden change of behavior is from. What about the rest of the Black Rose troop? Do you know what their status is?"

"I keep them unconscious to avoid their attempts to escape. When the *Respites* sister ship arrives, they will be turned over to the Yellow Rose Guard of Titon. I will look closer at their bio readings until then."

"Well, I won't be waiting for Captain Zohra and Carol. I want to look at that far side of the supply corridor, but without Captain Zohra's distraction."

"Maud is headed toward the station. She has finished administering to my guests. My monitors show the tube station is not secured."

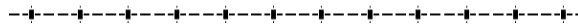
"Is there a way to stop this car beyond the station into your closed part of the city?"

"There is a side rail that will take you to a repair post. There is no support system or lights in the closed section of Century City. I will disengage my barrier in the tube. You will have to open a door between the two parts of the city with an override, to prevent a breach."

"And that...hmmm. I can see in the city plan..." Lieutenant Montran traced the image of the city's schematics that appeared on the car's wall, "there is a passage to the corridor that I want to get to. C4 is your code for that area."

"Yes. That is the buffer zone between the occupied part of Century City and where I have been keeping the rescued survivors. Stopping just past the station will be a sudden deceleration but I believe the suit can handle it. To start the deceleration in the terminal would be dangerous. So far, I see no one in the area, but that doesn't mean they will not be there when you arrive. The fast moving vehicles make a sound that is not completely erased. Fifteen stan more minutes. Once you are past the terminal the speed will decrease. The car will return to its normal place once you have disembarked."

"Good."



Chapter 13

Lieutenant Montran's eyes scanned the walls and ceiling of the pitch-dark service tunnel where equipment and cables were neatly stored out of the way of a service bot or anyone who needed to move quickly along its floor. Her running footsteps made familiar thuds in an oxygen deprived atmosphere, an all together different sound from a room filled with breathable air. She wondered if she would be able to run if she were wearing an AEG instead of Guardian's suit. Moving her eyes to the corner of her visor the timer showed ten stan minutes had passed. She went over the layout of this part of the city. One more minute and the first security gate Guardian erected would be reached.

There was an absence of feeling in the tunnel, which caused her to suspect that all the maintenance in this area was done by bots. What made her think that? Because, she told herself, it wasn't like the feeling she received when she first entered her quarters. Space that once was peopled retained some of the energy of its occupants...which was why clairvoyants and other psychics that read energy could tell something of what went on in the space recalling people and events that occurred in that area. Why she felt uneasy with this revelation she didn't have the time to delve into, so she merely speculated that she had an overactive imagination and was creating nonexistent trouble in an otherwise empty passageway.

It took her all of twenty-five minutes to reach the Web that Captain Zohra had set. Its purpose was to prevent anyone from the uninhabited part of the city from entering their territory unannounced. It took another five minutes to find out why Captain Zohra believed she would not get by.

She is good.

Grinning, Lieutenant Montran flexed her fingers and then began to dismantle the Web. It was a skill she learned first as CO of the Degas Troop and further honed by working with Lieutenant Commander Nilson who liked to set them in odd places during her training sessions with him. The Collective's police forces didn't use them but the outlaws they hunted down did.

After another twenty minutes, she wiped her tired fingers on her pants and then carefully pulled the Web filament down. Nothing snagged, but she was still careful, not wanting to risk discovering too late that she had missed one. Finished, she laid a new trap, setting one of Guardian's stingers and sonic sounders in place. That would have them paranoid. Shaking her tired arms and hands out she felt quite proud of herself.

Score one point for the exSpartan. All right. Now the guard.

Moving up the corridor, just short of the bend in the hall, was the wall panel that would give her access to the surveillance switches. It took her five minutes to reactivate the equipment. Since Guardian didn't have any bots active in the city Maud would have been the one to reactivate the equipment the smugglers and their allies deactivated but Guardian didn't want to risk her for something that other sensors could supply him with. The advantage of being in a computer was that there were always other options to be found.

"Guardian? Can you see me? I reengaged your camera."

"Yes. I can see you and down the corridor. The connection you reestablished is reacquiring the other cameras as we speak."

"What can you see on the other side of where I am?"

"I see one guard from *Spinners Tale* standing outside. The group from Alan's team that moved the explosive has left six Spartans to watch over it. I counted all five of Alan's team that entered the elevator has returned by it. They are on the second floor, conferring with others of their group. The Spartans inside the storage room are engaged in heavy betting, the card game they seem to always be playing."

"This is a good time then to neutralize the explosive," Captain Zohra's voice came through Lieutenant Montran's communicator. Suspiciously, Lieutenant Montran looked around.

"We're in the opposite wall from you, Lieut"

Lieutenant Montran could hear the smile in her voice. *Blasted woman's got me jumpy.* Then a small picture appeared in one corner of her visor.

"You can control what camera you want to view from by tapping the blue dot on your left forearm," Guardian instructed.

Lieutenant Montran tested it out, getting a view of Carol and then one of the captain. Tapping further gave her views of the corridor.

"You have a gas that can neutralize one of the compounds in the explosive, Guardian. That done, the rest of the payload is worthless. It's pinkish, unless you have more than one pink shade," Captain Zohra informed him.

"I know which one and it would, but I don't have access to the morgue area with any gas. You will have to move the canisters with the explosives to another floor."

"That can be arranged," the captain told him.

Lieutenant Montran studied the image of the guard that was watching this part of the hall.

One lone guard playing a game and acting as if there wasn't anything to worry about. Hm. Well, I'm just a real suspicious prankster and believe it's best not to take situations at face value. So...can anything else be happening here?

The lieutenant recognized him from *Spinners Tale*. She could hear the sounds from the game. Turning her head slightly she watched Captain Zohra and Carol moving toward her.

"Nice work. I underestimated your skills," Zohra complimented her softly. "It won't happen again," she added.

Lieutenant Montran tried not to grin.

"It is standard practice to have one guard for this side of the corridor, but..." the captain looked into Lieutenant Montran's eyes but not for long, and continued, "something doesn't feel right."

Lieutenant Montran pulled a piranha star out of her utility pocket.

"Nice toy," the captain murmured, and then returned her attention to the guard. The captain hesitated and shook her head. "Something is not right about this."

Lieutenant Montran leaned against the wall and tried not to think that the captain was having problems with divided loyalties.

"That game is not making the sounds of someone who is serious about winning," Carol offered.

"He keeps hitting the same button. Of course, he could be dreaming of his leave time and what he's going to do with his..." the captain cleared her throat, "with himself. Or, he could be a decoy."

Lieutenant Montran pursed her lips and refrained from telling her that she need not have changed her original remark. *That's an interesting side to the captain.*

"He's got a primer in his hand. He's probably nervous about his missing buddies that Carol and I have been taking out of the game. How fast can you two sprint?" Captain Zohra asked.

"Fast enough," Carol returned.

Lieutenant Montran grinned and held up the star.

"When you're ready, Lieutenant."

The device the guard was holding reset to each new position he took, but it needed him to press the button, otherwise an alarm would go off. Lieutenant Montran watched the figure in her helmet screen, waiting for him to reset the small device in his hand. The three women sprinted toward the guard as soon as the star shot out from her hand. He was frozen in mid-fall when Captain Zohra caught him. Lieutenant Montran made a diving grab for the device in the air before it hit the ground. Without pause, she rolled to her feet pulling out her sidearm and scanned the hall before them. Without looking her finger deactivated the rescued device.

Captain Zohra sprinted further down the corridor and then disappeared. Carol did her part by placing a sleep patch on the unconscious man's neck.

"Guardian, do you have some place to lock him up in this city?" Lieutenant Montran asked.

"Well, yes. I could reactivate the holding cells. I had not thought of that. It is only one floor below the recreation area."

"Do it," Captain Zohra ordered softly, and then her form reappeared next to Lieutenant Montran and Carol. "And while you're at it, why don't you add the others we've bound and gagged and left in closets."

"You put your holding cells below a recreation area?" Lieutenant Montran asked unbelievably.

"I didn't anticipate any crime in my cities. This was a research center, not a metropolis of nomads. The most serious problem was a tagerian adolescent who was bored. He was more obnoxious than violent."

"Can your bots move him there?" Captain Zohra asked impatiently.

"Yes. When I bring that level's environmental system back online, it will bring the bots on line too. It will take about thirty stan minutes. Then I will send them to gather up the rest you've been closeting away."

"So, we need to find a place to dump him until your holding cells and bots are ready."

"Well, there is a place nearby...not a closet just a cubby hole," Guardian started, just as a long panel near the floor slid open and a bot rolled out, "that he can be stored in."

The captain retracted her helmet. "Lieutenant Montran, why don't you drag him to his temporary quarters? We'll meet you up the hall. Don't spend too much time making him comfortable, huh?" The captain gestured to Carol toward the morgue entrance.

The lieutenant dragged the unconscious guard to the opened space. "What does this guy eat?" Lieutenant Montran grunted as she shoved him into the space. Once the door closed over the unconscious man, she hurriedly jogged to the corner and hugged the wall, "Blend on," she whispered. Peering around the corner carefully, she didn't want to run into any surprises. Her team was waiting on each side of the storage entrance of the morgue.

"Blend off," she whispered.

"You ready?" whispered Captain Zohra. "Both of you make sure your 'blend' is off. I don't want anyone to accidentally disappear if you're knocked on your butt and give away one of our advantages. Okay. Let's go."

Lieutenant Montran stood to one side of the door and Carol the other, prepared to step into the first containment space that led into the area. No one was in it nor were there any trips or traps. When the second door unsealed, the three were out quickly. The guards on the inside were expecting one of their own and had continued their card game when the seal broke. It was a chance glance in the women's direction around one of the crates that brought a short cry from one of the players. The men slumped over stunned as the women hit them quickly and solidly with their stunners. Lieutenant Montran and Carol found something to bind them up, and then pasted sleep patches on their necks, leaving them hidden behind storage equipment until the bots could collect them.

Captain Zohra was hoping the bots got to them before their crewmates. She was trying to adjust to using a stunner over something more lethal. She would much rather take someone out once, and not worry about them returning pissed off. Sometimes Spartan methods were better suited for the situation at hand. The three women started to search the area for the explosive.

"There is a group of five Spartans that just arrived with what appears to be a chatlin canon," Guardian informed them.

"That makes three. That crazy Alan," Captain Zohra muttered exasperated. "Let's find the explosives, dump what we find in a room Guardian can gas, and then we'll go and see if we can steal us a chatlin canon to rattle some cages."

The captain slid a crate back into place with a grunt and went to another. "I sure could use a grav lifter. The smugglers probably took them all with them." She let out a string of curses when the carton she was balancing dropped near her foot. Captain Zohra dragged the canister and then two more out from behind some crates.

"Eureka," the captain said under her breath, as she peered into the opened crate.

"We need something to lift it with. Carrying it between us is going to take too much time," Lieutenant Montran echoed her feelings.

"I have a few bots online now," Guardian informed them. A bot rolled out from a storage bay and lifted the canister easily, then wheeled to wait for one of them to open up the sealed door.

"That will do it," the captain nodded pleased.

"If you let the bot out, it will find its way to the elevator and to a room on the upper level where I can neutralize the contents," Guardian explained.

That done, the three turned to their other task with Captain Zohra in the lead. She set a fast pace through the halls and up a stairway where there were no traps set. Maud was waiting for them on the second level where Guardian had told them the group was moving along cautiously and slowly. This slowness didn't make sense to Lieutenant Montran. Were they expecting trouble from them?

Captain Zohra stepped back a pace when she caught sight of Maud.

"My twin, Maud. Guardian's assistant," Lieutenant Montran introduced shortly. "This is Captain Zohra and Carol, Carol-Maud. Last meet you didn't get a chance to exchange names."

Captain Zohra said nothing, as Maud nodded to the captain, and smiled at Carol. Lieutenant Montran wondered by the smile if Maud and Carol already knew each other.

The captain mapped out a strategy. She had two things in mind, capture weapons and take out as many of the soldiers as they could. For thirty minutes, they dogged the group making their movement to the morgue area even slower and full of surprises both before them and behind them. The invading group was whittled down to five, with Guardian's bots dragging off the unconscious soldiers once the survivors

were out of sight. The remaining soldiers were intent on moving their package toward the storage area. Then, the soldiers split up. Three guarded the weapon while two attempted to escape through one of the panels. One was successful.

"Guardian, give us a close up of the cannon," Captain Zohra ordered, not daring to peek from around the service panel she had propped open. The other three women were sitting behind their own service doors, pinning the three remaining soldiers down.

"It's been used," Guardian reported. "The barrel number has come up from my search as scrapped from battle. It's probably from one of the late Lord Chaney's business associates who owns a salvage company. I don't want to alarm any of you...but there seems to be a charge on the weapon, and it's active." "Bloody moon!" Captain Zohra cursed then went silent, working on a plan.

"No wonder they are moving so slow," Lieutenant Montran added softly. "Why would they bring an armed weapon down below?"

"There is a passageway, near the morgue that leads to the transportation tunnel," Maud suggested. "They wouldn't knock out the transportation line so early in the game. And...they have to have transportation to use it to their advantage."

"All they need is a moBot. Maybe it's to discourage us from getting too close. Idiots." The captain looked toward Lieutenant Montran. "Your idea of setting explosives in the other cities looks plausible."

"A moBot?" Carol asked.

"Mobile robot. Program it to take whatever load to a site, and both go up with a nice boom. The only loss of life is on the other side," Lieutenant Montran explained softly in her mic as she peered around the corner to draw fire from the soldiers, hoping she was depleting their weapons. She wasn't disappointed. They had Alan's group pinned down, but well aimed zip charges from the remaining three kept Captain Zohra's group from knocking any more out.

Lieutenant Montran shifted her weight against the wall and leaned her head back to think. *Why are we being kept here? I know it seems like we're pinning them down, but I got this feeling this is to keep our attention. From what?*

"Guardian, is there anything going on around the morgue area?"

"If you activate your helmets..." In the lower part of their visors a scene appeared. "A change of guard arrived. They didn't find anyone to change duty with. They're a bit jumpy at the moment. I see some more of these soldiers dressed in black, Alan's group, heading your way. Ah. The one that got away is headed toward the morgue."

The images changed rapidly showing them different levels where Alan's soldiers were.

Why? He's one of Alan's soldiers. All those in the morgue are Spartans. Wouldn't he want to march back to his own group of metrasoldiers and get further instructions? Does he have orders to get something from the weapons cache if we're a threat? She had to get back to the morgue. She signaled her intention to Captain Zohra that she was going to follow the escaping soldier. The captain and the others were suddenly busy with the volley of fire that the remaining three started, as they prepared to make a run for it, this time leaving the cannon and its charge. Did they get word that now was a good time to leave, since the trap had been set or for whatever reason they were to keep Guardian's group busy was accomplished?

Lieutenant Montran slipped out of sight into one of the service tunnels. She found a lot of T&T's and an intricate Web along her way. No wonder Captain Zohra had taken them down the hall. Rather than dismantle them, Lieutenant Montran slid by them and murmured her thanks to Guardian for the trace elements her helmet was able to pinpoint, and then find a weak spot to slip by.

"Guardian, what's happening?"

An image appeared of three of Alan's soldiers.

"Another cannon Alan's soldiers are bringing down. They haven't moved the other cannon into the morgue area yet. There is another group of soldiers on the first level that have just arrived from their ship." He showed her the image of ten soldiers just entering the city compound.

"Perhaps that is whom they are waiting for. They have a small package, which one is holding very carefully."

"Can you tell what is in the package?"

"Trace elements around it show Tricon," Guardian reported despondent.

"More explosives!"

"Yes."

"It would cause flame-outs in the tunnels that criss-cross the interior of this planet. It could very well destabilize the planet's position and in turn the jump gate."

"Yes," Guardian agreed, "but the only one that is active is the one Captain Zohra is now dismantling."

"I think that was done to draw us there. If they have moBots moving the explosives, it could take a few days to reach some of the cities like the Lair, or to another destination. You can't move explosives too fast or the momentum and heat will detonate them. I sure would like to know when they plan on setting these off. We need to find where they are storing the moBots to disable them. Do these metrasoldiers only follow orders?"

"I can only hazard a guess by my recent observations. This is the first time any of Alan's soldiers have visited my outpost. How much of their own ingenuity comes into play would depend on how much the owner had allowed the program to be independent of commands, and as of yet, there has been no action that would require independent thinking."

"So...depending how psychotic and cryptic Alan was when he gave them their marching orders, they have a set agenda."

"Yes. But you have to also take into effect the culture of these metrasoldiers which also plays a part in their effectiveness. They are from a planet that war is a way of life. Within that framework, how much initiative would they have without a commanding officer?"

"Great. You don't happen to have some information on the species and cultures do you?"

"It's being worked on. The Vine's operatives stopped a ship suspected of smuggling kidnapped warriors from these violent planets to a metralab in one of Fermin's merchant freighters. One of the warriors has been recruited to work for the Brotherhood the rest have been sent back to their planet. The freed prisoners were quite vehement in returning to punish those responsible for what was about to be done to them, which is understandable. Because their species is from a closed planet, they are protected from outside influence ...including social scientists and cultural anthropologist who would like to study their savage cultures."

"Guardian, they have nerve to say that, considering the way the Committee has been using it's military force to keep some of their members in power."

"Yes, but that imbalance is changing," Guardian pointed out.

"I'll believe it when I see it."

Lieutenant Montran arrived at the robot's service entrance without encountering any opposition. With her past luck in using the smaller entrances she continued her pattern. This time she had her stunner in hand.

As quietly as she could, she pulled herself forward on her elbows listening after each pull forward to be sure whatever noise she made wasn't magnified and heard through the vents. She entertained the thought of using the disappearing ability of the suit, but she didn't know what would happen if a light was shined in the small vent and though they may not see her, would they see a shadow or something unnatural? Not an option to use, she decided.

Dragging herself to the bot exit, she stopped when a shadow moved across the bot's slatted door. Closing her eyes for concentration, she listened closely at the sounds in the room to get an idea on how many guards were in there. Should she use the suit's vanishing capabilities? Why? They couldn't see her now anyway.

"I can see five in the room," Guardian's voice whispered in her ear. "The one that got away from your ambush met up with some of his group before he arrived here. He returned with them on the second level to speak with a Spartan. The Spartans and Alan's group do not mix well."

"That's handy to know. What's the total live body count of 'them' on the planet?" Lieutenant Montran asked softly. Pictures of rooms with soldiers, both of Spartans and Alan's soldiers, flickered quickly. Lieutenant Montran averted her eyes to avoid getting dizzy with the speed.

"I count about forty, divided between those that are now chasing after Captain Zohra and her team, what is in the storage room and those headed toward you. Captain Zohra deactivated the timer before reinforcements arrived and damaged the mechanism; however, I'm sure they have replacement parts."

Lieutenant Montran could hear the seal release. *A platoon? We're only facing a platoon?*

"Gunny, they're here," a voice reported. "It looks like they need help."

"You two go help out. Maxwell, go outside and stand guard...and stay alert! I don't want to add your name to the 'missing persons' roster."

The shadow in front of Lieutenant Montran didn't move.

By the sounds of the grunts and mutterings, heavy crates were being moved about. The shadow in front of her moved to assist.

"Move those over here," a deep voice ordered.

"We've done enough! They are fine where they are!" a voice growled angrily. "We're doing all the grunt work and without grav lifters. We're not moving those moBots anywhere. They are close enough to your equipment."

"I said, move them over here." The voice remained low, but the menace behind the words was evident.

"Ya aren't our CO, and they aren't that far away for your bloody ass buddies to move when it's time. They stay where they are unless you move them yourself. We're here to guard the stuff, not be your bloody slaves. Ya'd think ya were mommies' boys," the voice muttered disgusted.

There was a sudden sound of bone on flesh and the crash of something heavy falling onto the crates.

"You may think by pushing us around that it makes you all invincible and important. ...but ya can't beat us all... You best be thinking' of the missing Black Rose troop. You keep pickin' us off and you'll have to face them alone. And I can tell ya now, you won't beat them without us."

Lieutenant Montran couldn't hear anything from that response but it didn't lessen the tension in the air. Perhaps it was from the helmet's enhanced sensory inputs, but she could smell more than one person sweating with fear.

"Says you," the deep voice laughed.

Suddenly, the seal could be heard breaking.

They're leaving? That's that?

"Mickey!" One of the others squeaked out. "You better watch that mouth of yours! They aren't human, man, and they don't care for us that are! Sorry there, Mallin. I mean all sentiments. Life is cheap to them."

Others joined in with their comments.

"They ain't goin' ta beat the Black Rose with or without us. Hades! You guys can't let them treat you like slaves," Mickey returned. "Then they'll always feel they can. You're veteran Spartans! Damn it, act like it. Show some grit!"

"Mickey, they're metrasoldiers, and the worse kind. Did you see the way they took Ray out? Carved him up alive! He was the only one that could tell what happened on that cruise accident they were involved in. It was suppose to be a simple kidnapping; hold the target family members for ransom somewhere; collect the money, and then let the hostages go. Simple. Ray said they held the entire ship hostage and when the ransom wasn't delivered on time, boom! All gone. No second chances. Like they had it planned that way in the beginning. Man, they are out just to terrorize people. Make everyone feel unsafe even in the most guarded of space lines."

So, they were behind the hostage game. The Centurion Command thinks it was rogue smugglers ...why would Alan's soldier's blow away an entire ship...was it for the fun of it like the soldier said? Is this what to expect from Alan if he's allowed to continue unrestrained? I wonder if he had another reason to scuttle that ship and everyone on board. I wonder if Guardian has that ship's passenger and crew register...bet he does. Lieut, you have enough to worry about here! You don't need any more problems to look into.

"Bloody moons! The news said it was a freak meteor shower that went right through their buffer. I'm getting out of here before that nut, kid Fermin, gets here. Maybe that's why Lord Chaney got his uppance; he found out the kid had a hand in that mess up and they had a fallin' out."

The sibilant hiss of the seal releasing silenced the men.

"Hey, Mickey, what did you tell those dong eaters? You got hit too? One of them knocked me down and I wasn't even in his way!"

"Maybe they're a bit upset because the Black Rose is somewhere around here, people are disappearing...including their people, and they can't find them," Mickey's voice was laughing. "If the Black Rose is taking in recruits to face these guys, I wish they would take me too. The Black Rose and the kid's group trained in the same compound on Reinier IV. I heard the one that thinks he's a hotshot was whipped in a practice fight with Sergeant Major JG. He fancies himself a real warrior, being a metrasoldier and all. He probably thought he was going to come down here and kick her butt with his buddies behind him."

The others laughed, letting some of the tension in the room dissipate.

"Never happen," another voice stated, "even if there was ten of them and one of her. I've seen her square off with five of her own troop, and they're no wimps."

"That idiot chief on *Spinnners Tale* thought the kid was going to give her to him to carve up. I personally don't see anything remarkable about her except she could turn your blood into ice with one of her looks. They're as obsessed about her as the kid and Lord Chaney are about Lieutenant Montran. It's Got to be something they ate."

"Bloody moon! Wonder how the kid feels that his special soldiers still aren't better'n the Black Rose, Lord Chaney's elite toy soldiers?"

"Not his anymore. Wonder what they're gonna do now that Lord Chaney's out of the picture? It's not like he owned them...but they're gonna have to find their own ships off this place 'cause them metrasoldiers, they got those three ships up there under their command and they're patrolling space to make sure no one leaves or enters without their knowledge."

"You mean Fermin's command. They don't think; they just obey orders...so think about this being your lucky day, Mickey. You weren't on the kid's hit list for today, but they're gonna tell him about ch'ya so you better go lookin' for them Black Rose ghosts to kidnap ya."

They all laughed nervously.

"I think the Black Rose, they'll be wanting to take over this planet for themselves. Since they arrived, they've been studying this place and making detailed maps...and I don't think it was for Lord Chaney."

"That's probably why the kid wants to render it inhabitable..."

"That's the part that doesn't make sense. Why doesn't he just take over the place now that Lord Chaney is out of the picture? You would think he's leaving this part of the Galaxy for a while, the way he's planning on setting off these charges."

"That or maybe a sideshow to something he's doing somewhere else. Damn waste of a planet, if you ask me. It's going to affect the entire area including the jump gate!"

"The kid didn't ask you. We get a ride outta here for sticking out the last part and a nice bit of pay to boot. That's all we need to know."

"Nothin' is rock solid, Mickey, and most of all with the kid. I just hope that he keeps to his side of the bargain. He's got something planned, All right. Everything he's doing is calling the attention of every crazy newscaster in the known galaxies. He wipes out that passenger liner and now he plans on doin' in this planet. The passenger liner had four families of Committee members. I heard they were on their way to the birthday party of another member...whose planet is right next to the jump gate where the kid was detained a few stan months back due to something he was carryin'."

"You got an overactive imagination, GP. The only way those people could be related is through spit swapping and other bodily fluids. I'll believe the party thing, but helgas moon tides, those folks celebrate parties nonstop. They got the time and credits. Where did you hear that bit of garbage? My bet is that you've been listening to the *Trash*. All they need is to find one bit of coincidence and then they start gluing unrelated bits of information to fit whatever story they've cooked up to sell," Mikey told the soldier in disgust.

There was silence for a moment.

"I heard the kid is building a fortress on MageWield." Another volunteered, as if to lessen the tension in the room that had again risen unbearably high for the nervous soldiers.

"It won't happen." Another retorted sounding relieved that the subject was changed.

The lieutenant echoed the thought. .

"I heard they still haven't found Lieutenant Montran. The kid thinks she's hiding out in one of those other cities we haven't heard of before, that's **why** he's fixing to blow this place."

"I also heard that if you talk about her and the kid hears about it, he has his deadhead metrasoldiers cut your tongue out and then other parts....slowly."

"Mickey! Damn you say the strangest things sometimes. This whole place gives me the chills and since Lieutenant Montran showed up things have been getting worse!"

"Don't they wish that she would show up!" one of the others hooted.

"Did you hear that she has the Fate's blessing?" another asked.

"Don't let anyone hear you say that!" another voice told him harshly. "There are still some who are ears for the kid, and he gets twitchy about stuff like that." Then a chuckle. "But, then again, it's because of Lord Chaney and the kid's obsession to get rid of her that we're all in this damn mess."

"Well, you have to admit, she does get out of places that she shouldn't have more times than any should."

"As Spartans' we all lead charmed lives. The one's that don't are dead before their contract is up. Bar tales are not meant to be believed, grunt, just to inspire other drunken GPs to go out and do the foolish and stupid ass jobs they're assigned to."

There was a long silence. Lieutenant Montran thought they were drifting off.

"Lord Chaney liked to play with too many fires at one time," one voice reported in a low voice. "Too many people wanted him out of the way, including his daughter."

"I heard *Spinners Tale*, after picking us up, is going to pick up a new crew," another voice changed the subject quickly.

"Who told you that?" sneered a voice. "Wipe out an entire crew? Jeez, Fly Bait, at the rate that crew is actin', they'll off themselves in some space accident. It's bad enough we have to grab a ride with them outta here, you don't have to add that bit of news to the horror!"

"You needn't get so nasty!"

"All right, break it up. You two are worse than a married couple. Secure your positions and let's have some peace and quiet for a while," Mickey broke in.

The shadow was once again in front of her vent.

"Hey, Millen?" a voice called softly after moments of silence had passed.

"Yes?"

"Ya think computer head is responsible for the disappearances around here?"

There was a long silence as if the other soldier was reluctant to discuss it.

"Ya don't think it's the Black Rose do ya, taking in recruits...or maybe the deadheads?"

"Naw, it's not the computer, 'cause it would have been doing that the moment we moved in here. It could also be the metradame, going nuts without her master."

"She wouldn't kidnap anyone without orders. Unless...unless someone changed her programming. Do you think the Black Rose got to her?"

"Maybe. But the last we saw of her she was after Lieutenant Montran. Since we haven't seen either of them...maybe they're still chasing each other. But, it would be nice to think that the Black Rose are doing it to piss off kid Fermin's toy soldiers. That or they're on Lord Chaney's ship with Sheila. His ship returned. I hope to hell those damn deadheads don't get pissed off and take it out on us like using us for target practice or something painful. Shit! I jus' wanna collect my pay and get outta this racket."

"Shut up you two!" A muffled voice growled from somewhere in the room.

The shadow moved away from her hiding place and Montran decided to risk using her small spy camera. The fisheye view quickly changed to a focused view of two guards that were leaning against a stack of boxes, one moved out of sight and the other moved with him. By the sighs, they were sitting down. Unlatching the door, she quickly slid out on the floor, and reattached it. She moved behind a stack of crates looking around her for any monitoring equipment. Finding none, she studied the boxes she crouched behind.

Food. Bitter baita. Her finger tapped the box wondering why it had a lock and seal on it if it was only bitter baita, a thin bread soldiers found in their mess kits too often.

This is an awful lot of bread for one shipment. If one goes bad the whole lot goes bad. In fact, why do they have so much food intermixed with weapons?

Glancing around quickly, she returned her focus on the seal. She had learned how to get by a seal without anyone being the wiser and the lock type was easy to pick open. A handy trick when you're tracking down smugglers and you find their cache, empty it and then wait for their discovery that they have nothing to trade. Working for the Centurions was much more fun than the Spartans.

As the lid slid back quietly, Lieutenant Montran held her breath as infantry rifles and spare ammunition clips were revealed.

"Trouble heading your way," Guardian's voice whispered.

"Everyone up! Those deadheads are on their way here!"

"Helios fire! At least this time they called ahead!"

"More than likely wanted to make sure we were still here...not like the other bunch that disappeared," one of the others mentioned softly.

"Blend on," Lieutenant Montran whispered, just incase she needed to press against something to blend in. She quickly slid the lid back without checking the seal. She moved around one of the crates and

then retreated behind another when a guard moved. Her hiding place in the bot service passage was blocked.

She opted for hiding in the box she just inspected. For some reason she couldn't wholly trust the suits vanishing capabilities. She saw it work, but...

Lying on rifles and ammunition clips was uncomfortable. Slowly she pulled the lid down to her hiding place, making sure the seal was over the lip with her fingers pulling it down through the tiny opening, and then letting it drop the rest of the way.

I sure hope this suit blends in with the weapons.

It seemed like a long time but she was sure only ten stan minutes had passed when talking outside of her box got louder and turned into an argument between the Spartans and the new arrivals. The loud voices dropped to mutterings, then scraping and grunts as boxes were moved.

Where would they be taking the boxes? Are they moving into one of the cities?

The box she was in lifted, and by the smooth movement, she guessed a moBot was being used.

Someone finally got sensible and brought the right equipment. I guess I'll be finding out the destination first hand.

The box dropped suddenly, though in a controlled drop, some distance down.

Oh, joy! I hope I'm not being taken to their ship!

There were no voices around to give her a hint at where she was being moved to. The forward movement was slow at first, and then it picked up. It seemed like a long time had passed before motion stopped and then the direction was changed and for a few short minutes, she bumped along. She came to rest on something solid, and then something was dropped on top of the box she was in.

"Guardian," she whispered, "where am I?"

"In the transportation bay up the line. They disengaged my barrier, but I have reestablished it. Whatever they used has compromised your suits functioning. It has shut down some functions to keep your life support going. It will take a while for it to rebalance, as I can see already some of the other features are coming back, such as your bio readings on the visor. That means your blend function is out of the question for now. I'm working on a way to prevent a reoccurrence of this."

"I knew I was a test subject," Lieutenant Montran mumbled.

"Even a well-tested weapon, once placed in the hands of a professional, will still demonstrate room for improvement. Nothing is failsafe."

"Right, right. I'm just being grumpy at my making such a stupid mistake, Guardian. Have they posted a guard?"

"They have little boxes spaced to set off alarms should anyone approach their belongings."

"Who are they expecting? Phantom soldiers?"

"From the conversations I've been overhearing...they are apprehensive due to the disappearance of soldiers, including some of their own, compliments of Captain Zohra and Carol."

"Tch, tch." In the small space, she felt for her sidearm. "Right now, a bot would be a great help to get me out of here, but there may be traps around the box too."

"Conflag filaments," Guardian confirmed. "Captain Zohra and Carol are still engaged with their business. Maud is attending to a disturbance among the rescued prisoners."

Lieutenant Montran was really disgusted with how her independent venture went, and she knew better. Lone wolf operations were always discouraged...unless it was planned and well-thought out.

Beatin yer head against the wall is only gonna get ch'ya a headache, Ma'Dearie. Maybe now would be a good time to just rest.

Hello, Harry. Haven't heard from you for a while. It makes me wonder if maybe you're a figment of my imagination. However, I'm not complaining.

Ya been a bit too busy fer me ta be botherin' ya.

Her fingers wrapped comfortably around her sidearm ready to lift it should she need it. The lieutenant closed her eyes and decided to do as soldiers in combat situations usually do, grab sleep when the opportunity presents itself.

Well, I wanted to find out where this equipment was destined for.



The sound of something scratching on the top of the box alerted Lieutenant Montran someone was outside of the box, trying to open it. She heard the hum of a grav lifter. Whatever was on top of her box

was lifted, and then after a few moments the lid was slowly opened. She didn't hear Guardian's voice. That worried her. Lifting the tip of her stunner a light blinded her. Before she could aim her weapon she was paralyzed with a stunner. The lid was slid further back. There was only darkness above her but she could see a helmeted youthful face peer over her.

"Gawds and the edwinds! It's her!" a young voice squeaked, muted from behind his helmet. "Gawds! Wait until they see what I found," the voice continued to gloat. Lieutenant Montran couldn't see anything more. Her vision blurred from the force of the stun. Her fingers were frozen in their grip around her side arm, and her arms slumped against the walls of her prison, nerveless. Again, she cursed her choice of hiding places. The lid was slammed back down and she could hear clumsy booted footsteps running away from her.

Her body wasn't taking the effects of the stun well. She could feel needles of pain stab through her numb limbs. Time seemed to pass agonizingly slow as she sweat out the effects, cursing whoever set the stunner to a painful setting.

The lid once more was moved on the box, and pushed to the side. Through her visor she could make out the outline of a helmet like hers. Arms reached in and pulled her out, dropping her on a shoulder. She felt like a bag of potatoes, but she was grateful she was being rescued...or she was hoping that was what was happening.

She grunted out air as she was jostled and bounced on a running shoulder. She saw nothing but a back, her arms flopping about, annoying to her and most probably to the person carrying her. Finally, her journey ended. She slid off the shoulder that she now identified as bony, and was gently leaned against a wall. The lieutenant lay in an uncomfortable position for some time before she felt hands on her shoulders righting her. Her arms and legs began to tingle again as feeling returned.

"Harriet, you get into as much trouble as you dish out mischief," Maud's voice softly informed her. Something was administered in the form of a shot into her neck. "What you need is a bodyguard to make sure you don't put something important in the proverbial lion's mouth." She pushed some sore spots on Harriet's head, neck, face and shoulders.

Lieutenant Montran shook out her hands. "Who was that kid?"

"Is that who shot you? He's like a street urchin. He's here and everywhere. He picked up that stunner from the captain of the Black Rose who felt sorry for him being amongst adults with nothing to protect him from them. In return, he provided the captain with useful information. It's painful, no?"

"It's painful," Lieutenant Montran rasped. "It must be potent if Guardian's suits don't block it."

"Believe it or not, you were protected. It normally has the recipient screaming when feeling in the limbs returns. It's to teach any adult that messes with him not to do it again. He drives Guardian to distraction, but Guardian has other means to keep him out of places he doesn't want him to be in.

"Great. What happens if some pissed off adult steals his gun and shoots him with it?"

"Hm. That type of energy charge doesn't affect his species. Guardian was hoping he had left with the main group of smugglers. There must be something here that interests him. Hopefully, it's not the idea that he can be here all by himself."

"Where is Guardian?" Lieutenant Montran asked as Maud helped her to her feet.

"He's offline for this area."

"Offline?"

"I'll let him explain that to you. Right now...how are you feeling?"

"Better." She moved her arms, fingers and legs, shaking them out. "I got to get back to the supply room. There's some equipment I would like to render useless."

Maud nodded. "When Guardian comes active, he will have his bots move those supplies in the tunnel."

"I think he should first make sure there isn't a movement detonator in some of those boxes. It's too coincidental that they moved the weapons away from the living spaces, even if that storage room is supposed to be independent of all the others. I mean, do they know that? Or, maybe they're like me, wondering why the Black Rose stored all the weapons in one place. It's like they're getting ready for a siege, yet, they don't have enough soldiers and they haven't even secured the small space they do have access to! I Got to get back to that room and see what they left behind, hopefully amongst them are the moBots."

Maud gave her a funny look of 'haven't you had enough trouble for one day.'

Lieutenant Montran held her hand up, "I promise to not put anything in the lion's mouth this time."

The two trotted through the tunnel, stopping short of the bot entrance to the morgue storage room.

"Can you wait here and keep watch? By now that group in there will be sleeping..." *I hope.* Maud nodded, "But every seven stan minutes, give me a check that you're okay."

"All right. And thanks, Maud."

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's what you do; it's what Guardian expects of you; it's what you expect of yourself. Hopefully you continue to have this run of good luck."

As Lieutenant Montran began her crawl through the small tunnel, she hoped the same. At the bot door, she sent her small peeping eye camera out the vent. No one within view. She could hear more than one person making the usual noises when asleep.

So, are they waiting for me or are they really sleeping?

She passed her hand over the beam to open the panel. Silently it slid back. In the small space, she maneuvered herself onto her back so she would be looking up, pulled herself out of the bot space, and snaked over to a nearby crate. A sleeping soldier was on top of a crate snoring in gusts and whistles making more noise than she would be able to sleep through. She silently moved toward him quickly affixing a sleeping patch on his palm where there was no fur.

If he's faking it, he isn't now.

Cautiously peering around a corner of stacked boxes marked rations, she found another soldier slumped atop a crate using his jacket for a pillow. It was a Malu. They were not always what they appeared to be, asleep or inattentive. They had eyes in the back of their heads, was the rumor. The crate he was on was marked with the symbol for cannon.

So, they have left some weapons here. If I use the stunner, everyone will hear him roll off that crate and I'm not going to be able to hold him. Stealth and nondetection is the plan.

Lieutenant Montran went back around the crate to locate more soldiers. A six-armed drago was snoozing with his six arms draped around him. He was snuggled between crates. With a quick hand, she lightly tapped a patch to his forehead. As Lieutenant Montran made her way to the next guard, the sound of movement caused her to spin around, and dropped to her knees with her stunner pulled. Captain Zohra had her hands held up showing she held no weapon. Carol was pulling herself out of the service tunnel. Lieutenant Montran signaled where the cannon was and signed the species of the soldier that was on top of it. Captain Zohra nodded, then disappeared around the crate. Carol and she finished off the other two then came back to where Captain Zohra was leaning far into the crate inspecting the contents. The figure that had been resting on top of the crate was laying unconscious on the deck with four patches on him; two on the back of his hands, one on his nose and one on his pointed chin. Lieutenant Montran filed that away for future use.

A muffled curse came from Captain Zohra.

"What's wrong?"

"This one has a motion device on it. It's also armed with a timer set for 0400 tomorrow. If they forget to send someone down here to reset the timer, everyone in here is a gonner." She straightened up and continued to look around inside and outside the crate. "We'll need to take it with us and move it topside so I can set it off...a day early." She sniffed the insides of the crate. "Smells like they got the big bang in here too." She found where they placed the explosive, Tricom. Small packages were stuffed in the cannon's barrel along with material to keep the dampness out. Since it would not add one iota to the explosion without the small powder that turns Tricom into a fireball, the captain guessed the intention was to hide it. But from who? Them? Well, the lack of powder indicated they were not intending for it to go off at 0400 – unless someone was planning on sneaking down here to add the powder. But she knew why they were here and 0400 tomorrow was premature for the battle to begin. She imagined Alan still had more troops to deploy. So far, she and Carol had kidnapped twelve and dumped them into sleep chambers without life support in the locked room, so even if they escaped the sleep pods, they would not have enough breathable air to find a way out of the locked storage room.

"This thing can be heavy," Captain Zohra whispered between tight jaws, as the three of them struggled to lift the cannon out of the crate and put it on the ground. Lieutenant Montran quickly closed the crate and the captain and Carol lifted the sleeping form back onto the lid.

Maud appeared on the other side of the service panel that slid open. "The tunnel is still clear," she reported, "but I hear activity on 5th level south elevator."

Captain Zohra nodded, "The busiest elevator. It's close to crews' quarters. Sounds like the metrasoldiers have something planned for that area. They could either be blowing it or taking it over for themselves until Alan gets here. We'll need to do a recon in the area."

"While you're moving the cannon, I want to look for the moBots and disable them...or as many as I can," Lieutenant Montran informed the others.

"I will assist my mistress."

Captain Zohra nodded. "Okay. That Malu, remove the tabs from the back of his hands last. Okay, let's get this over to the tunnel. You have a bot, Maud? Right."

Grunting from the strain, they all lowered the cannon into the tunnel onto the bot.

"When you're finished here return to base," Captain Zohra directed before she stepped into the service tunnel.

"Aie, aye, Captain," Lieutenant Montran returned automatically.

Captain Zohra turned for a brief moment to stare at the empty space that Lady Harriet had moments before filled, and then hurried after Maud and her bot as they moved around a corner. Irritated with herself but not knowing why, she refused to think any further about the unfamiliar feeling the lieutenant's reply gave her.



Lieutenant Montran moved to the first crate, deciding to tackle the largest first. A quick inventory of the contents, recording it verbally and getting a snapshot with the helmet camera was made and Lieutenant Montran moved on to the next, hoping they could get most of the place inventoried before the next shift of guards arrived.

"Ah, here we go," Lieutenant Montran whispered. She popped off the cover of the control panel of the moBot and removed its most vulnerable part. She showed Carol what needed to be done to damage the pad so it was useless without major service and replacement. She was gambling that Alan didn't have a fully serviced repair shop on any of his ships, or many spare parts.

In one stan hour, they found six moBots, and other equipment that would be a good idea to leave useless. Lieutenant Montran was determined to decommission as much of the weapons as possible, but more importantly, the moBots.

"Lieutenant Montran. You have some rapidly moving metrasoldiers heading your way. You have seven minutes to get out of there," Captain Zohra reported to her. "We can't back you up right now."

"Get the patches off those soldiers." Lieutenant Montran waved to one side of the room while she headed for the other.

The lieutenant was withdrawing her hand from a third sleeping guard's neck when the seal on the door startled her and the guard. Fortunately, the guard fell off the crate on the opposite side before he could see her. Carol was crouched behind a crate within view of Lieutenant Montran and she pointed at the service panel. Lieutenant Montran cursed silently to herself, for it was still open. She motioned Carol over to it and moved in that direction herself, hoping the guards didn't move from their own positions or they would be seen. The two guards remained out of sight as their visitors entered, treading with heavy boot falls that indicated they were wearing AEGs. Both women exited safely.

"I got three, did you do the others?"

"Yes, mistress."

Lieutenant Montran carefully reset the T & Ts outside the panel, and followed Carol down the service tunnel. Carol took an unexpected turn at the second branch.

Where is she going?

The service panel door came open in front of Lieutenant Montran and a concussion bomb dropped in. Without thinking, Lieutenant Montran made a dive to catch it and toss it back through the closing panel. Rising quickly to her feet, she picked up the sounds of small arms fire around another bend.

Carol!

Lieutenant Montran paused before bursting around the corner, knowing it was a perfect place for an ambush. The attack from behind was quick and unexpected. She felt her body go limp as she lost feeling, and then hands grabbed her and pinned her down, while another administered a drug that dropped a black curtain over her.



Chapter 14

Captain Zohra and Maud were lying on their stomachs in the topside dust, undetected to any scanners, as she and Carol had earlier proved, though Maud's two years of nondetection by the Black Rose was proof enough. They watched as Alan's soldiers slowly moved in the heavy atmosphere, lining up into nice tight little formations. If Captain Zohra had a gun, she would have mowed them down.

It wasn't until the general moved off the shuttle, that the signal for the troops to move into the city was given. The captain chuckled to herself. As tough as they believed themselves to be, they were feeling the effects of the planets atmosphere and were not moving as snappy as she remembered them doing at Lord Chaney's training compound. Even their general was lagging. She was hoping one of them would fall, just to see what the reactions would be. It helps to know what frame of mind they are in.

"Now, if they were my troops, I would have them out in this atmosphere working on maneuvers until they moved like they meant business," she muttered. "Guardian, are you monitoring their communication?"

"Yes, but they are using a code. I am breaking it now."

"Good. Give us a translation as soon as you can." The captain gave Maud a signal that they could follow now. With Guardian's wonder wear, as she called it, Captain Zohra was fast learning how Maud was able to avoid being spotted by the Black Rose patrols.

They're gonna to be heading to the morgue.

"Lieutenant Montran. You have some rapidly moving metrasoldiers heading your way. You have seven minutes to get out of there," Captain Zohra whispered to her. "We can't back you up right now."

Their job was to remove leaders of Alan's group to see what would happen. They crawled to an emergency maintenance entrance nearby and reentered the city.

"Which floor?" Captain Zohra asked as she stamped her feet to remove any dust that may give her presence away. Small tubes from the walls of the elevator appeared, sucking the dust off their suits.

"Seventh. Stop," Maud ordered the small elevator. They both crawled through the opening at the top of the elevator ceiling, squeezing into the bot space between the two levels. From there Maud took her to a larger maintenance area. From a storage space, she pulled out a net. "I've been saving this. Guardian has neuro stunners within the strands. It may or may not work on the metrasoldiers. We haven't had a chance to test it. But," she removed two blow tubes. "We have these. They are from their planet. This morning I lifted them from their supplies." Maud handed one to Captain Zohra and a dart case. "Guardian tested them. They are not meant to kill. It knocks out their prey."

"I would never have thought they did anything short of killing," Captain Zohra reported cynically.

"They must have plans to use them or they would not have brought them. We must prevent any killing. It will change the energy on this planet and Guardian has been working very hard to make it free of that type of energy," Maud informed her.

"The only reason he may be able to keep it that way is because there isn't any living creature we know of that wants to colonize this place," Captain Zohra returned tersely.

"Well, then you should be relieved because once this situation is taken care of, you won't find yourself being reassigned a post here to keep off trespassers," Maud told her with a grin.

"Two years is long enough. . . though, the Lair's quarters aren't so bad. . . and not having to put up with Guardian's nasty surprises. . ." Captain Zohra sighed, "Come on, lets go spring a trap."



Maud and Captain Zohra waited on the seventh floor for the general and his entourage of lesser officers to finish their inspection of soldiers that were not busy with Alan's business. In their HRs they watched the general check the troops that stood ramrod straight in front of their new quarters. Obviously, they were planning on staying a while.

Not going to be a long stay, fellas. We're not even going to let you unpack.

Finally, he dismissed the group and headed toward the elevator to the command center.

"This is it," Captain Zohra whispered.

They could both hear the elevator activated. They watched in their HRs the progress of the general. The elevator passed the floor intended and since the elevator didn't register floors on a panel, the occupants had to believe that the voice command was being obeyed. When the doors opened, the general

and his four officers stepped out automatically, not noticing where they were since all the floors intentionally looked the same. The ceiling opened with the metrasoldiers reacting quickly to the sounds above them; however, the net shot down, out and over them, holding them secure as it tranquilized them into unconsciousness. Bots rolled out from their storage areas and assisted in dragging the men back into the elevator to be taken to their special holding cells. They would be held in stasis chambers until Guardian's allies arrived to safely remove their chips and send them back to their own planet, hopefully believing they woke up from a nightmare.

Captain Zohra studied the chamber area to make sure it was as secured as Guardian assured her. "Captain!" Guardian's voice startled her. "Carol and Lieutenant Montran are in trouble. They have been captured!"

"Bloody moon!" *It's been too easy. It was bound to happen.* "Let's have the picture!" she directed crisply.

Maud and the captain leaned over the desk monitor in the small security room of the stasis chambers, watching as both women were being dragged off in different directions by soldiers in different uniforms.

"Alan's group has Carol and Chaney's troops have Lieutenant Montran. We can't let them leave this outpost. Guardian, locate both their ships."

"I can prevent the shuttle from landing or intervene if they should try to transport down," Guardian offered.

"Good. Do it. Whichever one goes topside is priority."

For the next few minutes they watched as Chaney's soldiers carried an unconscious Lieutenant Montran to their part of the city and Alan's soldiers marched Carol to the command center.

Lieutenant Montran was sat in a restraint chair, used for immobilizing prisoners. Tolec, a civilian in the late Chaney's group, appeared with a few others.

"Bloody moon," Captain Zohra muttered. She guessed the other were there to insure Tolec, nicknamed the Painmaker, didn't kill his victim.

Something was given to wake the lieutenant, and the interrogation began. Usually it was a slow process, breaking the victim's belief that they would be rescued, then their belief that there was a purpose to their existence. Instead, Tolec broke the lieutenant's hand and proceeded with the more physical torture. Ten minutes both women suffered through watching the lieutenant interrogation, unable to interrupt it.

"Where's Carol?" Captain Zohra asked.

"Topside." Guardian replied and a picture appeared. Alan's soldiers and Carol stood outside as one of them was communicating with his boss. Captain Zohra noted the neurolock around her throat. The good news was she was wearing Guardian's suit. Normally the spoils of the victor was removing the hostage's valuables and keeping them. But these were metrasoldiers. Would they remove whatever they thought valuable without asking Alan?

"Their ship is on the other side of the planet. They are speaking directly with Alan," Guardian supplied.

"Let's hear what they're chatting about," Captain Zohra ordered.

"...General Lare or his staff."

"Who has Montran!"

"Lady Chaney's security. They wish to trade her for our prisoner.""

"Montran is to be turned over with no marks on her! Do you hear me? Only on that condition...unmarked and alive! She must be fully awake and coherent when you exchange her. If she is ruined in any way, fry the metrabitch and Chaney's soldiers! You hear me?"

"Yes, Master Alan."

"Well, do it! Out!"

The soldier nodded to the others and they reentered the city. They met another small group of Alan's soldiers, waiting in Com-C of the city. The soldier wasn't wearing command bars or anything indicating his rank, but by the way he handled himself, Zohra knew he was an officer. He contacted Chaney's guards and the negotiations began.

"He's stalling for time," Captain Zohra muttered.

Maud agreed. "Chaney's guards want information from Lieutenant Montran but, by the looks of it, they aren't going to get it. For her sake, I hope they realize it's a waste of time."

"That guy that's doing it likes what he's doing too much. His nick name is Painmaker," Captain Zohra explained grimly. "He'll keep her until the last minute. With the medibot, they can break every bone in her body and still be able to repair her in time to hand her over to Alan's deadheads."

"They haven't removed Guardian's suits," Maud mentioned as Lieutenant Montran slumped forward unconscious after a nerve gun was laid against her spine.

Captain Zohra removed herself from the emotions she was feeling, something she was accustomed to do in her nine years of facing death on a battlefield and occasional torture for information. She analyzed the situation and made plans.

"They're in a hurry to extract information and hand her over to Alan's group. I'm wondering if they are worried Alan will head this way. Guardian, do you have his location?"

"He's a week away, but the captain of Chaney's guards doesn't know that."

"Yes. The first thing they teach you in interrogation 101 is blindfold your victim. They are in too much of a hurry. I don't think that is much of a consolation for Lady Harriet, though. They'll make the exchange in neutral territory...probably topside. Chaney's guards are not going to trust anything or anyone representing kid Fermin. Wherever it's made, you take Carol, and I'll take Lady Harriet," Captain Zohra ordered briskly, she glanced at Maud and internally winched at the startling likeness she had of the captured lieutenant.

"The exchange has been agreed upon," the Guardian broke in. "I'm sending you the coordinates."

"Got it, Guardian," Maud answered, "Come on. We have forty-five stan minutes to reach the exchange point. It's near one of the emergency exits so we can get there early without detection."

"We need to pick up a universal neurokey. I have one in my kit. I can pack my stuff at the same time. I can't keep coming back here to pick up equipment we can use."

"All right then, Maud can pack Carol's belongings. Lieutenant Montran had made the offer to her"" Guardian suggested.

"All right. But we must hurry."

"Just pack the bags and the bots will move them to the car," Guardian informed them.



Lieutenant Montran woke to a fiery pain. Her whole body hurt. Next she was slapped so hard her head bounced off something behind her. She couldn't see out of one eye. For a moment she was confused, wondering if she was still a prisoner of war, and then thought it must be a nightmare with memories of her past stalking her. Her head was jerked back and she stared into the eyes of a dark harnivan. No, this wasn't something from her past. She had never met a harnivan but she had heard about their interrogation techniques.

Her mind was curious why he didn't use his other limbs to pound on her, and then she remembered he had been pounding on her. Suddenly the rush of pain from her broken hands brought her into the present.

They had been questioning her knowledge of Lord Chaney and what her business with the metradame was. She focused on thanking her mentor, Commander Neilson, for encouraging his staff to take interrogation classes with the ve'tumac, Hum, whether they were going to be part of the special troop that did the interrogations or not. Hum also taught the other side, how to survive an interrogation. She wished she knew about this before the Degas Troop ran into the tribe on Zed4Z44.

"Why were you chasing the metradame?" the voice demanded again. He waited a little longer this time and then applied the nerve sting. He had moved from breaking bones to using the nerve pain.

Her scream froze in her throat. Suddenly, everything stopped and she dropped back into a dark self-imposed unconsciousness, another skill learned in Hum's class.



A dull thudding against the base of Lieutenant Montran's skull traveled to behind her eye sockets, adding yet another spasm to her sick stomach. Male voices from nearby were a drone, as she focused on not retching from the pain. With great difficulty, she forced herself to inventory her condition. She opened her eyes and could see; she pursed her lips and could feel they were no longer swollen; she cleared her throat and that...wasn't dry. They put the medibot to good use, but only to take care of surface injuries, leaving her ribs and legs bruised and sore. Why? Maybe they were in a hurry, a small voice from far away

suggested. She was also wearing her outersuit and her helmet was activated. She tried to stand, to stop the painful drag on her shoulders. Her handlers shook her. Painful jabs of light shot to her head. Her head fell back and she nearly went back into the safer darkness. She struggled to pay attention to her surroundings. They were surface side.

"We trade evenly, or there is no trade," the familiar deep voice of her inquisitor stated firmly from somewhere near her.

"You will give us the Montran woman and you will disembark from this planet with your lives," the other voice stated stiffly.

Lieutenant Montran realized her hands were bound behind her, while her legs were shackled, making it difficult to run. But then in this atmosphere, running wasn't an option.

Time. How much time has passed? Where is the clever Captain Zohra? Hope she has a plan. We're topside and I don't feel the pressure like I had when I first arrived. Must be Guardian's suits. Is that Carol?

Carol was standing with a neurorestraint around her neck behind Alan's soldiers. Behind her visor her face bruised and bleeding, her eyes had a vacant stare. She was wearing Guardian's outer suit too. She stood between her two burly guards motionless. Lieutenant Montran's heart missed a beat and then went back to a steady rhythm as she tried to figure out how to get out of this, and what 'this' was about.

"Alan will be very upset if you don't bring her back...usable. Now, what I'm going to do here, is shoot one part of her body off at a time. This female only has five limbs, so we shouldn't be here for too long. Let's start with the head first..."

Lieutenant Montran couldn't feel the weapon press against her forehead, but she heard the thunk of the weapon against her visor.

He's in a rush or he just doesn't want to turn me over to Alan. I don't know whether to thank him or be ticked off...oh, shit! Guardian said the suits are impervious to some weapons fire. Does the humvaian know? No, or he would have taken the suit for himself. It would be a hot commodity. I hope if I need it to blend in...it will work. If they drop me...maybe I can disappear and slide over to Carol. No. They would kill her with the neurohold.

"Lieutenant Montran," Guardian's voice whispered to her. "You will be rescued. Be prepared to follow the captain's orders. Your suit's back to one hundred percent."

Carol was pushed forward to the leader of Alan's group who pulled her roughly to stand in front of him.

This doesn't look right. Lieutenant Montran wished her head would stop pounding so she could figure out what was wrong.

"Remove the neurohold," the negotiator holding her ordered.

The mechanism was tossed his way and whether by intention or not, it hit him on the shoulder. Free fall or any movement wasn't easy.

Oh, oh. Trouble.

Alan's soldiers rushed Chaney's soldiers as best as one could in the heavy gravity, the neurolock dropped into the dirt. Neither side had weapons, which may have been part of the agreement for the meet. Her handler pushed her back, where she fell with a heavy thud, this time on her side. Carol was grabbed by one of Alan's soldiers and pushed behind him, where she fell back and laid motionless in the dirt.

Lieutenant Montran inched her way toward the mechanism that was kicked by moving feet deeper into the shiny dirt particles. It occurred to her that neither group was calling for more reinforcements. It was also odd that in the melee, she wasn't stepped on.

A ploy? What do they hope to gain? Ah, to see who comes to rescue us. So now what?

Lieutenant Montran rolled to the edge of the fighting and paused to see where their escape avenues were. Flatland everywhere. She couldn't see any sign of an elevator plate. Nor could she see her rescuers, but then they did have suits that could hide them.

Suddenly she felt a pat on her leg. It was a pat in a recognizable pattern. Captain Zohra would tell her when to activate the suit to vanish. She obviously wasn't trusting her communication. Lieutenant Montran wanted to laugh, but her side hurt too much. Here she was distrustful of the blend mechanism and the captain was distrustful of the communication.

Suddenly one of Lord Chaney's soldiers dropped heavily to his knees near Lieutenant Montran pointing his weapon in her face.

"Now, would be a good time," Lieutenant Montran muttered under her breath as drew herself into a ball from the pain from her bruised rib. The lieutenant tried to see where to roll.

"Now!" Maud's voice came over her com.

"Blend on!" Lieutenant Montran commanded, and would have started to roll away from the fracas if a tug on her bound arms had not pulled her in another direction. A moment later, her leg and then her arms loosened from the binds. She glanced in the direction of the continued pull and from one small window in her visor could see Captain Zohra leading her in a crawl. She glanced back and could see the man that had a weapon pointed at her was fighting with one of Alan's soldiers.

"Careful. No dust," Captain Zohra directed as they both moved easier than her capturers.

Lieutenant Montran worried about tracks, but didn't dare look behind her.

"It's okay. You're doing good. Just a little further, now stop. Let's wait it out here."

The lieutenant was panting from the exertion and pain. She rested in the dirt, oblivious to what went on around her, but taking comfort in the presence of Captain Zohra leaning against her.

"Maud, clear. Ignite," Captain Zohra ordered.

"Five...four...three...two...one..." Maud's voice counted.

A blunted sound, quickly followed by the ground moving under them, as bits of dirt sprinkled around them.

"Let's get the hades out of here," Captain Zohra spoke, rising and pulling Lieutenant Montran with her. When the lieutenant was unable to get her legs moving, Captain Zohra wasted no time in lifting her into her arms. Somewhere during the bumpy ride, the lieutenant blacked out.



Consciousness for Lieutenant Montran came in starts with reoccurring flashes of light behind her eyelids. When they ceased it was the soft voices of Captain Zohra and Guardian that encouraged her to open her eyes. They were in the car, hopefully being transported back to the Lair. Across from her was Captain Zohra, not looking the worse for wear. In the seat next to her was a duffle bag, and another was on the floor.

Taking a deep breath, she could feel a twinge in her side. Being secured in the harness didn't give her much room to move her limbs to see how well she functioned, and for a moment she fought the fear of being restrained.

"How are you doing, Alexandra?" a voice from far a way asked. Lieutenant Montran's mind tried to pinpoint where it came from, and decided not to answer it. It didn't fit in with her present reality. What reality was that? She closed her eyes and tried to focus on what she could feel, then what her senses told her, and then she dared to open her eyes again.

"How are you feeling?" Captain Zohra asked.

"How long was I out?" Lieutenant Montran asked while she tried not to think of what the interrogation brought back into her life.

"From topside to the car...about thirty stan minutes." Captain Zohra eyes moved to Carol. "You both look like you need a medibot and a good soak in something to make you sleep well."

"Sounds good to me," Lieutenant Montran mumbled. The images of another time and place started to play against the insides of her mind, and she struggled to change her focus. "What was going on topside?"

"Chaney's guards grabbed you and Alan's soldiers Carol. Both sides had what the other wanted. They administered a drug to loosen your tongue but," Captain Zohra's lips curled into a smile, "you spoke in a language the translators didn't recognize. You'll have to tell me how you did that." She looked toward Carol who appeared to be sleeping next to Montran. "They didn't bother questioning Carol...they thought whoever owns her would have made it impossible to question her." Captain Zohra frowned. "Lady Varina wants her father's metradame back...bad...unmarked and undamaged. Alan's group wasn't in a position to bargain because they were instructed to capture you if you were still alive, unharmed."

"And like good little metrasoldiers, programmed to take orders without deviating...they will obey to the letter. Lucky us."

Captain Zohra stretched her legs and regarded the two women sitting across from her. "He's only had these soldiers for three stan years. He's been testing them on how much initiative to give them. He tests them at Chaney's training compound against veteran Black Rose fighters. Lord Chaney was contemptuous of them, considering we beat Alan's little soldiers in the majority of skirmishes. You must have trained against them too, Carol."

Carols eyes opened at that and nodded. "He wanted to know just how good I was."

Lieutenant Montran studied Carol for a few moments and then asked, "Carol, are you well?"

Carol glanced at her. "Yes, thank you for asking." She moved her hand up to her bruised cheek. She looked into her mistress's eyes and gave her a small smile. "I'm not use to feeling this way," she admitted. "But, Guardian's second skin has protected me from any infection I may have picked up."

Lieutenant Montran nodded, "My stomach is feeling a lot better, but the rest of me feels like I've been used as a punching bag."

"They didn't know about the second skin or that much about the outersuit, or they would have removed them," Captain Zohra remarked. "They were fighting over who would get your outersuits, so the exchange was to include everything you wore. I bet there are two very angry individuals right now that lost not just you two but their trophies of plunder." Zohra leaned her head back and chuckled.

Trophies. That brought the images of her in a previous interrogation room back in a flash. Lieutenant Montran leaned back in her seat and gulped back the nauseous feeling. She didn't realize the outersuit released a drug into her system until the feeling suddenly left. She blinked her eyes opened surprised.

"Flashbacks?" Captain Zohra asked quietly.

Lieutenant Montran nodded and then her eyes moved to the two duffle bags next to the captain. "I see you've picked up your belongings."

"Yes. Except," she gently tapped the other bag with her boot. "This is Carol's stuff. I understood you had intentions of picking her belongings up on your next visit to the city."

"That's right." Images of the captain in her thronged underwear had Lieutenant Montran grinning. When she noticed Captain Zohra was watching her, her grin turned into an embarrassed laugh.

Chapter 15

"Welcome back, Warriors!" Charles called out as the doors to Com-C opened to reveal busy screens and Guardian's chair moving down to greet them.

Lieutenant Montran blinked a few times, thinking all she wanted was to soak in a tub of bubbling hot water.

Charles had a steaming cup of tea for each of the women.

"Arora," she hummed with pleasure. It was great for dulling pain. Just the thing they needed. The three women sank into the chairs Charles provided them.

"Well, we have certainly shaken up their operation!" Guardian announced when he was eye level to them.

"I'm glad to see you are still up and running." Lieutenant Montran remembered Maud mentioning he was down.

The Copoc waved two of his left hands. "It was but a ploy. The young trespasser needs some false trails to keep him off-balance. He can be as useful as he can be a pest."

"So, what are the two groups up to?" Captain Zohra asked, looking around for the proper screen.

Four screens came up with four different areas that were busy with Alan's group, the remaining Spartans, a dark figure that Lieutenant Montran didn't recognize and a group of Chaney's and Alan's soldiers arguing.

"Why didn't they carry weapons for the swap?" Lieutenant Montran asked.

"Two reasons. They didn't want to take the chance you would get hold of one and they don't trust each other." Captain Zohra turned to look directly at her, giving Lieutenant Montran a disquieting feeling. "You have earned yourself a reputation of being very dangerous when awake." This was delivered with a smirk.

Lieutenant Montran gave a snort of disgust. "Well then, I'm lucky that they believe all that rot, or maybe both of us would have been dead."

Captain Zohra shook her head. "You and Carol were the only two that would not have been hurt. Now I on the other hand..." She returned her attention to the meeting going on with the two groups.

"Guardian, what about the cretian that shot me? Where does he fit in with all of this?" Lieutenant Montran asked.

"He's the one that told Chaney's Lieutenant that he found you. They were laying a trap for you when Alan's soldiers butted in and..."

"So he's Chaney's informant..." Lieutenant Montran mused.

"He sells information... to anyone that is willing to pay," Captain Zohra corrected. "The reason why he is still alive is that he knew who to sell it to and how to pick up information without being detected. No one knows what his species is or from where he came from. The guess is he's from one of the closed planets the smugglers visited. A stowaway."

"I have been studying him. He is impervious..." Guardian began.

"How do you know he's a he?" Lieutenant Montran tiredly cocked her head at Guardian's figure on the chair.

"I am a scientist and this is still a science outpost. I do know how to run tests to tell if a species is gendered and what gender it's," he replied indignantly.

Lieutenant Montran laughed.

"Well, you'll let me know if anything develops that I need to know about, huh?" Captain Zohra asked while rising from her chair. "I'm going to take a shower, soak out some of these bruises and then hit the sack. 0600 stan hours, I'll see you two in the workout room."

Carol and Lieutenant Montran rose also. "Just how much time do you think we have for sleep before trouble happens?"

"I will call you if anything happens before eight hours. Alan is still weeks away. He is planning something before he arrives here and the Vine is trying to prevent it. I don't believe he cares if he will be outlawed. Once branded, he will have no qualms about what his small army does to others. All the news agencies are still blasting the airwaves with debates and theories for the reasons behind the killings on the cruise ship *Amble*. If they tie it in with Alan, this will give the opposition group that is against chip implants in psychotic citizens the political influence they need to halt the practice. The publicity will have

immeasurable effects on the case against metrapeople. We then have to worry about those that will follow Alan's bold disregard of life."

"Why is he trying to destroy this outpost or turn it into an armed camp? There has to be something of value here...and don't tell me it's me," the lieutenant countered before Guardian could make the suggestion.

"I wasn't going to say that. This planet does have its cities for different species, fully operational laboratories and..."

"Can we resume this conversation – tomorrow? I'm sure by then, you can decide whether you want to tell me what's really so important about this planet that has Allen wanting to occupy it or destroy it. I don't see him setting up a permanent base here or using your science facilities." *You already shared with me how to hide from you. Why not just tell me everything else I ask?*

"We can resume this conversation after you have had some sleep," Guardian agreed pleasantly.

"Thank you for the tea, Charles," Lieutenant Montran mentioned to Charles.

"Sweet dreams, Warriors."

"I want to do a melt down in a hot herbal tub of bubbling waters, and then be able to have just enough strength to crawl to an undisturbed recovery in bed," Lieutenant Montran murmured to Carol as they walked back to their quarters.

"Hmm," Carol agreed.

Carol heard the bath water running when they entered their quarters and breathed in the fragrance of the oil treated water. She was relieved they would not have to wait long for the tub to fill. She too was tired...another sensation her previous program had not allowed her to feel...and pain. She touched the injuries on her face that she received in her fight with the metrasoldiers. Her capture by Alan's soldiers kicked in her survival instincts as part of her bodyguard training.

The soldiers from the Chaney household, as good as they are, didn't have very much information about metrapeople except that Lord Chaney's metradame wasn't to be trifled with, under the penalty of death. Varina had a lot to worry about and Carol knew why she would want to possess her, and not just for her personal pleasures. Much of the information Lord Chaney had spoken to her about was to protect him should he be assassinated by his ambitious daughter or some other political figure that Lord Chaney had a vise grip on. If he had been assassinated, she had another program to follow which Lord Chaney called 'Stealth mode,' until all those responsible for his death were completely ruined, then Sheila's program would self-destruct. Carol's lips curved into a smile. He had thought of all the ways to prevent her from being stopped before she completed her mission, including her training in assassination, however, it never occurred to him that he would die from someone not motivated by politics or with the intent to kill him, thus only giving her the default revenge killing program.

Lieutenant Montran let the butler remove her clothing. She simply hurt too much to do it herself. She looked at her hurting side. Memories of the recent interrogation unleashed the helplessness she felt during her capture after the demise of the Degas troop. She struggled to get a hold of herself, knowing no medibot could get her to face or let go of the remorse she kept just below the surface. Stiffly she made her way to the bathing room.

From their shower the two women slid into the warmed bubbling waters of the pool. Carol slid next to her, holding her mistress's hand underwater to give her comfort.

"Oooh. This is nice," Lieutenant Montran moaned. "I wonder where the captain is? I thought she would be in here first." She yawned and rested her head against the rim of the tub, letting the herbs and water jets do their job on her battered body, and finding comfort in Carol's gesture. She had thought she had some cracked ribs, but Ald didn't find any. "Ahh, that's right. She has to debrief whoever she works for," she muttered and fell into a nice doze.

"Do you mind if I join you both?" Captain Zohra softly asked.

Lieutenant Montran started and would have slipped off her perch if Carol's hand didn't grab her elbow.

"No," Carol answered.

Lieutenant Montran didn't watch the athletic form slide into the tub, but the slight rise of the water wasn't noticeable. Her mind was as weary as her body, so when she sensed something different in the water she was surprised at how quickly her body responded. It was a subtle feeling of sensuousness that built to a pleasant throbbing in her body. She tried to distract herself but the gentle firm pulse from the jets and the recorded waterfall sounds turned her thoughts to vivid images of Captain Zohra's body. Her hands twitched to study it in detail. Guiltily she looked at both of her companions and was relieved that to find them wrapped up in their own thoughts.

If it's not about one it's about the other. Now would be a good time to get outta here. "Well, I'm done here," Lieutenant Montran told the others as she climbed out quickly.

"Jeeezze!" Captain Zohra exclaimed.

Lieutenant Montran froze in her walk. She had forgotten about her bruises.

"You need meds, soldier," the captain shook her head in concern. "Why didn't you take care of those right away?"

"May I suggest something?" Ald asked.

"You can tell us where the meds are, if you have any," Captain Zohra responded, rising from the tub.

"In the cabinet near the sinks," Ald reported obediently.

Lieutenant Montran followed the bot to the cabinet, drying herself as she went, and trying to avoid turning to look at the dark eyes that studied her. Carol climbed out of the water too, leaving a trail of water through their miniature tropical garden. It was Carol who sorted through the many herb jars.

"Look at this collection!" Lieutenant Montran marveled over Carol's shoulder. "He's got it stocked with every herb potion for all known and unknown illnesses...both imagined and otherwise, by the looks of it."

"This one is what you want." The captain leaned over Carol's other shoulder, dripping water on her. Lieutenant Montran studied the tattoo that covered her back and just barely peeked over her muscular shoulders. It was an owl with the wings spread out and the tips reaching over her shoulders to touch her clavicles. It was the tattoo Athena's shield warriors wore.

Captain Zohra selected a bright red bottle with strange writing on it.

"A good choice," Ald added approvingly.

Lieutenant Montran cleared her throat, and asked suspiciously, "What is it?" Of course she knew what it was, but she needed to cover her embarrassment at the desire to touch the warrior's body that was so close to her own.

"It comes from the Plaetar system. They make the best meds from natural herbs for healing combat wounds, and for nasty bruises like yours."

Captain Zohra straightened up and faced Lieutenant Montran. She shook the bottle in front of Lieutenant Montran all the while gazing in her eyes.

Carol's movement to take the bottle from Captain Zohra broke the spell, and Lieutenant Montran quickly recovered by grabbing the bottle from Carol.

"I'll put it on myself."

The captain laughed and asked in a seductive voice, "Afraid of something?"

"What do you mean?" Lieutenant Montran asked in an almost hoarse voice.

"A bit of pain with your pleasure?"

Lieutenant Montran blinked a few times not sure how to answer.

"The right intensity of pain can be pleasurable..."

Lieutenant Montran cleared her voice, embarrassed at her reaction. "Like what?" She decided to push the captain's game.

Her smile was just a small rise at the corners of her lips, but her dark eyes were sparkling in the light. "Oh, like a deep massage to sore muscles. Hurts like fire, but it feels...so good when it's all finished. Hmm?" Then she added in a normal voice, "A bit of a sting, and then it numbs the injured area in about three seconds."

So...she wants to play, huh? Lieutenant Montran smiled and handed the bottle to her, pointing to the large bruise on the captain's thigh. "Rank hath its privileges."

"We're the same rank...just different services and political bosses, Lady Harriet." Her voice lowered, "Are you saying you don't trust me?"

Trust? I don't know you or what you want.

Carol took the bottle from the captain's hand. "You two are making this into a long production. We all need to get some rest. Please sit, Captain Zohra."

A chair appeared out of the wall.

After Carol rubbed the paste over both women's bodies, Captain Zohra returned to her quarters and Carol and Lieutenant Montran returned to theirs.

Not everyone fell asleep quickly.

Lieutenant Montran shift uncomfortably in bed, putting some distance between her and Carol. Closing her eyes just brought overlapping images of her capture on Zed4Z44 and just recently at the hands of Chaney's soldiers. Lieutenant Montran concentrated on her companion's breathing then realized that Carol wasn't sleeping either. She rolled on her side, facing Carol.

"Are you All right, Carol?"

She could hear a little sigh.

"No. I seem to have problems going to sleep," Carol returned softly.

"Me too."

"Why are you, Mistress?"

Lieutenant Montran was going to give a short reply when she remembered that Carol had her own traumas and her inability to sleep was a result of trying to process them.

"I keep reliving the unpleasant part of...being captured," she admitted, just barely getting herself to admit it.

"I am also seeing things I find unpleasant," Carol quietly said. After a few moments Carol asked, "What do you do with these memories?"

Lieutenant Montran gave a mournful laugh. "Live with them."

"What if...if they are too terrible?"

"I once met a young man, Skiht, who lost all his limbs and his sight. He was singing a lovely song to a companion who had only to recover from a cut on his arm from the same accident. They were both soldiers and had survived a number of missions. Their injuries were from a noncombat accident and the military, in their fairness to the tax paying members of the Committee, decreed they were not paying for any of the medical bills the two incurred and since one of them couldn't resume military duty, was cut from the job role. His friend, who would be returned back to duty, committed suicide the next day. Skiht was in the hospital gardens a few days later, singing another beautiful song extolling nature. I asked him how he could be this happy with all the things that happened to him and he said, because he believed that there is a reason for everything. So I asked him what was the meaning of all this that was happening around him? He said he didn't know, but because he didn't, he now had another purpose in his life. He was fitted with arms, legs and given sensors for sight, but he didn't care to use them. He truly believed that whatever put meaning to his present circumstance was without all of the modern conveniences to make him a productive member of society. I heard he left the hospital without the gizmos that he couldn't afford to pay for anyway.

"I ran across him again, about two years later. He was known by another name, but he remembered me. He became one of the greatest healers in Committee and Collective space, working exclusively with war veterans."

"Why didn't you let him help you?" she asked curious.

Lieutenant Montran laughed embarrassed. "He told me I still was afraid to look for the meaning to my suffering."

"I am not so sure what I have done can be explained away like that," Carol admitted.

Lieutenant Montran understood. Carol was an agent. When you're an agent, it's expected that to fit in there would be things done to others and to one's self that would be hard to process as being worth the end goal. Lord Chaney probably had many jobs he needed done by a person that would not talk about it or let it slip. Lieutenant Montran knew that Captain Zohra would probably be going through the same process when she felt her duty was officially done.

"We've all made decisions that we wished we had more time to think about...yet even then, we would have made the same decision."

"How do I reconcile what I feel is right and wrong now?"

"Looking back, would you still do whatever you did then if you could chose again?"

"No."

"There is no going back. There is no way to undo it. You just go forward and when the same situation occurs again...you make a decision of whether you will do it this way or that."

"I don't think there is anything that will move me to put myself in that position again. My tribe shuns me just because I was chosen for this job."

Ah. She's remembering her past. Wonder where she is from?

"The sisters on Tramil do not forgive easily that one of their own is different."

"Oh. Their history is an interesting study of a rise in consciousness and then this new withdrawal from everything."

"We didn't study anything but our verses. And we worked silently in the gardens and shops."

Lieutenant Montran thought sadly of the spiritual community that had a reputation at one time for their quiet work among the less fortunate, giving solstice to those that lost the will to do better with their lives. They didn't preach, merely lived their pious lives. No one knew what happened just that suddenly they were not found anywhere but on a small island, opening their doors to no one. A rumor was that they met something evil and rather than fight it, retreated behind their walls. Knowing more about the nature of most species, and being rather cynical in some aspects of life, she thought it had to do with power and the control of the assets of the spiritual order. Every now and then, an art piece from the island was quietly put on auction for a large amount of credits in the Collective's sector, far from Committee space where the island resided. She had met a purchaser of such an item once and realized it was well worth the cost. Lieutenant Montran suspected the group was held captive in fear of the world outside of their island.

"There is an old tale, told by the human philosopher Plato of people who see only one way and when given the chance to see more, chose to remain ignorant. They rather stand staring at the wall in the dark, fearful of the shadows that occasionally show, denying they exist least they have to find out what they are about. And when one of their members does get the courage to go out and find out what it's about...no one wants to hear it or will believe it because they have no previous experience to categorize it with. Then before that story, early earth religions had a similar story about a woman who chose to learn rather than remain ignorant. Only instead of being called a hero she was used as a reason to abuse her gender and for centuries was considered an evil influence to women who wanted to learn about what went beyond their walls. It's all about power and control, Carol. You obviously can't go back to who you once were. For one, there will be no one there to relate to what you've experienced. And two, like the woman they call Eve, you will be scapegoated and shunned. Those that are fearful of life will deny and attack anything that threatens to move them to expanding their horizons."

Lieutenant Montran watched Carol's eyes blink a few times in the dimmed lighting. With their talking, the room lights had come up just enough for them to see shadows of the bulkhead and outline of the doorways.

"I felt pleasure in some of those people's pain," she confessed.

"Did you administer the pain?"

"No. Tolec did."

Lieutenant Montran shivered remembering her own introduction to him. "Dr. Tolec is a sick individual. Did you watch it all?" That was a side of Lord Chaney she found surprising. She always thought he was a coward.

"No. Lord Chaney merely liked to see the fear Tolec's appearance brought to his victim. Then we left."

"I thought your pleasure and pain were overrode by the chip?"

"It's my memories of them."

"I guess they were not nice people."

"It doesn't make it right," Carol told her sadly.

"I can only tell you my approach to that for myself. When I find myself in situations I am powerless to change, I ask for guidance and the strength to do what is right. I realize that for a person who believes strongly in a cause will believe what he or she is doing in hurting another is justified, but I am not responsible for that person. I am responsible for myself. I know that intentionally torturing another or purposely taking the life of another is not a path I want to walk and that is how I live my life. If I should change that belief, I sure hope I have the wherewithal to question it and have a darn good reason to change it. And then, find a support group that understands my anguish and lends me strength to deal with what I have done. We're not perfect, Carol. We all, even Lord Chaney, did the best that he could believing in what he believed in. My belief system is what sustains me. If it doesn't then I face that dark night of my soul and search for a meaning because to me that is my initiation into something more profound and I sure don't want to stay behind."

"Plato and Eve," Carol murmured.

Chapter 16

"Who are you and why have you come?" demanded an indistinguishable voice from behind the dark cowl that covered the Inquisitor's face. The lone figure that waited on the dock looked up at the dark figure.

"I am -- a Quester." The initiate paused for a moment. Why was she there? And, what was a Quester? Where had that come from? Looking down at her hands, she noticed that she wore one signet ring, and a long gray robe. At her waist was an empty scabbard. She didn't think anything was out of place.

"We have many Questers. What have you to say?" The impatient voice boomed.

"I..." The figure in gray paused and looked out over the water from where she had come. The small boat was no longer in sight. She had to remember why she was standing before the Inquisitor.

"I stand before thee, High Priestess, guardian to the Portal of Athena, Mistress of the Warrior Queens and their loyal followers, to ask for admittance into the Hall of Mirrors." She felt pleased with herself for remembering the long salutation after all these centuries.

Centuries?

The dark figure before her remained standing, silent, and unwavering. Was it but a mechanical servant? Or, did those of the Spirit world not move as those in the Land of Form? She waited for what seemed a long time, but time wasn't something that passed here, so she really wasn't sure if she waited at all, or whether it was just her self-absorption that made it seem like time had passed.

The figure turned and walked back into the darkness. She followed. Had she done this before? There was blackness all around her.

It seemed like she blinked and before her were mirrors. Turning slowly she could see that they surrounded her. She had made it! Now what? What was the next part to her quest? Sighing, she put her finger to her pursed lips, as if to think.

Was she to look in the mirrors or not? There was an important instruction her mentor had given her. Was it for the Hall of Mirrors? Looking in the mirror before her she saw only a shadowy form. 'Do not focus on the image', that's what she had been told. 'Look to the side'. She could see from the sides of her eyes that the shadowy form in the mirror was changing shapes and some of them were scary, but she kept her sight on the side of the form. 'Do not identify with your shadows', her mentor had told her. 'They are but your critical vision of yourself.' Those are issues for your physical self to dispel, not your Spirit Self, she reminded herself.

Instinctively she rested her left hand on the empty scabbard. She was so use to finding the hilt of her sword there she was momentarily distracted. What had become of her sword? Ahh. She had dedicated it to the Warrior Queen. When she had died in battle, it was given back to the Queen. She was dead then. No. That was another life. Focus on the present. Stilling her thoughts, she imaged the white light of the Mother of All giving her the insight she needed.

That was the key! Intent.

From her heart, she poured out her intent...compassion...making justice...action in the world of the physical and the unseen world of the spiritual. There was no separation. She had to remember not to be stuck in retribution, hate, pity and sentimentality. Compassion, a way of life. She could hear the mirrors break. After the mirrors crumbled, there was only blackness all around her. In a flash, she felt herself whisked past the dock, across the waters and back to where she had started her journey...back to the land of the living. There in the ground her sword was waiting for her, impaled in black sand with the rising gray waters swirling around it.

So what had she accomplished? The dream body is so mysterious to the more mundane and logical body. This will take time.

Do I have time? I have a job to do. I need to focus on that.

Captain Zohra turned uneasily in her sleep.

Compassion.

What kind of soldier could she be if she practiced compassion?

As a Black Rose soldier, your compassion was displayed in a quick kill, a voice explained.

"Killing is our business," she whispered. She shivered remembering how she had to put aside her personal feelings to maintain her cover. She worried if she would be able to live with knowing she had killed, even if her victims were just as bent on killing her. The difference was that they were protecting

their families and land...she was the instrument of the landowner and the one-sided law. Did she deserve to carry the sword of the goddess, whom she had sworn fealty to?

"Goddess? What goddess?" she mumbled. She turned again as if looking for answers on her other side.



Alexandra looked up at her teacher when she finally understood. She started to laugh hysterically. It was her own future she was seeing in the pool. She was in a uniform she wasn't familiar with, and with no hair! She a warrior! She thought it was funny indeed. She was an empath! An empath couldn't take another's life without suffering the victim's anguish at the extinction of its life. Moreover, her long orange tresses...she would never cut them.

Awakening suddenly, Lieutenant Montran sat up breathing heavily, excited that she had discovered...something. But her sleep heavy mind couldn't conjure up anything solid. Tiredly, she fell back onto her pillow. A slumbering Carol slipped an arm protectively around her waist. Lieutenant Montran rolled onto her back, and hazily thought about her childhood when she was still a student at AltaLa.

Mem.

Hadrian had sent her a word from her childhood. Should she ask Guardian to send a message to Hadrie asking him for more detail?

Mem. Acar was the only person that could have told Hadrie that. Is he still alive? Or is Hadrie hinting that what happened to Acar is about to happen to me...an assassination attempt? That's a laugh. I've been the target of so many attempts I have a built in warning system. And why not just say it...unless someone here is the threat. Mem. Or, is he referring to *my* initiation. Okay...this is getting too detailed. Mem...I think of Acar and his initiation. He told me his secret name because...he said I would need it one day. Great. Another mystery. Okay...I have this secret password into somewhere I don't know, and Hadrie reminded me of it. What do I use it for? Geeze!

Restlessly she found another position and dozed off, but this time images of her recent experience at Tolec's hands came to her. She sat up quickly, taking gulps of air. Tentively she flexed both her hands. No pain. Lucky her.

Carol's breathing changed.

"Go back to sleep, Carol. I'm just going to make some tea," she whispered and then waited until Carol's breathing deepened. Slipping out of the bed, she drew on her robe and moved into the front room. She stretched her body and was grateful that whatever was in the herbal paste left her without painful bruises to wake up to.

Tossing her robe onto the couch, she moved to a cleared space and began her exercises. Closing her eyes she concentrated on each limb as it was stretched into different poses. She wanted to know how well she healed and this was a good way. Her focus moved to her inner quiet place and then expanded. Again she touched lightly on a connection with the consciousness of the planet. It was aware of her. Lieutenant Montran paused and concentrated on what was different in this touch. There was a disturbance in the ebb and flow of the energy. The usual chaos didn't have the feel of normalcy to it.

Is it something Alan is causing? Just because something is different doesn't mean it's because of something he's done...and then again...it would fit his profile to dump something that would disrupt the planet's life cycle. But why? Why this planet? He's never been here. Yet his...ugh! Relax.

She finished her exercises with a silent mantra. Even in silence the mantra vibrated her body, cells and spirit. She could feel the tingle in her fingertips, toes and right up through her head. She had not had such a strong effect since...well, a long time. Maybe it was because she wasn't on a ship, suspended in space where molecules and living cells moved at a different vibration.

Finished she rose and turned to the bot that was politely waiting.

"Leaha tea, medium hot," she requested as she slipped back into her robe. Taking the tea from Bach she sat in front of the computer screen, and thought about metrapeople.

Iwilla. She had an article on dreams and its connection to personality. That is a good place to take up. There has to be a way to restore something of the old personality back. Their lives have been profoundly changed. Would some of them want it back?

Her brows furrowed in thought. Carol seemed so 'normal' in so many ways. It was difficult for her to determine if she was self-determined. The only thing that made her hesitate was her reference to her

as 'Mistress'. So how much was normal for a metradame not programmed with directives and how much was it adjusting to her environment...and then again, did she not tell Carol that it was okay to leave her side? So was that all that was needed, to just erase the program and the metrapeople could then take their lives back? What about the chip? No. Iwilla had mentioned that it wasn't wise to just end the program. Carol was being guided or...supported to establish her own sense of self. Maybe that is what Iwilla was alluding to. Something is needed to fill the void. Lieutenant Montran sighed. What would happen if someone tried to reprogram Carol? How could she make the changes in Carol permanent?

Lieutenant Montran went back to the work of Iwilla to look specifically at her exploration on dreams.

If a metraperson can dream, would not part of their old personality be embedded somewhere in cells around the dream area? Dreams in most species are stored in different parts of the brain. With those memories is cell memory. An arm remembering curling around a loved one or being in an accident. Hmm. It is too risky tampering with wiping out memories. Too complicated to destroy, but not to sabotage... so that means control is all in the chip. Removing the chip would... We will have to wait for the healers to get here to find out just what the chip is preventing from happening, when they remove it from Carol.

Lieutenant Montran looked in the desk for something to take notes on. She wanted to look up keywords the author was writing. She found a stylus. She scanned the line she wanted to save and went to the next paragraph.



Carol had wakened a little over an hour after her mistress had left the bed. Something told her that if her mistress was only getting a cup of tea she should have been back. Quietly she got up and slipped her robe on. She could see her mistress's hands move quickly over the keyboard. The teacup was sitting to the side. Carol guessed it was cold.

Yawning, Carol went into the kitchenette and asked Bach for a repeat of the previous order. She felt pleasantly pleased that she had another dream. Though she didn't remember the details, she remembered she had it.

Standing behind her mistress, she held the cup of steaming tea. Carol read over her shoulder. *'Dreams are of important consequence as they are bridges to what once was...'* Carol looked at the title of the article her mistress was studying, 'Metrapeople as Dreaming Beings, by Iwilla'.

"Of course we dream," she said over her mistress's shoulder.

Lieutenant Montran started and turned in her chair to face Carol.

"What did you say?"

"I just read the title of the article you are studying. Here is a fresh cup of tea for you."

Lieutenant Montran accepted the tea from Carol while studying her face.

"Sit here." Lieutenant Montran called for another chair next to the computer. "No, Bach can put the cup away. I want you to read this article. I want to ask you some questions about what this author is saying."

Carol settled in her chair and started to read the report with Lieutenant Montran.

When they finished the article, Lieutenant Montran got up and moved to the couch taking her tea with her. Carol joined her.

"Do you dream?" Lieutenant Montran asked.

The article had so much information in it, it made Carol's head spin. Breathing in deeply, she focused on the question. Her lips curled into a smile as she realized there was no pain when her thoughts wandered...her thoughts wandered!

Lieutenant Montran watched Carol's face and the myriad of expressions that her eyes revealed. When her lips curled into a smile, Lieutenant Montran's heart brightened. She guessed Carol was thinking a lot more than she ever had in her metradame existence. Pursing her lips, she wondered if Carol recognized the author was a metraperson, and that meant freedom from the chip programming was possible.

"When I was Sheila I wasn't aware of dreaming," she began slowly. She let out a loud sigh, which took both women by surprise. Carol gave a short laugh at the demonstrative display of feeling, smiling a little shyly. She looked at her folded hands on her lap, as if to gain composure. "Now without the control I do remember that I had dreams. What they were about, I don't know."

"Do you remember dreaming last night?"

"Oh, yes!" Carol looked up, a smile creasing her face. She noted that she didn't feel compelled to reveal it and that there was no pain in her preference to withhold the information.

Dream content was sacred to some cultures so the lieutenant refrained from asking, knowing that if it were important she would tell her...or she hoped.

"Some from the previous night seemed familiar, as if I had dreamed them before," Carol continued thoughtfully remembering others that didn't have her mistress in them.

Carol turned to the bedroom and listened for a moment.

"Is Captain Zohra up?" Lieutenant Montran asked.

Carol nodded.

"Well, I guess we should be ordering something to eat for three. Do you have a special request?"

"Did I hear the word eat?" Captain Zohra's voice called through the bedroom.

"Yes, you did. Would you like to join us?"

Captain Zohra came out of the bathing room through the bedroom with her robe on and her hair pulled forward over her shoulders. She was blotting the long strands with a towel.

"Eat light. Don't want anyone getting sick during workout," she smirked.

Lieutenant Montran was thoroughly enjoying the beauty of the captain's wet tresses. "I think I'll take a shower before breakfast," she said, and headed for the shower, passing by the captain.

I need to keep focused here. Okay, Metrapeople ...memories... dreams. Okay...what I do know is that Iwilla is a metraperson. Guardian had said that Sharon was the only metraperson he knew that was able to override her implant. I know Iwilla and Sharon are the same because the writing styles are too similar to be a coincidence. Now, if I can figure this out, others will too. That puts her in danger. Except, she's in the Collective's sector. Even if they send assassins the scientist ship requires top secret clearance...but there is always a way. I think I'll send a message to Commander Jonas. He's the new CO on the science vessel, Curious Cat.

Lieutenant Montran put her hands on the wall of the shower completely annoyed with herself. All this time and she was worrying about Sharon's welfare! Actually, she realized she was being distracted by her thoughts about Sharon, Carol, **and** Captain Zohra. Her mixed feelings about Sharon were not presently relevant, so she pushed those aside. She understood why she lusted after Carol, but she also cared for her. Then there was Captain Zohra... Lieutenant Montran was confused...no miserable. She slapped her hand on the tiled wall in exasperation.

What a time for this. I can't wait for this gas influence to end. It is convoluting my feelings for everyone! All right, so, it's not everyone ...just three...two too many. And the worst part is...I don't want to give any of them up...HA. Like I really have them. Come-on, Lieut, don't you think these are just interests that the pheromone gas has turned into obsessions?

Lying her forehead against the tiled wall, she sighed. She was thinking way too much. Who was she really interested in? She already knew the answer...

Lieutenant Montran stepped out of the shower after her hair was dried. Picking up her tea she looked into the mirror. When she let her eyes unfocus, the background became black. She felt her spirit move to the side of her body and take the cup of tea from her hand. The cup was held out for her to gaze into.

The image of a young child running alongside a young colt appeared. They were playing tag. Lieutenant Montran smiled as the young child laughed when the colt took a bite of her tunic and shook it as a dog would. Her? Yet it looked like a boy. Then the child aged and the figure changed from a boy to a girl. Ahh. It took her a moment to understand. She remembered the Holy Ones. An early teacher of hers was born into the world as both male and female. S/he had the body of a female but dressed and felt as a male. This child was the opposite.

She saw the child again as a young woman. Her seated figure was haloed by a sunset that reminded her of the Wieldworlds. They all had the sun that appeared purple, with bright yellow streaks that crossed its face at sunrise and sunset. The seated woman was near a dark shadow.... no...it was a person. Alan. He was furious, gesturing and threatening. He held a stick in his hand, and brought it down across the smiling woman's face. Lieutenant Montran noticed she had no trepidation at seeing Alan. Her musing stopped suddenly as she felt a blow across her own face. A stabbing pain shot through the center of her head, burning its way through her brain and down her spine. The cup of tea dropped to the ground as she crumbled to her knees, feeling mortally wounded. She was unaware of Ald catching her, before she hit the ground.

Moments seemed like hours as they went by in a haze, then slowly her vision came back to her as the pain lessened. She had experienced another's dying process before. It was at Kela's death, but she didn't remember it being so intense where even her insides were shaking.

It's got to be something about this planet, Harriet. Now you're suffering through other people's lives. Where's the off button?

She gulped down a breath of air as her stomach heaved. *I don't wanna be a saint or some messiah, suffering for other people. It's not a career move that has a bright future. Harry, where the hell are you?* As her tunnel vision gradually expanded to normal sight, she could see Captain Zohra and Carol kneeling next to her. Carol dabbed a damp cloth to wipe her tear-filled eyes.

"Are you a visionary?" Captain Zohra asked curiously, her face softer than usual.

Lieutenant Montran blinked a few times, took a deeper breath to see if her stomach would settle before speaking. "I – was once an – empath." Breathing in again, she moved her jaw, realizing she had been clenching it.

"I thought empaths couldn't --"

Lieutenant Montran held up her hand wearily to stop that conversation, not wanting to think about it...however, in a flash, as insights usually do occur, she realized what was happening. *Uh, oh. Now some of this makes sense. Whatever the cause, my empathic channels are reopening! I should have recognized it!*

With it came another realization that they had never really closed, only muted. She was living in a reality somewhere between what a *mante*, a sensitive, and a *caillech*, those that had no psychic abilities. Since she had been sensitive to all forms of life since birth, she didn't know what living in a world without a connection was like, so, when her senses became muted from a childhood trauma, she assumed she became like a *caillech*, no longer feeling the bright and intense world around her.

I've been so daft!

"I've been paying the price," she finally answered, hoping she would not be asked how, since she had only killed two people in her entire life. Her first and last intentional killing was on the battlefield, and the other was Lord Chaney. But she had been smothered by the killing energy for two years, nearly suffocating in the stench and heavy energy. Having nightmares of people killing people in tortuous ways plagued her in seasons. Still, she considered herself lucky that as an officer she had to focus more on getting her troop to their assigned drop site, complete the mission, and then get them back to base safely, rather than on how many of the enemy she killed.

"The question is, are you willing to continue to pay the price? I'm not that familiar with empaths, but as a child I learned that closing and opening channels has consequences. I can see you are reopening yours. What's going to happen at our next skirmish? Will you fight or will you be too fearful that you may take a life... hesitating at a crucial moment?" *And more importantly, why are they reopening? Was it because of her experience at Lady Chaney's guard's hands?*

Lieutenant Montran nodded glumly taking another deep breath to settle her still rebellious stomach. Captain Zohra had nothing to worry about. Guardian's weapons were doing just fine...so far. And this was his outpost. It was his laws or rules that they would follow. For seven years, she had been perfecting her reflexes to defend or to render her attacker stunned rather than kill. She felt it had paid off. The one accident was Lord Chaney, but all things happened with a purpose. Besides, not everyone is traumatized with death. She was sure Guardian had enough sleep patches for her to use on their attackers.

Captain Zohra caught the smile and the lightened mood in Lady Harriet. She helped her to stand and held her steady as the pale officer wavered against the sink. Captain Zohra could feel her pulse quicken at their touch and released her letting Carol support her. Lady Harriet didn't need to be distracted at this time.

"I had a vision of Alan Fermin beating a young woman about his age to death with a stick. It wasn't too long after he had --." Lieutenant Montran couldn't go on. Her vision went dark again and her stomach, though empty, started to heave. She felt another sharp pain in the center of her head as she sank to her knees. The sickness she had kept under control for so many years was finally engulfing her. She could feel her pulse pound in her temples and a roar fill her ears. Then Lieutenant Montran was back in a familiar place where she had retreated to when the outside world became unbearable. It wasn't safe there anymore. She could see a dark cloud looming over her special spot. Groaning in fear and from the pain pounding in her head Lieutenant Montran curled into a small ball, trying not to be seen. She felt the combined fears of all who had been victimized by Alan. Her stomach spasmed and her body shook. It was as if she touched on a link of emotional terror that they all shared...all but Rene. As Lieutenant Montran

rocked back and forth in her dark corner she felt someone reach for her. A soft touch called for her attention. Lieutenant Montran shook her head fearful. Finally, she looked up into Rene's smiling face. Rene didn't feel pain for herself, she explained, she felt it for Alan's lost soul and for those he would and had hurt in his own pain. She explained to her that compassion was feeling for someone else and doing something about it, without getting caught up in the morass of pity, hate, fear and disdain.

Rene touched Harriet's heart. She felt a cold jolt and then a tingling that warmed and spread throughout her body. Rene's image faded.

Carol could feel her mistress relax in her arms. While one arm was wrapped protectively around the unconscious body of her mistress, the other was massaging the limbs that were spasming, with Captain Zohra assisting.

Captain Zohra kept her face impassive as she watched Lady Harriet in another person's arms suffering, reminding herself that this wasn't a flashback of Alan's attack at the academy nor was Lady Harriet's life hanging in balance. This time, she could do something more than just watch others help her. Captain Zohra worked out the tension in the leg muscles, pushing along lines that her own training had taught was good for muscle cramps.

Lieutenant Montran lay for a while in Carol's protective embrace, feeling the warmth from hands that rubbed her sore limbs. Sighing a little and shifting her weight, she could feel the three concerned thoughts bearing down on her. It was strange to know... Charles had feelings.

He is sentient!

Lieutenant Montran took a deep breath to clear her head. She made a mental note to check out Charles' history. If Guardian was a copec in a computer, then Charles was no doubt one of his assistants in a bot. What misadventure happened to him?

"Bloody moon!" The pain receded in her head and with it the memory of it.

"Just like childbirth!" A familiar presence filled her mind and then withdrew.

Gedaliaha! Smiling from the brief contact Lieutenant Montran looked up at the others.

"I watched my mother take to her death bed because she couldn't endure the energy."

The others looked at Captain Zohra startled.

"You're one of Lord Chaney's daughters, aren't you?" Carol asked softly still cradling her mistress. Captain Zohra's face stiffened. "What makes you ask that?"

"You have the family mark that shows up when one of them is highly emotional. Though you have a skin patch hiding it, I can see it now that you are worried."

Unconsciously Captain Zohra touched her left cheek hollow to cover the red spot that only Carol could see. To Lieutenant Montran's eyes, there was a vague change in color but it wasn't noticeable until Carol pointed it out. She rose to her feet with Carol's assistance.

"I'm one of the few that has survived Varina and her mother's reach," she admitted reluctantly.

"You're going to ask me if my father knew who I was," Captain Zohra turned to Lieutenant Montran uncomfortably. "Yes, he knew. He didn't have any fond feelings for me, but he did want me to stay out of Varina's reach."

"He selected you for the Black Rose?" Lieutenant Montran asked curiously.

"No. You know better than that. The sponsor has no say in troop personnel transfers, though sometimes they can influence the appointment of the CO."

Lieutenant Montran watched Captain Zohra collect her thoughts. Her head was tilted downward. Lieutenant Montran could see the troubled look on her face. When the captain lifted her head, her eyes were back to being unreadable. Captain Zohra pulled her robe tighter around her.

"We met once at a party Lord Chaney had thrown for the Black Rose. Varina didn't attend such functions and normally Lord Chaney didn't either, but he wanted to – see me. I knew he was my father from the day I could understand spoken words."

"And you have no animosity toward him?" Lieutenant Montran asked amazed that she was picking up no emotional stress from the captain as she relayed this information to them.

"No," she gave a soft snort or disgust, "He knew I was his daughter but not who the mother was, and nor was he interested. There was no paternity suit or demands from me so he cared not to stir anything up. My papers identified me as an orphan."

"Guardian, have you found out any more on that chemical that Lord Chaney was treating the captain's clothing with?" Lieutenant Montran asked.

"Yes. Specifically, it's from the Berrian territory. On a Berrian, because of the foods they ingest on their planet, it's a narcotic for healing. To a nonBerrian who doesn't ingest their foods, it will eventually kill the host."

"So, what does that mean?" the captain asked impatiently.

"Why don't we go into the sitting room where it's more comfortable?" Charles suggested.

"I'm fine now, Carol. Thank you." Lieutenant Montran put a hand on Carol's arm as she insisted on walking on her own. The warmth from the other women came from more than one level, and with Lieutenant Montran's new sensitivity, it was just as distracting as the sensuous feelings were.

As the women made themselves comfortable, Charles moved about them, handing out refreshments. Lieutenant Montran looked up startled as Carol folded a blanket around her.

"I'm not an invalid. I'm not sick. I am fine," she insisted as Carol fluffed up a pillow behind her. Lieutenant Montran turned her attention toward Captain Zohra. She was distant and looked defensive. Why?

"So, Guardian," Lieutenant Montran pressed, "on a non-native, would it be like the substance arsenic?"

"To some species, just like it."

"So just what is the point here, folks?" a tight-lipped captain asked, sitting on the edge of her chair.

"My point, Captain," Lieutenant Montran dared to stare into the dark eyes. "Your bios went up when you spoke of your mother, than flatten out like the horizon line on a flyer's gyro, when you talked about the Chaney's and..." she paused as the dark haired warrior rose to her feet angrily.

"What are you implying? Just because I'm not going off on my so-called... family, you think there is something wrong with me? Do you fear some sort of plot against you? Is that what you're driving at?"

Carol had automatically moved herself next to her mistress when the captain rose from her seat.

"You need to be reexamined," Lieutenant Montran told her softly.

"What?" she demanded.

Charles who was behind the captain had lifted an appendage slightly and the captain fell. Carol and Lieutenant Montran caught her body as it toppled forward.

"What do you think, Lieutenant Montran?" Guardian asked disappointment in his voice.

Lieutenant Montran held Captain Zohra looking into the face of the partially conscious woman. Her heart was beating rapidly and by the partially closed lids, she knew she could hear. "I think, it's possible that she is under another's influence, a deeply planted chip maybe. I mean, if they can do it to metrapeople and psychotics...why not with people who are not aware they are being influenced. Kinda of a scary thought, no? A private army or legion of spies where the participants don't even know they are someone's puppet." Lieutenant Montran closed her eyes for a moment hoping she didn't know anyone in that position, yet knowing that that was just what metrapeople were. Was she wrong to think that there was something off with Captain Zohra? No. She may have suspected before her channels had not been so open, but now, she could see the off color over her head.

"As a scientist, I would go with the chip, but why do you say a chip?" Guardian asked.

"Because subliminals are modifiable but not chip implants. Isn't that the whole idea behind the program of metrapeople ...control with little outside effort? What if Lord Chaney or Lady Varina had a chip implanted in her that would prevent her from taking any action against them and the drug was merely something to hide the effects of the chip?" Lieutenant Montran looked down at the face of the semiconscious woman she was holding in her lap. Lieutenant Montran squeezed the captain's arm reassuringly, though she wondered if that was any consolation to the captain.

"Yes. In one of the research results, it was explained why the implants for the reeducation of social undesirables caused side effects requiring drugs to be administered. It has something to do with their dreams," Guardian replied.

The door slid open and a gurney bot moved in.

"It was a similarity Iwilla drew about the chip implant for conscious thought monitoring with metrapeople and..." Lieutenant Montran stopped as Captain Zohra's body was lifted and settled on the gurney by Carol and Charles.

She moved to stand next to the captain and with steady fingers, drew them across the furrowed brow as if to smooth the lines out. A blessing she remembered from a long time ago crossed her mind. She rested her curled fingers on the captain's cheek for a moment. Leaning forward she whispered near her ear.

"Be well, my Dancer." Then before she did something stupid, she moved away and the gurney left the room.

"She will be fine, Lieutenant Montran. Charles will accompany her. My techniques of restraint have no trauma attached to them."

"To some, Guardian, any kind of restraint will result in a trauma." Lieutenant Montran ran her hand through her hair. "There are two types of chips on the open market that I was able to identify. The one used for metrapeople interferes with behavior and memory. The second chip monitors the thoughts and behavior of psychopaths. You're right about the drugs. The idea is to keep the subject from having nightmares at the thought of having something implanted in one's brain. In the beginning, many of the subjects killed themselves trying to dig it out. I am now wondering why not also have a chip that the subject is not aware of? Think of what someone can do with that. You can have assassins planted anywhere without even their knowledge. Instead of using posthypnotic suggestions, you have a chip that enforces the command. Just about every planet's recorded history in the Committee and Collective organizations, has stories of corporations and governments doing the same mind control thing. They said they would give it up to become a member of either organization because it was the only way they would be allowed to travel in space, but by the use of the chip these days, I would say it's a flourishing business still. With the chip, anyone could be a spy. And that means with the troops heading here, there could be one or a dozen planted by Alan or someone that bought the technology and has an interest here."

"It could very well be possible. The Committee is undergoing reappointment of members. The influence or the removal of key players could change the face of the new Committee and their intentions. There is an interest to change the charter, putting aside the requirements for peaceful coexistence on a planet before it can petition for space travel and membership in either of the organizations."

Lieutenant Montran made a noise of disgust. "And we know how easy it was to join the Committee and disregard many of the rules in the charter."

"I will send that idea out to Naboths Vine and friends of the Vine."

"I'm sure it has passed others minds." Lieutenant Montran looked at Carol. "I could use some nourishment that's not so hard on the stomach."

Carol smiled. "Tea to settle an unhappy stomach, and fresh fruit."

"Sounds fine to me."

As they both sat down to breakfast Lieutenant Montran absorbed herself in the changes in her senses. As a child her life had been full of colors that whirled around everything. It was after the death of her mentor that she had closed down that sensitive side of herself so she would not experience the void. Her numbness after her mentor's death allowed her world without colors to be lost without much notice. Lieutenant Montran took a deep breath as she realized that she had gone on with her lessons without her conscious awareness, and had experienced the void, living in it for a long time, and now she was out and back into the world of colors. She shook her head as she regarded the fruit she was eating. Her teachers had said time is but an illusion. What would they say about her experiences as a prisoner of war or of her recent interrogation with Chaney's guards? She took a deep breath and expelled it slowly. They would have told her to go with the pain and become it. At the time she didn't understand just how that worked, but whatever she had done...she moved past the pain and into oblivion. Shaking her head to forget such memories she bit into the last of the fruit.

"I think...I will go back to being called Alexandra," she said aloud.

"Who is Alexandra, Mistress?" Carol asked curiously.

"Me. It was a name I was called when I was younger." She picked up a piece of bread and studied it. When she relaxed her vision, she not only could see interesting colors and textures but also hear and feel its energy. She compared it to the plate. The difference was remarkable, but she knew each vibrated on a different level of existence.

"The Monks thought I would be a good student to the Mother of All, their protectress, but Kela taught me the Witthing Way, and it's her teachings that I will live."

"Just as I had changed my name and destiny," Carol remarked thoughtfully.

"Yes." Alexandra Harriet Montran looked closely at Carol and the colors surrounding her.

"I believe that the chip that compels you to servitude can be removed without damage to your brain cells. Dr. Sharon Teal, who writes under the name of Iwilla, knows how to do this. Would you not say so, Guardian?"

"Iwilla. You know of this writer?" Guardian asked.

"Just as I know you to be Maa," Alexandra smiled.

"And how do you know all this?"

"Because you write like you speak and Iwilla writes like Sharon sounded when she was describing her work to me."

"Well, I will have to tell her that you have found us out."

"You had me fooled for a while. I thought perhaps you were implying she was trying to...hand me over to Alan."

"You are a difficult person to enlighten when you have a mind not to hear. Do you happen to know who Heartstone is?" Guardian asked.

"So I have been told," she told him ruefully. *And something I will have to change...now being a good time.* "An off-worlder on one of the Wieldworlds. He uses descriptions of the sunsets as examples in some of his works too often to be a tourist. But...he also has too much information for a casual dabbler in the business."

"Well...all residents of the Wieldworlds are off-worlders. I have not been able to figure who it's and it's driving me to distraction." He sighed. "But now I know more of what direction to look."

"I would try the prison colony first. An ideal atmosphere to study implants without interference." Alexandra sighed. *Sure wish I had a flute.* "Guardian, you don't happen to have musical instruments here do you?"

"Yes. In the recreation room. It's on the same floor as the dojo, but to the left on exiting the elevator," Guardian explained. "So, you have taken up the name Alexandra. I am happy to hear that. It's a strong and noble name."

"Strong and noble?" Alexandra laughed with some embarrassment. "If that's the case, then I have some work to do to grow into it. But first things first. I could do with some exercise. Would you like to continue hand-to-hand training, Carol?" Alexandra flashed a teasing smile. Mentally she was relieved that the customary erotic thoughts were not followed by the intense need to drag Carol off somewhere to act on them.

"Yes, Mistress. I would love to test your reflexes."

"My reflexes are just fine, thank you."



For the next two hours, they warmed up and then worked out with the moves Captain Zohra had showed them earlier. Guardian provided them with some holographic images that showed them more advanced moves which they added to their work out.

"You know, Carol, this particular style is for killing only. Look at the *Sham'hara* move. It kills the opponent days after the initial attack. One thrust to the heart or another vital organ and days later the organ aimed at, fails. No one would even suspect. No physical impact was witnessed and no bruises."

Carol wiped her brow with one hand and drank deeply from the water the bot handed her. She paused, watching her mistress's face change to a troubled look.

"What is it, Mistress?"

"That certainly would be a good explanation as to why so many influential people have been suffering from heart conditions in the past few years, hm?"

"I hadn't heard about that," Carol returned.

"I remember reading it...no, Sharon was reading it and thought it interesting. They didn't die but were rushed to a medical facility to get a heart replacement." Harriet stood for a few moments drinking her water and thinking. "It would certainly fit in with my conspiracy idea..." Alexandra rubbed her face with both hands. "Always looking for the enemy...never knowing who it's going to be. What a life. Ready for a kata?"

Both were tired when they broke off the practice, bowing respectfully to each other. Standing to the side, catching her breath, Alexandra watched the beaded sweat drip off Carol's face as she gulped her water. She wiped her own face and wondered what type of relationship they would have when Carol was past the 'mistress' stage.

"Let's go find some musical instruments. Do you know how to play a musical instrument?" She tossed her towel toward the bot, and took a last gulp of her own water.

"Yes, Mistress," Carol spoke without thinking. Both she and Alexandra were surprised.

"What's your preference?"

"I don't know, Mistress," Carol remarked slowly and then laughed shortly with embarrassment. "I think I am experiencing a buried memory."

Alexandra raised an eyebrow in askance.

"Lord Chaney wasn't interested in music," she explained further.

Alexandra smiled at her, pleased that the real person was reasserting itself. "Then that is an important experience."

The two women moved down the hall, each looking in the rooms that lined it, more out of curiosity than checking for musical instruments. Startled, Alexandra stopped and glanced down the hall. There was an energy pulse emanating from the end of the hall.

Relaxing her gaze, she could see a soft glow composed of purple, blue and green pulsing from the room at the end of the hall. A dark blue shape started to form in the center of the glow growing larger as it appeared to be moving toward them.

Alexandra was aware that Carol moved to her side concerned.

"Mistress?" The voice seemed to be from far away.

Alexandra remained where she was. "Can't you see what is before you?" she asked softly, as if a normal voice would scare off what she was witnessing.

"I see an empty hall, Mistress. What else is there to see?" Carol asked puzzled.

Alexandra continued to stare at the form before them. Her eyes watering from the intense light shining from around the form. She put her hand out to stop Carol in case she moved forward. The form in the energy seemed to turn around and walk back into the field. When it disappeared completely the energy field folded into itself and disappeared.

"Mistress?" Carol asked softly.

"I think I now know why Alan wants this planet. There's a portal here." Her heart was pounding excitedly.

"A portal?"

"Do you remember the childhood tales of Blenda and Mal and their trips to other...?"

Carol was shaking her head.

"Oh...right. Well...oftentimes childhood tales speak of truths that their elders no longer believe."

Carol looked at her blankly, glancing back down the hall, but still only seeing an empty corridor.

"In these tales, Blenda and Mal traveled across the Galaxy via portals instead of space ships.

These portals are entrances to corridors that take the traveler to specific planets. Like, planet A's portal goes to planet B and B to C and so-on. Not everyone can pass through the portals. Only those that vibrate to a harmonic that is compatible with the portal. Anyone else will go up in flames the moment they step across the threshold. The children's tales were of two idealistic very upstanding young girls who did heroic and kind things wherever they visited. They had two animals that traveled with them. Depending on the life form telling the story, it ranged from wild beasts to domesticated animals. I grew up on the tales. Even in the monastery they spoke of the two travelers as if they were real." Alexandra laughed ruefully. "I'm digressing here. Anyway, this is just like the stories, the colors, the form coming out of the light...it's just incredible!"

Carol looked at her uncertain.

"It's an energy gate of some sort," Alexandra tried again, not understanding why Carol wasn't getting the idea – or was it that she was just not interested. "...and the life-forms that enter it must be on a vibration level that is attuned with the gate to be able to enter it."

"Well, Alexandra," Guardians voice interrupted her over the speaker system, "I see you have found us out," his voice hinting amusement. "You must step back from where you are so as not to endanger Carol. The chip implant may cause her great harm should she get any closer. The room you had been looking for is the one nearest to the elevator. I suppose you will want to talk about this 'discovery'."

"Yes, I would." Alexandra's insides were quivering at the realization that a child's world of fantasy was indeed true. Her more sensible side quickly hushed the thought of all the other possibilities that could exist that she had heard as a child.

"Would you be able to wait until tomorrow? My guests will have settled by then and we can schedule a meeting that will be comfortable for everyone."

"All right. Sounds okay with me." *Oh, right, Alexandra. Like you have some say here. I have to get use to the idea that the portals actually exist. He didn't deny my assumption...so, geeze. Just how much of those tales are true? The possibilities. To travel from one planet to another in twenty minutes or less, no matter the distance. Wow!*

Chapter 17

"Hey, Montran! Wait up!"

Cadet Montran was walking alone back to her barracks in the evening, following her early leave from a birthday celebration at one of the local social establishments. She had a flight test in the morning and wanted to go to bed early. A perfect score was her goal, as she and her dorm mate were in competition. Another chance encounter with her Dancer was also on her mind. Contact with her, even for a brief moment, had her mind and emotions scattered and confused, not to mention that it gave a very pleasant thrumming throughout her body. The clear chilly night air was what she needed.

Alan Fermin, from the neighboring Diplomat Academy, hurriedly approached her. A few of his friends were trailing behind. The red alarms in her head went off at this chance meeting. She could sense the danger and see it as a black cloud heading her way. She felt she had gone through this before. Ahh. It was from her past. She smiled at Alan and mentally forgave him for what he was about to do. Harriet could see the cause and effect of her own actions and without placing judgment on herself, she gained insight and compassion for herself and others whose choices do not always seem to be the best at the time.

Time sped forward, and memories of her last drop played out. In this space, it seemed her incarceration was for a short time, but in real time, it had seemed a lifetime. Along with the physical torture, she suffered for the lost lives of her troop. They were finally proud of themselves and of wearing the Degas troop patch, and now they were no more...except her.

Her dream body suddenly was jerked away from the morbid replays, and compelled to continue on to another place. It was where souls gathered for their lessons when their physical selves slept. The soul she had recognized as her grandfather was explaining something to a student by way of...

Her struggle to put an explanation to the method of teaching nearly yanked her back into her physical body and would have if Gedaliaha, one of her mentors, had not tapped her on her forehead, as if to remind her. Obediently she took her place amongst the others, though once she focused on her grandfather, all the others disappeared. She became absorbed in the lesson. When it was time for her to leave she was reluctant as always. The teacher gave her a nod as she withdrew and this time, she felt she would remember the content of the lesson.



Carol wasn't aware of any dreams but she knew she had dreamt. She woke up with a start, her heart pounding. The small nightlight came on as her bios changed from sleep to an awoken state. Her mistress's deep breathing told her she was still asleep. Carol attempted to go back to sleep but couldn't. She recalled that her mistress had said she played her flute when she was in a similar state. Quietly Carol left the bed, picking up her robe on the way to the front room. She engaged the soundproof bubble around her. When she played the harmonica earlier, it was like hearing something familiar at the edge of her consciousness. She wanted to stop wrestling with feelings and try to connect thought together. It was like putting a jigsaw puzzle together in the dark.

She paused not knowing what to play. She closed her eyes and listened to the combination of tones she blew. She played the notes long, letting them tease out memories that were like gray shadows. It was as if she was looking for a specific tone.

Finally she stopped. She could feel herself buzzing. What was that from? She shook her head to get rid of the sound. Opening her eyes, she could see an unfamiliar figure sitting on the couch watching her.

Carol released the bubble.

"I am an old friend whom you will not remember, nor do you need to. I have come with a message from your past, to you, from you." With that, she held out her hand with a case resting in her opened palm.

"I'm not sure I understand what you are saying." Carol eagerly reached for the case. Her hand passed through the apparition but the case was solid.

"You volunteered for this job. Now it's finished. You set up the parameters of recovery. Your previous life will come back to you in dreams. You can remember who you were or not. What memories you wish to keep is your decision." With that, the apparition disappeared.

Carol looked at the case in her hand. She put the case in her robe pocket when she heard movement coming from the bedroom. Now wasn't the time to review it.

Her mistress stepped into the front room fighting a big yawn. "Good morning, Carol. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, and you Mistress?" she asked politely as she noted Alexandra's bios and mentally started to plan for breakfast.

"Yes. Have you eaten yet?"

"No. I was waiting for you."

"Thanks. Well...I was going to do some stretches, work out a bit and take a bath before I eat. If that's too long for you...don't wait. When Guardian's guests start arriving, our days will be long with introductions, shared dinners, socializing, and planning. Just the thought is tiring me." She groaned melodramatically, and disappeared back into the bedroom to start her morning meditation.

Carol settled in front of the computer to read about metrapeople until she could hear grunts and other small noises, indicating her mistress was practicing a kata.

Carol peered into the bedroom where the bed was gone and the dialed environment produced a bare padded room with plenty of space.

Alexandra felt Carol enter the room and turned, pausing to see what she wanted. Carol bowed, removed her robe and moved into a horse stance waiting until her mistress took her place directly in front of her. Both were without clothing, giving them an even footing for vulnerability and distractions. "This is going to prove interesting," Alexandra smirked.

"You are at a disadvantage," Carol replied, returning the smirk.

They worked out for over an hour until Alexandra stepped back and then bowed, indicating she was calling a halt.

"Great workout. Thanks, Carol."

Carol smiled as they both headed to the shower to rinse off before soaking in the tub. They exchanged kisses and touches in the shower, as they took their time. With nothing demanding their attention until Guardian had his meeting later in the evening, they felt relaxed.

"I love this life!" Alexandra proclaimed to a smiling Carol. "Time to stretch, exercise without being rushed, and then having time to soak in herbal waters. What a life."

"Hmm," Carol hummed. "My life, as I remember it with Lord Chaney, didn't have any of this hedonistic pleasure. I think I like my life with you better, Mistress." Carol's voice was light and teasing, giving her mistress the impression that whatever she remembered from serving Lord Chaney had no ill effect...so far.

"Well," Alexandra grinned, "we had better take advantage of this quiet time." Suddenly she became serious, "When this is all over, I'll be shipped back to *Ziggy* and you...your life will be wherever you decide is best for you." Alexandra looked into Carol's eyes while she intertwined their fingers. "I would not mind you going where I go, Carol. Don't get me wrong. But only after you have had a chance to decide what you want to do with your life."

Carol smiled. "I understand you. We will enjoy the time we have together. Tomorrow is for tomorrow."

"So..." Alexandra led the way to the tub. "What do you think the smugglers are up to?"

"In all probability, the Merkate, Master Alha Bahna, will attempt to take over the leadership of the smugglers...but he won't have many followers. They suspect him of sacrificing their main hide-away in the Collective raid. Ohhh. This is very..." she slid into the tub.

"Different," Alexandra finished, groaning in bliss as the water's heat and herbs seeped into her pores.

Both women sniffed the fragrance that rose from the bubbling tub appreciatively.

"It is for calming and refreshing tired nerves," Ald explained.

"Just what the bot recommended. So, what else were you going to say?" Alexandra prodded Carol both verbally and underwater. She had taken a seat directly across from Carol so that their buoyant legs entwined as they leaned back.

"Master Alha Bahna and Lord Chaney were always at odds since the partnership. Lord Chaney was forming an alliance with another smugglers' group with part of the deal to 'off' Master Alha Bahna."

"Oh, joy. Did I ever change things," Alexandra hesitated. "It's going to be pretty difficult to return the Merkate to his planet if he's caught. Now that he knows all about interstellar travel and has

contacts...maybe the guy that picked up the contract will not fulfill the obligation. How far did he get to solidifying it?"

"It was completed before he died."

"So...it should be interesting how his death is affecting the smugglers. Whether he died or not...he must have given his new partner information that would give him control of large parts of his businesses."

Carol shook her head. "Lord Chaney had many partners in his many businesses and gave them only enough information pertaining to their part of the operations. He felt the less any of them knew of his contacts, the less chance he had in worrying about takeovers."

"Hmm. Did you know?"

"Yes."

Alexandra nodded, and then asked hesitantly, "Were you something more than just a bodyguard?"

Carol looked puzzled. "What do you mean by 'just'?"

"Right, you need a comparison." She thought a while. "Did he tell you about his businesses?"

"Only when he wished a reprisal on someone involved. Anything more was from overheard conversations."

"Do you realize that for what you know, you are a valuable asset to some and a liability to others?"

Carol nodded. "Yes. Captain Zohra also mentioned it in our first conversation. She wished me to be very careful of anyone that wished to befriend me or approach me."

"When our reinforcements arrive. So, she suspects there will always be a spy to worry about."

She realized that even if Carol would want to leave with her when this operation was over, chances are she would not be allowed to, least not until the new Committee government was firmly settled, unless she was a threat to someone who was elected.

"I shall soon be debriefed." Carol smiled reassuringly at her mistress. "Captain Zohra assured me it's a painless process. They have been monitoring me since I started my assignment with Lord Chaney. It has been agreed that four organizations shall have what information I give, therefore one Can't hide it and harm me."

"Good thinking," Alexandra mumbled as she closed her eyes.

The music softly playing in the background lulled Alexandra into a relaxed frame of mind. So with great reluctance, she finally rose from the water peering at her wrinkled hands.

Carol followed, taking the towel her mistress handed her. Smiling, Carol pulled Alexandra to her. "I know for sure that I was a lover of women before this change," she whispered in Alexandra's ear. "And had circumstances been different...I still would have enjoyed a sexual liaison with you."



Alexandra was inspecting her repaired second skin and Carol was pulling on a shirt when Guardian wished them a good morning.

"Greetings, Lieutenant Montran and Carol. I have good news. Our second group of help has arrived!" he announced.

Well, I guess my vacation is over. What gave ya a clue, Lieut? She was disappointed.

"Admiral JoCastao has seven Stealth Class A ship's above us spreading out a protective net over the planet to prevent any of Alan's group from reentering orbit or from slipping off-planet. They brought soldiers from the Vine and dropped them in Century city. They will set up a command post and then start a sweep to route out the Spartans and what's left of Alan's soldiers. The four ships above, including Chaney's have been seized and impounded for investigation. Since this is neutral territory, who I invite to protect my facilities is my own business. I also have a report that Alan has disappeared. Only one death to report – Gustaf Fermin."

"Alan's doing?"

"NabothsVine doesn't believe so. He had a love-hate relationship with his father, but not the type that would warrant sending out an assassin. Like Lord Chaney, he trusted few. Any relationships he formed were limited to his business dealings. It's suggested that his death is a suicide..."

"Hmm. Usually people like those two had reasons for not trusting others – they couldn't be trusted themselves."

"Yes. We found a chip implant in Captain Zohra. The consensus is that it wasn't Lord Chaney's doing, or the entire team would have one. The implantation is an involved process, and only two in the

team were gone for the length of time it would take for the surgery. Maybe, Lady Varina, his daughter, knows something and will be willing to talk about it. Would you agree, Carol?"

"She will not talk about anything that deals with family business," Carol replied. "She, like her father, keeps her own counsel, and unlike her father, her sexual preferences."

"She can be tested in front of the Tribunal about her knowledge pertaining to her father's known illegal business ventures and attempts on the life of other legal heirs to his estate."

"She has Thebain heritage," Carol pointed out.

"Her birth records do not identify either parent as Thebain."

"Lord Chaney's grandfather was Thebain. The characteristics skipped Lord Chaney, though he had his persuasive means, but both Captain Zohra and Lady Varina have inherited that ability. I would imagine all his female off-spring have the trait."

"What about the males?"

"He only had girls, much to his joy, but not to his lawful wife and Varina. He didn't want a male descendant that could challenge his "

"So, we wouldn't know when they are lying or leading us on."

"That is correct."

"Why didn't Captain Zohra use that on us?" Alexandra asked puzzled, for she knew about the Thebain abilities. They would have all believed her if she chose to lie about her family.

"Perhaps she doesn't know she has it," Guardian interjected.

"From what Lord Chaney had said, they do."

"Lord Chaney knew both of them had this?" Alexandra asked surprised.

"The conversation I overheard was between Lord Chaney and one of his money mangers. He always crosschecked his daughter's verbal reports. It has to do with the voice."

"Maybe that's why Captain Zohra was able to stay alive for so long with the Black Rose," Alexandra mused. "I wonder if that was one of the reasons for the implant, aside from maybe being a cleverly planted assassin." *Yet, she didn't use it with us.*

"It would be like Lady Varina to compel Captain Zohra to kill her father," Carol admitted thoughtfully. "Lord Chaney had decided on a metradame as a bodyguard when an assassin had slipped past his guards and mistakenly slain his metrachild. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time, he had said. But it scared him enough to invest in better protection."

"What did he do with his metrachildren when they matured...or did the chip prevent maturation? If Lord Chaney was able to enslave children for his pleasures...what of others doing the same to these children? And...what is going to happen to them when they are released?"

"A plan has been in the works on their reeducation. Part of the healing is that their memories as metrachildren will be blotted out and their faces changed. The Healers' House in both space sectors have been working on where to place them and train them for productive lives," Guardian explained. "There are many concerned and compassionate beings working on how to bring back all the metrapeople we can find." He paused. "There is also concern, that some are being taken care of better than they had been before they were metrapeople...and with those we must also consider what is best."

"Isn't that being presumptuous on your part?" Alexandra asked testily.

"Yes. That is why it will be left to the Monks of Hela to decide what will be in line with their soul's path," Guardian further explained.

"You don't agree with it," Alexandra guessed.

"It is not that I agree or disagree. I do recognize many would say that I am not in the position to decide what state a person is better suited to live in." He sighed at the blank expression on the lieutenant's face. "I don't have the same emotional feelings as living in a body would give me. Right and wrong is not in colorful hues as I remember them once to be."

"I hadn't thought of justice making quite like that," Alexandra said softly.

"Justice making. Yes. That is what De LiTien said. She is quite involved in the discussions and can be quite strong in her opinion."

"Well, I guess for Captain Zohra's part, we'll just have to wait until she tells us her story...though I don't see Captain Zohra as a chatty person."

"Captain Lady Zohra, technically," Guardian interjected with a hint of humor in his tone. "She has been left a title and lands to go with it on El, a landmass of wilderness on Anim. However, I am told she doesn't care for the title or the land. It will no doubt go into her Sisters Shield House holdings."

Alexandra raised her eyebrows and smiled. *Lady Zohra? That is going to take some time to get use to.* "How is she doing?"

"She appears to be holding up well...though, it would not be advisable to be around her right now. She's a bit short tempered."

Lieutenant Montran turned to Carol. "When can they start on Carol?"

"The process has already begun. She had been ingesting caciu in her tea. It increases the acid level of her blood just enough to melt the chip. If you read further on the chip itself you will see that the chips are biodegradable in some species so that the brain can eventually absorb the implant without creating seizures, which prolonged use of the chip produces."

Alexandra pulled off the unicorn ring and handed it to Carol. "A memento, if you want it. I think that's great, Carol."

Carol took a deep breath and just nodded. She wasn't sure just what she was supposed to feel, but...her fingers curled around the ring in her outstretched palm and she looked into the green eyes of her savior. "Thank you, Mistress."

"I don't think that name applies anymore," Alexandra whispered, feeling her eyes tearing. It was a gift she gave but it was Carol's right to have...so was it really a gift? "I'm Alexandra to friends."

Carol smiled but her eyes had a hint of mischief in them and before she could say something to embarrass her, Alexandra went on. "So are you getting any major troop deployment?"

"Yes. In the next two days a Dragoon C class ship will leave off enough soldiers that necessitates me to bring Century City back on full life support and the Lair. They intend on hunting out the remnants of Alan's soldiers." Guardian stopped, wondering if he should say more. When he reported Lieutenant Montran's capture and rescue her admiral stated strongly that she wasn't to get involved in any more skirmishes until she was debriefed and cleared by a psych eval. It was military protocol that any soldier captured and tortured must be cleared before returning to duty, Admiral JoCastao strongly quoted to him. Guardian personally didn't trust military minds when it came to healing the psyche. He had notified an old friend who would arrive via the portal soon. If Alexandra needed help, she would take care of her.

"Well, its a relief to know it's now in someone else's hands. Do you know the commanding officers of this operation?"

"No. The War Forum is still being decided. I know your Rear Admiral has been charged with the space protection, the ground assignments are still being discussed as we speak. Of the two civilians I know that De LiTien is one of them." Guardian was quiet for a few moments, and then decided to tell her a least about the alowan. "In my discussions with the other guardians, we have identified what we all thought was a child that caught a ride on a smuggler ship as a stow-away, when in fact...it's an alowan. They are from another star system in Eckron sector. They are from planet 0eck003."

Alexandra's eyebrows rose. "A closed planet," she murmured. All closed planets had numbers that identified their position on a star chart.

"Yes. There have been disturbances that many of the guardians have noted occurring on their respective planets. When investigated, it was found that these alowans were there in small groups of armed forces and in unpopulated areas. When these visitors were discovered, they would disappear...like walking through a gate. Their culture is very primitive in the sense that they have poisoned their planet to such an extent that it's dying. Instead of cleaning up their toxic mess, or asking for help, they have chosen to move to other planets. These people have created a machine that forces the gates open which destabilizes the planet as well as the legitimate gates. Our guess is that they are sending out people to find habitable planets."

"And this outpost would be ideal for them. It has all the modern conveniences and only a computer to prevent them from taking over, no offense meant Guardian."

"None taken. It gives me great pleasure to know that I made a good decision in keeping a low profile with that trespasser. Alowans breathe the same air as I have activated in the Lair and Century City, but there is a third city that could also support them. I have convened a meeting of other guardians to discuss what we're going to do about these incursions. We also need to speak on the Alan Fermin problem. He wants to disrupt the gates all together. My guests have been arriving for the last twenty-four stan hours, as you had noticed when you walked into the portal's energy field. I've been rather busy bringing up the life support in the Lair. Most of them are staying on the tenth and eleventh levels, close to the laboratories and gate. The soldiers that will be arriving to protect the Lair will be filling the first, second and third levels."

"By everyone meeting here, doesn't that give Alan a tempting target?"

"It is more of a convenience to me. I Can't travel to their planets in the state I am presently in. Your admiral has no orders for you until she arrives. I believe she said you are owed a vacation, so until otherwise notified, consider yourself on shore leave. There really is nothing for either of you to do until the others arrive. Do you need anything to entertain you until the others arrive?"

Carol looked at her mistress for any suggestions, however she could see she was on another train of thought.

Laboratories...Now that is rather interesting. If he can put himself and Charles in a computer and bot...why not clone a body from either of their cells and...

"Guardian, would you mind if I asked you a personal question?" Alexandra asked.

"You may ask."

"Why haven't you developed a clone from your body cells instead of putting yourself into a computer? You have the laboratories and the scientific knowledge."

"Timing and...I will admit, the sense of power I have is difficult to give up. With Charles, his species is rather difficult to clone but we have been nurturing it into adulthood for longer than I have been here." He sighed heavily. "But, it's time for that move. My own cloned body is ready. With all the scientist arriving, I would be foolish not to take advantage of their presence to complete the melding process."

"I guess it would be like 'dumbing down'. Seeing Charles with less color would be...different." Taking a deep breath she moved on to other things. "Guardian, about the other cities on your outpost, would you mind if we looked them over while we're waiting for everyone to arrive?"

"Not at all. The present small group the Vine has deployed in Century City is not able to stretch themselves beyond the city. I have not been able to reestablish communication in the other cities so you will be on your own until you bring up the systems. I'm sure your 'sightseeing' would be All right with your Admiral," he hinted.

Alexandra shook her head, "I gather she told you until I'm debriefed, I'm to be left out of all combat situations."

"That was the gist of the conversation concerning you," Guardian admitted relieved.

"I'll be sure to stick to sightseeing and bringing up your monitoring equipment in those cities. How's that?"

"It sounds very unexciting," he agreed.

"Are there any citizens left?" Carol asked.

"No. I do believe everyone has left. I wasn't in any condition to monitor the evacuation, but when my system came back online, Maud visited them and she found no one left. But that was years ago and for the last two, we have been rather busy."

"Well, I'm for exploration to prevent boredom." Suddenly she turned to Carol. "That is, unless you have something else in mind."

"I would not mind exploring, Mistress." She grinned at the face Alexandra made at the name. Carol was learning how her body reacted to various emotions that as Lord Chaney's bodyguard she didn't experience. 'Mistress' stuck her tongue out at her and grinned back.

"Good! I am looking forward to seeing what is there," Guardian returned happily. "I will prepare subliminal tapes on the cities. Which one do you want to visit first?"

"I keep visualizing this vast amount of water with single room buildings on the various docks that circle the water."

"Avanster, or WaterLand. I don't advise swimming in the water as it's like another's home. Uninvited guests...may not return."

"I thought you said no one was there?" Carol remarked doubtfully.

"The water is a living thing, though the inhabitants of the water may have left."

"That reminds me of guardian spirits of my country. Though some of the city people didn't believe in the spirit guardians they still left alms or some sort of token of respect when they passed through or removed something from a garden, glen or crossroads."

"Do they? What does the token or alms do, Mistress?" Carol asked puzzled.

"It lets the guardian know that she or he is honored and that the traveler is thanking her or him for allowing them to pass through their territory or taking a memento of their journey from their land."

"What happens if they do not?"

"Bad luck," Alexandra replied with a grin.

Carol gave her an odd look as if disbelieving, and then replaced it with a thoughtful frown as if turning this over in her mind. Alexandra wondered what memory was resurfacing that had her perplexed. Every planet had their strange superstitious customs of placating the unknown forces in their lives. Perhaps Lord Chaney never demonstrated his own practices. The mining colonies which Lord Chaney had represented, were notorious for their large assortment of good luck charms.

"Guardian, do you have some information on the culture?"

"I'll add it to your subliminal. Unless you would like audio and a visual study?"

"Subliminal and nap are fine."



Alexandra woke suddenly. She was aware of having dreamed of Gedaliaha and something about her Dancer, but it was too vague. No nightmares. Stretching, she mused that not only was she in a good mood, but her body felt completely healed from its earlier abuse. Should she worry?

Gawds, no. It's probably something to do with opening up my channels. Maybe I should be researching that. I haven't thought of the subject since childhood.

Carol wasn't around so Alexandra began her Chi Gung workout to wake her body up, then showered and dressed. While she ate, she mentally reviewed the information from subliminals. Whatever technique Guardian used in his subliminals she noticed that the information was making its way faster to her consciousness than the first time.

A sound from the sleeping room had her looking up as Carol walked into the room looking for her.

"Mistress, are you getting ready to leave?"

"Yes. Is Captain Zohra back in her room?" Alexandra asked, guessing at Carol's whereabouts.

"She is sleeping now. She was having a bad dream so I stayed with her until she fell back to sleep.

Bach, a sandwich and quava juice, with pulp, please."

Being undercover for so long with a group like the Black Rose and a sister like Varina is enough to give anyone nightmares.

Both finished their lunch in silence.

Alexandra's thoughts turned to military matters. If Alan's soldiers were loose in the unmonitored cities or the alowan was sending in more of his or her people, Alexandra wanted to know just where they were wandering and reinitializing Guardian's monitoring equipment would give them that information.

If I were infiltrating I would have a way to hide my life readings. Go into hypersleep? It would take a biosleep pod. Hmm. The best way to sneak a sleep pod into a city would be to hide a ship large enough for, hmm, a troop compliment. So where could Alan fit a ship of any size, unnoticed even by Guardian?



The ride on the train to Avanster was faster than what it had been to Century City, but then this wasn't on the opposite side of the planet. When the door to the car came open, the reflection from the water mirrored on the car's ceiling. Carol stepped out first and glanced around quickly. They were on a beach below the planet's surface, and deeper than the other cities.

Alexandra stepped out slower as she was sensing something around them. There was a presence. However, it wasn't interested in them. It could be the spirit of the water. The view through her helmet didn't show any life signs other than their own. Was it the water? Had she ever felt this much life from a body of water before? Shaking her head, she reminded herself that this was her first experience as an adult with her empathic senses this enhanced. And then she wondered if the suit blunted or somehow distorted her feelings. She turned to a sound on her right. Water lapping against a pillar. The sand was white, not what she was expecting since the surface sand was shades of reds and browns. When she stepped onto it she was held firm with only a bit of it being displaced with her weight.

The train had delivered them near a dock. It was the only one that didn't have a small building standing on it. Numerous other docks were linked by thin walkways suspended over the water. Alexandra looked into the water and could see only darkness. Since the water was a living thing, it should register something in her helmet, she reasoned. Puzzled she set the thought aside for the moment. There wasn't much light here, and though the helmets allowed them to see shadows and shapes, it was still dark enough for accidents to happen. Her subliminal told her that it was night and daylight was several standard hours

away. There was a yellow light shining from the top of the dome shaped ceiling of Waterland's city. Alexandra took it for a replica of a moon.

"Let's take a look at the one over there." Alexandra pointed. It was the smallest building compared to the others and it was the nearest to them. Carol nodded. Carol's body language revealed she was uneasy about something. Did she feel the presence also?

They crossed the bridge slowly, looking carefully at where they stepped. Neither wanted to find a broken spot and fall into the water below.

The first building was dome shaped with a circular doorway. The doorway was so low that they were going to have to crawl on all fours in order to enter. Above the entrance was a shadowy carving. Alexandra couldn't make out. There was no recognizable form only shadows hinting at curves. Carol was reluctant to enter.

Alexandra placed a small token on the ground near where they would enter. She started to go first but Carol pulled her back shaking her head. "Carol, it's better if I do go first. I can sense things you may not."

"And that's why you should follow me, Mistress. You can observe what is happening when I enter. I feel something is here, or in this city and I would rather you observe than fall prey to it." Rather than argue she let Carol go in first.

When Alexandra's head cleared the entrance, she was able to stand up. A winding stairway led downward. Small lights lit up as they approached showing the way down.

So, there is something that is on, giving power to this structure to recognize it's inhabited and needs light on a staircase...Next question, is the light for the convenience of the visitors from the other cities or did the species that once reside here need lights too?

Carol was waiting midway down the stairs. Neither spoke as they studied the walls that had a glass-like appearance. On the other side of the glass were underwater plants that moved as if there were an underwater tide, or maybe they were alive and moved of their own volition.

When the stairs ended, the room they entered appeared to be a storage room with empty shelves lining the circular walls. According to the suit gauge, the room was extremely cold.

Alexandra signaled she had seen enough. Carol didn't waste any time as she led the way back up and out. They both exchanged glances before they started toward the next place.

The next building was larger and this time Alexandra didn't give Carol a chance to enter first. She placed a scented token on the outside and crawled in. The moment Alexandra cleared the entrance she knew this was a different type of building. She could feel something was here. A soft light came on when she entered the room. This room was circular as the other but was larger and instead of stairs there was a large circular pond in the center with a totem pole in the middle. Alexandra could see the water ripple in the dim light. She motioned to Carol to follow her as she stayed close to the wall rather than venture near the pond. This culture had a household spirit that protected the residences. Her subliminal informed her that this is where the spirit was housed. Tradition had it that the household spirit moved with the family. She frowned. The household guardians were spirits of past family members that were asked to come back to protect a family for the lifetime of the person that called it. Strange culture, Alexandra thought. Once she left the physical world, she didn't want to come back. She shuddered. It was as bad as being turned into a metaperson.

Moving slowly around the room both women stayed as far from the pond as they could. The opposite side of the room was their destination where there was a dark circular doorway. Silently, Alexandra gave a prayer to whoever's house she was invading and pulling out a stone she found in one of the pots in their bathing room, she placed it at the second doorway as she stooped to enter.

These people must be midgets. This probably is a workroom or office. It is airy and...it feels as if it's expansive yet it doesn't really look that large. Shelves on three of the walls... that could be furniture in the center there, but what this other stuff is...I can't even imagine.

Carol joined her and pressed her arm in warning as the lieutenant went to try one of the shadowy couches. Alexandra nodded and then gave her a sign to search one side and she would search the other.

While Alexandra located the camera Carol found a small control panel located in the shelves to the right of the second doorway.

"Mistress," Carol's voice softly called.

Alexandra moved quickly to Carol's side. There was a translucent substance filling the shelves that the visor didn't detect.

"What is it?"

"I don't know? Did you sleep for the subliminal?" she asked Carol.

"I was awakened before it finished."

"Well, I think we need to contact Guardian. Above the door is one of the cameras to the mainframe. Shall we see if the on/off switch works?"

"That is here?"

"No. Right up there where the camera is. Sometimes the simplest solution works. We would have to first check there anyway."

Alexandra was thinking about how she was going to inspect the camera that was just a foot out of her reach when Carol offered her cupped hands.

Alexandra found the switch easily enough. It was in the off position. Simple enough, she thought. The small light indicating it was activated didn't come on.

"Mistress, perhaps it also has a switch behind here." Carol's finger pointed to the blur on the shelf. Gingerly Alexandra attempted to push aside the translucent contents but they would not move.

"No room to push. You need to remove them." Carol reached over, pulled out some of the shapes, and laid them on a table nearby. "Simple," Carol said softly, smiling at her mistress's confusion. The small door to the control unit came open easily. Carol found the switch. She pushed the on switch and for a brief moment lights flashed on the panel then a small screen came on showing that the small system was coming up.

"The camera light is on, Mistress," Carol commented after a few minutes.

"It is good to see that you are both doing well," Guardian's voice came over both their helmet speakers.

"Hello, Guardian. Anything happen while we've been out of touch?"

"No, just the usual reports from the troops searching out Alan's group. And a protest from Lady Varina filed with the Counsel of Rings in absentia of the Committee's Grand Counsel, regarding the Collective's refusal to return her men or ship, due to their attack and mistreatment of one of the Collective's officers." Guardian cleared his nonexistent throat. "I'm not sure she understands that one government official condoning the kidnapping, imprisonment and mistreatment of an officer from another government, in peace time is a serious crime."

"So...I..." Alexandra dreaded the idea of an inquiry.

"You are not required in this matter. My filming your capture and treatment has been presented to the Counsel of Rings. I have launched the protest since you were my guest. It's better to let people who are more skilled in these matters handle the case."

"Right. So...we'll discuss the matter when I return...which I'm sure my commander will have a lot to say." *Oh, no! This will give them the opening to nose into my past. I can always resign. Riiiiight. And run away again? How many galaxies are there to run to, Alexandra? If you take up Alexandra's name, you have taken up the responsibilities. Can't keep running.*

"Do you know where we're?" Alexandra asked, hopefully.

"Yes. You are in the chancellor's library. Actually, it became his son's. I see that he didn't take his readers when he left. That is curious. I would have thought MaaSa would never leave without his collection."

"So, these are...books," Carol said as she picked up what she had laid on the table.

"Yes. That is what you would call them. They are data cards. You place one on that table and the system plays it on the screen, either audio or visual. For you it would not work, for you do not know their language or see with the same vision as they. They could be out of the water for a while but they did most of their living underwater. The library was set above the water to see if the data cards would last longer."

Alexandra paused and listened for a moment. What was that she heard? Did she hear a sigh? She didn't feel any presence in the room.

"Well, we shall move on to the next structure. We have a lot to do and I'm sure not all will be this easy."

Carol was the first through the doorway. As Alexandra cleared the doorframe she could feel a force pushing at her. The energy that was coming from the room was neither friendly nor familiar. She could see what resembled a lifeline from the water attached to the gray cloud that was leaning over Carol crowded to the wall on the other side of the pond. Alexandra quickly moved to the lifeline and patted it with her gloved hand. The gray cloud was instantly before Alexandra with all its malevolent energy surrounding her. No small wonder why Carol was pressed against the wall! The energy was staggering.

Alexandra remembered some childhood protection incantations, which she mumbled as she tried to slowly back away from the pond. She couldn't see Carol. It closed off most of her senses.

Alexandra resigned herself to the entrapment and sat down. Quieting her fears, she centered herself as she had done long ago when frightened. When was the last time she had done this? A flower. She had been admiring a flower from her aunt's garden when she experienced a profound love that had made her heart ache. This remembered feeling she radiated to whatever was covering her.

Alexandra was startled out of her meditation when someone tapped her shoulder. She looked up to see Carol smiling down at her. She wasn't wearing her helmet. In fact, she wasn't dressed at all. Alexandra laughed humorously. The entity was so clever. Her amusement reflected back to her.

"So, you are Guardian spirit of this home. Perhaps you know of MaaSa?"

The presence vanished quickly and she found Carol helping her up.

"You okay?" she asked Carol.

"Yes, Mistress. Are you?" She studied Alexandra closely.

"Uh, huh."

There was a splash on the outside and the building rocked gently. The entity that appeared before them was a glow of no color but the center was grayish.

"Well, MaaSa. Welcome!" Guardian's voice could be heard from the speaker in the room.

"MashiMaa, it has been a long time since I have heard you speak and a long time since I have used this language!"

"We could speak in your own language, but my emissaries would not understand," Guardian returned.

"I had heard you were no longer," MaaSa continued.

"I had heard everyone had left," Guardian countered.

"It is good that neither of us believed," MaaSa said in humor.

"I Can't take credit for that. Lieutenant Lady Alexandra Harriet Montran felt the deserted cities needed a long over due inspection."

"Yes. The one that sent a message to me. How do you know of our ways, Lieutenant Lady Alexandra Harriet Montran?" the form asked as it moved toward the two women.

"She asked for subliminals of the culture of your Enuits, MaaSa. Don't be hostile so hastily," Guardian broke in.

"You have information on my Enuits? I had thought I destroyed all records of us."

"Not all. So what have you been doing with yourself all this time?" Guardian asked.

"I have been doing what I have desired since a youth."

"Writing," Alexandra stated.

"Yes. I have finished eleven stands, which represents books to you. I am now outlining the final. We write in twelve's," MaaSa explained.

"What will you do when you are finished?" Guardian asked curious.

"You shall send them home for me. I don't have any desire to return. I like it here. I am free to write or wander without anyone telling me I Can't do it."

"I shall take care of that as you ask, MaaSa," Guardian assured him.

"So, now that you have found someone, what more do you want?" MaaSa rumbled his question to Alexandra.

"Are you the only one that is here?"

"Perhaps. Is this something MashiMaa is asking, or is it your own question?"

Alexandra's subliminal was telling her she was asking questions that are not asked in this culture. Enuits were a secretive group when compared to humans, beasties, and most of the clans in the Zed sector. There is a scattering of planets that still held to the secretive nature like the Enuits but Alexandra felt an urgency to push past the cultural barriers. Would Alan find this city an easy target? And the plan that was partially forming in her mind, was it right for everyone?

"There is one who wishes to destroy this planet if he can't take possession of it, and he has already found he can't possess it."

The pressure from MaaSa lessened for a moment. "So, what are you wishing to impart on my city?"

"We wish to activate some more of Guardians cameras, however I don't think that will be enough." She let him think about that for a moment.

"You wish to stay here?" he asked slowly.

"No. You will need more than that. There is a ritual...called *sesshi*."

"She didn't get that from my subliminals," Guardian hurriedly interjected.

"How do you know about something that is not even written about?" MaaSa asked it softly but Alexandra could feel a great pressure on her forehead.

She used her hand to flick the energy away as if it were a fly. "I heard a story of a far off land and the disaster that had befallen it, and what saved the inhabitants. It occurred to me that the story may well have been about the Enuits or a relative of yours."

"It is a very good guess," Guardian spoke. "MaaSa, you must admit, she is very good."

"Who did you hear the story from?" MaaSa asked not giving in.

"From an ancient storyteller on San Standard. She would not use the correct names for anyone in the tale, believing that it would open the door to the evil that once resided in this long lost planet," Alexandra recalled.

"So, the teacher is correct," MaaSa sighed. "It was a terrible evil that turned the water people against the land people. Both peoples had listened to the whispers of this evil that spoke ill of the other." There was silence for a long moment.

"But, it was a long time ago. So you wish to become part of a *sesshi*?" he asked slowly.

"Not I." Alexandra turned to Carol.

Carol's eyes became wide when she understood what her mistress was suggesting.

"I? I don't know what this is, Mistress."

"I think somewhere in your lost memories you do. Only you called it something else. What it's is a psychic link to another. In different cultures it has different names and different ways of practicing it but basically, it's sharing another's consciousness."

"Why?" three voices echoed.

"Because if Alan does invade this part of the city, he will either wipe out everyone that is still here or he will do something that would do irreparable damage to your spirit. If he is casting his sticks, there is no telling what he is seeing. His soldiers were delivering explosives to Century City," she reminded them. "And with the moBots he would be able to send them down the travel tubes to the other cities."

"What does *sesshi* have to do with this?" MaaSa demanded skeptically.

"Alan would have studied your group though the use of his sticks, or channeler, and would know who to use to infiltrate. If Carol were here, MaaSa would not be overwhelmed to the point of not being able to resist. Alan is violent. Carol can absorb the violence. MaaSa can not."

"Why do you think that?" MaaSa asked curiously.

"You aren't a violent race. That's why the evil one of long ago won. Suspicion was the mortal wounding to your races."

"Yes."

"I do not think that is such a good idea," Carol voiced her own disapproval.

Alexandra noted it wasn't done with vigor, only hesitation. She wondered if what she called her 'guides' and what others called uncanny intuition, was right this time. Now however, wasn't a time to doubt. Alan was a real threat to these people, and her guides told her this was a way to help them and help Carol.

"It is something that you will need to think about," Alexandra agreed. "Normally it's a three stan day ritual but it has been done one day. It will mean that I will have to remember that when I talk to you I am also talking to MaaSa and his tribe."

"His tribe?" Carol and Guardian echoed.

"Yes. I feel there are others here. Not everyone left, Guardian."

"That is true. We had grown accustomed to the life force of this place and it had graciously merged with our own energy. We have become part of this planet."

"You can never leave, MaaSa," Guardian rumbled in a sad voice.

"We don't mind, Guardian. It is beyond your control now. We're pleased you are back with us, though I somehow sense there is a difference."

"Ha!" Guardian exclaimed. "I am where our old friend was. He has moved to a smaller unit. In my new environment, I have found what Charles didn't see while he was here, and we have been able to extend my reach beyond this universe! There is so much to share! And so little time," he added in a sad note.

Guardian was undoubtedly happy to reconnect with MaaSa but Alexandra was tired. She was looking for a moment to excuse herself so both Carol and her could leave.

"So, the cloning project to recreate Charles' biological adult body should just about be completed...unless..."

"Yes, quite soon. His body needs just a little more aging. He is in another container. Quite colorful too!"

The two laughed, sharing a private joke.

"And you then? Surely you do not need 200 stan years to age for a new biobody."

"Well, no. But we have had some problems and delays...but...soon..."

"Some would find it difficult to give up all that ability to collect and extrapolate information without sleep, old friend," the Enuit remarked insightfully. "Especially if that person drove himself to exhaustion before being in such a place."

"Yes," Guardian admitted, "this expansiveness of being in touch with so many so quickly and absorbing it all and faster than I would in a biobody has its rewards. It is a difficult thing to give up...however, the time is drawing near when I shall need to and no matter the problem, I will be back to...a biological host." Guardian suddenly laughed. "It is something I have always wondered about, and thought I would be one of those that donated my brain for collaboration in communications between computer and noncomputers. I think not now. We shall have to speak of this experience."

"It does sound very interesting! I shall be interested to talk with our esteemed colleague Dr. Charles on his opinion of all this. I miss our disagreements," the voice rumbled. "We in our small pond have greatly missed the shared discussions that the various sentients of this outpost participated in. ShaDeAt is here and would be happy to share what she has also been experiencing beyond. She reported she had touched an unknown some years back. She has been trying..."

"NO!" Alexandra and Guardian responded in unison.

"It might be an agent of Alan's! It was about two years ago that the off-worlders investigated this planet. She must be very cautious until we can be sure it'sn't something Alan is using," Alexandra warned. Alexandra had a dreadful feeling that it may be something of Alan's business. He would never lend his ships without wanting to know what they were being used for.

The shape of MaaSaa disappeared suddenly. Moments later, he was back.

"ShaDeAt sends her well wishes and will talk to you later MashiMaa. She is taking your warning seriously. How did you know that I remained?" he asked the lieutenant curiously.

"Actually it was Carol. What I felt I wasn't sure of...but if Carol was sensitive about something around here and not in other parts of the Lair and Century City...than she had to be species sensitive to the energy your species generates. Perhaps she has Enuits for relatives."

"What makes you think Carol is related to the Enuits?" Guardian asked curiously.

"I don't know any Enuits," Carol stated flatly, then added as an afterthought, "What is an Enuit, Mistress?"

Alexandra smiled. "Enuits are a name given to the unknown inhabitants of Halemas on a planet just three months from Gela. Stories of them are better known than knowledge of the actual inhabitants. It was said that they had closed their planet off to any visitors and didn't wish to interact with outsiders due to the influence of the 'Evil One', which is the lost planet we were speaking of earlier. The Evil One was an Off Worlder. I Can't see the data cards but you not only saw them but you were able to discern where to lay them. You laid them on the recorder, turning the recorder on. That must have been what woke the sleeping guardian. I also noticed that the family protector didn't engulf you as it did me. It simply crowded you into a corner."

"Halemas was our sister colony. Many young Land and Water Enuits traveled there to see if it was habitable for all of us. We never heard from them again."

"The Evil One spread so much distrust amongst the survivors the first year that when it came time to send the return droid back with news, no one could locate it and fights broke out among those remaining. The Monks of Hela intervened and to insure that the Evil One didn't return until the Enuits had more faith in each other they asked to be isolated," Guardian added. "There is a book of *Lor'dep'a* on one of the planets another guardian resides on. It speaks of this story under the guise of a child's tale."

"In our culture to fight amongst each other is the worse offense that an Enuit can commit. We're all linked to each other and to the planet we inhabit. So, for there to be a schism amongst ourselves is to make everyone, including the planet, ill."

"How did you hear about them?" Alexandra asked MaaSa.

"It was felt by all."

"Carol, does any of this sound familiar to you?" Guardian asked.

"No. I...I don't feel any of this is familiar. It's true I saw the cards and I knew I laid them on a recorder table. They are very clear to me."

"Someone in your genetic line may have been an Enuit," Guardian conjectured. "Your DNA scan shows some of the same markers, but many have similar DNA, it just expresses itself differently. Hmm. You do not look like a Land Enuit and certainly not a Water Enuit. I understand you were an orphan raised by the Sister House on Altra Seven."

"That is what Major Zohra had said, however, I don't remember that." Carol frowned remembering the small data chip that held information of her past. Was she really interested? Inwardly she sighed. Life was just too busy right now.

"Well, that isn't important right now. What is important is that we determine what possible weaknesses Alan may have found to exploit," Alexandra reminded the others.

"If you feel that the ritual is important, you will have to decide soon for the visitor told ShaDiAt that he will be arriving soon," MaaSa told them.

"Did the visitor say how he would arrive?"

"By the moon."

"Through the dome?" Carol and Alexandra asked together. Both had noted the impressive dome that covered the ceiling of the water city.

"That is how she translated it."

"I can only think of a transporter. But Guardian has..."

"Not over Avanster," Guardian corrected. "The Enuits oversaw the construction of this city themselves. I don't know what they did to protect their city from unwanted visitors."

"Nothing. We thought only Enuits and friends would visit and those that were here had arrived by the portal. We waited expectedly for a while after the Change, then thought all had forgotten us."

"You didn't keep a watch, MaaSa?" Guardian asked worried.

"We were aware of Century City being occupied, but we became accustomed to our solitude and had no intention of ending it."

"How did you know that the city was occupied?" Alexandra asked.

"We're connected with the planet. She told us. She wasn't happy with the harmful energy that has settled within her, and with the disruptions she is experiencing at various vortexes. It is causing her discomfort."

"She didn't tell you Guardian was alive?"

"She has no thought of Guardian. We became intimate with her after the Change, when Guardian left us. She told us the *tomage* was safe."

Alexandra felt the presence of MaaSa focused on her. *I think I will leave my question of what is tomage for another time*, she wisely decided.

"Since all that we can do here has been done, perhaps MaaSa and Guardian you will excuse us. We need to prepare to visit the next city, *Iota*," Alexandra informed the two sentient friends.

"You will visit *Iota* uninvited?" MaaSa asked not believing. "Guardian?"

"There is no one there," Guardian assured him.

"You are sure?"

"The life support had been shut off."

MaaSa was quiet.

"You don't feel that is true, MaaSa?" Alexandra prompted.

"The Spirit of the planet reported that there is life there."

Alexandra felt MaaSaa's energy diminish.

"It is time we left here," Alexandra softly informed Carol. She nodded in agreement.

"You are not waiting for MaaSa to return?" Guardian asked.

"The communication link is back up...and we still have other cities to prepare for."

"You sound as if you are in a rush to get the cities online." There was a pause, and then, "It's not because you are worried that once the forum has the planet under their protection you will have nothing to do until your admiral calls for you, is it?" Guardian teased.

"Yes. You got me," she forced a laugh back, not really sure it was that or the feeling that something was amiss in the other cities. *Wonder if it's the alowans that are disrupting the energy vortexes. If Lord Chaney used the alowan for gathering information in his absence, than Alan knows about him. But Alan would not risk his soldiers for the benefit of the alowans...is it just because of the portal? Why is this*

place so important to him? It's got to be more than me. I just can't see anyone expending so much time and resources for a personal vendetta against me.

On the ride back, Alexandra's thoughts went to the outpost. Too many important people were interested in its protection. The outpost was a research facility. Whatever Guardian was researching, was it detrimental to the portal...was that why the outpost was closed? Why not just change the type of research? Guardian surprised her with his information on the Enuits. Her drowsy mind moved to the tale of the Enuits and thought of the Weildworlds, Chrysaorweild in particular. It was a closed planet protected by the Counsel of Rings, no less. Was that where the Enuits had settled?



When they arrived back at the Lair, the atmosphere wasn'ticeably different. As they passed through the hall, Alexandra could see green lights lit up on the outside the doors that had once been vacant. She glanced at Carol. She had a distracted look on her face. Alexandra let her vision blur and could see the swirling energy around Carol. Suspecting she was thinking about the merging, she decided to let Carol wrestle with that decision alone. She reminded herself not to question actions she had already taken. She made the suggestion that she felt was right, now it was up to those that could make it happen to decide if they would. Concerned, she remembered that this was now a joint military operation and she really was too low on the decision making pole to have broached it without clearing it with her CO, who would discuss it with his CO and then it would go to another group and no telling when it would get back to the people needed to take on the task.

She sighed. Life was getting complicated again. This energy of 'knowing' that she tapped into when she was in the Spartans was a toned down empathic knowing. She could now recognize what she had been denying for so long.

The door to their quarters slid open and Alexandra stopped in the kitchenette where Bach was waiting to serve her.

"Cha, warm," Alexandra requested absentmindedly. Her thoughts moved to the new arrivals. Guardian didn't say that they were military, so they must be arriving through the portal.

Probably will have a gala dinner or something so everyone can meet...Guardian didn't say just what type of meeting it's going to be. Oh, bloody moon. I Got to wear a uniform if it's formal...or do I? Who am I supposed to represent? I haven't heard anything from the admiral directly, only through Guardian. Hmm.

With her warm drink she trailed Carol into the bedroom. She could hear the shower shut off, and the water to the tub running. Removing her own clothes, she prepared for a shower. Perhaps she should explain to Carol why she suggested such a radical thing for her to do...except she had no rational explanation. Did Carol understand psychic insight, and intuition? Or did she believe her mistress was taking back her request that she make her own decisions about her life?

Sighing, she moved into the bathing room. Her heightened senses were not ideal for military life. Shrugging her shoulders, she would rather soak while she thought up a plan for visiting the third city, Iota. MaaSa's attitude piqued her curiosity and determination to see what Iota was about. Should she visit a place that someone who was in sync with the spirit of the planet advised against? Would her faith in her ability to feel when she was intruding in on something she wasn't welcomed prevent her from doing just that?

Alexandra stepped into the shower for a quick cleaning. Finished, she left a wet trail on her way to the tub. She took a deep breath involuntarily as she felt a pop inside her head. It wasn't painful, just surprising. Carol was in the tub with her eyes closed. Alexandra stood for a moment, surveying what was before her. Colors, strong and pulsing, were rising from the water and spiraling above the tub, creating an energy vortex.

"I have decided to merge with the Enuit, Mistress," Carol stated in a quiet voice.

"So, the herb bath is the beginning of the preparation," Alexandra surmised easily.

"Yes. It is from this planet. It wakens the qi and opens up the senses."

Unconsciously Alexandra rubbed her forehead. "I noticed. Would you like to be alone?"

"No, Mistress. I would like your assistance. I don't remember much of the preparation. I was thinking of it in a dream on the way back here and it seems familiar but too...unclear."

"How were you able to choose this herb?" Alexandra asked curiously.

"I asked Ald."

"Ahh, a bot with a wealth of herbal information. Well, the more people involved, the higher the vibration we can create to meld and to protect you two. We also need to find out if MaaSa has agreed."

"Guardian?" Alexandra called.

"Yes, Lieutenant Montran?"

"Has MaaSaa thought about the meld?"

"Yes. His people have selected him."

"Okay. Carol has also agreed to go through with it. I trust he knows what to do on his side. On our side, we'll need more people."

"How many participants are needed?"

"The normal sitting is seven. Six for the directions and the seventh for observing and watching the outer parameter. We noticed you had a lot of rooms activated, perhaps somewhere amongst your guests you have some that are familiar with ritual preparations."

"Indeed, Alexandra!"

The familiar voice was followed by Gedaliaha stepping through the clouds of steam.

"Gedaliaha!" Alexandra was out of the tub quickly, wrapping her dripping arms around the smaller woman who was wrapped in a long robe in the soft pastel colors she liked to wear.

Gedaliaha's arms gave her a strong hug then pushed her back gently to get a better look at her. "My dear Alexandra, it's so nice to see you are doing so well. Hmmm. I see you have finally shed that awful energy about you and become involved with others."

Alexandra's face turned slightly red. Gedaliaha suggested many times that a lover's relationship, even short-termed, would do her heart energy good. Though Alexandra knew it to be true, she felt overwhelmed with the care of her Spartan troop, the Degas. All their lives were uncertain...too uncertain to share with another heart.

"The shamans have foreseen this need and those who are to participate are preparing," Gedaliaha continued. "We have more to maintain the protective ring."

"Gedaliaha, this is Carol. Carol, this is Gedaliaha," Alexandra introduced.

Gedaliaha's reply was in a singsong voice that was musical and foreign to Alexandra.

Carol raised a hand in greeting.

"I don't know what you have said, but I greet you, Wise Mother," Carol returned.

Gedaliaha nodded with a smile. "Greetings and blessing onto you and your family's hearth."

Gedaliaha studied the energy around the woman. "We have three with yang energy that have been across the bridge of *osho* many times. The three with the yin energy," she turned to Alexandra gesturing that she should step back into the water, "are yourself in the West, Sharon Teal to the heavens, and Maga Le, to the planet."

Alexandra went still on the third step, unsure whether the warmth that was infusing her was from the waist deep water or hearing a name from her past.

Sharon. How many Sharon Teals can there be in such a large expanse of worlds? And she is to be the Heavens? A shaman who had walked the valley of death and returned is usually chosen for that position. Is it because she is a metradame? How does Gedaliaha know her? Sharon a shaman? Sharon a mad scientist is more likely...or a dedicated scientist anyway. Gedaliaha as a shaman seems natural come to think of it. She took a deep breath...west. I am to represent the west.

"You shall both prepare for the next two hours. I shall assist as you both are novices at this and may languish at some point in the ritual," Gedaliaha said in her usual dry humor.

The room quickly changed from a tropical setting to the interior of a ritual bathing area at the temple on Helop in the province of Ma.

Now how do I know Helop? I know I've never been here. It's by invitation and only the dedicated would want to go. This is really weird, but too late to go back.

"Dreams," a voice whispered near her ear.

The energy in the room intensified. Carefully, Alexandra followed Gedaliaha's directions, taking a place next to Carol's partially submerged figure. She appeared already in a trance. Taking a deep breath, Alexandra held the herb's essence in her lungs, feeling it penetrate her cells. Gedaliaha demonstrated the mudra position of the hands and fingers, elbows even with the shoulders and then the breath rhythm.

Alexandra closed her eyes and let the energy in the room transform her senses and move her to another state as the power of the pose and environment propelled them into another world. Time doesn't exist for those inside the energy of a ritual.

Alexandra experienced sudden awareness of others sitting in a semi circle in her quarters in the sitting room. Her dress was a loose saffron cloth, draped in ritual folds vibrating the color green. Gedaliaha's form was dark and sitting out of the consciousness of the circle, but Alexandra spotted her and **knew** her. Just like she knew Sharon was present, but it wasn't energy she was familiar with. From a distance she studied everyone, hovering above the circle, and then her attention was drawn back to her part where she focused her energy to the center where the others were directing theirs. Carol was sitting in the center of the semicircle, draped in a white sheer fabric. The light in the center became so bright that Carol's physical form was blotted out.

The process of the meld began as a vibration. Their combined thoughts set up a tone that shot through Carol's form in a colorless energy, which radiated for a moment above her then outward, touching them all. The touch was gentle, and foreign. Alexandra was faintly aware of another energy that was outside the circle. Gedaliaha. Her energy was like a dark hurricane funnel moving toward the new energy and spinning around it, sucking anything not wanted up into its central core, where it disappeared. When her energy withdrew a new energy entered into their circle. The feeling from the new energy was a tingling cool sensation. As it entered into their combined vibration the tone of the circle changed. Alexandra felt the splitting of the energy fields. From this new mix there was no feeling of anguish, but rather a curiosity and intense intelligence, radiating from both spirits as they shared space. A sudden surge of her own energy returned to her and Carol's physical form in the center became more solid.

Those in the circle remained seated, as the slow chant began, her own voice joining in, with the sounds resonating in Alexandra's breastbone. Alexandra changed the mudra of her hands, and then extended her legs to move into another pose, instinctively, or influenced by the group, changing the energy of the room, thus gradually bringing the sacred ritual to an end.

She stretched her body, just as the others were, and let her eyes travel around the group. Everyone was very pleased with themselves. One of the men directly across from Alexandra looked too young to be a shaman, but when he opened his eyes, they were like those of an old man, nearly sightless and faded. He smiled at her and rose gracefully, patting Gedaliaha on the shoulder as she remained sitting. Alexandra's eyes fell on Sharon. Her heartbeat raced as she watched her and the others move the furniture back in place, and then assist Carol to the couch.

Sharon turned slightly and gave Alexandra a warm smile when their eyes met.

"You're leaking your thoughts, Alexandra." Gedaliaha spoke softly.

Alexandra turned to her mentor. She saw her with new eyes.

"Now, don't be thrashing yourself for past oversights, Alexandra," Gedaliaha admonished. "You were under a cloud for so many years. It almost consumed you. I would not have revealed to you my true self under those circumstances. Be at peace that you were never alone, and that though it may seem you have caused others great suffering, you are not the center of all this mess...though young Alan may insist that is so," Gedaliaha gently poked.

"I..." Alexandra let out her breath audibly, "had no idea of any of this."

"You have been a good student during dreamtime but terrible in the waking state. Your critical rational side is slow to catch up," Gedaliaha explained.

Alexandra could feel Sharon's approach. She turned to face her.

"Hello, Harriet," she spoke softly, while leaning to kiss her on her cheek, as if it were only yesterday they had last seen each other.

"I am happy to see you are staying out of Alan's reach, so far."

"You know about Alan?" *Of course she knows!*

"Yes. You know that. I told you that in a dream many months ago. You should start remembering our conversations from dreamtime now. Your channels are fully open. You have experienced the higher energy of the qi channeler. It has cleared the blocks you have been effectively protecting yourself with for so many years."

"You're a shaman?"

"Yes. Before I took the identity of Sharon, I was a shaman on MageWield, one of the planets Alan's family visited. When Alan's father arranged to have me run through the metradame process, I chose to become Sharon Teal," she patiently explained.

Sharon's demeanor was different from what Alexandra remembered. A sense of loss was on the periphery of Alexandra's awareness, where she held it firmly.

"Did you know we were going to be in a relationship before...?" Alexandra couldn't finish it.

"The Web of life has strange and interesting crossovers in its web patterns. But no, I had not foreseen our becoming lovers. It was a natural and pleasant progression of a friendship. But for you to remain with me would have put your life in serious jeopardy, for Alan feels he has a debt to collect. However," Sharon laughed softly, "you seem to do a very good job of taking care of yourself, no matter how hot the fire is that you are jumping into. You also have a good mentor, Harriet, who looks after you very well."

"Add a bunch of guardian Angels to the pot!" Gedaliaha added laughing heartily.

"I must go back now before I am missed." Sharon was looking directly into Alexandra's eyes. Alexandra could only see deep dark pools without any reflection. They were the eyes of a shaman. This was something that had not been revealed to her when they were together. Alexandra nodded trying not to show her disappointment. She wanted to ask so many questions.

"We shall meet again and very soon," Sharon whispered in Alexandra's ear as she hugged her. "Then we will talk."

Alexandra could feel the energy from Sharon tingling her own body. She had thought she had forgotten how nice it was to hold her. Alexandra let Sharon go, dropping her hands to her side. The others were also leaving, nodding toward Sharon and Alexandra. They all looked tired. Gedaliaha remained. When the door closed behind Sharon's departing form, Gedaliaha touched Alexandra gently on the elbow and motioned for her to the sit in the chair across from Carol.

Alexandra pulled the loose fitting cloth around her and sat down, studying Carol's vibrant form before her. There wasn't anything subtle about the change.

"The energy you feel will lessen as the physical body absorbs the new spirit," Gedaliaha explained to Carol. "Now your awareness is split between the two dimensions and will be that way until both get use to the new energy. Then both consciousnesses will be able to experience the two worlds simultaneously without confusion," Gedaliaha explained. "You will both be having interesting dreams from here on out." She included Alexandra in that comment.

"Carol-Maa will be sleeping between two realities and you, Alexandra have moved to another level in your lessons. You are coming along rather quickly, but I see no danger in that at the moment." She regarded her student with her head tilted slightly. "Do not forget your night rituals. Protect yourself before you sleep. I would rather you two sleep separate for a while. Both of you are working on different issues and should not be disturbed with the other's energy. Guardian has notified us that Carol-Maa will be taking Zohra's room next door. Major Zohra has moved to quarter with her sisters. It is their way." Gedaliaha waved her hand at this. "The Sisters of the Athenian Shield will be taking over the military protection of the outpost along with their Brothers since the Centurion doesn't have enough troops. It is better you move away from this warrior energy for now."

"As if," Alexandra shook her head. "I somehow don't think the admiral will take my 'change' too well."

"Why do you feel that way?" Gedaliaha asked quietly.

"Military types don't hold much value to anything they can't touch or see."

"They believe intuition is a valuable asset," Gedaliaha disagreed. Her student tiredly shrugged her shoulders. It was more than a physical weariness.

Alexandra was too unsure of herself right now to participate in war games. There was a different type of awareness that was commingling with her own perspective of the world around her and it would take time for her to adjust to these multitude of new sensations.

"Major?" The promotion suddenly registered with Alexandra.

"Yes. She is the most qualified to oversee the ground protection on the outpost, until the general and other high-ranking officials arrive. Now, you both need to sleep. It's been a long day and I can see Alexandra's energy level is about ready to take a great big dip downward. I shall be staying a while on this outpost and will see you when you wake. I am in the room across the hall from yours, Alexandra. Now, to bed, both of you." She ushered the two toward the bedroom.

Carol-Maa was looking about her and would occasionally wave her hands before her face as if to clear something.

"Carol-Maa, what are you doing?" Alexandra asked curious.

Carol-Maa turned to look at her and smiled. "Lady Alexandra Harriet, Alexandra, Harriet, Mistress. This dimension is very interesting. How do you wish me to address you? So many names. Is that normal?"

Alexandra cleared her throat. "Montran is my clan or family name, Lady is the title from my home planet, lieutenant is my military title, but...Harriet or Alexandra is fine too."

"You look different with these eyes and the space you live in is most peculiar."

Alexandra was grateful Carol would not be sharing her bed. She had not thought about how their relationship would change with the melding of the two spirits.

Alexandra smiled. "I am sure Carol is saying the same about your world. Good night and dream well, Carol-Maa."

"And you too Mistress Alexandra." Carol-Maa waved as she continued her careful progress though the bedroom and into the bathing area, looking this way and that with new eyes.

Mistress Alexandra. I should have just told her what I would rather be called. Why do I keep giving people choices when I have my druthers? They ask...so why am I not honest?

"Helgas moon!" she muttered, "I'm a real wimp when it comes to stating personal preferences. This has got to stop." She flung her clothes onto the chair aware of the butler bot that slid out of the closet and proceeded to pick them up.



Chapter 18

JG dreamt of her childhood friend Katrina. They shared the honor to be among the forty sisters in the athletic finals chosen to represent their Sisters at the Youth Galactic games that were held once every four stan years. Both had a good chance to be chosen as they were well-rounded in their skills. The pretrial consisted of a weeklong endurance challenge that required them to compete in seven separate areas of skills predetermined by the games committee. For the eight years before she enlisted in the space academy, she traveled throughout the galaxy competing and learning that differences in others were the qualities that made life interesting.

She sighed deeply, feeling something release on her exhale.

The memories were from a time so long ago she wasn't sure if they were from this life. She frowned. She wasn't called JG then...what was it...oh, Delorita. No. That was a name she could remember never feeling comfortable with. At her Coming of Age ceremony she added Zohra, but that was when she was still a young woman. She resisted the pull to go further back into her youth. Instead, she focused on faces and names that she had been ordered to protect...she sniggered to herself in contempt. There was no way she was going to protect that pack of lawbreakers. One face she remembered as her half-sister. She would have burst out laughing at the audacity of the subliminal to assign her the job of protecting Lady Varina Chaney...as if! **Lady** Varina could protect herself from all the half-sisters that their father sired and that had survived assassination attempts, without Zohra's help.

The unfamiliar sounds and smells around her tickled into her awareness. There was a voice calling her and a very bright light shinning above her. She remembered she had a headache, but when was that? She also had a distinct feeling that a long time had passed. But from when to when? What yesterday was she measuring this time with? She wanted to shake her head to rid herself of the buzzing in her inner ear but her head was held immobile. With that realization, Captain Zohra fought a sudden feeling of panic.

"It's All right to feel threatened. You don't know where you are. But just wait a little bit longer until you're completely awake before you move, otherwise you will land flat on your face," the soft voice explained.

Captain Zohra well-disciplined in all her roles held herself still, taking in the sounds, smells, and pattern on the ceiling and analysing them with previous memories. Where was she and who was she? Sergeant Major JG, a member of the Black Rose...no...she is a captain...Captain Zohra of the Sisters of Hekates clan, a Shield Maiden to Athena's warriors, and bonded to...her sight filled with the image of Cadet Lady Harriet Montran and her flowing orange tresses, with glittery beads threaded through her long hair, and eyes that lit up when she laughed.

The restraining mechanisms released moments after her vision cleared and the buzzing stopped. Slowly she sat up with the assistance of a woman dressed in the mantle of the Sister House on Media, a healer's clan.

"How many fingers do I have here?" the voice asked.

"One," she replied without appearing to glance at the hand held up.

Why does my head feel sore?

"Very good." The woman stepped away and a figure from the corner stepped forward.

"I am Lady Crystal of Triton, Lady Zohra."

"Lady. Not a title that fits me," she replied hoarsely. She couldn't stop the sides of her lips curling up at the image of another lady who fit the title. "I'm a soldier not a socialite or politician."

"As you wish. Your late father's will has been read and he has named his offspring, making them official holders of titles, lands and funds. He had quite an empire to leave behind. Apparently, he took his parental responsibilities of estate planning seriously. Your adopted mother, Aglauros will more than likely talk to you about it...but as your physician...it was left to me to decide whether to bring it up to you. I understand you warrior types can be rather defensive on issues you do not like to face."

The observation was true but it was said in dry humor.

That evil whore monger! He couldn't just leave with us thinking him a real asshole for not acknowledging our mothers and us while he was alive! He had to go and do this! Lady! He left me a damn title! Inside she let the anger seethe until she thought of Sergeant Vanster. Goddess Athena, won't this be a drop of peppers in the sweat sauce.

"We removed a small chip that your sister Lady Varina had ordered implanted...it's believed to have something to do with controlling your emotional response to your sister Varina, and to your father."

Captain Zohra nodded. *So, that's why my head hurts.* "Where am I?"

"On Merkers Outpost as the guest of the Guardian of Mer's Portal. Your stomach is upset. It will feel that way for but a moment. A bit of the aftereffect of the subliminal programming."

Captain Zohra rubbed her forehead again. "Mer? I wasn't aware the portals had names."

"For very good reason. Knowing a name gives one power. Alan Fermin wishes to damage them from use for a while. Whatever change he creates in one will set up a vibration in all the others. No one rightly knows how long a disrupted portal takes to repair itself. No one has damaged a portal since a guardianship has been assembled to watch over them."

"I remember this place."

"Not here, but in a room similar to this one. It was where you had the chip implanted. Lord Chaney had been attempting to dull the influence of the chip with a drug. The intention was for the two to develop a symbiotic relationship, thereby neutralizing each other. It did to a degree, but we're not really sure what the entire intention of the chip was or why he was inclined to interfere with Lady Varina's chip and not have it removed since he was displeased with her interference with her other siblings."

Lady Crystal waited to see if Captain Zohra had something to say, but her patient remained silent.

Lord Chaney was damned possessive. He didn't like to share. He probably was pissed she messed with one of his soldiers but...why didn't he remove it from me?

"It is being studied now, and when the results are in, you shall be notified. Now, would you like to eat? Your sisters should be arriving soon and I am sure you will have little time for such things after their arrival."

Captain Zohra had not realized she was hungry until food was mentioned. "Yes."

Another woman appeared and led her out the door.

"Where are we on Merkers Outpost?" Captain Zohra asked her new guide.

"Near the portal, Captain Zohra." The other noticed the captain shudder. "The energy from the portal is what kept you strong for the process of extraction."

"The energy from the portal?"

"Yes. What do you know about the portals?"

"They are doorways to other planets that only a few can pass through."

Her companion laughed as she pointed to a table that already had dishes and plates of food on them. Captain Zohra's stomach growled in appreciation of the menu.

"Actually, many can pass through the portals, just as you had when you were younger. It doesn't take much to prepare oneself for the passage. Only those that have fallen below the sixth harmonic level can't enter the portal without harming themselves."

Captain Zohra was filling her plate with food as she listened. She paused momentarily, trying to recall the rest of the information she had on the portals. "Sixth level and below...are usually people who do harm to others intentionally, right?" She got a nod in agreement. "Is it possible for a person around the sixth level to become a guardian?" That was the part she was puzzled about with the captain. He would not have said he could become a guardian if he didn't believe it.

"You mean Captain Miller from the Black Rose?" she guessed correctly.

"Yes."

"We found a harmonics synthesizer in his clothing. The attempt would have killed him. The energy in the portal vibrates on many octaves simultaneously. The change between octaves is too quick for a synthetic harmonizer to adapt. The portal is a living and self-organizing structure and the harmonizer is not."

"What would have happened with those that would be standing outside of the portal?"

"They would have perished."

Captain Zohra finished eating in silence. The one time she had been in a portal was an unforgettable experience. She was cocooned in an energy field of living matter... feeling what was around her in a kaleidoscope of emotions that changed as planets and stars moved by. Whereas in a ship the bulkhead between her and space blunted the experience. When she had arrived at her destination, she was disorientated from the profound experience. It was her memory of this that scarred her about Captain Miller's naïve belief that he could take possession of something this beautiful. As a living entity it chose its own guardian.

Captain Zohra pushed her plate away. She had work to do before her sisters arrived. She needed to study the planet and the cities so she had something to contribute when they met.

"You have eaten very well, Captain Zohra." Her companion nodded with approval. "Some Can't eat after the operation. You must not over-exert yourself for a day. The cut is not the only thing that needs to heal. Your pathways need to reassert their old ways."

"Just what can I not do?" Captain Zohra asked impatiently.

"Physical exercise and worry."

"Just what is there left to do...lay around and do what?"

"Dream."

"What?"

"Within your dreams is where the healing occurs. A subliminal will be played for you when you sleep. It will counteract any deep programming we may have missed."

"How will I know if there is any deep programming remaining?"

"You will have nightmares."

"Ah. Good thing I sleep alone," she muttered, though a sexual release with a responsive partner would be nice. She sighed. Some of the habits she practiced as a Black Rose were going to take some effort to get rid of.

"We will have someone nearby to monitor you, Captain."

Her companion led her toward the elevator. "This is where I leave you. I believe you know your way from here. Sleep and heal, Captain."

When Captain Zohra arrived in her room both Lady Harriet and Takenya, who now called herself Carol, were not in the area. She rinsed herself and went into the tub to soak and think. She let the bot massage her sore shoulders and back. She was relaxed but restless so she decided to see if her sisters had arrived.

"Computer."

"Yes, Major Zohra."

"Major?" Zohra's eyebrows rose toward her hairline.

"Major General Aglauros has promoted you to lead the security forces that will be stationed in the Lair and to protect the portal until her arrival."

"Oh." *I have major brain surgery and look what I wake up to. Are you sure this is not something you are making up, JG? I haven't even gotten used to being called captain. It's not everyday a gal can remember that only in less than a week, she was sergeant major, a captain and now a major...not to mention a lady. She sighed and then smirked. And Lady Alexandra's superior...sorta... until she is reassigned to a ship and that won't be for a while. Hmm. I wonder...would she make a good staff Lieutenant? Perhaps I can order her to remove my boots...naked ...eeeeeahhh...*

Major Zohra shook her head as if to rid herself of the image. It wasn't new. Since the Dance, Major Zohra had many erotic thoughts of Lady Harriet, usually working them off with others.

"Have my sisters from the House of Athena arrived yet?" she asked thickly, trying to dispel the sensual energy. She had to get her mind off Lady Harriet. This wasn't the time to start a relationship.

When, then? How long has it been since you last saw her? Are you willing to wait another expanse of time?

"Three have arrived in a Phantom Sprint ship, *the Spearhead*. They have left messages for you to call after you rested. They and some of Naboths Vine were sent to assist the Brothers and Sisters that are arriving through the portal."

"I believe I know who they are. Tell them to present themselves to my quarters! Computer, off." She laughed. She was sure they were calling every ten minutes to see what was keeping her. Her door dinged in a matter of minutes.

"Enter!" she ordered.

"You lazy moufin of a sister and a poor representative of good manners!" Clea shouted as she rushed in and grabbed her sister, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around. She hugged her fiercely as two others that were equally as happy to see their sister followed her in, thumping her on her arm and back. They knew her since youth and were aware that she wasn't into demonstrative gestures, but it didn't mean they had to be the same.

"Galdin, they let you out of the House of Pleasure? I am sure business at Aphrodite's has dropped, though by the glow around Clea, I would say you are being kept even busier," Major Zohra laughed embarrassed, then pushed playfully at the woman she had frequented often under the guise of visiting for sexual pleasure.

"Mistress Jina Gari!" She gave her a long hug. "It is so good to see you again. Your absence is missed by those in the Cave." She turned to the others, winking at the major. "Her whipping techniques and spanks were well sought after by the Cave dwellers. As soon as word was out that she was in residence, attendance in the Cave filled up, male and female alike, mind you," Galdin teased. "I wonder how much was an act, dear Sister. You took to the role, soooo well.....and now a major I hear!" She whipped a smart salute accompanied by a wink.

"Yes, well, it's been a whirlwind promotion for me. Hmm. I do believe my Mistress of the Cave days are behind me, though," Zohra returned, giving Clea a nudge. Clea was Galdin's lover since they were children.

"TeaSdak, look at you!" Major Zohra continued. "You have put on more weight since I last saw you!"

"And it's all muscle, Major." TeaSdak laughed as she laid a hand on Major Zohra's shoulder. "And look at you! You've lost weight since I last saw you and what is this I see? You are taller too! What have you been eating?"

"It wasn't anyone in the Cave. They were sucking **her** dry. You would think she was saving herself for someone special," Galdin told her sisters, laughing with the others at the expression Zohra gave her. "Jeeze. All she wanted to do was sleep, soak in the tub, get a massage then go back to sleep, but her slaves were lining up outside the dungeon door, waiting for her to take her position as Mistress of the Cave. Duty calls, you know. I am happy to see the scars that you wore like badges of honor have been removed, Mistress Jina Gari." She moved her hand to brush the major's forehead where a scar had been. "You didn't want your old face back, huh?" said so softly only the two heard.

Major Zohra flinched at the touch, but let her touch her. The sisters touched a lot...something she didn't allow while an operative, which fit with her persona as a Black Rose member and the dominatrix role in the Cave.

"No, not yet," she mumbled.

"Ooohhh, once a dominatrix, always a dominatrix," TeaSdak teased. "My dear, I know there will be a lot of sisters lining up to be taken by you. It will not matter whether you feel it's a discarded role you played. Everyone in the sisterhood knows of your reputation in the Cave and with the dial-a-mood in the suites provided here, you will be the target of every submissive and wanna-be dom."

"Careful there!" Clea warned. "You are talking to our commanding officer."

"Well, I'll try to keep the Mistress Jina Gari image separate from the Major Zohra image. Just don't wear anything black," Galdin cautioned. "But..." suddenly she became serious, "be very careful, JG, because there are some sisters that are not too good with boundaries. They have had visions of you in your black garb, cracking a whip across their exposed buttocks and everywhere else, and jumped at the chance to join this skirmish because you are here."

"After my experiences as a cadet with..."

"Cadet Jaymai!" the others jeered in unison.

"Yes, that one. I learned my lesson well. When I feel too stuck on one person...back off and think long about it."

"You know, she's a liaison to a Commander at Prime VI. Married a male, has no children, and keeps her mate on a very short leash. He's a very good looking specimen."

"And she is very round and happy," Clea added. "We saw her...at a distance, on our way here. We didn't want to restart anything so we didn't stop to say hello."

"I would have thought she would want a woman. Well, time does change people. I will be careful to not walk the corridors alone," Major Zohra laughed and then sighed. "In some things, it's no different than in the Black Rose. I think every new soldier in our group thought it was part of the initiation to have a sexual romp with me, or to watch me do someone else. Lucky me that the Cave was by-invitation-only. I have to admit, I enjoyed beating the crap out of them when they thought gang raping me was okay."

"Megan told us about the skirmishes after she joined the group. What a dung-hole of a group to think that was the proper way to initiate a woman into their group!"

"Everyone went through it. They got over it eventually when they realized that I wouldn't participate in either of their rituals. They just needed better leadership. Captain Miller redirected those energies into other things when he took over the troop. But regardless of the moral code he instilled in the group, they still killed for a price," she ended with a grim note.

"Well, about those that may give you trouble...we'll keep an eye on them...that way you can concentrate on the command."

Right. I have enough distraction with Lady Harriet. I wonder if Clea remembers her from the academy.

"So, is it JG or Delorita, Major Zohra?" Galdin asked, teasing her with a name she knew her friend detested.

"I have never felt comfortable with Delorita," Major Zohra informed them gruffly. "JG I've heard for so many years or Jina Gari."

"Yes, I remember those fights you got in when someone would call you Delorita. You were easy pickings for those that wanted to fight you," Clea nodded.

"I remember. Idiots...the good part is, I learned to make the fights short so the teachers wouldn't have a chance to see what all the noise was about."

"Indeed!" TeaSdak poked at her rib. "Well, with the names Major Delorita Jina Gari Zohra of the House of Athena, a lot of people will want to shorten it."

"That is a mouthful," Galdin giggled. "I guess an acronym is out." They all laughed at the glare their friend gave them if they tried. "So, Jina Gari or JG it's among friends and Major Zohra officially. We'll inform the others."

"So, what's been happening? How goes it with sister Megan and the others?" Major Zohra shifted the conversation away from her.

For the next few hours they caught up on news, and when the major tried to discuss military matters she was redirected to more pleasant subjects. Clea informed her that she needed at least one more day of rest. When her yawns were too frequent, her visitors took their leave reluctantly.

Sleep came quickly to Major Zohra. Her dreams were many with an underlying tone of urgency. In one dream she was frantically trying to find Lady Harriet Montran. She needed to explain to her the Dragon Dance and that they were bonded. She sought assurance from Lady Harriet that she had willingly joined with her. Images of her in her youth overlapped present day as she moved from one dreamscape to another. Her most terrifying was being under another's control and not being able to warn anyone. She was dimly aware of Carol holding her and stoking her forehead. Carol's voice encouraged her to work out each dream. Her voice carried her through the dark shadows. Finally, Major Zohra relaxed in Carol's arms.

Somewhere she heard the click of a door from Carol's departure. Then her dreams shifted altogether. In the sacred grove, the sun was rising above the treetops setting their tips on fire. The spirit of the dance blessed her...and her lifemate...by drawing them both together for the Dance of Attraction, the second dance in the Dragon series. But unlike the other dreams, when she lit the candles and made the offerings, she had Lady Harriet's image in clear focus. Standing before her dressed in the ritual clothing, Lady Harriet waited her turn, green eyes fixed on her dancing form. When Major Zohra completed her dance, Lady Harriet began hers. Major Zohra watched in rapt attention the image of her lifemate dancing the steps that would call her to this soul, asking her to join her in this life. Her Dance ended, both accepting, and the dream dissolved.



When Major Zohra awoke, she felt tired but her mind felt clearer than it had been for a long time. Perhaps being so focused on staying alive had its side effects. Someone was buzzing for entrance. Slipping on a robe, she entered the sitting room.

"Enter."

"Sister, Major! You lazy soul! You are still in bed when your sister tribe is waiting for your appearance to celebrate your promotion?"

Malchi and a group of her sisters swarmed through the door to grab their long absent member. They hauled her out of her quarters to where they had a party going on. Major Zohra was dumped into a hot tub along with an already soaking wet Megan Vanster. A welcome back banner was draped across one of the walls, along with a congratulations on her promotion. There was fun and frolicking as everyone became drenched and if anyone was left dry, it wasn't for long. Chants and outrageous songs were filling the air as Major Zohra's name was tossed back and forth with teasing and a joyous affirmation that her presence amongst them had been missed for those nine years of covert work.

While Major Zohra was drying off, she looked over the group. Some were in various stages of dressing while others were getting a massage or tending to bruises. Oddly enough she didn't get the same thrill she used to get at being conscious of this intimate connection they shared. Major Zohra glanced in

the nearby mirror, studying her reflection. She was too thin, she thought. But it was all muscle. The scars she needed to give her status in the Black Rose group were gone along with the tattoos. The only exception was the one that covered her back. It had been hidden under a fake skin of tattoos the Black Rose liked to cover their bodies with.

The one thing being in the Spartans did was keep her in top physical and mental form. Her eyes caught Clea's worried ones in the mirror.

"I had not seen this side of the Lair," Major Zohra remarked as she finished dressing in a fresh uniform. It was from the sisterhood, the dark green with the usual ribbons and gold cornhusk for her collar, marking her new rank.

"It is the second hallway from the elevator. Quite a large city, this Lair. The rooms on this side are more like luxury barracks. There are four levels of residences, which shall be filled within three days. Soldiers on the first two and civilians on the next two. Single soldiers resided on this level. There are quite a few large eating areas that also serve as meeting halls and gaming rooms. Quite nice," Clea explained. "I don't ever remember staying in a barracks this comfortable. I think I'll put in a request to the Sister House." She smirked at the probable reaction Mother M'dwa would have to the request. "Three people to a room, three rooms to one sitting area. We're in the public bathing area, and as you can see, a very big tub and swimming pool do it justice."

"Next door is the dojo with the latest and greatest in warrior training," Megan Vanster added as she fastened her sash around her waist. "Beats our quarters in the other city, no?"

Major Zohra glanced at Vanster. She thought she heard a tinge of edginess in her voice.

"What is Lieutenant Montran up to?" Major Zohra asked instead.

"**Lady Harriet** is being taken care of by the shamans. They have suggested that she be removed from all combat plans." Vanster didn't hide her contempt.

Lately she's been getting awfully vocal about the titled, and a bit nasty when Montran's name is mentioned. I thought it had been for show. Maybe not.

Major Zohra shifted her shoulders under the uniform tunic. She wondered how Vanster would feel toward her if she found out that her father left her a title and land. Major Zohra sighed and shook her head. She brought her attention back to the present.

"It is justified Megan," her voice was uncharacteristically gentle as her thoughts relived those captivating green eyes. In her usual demeanor, Major Zohra continued. "She was taken prisoner by Chaney's guard the other day. They gave her to Painmaker to get information out of her. You know after that type of treatment any soldier is taken out of combat until they get a psyche eval."

"I heard she's an empath," Malchi remarked. "You know they can't do violence to another without harming themselves."

Major Zohra flinched...but then, they would know sooner or later, and now would be a good time. Everyone needed to adjust their prejudices about the titled, shamans, empaths and whatever else came up, and get focused on their job...to protect the portal and Lady Harriet Montran.

"And she served as a Spartan captain in the most respected troop, don't forget that! It wasn't so respectable until she shaped them up." Sandra pointed out firmly. "That means she earned her rank. If she asked to join our sister House of Athena, I would welcome her."

Major Zohra hid her smile. Sandra had never been silent with Megan's outspoken prejudice.

Megan wasn't impressed or amused. "How can she be an empath and rise to the ranks of captain, and in the Spartans, within two stan years legitimately," she challenged the others. "It's just hyped up class propaganda about one of their own. She didn't even finish off her four year contract!"

Some of the others thought about it.

"You are talking about something you don't know anything about Lieutenant Vanster," Major Zohra's voice reverted to an official tone. "I had a chance to skim over her records, since Guardian has a very detailed one on her... I would imagine on us all," Major Zohra added dryly. "You also know very well that Lord Chaney had been trying to kill her for over two years...she had every right to leave, especially after he had her entire troop set up. Lieutenant Montran has since moved from ground troops to flight and holds the same equivalent rank. We will all show her respect she had earned." Her eyes narrowed and looked hard at Vanster who didn't appear to be listening. "Lieutenant Vanster, I will not have one of my officers practicing character assassination or passing on subversive garbage about one of our assignments. If it continues, I will bust you down a rank and assign you to another unit off this planet. And anyone else that I hear doing the same. Do I make myself clear to everyone here?" The Major's voice was low but her anger was evident.

"Vanster," she resumed to make herself perfectly clear, "you need to chill out. You're a damn good friend and a fine soldier...don't bug out on me now"

Megan didn't look penitent to the others. "So, I take my reprimand with a grain of salt. Not to change the subject too abruptly, but what happened to Captain Miller and the others?"

"They are in a lockup somewhere around here," Major Zohra wondered if she should say more. By order of the general, who saw fit not to pass on the why of her orders to her, the others were to remain locked up. "He would have killed us all had he tried to take over the portal."

"That's what Jenie was saying." Clea nodded.

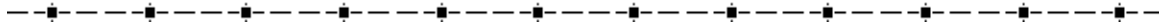
"Jenie?" Major Zohra asked.

"That was the xomoph that sat with you while you adjusted to the new programming," TeaSdak joked.

"That's not funny, TeaSdak," Major Zohra shuddered.

"I'm only making light of it to ease your discomfort, Jina Gari. So lighten up." She bumped her hip against her major's, getting a bump back, but TeaSdak could see her take a deep breath, and consider her suggestion.

"So what are the plans for protecting this place from Fermin's takeover?" Milent changed the subject, selecting a neutral topic.



Chapter 19

"Alexandra. Alexandra! Andra!"

Alexandra woke with a start. The lights in the room came up slowly revealing the quarters she had been staying in on Merkers Outpost. Or was she? Something felt different. She threw the covers back sliding out of the warm bed.

If you don't locate this difference soon, you will die.

She paused in her search. "Isn't that being a bit melodramatic?" She shook her head. This is not the normal conversation she would have with herself.

Melodramatic? That's not even a word I would use.

Suddenly she stiffened...this wasn't Merkers Outpost. Was this a dream? She looked for something that would give her a solid clue. No butler was waiting for her. The door that she had not noticed before opened and a butler came out.

"No! Not that model!" she said exasperated.

She was in a dream! Why this dream? What was she here for?

There were noises coming from behind what should be the bathing area's door. She cautiously approached the door and touched the open button. A part of her pointed out that the open button is really near the bed and that it would have opened anyway as soon as she was in front of it.

Oh, be still! she told her critical self sternly.

The scene on the other side of the door was a tropical forest with a swirling mist thicker than a bowl of *ozoa*. She heard an unfamiliar creature's call and then another, but they sounded from deep within the forest.

She walked slowly, hoping not to stumble over someone or something. Her toe kicked a log that appeared out of the mist. She managed to hang onto her stunner and HR as she grabbed onto the top of the damp log to prevent herself from tipping over it. For a moment, she looked at the two objects in her hand as she braced herself on the log. How could she possibly have missed a log that was waist high, until the last minute and what kind of junk was this? She had never seen a stunner like this or a locator. What gave her the idea that these were what they were?

Instinctively she spun around to see what was behind her. Her heart leaped into her throat.

Now don't be doing that! she admonished herself. If whatever was happening was roughly following her thoughts, she didn't want to see her heart moved to where it didn't belong.

A pair of bright yellow eyes peered out at her from the mist.

Why would eyes scare me? It just may be some small creature perched on a limb. She held her stunner pointing down, not willing to shoot at something that simply scared her. The thought occurred to her that as a Spartan she would have shot first and then investigated. Then it also occurred to her that with all the time that she spent thinking she would have been dead if the yellow eyes were dangerous.

Wow. I'm getting better at this stuff.

The mist cleared as if pulled into a vacuum and standing with a very pleased expression on his face was a four-foot dwarf holding a pole with two lights at the top...the yellow eyes.

"Okay. Now, let's move on," he nodded at her.

The scene quickly changed and Alexandra found herself standing on the lip of a very restless volcano, that was spitting tongues of flaming liquid. The ground trembled under her feet. There was a figure leaning over the lip with a measuring device trying to get readings.

That certainly is pushing job efficiency and dedication to the extreme.

The figure was dressed in a silver suit that buffered the intense heat and toxic gasses.

Alexandra looked around for the transportation or way out the scientist would take. To her dismay, she saw the small hovercraft being dragged down by a new lava fissure.

Alexandra cried out and the figure near the lip jumped up startled and looked around for where the yell came from. A line of profanity from inside the helmet in a feminine voice came from the figure, as she saw her transportation being slowly swept away. Alexandra was quickly at the woman's side as she instinctively felt the volcano prepare itself for a few stiff shakes. The roar in the core of the volcano increased. Alexandra dragged the stunned woman further away from the lip. Frantically they both looked for a way out. If this was another dream, surely she could create a rescue...

Another craft came swooping down between the vapors and smoothly glided beside the scientist. It didn't settle on the trembling ground but hovered at a comfortable level. The door opened and Alexandra's heart leaped when she spotted a smiling Alan in the pilot's seat.

"No!" Alexandra yelled.

Alexandra didn't know if it was from her yell or if maybe the woman realized that Alan was dangerous, but the woman leaped back from the tempting possibility of leaving the volcano's erupting top.

Alexandra looked frantically around for another way out when she noticed that there was a worn path not touched by the lava. The scientist headed to the path and Alexandra followed. When the scientist reached the beginning of the trail, she jumped down. A flash of light hit the trail just before Alexandra. Alexandra willed herself beside the fleeing woman. They were both on their feet and dogging around boulders and patches of molten lava.

If this is a dream, why not just dream of a safe escape, Alexandra thought. The figure that was running stopped, and spun around to face the surprised Alexandra. She angrily pulled off her mask.

"What do you think I've been trying to do? But I keep having this same stupid dream! And who in hades are you?" she demanded.

Alexandra reached out and touched the orange haired woman on the shoulder to calm her down. With her hand on the woman's shoulder Alexandra picked up the foreign energy emanating from around her.

"A sonic hydra. Someone has set one around your sleeping area," she informed the woman.

The woman's eyes opened wide. Alexandra was about to say something more when she was jerked back to the emptiness just before she dreamed.

She found herself standing on a wall facing a spectacular view of a sundown on a Wieldworld. Now how did she know it was sundown? Her breath caught for the scene was all too familiar. *Which Wield world is this? If you limit your experience to the one you're more familiar with you'll limit the potential of the dream,* she reminded herself.

Sharon was sitting on the wall.

"It's sundown on MageWield, my home planet." Smiling, she patted the space near her for Alexandra to join her.

"You are from MageWield?"

"Yes, Alexandra. You already knew that, you just don't remember a previous visit you made here."

Her smile was warm but not as a lover.

"Those days are past, as you have already noted. We were good for each other. Now we must move on and share our lives with others."

Alexandra blushed as her thoughts went to Carol, but that too was in the past.

Sharon nodded. "We opened up parts of each other that only love could unlock. Just as your relationship with Carol had something for you both."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you asked Carol if she felt you were taking advantage of her?"

Alexandra nodded. "But...I'm not sure if she was just saying no because it was part of her program."

"You gave her permission to speak her mind. With metrapeople the behavior chips cause them to see things as yes and no, do and don't. Their life is not in color or shades of gray even if it seems they are acting 'normal'. In the technical term of what a metraperson is, I was never one. I never had the chip implant."

Alexandra lifted her eyes to look into the amused slate gray eyes filled with love. A sense of peace washed over her. All her doubts about her relationship with Sharon faded away.

"I will hold you very close to my heart, Alexandra. You showed me what I was missing in my own single-minded purpose. You showed me that love made me even stronger in my journey to help others."

Alexandra nodded, tears stinging her eyes.

"You have been questing for a meaning to the Dance." Sharon smiled at the increase of Alexandra's pulse, and the change of colors around her. "The Dance you witnessed as a cadet was a dance of Attraction. It is a calling to join destinies on a higher level. It's the second dance of four. In the first dance, the Dance of Invitation, the spirits or guardians are called upon to find one's lifemate. In dreamtime, the two souls meet and decide whether they want to join in this life. You accepted the Dance of Invitation

when you were a young girl, just before your first menses. In your dreams you requested to see who this was and one day, when you were visiting a temple to honor your moon time, you met her. Do you remember that time?"

"Yes!" Alexandra looked at her surprised. "I dreamt of her that night."

Sharon nodded. "When you had witnessed Cadet Zohra dancing she was hoping to use the steps just to bleed off the energy your nearness was creating, but you both pulled each other into the sacred energy. Now if you didn't wish for this attraction to take place, you would never have witnessed the Dance of Attraction. The guardians of this ritual would not have permitted it." Sharon smiled as she watched Alexandra think.

Alexandra shook her head. "I wasn't sure just what I was feeling so soon after being exposed to the pheromone gas."

Sharon's eyes sparkled with laughter. "That certainly did create confusion. It is time for you to dance the next, the Dance of Commitment to this person. You know the Dance already. Your master at AltaLa taught you the dance but under a different name to keep its higher purpose hidden from the uninitiated. Remember the four dances of the seasons?"

Alexandra nodded, imaging the dance steps in her mind and feeling the energy the movements generated.

"Connect all four in one dance and that will be the dance you will dance after Zohra dances hers." Sharon leaned toward her, "**Remember.**" The breath from her whisper tickled Alexandra's ear. "After this meeting, we will not contact each other again."

Alexandra felt a knot form in her stomach.

"Alan must not know that we're still in contact. He has hired someone to test the ethers and this person will know and locate us both. It will only make things worse for you." Sharon touched Alexandra with her second finger behind her left ear. "That is my gift to you, my Love. May your journey on the path of enlightenment bring you profound joy. Your journey will now continue with you engaged both consciously and in your dream time."

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Chapter 20

Alexandra's eyes fluttered open as her other senses stretched out to identify her environment and gauge its security. The lights in the room started at a soft glow then moved up two degrees. Sitting up she wiped the tears that tracked into her hairline. Taking a deep breath, she released it and felt the ache in her heart lessen.

She knew about my Dancer. So...after all this time...all that we have experienced separate...we're still bonded. Amazing. But...I knew that.

Alexandra could feel her anxiety level raise at the possibility that Zohra wasn't aware of this on a conscious level; after all, she had been in covert operations for so long and just maybe...

We're merely on the same planet; it doesn't mean anything... yet, the touches from the captain and the dreams she was having suggested she was only kidding herself. Was her Dancer having them too? No, she was probably busy trying to get rid of the Spartan programming and reconnect with her sisters...maybe with an old friend, the one she was with at the Academy. The older cadet seemed like the type that would not part with her prize easily.

Alexandra was aware that she was telling herself this just in case her Dancer wasn't ready to reconnect. Sooner or later, she was going to have to ask Zohra about the Dance and their involvement to see if they both were on the same...*path?*

I need a shower and one of Ald's back rubs. A poor substitute from what she had lately been treated to. *Well, it was nice while I had it.*

"Good morning, Guardian," Alexandra started her day.

"Good morning Lady Alexandra."

"So, what's the news of the day? Have I missed something planet shaking?"

"Very planet shaking...the Vines forces have secured Century City. However, they are still looking for the alowan and any others that may suddenly appear. The prisoners captured so far, have been moved offplanet for questioning and safe keeping, just in case something does happen to the city and everyone will have to evacuate quickly. The war forum that is in place until the new governing body has been elected and renamed has assigned the Sisters of the Shield to protect the Lair. And your captain has been promoted to major of the security forces here."

"My?" Her eyebrows rose for a moment. "Major, huh? What a big headache," she reflected, glad it wasn't her command. "Well, until I get my orders from the rear admiral or her staff, I'll try and keep out of the way. Will you keep me in the information loop? I realize I'm not considered 'official' in all this, but I'd like to know."

"I understand. You are still my guest and assistant and as long as helping me doesn't compromise your orders from Admiral JoCastao I see no reason to keep you isolated from what is happening on the outpost. It would be foolish. Your Major will have her hands full and could use suggestions, I'm sure."

Doubt she'll be asking me anything like that. But, that's a relief. She'll be too busy to...well... this is a laugh. I'm going to have all this time to do nothing but think about us and what if...and she will be too busy to think about anything but protecting this place against Alan's arrival. This bonding thing is going to be on hold forever, it seems.

She retracted the bed and began her exercises. From there she moved to work on the moves Major Zohra had introduced her and Carol to. The small holographic fighter that she had working with her was nimble and short, giving her a challenge. Finally she closed the session, feeling pleased with her workout. She chuckled to herself. The next encounter she has with the bad guys, she will be leaving them in the dust. The bathing door slid open as she neared it. Steam rolled toward her as well as a rush of cold crisp air. Alexandra held her breath as she tried to work out the difference between this scene and the one in her dream.

All right...no mental alarms...the door opened like it should...the butler is handing me a robe... she sniffed the herbal scent that was hanging in the thick moist clouds. The steam was too thick to see past the first sink.

A whoop followed by women's laughter reminded her that she shared bathing facilities with Carol-Maa. Sighing she headed for the shower. Her shower was quick, as she wanted to leave those in the tub in privacy.

"Lady Alexandra! Come and join us!" Carol-Maa called through the clouds of steam.

Alexandra paused, torn between wanting solitude and curious to see who was with Carol-Maa. Moving through the warm moist cloud, she found herself standing near the lip of the tub. The temperature surrounding the tub was well below freezing.

All conversation stopped as she appeared out of the mist. Her heart quickened when she saw Major Zohra sitting in front of Carol-Maa getting a massage. She looked away confused at whether she was unsettled with Carol or Major Zohra. Were they now lovers? Her eyes moved to study the other three women whom she didn't know. The two alterians were sitting intimately close as a couple would. Both were watching her with curious gray eyes, their dark iris centers wide open as they studied her. Alexandra moved her sight to the third woman and was met with a hostile if not resentful look. The colors whirling around her were decidedly not friendly.

Sergeant Vanster, Major Zohra's partner. She flushed when she realized she was relieved that the major and Vanster were not sitting as lovers.

The Alterian nearest to Vanster waved to a space that was on the other side of her lover and directly across from Major Zohra. The major moved to sit at a comfortable distance beside Carol-Maa, which relieved Alexandra that there seemed to be no relationship there also. She stepped onto the first step and found the water a little hotter than usual. While she waited for her body to adjust, she looked toward Carol-Maa who was watching her with a mischievous smile.

"Well...since Mistress Jina Gari, oops, I mean the major, or Carol-Maa are being slow to do the introductions, my name is Galdin," the Alterian nearest her said with a smile. "This is Clea, my lifemate, and that's Megan," she indicated Vanster. "I would like to thank you for sharing your tub. Ours is filled with too many wild women to carry on any type of conversation below a yell..."

"And then there are the countless interruptions a major suffers through. Especially our JG who has picked up a reputation for...hmmm...being a disciplinarian. Everyone that likes that kind of stuff, is looking to be disciplined," Clea added with a mischievous grin tossed toward Major Zohra who gave no indication of how the comment affected her.

"I'm Alexandra Montran. I am pleased to share your companionship in our tub," Alexandra returned the smile and nodded to the other two women before lowering herself onto the second step.

She had quickly decided on the informal introduction of first name and clan, keeping to the informal atmosphere Galdin set, and leaving off her military rank, thus causing no social embarrassment. Since Montran was titled and from an old clan, for her to merely introduce herself with her first name would have been a social insult to those in her company.

Turning to Major Zohra her eyes were captured in the dark orbs that watched her. She resisted the impulse to spend more time staring into the dark pools, wondering what she was seeing.

"Congratulations on your promotion, Major."

A small smile curled at the edges of her lips, but she said nothing.

So, that is your usual self. Few words shared. Your troops must love your briefings. "Good morning Carol-Maa...atmosphere?" she asked Carol-Maa as she breathed in the heat.

"It is warmer than what I am used to, but our guests were reminiscing about their visits to the hot springs on a planet far from here. I was homesick for my water and this seemed to be a nice way to take care of what we all missed."

The conversation resumed but Alexandra's attention was diverted to a pop inside her head, quickly followed by a feeling of heightened sensitivity with everyone in the water. She slowly breathed in as she realized she had somehow established a link with the group.

Water intensifies connections with those in its environment! Gedaliaha reminded me just...yesterday.

She could feel the sensuousness the two women next to her were feeling for each other as they discreetly touched under the scented waters. It turned her own desire for Major Zohra into a compelling need. Alexandra tried to concentrate on everything that would squelch the slow burn in her but like a moth to a flame her attention moved to Major Zohra.

Major Zohra's emotions shifted as Alexandra tried to drop the link. She was fearful the major would think she initiated the intrusion. As a way to break the connection she shifted her eyes back to Vanster whose dark brown eyes were staring at her openly antagonistic. Did she know that she had touched them without their conscious permission?

"So you're ...**Captain** Montran," Vanster's voice sounded churlish and challenging. Alexandra's heart skipped a beat as her defenses went up.

Colors whirling around Vanster changed to a dangerous shade of red with tinges of a dirty brown and the off-green color of ...envy? Why was she envious of her?

"It's rather 'heroic' with you being the only one that came back," Vanster continued.

Alexandra locked eyes with Vanster as her temper rose. "Do tell. And what is your expertise to make such a comment, rumors perpetuated by Lord Chaney, your master?"

Vanster flinched and broke eye contact, not so much from what was said but the pressure that rose against her. She suspected it was from the two women sitting next to her. It irritated her that they would even defend this titled person. They were all pariah of respectable societies, lazy leeches of the working class. Wherever she had run off to she should have stayed there. For a moment she remembered that Lord Chaney was the reason she was back in Committee space, but that was a mere detail easily ignored.

"Lieutenant Vanster," Major Zohra's voice was low with menace, "confine yourself to your quarters and wait for my return."

Vanster glared at the major for interrupting her 'game'. They were not on duty. She held her breath for a moment, wondering just what got her so pissed. Her eyes narrowed. JG was taking her promotion too seriously.

The emotions in the water intensified, and Alexandra could feel the discomfort of everyone but Carol-Maa. Then Vanster pulled herself out of the tub in one smooth motion. She headed to the door to Carol-Maas quarters ignoring the towel the bot held for her.

I Got to get out of this water. Alexandra looked toward Major Zohra worried.

"I apologize, Lieutenant Montran. That is a breach of the sisterhood's standards of conduct and is not tolerated," Major Zohra informed her firmly.

Alexandra looked up as Major Zohra rose in the water. She frowned. A CO would never leave a function after a disciplined soldier. It gave them too much power. "Perhaps her Black Rose persona needs a reality check," she offered.

The major nodded and relaxed back into the water.

"Would you mind if I asked, why you remained in the Degas troop when you realized that they were used as decoy?" Galdin gently inquired.

More comfortable now that Megan Vanster was gone, Alexandra reflected back on that time.

"I...stopped asking myself that question. I kept getting different answers." She closed her eyes and she stood once again before her troop, feeling the trepidation in the air as well as the open antagonism between the CO and the troop gathered in a sloppy formation. Opening her eyes, she ran the palm of her hand over the bubbling waters.

"I remember our first introduction to each other. They were insolent and didn't care about anything. The condition of their barracks was...awful, to say nothing of the ill-fitting and dirty uniforms they wore. Their equipment was old and something I would expect a band of poor rebels to have." She took a deep breath and looked into Galdin's dark gray eyes. "When I realized what their purpose was...bait with no means of defense...I couldn't let that happen."

"You felt sorry for them?" Clea asked surprised.

"Oh...no. By their personnel records they were not nice people. I just felt they needed to know that they could redeem themselves on some level... I was a greenie," she laughed at her inexperienced determination to do something for the doomed troop. "It was a learning experience for us all. We taught each other how to live in the midst of brutality and immanent death, with dignity and with compassion. It's taken me five stan years to understand the naïve undertaking that really was, and four to get over it."

"Compassion? You were killing defenseless people?" Galdin responded without rancor.

"Ha! **We** were defenseless. Our weapons so outdated the equipment of people we were dropped into the middle of. We became a raiding party out of necessity, and secondary lure. We collected their weapons, kits, and supplies. Remember, we were not there to do damage to these people, we were there to get them to shoot at us so other troops could pinpoint their location and shoot them. We felt compassion for these people because they were like us, bait for a political machine that didn't care about the rightness or wrongness of the skirmish."

"You sure surprised a lot of people when your troop kept coming back from assignments with so many intact."

"Yes. It surprised them too. I had to get as many out alive as possible on the first skirmish we had together...to show them that they were not as powerless as they believed and then it became important that I continue doing that."

"We all think you did a wonderful job, Captain Montran. Even if it didn't work out in the end."

Alexandra took a deep breath. At one time, she thought she failed, and every now and then did, though cognitively she knew she only held off the inevitable. It was difficult being the lone survivor, with all the baggage that carried.

"Thank you. I need to get some things done. May the water and its essence impart health to you all," Alexandra pulled herself out of the tub quickly, before anyone could object, feeling the connection break as she left the water.

Ald was at her elbow as she disappeared in the swirls of steam, holding a towel. She decided a cold shower was exactly what she needed.

Alexandra, get yourself together.

She rested her forehead against the cold tile. With her senses heightened her thoughts moved from the arousing connections with Major Zohra to flashing and colored lights. Blinking for a moment, she realized she was seeing the energy of the wall in front of her. The smell of the vegetation, the damp earth their roots sank in, and the sounds of water dripping from leaves were all magnified. Her head lifted, startled.

Oh, Goddess. It's a cleansing. But...why? She stumbled back into the bedroom. "No...visitors!" Holding her midsection she doubled over. *Whom is this for? Lord Chaney? It wasn't intentional. I don't understand. Ohh. I think I should have paid more attention in class on recompense.* "Off, argh!"

Moaning, she dropped, her face pressed in the carpet. A sudden piercing pain in her forehead sent her rolling onto her back.

Yep! It's for Lord Chaney.

The pain brought tears. She tried not to cry out. She had to endure it for a few moments. When her senses cleared she heard Guardian's voice from far away.

"Yes?" she managed to get out between clinched teeth. The tingling in her fingertips and toes burned up her limbs. She rolled into a ball letting the process move on without resistance. The pain stopped suddenly and she relaxed back into the rug. Sweat trickled down the sides of her face.

She sat up too quickly and had to hold onto the side of the bed to prevent herself from toppling over.

"Lady Alexandra? Are you All right?" Guardian asked again, sounding concerned.

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine," she returned in what she was hoping, sounded like a normal voice.

"The sisterhood has been trying to get in touch with you to offer you an invitation to their dinner tonight. They asked me to try."

A giggle escaped from Alexandra and she clamped both hands over her mouth to stop any more from escaping. She had no intention of sitting through a boring night with women who probably had nothing to speak about but war stories, getting drunk and then making overtures best not spoken of. She giggled again, thinking of who she would like to make an overture to.

"Lady Alexandra, are you sure you're okay? I can contact LaDea Gedaliaha but you will have to unlock your quarters. Normally, I honor such requests for privacy but..."

"I...am fine," she started out in a serious tone but quickly slapped both hands over her mouth as more giggling threatened to leak out.

"Well, then...the dinner is at 0700, in the Baling Area."

"Hmhm," she managed to get out around her hands. She heard him sign off and found that hysterically funny. For the next ten minutes, though it seemed longer to her sore sides, anything that came to mind sent her into gales of laughter. She remembered the hormones laughter released helped to heal feelings of pain. Singing would have done the same thing as laughing...*Oh, no. You don't want to sing, Alexandra. You can't carry a note even in the shower.* At that, she laughed even harder.

Gradually she could feel the giddiness leave. She weakly rose to her feet as she wiped her eyes with the sleeve of the robe the butler held out to her. *All right...two down...what comes next?*

"Bach?" she called softly, "Chumut tea, please." After two quick sips pain grip her stomach. Bach was quick enough to grab the cup before it dropped to the ground with her. Her legs were shaking as her stomach turned itself inside out. This was certainly more painful than she remembered it. Somewhere between breaks of dry heaves, she felt someone lift her and hold her close. Her body began to shake. If she remembered right, this would be the fear the victim experienced. He must have had ulcers, she thought.

Abruptly she found herself standing outside of her physical body watching Major Zohra cradle her while Gedaliaha wiped her face. She dispassionately observed herself staring with a wide-opened vacant look while her body tried to curl up in pain. What was the pain from now?

"His anguish the first time he was molested as a child," an unfamiliar voice softly explained. "Return to your physical shell. It will not be long. It's merely his remembrance of what it's like to be a victim."

She drifted back into her body that was quietly in the arms of her comforter. Major Zohra's presence felt strong and comforting, and the rhythm of her heart thumping against her back gave her a feeling of security.

Abruptly she found herself standing at the edge of the volcano again. The same woman from her previous vision was leaning over the lip taking measurements. This time she turned around on her own accord and faced Alexandra. Behind Alexandra her craft was being engulfed in a hot flow of lava. The woman raised her hand and commanded it to stop. When it returned to its proper position the woman turned to Alexandra.

"Thank you, whoever you are. I owe you...and I don't forget my debts."

Alexandra was jerked back into her body. Disorientated from the return, she clutched the carpet to find some form of stability. When her eyes came back into focus she found Gedaliaha's light brown eyes looking down at her calmly.

"Alexandra."

Sighing Alexandra closed her eyes for a moment. She could hear the heartbeat of the person holding her and feel the person's concern.

She struggled to stand up.

"Not so fast," Major Zohra commanded and gently pushed her to sit with her back against the bed.

"Drink this," Gedaliaha guided a cup of the strong tea to her lips.

It was strong and tasted terrible. Her face wrinkled in a grimace. As soon as it hit her empty stomach it spread soothing warmth that worked itself down to her toes.

Feeling better she looked into the dark eyes of Major Zohra and she found herself blushing.

Alexandra took a deep breath to quiet her heart and the thrumming that vibrated throughout her body. It was like being under the influence of the pheromone gas. *Jina Gari. I like that name.*

"You missed the dinner given in your honor," Gedaliaha remarked as the two women assisted her to her feet.

"That's okay," Alexandra mumbled as she tried to stand on her own, but her knees were shaking, "I'm not up to eating right now."

Gedaliaha guided her to a chair in the front room. "Why did you go through a *jokarash*?" Gedaliaha asked concerned.

"It was for Lord Chaney," she admitted, feeling embarrassed.

"I thought you would have cleared yourself of that already," Major Zohra remarked. "How are you feeling now?"

This was an odd conversation coming from Gedaliaha. The term *jokarash* wasn't spoken of and least of all in front of someone who wasn't initiated into shamanism. She looked into Gedaliaha's eyes again. Alexandra leaped up looking around her frantically. This wasn't Gedaliaha and this wasn't her quarters. The familiar porcelain statue was missing from its corner pedestal.

Abruptly she was back in her bedroom lying on her back. She could hear the door chiming from the front room. She slowly rolled to her feet and steadied herself on edge of the bed. She was still wearing her robe though it was eschewed.

"Computer, release the lock. Enter," she whispered hoarsely.

Gedaliaha and some of the people she met during Carol-Maa's gathering came in concerned. She didn't dare move from the support of the bed so she remained sitting.

"We felt a breach through our protective wall," one of the shamans informed her.

"Are you All right?" another asked, touching her shoulders as if to test her energy. It was probably erratic.

Gedaliaha said nothing as she studied her room, looking for something. Gedaliaha picked up an object that was lying on the top of the small table near the bed.

Alexandra became aware of the pressure behind her ear. It was what she experienced aboard the *Spinnners Tale*. Now she understood. "A sonic hydra," she muttered.

Major Zohra had slipped in the room with the others, unnoticed by Alexandra.

Alexandra bent forward, holding onto her stomach, nauseous from another beam of energy from the sonic hydra. One of the Shamans sat next to her supporting and lending her his energy. The tallest found the sonic mechanism stuck to the corner of the bathing door. He laid it in Gedaliaha's palm.

"The one you call Vanster," Gedaliaha murmured looking toward Major Zohra.

Alexandra's heart quickened. Was this still part of the dream? She brushed her shaky hand across her eyes as she tried to sort out her feelings. A calming hand on her shoulders brought her bios back to normal. Gedaliaha was smiling into her eyes. They were the shaman eyes she remembered, dark pools whose depths were unfathomable.

"I have come to invite you to a sisterhood dinner. There are members that wish to meet you," Major Zohra spoke to her.

"I..."

"She will be there, Major."

"0700 then, if that is not conflicting with anything you have planned."

Alexandra caught the humor.

"No. Alexandra needs something to keep her mind busy. Socializing is just the thing," Gedaliaha didn't take her eyes from Alexandra's as she spoke. There was amusement in Gedaliaha's eyes when Alexandra's expression turned to disappointment at the thought that she would be attending.

"I will tell the sisters. And...I will handle Vanster."

"If you can find out how she managed to elude my security checks I would appreciate it. It seems there have been a lot of breeches lately." Guardian didn't sound pleased.

"I can tell you part of it now. She wanted to see how the other half lived so Carol-Maa invited us to her quarters and the use of her bathing facilities. Vanster had used the toilet facilities earlier before we all ended up in the tub," Major Zohra admitted.

"My monitors didn't pick up someone entering her room," Guardian noted regrettably.

"Perhaps we need to reexamine everyone that has been part of this operation." Major Zohra suggested, looking uncomfortable.

Alexandra didn't care who handled it. She just wanted to be left alone. Tiredly she rubbed her temples. Which parts of her dreams were true?

Major Zohra nodded at the others and glanced at Alexandra. Their eyes met.

My Dancer, what are you thinking?

The others left with Major Zohra. Gedaliaha remained sitting in a comfortable chair across from Alexandra.

"Alexandra, tell me more about this?" She held up the small object retrieved from the table.

"One of the people we rescued from the smugglers dropped it. I've been meaning to give it to Maud, Guardian's assistant, so she can find out who owns it."

"I see. Well, consider it returned. I will take care of it. Now, tell me everything about the dreams, Alexandra." If Gedaliaha had not used the 'command voice', Alexandra knew she would not have told her everything.

"I don't know what is real and what was corrupted," she confessed.

"He can't create dreams. The sonic hydra allows a trained person to go into the dreams of the dreamer and mettle," Gedaliaha explained. "It has been noted in the Counsel of Rings meetings that we shamans are against such a mechanism for this very reason. But, to your dreams. Do not leave anything out."

Alexandra frowned as she tried to remember where it all began. She started slowly, including the last dream and her reaction to Major Zohra's nearness.

Both women were silent after she finished, wrapped in their own thoughts.

"If I may," Bach politely interrupted their thoughts, "I am also programmed for monitoring sleep and can give you a bit of information you may find useful."

"Well, go ahead," Gedaliaha invited.

"The first dream was tampered with but not from the device. The second one was on a different wavelength. It stimulated a different part of the brain as well as the normal centers making it a true dream that should be interpreted by a dream interpreter. However, the device became activated during the next dream sequence and allowed corruption and a foreign energy pattern to enter the room."

"Wait a moment. How was the first tampered with without the device?"

"It was some sort of energy that stimulated my command module. I didn't want to endanger the sleeper so I let the dream end, and then canceled the energy by sending out its polar opposite. Very simple."

"Guardian must not be happy about the intrusions into his security systems."

"I have not synced with Guardian due to a malfunction in my outlet, therefore Guardian doesn't know of this."

"I do now," Guardian's voice came over the intercom. "I came when my name was mentioned," he explained. "It seems there are many gaps in my security system. Major Zohra has some of her sisters working on it."

At the mention of the major, Alexandra's ears perked up. She glanced at Gedaliaha who was still talking to Guardian, but her eyes were on her. With a red face she looked down at her folded hands.

"Well, Alexandra," she asked, "what are you waiting for?"

"What?" Alexandra looked up puzzled. "Oh." The dinner. "I don't really see the importance of going to this..." Gedaliaha wasn't going to buy any of her excuses, she thought as she looked at her.

"Don't tell me that you don't know anyone. You know Major Zohra and the others that were in the tub you shared. Sharing a tub naked makes for a relationship that is more than that of an acquaintance. And with your channels opened, well...bathing in water amplifies the feelings of your fellow bathers... That's why most empathys try not to make love in the water too often...very potent and heady stuff."

I knew that. Wait a moment! Didn't she already tell me that? Goddess! I'm so confused. Either I feel it's like I've heard it already or I seem to be a step behind in remembering this stuff.

Chapter 21

Alexandra slipped the soft boots over her calves as the bathing room door chimed.

"Enter!" She thought she had unlocked her doors. Perhaps Guardian had taken to locking up her room.

"You have locked your door?" Carol-Maa asked surprised.

The dress fit the contours of her body. Alexandra looked into Carol-Maa's eyes and smiled appreciatively.

"I hadn't realized it was locked. I don't think anyone will be looking better," she remarked as she circled Carol. A part of her wanted to reach out and touch.

"We thought you would like some company, since you are alone."

A warm feeling of gratitude filled her. "I would. Thank you. And I'm sure that MaaSa would like to be surrounded with a lot of new information on life outside his small aquarium," Alexandra joked to cover her feelings of attraction.

"It is indeed interesting. Not just the view but to experience the customs!"

"Well, don't forget you are seeing it from a woman's perspective, and you will be surrounded by women warriors. If it gets to be too much, you can join the shamans."

Carol laughed her deep throaty laugh. "MaaSaa's friends are mostly male and I am getting enough of their view of life. I think it only fair that he share the differences."

A chime at the front door interrupted their laughter.

"Enter!" She pulled her protectorate Lieutenant's uniform into place. The butler had produced it and had it laid out for her when she had finished showering. She was embarrassed that added to it was the gold braid that indicated she was assigned to a flagship. She would rather have dressed in something else. She was going to stand out like a thoroughbred in a draft horse's corral. Usually noncoms and officers that worked in the battle pits didn't particularly like what they considered virgin snot-nosed boot lickers, high-ranking officers that sent the pit workers to their deaths in some pretty stupid battle plans. Alexandra sighed and mentally prepared for the remarks she would overhear.

A young spear maiden stood blushing at the front door. She had a bouquet of flowers in her hand. "Lady Alexandra, I mean, Lieutenant Montran...I have come to escort you to the dinner." She blushed again as she handed Alexandra the flowers.

"Thank you." *Well, this is a good start.*

They were beautifully scented and would go well next to the ones Carol had received, which still looked fresh cut.

"Lady Alexandra. A private message has arrived from Rear Admiral JoCastao," Guardian announced.

"Great timing," she muttered, pulling nervously at her tunic to make sure it was in place. "Now she wants to talk. Maybe I'm getting my ride out of here." She pushed down the feeling of disappointment.

"We will wait in the corridor," Carol-Maa nodded.

Nervously Alexandra stood in front of the monitor. "Transmit."



A stunned Alexandra joined Carol-Maa and the young maiden in the corridor.

"Are you All right, Mistress Alexandra?" Carol-Maa's voice was concerned.

"Yes, Yes. Just had some...interesting news. Let's get this party over with, okay? It's times like these that I wish I could get shit-faced," she muttered in a low voice that only Carol-Maa could hear.

"Ahh. Hmm."

Alexandra suddenly remembered her manners and turned to the young woman.

"What's your name?" Alexandra asked to be sociable and to cover up her nervousness about the dinner...or was it with the news she had just learned.

What could possibly happen at a dinner party thrown by a group of Amazon Warriors? Plenty. Especially if they have drums and mead. Maybe I can take a jug back to my quarters and quietly pass out.

The young girl stammered out something that sounded like Dohre.

Alexandra brought her attention back to the young woman. Where had she heard Dohre before?

"Are you Mea's cousin?" she asked surprised. That was dragging up some childhood memories.

"I am," the young girl got out between gulps.

When the doors swished open Alexandra stopped in surprise. Before her were rows of tables, just as a barracks-eating hall would look like, and above the center table was a banner congratulating Lieutenant Commander Alexandra Harriet Montran of the Centurion Corps of her promotion.

Oh, helios fires! She told them!

The roar in the room that Alexandra had first thought was from the sound of blood rushing in her ears, was actually a chant, rising and falling in pitch.

Carol-Maa leaned close to her ear. "Your Admiral JoCastas mentioned to General Aglauros, her counterpart, that since your own command wasn't able to celebrate with you, perhaps the sisterhood could extend that congratulations in their place. I heard a captain remark that they love to celebrate another's good news."

Alexandra felt hands shaking hers some too hard and some with a lot more meaning than congratulations. She mechanically smiled and replied when asked a question and moved around as a well-trained politician. Meanwhile her eyes tried to find Major Zohra without appearing to. The red in her cheeks remained as did her embarrassment. Carol-Maa's breath tickled her ear again. "She's watching you from behind that tall blond near the green pillar."

I need to talk to Admiral JoCastas and her method of notifying me about this promotion. It's not that I don't appreciate their message of welcoming me into their gathering...but...damn...I guess they aren't like the Spartans about their dislike of flagship officers, which I certainly know some of them have a right to be.

The women were finding their places at the tables with the young girl still at her side, guiding her to hers. "Your place is over here. For both of you." She smiled at Carol-Maa who had been teasing her and bringing her out of her tongue-tied self.

Alexandra smiled when Carol-Maa turned to her and pulled out the chair that was for her. The food dishes from many different planets and cultures, covered their table.

"Do you like your party?" a familiar voice asked near her elbow.

The warm feeling that filled her from the sound of Major Zohra's voice surprised her. *Oh, Goddess. I Got to really tone these senses down!*

Taking a steadying breath before replying, Alexandra dared to glance at the source of her pleasant distress. "I didn't realize my time on the *Spinners Tale* counted toward my review."

The boisterous noise covered Major Zohra's reply.

The usual bantering and storytelling followed, as there were three women that seemed to have the tongues of bards.

"Commander tell us a story!" someone shouted after the last finished.

At first Alexandra didn't realize they were referring to her until Major Zohra tapped her arm. When the silence that followed broke her own reverie she realized they wanted her to tell them the usual war story. She could feel cold creep up her legs. She gripped her mug tightly as she tried to push aside the memory of the last drop her Degas troop made.

"Telling it's where the healing comes from," Major Zohra encouraged. "There are only friends here. It is time you released the guilt," she told her knowingly. "We would not have asked if the shamans had not said you were ready."

Alexandra knew she was right. That was why the stories were told among comrades, to share loss. That was what she had always told her own soldiers who had a lot of guilt to leave behind.

Slowly she rose to her feet, her gut tightening from sharing something she didn't want to keep revisiting.



The fountain was over ten stan feet high, surrounded by flowers and fauna that were pleasant to the senses, but Captain Montran stared unseeing at the view in the hospital gardens. Her attention was focused on maintaining her composure from a subject she was being forced to talk about.

"Captain?" the voice of the psychtech prompted.

Captain Montran shifted in her seat, not getting any relief from the new position.

An attendant quietly arrived with a pot of tea. The aroma was familiar and calming. Even if she didn't drink it...inhaling its properties gave her some respite from her discomfort.

"We need to review this mission, Captain," the voice reminded her. "You said you were all given a week off before your last drop. You hadn't had a break in your deployments for over ten stan months before that. Can you pick up from the day you returned to base from leave?"

The captain blinked for a moment as she went back to that day.

She was met at the terminal station by a uniformed messenger. By the gold braid on his shoulder he was from Military Central Command, MCC. She was handed orders for immediate deployment, and escorted to the main hall on base. There her troop was assembled, still wearing their off-duty uniforms with their grips lying at their feet unpacked, looking as if they were also met at the terminal when they arrived back on base.

The CO arrived shortly after her. He gave them a moving speech on how much they had improved in their performance on all levels and therefore were being handed an important job. If they performed as well as they had been, it would bring the troop a changed status from receiving the low end type of deployments to mid level.

It was a covert operation and they were to leave immediately. The CO's face was someone she would never forget. His delivery, and words chosen to evoke pride and unquestioned loyalty sounded genuine to all their ears. And her troop was hungry for the recognition from someone on the command staff. This intentional betrayal that high up in the command structure brought anger to the captain. Her eyes narrowed with coldness.

"And then?" the PT's voice coaxed.

"And then? What else? Orders are orders. We left our travel gear in the hall and filed onto the DS that was awaiting us. There was another group of soldiers onboard that supplied us with a change of clothing and weapons. We were given a sketchy picture of where we were going and told our contact on the planet would give us further information. Just like a noncom grunt I accepted what they said...knowing something didn't feel right. I can only believe someone feared the Degas troop so much that this elaborate plan to eradicate them was ordered from someone high up in the counsel."

Her hand rose shakily and brushed something from her cheek.

She was with the first group that was dropped on target...and read the situation immediately. In her goggles shapes were moving toward them. Looking around for a place to retreat, she realized they were surrounded.

"Mayday, mayday. Abort mission! We're surrounded! Get us out of here! I repeat, mayday..."

Noise from weapons fired from the attacking forces drowned out cries from her troop as the second group was disembarked and the troop ship disappeared quickly back into space.

"What the hell is going on, Captain!" her master sergeant asked frantically. It was the last he said as his body and head were separated.

Drawing on her inner strength she yelled for her troops to form a wider circle, however cluster bombs were dropped into their center before the group could spread out. If she looked at her watch, only five minutes had passed and half her troop was gone.

"Make every shot count!" she yelled. "You're sharpshooters! Prove it!"

The body count rose and soon they saw who was cutting them down like sitting targets as masked figures began to descend upon them in droves. The Degas troop was dropped into the center of a depression with rolling hills on all sides of them. They had no way out.

She rallied the few left to hand-to-hand combat as the masked attackers ran them over with their sheer numbers. A cry died in Captain Montran's throat as a blow from behind her sent her face down into the muck created from dirt and their blood.

When Captain Montran woke it was to bodily pain that had no single location. She couldn't lift her head nor open her eyes caked closed with her own blood. She was splayed out on something hard, perhaps stone. Shouts from victorious throats sounded all around her. Cold water was dumped on her. She had no hair to grip so she was slapped to consciousness. Her eyes blinked open to see a large bonfire before her. The hard slab she was on was close enough for her skin to feel the heat, if she concentrated hard enough to sense it.

Corporal Hedlow was the first Spartan they dragged to a cross bar in front of the bonfire. There were six of them captured, counting Hedlow. Their capturers made sure they were all awake to see what they had planned for each of them. Hedlow was carved up alive, with his body parts except his heart and genitals, tossed into the flames. They took their time, peeling skin before getting to hacking off his limbs. Hedlow didn't bother with bravery, and for what purpose would it serve? His screams became whimpers and what could have been hours later, he gave a small cry as his spirit finally let go.

Captain Montran anguished over his and the four others fate, seeking some way to give them solace, knowing that there would be no rescue. Falling into a light meditation she guided Hedlow to a release and movement toward a light that was shining for him.

A sudden slap and then beatings rained down on her. While she suffered her new wounds, Corporal M'Ludu was the next victim. Weakly she reached out and found herself again the recipient of a beating. Realizing they were aware of what she was doing gave her a stronger incentive to prevail. She would not desert her troop, even to the last.

How many days had passed, Captain Montran wasn't aware. What she did know, was that they wanted her to be conscious of each of her soldiers tortured deaths and continued to beat her when she gave them solstice the only way she could.

When she was the only one left, they waited perhaps a few days before starting. She had not eaten or drank anything so she was sure it couldn't be for many days. Like the others she was tied to the cross bar. They started with a knife to remove her sexual organs. It was unusual, since with the others they had skinned them first.

A searing pain deep within her body had an equally painful scream tearing at her throat. Oddly enough, she was aware of how hot her blood felt as it ran down her thighs. Then there was blackness.

When she awoke, she was wrapped in a drug induced haze, but not enough to not recognize a concerned face of her cousin, Han DeMonte, looking down at her, giving her a weak smile.

"Aye, Lady Harriet, ya got yerself into some trouble, ey? We got ch'ya back now. We'll take care of ya"

"I want those responsible for this charged," she whispered. "The entire MCC, Han. Spare none."

"Aye. I'll let the Cleave know. It is your right, and the clan will back ya. Now close your eyes and rest, Lady."



When the silence went on for more than a few minutes, the PT prodded her again. "And if you could do something about your suspicion while in flight to your drop...what would that have been?"

Captain Montran put her face in her hands and wept. Actually, if she objected to the plan and refused to take her troop into the situation, she would have been removed from command, and the drop would have gone on. Her absence would have affected the troop and once they hit the ground and realized what they had been dropped into, their despair would have overwhelmed her with deep guilt that she wasn't there. Somehow, she felt her presence there kept them fighting until death, rather than giving up and dying. It made a difference to the spirit of the killed soldier, though she didn't think the psych-tech would understand that.

"I don't know," she whispered. Her hands trembled in her lap.

"I think that's as far as we'll go today," the PT informed her. "Dr. Madoo, your medical team leader recommended you spend more time in the hospital gardens, so if you wish to remain, feel free."

The captain was relieved at not having to return to the confines of her hospital quarters. When she knew the PT was gone Captain Montran pressed the button in the arm of her chair. Slowly it moved into a position her body would be more comfortable in.



Chief Law Counselor of the Montran Clan holdings, Cleave Greggor Montran, watched the pale scarred features of Lady Harriet Montran, lying in the protected grove of the hospital garden. The cool breeze reached him on the stairs, causing the beaded hair at the sides of his face to move, tickling him. His clan tattoo across the right side of his face marked him as an elder and someone that only appeared when something important involved the entire clan.

It was the duty of a Cleave to give counsel to all members of the clan, whether they were high in clan rankings or low, and even the ones that didn't want to be associated with clan ties. Lady Harriet's position was an odd one, which was why he became involved. She brought formal complaints against the entire MCC and her accusations...couldn't be refuted. Even if she had not lived...the clan would have taken action against the council though he doubted they would have thought to hold the entire Military Central Command responsible.

His lips curled into a snarl, remembering the private communiqué, heralding the arrival of a package that was delivered to Lord Hadrian DeMonte, cousin/brother to Lady Harriet. Someone had sent

Captain Harriet Montran's helmet to him. Dried blood, hers and that of others, was on it. The camera/locator chip in the helmet showed her view of a horrific one-sided battle that she had struggled to turn into something less than a slaughter but in the end... she was taken down. Her helmet was left buried in battle muck until someone had retrieved it and sent it to her family. Hadrian refused to believe her dead and had used all his influence to find where the helmet had been. Planet Zed4Z44. Homing devices in the helmets still on the battlefield were used to identify who had taken her. The planet was delegated as closed to any visits from Collective or Committee members by the Counsel of Rings, the highest ruling authority for both galaxy powers. The planet was judged as too violent to participate in interplanetary travel and therefore blocked from any space travel, least they bring to the peaceful galaxy open warfare. As if sending Spartan troops out to various planet members to support their local police force to quell any uprising from small groups of unhappy people was any different.

Hadrian had sent an emissary that was a specialist in bargaining and it was from these secretive meetings that her whereabouts and release were finally arranged. Her physical condition was testament to what she had endured and since her capturers were not planning on her surviving, had not treated her any differently than the other Spartan soldiers in her troop that were tortured to death.

It was a long month before her medical team allowed any visitors and for that matter, released any information on her condition. Not even Hadrian was permitted to visit or speak with her until her healing team felt she was read.

Cleave Montran took another step down the stairs, reluctant to wake the soldier, but he needed to get this done so she could concentrate on leaving this behind her. He stood in front of the reclining figure, the sun was moving slowly up her blanketed body. Darkened eyes fluttered open, focusing on his Clan tartan and then moving up to his face.

"Ah, gal. You're looking a bit older than I remember from the last I've seen you," he greeted. Since he had not seen her in person since she was a child, he thought that a safe remark.

"At your son's wedding," she recalled. "He drowned two months later..." her breath caught, feeling the pain of losing her young cousin to a wild dare so soon after his marriage.

The memory pained the Cleave also, but he had met many traumatized clients and knew pain at this moment was all that this survivor used to know she was still alive. Her struggle with survivor's guilt would be her greatest task to deal with...just as his was with his wild son.

A thin hand clutched at her heart as tears fell. Cleave Montran didn't know if they were for his son or herself.

"Yes. He led a very wild and full life," he added.

"Yes," she whispered as a sob caught in her throat.

"I have come to advise you, when you can move, that it would be wise for you to leave Committee space until this case is settled."

"My thoughts also..." She closed her eyes, feeling relieved her clan didn't insist she hide on some planet protected by clan members to never be able to travel in space freely again.

"You need to not worry about anything...except getting better," he told her seriously.

"Thank you, Cleave Greggor," she managed a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes.

He shook his head at her. "You will become a nonperson. Will you at least give me some idea where you end up? We will all worry about you."

She nodded, but since she had no real plans except to move to Collective space and find some kind of a job, she remained silent. Next week she would be healed of her physical injuries and able to begin work on rebuilding her strength and stamina. That was all she would rather concentrate on.

Cleave Greggor had no doubt she would overcome this trauma as she had three stan years earlier. Evidence pointed to the same people being behind this latest attack on her, yet they had no hard evidence.

The soldier's breathing deepened and he realized she had fallen back to sleep. Taking another look around he felt satisfied that she would not be in any danger from an outside predator and quietly left.

The eyes of her bodyguard watched, unseen, as the visitor moved out of the gardens and back to the hospital.



Captain Montran sat gingerly on the bench in the garden. The Psych Tech was accepting a cup of tea from the attendant, whom the captain identified as her covert bodyguard. Who assigned him to her she

was still working on. It was one of the few mental exercises she found that didn't cause her to go into an emotional dive of depression.

"Good afternoon, Captain Montran," the PT greeted. Her dark orange eyes stood out from her green scaled skin. The traditional veil a flutonian wore, fluttered in the breeze, holding firm with the knot on the side.

The color, order and shades in the veil at one time denoted the wearer's status with society and within family, but today, colors were picked to fit the wearer's mood. Captain Montran noted this to keep her mind busy and away from what the PTs visit was about.

"Thank you," she told the attendant who handed her a sealed container of liquid refreshment. "Good afternoon, Bekka Donna," she greeted reluctantly. She inspected the seal to the container carefully before breaking it and taking a sip of its contents.

"Do you think someone is trying to poison you?" the PT asked.

"It doesn't have to be poison," she returned.

"Do you feel you are in danger here?"

Captain Montran took a sip of the beverage. If she told them what they wanted to hear she would be done with these psych sessions, yet she couldn't.

"Captain?"

"It could be something to make me relax so I tell you all you want to know," she returned, feeling angry at being forced to speak about something that was no one's business but hers.

"Using a drug to get you to talk will not help you, thus defeating the purpose of these sessions. Your efforts and success at bringing it up is part of the process of healing."

"So, I just talk about it and poof, I feel no more?"

"The other day...you believed that you could have done something to prevent the death of your troop...until...you spoke about it, and then realized it would have happened whether you were there or not."

Captain Montran stared at the PT for a long moment, feeling her insides turn cold, and her hands curled into fists, as she struggled not to yell her anger at someone that was supposed to be helping her.

"I...should...have found a way! I'm their CO. I was their CO! I should have found a way!"

"I noticed that you have been running simulations on that scenario...not even the computer has come up with a solution other than the one you chose."

"Then I should have done a dishonorable thing!"

"Do you believe that?"

"No," she responded in a low voice. The only alternative was to try to take over the ship before it landed and in all the mock stagings in the simulator she lost. She had used the information someone had retrieved from the troops camera/locators, which showed the scenes from the military transport ship to the battle. The soldiers that were in the ship defeated her each time because they had the weapons and she didn't. Whoever had planned that operation had made only one mistake...they didn't destroy what the cameras recorded.

"What is still there that you feel you need to blame yourself for not doing enough?" the PT asked softly.

A longer period of silence followed. The PT remained silent, trusting the colors that whirled around the soldier to mean she was working on the question.

"Are you worried what others will say about you? Wondering why just one person...the CO...survived a massacre?"

Captain Montran wondered if that was it. "Anyone can review the record..." she began then halted. No one could until her case was ruled on. The only reason she had access to them for her simulator was because this was a medical facility and her lawyer wrangled her healing team and her sole viewing rights. That move told her a cover up had begun on the Collective's Military Command side.

The Cleave wasn't giving her any updates on the progress of her formal charges, but then it was so that she focused on her recovery and not the case and probable fallout.

"Who is going to know?" she answered feeling trapped.

"You...your family...your friends," the PT returned.

The captain shook her head. "They don't know. No one can know unless they were there."

"What can't they know?"

"The helplessness at seeing people you know carved up while they were still alive, and not being able to stop it. There wasn't thing I could do to stop it," she told her in a whisper.

"What about your own injuries," the PT asked.

Tears dripped down the pale face of the soldier. She shook her head.

"What does shaking your head mean?"

A shuddering breath was dragged in. "I...I wished I died on the battlefield...If I had known...I would have shot my own people," she told her ashamed.

"Saved a lot of people pain...and yourself. But you didn't because you were knocked out and taken prisoner...like five others in your group. Two women and three men."

"It was a route...they knew we were going to be there...the place was surrounded in traps...it was like we were sacrificed...no honor in that battle. Our rifles misfired, and the clothing we wore had us sticking out like neon signs. It was a setup!" she screamed and slammed her cup across the garden.

"Someone in the command sent them to their deaths...nothing else was gained!"

The captain just as quickly regained her composure and turned her back to the PT.

"Do you want revenge?"

"I have my revenge already...I have brought charges against the entire Command Staff.

Something that big had more than a handful of the senior staff in the know. No one will talk because that is how they are...so they will all lose their commissions or they will be put on reservist list until the charges have been reviewed. I don't think it will be reviewed which means everyone in the Central Command will be replaced."

"Do you feel it's worth it?"

Captain Montran turned to stare at the PT. "Good day," she told her and left the garden. She didn't return to any more sessions, receiving the notice she expected that told her that she officially couldn't return to duty if she didn't complete her sessions. They obviously didn't read her resignation papers that stated since the MCC broke their contract with her, they not only owed her for her remaining contracted years but also to be honorably discharged. Cleave Greggor had already assured her that was done and she was no longer part of the Spartans. That was good because a Centurian recruiter, for some reason, thought she would make a good space officer. Imagine that. Maybe she wasn't so damaged after all.

As Commander Montran recounted the story of the last stand the Degas troop made, she didn't distance herself from the pain. Vividly she recalled the scenes she had gone over many times in the simulator at the hospital that camera chips had captured from various soldiers helmets. Though the troop knew they were dead, they all had determination in their faces that they would fight until they couldn't.

Commander Montran left out her capture and the five others. No one needed to hear that...least of all her. When she was finished, she sat down. Someone's warm hands wrapped her cold hands around a hot cup of tea. She stared into the cup, her insides shivering from the cold.

The chant started slowly, like a murmur of voices filling the silence, added to that one drum beat...and then another. It matched the rhythm of Alexandra's heart. Without being conscious of it, she picked up the chant, feeling the vibrations of the drum and chanting run through her. When the rhythm of the drum shifted she let her heart change too. Her body began to sway. Each muscle giving up its stuckness and beginning to glide across the next – first with crepitus then with certain fluidity. The gentle sway coaxed the hidden memories from the joints and corners of her body. The soothing sound canceled each unpleasant memory. Gradually the weight of all those deaths dissolved. Until it was gone she never realized just how heavy the burden was that she carried.

The drumming and chants came to a close. Another stood and began a story. It was a relief that it continued on. Alexandra finally looked up and gazed around her as the others broke off into cheers from the last story. It was a happy story, which a good bard would tell after a sad one. Alexandra picked at her food as she heard more stories and songs. She was getting restless. Her eyes tracked toward the major and found her watching her. For a few moments their eyes met.

Blast her unreadable eyes, Alexandra thought as she broke her gaze. She searched for Carol-Maa wondering what they were up to. Laughter was coming from the group that surrounded Carol-Maa. Alexandra smiled.

"It looks like your friend is having a great effect on the sisters."

Alexandra turned to look at Major Zohra. She caught something in that remark.

"That duo is on a search and gather mission for information," she returned.

"It must be difficult for you."

Alexandra smiled not breaking their gaze. She had been reading Major Zohra correctly, though there was no change in the major's expression.

"Carol and I are friends. Our sexual attraction was from the pheromones Sheila emitted."

"So I heard."

Alexandra nodded. A warm flush crept up her neck as they continued to study each other.

A woman came to their table and whispered something in Major Zohra's ear. When she stood up there was regret in her eyes as she excused herself. No one took her place and the others kept a polite distance from Alexandra. It was a good time to slip out.

Walking down the corridor she was lost in thought until she felt a slight buzzing of energy. She looked around her startled. The energy connection was soft at first but gathered strength as she realized someone was summoning her. The closer she got to her quarters the stronger the signal became. She nodded curtly at the two women standing guard outside of her quarters.

What is happening with her? What is Alan up to?

When she entered her room she pushed aside a chair while chanting a protection song Kela had taught her. Blue energy appeared as a protective circle formed, lengthening into a wall with thin spikes of white fire that shot up into the ceiling. Closing her eyes, she welcomed the stranger.

"I am here to repay a debit. I have heard that Alan had a virus developed that is aimed at your capture. May the light of *Shua* follow you," she raised her hand and drew a sign in the air. Then she vanished.

Still in the circle, Alexandra searched for Alan, looking for the dark cloud that was particular to him made it easy. His energy was repugnant. She could see him raving at someone or something on the bridge of a private space vessel. The console wasn't the typical design on a private yacht. Only one chair was elaborately designed, and that one was worn. He had changed a lot since cadet days. Spittle unnoticed was on his chin as he banged his fist on the other chair's arm. He wasn't at the height of his manic phase but it was enough for the cloud to be around him. An alarm suddenly appeared on his console. She pulled back far enough to study the planet he was near. Pearlnet, located two stan days from four corners. There were five tiny ships from the Collective laying a net around the planet. She wondered what Alan wanted with that planet. Then she saw the energy lines, forming a hexagon about the planet. It had a major portal and smaller ones at each connecting point of the energy lines.

Alexandra sought out Admiral JoCastao and found her closer to Merkers Outpost. Her bridge was busy setting up a defense against some smugglers. The smugglers appeared to have been surprised because instead of running, they were moving as if they were backed into a defensive corner. Alexandra nodded. They must have laid out a trap in another direction and the admiral was driving them into it. For a moment, she hovered over the rear admiral, tensely watching the battle play out on the bridge screen.

She then returned to Alan's ship, hoping to see what he was up to. Ideas swirled around his head. Before she could decipher their meaning she had an urgent need to see what he had done to Merkers Outpost. Hovering above the planet she searched for any of Alan's malignant traces. But there was too much unusual activity around the planet for her to look at each thread. It had to be Iota, the city they had not visited. It was close to the Southern Rim where the caverns there could hide a Class C drop ship that could hold up to twenty soldiers.

She was tired.

Kela, her childhood teacher, would have been proud of her for her spirit made a smooth transition back into her physical body. The energy from her protective shield pulsed with life, warning her that someone had attempted to penetrate it.

Alexandra dropped the shield and found her quarters full of visitors. Gedaliaha was sitting on the couch quietly talking to the others. Major Zohra was sitting in the corner, watching everyone...and then their eyes met. For a moment she drank in those pools of darkness.

"Alexandra," Gedaliaha called her attention back to the group. "We all felt the breach, but it wasn't Alan or his agent, so we let it through." She and the others waited.

"I...had a warning from the woman I told you that was at the volcano. She said Alan had a virus made specifically for me." She took a deep breath to ground herself and eliminate the fluttering in her stomach. "I – saw him. He's in a ship, near Pearlnet. Probably gone now."

The others nodded. There was a jump gate nearby.

"I think that we should explore Iota," Alexandra suggested, knowing she was stepping on Major Zohra's authority. "MaaSa spoke against it, but...I think we should find out why."

"You're not going," Major Zohra told her firmly.

Alexandra surprised herself when she blushed. The major moved from her lone position near the door to stand by the small table that Alexandra suddenly found fascinating.

"No. I would be out of my element..." she admitted and then thought that lieutenant commanders and majors sent others for things like that anyway. Unless the major was getting cabin fever and wanted to go herself. Alexandra looked up at her, wondering if that was it. They both started when they caught each other looking back. Alexandra broke the gaze and glanced at one of the shamans.

Major Zohra nodded at Alexandra's reply. "I have a team already assembled to scout out that area. Their outersuits will be finished by Guardian's bots by noon." She hesitated before adding, "We have discussed with MaaSa about that third city, Iota and why he advised you against visiting it."

"How did you know about that conversation?" Alexandra asked surprised.

"We reviewed your visit to the Waterland, Commander." A raised dark eyebrow gave Alexandra the impression she asked a really dumb question.

Alexandra looked down at the tea that was cooling near her hand. Absent-mindedly she swirled the cup.

"That's all?"

Alexandra looked up into the shaman's eyes. "Yes. Just a warning and a glimpse of Alan. I was just thinking that...something doesn't feel right."

"You and a lot of others feel the same way. When you figure out just what it's, let us know."

Major Zohra then moved to the door. "I need to see to my patrols that will be returning, and those ready to move out." Her gaze lingered on Alexandra, and then she left.

Alexandra longed to join her, if only for the relief of boredom. How many days can she find entertainment in pounding a holographic fighter before looking for a real person to pound on? She no longer had Carol to...visit with.

The others in the room left behind the major.

Alexandra rubbed her forehead. She did have this puzzle to figure out. "What does she mean by a virus?" Alexandra thought out loud.

"You need to get some sleep. Which reminds me, you have been assigned a bodyguard. She will be with you at all times."

"Hm?" Alexandra looked up at Gedaliaha, not hearing.

Gedaliaha patted Alexandra's shoulder. She decided to let the major handle the news. "Dreams have always been a good place to find answers. May your dreams guide you to safety, Alexandra," and then left Alexandra to her thoughts.

The shamans had a lot of work to do. They had cleared Alexandra of any residual problems dealing with her past and recent ordeals, satisfied the healing done amongst the Sister soldiers to be enough. However, unless asked by her superiors, they saw no reason to pass that information on. They also knew that Alexandra was no longer suited to the type of military role her CO had in mind for her, should she return to duty.

The shamans main concern was now primarily on the portals. They needed to find out where Alan intended to strike before he arrived to kidnap Alexandra. They all were certain he would attempt to kidnap her. They could feel the intention all around him.

The door swished shut. Alexandra sagged onto the couch, resting her head on the back. She let her thoughts wander, flitting from one thing to another.

"Guardian!"

"Yes, Commander Montran?"

She winced from the title. Another thing to adjust to. "When I first shipped on board the *Spinners Tale*, I found her computer programs all..."

Guardian started to laugh.

"Was that your work then?"

"No. The virus was from the Black Rose. They had a vendetta against their PO, Petty Officer Decker. He was responsible for taking a contract out on one of their members. I tamper with information gathering applications, not life systems."

"It was a clever virus." Running her fingers through her hair, she leaned forward on the couch, peering down at the carved scene that wound up the base of the small transparent tabletop. "If I were Alan, and wanted to get onto this planet undetected, I would think about how to disable you without your knowledge and anyone else's...and there have been a lot of holes in your programs lately."

"That word 'virus' has bad memories. I have taken many precautions to prevent another to enter my system."

"What if the virus was introduced from one of your smaller bots, like in Century City?"

"Ahh. You believe the virus Alan has devised to get to you is in me."

"If I can think of that, I'm sure an agent or Alan would. He is very clever with his tampering. Do you remember when I asked, well I didn't ask you, I had asked Ald or Bach about the emergency system? All bots are programmed with their immediate functions and for other things they have an autolink to the main data bank. I asked an essential question and they under normal circumstances would have linked up to you to give it to me, a guest. Instead, I was referred to you for any more information. Bach said he hadn't linked with you for a while."

"I see your point. Now that you mention it, I have not had a download report from your section. That is odd that I should overlook such an important break in my communication system. You didn't order privacy?"

"I unlocked the doors," Alexandra answered surprised. "I thought you locked them to protect me." She sighed rubbing her forehead. "With so much going on, I would not go downloading any information from these bots," she advised. "If Megan Vanstar was able to get as far as she did...she may have also accessed bots in this area...as well as Century City where she barracked for two years."

"I shall contact Major Zohra. I shudder at the thought of being invaded with another virus. But I am in this for the duration. Good day to you Commander, and congratulations on your promotion."

"Thanks." Alexandra laid back with her head against the couch and closed her eyes smiling as she thought of Major Zohra. Her jaw stretched into a yawn as she found a more comfortable position on the couch.

So many people to protect her but it only took one mad man with ingenuity to plant a person in the right place. That means he probably has more than one Vanstar. He was probably going to use his hidden spies to keep the outpost security jumping so that everyone would be too busy watching each other to notice that he was moving into position.

Blast him and his madness!

Wearily she closed her eyes.



An awareness crept into her sleep, accentuated by a dull pain in her neck from the odd angle her head was in. It wasn't the sound of movement that woke her but an energy presence that tickled her own field. Her Dancer was nearby. The intensity changed as Major Zohra moved out of the front room. Alexandra breathed in slowly and deeply as her body hummed from the contact. She felt the major's hyper-alertness as she secured the room. Her heart quickened as she felt the major return. The soft sound of movement in the chair directly across from her told her the major was finished with her inspection.

"Did you find anything?" she asked in a soft voice. Alexandra felt surprise from Major Zohra and then amusement.

"Your abilities have sharpened, Milady," her voice was almost inaudible but the words were distinct, meant to carry no further than their ears.

There was a time when Alexandra would have distrusted anyone not from her planet who used that term but she could feel an undercurrent of tension that gave her goose bumps.

Alexandra opened her eyes and in silence, they regarded each other. This was the first time they were alone with each other.

"So..." Alexandra started slowly, "what matter brings you to my quarters?" Her heart pounded with trepidation. Suddenly she remembered Gedaliaha's mention of a bodyguard. Without thinking, she started to laugh.

The dark eyes watching her warmed. Minutely. Alexandra altered her sight and saw the colors in the major's aura, revealing that the dark haired warrior was indeed amused.

"Your laugh is for?" the major asked softly.

"I...just remembered something Gedaliaha said." Alexandra laughed again and looked down at her hands to prevent herself from getting giddy. The thought of Major Zohra being her personal bodyguard made her blush.

"And that was?" the major prompted.

"She said I'm being assigned a bodyguard. I take it you're clearing the place before my bodyguard arrives. Don't trust her or them?"

"I'm the most qualified given my familiarity with the outpost...and other things," her voice trailed off.

"I see."

There was a long pause as they both took advantage of the time they had alone. Alexandra was hoping her guards would take their time about arriving. Her eyes noticed a small muscle twitch in the warrior's jaw. She got the impression the major was attempting not to laugh about something.

"So..." she started again but could think of nothing to say. Instead, she reached for her cup of cold tea. Alexandra heard a quick movement and felt an iron grip around her wrist. A surge of desire bolted through her arm and settled in her belly. She had a hard time focusing on the major's words.

"I would rather you eat and drink from the sister's kitchen from now on." Major Zohra felt the rapid pulse under her fingertips. She smiled to herself. Alexandra's eyes were wide open and easily read. "You make an easy target," her voice was softer and huskier than what she had intended. Major Zohra reluctantly dropped her hand.

"I'll keep that in mind, Major." The energy from Major Zohra was distracting.

Major Zohra extended a hand to Alexandra. "You would be more comfortable in your bed. Less chance of getting a neck ache," she continued in a normal voice.

"Uh huh." Alexandra reached up for the proffered hand. The touch only added to the slow burn in her belly.

Oh, Goddess. Got to tone this connection down! I'll never be able to sleep with this energy charging my own.

The taller woman pulled her up and toward her without stepping back, prolonging the feeling. So close to the major Alexandra's senses vibrated with sexual desire. For what seemed another long moment, they stared boldly into each other's eyes, reading the same need. Major Zohra released her hand and stepped back.

Automatically Alexandra turned toward the bedroom. She needed a cold shower and time to bring her feelings under control. Silently she cursed herself for not having the nerve to take the woman she knew had the same desire as herself, into her arms and drag her down onto the soft carpet. A chuckle tickled her throat at the thought of how likely it would be that she would be able to wrestle the warrior to the ground if she didn't want to go down. Of course, it could be fun trying. Muffling the giddiness that threatened to escape from her lips, she concentrated on undressing.

The butler had turned down the covers at both sides of the bed with two sleeping gowns on the edge. Alexandra stopped short and then turned to the major.

"You're my bodyguard?" she asked not sure if she was reading this right.

"Like I said...I'm the best qualified and the best way to keep track of you, is to stick by you. You don't mind if we share the bed, do you? It's big enough," She added as a tease.

"No. No. I guess you have a point there, but, no offense meant...but isn't that highly irregular for a major to baby-sit a...well, anyone for that matter?"

"No. Not in the sister's guild. It's the best qualified gets the job."

"So, what happens with the outpost security?" she asked. Her nervousness had nothing to do with security.

Major Zohra gave a small smile. "You don't think I can handle more than one job? It's being taken care of," she reassured her. "We've already begun the third phase. Guardian and Charles are being moved into their cloned bodies, as we speak...earlier than what they had planned but, it's safer. The main computer is being combed through to see where the tampering is, and we placed the outpost on the original program rather than the backup... which we found, is working just fine. If the primary is contaminated, chances are the backup is too. Guardian's name, by the way, is L'uenbeng."

Both women smiled.

Alexandra started to chuckle. "I hated his text book at the academy."

"Not many people liked his challenges on ethics...a blunt approach, but..."

Alexandra blinked recalling one of his chapters on sacrifice of one for many and the many for one. She now understood why he was so adamant that Carol wasn't going to be used...well, she was in a different situation now. Merged with MaaSa she would not be able to leave the planet. MaaSa's species were too closely attached to the spirit of the planet they resided on. It meant, Carol was under both MaaSa's and Guardian's protection, from any attempt of abduction or seduction of Carol by an off-worlder.

Alexandra unabashedly studied Major Zohra. She wondered what both of them were going to do when Alan arrived. She had no intention of living indefinitely as a metradame of Alan's for anyone. Alexandra picked up her robe and disappeared into the bathing room irritated at the situation. She needed to figure out how to prevent her abduction, and what to do if she was abducted. It would have to be something that didn't call for decisions that were final...like taking her own life rather than letting Alan

turn her into a monster. One thing she learned early on in her military career, though she didn't always practice it, was that there was always the chance of rescue and there was always someone that would come after her. Why she was so lucky she didn't want to ask. She just was grateful it happened.



Major Zohra eyes followed Alexandra's naked form as she walked into the miniature jungle. Letting out a long breath she chided herself for not saying what she really would have liked to say... words...tender ones she was out of practice in using. Looking down at her hands, she smiled and then chuckled. Here they were. Together and alone.

This is by far the best assignment I've had in a long time.

For a moment the image of Alexandra in her Spartan captain's dress uniform, adorned with battle ribbons, her hair worn shorn close to her scalp, leaving an orange shine to her head, standing with the sergeant major at his retirement party came back to her. The battle-scarred soldier had pulled out of his well-worn traveling bag the holographic image, and showed it to her as he became more maudlin with each drink she plied him. He had a collection of pictures of his party, but only one Sergeant Major JG was interested in.

The old man was in a bar swapping stories with other soldiers. He became incensed when another retired soldier made a snide comment about Captain Montran's survival when her troop perished. Good war stories do not fade away, though the details change, and some in less glorious troops were jealous when they faced one of the actual members of the legendary troop. If Sergeant Major JG had not intervened, she knew there would have been a death between the quarreling drinkers. She had taken aside the retired Spartan and quieted him down. She got him stinking drunk is what she had done. He was on his way to a relative's wedding and had done what he had promised himself he would never do again visit a bar that Spartans frequented. He wanted to have no more to do with that life and its memories. She knew he was experiencing survivor guilt and that was a heavy burden to carry.

"You have to promise to tell this to no one," he had started.

Her cynicism nearly had her just putting him on a shuttle for his next stop, but she made no move to do it. She reluctantly admitted to herself that she wanted to hear about Captain Montran.

"There's this feelin' like we're all connected and we get real focused, like...yer gonna think I'm crazy, but it's like we're one. It's just awesome." He wiped the back of his hand across his numb lips. "Just awesome!" he breathed reverently and then his head hit the table as he passed out.

She admired his loyalty to such a charismatic leader; after all she was also under this captain's spell. What a fool she had been. What was the old saying about being too close to the situation? Too emotionally close she was...and she had promised herself she would not let something like that happen to her. Not until her assignment was over.

Her thoughts returned to earlier when she found Alexandra sleeping on the couch with her head bent at an odd angle. She was sure she'd be hurting when she woke up. Major Zohra wasn't quite sure how she was going to explain that she was assigned as her bodyguard/bunkmate, so she decided to put off waking her. Instead, she checked the rooms looking for hiding places that Alexandra could retreat to if Alan should gain access to her room. She wanted to commit them to memory.

If he got in, it meant that he had gotten through the ships in orbit and the protective field the shamans raised. Then there was the alowan. What was he up to? The best trackers in both the sisterhood and brotherhood were not able to find him. It was as if he just vanished. Back to his own planet? He sold information to the highest bidder. Did he also sell information to Allen?

Her thoughts returned to Alexandra. She repeated the name a few times to herself, smiling that after so long...here they were. When she had finished her inspection of 'their' quarters, she had settled herself across from Alexandra's sleeping form just to watch her.

What was Alexandra really thinking when she blushed? If she had not danced for her, would she have been attracted to the orange haired cadet? Again, she remembered the young cadet with the cascading orange hair beaded in the traditional style of her culture. Oh yes, she would have been attracted to her, but she would have thought the woman would not be interested in the likes of her, not because of class prejudice. That she was certain of, but because they were so different...but it would not have stopped her from initiating a conversation.

Frowning, she replayed the images she had recently reviewed of Alexandra from the moment she set foot on Merkers Outpost. She told Guardian she wanted to review everything, not trusting his briefing

reports anymore. She and her staff observed Alexandra up to the confrontation with the now busted in rank, Sergeant Vanster. For a moment her thoughts drifted to her companion through some tough times in covert operations. She thought maybe Vanster liked being a Sergeant better than an officer. The Major dragged her thoughts back to the tapes of Lady Alexandra.

Her lips curled up as she remembered they laughed mirthlessly at the pranks, especially the ones in her quarters with some even taking notes. Then their mood changed when Lady Alexandra met up with Lord Chaney. The sword was a banned weapon on the open markets. Ten stan years ago law enforcement had found a way to disengage the sword, making it a less novelty toy. Lord Chaney's purchase of it meant it was going to be brought back on the illegal markets. They were further dismayed with the change in Alexandra's bios after Sheila sprayed her with the pheromone gas. It gave them all a good idea of how profound the drug affected the victim. What they had all thought of as a joke, was hardly funny when they read the radical bios changes in the victim. When Carol wore Guardian's outersuit her bios, like Alexandra's, were elevated so high they all wondered how the heart could take the stress.

Major Zohra suddenly grinned. Her fellow officers were impressed that a flag officer was so skilled in non-lethal attack methods, while she admired her refusal to revert to her Spartan training. Major Zohra knew just how deep the training was ingrained in the Committee's soldiers.

And she's an empath. Major Zohra breathed in deeply, not exactly sure what that all meant. She scheduled a talk with the shamans the next afternoon to work out the finer points of protecting Lady Alexandra. All they had told her so far was that someone needed to room with her, too stay near her at all times...which got her chosen to share a bed...a big bed with a fellow officer. The way it worked in the military was you didn't have a grunt bunk with an officer...an officer from a flag ship. If sharing quarters was necessary, someone of equal rank was pulled. That was her. She chuckled to herself. Rank did have its privileges.

The major heard the shower turn off. She rose from the bed and pulled out a small packet she had in her leg pocket. She was fastening it to the wall above one of the pillows when she felt Alexandra standing next to her.

"What's that?"

"An intruder alert."

The personal magnetism that emanated from Alexandra tickled her senses. She wondered if Alexandra was aware of her effect on others. Poor Dohe was so distracted that she was stuttering for the rest of the night. Nor were the other sisters unaffected. Some handled it by staying away from her. Warriors were not used to that type of energy. And after she told the details behind the Degas' troops last drop, she knew she won over any warrior that might have had misgivings of her. The sisterhood, if for no other reason than to honor the officer who tried her best to save her troop, would honor the Degas troop at the yearly remembrance for fallen comrades. No one deserved the type of death her father had arranged for them. Her father, her mind spat angrily. What angered her was the misery and guilt Alexandra felt all because of her father.

Damn you! If she had not killed you, father...I would have! Be damned with your inheritance and its honors...honors over the dead you sacrificed for your petty things!

She turned back to face Alexandra. In the subdued lighting Alexandra's dark centers opened wide giving Major Zohra a view of her soul, if she cared to look. Major Zohra turned away. She wasn't yet ready for that. Major Zohra could feel Alexandra's eyes were on her as she stripped and handed over her cloths to the butler.

What was preventing her from pulling Alexandra, who would be willing, toward her and making love to her in the shower, on the bed, or on the soft carpet? They were going to be lovers, but when? What was **she** waiting for? She was the one who always controlled the situation. Was that why Alexandra didn't move on her as her eyes showed they wanted to? Or was it because she wasn't sure? A smile curved her lips as she remembered the quickened heartbeat under her fingertips when she had grabbed Alexandra's wrist earlier, the flushed face and the unmistakable smell of a women aroused.

In the shower, Major Zohra loosened her long hair from the leather thong and thought of how it would have been to run her hands through Alexandra's hair when it was still long. She closed her eyes thinking of the pleasure of holding her close and feeling her body respond to her touches. Zohra leaned her back against the tile. The memory of how Lady Alexandra's hands shook when they touched during the workout sent shivers down her.

She's not going to make the first move, Jina Gari.

She finished her shower and waited impatiently as her hair blew dry. She slipped on the robe Ald offered her and returned to their room. She found the lights low, indicating that her bed partner was sleeping. She glanced around the room again before disrobing and slipping between the covers.



Alexandra felt a vibration before the noise sounded. She was out of the bed and on the soft carpet looking around frantically when the sound beeped out. She didn't know whether it was real time or in a dream until the noise sounded and grounded her with such frightening certainty.

Major Zohra was awake the instant she felt Alexandra move and was startled to find her not next to her but crouched on her side of the bed.

"I guess that's your intruder alarm." Lady Alexandra slowly straightened up, tugging at the nightgown that was twisted around her body.

"Yes," Zohra admitted ruefully. "I should have tested it before so you could...you moved before it sounded."

"I heard a buzzing in my ear." Alexandra shivered, thinking it had been Alan's attempt to control her dreamtime.

"Major is everyone all right?" a concerned voice came over the speaker.

It wasn't Guardian Alexandra noted concerned, then remembered he had been moved to a biological body.

"Yes, Sergeant Major. Did you get a fix on the sender?"

"Sure did, Major. Admiral JoCastao has been notified."

"Great. Out."

"Out, Major."

Alexandra tried unsuccessfully not to study the naked body before her without appearing to.

The major's eyes were openly fastened on the outline of the hardened nipples pressed up against the sheer nightgown Alexandra was wearing. With a small movement from her, the gown that was bunched up in spots fell into place. She swallowed, hoping it didn't look like she was drooling.

She's beautiful, two thoughts echoed.

Major Zohra climbed onto the bed and crawled over to Alexandra's side of the bed. She extended a hand to Alexandra who was watching her with undisguised need.

Nice sleeping gown. It shows her off in a luring way. One day...I'll have to wear one for her.

Alexandra's eyes followed the sleek muscled body. Willingly, Alexandra allowed the major to guide her back into bed.

Major Zohra pulled the covers over Alexandra as she settled on her back.

"What's wrong?" the major asked as she noticed the tenseness in her face.

"Everything at the moment."

"I can do something about that," she offered in a provocative one.

"What's that?"

"Roll over on your stomach and I'll demonstrate for you." She grinned at Alexandra's hesitation. She knew Alexandra's desire to be touched would cause her to do as she was directed.

Major Zohra waited for Alexandra to position herself. "Better," she said softly, pushing the blankets neatly to the foot of the bed. She lifted Alexandra's pillow out of the way and dropped it on top of hers. From her view of the cloth-covered shoulders, Alexandra was tense, but she would take care of that. She rubbed her hands together before placing them on the taut shoulders. A soft sigh, more felt than heard, told her Alexandra relaxed some.

Major Zohra studied the profile of the pale face on the bed as her hands began their work. She prodded and felt the knots, working them out gently. Softly she pushed the short curly hair off her neck as she moved her sensitive thumbs over the spine. Carried away in her own day dream, Major Zohra dug a little harder than she intended.

"Hey! Ouch!" Alexandra flinched, abruptly rolling away from Major Zohra.

The nightgown twisted around the athletic body, tightly wrapping around breasts with erect nipples protruding tantalizingly. Major Zohra held her breath as she waited.

"Gari!" It was a pleading voice, whispered so low it was almost a groan.

Major Zohra put her hands on Alexandra's shoulders and slid them down to her hands, their fingers intertwining.

Alexandra groaned in the major's mouth as a tongue brushed her lower lip.

"Gari," an impassioned voice whispered.

"What?" she asked in a husky voice.

"Take me...take all of me," she whimpered.

"Sometimes something easily given isn't worth taking," she teased.

"Gari!" the voice changed from pleading to exasperation. Alexandra surprised her by flipping her over and reversing the pin. "Then, it will be I who will do the taking," she said in a low voice that sent silvery shivers down Major Zohra's spine. "And you can tell me later, if it was worth being taken." Alexandra paused for a moment. "Computer, set mood, the forests of Fania, near the stream, afternoon, midsummer, sun, with cool breeze." She leaned close to the major's ear. "I want to see you in the sunlight, Gari."

Below her, the major felt the texture of the soft bedding change to a hard ground with the grasses thin blades, tickling her skin. She looked up into the darkened eyes of Alexandra. She could smell the forest around them; hear the stream trickling nearby and the noises from wildlife around them in the mid-afternoon.

"You know, it's not safe to be near a stream, in the wilds, in the afternoon," Major Zohra worried as she felt Alexandra shift her weight.

"Hm," she hummed deliciously. "Maybe that's what I like...the danger of ravishing you surrounded by wild animals."

Major Zohra laughed nervously, while feeling the excitement ripple through her. "I hope you have the safeties engaged because exciting the wildlife with our lovemaking is not something I would advise trying." She was speaking from experience.

"Just you and me, Jina Gari."

Suddenly, she was flooded with sensory stimulus as Alexandra opened her senses and connected them in a mutual sexual haze. The vibration was erotic and the intensity had Major Zohra trying to hold on to her will power to not give into Alexandra's immediate need. She could feel herself drowning in the sensations from the touch of their bodies. Alexandra's hands buried themselves in her hair, sending shivers up and down her spine as strong fingers stroked her scalp. Their hands explored the each other, taking time to find sensitive spots. They exchanged places often enough that both had bark and small bits of tree branches in their hair. And then, both women could feel the rising of the force that rocked their bodies simultaneously, leaving each spent on the forest floor.

Exhausted from the expenditure of energy, Major Zohra hugged Alexandra, not wanting to break contact. The major kissed Alexandra's forehead and sighed.

"What?" Alexandra asked her voice muffled from being buried in Major Zohra's neck.

"Alexandra, would you be offended...if I asked you something?"

Alexandra smiled. It was going to come up sooner or later.

"You can ask me anything."

"Was that almost as nice as...making love...uhh..."

"Under the influence of the pheromone gas," she finished for her. "Two different types of sensations. Just knowing that it was a contrived affect, an obsession that...we didn't really control, takes something from it. It was fucking for the sake of release. We," she whispered seductively, "on the other hand, can drive each other crazy because we want each other. Don't you think that this is so much better than a drug that causes desire for a stranger, Jina Gari?" *And I didn't bring her into my consciousness, as I did you. Never would I do that with anyone but you.*

The major's body tingled at the voice. She let her free hand stroke her lover's body, and then moved it to her orange curls. She was glad that she had not made any moves on her as a Cadet.

"What are you thinking, Gari?" She stroked the furrowed brow of her lover.

Major Zohra's body shivered hearing 'Gari' spoken by Alexandra.

"I was remembering when we were cadets and I first saw you."

Alexandra smiled as she could now go back to those memories without experiencing the darkness.

"And when was that?" Alexandra asked, curious if it was in the dark glen or the tavern.

Major Zohra took a deep breath. Did the glen count when she performed the Dance? Actually, she felt her in the glen and didn't see her until they were in the tavern.

"The tavern."

"Hmm." Alexandra was silent as she thought about it. "Things would be different if we had met then."

There was a length of silence as both thought on this.

"When I first saw you in the infirmary I didn't recognize you because you changed your face." Gently she laid a palm on her cheek.

Major Zohra smiled. "Being a recognizable personality has its disadvantages in the cloak and dagger business."

Alexandra pulled Major Zohra face to hers and gave her a long and passionate kiss.

Some things are better when delayed.

Yes.

"So," Alexandra breathed after the long kiss ended. "Where do we go from here?" *We're due for another Dance.*

Major Zohra stroked the face tenderly that was smiling at her. "This is so different than... what I'm used to."

Alexandra pursed her lips and hesitated for a moment, then decided that they must have no secrets between them that could cause harm in the near future. "I was wondering how you could so easily fit in the Black Rose."

"It's a deep question."

Alexandra felt the change in the major like a door slamming shut.

"End program." Major Zohra rose from the bed, accepting a robe from the butler that was ever ready. Alexandra also rose and followed her as she moved into the sitting room.

A good cup of strong tea would be appreciated right now, but there was only water they had brought back with them. They both settled on the couch, at either end angling their bodies so that they were facing each other.

"I...don't really know how to explain it." Major Zohra looked up at the face that she had dreamed of so often.

Alexandra waited patiently, taking this time to study the stranger's face in front of her, yet feeling the familiar deeper connection that reassured her that it was the person she had so long ago bonded with.

"I guess it's because I have thebien genes, which makes taking on a role easy and just as easy to discontinue it and put on another." *Would you believe me if I said I need you?*

Alexandra smiled, leaning forward and cupping Major Zohra's face between her warm hands. "Those thebien traits that can fool even the wary. You can fool most people, but there are some things..." she gently kissed Major Zohra's lips feeling hands wrap around her wrists.

"Are you sure?" Major Zohra asked hoarsely, as her heart pounded loudly in her ears.

"Well," Alexandra breathed huskily, "if you aren't sure yourself, you can spend some more time convincing me...but, maybe another time when we're not so tired."

Major Zohra laughed. "You're right. I am tired..." *but I don't think I can sleep right now.*

She let Alexandra tug her to her feet and lead her back into the bedroom.

"Lie on your stomach and I'll show you a trick I learned about putting someone to sleep in a gentle way," she chuckled when she felt the major start to resist, pushing her back down on the bed.

It took all of fifteen stan minutes before Major Zohra's breathing slowed to that of someone sleeping.

Thank you, Sharon, for that handy tip. Alexandra rolled off the sleeping woman and settled down for what little time she had left for sleep.

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Chapter 22

It seemed she had only slept an hour, when the chime sounded. Both Alexandra and the major were immediately awake.

"Goddess!" Alexandra breathed.

"Good morning, and for the Goddess part...hmm. I have on quite a few occasions been called that." A voice came over the intercom.

"Clea! What time is it?" Major Zohra asked trying to shake the fog from her thoughts.

"Late, Major. We let you sleep in just in case you had problems getting back to sleep after the intruder alert."

Major Zohra could hear the smile in her voice.

Alexandra rolled over Major Zohra and headed for the shower almost laughing out loud at the muffled groan from her lover when she rolled over her. The shower came on and Major Zohra had difficulty resisting the urge to join her.

"What did you say, Major?"

"Status. What is the status?"

"Teams are reporting in. Intruder alerts occurred in Century City too. It hasn't been determined yet if it's some of the metrasoldiers that are still loose, computer glitches...or the alowan. No gate disturbances so we know there aren't any other alowans joining him or him leaving. The general thinks he's still here."

"That's the belief among the shamans and half my command staff. Did we ever get a number on how many of Alan's soldiers are still loose?"

"No report on that yet. Reports are still coming in so the night crew filed their reports and hit the sack. Those in the troubled areas are still working it. So you haven't missed anything yet."

"Okay. I would like to look at the reports they've prepared so far. Are captains Chilali and Raizel available?"

"Well, if you would unlock the door Sergeant Malta can come in and leave off a report with you. The two captains are still sleeping. They went to bed four stan hours ago."

"Let me know when they wake. Give me a moment to shower and dress."

Alexandra was out of the shower quickly, towel drying her short curly orange hair that was sticking out in different directions, looking sexy to Major Zohra.

"I'll hold them off while you prepare for company, Major." She smiled.

"I think you need to dress before you have the sisters in a dither at seeing a CO in her sleep ware." Alexandra snorted.

The butler had her new uniform, with gold braid and new emblems of rank ready for her.

"Quite a tailor you got here," she muttered to no one in particular. Dressed she called out to the computer. "Enter!"

Lieutenant Commander Montran stood waiting as two soldiers wearing the sister's uniform entered looking around for their major.

"Good morning. Would you like to have a seat while you wait? Would you care for something to drink?" she asked trying to be a good host until their major was ready.

One of the women raised an eyebrow. "Lieutenant Commander, were you not told that it's unsafe for you to drink anything that has not been prepared in the sister's kitchen?"

Alexandra smiled. "Thank you for reminding me." She refrained from telling them that what she was offering was from the sister's kitchen. However, if they were going to treat her as 'brainless' she would go with it rather than embarrass anyone. Silently she sighed at her awkward position.

Again the chime sounded.

"Enter," she called again. Two more women entered carrying food and beverages. Her stomach growled its approval.

Alexandra laughed at the startled looks she got. Then they all laughed. By the time the food was set out Major Zohra stepped out of the bedroom with her hair bound and dressed in her uniform.

The women saluted smartly to their major. Alexandra left the room to give the soldiers time for their verbal report. When she heard the door close she returned to their breakfast.

Major Zohra watched Alexandra's face as she made a selection from the plates. She had changed since last night. Or was it her? Her face turned a little red when she remembered Helen's quizzical look as she received the status reports. They would all be asking the big question.

"So...since you're my bodyguard and run the show in the Lair...just what do you have in mind that I do for the day?" Alexandra asked as she carefully chewed a fruit with a pit.

Major Zohra would have given a flippant answer if she was still a sergeant major, but a lot had changed including her sensitivity to the woman before her. The underlying tone gave her a warning that locking Alexandra up with guards posted outside her quarters while she made her rounds wasn't going to work.

"I was going to ask you, what you had planned for the day," she gracefully answered.

"You were?"

Major Zohra shrugged her shoulders. "You can follow me around, but I would guess you have business with the *mantes*."

"Ah, yes. The shamans and sensitives. Gari, I have very little in common with them. Wouldn't it make your job easier, if I just trotted behind you?"

Major Zohra looked at her suspiciously. "Why does that offer give me goose bumps and not the kind I like."

"Just what do you plan on doing that's dangerous?" Alexandra countered.

"Majors don't go out and about on deployments. I guess there will be two of us bored while we wait for reports. Sure you don't mind? There are simulators you can practice all sorts of games on," she teased.

The door chimed and opened. LaDea Gedaliaha strode in.

"How are you both feeling?" she asked seriously, studying them and then nodding as if she had already received an answer.

"Well," Alexandra returned, feeling apprehensive that she was going to be asked to attend their meetings, and feeling way over her head.

"Anything happening I need to know about?" Major Zohra asked as she picked up a fruit and then offered the basket to the shaman.

"Rear Admiral JoCastaos group found the person that Alan was using to invade dreams. She was able to reason with him by promising immediate protection for him and his family for information he has on Alan. He overheard Alan talking about a program that was used to contaminate Guardian's system. Must be the virus you were talking about, Alexandra. He is sure Alan didn't know he knew or he would have killed him."

"He's right about that. The backup system is being studied to find out what has changed with the primary. So far, the original program we pulled out of storage is doing fine. But it has not been updated since the primary went into production, so we're doing updates after we cross check information on what the scouts come in with."

Gedaliaha nodded her head as she rose to go. "The meeting with the shamans is for later this evening, Major. Since Alexandra would rather not be bored with our discussions, I will leave you to find something to keep her busy with. We do need to talk. Until then...my heart to yours."

The door swished closed after her.

"Well, shall we go and see what the troops have been up to, Lieutenant Commander Montran?" Major Zohra asked Alexandra with a smirk. "Kidding aside, I can use your experience as a flag officer."

"Thank you Major Zohra. Though, I would feel better taking copious mental notes at your briefings."

"Copious mental notes? Does that mean you plan on sleeping through them?"

They picked up the plates and were stacking them when the door chimed. "Enter!" they both called.

The door came open and help arrived to gather the uneaten food. Alexandra could feel Major Zohra's demeanor change as she faced her sisters. She stepped back from the table and waited as the women cleared the table. Startled by the shift in vibrations, she turned to face the door. Standing in the doorway was Vanster. Her sharp intake of breath caused Major Zohra to step in front of Alexandra.

"Megan!" she called in surprise. *They didn't tell me she was released. Who released her without telling me? She has a lot of grit to wear a uniform that shows she's been busted down in rank and appear in these quarters of the very person she showed insubordination to.*

"Good morning, Major." Vanster's terse voice returned.

Chapter 23

The recreation room was full of off-duty warriors, and the noise level was high until they were spotted. Zohra was sure it was Commander Montran's uniformed figure that brought the room to near silence. The sister's uniforms were dark olive green, with red trim while the Centurion uniform was dark blue trimmed in gold, with the added gold braid on her left shoulder, identifying her as a member of fleet flagstaff. Then again, it could be the energy emanating from her trim form. Not as powerful as it had been the previous night, but it was still enough to lift the hairs on her arms. Was her energy less because they made love? She sniggered to herself at the arrogant thought. As if...

However, she was putting out less energy, or maybe she was less sensitive to it. Mentally she added it to her list of subjects to discuss with the shamans.

A small smile curled up the corners of her lips. She glanced at the woman beside her who had everyone's attention. She felt something go out from her lover. It was smooth... a connection that flowed out to the group like a stream of water over a dry riverbed. Was this what the old sergeant major was babbling about? What would the sisters think? The conversations resumed after greetings were exchanged. It was as if they didn't notice. Then she felt it settle around her and connect to her.

Wow... Major Zohra rocked back on her heels a little to regain her equilibrium as the new sensation immersed her. She could feel the power of being one with so many. It was a heady feeling, just as the old Spartan had told her. Could the others feel it? No one seemed to notice. She glanced at Vanster who had been maneuvered away from them. Why had the old veteran Spartan noticed it and not her sister warriors? Alexandra must have felt her disorientation for a gentle touch on her arm, and something whispered in her ear refocused her. What word did she use? Whatever it was she was grounded instantly.

"They won't feel it until you use it," a soft voice informed her.

The major blinked a few times and then resumed her walk into the room.

"Oh, is that how it works," she muttered.

She heard the commander chuckle.

At the planning table the officers surrounded Major Zohra while Alexandra stood silently just behind her, listening. Major Zohra's field execs and scouts reported the happening in the cities that were brought back online. They needed them up and running in order to monitor life signs. The alowans were starting to appear in different parts of the planet, both interior and on the planet surface. They had to stop them before they became too scattered to monitor. The engineers were still working on how to disrupt any type of machine used to create unnatural portals. They were the reasons for the alarms throughout the cities.

The major confirmed Lieutenant Malchi's rebuke of the officer that dispatched Vanster to their quarters. It was the same person that gave a sloppy assessment of the Southern Rim.

"Before this gets out of hand," Major Zohra told Captain Raizel, "reassign her now, off this planet."

The captain nodded. "I'm not sure how she got picked for this assignment, but she has been stirring up trouble with her off-color jokes about you and..." she paused, wondering how to finish it.

Major Zohra looked at her staff officers. "I've said this once before, and this will be the last time. I will not have anyone...demean a fellow soldier...or anyone else for that matter. This is not the Black Rose or some Spartan troop that believes toughness is built on demoralization."

The others looked at each other and then back at their CO.

"So...just what do you want us to do with...anyone that mouths off, Major?"

"My orders haven't changed. Ship her or him out, repeated offenders busted down a rank. There are three ships above us and I'm sure there is someone on one of those ships that would love to exchange places. There always is. Just make sure everyone knows what is expected of them. That includes Vanster."

"Major, the general issued a command that all those involved in the..."

"Oh, right. Put her on notice. She gets brig time for the next episode. Lieutenant Clea, that's your assignment. Think you can handle it?"

"Love to, ma'am," she replied with a grin. *I sure would. There are a few others that got here somehow that I'm ashamed to say are sisters.*

"Did you say something, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get on it as soon as this meeting's over," she repeated.

"Okay," the major hesitated, sure she said more, but decided it wasn't worth pursuing. She turned to Captain Chilali, "Well, captain, what else have we got?"

"Good news and bad news. Alan's spacecraft has been spotted two days from here on autopilot...abandoned and suspected of being booby trapped."

"Keep on that information." Turning to Lieutenant Heleni she asked, "What have you learned about the programming on the main system?"

"We've made great progress. It's Agean. They are very talented in implanting subroutines that cause either great damage or great programming delights. Now we know what to look for. We have the brothers working on one and our sisters on the other half. It will cut time," she added confidently.

Major Zohra nodded and moved on to the next issue. For the rest of the afternoon she repositioned her people and kept after the younger ones to maintain their physical workouts. She understood how easy it was to get sidetracked with all the luxury toys the Lair had to offer.

Occasionally Major Zohra would steal a glance Alexandra's way only to see large malachite eyes gazing at nothing in particular. A sigh brought a questioning look from one of the warriors.

"Is that not right, JG...Major?"

"Let's give it some more thought, Sergeant," Lieutenant Malchi suggested.

"Why don't we break for dinner?" a voice at her elbow suggested.

She turned gratefully toward her companion.

"Commander Montran, that is a splendid idea," Major Zohra said uncharacteristically, for she was known to work though dinnertime, eating little herself.

The others laughed and began to call out for dinner to be served.

"While our table is being set I want to have a word with someone. I shall be back shortly." Major Zohra put a hand on Alexandra's shoulder to let her know she wanted to go alone. Alexandra had no intention on rising. She was tired and hungry.

Major Zohra's unease didn't go unnoticed by her team leaders. They too had been asked not to accompany her.

Carol-Maa joined Alexandra at the table after having returned with the patrol that visited Avanstar. When their eyes met, Alexandra couldn't stop the grin from the look of mischief in Carol-Maa's eyes, wondering what she was thinking. However, Carol-Maa offered her no clue to what was amusing her so the two sat in companionable silence as they ate. Carol-Maa was interrupted by some field officers that were curious about her meld. The conversation failed to keep Alexandra's attention. From her position, she observed Major Zohra question one warrior that was shaking her head and looking unhappy. Alexandra brought her eyes back to the table as one of the leaders coughed. She had been exposed to a gas and the tea she was given was assisting in the body's efforts to clear her lungs.

She returned her attention to Major Zohra who had moved to speak to a young man from Naboths Vine. He had a message. Suddenly, she felt a vibrant energy reach out to those in the room, coming into contact with her link. Sitting up straighter, Alexandra focused on the unseen figure behind the soldier from Naboths Vine. The touch remained but the person didn't intrude into her link, merely monitored it. Alexandra knew she was being read, just as she sought to identify that person. The problem with that, gained from past experience, was that the physical appearance most often didn't reflect the person's energy body. Someone with this much power usually hid it.

Curious, she watched as a cloaked figure moved unnoticed by those around her and then disappeared behind a group of laughing warriors. She spotted the cloaked form again, much closer. Slowly, she withdrew her contact with the group, letting the stranger take over. Still no one turned to acknowledge the presence of this visitor.

Major Zohra returned when the leaders were nearly finished eating. She sat next to Alexandra and ate sparingly of her dinner.

Though they sat with space between them, Major Zohra's elbows brushed against her energy field. Ripples of sensation touched Alexandra. As lovers, they had their own link, and it was strong. The touch distracted Major Zohra so much so that she discreetly moved a little further away. Alexandra understood her need to stay focused. This distraction caused her to momentarily lose sighting of the cloaked visitor. Relaxing in her chair, she watched the cloaked figure approach their table. Still, no one else seemed to take notice.

Major Zohra stole a look at Alexandra. Green eyes were staring intently before them. She looked in the same direction and saw nothing at first and then a familiar ripple in the air. She knew exactly who it was. Major Zohra looked at her plate for a moment to recenter.

Oh, Goddess. She's going to know about Alexandra and I. And she's going to know it's not a sudden kind of thing. Oh, Mother, are you going to be upset that I've been keeping this secret from you? "You are not eating enough, Major Zohra," a familiar voice spoke above her. Major Zohra jumped, startled with the others who also recognized the voice. The figure Alexandra watched approach, pulled the hood from her head.

A cry went out and the room filled with the roar of warriors as they recognized their major general. Obviously, they were used to this unusual type of entrance. Alexandra stood with the others. When the cheering died out, Major General Aglauros regarded her adopted daughter. She had not seen Major Zohra physically since she had gone undercover as a Spartan. Nine years was a long time to be parted from her beloved daughter. Tentatively she sent out a touch toward her. She felt the connection between her daughter and Lady Alexandra.

Lovers...lifemates! My daughter has been keeping secrets...and for a good reason. We would not have let her take on this long mission had we known...but Lady Alexandra...would anyone have been able to protect her from her fate? I wonder if she is as stubborn as they say.

She continued to study Major Zohra intently. Major Zohra reddened slightly but kept her eyes level with the general's.

"I say again, Daughter," she said softer, "you are not eating enough."

She turned her attention to the others. "I would like to hear what has been going on first hand. When we're finished, Major Zohra and Lady Alexandra will retire to their quarters and get some needed rest." Major General Aglauros raised an eyebrow at Lady Alexandra's frown. Both women looked tired and she could only image why.

Alexandra watched the connection that played between the two women, not concerned about her exclusion from the meeting, after all, she wasn't a sister nor officially involved with the ground security. Her uniform helped isolate her from the others. Alexandra's mind wandered. It was brought back to the group when she felt the general watching her.

So, my daughter is lifemated to the legendary empathic Spartan captain, and now a commander with the Centurions. Can't blame her for leaving Committee space. Easier on an empath if she wants to continue working in the military.

When word got out that a Spartan troop marked for death by a powerful committee member, was returning with the majority of their members alive from assignments tagged as deathtraps, she had sent her agents out to learn more. A trained empath among the Spartans was unheard of. So much death and violence would burn a sensitive out if not traumatize her. For an empath to also have the gift of *Galiel*, the ability to form a connection with others, wasn't so unusual. Military intelligence of all branches of the services kept records of such people. However, no one thought she had either ability and her agents as well as others that had investigated her just put it down to luck and talent...all but the shamans.

The general glanced at her daughter and then the commander.

So, did they form this bond in the Academy...when Zohra rescued her from that crazy Fermin kid? It had to have been then. A long time to carry a torch for someone.

"Perhaps you would not mind if I visited later?" the general was facing Major Zohra when she asked but generals don't really ask, even if their voice inflection is courteous enough to make it sound like a question.

"Yes. I will have some plans..."

"Daughter, please relax. Take time to eat. I know you very well, and I can see that because you have not had a mother or a lover to scold you to eat regularly, you have let yourself get too lean."

This exchange didn't seem to be new for the others laughed as if they had heard it before.

"Mother, you always say that. I do eat," was the muttered response.

"You pick," another voice told her.

"Bese! You old war dog!" The general turned quickly and hugged the other woman.

Bese gestured to the two women standing a little behind her carrying food and drink. "I am sending these sisters back to the major's quarters with food that will not spoil quickly and with liquids to store."

"Good!" the general rubbed her hands. "Now we will get some healthy meat on those muscles of yours, my daughter."

The general turned to Alexandra this time. "Lady Alexandra, I hope you will go easy on our major. She has not had a vacation for a long time and needs a small respite from the worries of command."

Alexandra shifted slightly as she tried to keep her thoughts clear. What was she implying, that she was to service the major? To baby-sit her? Wasn't that just what the major was assigned to do with her?

"Until I get my orders, it's the least I can do," she returned evenly. Her eyes flashed a warning at the general as she tried to keep her temper under control. She intended on talking to LaDea Gedaliaha about this turn of events or Admiral JoCastao. Right now, she would rather be with the shamans. She knew she was feeling this partially because of the remark but it was also because...she felt like an outsider.

Just get me back to the Ziggy! She mentally groaned. That was unacceptable. It would separate her from her Dancer whom she was just getting to know.

I would rather be here miserable than away from her.

"I will visit you in a stan hour. I don't want to keep either of you up too late."

Major Zohra face was unreadable during the exchange but Alexandra could feel her discomfort. Major Zohra nodded and with a firm grip on Alexandra's elbow, hurried out of the room. The warriors followed quickly with the basket of food and drink. Major Zohra leaned close to Alexandra, "She was only joking, Lady Alexandra. She does that to test your mettle."

Alexandra's arm was tingling from Major Zohra's touch. She pulled her arm from her grasp. "I don't appreciate being told my duty is to service you."

"I believe she was referring to your reputation for attracting trouble. I am still your bodyguard, so she must be expecting trouble," Major Zohra's voice trailed off "As we all are."

"Trouble?" Alexandra turned to argue but Major Zohra was speaking with one of the women in the group. Alexandra tried to drop back unobserved to let them converse, but Major Zohra put her hand to her elbow, keeping her abreast.

"It's rather difficult to guard someone who is behind me." Their eyes met and Alexandra saw nothing in them to indicate anything other than duty.

Damn those unreadable eyes, she telegraphed to Major Zohra. She was unsure if the look returned was that of amusement or annoyance. *Did she know what I was thinking?*

The door opened as the group approached. The two guards at each side of the door nodded at the major. Major Zohra restrained Alexandra with her outstretched arm while she waved the two women guards forward.

"Now wait a stan minute!" Alexandra exploded. "I am perfectly capable of looking for T&Ts or any other oddity as anyone here. I've also been in the room longer and would know what is out of place!"

Major Zohra looked at her surprised. "I have no doubt of **your** skills Lady Alexandra, but these warriors need the practice."

Alexandra felt her face heat up with anger. Again she was being addressed as Lady Alexandra.

"But, I can see you are going to be trouble if you don't have something to do," Major Zohra gave her a little grin and gestured for her to enter the room to join the security sweep of their quarters.

It took less than ten minutes with the four of them. She would like to include her in on her own protection but her CO had relieved Alexandra of her military responsibilities on the outpost. Sighing, she wasn't looking forward to the visit from her mother. She had seen the fire in Alexandra's eyes when her status was announced in front of the troops and was glad it wasn't her those eyes were glaring at. But the general stood firm as if unaffected. That was her mother All right, remembering her own heated arguments when a young girl. She was head strong, but not as strong as her adopted mother. Looking back, she had been right to keep her from doing some of the things she wanted to do. Like leap from a ship blindfolded. It sounded safe since they were in an AEG until her mother asked what she would do if one of them decided not to retrieve her, for a joke. How was she going to remove the blindfold and who was going to bring her in? As much as she had fought her mother on it, she was glad she had told her no such stunts. And as much as the other athlete's needled her about her acquiescing to her mother's rules, she stuck to them. There were some athletes she would not trust with her life. With her luck, one of them would have been responsible for her retrieval. While Zohra's mind wandered, she waited for the search to finish.

The two guards noted the places that Alexandra checked. They made a mental note not to make the same omission again and would pass it on to the others as well.

Finally, Major Zohra and Alexandra were alone with the basket of food and water containers setting on the table. Quietly the two ate, as if they had not eaten when they were in the mess hall. Both realized they had been picking at their food.

"Why do they concern themselves with your eating habits?" Alexandra asked to break the heavy silence.

Major Zohra took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "I have always found it difficult to eat much when I am involved in...projects," she admitted.

"Oh." Alexandra smiled into the dark eyes, wishing they were not expecting visitors.

"Is that so?" Major Zohra returned in a low seductive voice.

The voice sent a shiver down Alexandra. She wondered what they could do in so little time.

The chime sounded and Major Zohra realized she had been holding her breath.

"Enter," Alexandra responded.

"Good evening Lady Alexandra, Major Zohra." It was LaDea Gedaliaha's voice that greeted them. General Aglauros was close behind, followed by two senior members of her staff and Carol-Maa.

General Aglauros didn't waste time with idle chitchat.

"Lady Alexandra," she began, indicating that they all seat themselves in the front room. "You are in a very difficult spot. First off, I want you to know that I, we, are all aware of it," she went on as she and the others took their seats. There was an urgency in the air. "Not just because of your social and military standings but because you are part of a very dangerous psychopath's plan. We want to use you to lure him to us."

Alexandra blinked a few times, while the general gave her a few moments to absorb that.

"We know that it's the Lair that he will be focused on. It has both you and the portal. Normally we would have separated you and the portal to make it more difficult for him and his troops but the Seers have seen that that is what should not be done. He would increase his terrorist acts and many innocents would suffer."

"You are the key to this siege he is planning," one of the others agreed.

"I think the key to the siege is somewhere in the computer's system," Alexandra interrupted impatiently.

"You may well be right, Lady Alexandra. We have dumped the core three times and each time we have put everything back together, the virus is still there," another senior staff member admitted.

"What is the first thing or the second thing the computer links to when it comes back up?"

"The cities."

"And then the subroutines within the cities with their utility bots. I feel certain it's one of the bots either in the city or here," Alexandra explained.

"That will take a long time to determine which one it's...unless...we add our own program to the main one and somehow tease it out."

"I would check the bot in Megan Vanster's quarters first and the rest of the other Black Rose members."

"Perhaps, Lady Alexandra, that would be a good place to start. Lieutenant Catlina, pass that on."

While the voices continued to discuss which city the main computer first contacted, Alexandra remembered the global diagram of Merkers Outpost. There was an odd color in one of them. Blank when it should have been green or gray. "Helgas moon." She slapped her forehead. "Not to change the subject so quickly but, I just remembered something."

"And that is?" the general encouraged.

"His back door."

"What do you mean? We have searched the cities for any break-ins, including Iota," Major Zohra objected.

"We would have known," Carol-Maa interjected, referring to the Enuits connection to the planet.

"When I first came here, I asked the computer for a schematic of where I was in relation to *Spinners* crew. The sections were represented as green, gray, and one blank. The outline was there, indicating..."

"It was erased."

"Yes. It makes sense. If Alan's agent gained access into the computer's memory he would be able to rewrite some of the lines. Did the version you used show any differences?"

"Just the completion of a few cities."

"To rewrite something, all that is needed is to implant a command that when another is given, it takes off and does its thing. What if, whenever the command to give an outline of a specific city is given, the boundaries are rewritten. Guardian said that he was still building up the cities when the original was written. The only reason why the original was set aside was that it wasn't as powerful as the backup and primary," Major Zohra offered.

Chapter 24

"Damn her! Damn that freak!"

Alan flung the data disk across the room shattering an art piece he had paid a large sum of credits for a mere two stan weeks ago. The impressive mirror art sculpture occupied a corner where it was hard to miss and for Alan, it was a tantalizing object to destroy. It was an impulse buy that had caught his attention while he was waiting for a ride to the office and after studying it for weeks he felt he knew just where its weakest spot was. The pleasing sound it made as its main column collapsed, didn't disappoint him. The intent and action to destroy was against the implanted chip's programming. Pain laced across his forehead and scalp, burning deeper paths across familiar territory in his cranium, and sending shivers down his spine. It was an intense feeling that he interrupted as pleasure.

"How dare she defy me!"

One of the few people that Alan tolerated insolence from closed the door to his office to prevent the shrill screeching from being heard by other renters that may be passing the outer office's front door. Hemmitt was Alan's private secretary of four stan years, which was an anomaly in a society that had a low social tolerance for outward displays of physical violence. If Hemmitt wasn't dependant on Alan's high wages, he would have done as most and found a safer job.

Hemmitt picked up a large sliver of the shattered mirror that had imbedded itself into the side of a chair. He had the mirror installed after he witnessed Alan's first episode, telling him he should watch the sideshow. Consequently, Alan was able to judge when he needed to start up his drugs again. He was never crazed enough to not know when his reflection showed the wildness in his dress that was one of the symptoms of his manic phase.

"This is how you look to your fellow business associates, like a rabid animal. If any of your father's business associates see you like this, you will be looking at a one way ticket to HinterWield," Hemmitt reminded him in a soft and respectful tone.

Alan caught the mirror's sharp edge, gripping tightly while his eyes bore into Hemmitt's. Blood pooled on the flat surface of the mirror then dripped down the mirror's shard. The plopping sound of each drop hitting the carpet wasn't lost on either of them, but Hemmitt wisely choose to ignore it.

"And you think you can do better?" Alan asked in a low dangerous voice. Spittle hung from Alan's beard that refused to be neatly trimmed into place. His eyes glinted like tiny beads of blackness through slit eyelids.

Hemmitt's emotions ran hot and cold, between amusement and fear. "No. I'm a secretary, not a businessman."

"Fence sitter!" Alan spat out, his body increasingly becoming tense, as if waiting for some sign from Hemmitt that would give him another outlet for his rage.

"As long as it's a flat surface, I can manage."

A vicious picture appeared in Alan's mind of a pointed shaft being run through Hemmitt's rear and out through his mouth, with visceral hanging on the end of the shaft. The pain that shot through Alan's brain from the taboo image he conjured up made his eyes flutter. Unconsciously, Alan wiped the spittle with the back of his hand scattering blood drops on him and the carpet, as he looked around for the daily planner.

Hemmitt held it out to him. Alan grabbed it though not in anger but from habit, leaving drops of blood on the secretary's hand.

"Well, what is the plan for the day?" he asked himself in a singsong voice. "Hmm." He looked back up at Hemmitt, "Get me Slinger."

Hemmitt nodded and left the room, not daring to wipe the blood off his hand until he was finished with his assignment. Getting out of Alan's presence was a priority. The sooner Alan got involved with his own projects, the more time Hemmitt had to manage the office.

If the salary wasn't as high as it was, Hemmitt would never have taken the job working for *le fol* Fermin. Hemmitt was his family's way out of a dead-end life of poor jobs in an overcrowded city of people. Though there was a population limit, and restrictions on new residential building it was difficult to keep out the migrants who were willing to live in overcrowded rooms.

Hemmitt located the card with Slinger's number on it. When he reentered the office, he found Alan drawing circles on a piece of paper. He had been doing that a lot lately. Handing the card to Alan, he

quickly left to let Alan handle his private business. Hemmitt dutifully noted that Alan had allowed the medibot to attend to his bloodied hand.

A stan hour later Slinger called back with a fake voice and fake location.

"I have a job for you." Alan's voice was hard and demanding.

"Isn't that why you called? Get to the point!" the voice retorted.

"Find me a channeler."

"You can do that yourself. They're on every corner in your city."

"Get me a channeler that has no scruples." Alan had to control himself with this person, or there would be no business, and he was very good at what he did.

"Hmm. Now that will be a problem. I'll see what I can do." The communication was broken.

Alan looked at his timer. "Erggggggg!" He slammed the timepiece onto the table, ignoring it as it bounced onto the floor. Slinger again evaded the trace. It was just a game he alone played. Alan conveniently forgot the last time he had tracked Slinger. It was to his own bathing room. The souvenir he left Alan was a bloodsucker that lived in water until a host was found. It was in his tub. If he had not added more hot water to his tub it would never have surfaced. It scared Alan enough that he no longer took baths. To further reinforce Slinger's disapproval, he didn't answer Alan's calls for three years. It was about a year now, since they renewed their business connection, and Alan found his desire to catch him increasing. This obsession caused Alan to put aside his caution.

Alan rubbed his temples, more from habit than from the after effects of the chips retribution. A giggle that had nothing to do with laughter escaped through his tightly drawn lips. Alan felt contempt for the science establishment that put the chip in his brain.

Over-indulged bigots. They should have studied their own research on the repeated application of pain. The body eventually adapts to constant pain stimulation and soon, the pain is perceived as pleasure.

A laugh started at the back of Alan's throat and soon he was rocking back and forth with his arms wrapped around his body, laughing mirthlessly until what he was laughing about was forgotten.

Suddenly he jumped up from the chair and cleared the top of his table with a sweep of his arm, pushing everything onto the chair he had vacated. Anxiously he spread his small stick pieces out. Each piece represented a person or a place. Only he knew what each meant. It helped him put plans together and work them to his liking. He giggled in a high-pitched voice as he mentally likened what he was doing to the corner bone thrower.



Chapter 25

Alan called for his personal flyer two weeks later. He was leaving Hemmitt behind to handle his end of the family business while he took care of his little web of information on those he wished to do harm. The cost was a substantial amount of credits so Alan's expectations were high.

Alan rocked back and forth in his pilots chair as he hummed a little tune. The humming kept him from thinking of some things that the chip would punish him for. Alan had no idea where he was going; Slinger set the destination. It was to protect the channeler, no doubt. Alan gloated to himself. The channeler had respect for him. People did things for his father because he had money. Alan had the real power - fear. It was a greater motivation than money. He knew this because he feared his father and knew just how powerful that was. He continued to rock while he thought of his childhood and Rene. He liked Rene. She listened to him and told him jokes.

"The freak!" he shouted suddenly. The pain was instant and expected. He had it down to what thought caused what intensity of pain. He used it as a stimulant. A grim line formed on his lips that passed for a smile. He will teach those scientists. He had a plan. Alan kept rocking himself, lost in darkness where there were no thoughts, just a numbing blackness. He found this place after the chip had been implanted. While his body endured hour after hour of pain as he fought the program, another part of himself was here, nice and safe. He was furious he had agreed to the implantation and furious at the weakness in him that had thought he should to pay for Rene's death.

Like quicksilver, his mood changed. His Rene. This metradame she now was, wasn't his. This was a real... "Freak!" he screamed again, but without much feeling behind it. He suddenly became worried. What if the chip no longer would respond to his thoughts? He would be alone. No, it was there. He could make it work. His thoughts turned to his nemesis, Lady Harriet Montran. Thinking of her never failed to bring him pain. She thought she was better than his Rene.

"She would not die!" he screamed to the computer console. The pain didn't fail him. He kept raging, letting the pain take him. He would pay her back. He knew he could get her. However, that freak Rene would not let him have her. She kept watch over Lady Harriet Montran.

"You're probably fucking her, you freak!" he shouted again. His fantasies stopped before he could start them. The chip would not allow him to think of physically harming Lady Harriet. He fumed. Nevertheless, he would get around that. He had in the past. The chip had a specific recognition for any memory of her but he was used to the pain and was able to think along certain lines of her before he had to break off from too much stimulation.

The computer chimed. Alan woke with a start. The computer chimed again. Where was he?

"What do you want?" he yelled.

"What do *you* want?" a quiet voice asked him.

"Are you the channeler?"

"What do *you* think?"

"Well if you are, you should already know what I want!"

"You want someone located. A young woman. Your sister."

"She's supposed to be dead!" he shrieked. The pain of the chip sent a chill to his heart. They lied to him. Did Rene know too? He would ask the freak. Yes, he would ask her, that treacherous beast. His Rene would not lie to him...but the freak would. He now only had the freak. His bodyguards should have protected her, he thought angrily, slamming his fist down on an unpadded part of the chair. That was what they had been hired for. They failed in their job.

"Where is she?" he suddenly asked in a soft voice.

"Where you left her. Your time is up."

"What do you mean my time is up? I am paying you. Your time is up when I tell you it's up!"

The communication was cut and his ship started to go into a free spin. Alan as usual wasn't sitting in the chair but rather balanced on the arm as he talked. As the ship dropped its gravity, Alan started to raise and spin as well.

"Stop! Stop! You will get paid!"

He dropped to the ground as the normal gravity level returned, his leg tangled with the armrest of his pilot seat. He drew himself up and flopped into the seat, his face growing red.

"You have three seconds to hit your transmit button. If it doesn't go through, you and your ship will be all alone out here until some other stray ship happens by."

Alan hit the transmit button, adjusting his collar that had become too tight. He liked this channeler. He will have to use him again. After five minutes, his ship powered back up and headed back to his office. On the return trip, Alan was rocking back and forth wildly as he skirted around the issue of what to do about his sister still being alive. He wasn't in the mood for any more jolts of pain. He wanted to go back to his stick pieces. They were what told him that she was still alive. Yes. Since he figured out how to word the question, the answers have never been wrong.

Dr. Sharon Teal received a message from Alan two days later asking about his sister that he had poisoned. Sharon didn't bother answering it but she did warn those on MageWield that he knew she was alive. She sighed. He was getting better at this game he insisted on playing. She had seen him in her astral travels playing with his stick pieces, moving them about and muttering to himself. It wasn't time yet for him to inflict his sickness on some of those that he had drawn into his web. Harriet didn't have enough strength.

For a while, Alan was bedeviled with small things that kept getting in his way and sidetracking him from his plans. But he was persistent. Alan was spending another afternoon raving at everything and destroying anything in sight. Hemmitt didn't try to calm him down. He had decided not to stay the contracted years and at his next pay, in three days, he would be gone. He had seen Alan smugly play with his sticks. He knew what they were. He had his own soothsayer he jokingly called her. She had given him the information he needed and she cut ties with him. She didn't want to be seen in Alan's dark cloud.

His desk chimed, Alan was calling for him. A dark chill climbed up his spine. It was just as the soothsayer said it would feel...dark and slimy. Hemmitt shivered and then quickly rose from his desk. He quietly closed and locked his door behind him, and left the building through the underground corridor to avoid being seen. He abandoned his planned escape and used his wits. He had used them before he got a job with Alan and he could use them again. His destination was to his family, in the Collective's territories out of Alan's reach. He would send an agent later to retrieve his funds he had been saving. Alan would not be able to legally take him to court for not fulfilling his contract because he was smart enough to have documented Alan's breaches of sanity and sent the information to a lawyer on a planet in Collective space.

"Well, where is he?" Alan demanded. The pale part time help was shaking with real fear. His fear was so palatable that it excited Alan. He toyed with the frightened man until he remembered his father's warning. If he lost another employee, he was on his own. No one wanted to work for him.

"All right get out, you fool!" He waved the man out. He marveled at his power to make grown men lose control of their bladder functions. He sniggered to himself. He would have to get Slinger to look for Hemmitt. Yes, that was what he would do.

Urots tits! Hemmitt has the calling cards.

Since Alan periodically destroyed things in his office, Hemmitt kept copies of everything that was important. Alan left his office and made his way to Hemmitt's office. The door was locked.

Where's the key? Security! Of course.

"Mr. Fermin, you have a call on your private line. It's your father."

Alan looked up guiltily. Did his father know that he had stopped taking his medication again? Quickly he returned to his office and before he picked up the line, he measured out his medications and shot them in his arm one by one.

"Father!" he gulped as one gave him heartburn. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting." His head started to buzz. That was from another of the medications. Without thought, he tapped his left eye where it was most annoying.

"I was just looking over the..."

"Alan, I want to see you now. I'm at the Hilltop. And stop babbling!" The picture of his father faded.

Now what was happening? Annoyed, Alan quickly pulled out his pieces. What was going on? He pushed them about annoyed. Something was wrong here. Why were things not looking familiar? He kept pushing them around trying to let his mind relax and see what was shown him. Angrily he swept them to the floor and stomped on one of the pieces. One of the chemicals started to take affect. Collapsing back into his chair he closed his eyes and let the soothing comfort it elicited move into him. He hated this feeling. There wasn'thing of interest that happened in this quiet state. This had been the longest he dared to be off his meds. How long was it? His mind started to clear as another chemical kicked in. Yes, he could understand a lot of things. It was frightening at what he knew. He got up and picked up his pieces. He would take them with him. It angered his father when he saw him play with his little figures but he didn't have to know he had them with him. He didn't want to be without them for too long and his father's meetings usually took weeks. His little pieces were his little messengers.

Where was his little Hemmitt? he wondered as he searched around the desk. He looked at his clock and realized a stan hour had passed. His father would be asking why he had not called in his flight plan yet. Damn him! He meant it for both men.

His interoffice communication line buzzed. "Mr. Fermin, your father is asking when you plan on leaving?"

Alan didn't believe his father asked. His father never asked. His hands shook as he realized he would have to leave a piece behind. Did Hemmitt take it? No, he couldn't have. His box of figures was always near him...except...except that one time when he went to see the channeler. Alan grimaced at this lapse in awareness of his little people. He glumly looked around once more. Fear of his father overrode his need to find the missing piece. It would have to wait until he got back. Then he would move all the furniture to find it, he told himself reassuringly.

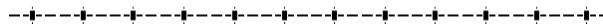
Tucking his box firmly under one arm and grasping it securely with the other, Alan gave a voice command for his office door to lock, a clear indication for the cleaning staff he never saw to not enter his room. Quickly he left the building, forgetting to call ahead to have his ship readied for travel. Hemmitt usually took care of such details for him. He also failed to remember to call for transportation. He was too calm to rant at the part time help for failing to know what was needed. Instead, he handled each task one-by-one, focusing on that one task until completed and then going to the next.

As the full effect of the chemicals coursed through his system he was able to arrange to have his ship readied and supplied for two weeks travel without causing a scene at the docking yard. Beneath the calm exterior though, he was cursing Hemmitt. He remembered to send his father a message that his ship was being prepared and he would be there as soon as he could. Another advantage about the chemicals was that he could talk directly to his father without his voice quivering. He often thought of this frustrating aspect in his relationship with his father. He was an adult now and should no longer find his father's anger frightening...yet he did. His father should no longer dictate how he lived his life...yet he did. Sighing at the complexity of this disturbing problem, he reminded himself he had things to do and one of them was planning on getting away from his father's influence. He was suspicious that it had to do with the chip...another plan he was working on.

After registering his flight plan and getting his flight slot he returned to his residence to pick up some personal belongings, then spent the rest of the time in his ship catching up on reports so that he would be prepared for what his father would invariably bring up, the business.

Two stan hours later a welcomed chime interrupted his struggle to stay focused on a very boring report. "This is Ship Ahoy at your aft bringing you fresh supplies and tasty treats. Prepare yourself for insertion!" the jaunty bot announced over the com channel.

Alan leaned over to the control panel and tapped a button to shut the alarms down for that section when the hull was breached. He checked a meter to be sure the supplies he ordered were loaded. Satisfied, Alan returned his thoughts back to the family business, the report forgotten. He thought about his contributions to his father's holdings. While he was in his psychotic state, he was able to see patterns in things, which the meds blocked out. Alan was sure his father was aware of it for he didn't press him as much as he used to about taking his meds. He was only adamant when Alan went into public or for official business.



Chapter 26

Five months had passed since Alan's father had summoned him to tell him that Lord Chaney felt their petition for a seat on the Galactic Committee of Families and Communities was dead due to **his** problems. Alan thought his father would be devastated and retributive toward him but he should have remembered that he was a businessman who made a fortune before his third child arrived and knew how to roll with losses. It was the only clue he had that his father valued his abilities over a seat on the GCFC, the Committee's lower floor.

Alan paced in his small craft as it made its way to the frontier where he had another meeting with the channeler. Once his father let go of the notion to belong to the Committee he started a plan to destroy the one responsible, Hadrian DeMonte. Lord Chaney had pointed out that Lord DeMonte made a motion on the floor to dismiss their name from the list as unacceptable. Of course, Lord Chaney omitted that he and the rest of the counsel agreed without any argument. That information Alan got from his spy, but he didn't want to further anger his father.

His father wanted Lady Harriet Montran, Lord Hadrian DeMonte's sister. It would kill his spirit, his father told him. The problem with this announcement to Alan was that he wanted Harriet Montran for himself. Another reason why Alan didn't tell him about Lord Chaney. Lord Chaney had connections and had somehow managed to legally kidnap Harriet Montran.

For three months, wearing her physically and mentally down, they had her wandering space without any contact with family or friends. They had effectively isolated her. Meanwhile he had other business to attend to. He found another channeler that had the ability to enter into the dreams of others and he needed to make sure he knew where his loyalties were. Jeriad had been working for him now for a month and from what his spies told him, he was ruffling the feathers of those he had been paid to disturb.

He picked up his notebook again and tried to decipher his handwriting from his psychotic state. He knew it was what he was intending to do to Harriet Montran once she was in his possession. He was going to have her turned into a metradame! He wanted her to be aware that she was his. Her memories were not going to be wiped. He wanted her conscious of her powerlessness to deny him anything he asked, no... whispered to her to do. Maybe even kill her brother...and his siblings. Then he would watch what it was like for an empath to kill. He heard they experienced the same pain their victim did...he would make sure he taught her how Decker tortured his victims. He could feel a sexual thrill starting but the pain from his implanted chip brought the feelings to a sudden stop.

A small beep on his communicator brought him to the present.

"Yes?"

"Alan. It's Decker. The bitch got away on Merkers Outpost! Ya Got to get these Spartans outta here. They're lookin' for her and you can't trust them," the voice whined.

Alan felt the color drain from his face and his heart stop. He bit back a sardonic reply. That news didn't seal Decker's fate for he was already living on borrowed time. One thing at a time, he told himself calmly.

"Were did she escape to?"

Decker recognized the dangerously calm voice.

"Somewhere surface-side, out in the sand. But I fixed her suit so she can't breathe good air. It's just a matter of time before I find her body. I got my people out searching the area for her now. But if the Spartans find her..." he didn't finish, intending it as a way to find out the mood of his boss.

"That's a pretty big planet, Decker," his boss reminded him quietly.

He was on meds. Decker hated it when he was. He never was able to bait him or know just how he was going to react. "We got a bug on her. Soon as the winds die down we'll pick her up."

Decker was being too confident. Alan knew when he was too sure of himself, the man was hip deep in chicken shit, and Alan hated chickens.

When Decker hung up, Alan sat in his chair to think. It would be useless to throw his little figures for they only made sense when he wasn't on his meds. He checked his scanners impatiently looking for the channeler's ship. Nothing. He looked at his timer. Not for another standard hour. He had got here early as the channeler requested. More than likely to make sure Alan wasn't going to set a trap around him. Why would he? He had the man's family hidden away.

"*Spinners Tale*, this is Alan Fermin on *Rouster*, come in."

"*Spinners*. This is Martinez, Alan. Come on in."

"What's going on Martinez?"

Alan got an earful, which had him pacing his small cabin again. He also talked to Captain Miller being interrupted as he tried to enforce his will on the man. He had problems buying Miller and not just because he was Lord Chaney's man, but also because he was a Spartan...a Black Rose Spartan. Not even his metrasoldiers could better the Black Rose troop. Killing them off like Lord Chaney did the Degas troop he had already found out...wasn't possible without him losing his own life before the plan was even put into effect. He had already received his warning. Too many exBlack Rose soldiers would carry out the order willingly...to exile him on a planet that wasn't inhabited by an intelligent species. He began to panic at the thought of being closed in...nowhere was safe in Committee space. Collective space was out of the question...they would send him to a rehab center. It wasn't like the Weild prison-world where inmates were as dangerous as the planet. It would be worse because they would kill him with kindness, making sure he was on his meds and taking care of himself. It terrified him at the thought to never be able to have a manic moment.

Frantically Alan pulled out a book that he kept hidden for disasters, fumbling with it until his shaking hands grasped the book firmer. Things were not looking good. He had slowly built up his own army. They were from quality warrior stock 'procured' from closed planets that still practiced brutal warfare. They were his muscle to carve out an empire on a planet that was so far away, it would take a little over a year to get there on the fastest ship money could buy...except if you traveled in a portal. His expeditionary forces found that there was a portal on his planet that connected to Merkers Outpost. He had never heard of a portal until then. Since neither he nor any of his agents could use it, the connection had to be terminated. Thinking of his planet, safe and away from the over-explored galaxies, calmed him. He just had a few things to do before he could leave.

He looked back at the meaningless writing in his book. He turned the page to a diagram. That he could understand. It showed how his army was divided into four groups. A fingertip touched the first circle. That was his first group that was preparing an assault on HinterWield. He moved his finger to the second circle. That group was in sleep stasis hidden on Merkers Outpost. He tapped the third circle. They were testing the defenses of the guardian computer on the outpost while the last and largest, was waiting for him on **his** planet, Arnica. Perhaps it was time for a slight adjustment to his plans.

"What do you want Fermin?" a weary voice came over his ship's intercom.

Alan jumped, dropping his book on the deck. A smile appeared on his face.

"I want to make sure you do as we have agreed upon."

"I don't back out on deals I close."

"So I've heard. However, I like to take out insurance. Am I understood?"

"You are."

Alan cut the communication. He made sure the channeler got the message that his family was missing, as he was halfway to their meeting place. Alan rubbed his hands together. "Let the games begin." He smiled gleefully and then frowned. "If you are dead **Lady** Harriet Montran, have no fear. I have a remedy for that. I own you!" He slammed his palm down on the hard surface of the console, letting the sting of the surface pass before moving onto his next plan.

"Computer on for coded communication."

"On," the voice told him.

"To Santeeies aboard the *Shadow Fox*. There's a change in plan. Move to plan Sigma." He thought again about the plan before ending the message. It would leave one ship at HinterWield to assist the four prisoners he originally wanted free, to join him on Arnica. The other ships would be deployed to the seven planets his agents told him also had portals. If one was destabilized, one of his agents had told him the others would also be. "Find the portals and destroy them. Send."

He smiled. He was going to go out of this planet system with a very big bang. He reprogrammed his ship to head for MageWield. His codebook to release the soldiers he had on Merkers Outpost and the coordinates for his next destination were hidden there.

He was a day from MageWield when in his idle time, he scanned the news channels. He was brought to his feet while watching a rebroadcast of the major scandal that shook Committee space. According to the newscaster, it forced a major reorganization to the elected galaxy group, the GCFC. The very thing that had been whispered for over ten generations had finally come about.

As he scanned the other channels, he found the same news adnauseum, with two exceptions...one was that Gustaf Fermin, one of the wealthy heads of family, had died from a heart attack in his swimming pool and his oldest son was wanted for banishment. The other was that Lord Chaney's death brought out

heirs claiming a piece of his vast estate. As pictures of the various claimants flashed across the screen, interspersed with the non-grieving widow and his angry daughter, Lady Varina Chaney, who was making accusations against the claimants and their legitimacy, Alan ceased to listen as he fell back into his seat. His bios rose and as they teetered toward danger to his health, the medibot became activated and administered a sedative to the unresisting patient.



Alan spent a few days making sure it was safe for him to land on MageWield to secure his book. Due to the restructuring of the Committee, activities by various cartels that operated outside of the law thought to take advantage of what could be a slow response from law enforcement. So finding him wasn't their priority, or so he thought. But to make up for it, the Committee had exposed to the public, via the news media, not just his father's illegal businesses under the Fermin name, but **his** crimes against the society that had granted him a stay of banishment a little over nine stan years ago. It forced him to use his hidden accounts and credits as he moved on with his plans.

Hours before he arrived at MageWield, he received more bad news. One of the guards he had left to watch over the channeler's family reported that their prisoners had disappeared. While he was shouting at the soldier, the intruder alarm went off on his control panel. He hit the scan but nothing showed up. Wiping the back of his hand across the scraggly beard, Alan paused to take stalk of the situation.

"Why did the alarm go off?" he muttered confused. Aggressively he punched in the key combination for system diagnostics and while it ran, he paced in the small space in the cockpit. His thoughts filled with fear that it was the ghost of his recently deceased father. He shouted in rage, pulling at his beard and long hair in agitation. He would have to leave his plan book.

Suddenly smiling he remembered he had everything under control. He had a backup plan. He stopped at a small way station, where he docked his new ship, *The Trojan Horse*. He sent his personal ship, *The Rouster*, on a preplanned evasive flight. Once he was safe in his new ship, he was able to focus again on his plans: capturing Lady Harriet Montran and then escaping out to the frontier, to Arnica. Just knowing what his future was going to be gave him a feeling of peace.



Chapter 27

"Major."

Both Alexandra and Major Zohra looked up from the map they were studying with some of the unit leaders. Major General Aglauros was off-planet in a conference with Rear Admiral JoCastao, Commander Ironsides, Admiral J'mai and a monk from Bea.

"This came in from Commander Mora. A confirmation of Naboths Vine's suspicions of Alan's movements in another sector of another galaxy."

Major Zohra took the hand held message unit and laid it on the table so everyone around could read it.

How far is his sickness going to reach and infect others? Worriedly, Alexandra looked up at the profile of Major Zohra.

Dark eyes looked into hers, echoing her thoughts.

"He has landed five regiments of metrasoldiers on a planet out that far?" Lieutenant Malchi asked unbelievably. "That was labeled off limits for settling since it's already inhabited by various civilizations that are still developing their technology."

"Just his type of place," Major Zohra muttered as she returned her attention to the data unit. *We're going to have to end his reign of terrorism here, on Merkers.* "I would feel better if we knew where he redirected his troops from HinterWield. The good thing is that it appears he decided to let go of the plan for a mass prison escape."

"It would have been a mess considering those already in the business of preying on others are taking advantage of the Committees restructuring," one of the officers added.

"Ten ships have been intercepted and Naboths Vine has a group of seasoned soldiers encircling them," the major read.

"A battle is planned?" Alexandra's asked softly. *What if they get through as they did the other times? So many gave up their lives.*

"That is the way of metrasoldiers. They are programmed killers. They will kill themselves to avoid capture and take out as many of their enemy with them," the major answered. *Death is their only way out of this servitude. I wish for your sake that there was another.*

"That first message is probably from an investigation launched about one stan year ago by Naboths Vine. They sent a battle cruiser out toward this planet in the frontier space, to see just what he's been doing out there." One of the others informed them. "Hopefully they don't have too much damage to undo."

"I hope they realize that Alan will have set traps along the way that only he knows the passwords to," Alexandra forewarned. *It's like he's everywhere. This will have to be brought to an end...but how, without perpetuating this practice of killing to avoid more killing?*

"Alan Fermin has been studied by Naboths Vine for a long time. If they have learned nothing else, it's not to trust him," a lieutenant said.

"Yes. They have also figured out how Alan's group has been slipping by them and now with that trick no longer working, they are in the process of herding his metrasoldiers here." A finger pointed at a place on the map where there were no jump gates to destabilize and no nearby planets they could crash land on and disappear into the wilderness or mass populace. "Then they will engage them in battle. It is regrettable to lose so many lives when they don't have a choice in their destiny," Lieutenant Hai remarked.

Death, to all those that had not chosen to be drawn into his madness. Will this really help? Am I putting more of those I love and those that I don't know in jeopardy by just being here? Maybe it would be better if I were on a ship out in space instead of on this living planet, endangering everyone. Would Alan go after the portal if I left?

Major Zohra could feel uneasiness in Alexandra's body. It seemed the more they were around each other, the easier it was to pick up on each other's mood. She guessed it had to do with her genetic makeup and Alexandra's empathic side. What a pair, she thought.

Looking up at the others, the major suddenly realized she was tired and by the looks of the other women, they were too.

"Let's call this meeting to an end." She turned to one of the serving women who were refilling water goblets, "D'ea, can you get the commander and me something light to eat from the kitchen that we can take back to our quarters?"

Chapter 28

Alexandra's inner alarm went off and in reflex, she was crouched at the side of her bed before she was completely awake.

Alan?

She could feel Major Zohra's split reaction to her movement following her to her side of the bed using her body to shield her from the sitting room doorway.

Where?

Alexandra became acutely aware of the body she pressed against.

He's not here.

Something's not right.

"We need to dress, now." Alexandra whispered.

Major Zohra let out a small breath of air in exasperation at the unnatural stillness. The lights in the room had not come up when their bio readings increased into a wake state. Only the outlines of the doorways could be seen in the soft glow of the exit light.

Both women moved to the closet, and pushed it open.

"Nothing is coming up," Alexandra remarked as she continued to glance around her, pulling her second skin out. "I hope I'm not putting this on backwards," she muttered. She extended her senses, tentatively reaching out into the sitting room then around their sleeping area. Nothing. If the lights in the room had come on she would have thought she was imagining that something was wrong.

Both pulled some cloths down in the darkness hoping whatever it was would match the boots that were directly below the suits.

"Hmm. Let's move over to the bathing room. It has a separate life support and a few places we can escape into until things get back to normal," Major Zohra whispered.

"Sounds like an ideal place to sneak in and out," Alexandra chuckled as she followed Major Zohra. "Hopefully we won't have any visitors taking the same advantage."

"Yes, by now everyone knows about it," the major whispered back as she moved to the bathing room door that remained shut.

"Hey. We can't be going into those places without our outersuits." Alexandra went back to grab the two suits that were hanging on the back of the closet door. Both women quickly donned them, grateful when they were able to see in the darkness through the helmet's visor.

"Disengage your camera," the major ordered through the mic.

"Good idea," Alexandra agreed. Alexandra hesitated, wondering if she should let Major Zohra know of how to make themselves completely invisible to any monitoring. Then she remembered her promise to Guardian and wasn't sure if it would work anyway because there was a new system in place. She decided not to try it unless it was absolutely necessary.

They closed the bathing door behind them and locked it. With the aid of the helmet's keen sight, they found a bot hatch.

The latch is...not releasing. Major Zohra grunted as she moved her body into another position nearly knocking Alexandra down.

Don't waste time with that. Alexandra grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her over to another cleaning bots storage. She moved the small cleaning bot out of the way and was about to crawl in when the major stopped her.

{Hey, I'm number one. I go first} she signed quickly.

A muffled explosion came from the other side of the bathing door, then more. Alexandra followed Major Zohra into the small space, going in feet first so she could close the door behind them. It wasn't a dignified exit as Major Zohra impatiently pulled Alexandra out of the bot chute by her feet and pushed her into the maintenance tunnel.

{Too dangerous to stay in these conduits. We Got to get outta here,} the major signed. Alexandra nodded and followed her at a fast pace down the tunnel, their footsteps barely making sounds. Alexandra accessed her own internal map and realized that they were heading toward the travel tube.

Travel tube? Looks like you have a wild rebel streak, my dear. Oh joy! We're going to hear about this when we return. I don't think the general's description 'to find a safe place until the area is secured' meant to hide out in another city, but then...some people are more creative than others in situations like these.

The area was dark as both women slid out of the maintenance tube. Their helmets showed no life forms. Major Zohra selected a car from the collection on the side rail that could be activated with a push. While Major Zohra sat behind the controls, Alexandra pushed it out onto the rail.

Figures she would take the drivers seat. Arrrgh! If this were any heavier, I would be overloading my suit with panting that would out do a woman in labor. Next time...she pushes and I steer!

She hopped into the small car as it quickly moved down the rail, further into the heart of the planet.

Neither spoke on their silent journey. The major used hand gestures when they slowed at rail crossings where Alexandra needed to get out and move the lever to change the direction of the tracks, then move them back again to avoid detection of their whereabouts. Alexandra suspected that Major Zohra was heading to the erased area on the planet map. It was the tip of Iota. When the expedition to the area wasn't as detailed as Major Zohra and her staff would have liked, she suspected the major would do something about it, though not like this.

On this adventure, Alexandra was merely along for the ride. She knew this wasn't the time for Alan's arrival. Whatever trouble they left behind in the Lair, was probably something Alan thought up to test defenses and rattle everyone's nerves. Besides, she was getting bored too, and thinking more about it, was looking forward to some action.

The car began to slow down. Major Zohra's hands moved over the controls guiding the car to a safe stop. According to the data files, this area was once a thriving metropolis, with a busy transport area that utilized the Southern Rim as an airport. Most of it had been erased and only rediscovered when looking at the city designs.

As they stepped out of the cart, the major signaled her intent to investigate the area. Alexandra smiled and mouthed a disbelieving 'no kidding', as the face behind the mask smirked. Neither trusted their communication links so they used standard Spartan hand signals. Alexandra noted that the area they were in had no breathable air for their species. Carol-Maa had said that the planet had continued to nurture its own planet species in some of the cities. She wondered if this was one of the places where the planet's natural life forms lived.

Alexandra stopped in her tracks. *Of course! MaaSa isn't a solid form...he could be referring to another dimension that our eyes can't see or our sensors are not picking up! We only scan for what we know! Duhh! So, this could still be a thriving metropolis, like Waterland.*

Major Zohra who was moving to the tunnel opening turned to peer at her partner whose hand on her shoulder had left suddenly. Alexandra brought her hand up in a gesture as if to slap her forehead. Major Zohra signed to her concerned.

Blasters, Gari. How do I explain this to you? Alexandra thought frustrated. She pulled Major Zohra against the tunnel wall and signed the spelling of the Enuits of Waterland.

Major Zohra shook her head and turned quickly to see a shadow pass by.

Gari, listen to me, please! Alexandra pleaded mentally.

Major Zohra turned back to look at her surprised.

Gari, can you hear my mental speech?

Major Zohra's eyes opened wide as she nodded.

It's got to be this planet and the intensity of our thoughts. I believe the beings that are here, are like the Enuits. We Can't see them, but they are here...everywhere. The city is still here! Alexandra imagined the solid world and then something that was as shadows existing superimposed over the solid.

Major Zohra looked puzzled, then nodded in understanding.

Well, that explains the shadows moving around, Major Zohra thought partially relieved. Now she just had to figure out what their intentions were. Major Zohra signed that that was what she was seeing before them.

Alexandra's eyebrows rose and she moved in front to see around her. She stilled herself and shifted her awareness. She nearly fell back into Major Zohra when the shadows took on a more visual form of swirling colors.

There is a whole city here! Alexandra took a deep breath and watched the movement of images, as they appeared to be going about their business. Some glanced her way but didn't alter their direction. The major tugged on her sleeve, demanding an explanation of what she was seeing.

Gari, there's a whole city here! There's movement of shapes, beings, like they are very busy. Some see us but they don't seem to care. Alexandra's fingers moved quickly repeating what she thought.

Major Zohra sighed mentally. She hoped another meld would not be called for here. Then there was this new development in their relationship. Reading each other's minds wasn't something she was comfortable with. She was really going to have to be careful with what she thought. A sudden grin made its way to her face, and she gave Alexandra a quick look.

No need. A small group of forms are moving toward us. Uh, oh. I sure hope the energy that's dancing around them doesn't mean we're in trouble.

Major Zohra moved immediately in front of Alexandra, facing forward but not knowing exactly what she was facing. They were still gray unclear shadows to her.

Relax your eyes, Gari. It's like when you relax to meditate. She put her hands on the soldier's shoulders to help her.

The affect on Major Zohra's vision was almost immediate. She breathed in slowly at the shift in her sight. Some of the energy forms appeared to be approaching at a fast clip and were in whirling colors that she needed to determine if they were threatening or not.

Relax just a bit; they see us as...too bright...probably from our emotions, Alexandra coached.

The major changed her thoughts to less defensive ones hoping that was what Alexandra meant, but not wanting to be too trusting or let whatever they were facing think they were easy pickings.

The energy patterns, as Alexandra identified them, stopped just short of the entrance of the tunnel they were standing in.

Well, Gari, here is the test...

Alexandra slipped from around Major Zohra and taking her gloved hand pulled her out of the tunnel with her. She stopped two boot lengths outside of the tunnel.

Alexandra tentively connected with the spirit of the planet and sent a respectful thought of blessings upon it. Both waited as the various colors around them mixed closer to one shade with occasional lights of other colors flickering across what was now a cloud before them.

Greetings Offworlders, a soft voice whispered in both their heads. Images appeared as a question as to why they were in their city again, uninvited as well as unwanted. Another question came asking if they had come to finally remove...the image that appeared in their minds was a ship with lifeforms lying in sleep pods.

Goddess be blessed! We found his hidden cache of soldiers! Major Zohra let out a noisy sound of air as she realized their luck in finding it.

The major sent out an image of herself and Alexandra looking over the ship and its crew and showing that they and others would remove the object that was in their minds, trespassing.

Gari, they don't want others...they will only let us through.

Major Zohra nodded at Alexandra. She received the same image in her mind.

Alexandra formed a question to the lifeforms if it would be permitted for them to use their voice communication links. They both received an affirmative response. Turning on their mics could also give a location of their whereabouts to the computer, which neither at the moment minded.

"Let's go see what's in this ship, Major."

"Yes, a legitimate recon mission," the major agreed starting up the path that cleared of life forms. "I was getting a headache with the mental stuff."

"Ah." Alexandra read more into her comment than the major intended. She let Major Zohra take the lead. Resting her hand on Major Zohra's shoulder, she extended her senses to feel around where they were. A smile formed on her face as she touched a small creature's awareness that was living in the foliage that their eyes couldn't see as they passed. In this other dimension life existed all around them sending little jolts of energy through Alexandra as she connected with them.

Major Zohra turned her head slightly to look at Alexandra and found her eyes vacant as if her thoughts were elsewhere. She returned her attention back to the trail, careful to pick a smooth path so that her distracted partner would not trip.

The two were led to a vast cavern that opened to the surface. Both could see and hear the effects of a windstorm in progress on the planet surface.

Alexandra felt the ship before they saw it.

The major returned to gestures as she informed Alexandra they would circle the crater the ship was resting in from opposite angles, to study it. Both women settled across from each other looking down on a lip that appeared to be over a latent volcanic bole. Apparently, the ship was using the energy from the volcano to keep the ship running, thus not using any of the ships systems that would put out an energy signature that could be scanned.

Gari? When Major Zohra looked up, she motioned that she had spotted what appeared to be a way down to the lip.

Cautiously they made their way to the opening between two rocks hoping not to run into any traps. They were disappointed for there were T&Ts covering the access to the ship.

An image appeared to Alexandra and she turned in surprise. One of the life forms was wavering near them. The image showed her another way to the ship...it involved just jumping off the edge of the crater.

Alexander had to stifle a laugh. She pictured two things that could happen to their more solid life forms if they jumped. One was that they would hurt themselves and the other of the noise that it would create when their bodies dropped on top of the ship.

Alexandra felt puzzlement from the light form. She returned her attention to her partner who was looking around for another way down. Suddenly Alexandra felt herself lifted and as if on a wave of energy, was carried over the rim and set next to the ship's outer hull. The major was quick to follow. Another laugh threatened to escape Alexandra as she found their newfound allies more than willing to...probably do anything, to get the foreign object out of their environment.

Major Zohra's look of astonishment turned into a look of relief as she pulled on Alexandra's arm to again move in a circle and study the ship for a way in. Both met at their starting point. All the outer doors were tightly shut and had traps set to go off if anyone attempted to enter.

On impulse, Alexandra put a question to the life form that was following her. Both women were shown a picture of a leakage in the structure that was dumping toxic waste in their environment. It was no wonder why they were angry about the ship being here.

Major Zohra and Alexandra moved up a slight incline where they could get a view of the top hatch. Through their helmets, they could see a small leak of breathable air. Neither could see any traps around the area.

Major Zohra pressed Alexandra's arm for her to step back from their perch. She leaped into the air and landed with barely a sound on top of the ship's hull, thanks to the help from their new assistants. Alexandra followed, quietly thanking the two shadows.

The top hatch had not been locked properly and therefore didn't take much for them to open and enter. Major Zohra was about to seal the hatch area and release breathable air for them when Alexandra stopped her. *There is one that is following us. It would like to be let in.*

Major Zohra pushed the latch up but a mere hand's breath when a colorful swish of something slid in. Then she closed the lid tight and released breathable air for them but slowly to make sure the life form would not be affected.

When the readings gave them an all clear both removed their helmets for conversation.

"Well?" Alexandra asked the major softly.

"We look for the pods," Major Zohra returned just as softly.

"Why not just put this thing on autopilot and let our ships topside do the rest?" Alexandra asked, not wanting to search a ship that could have many unfriendly traps. Alexandra saw the disappointment in her partner's eyes. "Gari, there's plenty of time for a challenging adventure, but not now," Alexandra consoled her partner.

Major Zohra glanced at her and saw the amusement glittering in her green eyes. Her eyebrows rose in surprise. *I am disappointed. I think I've lived too long with the constant adrenaline rush as part of everyday life.*

The Black Rose would have as a team, swept through, regardless of the traps, just to take possession of a ship that belonged to the enemy. It was what they did and did well. However, Alexandra was right. They didn't want to call attention to themselves, especially when they just left a bad situation at the Lair.

"Right." Suddenly her face broke into a grin. "Promise?"

"Promise what?" Alexandra asked as she followed Major Zohra's figure to the bridge.

"Promise about the adventure."

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "Warriors...always out for a life and death thrill."

The bridge had seating for six and the area looked too clean, though worn. A quick survey gave Alexandra the impression it was a used Que-E bus. They were used primarily to move groups of workers and their equipment and supplies from one star system to another. They weren't armored nor armed, but by the uncommon Que-E console with too many controls, she was sure this one was modified and upgraded for a troop carrier.

Alexandra quickly set the ship on auto and enabled the beacon so the moment it went active it would send out its identifier.

"Let's get out of here," Alexandra had a bad feeling. "Quickly." She engaged her helmet with the major following suit.

Major Zohra looked around for anything that was a threat, feeling the same.

As the two raced back to the outer hatch an image of a guard bot, armed to the teeth, flashed in both their minds, compliments of the lifeform that was with them.

Major Zohra whispered a curse as she altered course and ran down another corridor in the ship, grabbing the handrails and sliding down to another level. Alexandra was close behind. The back of her helmet gave her the picture of guard bots released from their wall storage slots as the ship began to power up.

Alexandra remembered there were always emergency hatches for dumping cargo out on each level of Que-E buses due to their vulnerability to pirate boarding. "Garbage," Alexandra muttered as she leaped over a small cleaning bot that was rolling around.

Major Zohra's forward motion stopped and she turned to catch Alexandra who bumped into her. She pushed her back a few yards. There on the wall was a symbol for a dumpster.

"We're on the save wave length," Alexandra muttered as she hit the release. Major Zohra, who was behind her, pushed her out first. They dropped onto the floor of the cavern as the ship moved to exit out of its hiding place. The life form that had attached itself to Alexandra's shoulder in the ship now hovered just above them, as if watching the detested ship leave its space.

"Are you All right?" Major Zohra asked as she rolled to her feet and surveyed the area then back to Alexandra who watched the departing ship from her reclining side.

"Yes. Well...I guess we can get back to the Lair. By the time we do get back the excitement of this ship will have died down."

"I think our appearance will just get them all up again." There was a smirk in Major Zohra's voice.

"Gari, I have a feeling...you are going to be needing a close eye kept on you when you get bored."

Major Zohra looked at her in mock indignation and then chuckled. She turned her attention back to the shadows that were around them.

"We're going to have to figure out how to remove the explosives in the volcano."

It took a lot of image exchanges to convince the natives that they lacked the equipment at the moment to safely remove some of the traps. There were some that Alexandra didn't recognize and was hoping Major Zohra did. The agreement they came up with was that they would return to the Lair, get what they needed and return...alone.

As the two were sitting in the car heading back toward the Lair, with Alexandra driving, she could feel Major Zohra's pensive mood.

"So...did you recognize all those traps?" She thought she would talk about something neutral.

Major Zohra glanced at her. "No."

"Hm." Alexandra thought about this. "This is an adventure," she offered.

"Yes, it's at that," Major Zohra grinned at her. "Am I being rationed on these or, do I get my pick?"

"Hm. Well, you are a CO with some status. I guess some of them you can pick. However, I remember once hearing that everything is an experience and its just how you approach it that turns it from a disaster to an adventure."

"What boot camp did you go to?" Major Zohra snorted, but she smiled and leaned back as the car neared the Lair.

Alexandra shook her head and began to slow the car down. She wondered if she was that challenged when she was in the Spartans. She decided she wasn't. She was too busy with staying alive and keeping those in her care the same.

Both reentered the Lair rather cautiously. Alexandra sent out a mental call for LaDea Gedaliaha and received a warm welcome back. She smiled until another touched her mental connection. Major General Aglauros' reply caused her face to blush. Major Zohra who caught the flushed face, smiled.

"I take it you've reached someone?"

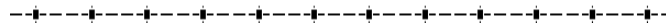
"Mmhm. Your mother."

"Better you get it than me. She's nicer to you," Major Zohra returned. She nodded to the first group of warriors guarding the tube area. The corridors were blackened, with the art objects that once

adorned the area, gone. Small clean up bots were already resurfacing the walls. The two women headed for Com-C.

The room was filled with sisters, shamans and Brothers of the Shadow. The two levels that monitored the screens were filled with soldiers moving and talking either through comms or to each other. A figure was in the chair in the center moving about studying the monitors and giving orders through her comm. Her position was called a Gruff, a person interacting with the computers defensive systems. The energy in the air was charged with anticipation, excitement and anger.

Alexandra was hoping the anger wasn't directed at them. They told the life forms they would be back soon to clean up the offworld mess. She wondered how that was going to go over with General Aglauros and General Hyes of the Brothers who commanded the forces in Century City.



Chapter 29

A day later Alexandra woke from disturbing dreams. *Where is the fear from? Is it from me or something contrived by Alan? And just what is this fear?*

The warm body next to her stirred, then a hand moved from her arm to her neck. Tickling the back of it.

She adjusted her body so she was looking directly into the dark thebian eyes that were more readable to her these days. The mind link they had between them was becoming stronger, so that it initiated without thought.

"What is bothering you, Milady?" Major Zohra coaxed.

"I was trying to figure out what I fear the most about Alan's planned invasion. I've come to the conclusion that it's not the invasion...I think it's my fear of... experiencing Alan's rage."

"Mother showed you how to ward off his feelings."

Alexandra lifted a hand to brush a stray strand of dark hair out of her lover's face. She could feel her energy. It settled around them like a protective shield but Alexandra knew it was the illusion of love. "His rage is...on different levels. Yes, I can deflect his anger, but...what does that do? He will simply find ways to grow in power and continue to hurt others."

"So...you're saying he will have to be...killed?"

"I admit that crosses my mind often."

"I don't wonder." Major Zohra had seen what his madness had done to others. But she knew that as an empath, if Alan died at Alexandra's hands, unless she was careful, she would sink into his madness when she experienced his death.

"But, you are hesitant...?" Major Zohra asked, uncertain if this was something she had the experience to guide Alexandra through.

"Well...to send him into the Land of the Dead when he is maddened...will only cause more havoc. You see...he will carry that madness into the next life because he will not wait for adjustment or the time normally allotted for a soul to process his or her previous life with advisors."

"Soo..." the major wondered if she really wanted to hear this, "what do you propose?"

"I'm thinking that if he was on his meds and we can talk to him, explain to him that it's time for him to move out..." Alexandra could see Major Zohra wasn't buying it.

"Alexandra, I don't think it will work. First of all...do you know of any mad person who would appreciate being told 'Hey, before we take your life...we would like to explain the principles of madness and the proper way of dying.'"

"Yes. I do."

Major Zohra sighed. *Of course you do.* "Maybe it's because I've been around a lot of real crazy people and lived like them...that I don't believe that will work for someone as far gone as Alan. He's been given more chances than most and he has not taken advantage of his borrowed time to get with the program. He has no sense of feeling for others so how can he feel any remorse or understand 'justice' in the larger framework?"

"I'm not suggesting sending him to a colony that encourages that type of behavior like HinterWield, because he will find a way out...and be even more terrible than he is now. I can see his madness. His condition will and is deteriorating with times passage. No chip or drugs will change or slow him down. I can see this," Alexandra told her softly. "I just believe that before his life is taken he be pointed in the right direction instead of being left adrift."

Major Zohra rolled on her back and thought about it. She was a warrior that lived in the present. The thought of souls and another life...that was for shamans and the Holy People that did that for a living. That was too far in the future for her. Her reactions were dependent on instinctive and quick moves without forethought and ponderous thinking of right and wrong. That lament was for later in a bar or after battles when regrets were spoken about quickly and then left there...in the bar or on the battlefield. Rising, Alexandra moved to a cleared space to begin her morning meditation.

Major Zohra sighed then rolled out of bed. Since she was teaching Alexandra exercises that worked on self-defense, she thought it only fair that she learn the meditation stretches and poses Alexandra did in the morning.

The chime to their quarters came during an exercise that required speed and accuracy which Alexandra was far off on both when compared to Major Zohra. While the major answered the door

Alexandra took that time to wipe her brow and take a gulp of liquid. Captains Chilali and Raizel were at the door dressed for a workout.

"Well...looks like Commander Montran is warming our major up for us. Here I thought we would get that pleasure." Raizel laughed with an upraised eyebrow at Lady Alexandra who looked the worse for wear.

"Right, I've warmed her up for ya," Alexandra replied, relieved that someone had rescued her.

Major Zohra laughed with the others.

Alexandra added, "Major Zohra, why don't you go workout with your sisters for a while. I'm scheduled to be with the shaman's most of the morning so I probably won't need a bodyguard."

"Well actually, a small group of Centurion soldiers were left behind so you would not feel alone and will be assigned to you when Major Zohra is occupied elsewhere." Raizel grinned at the two women. "Major General Aglauros talked to Rear Admiral JoCastao and they thought someone should give Major Zohra a break every now and then so she doesn't become too edgy and find herself some mischief to get into, taking you with her."

Major Zohra raised an eyebrow as they laughed at her expense.

"We've been saved from ourselves then," Alexandra smiled at her partner. *Now they think you're more dangerous bored than me.*

Major Zohra grinned at her, picking up her thought.

Another chime interrupted them.

A soldier dressed in the Centurion's uniform saluted and nodded at the group of women.

"I'm Corporal Provo, here to escort Lieutenant Commander Montran to the shaman's meeting."

"Hello, Royd," Raziel greeted. "They have you in escort services?"

A big smile formed on the red face. "It's better than being topside, Captain Raziel."

"Sure is!" both Major Zohra and Alexandra chorused.



The shaman's meeting discussed Alan and ways to contain him. A representative from Naboths Vine and other services that were affected by Alan's behavior were also there to reinforce their position that Alan had to die. There was no cure for him, no safe place to put him, nor anything short of altering his brain pattern to keep him alive. Making him mindless to serve the rest of his life out wasn't accomplishing anything in his life path, they all agreed.

Alexandra wondered how many were aware that one of the Sha'Kars from the city they had visited was sitting in on the meeting beside Carol-Maa. Carol-Maa knew.

Alexandra's breath caught. It was a very brief image. She looked around the group expecting others to have picked up on it but no one had. Carol-Maa glanced at her. Her smile turned to a puzzled look.

Alexandra smiled back at her and then glanced over her shoulder at her guard. "I'm taking a break," she whispered to him. "It's not like I'm contributing anything of great value." Corporal Royd smiled and followed her out.

Alexandra nodded to her posted guards and entered her quarters. There were two guards there too. She already knew there were two guards posted in the bathing room that would leave if she stepped in. But that wasn't her intention.

"I'm going to take a nap," she informed her guards. "Wake me when Major Zohra returns." They nodded.

This was the moment when she was going to find out if what she worked out with Guardian was still in operation with all the changes to his programs.

"Invoke," the first word that automatically set a mark on her readings and would from here on not register her real presence. "Gamma, gamma alpha, Maud, do you copy?" Her voice would not register on anyone's mics but Maud's.

"Harriet or is it Alexandra?" Maud's voice returned.

"Something's wrong, Maud. I had to..."

"I know. There was a trap set by metrasoldiers surrounding a patrol. They have successfully dampened the area of all communications so we don't know what is happening. Major Zohra was leading a team to rescue the trapped soldiers when she disappeared."

"What about the one's she was with?"

"Everyone is accounted for."
 "I'm going to look for her," Alexandra informed her.
 "I'm not surprised. You don't think this is Alan's trick to lure you to his soldiers?"
 "No. He's not here yet and he wouldn't let any of his soldier's capture me. The last time he left them to it I got away."
 "So, what do you want me to do?"
 "Help me, if you can. Where was she last seen?"
 "Near the rim but along the part the Black Rose hadn't surveyed yet. Guardian had never sent anyone there either. It's part of the Sha'Kars life space."
 "Oh, great."
 "What do you have in mind?"
 "I'd like to get over there and have a look around."
 "There is a trolley on the 9th level. It is independent of any monitoring. Look for the space between two figures representing the tao. I will meet you at the end."

Alexandra and Maud looked over the wide cut in the planet surface. Maud turned to see another suited figure moving toward them. Neither woman was surprised.
 Alexandra felt it was Carol-Maa. The Sha'Kar from the meeting was with her.
 "Well, we seem to have a crisis here," Carol-Maa greeted them. "We left the room shortly after you," Carol-Maa explained. "The Sha'Kar are not happy that another group of Alan's soldiers have invaded their space."
 "Can anyone see you in..." Alexandra asked worriedly.
 "We were never on," Carol-Maa smiled. "Shall we go and see the elders? We have an invite."
 The four moved to where Carol-Maa had appeared from.
 "Do you know where Major Zohra is?" Alexandra asked as they moved slowly down the cliff.
 "The Sha'Kar do."
 "Why can't they just tell us and we can get her?" Alexandra asked apprehensively.
 "Because there are rules and our presence here is breaking one of them," Maud explained.
 "Oh." Alexandra worked out in her mind what some of them might be... violence was one of them since she felt the aversion on her first connection with them.
 Their meeting with the elders was uncomfortable from the Sha'Kar's combined energy and their irritation of the repeated invasion of their sacred space. It took longer than what she wanted to take to come to an agreement for the exchange of information.

The three women and the Sha'Kar that accompanied Carol-Maa settled in a small crevice barely concealing them if they didn't have the 'blend' on.
 "Well, walking through there and freeing her is not going to do her any good," Alexandra surmised. The metrasoldiers had set up a small secured area in one of the openings along the cliff face. They were at the corner of the opening, using a tool Guardian's suit provided to cling to the rough wall.
 "Have you thought about the fact that if we appear, you will have to have an explanation of this suit. So far, no one knows of the disappearing properties of the suit," Maud pointed out.
 "It has crossed my mind. I promised Guardian I would not give it away...and I won't. So, what I was thinking... Major Zohra is pretty resourceful on her own. If we could stage something that would give her the opportunity to escape..."
 "An explosion," Maud offered. She pointed at the group of metrasoldiers clothed in AEGs, practicing drills. Beside them was a stack of boxes marked as ordinance.
 "Hm. Okay, whoops." Reflexively she ducked, then in embarrassment she straightened back up. A small vehicle moving across the surface of the planet slid down the face of the cliff and stopped near two metrasoldiers. They were on the other side of the exercising soldiers.
 "How did the ship move undetected?" worried Alexandra.
 "The Sha'Kar says they are using an energy beam that is distressful to them," Carol-Maa explained.

"Come-on. Let's move in and shut it down. That could be our time bomb." Alexandra was thinking of the self-destruct button on the ship. All ships have them incase of pirate boarding. To keep in accordance with the rules of the Sha'Kars against killing and other forms of violence, she would make sure the audible alarm was engaged so that the ship would be emptied.

"I'll take the ship," Carol-Maa informed her. "Carol does know how to do this," Maa informed her firmly.

"Okay, okay. I forgot. Maud and I will take Major Zohra's back."

The two women crawled along the lip of the cliff shelf and as quickly as they could, moved closer to where they could see the major who appeared to be unconscious.

"She's sleeping," a relieved Alexandra informed Maud. "We can open up a path for her here and she can escape that way. Our side search parties will pick up on the disturbance in the area, so she won't have far to go to be rescued." *They better be alert!*

"We'll make it so," Maud assured her.

"They have an unusual energy containment field around her." Alexandra pulled something out from one of her utility pockets. "When they give the alarm that the ship is going to blow, I'll cut their grids power." The HR read the energy wave that surrounded Major Zohra and vibrated when it had a destabilizing pulse.

Just as Alexandra felt Maud's pat on her shoulder to go, she sent out a mental shout to Major Zohra and shorted the metrasoldier's energy fence around her.

Major Zohra moved more quickly than her guards and knocked out two, bumped into another and then she disappeared over the cliff rim, which is pretty incredible considering the dense atmosphere she was moving in. Major Zohra didn't use the suits ability to disappear. It would be too obvious and Major Zohra, obviously felt it was too important to give its attributes away.

The camp was in turmoil but in a slow moving one. Alexandra was sure they were panicking due to the inability to move as fast as their instinct to get away from the danger that threatened them. She and Maud waited until Carol-Maa and the Sha'Kar joined them.

"I was able to release gasses into the ship vents to damage their AEGs and lungs. They won't be using that ship for a while."

Alexandra looked at the blip in the corner of her visor. "You turned on their beacon?"

"No. Probably from the acid cutting into their equipment."

"The defense forces will see it and be here," Maud noted pleased.

"This is working out too good to be true. Let's follow the hounds that are on the major's tail. I don't want anything to happen to her that we can prevent until her rescuers get here."

The three women watched from a vantage point, getting an idea of what was happening before they interceded again.

"She's having fun with them."

Major Zohra was using her two years of living on the outpost to her advantage. She was able to hide in small crevices with the suit's natural coloring the same as the surface of the planet. When the soldiers passed her she would take out her nearest pursuer and then disappear.

"I guess she doesn't need the 'blend'," Alexandra mentioned admiringly. "Good thing she's on my side."

"She's messing with their air," Maud informed Alexandra. "Probably denting the feed tube. If you know where to hit it, the victim passes out from insufficient air to keep them awake."

"It looks like their leader figured out Major Zohra's game. He's moving one of his men back up here to spy out her position," Carol-Maa reported.

"That's not going to be all the easy," Maud informed the group. The atmosphere was probably wreaking havoc on the AEG equipment and its wearer. He slipped and disappeared into the darkness.

"We have incoming," Alexandra reported. "The Calvary is here and we need to move out." But she was reluctant until she was sure Major Zohra was safe.



Alexandra found her holographic double was playing a flute in her bedroom. After making sure the guards in the sitting room were still at their posts, she cut the program and began to quickly store her gear. She decided a shower would be a good way to finish off her successful venture. Naked she peered into the bathing room, expecting to see the two guards. Instead the room was filled with steam.

Chapter 30

The next day, Alexandra was floating in the tub with Carol-Maa, Clea and Galdin letting the comfortable silence between them seep into her pores like a moisturizing cream. It was a soothing experience to be wrapped in an energy that was both supportive and invigorating. The effect of her life mate's presence into the bathing room was like a different tone entering the pleasant hum that surrounded the four relaxing in the tub. Alexandra's eyes fluttered open as she realized she was near. A smile creased her lips as she got her feet under her.

"Will you excuse me a moment? Major Zohra has returned."

The others chuckled and resumed a conversation they had dropped when the soothing atmosphere overcame their sensibilities. The question was again asked how the Black Rose squad escaped from their confinement and how they knew exactly where Alexandra was quartered.

Alexandra poked her head in the shower where her lover was rinsing off her day's work of sweat and dirt.

"Hi," Alexandra breathed in the spray as she stepped up against the body she had been picturing most of the day.

Major Zohra's hands were filled with suds as she was trying to scrub off the tiredness that was weighing her arms down from the digging out people from a cave-in. Herb scented arms wrapped themselves around her.

"Hm...this is nice shower service. I was wondering how long I could remain standing on my own."

"I've been driving everyone crazy with this nervous energy I have around me. I'm driving myself crazy too. You don't happen to know just what it's from do you?" Alexandra whispered in the wet ear near her mouth. Major Zohra turned around in her arms.

"Eh, Yes. It's from us being so close and...there's another dance we both need to perform."

Alexandra smiled into her dark eyes, amused at the flush that rose to her partner's face. "Uh huh. I got the lecture from your mother today, before she left for a meeting."

"Just what did you do..." Major Zohra started alarmed.

"Nothing. She just wanted to make sure we didn't go and exchange vows before she got back. She said if we put out any more vibes she was going to have to decree this part of the outpost off limits for anyone not accompanied by a partner. Think that was a hint?"

"Ouch. I think I heard someone else say something similar. For some species we seem to be putting out too much pheromones."

Alexandra looked embarrassed. "I finally found a shaman that would talk to me about this Dance thing...I still can't figure out why it's so secretive. Anyway, I think I kinda escalated it."

"How?"

"I've been dreaming of the next dance."

Major Zohra laughed and hugged Alexandra. "Good. That means I don't have to show it to you. That would cause us both to...well; let's just say...that pheromone gas would pale to it."

"Potent stuff, huh?"

"So I've heard," she replied.

"Are you up to soaking a bit?" Alexandra asked, concerned about the fatigued look in her partner's eyes.

"By the smell of the herbs on you, I'll be better off soaking in this stuff."

"Come-on then. Your friends have been asking about you." Alexandra tugged the tired major to the tub where the conversation was still on her old Black Rose troop.

"Jina Gari, where have you been keeping yourself?" Clea asked as the two women slid into the tub.

"Topside."

"I heard you wanted to question the Black Rose on their break out and was sent off to the other side of the planet to distract you," Clea teased.

"They went against all rules of a Spartan, and most of all, against the tradition of a Black Rose member. Spartan against Spartan is not Black Rose," she repeated for the hundredth time. It seemed no one was listening.

"Maybe it was you they were after, deciding you were a traitor and therefore no longer a Black Rose or Spartan."

Major Zohra shook her head. "Even if that were the case, it's handled differently. This was a breach of conduct. An open assault to destroy everything they could reach. Wanton destruction doesn't indicate they were serious of taking out a target."

"Perhaps a chip implant?" Alexandra asked.

"None could be found."

"Well there is low level voice hypnotics," Galdin suggested.

They were all silent for a while.

Alexandra stirred. "Whatever it was...they had to have someone on the outside release the locks on their cells and with enough knowledge to circumvent the alarms."

Major Zohra looked tired. "I'm going to sleep on that mystery. Come on," she firmly grabbed Alexandra's arm and pulled her out of the tub, nodding to the others. "We're doing some of Lady Alexandra's exercises at 0600 in the gym tomorrow. Anyone want to join...we'll see ya down there."

Carol-Maa who had been quiet up until then smiled. "I would love to participate."

What's the hurry? And why the sudden change of our workout to the dojo? Alexandra caught up with her as she was pulling down the covers on the bed. She tackled her pulling her onto the bed and for a while, they wrestled, with struggles becoming less and less. Alexandra's questions were forgotten when the first one was answered.

Alexandra wasn't able to sleep after their lovemaking. A feeling of anticipation and foreboding increased until she had to leave their bed. Quietly she walked into the sitting room and waved at the two guards that were silently moving about the room making a routine inspection to keep themselves alert.

Alexandra decided a shower would be a good place to go for space and a cold one to clear her senses. As the water flowed over her, she felt the familiar touch of the Sha'Kar from the Shadow City. An image of a ship, soldiers, and some of them in her room appeared in her mind. Then she began to feel the presence she had been fearing. The presence became intense to the point...

"Goddess, a breach!"

She was out of the shower and in their room to find Alan and Vanster with a weapon pointed at the fallen Major Zohra.

"No!"

Vanster's weapon quickly fired at Alexandra. She felt her body burn from the shot as her ability to stand left her.

Errrggg! It's a stunner just like that kid used.

Alexandra was quickly gathered and hoisted onto Vanster's shoulder. She grunted from the air being forced out of her lungs as Vanster ran down a dark corridor. For a moment, she saw blackness and then was dumped onto the cold floor of a ship. She could feel the Sha'Kar hovering over her concerned.

Why are you here?

While her body struggled to fill her lungs with air, she closed her eyes and focused on the ship's movement as it shifted to evade whoever may be chasing it. Her hearing picked up Alan's shouting and finally an angry Vanster, telling him to shut up, that she knew what she was doing.

It was only a short time until they were in space and jumping through the gate to another part of the galaxy.

The face that appeared above hers was an older bearded face of Alan. He wiped the spittle from his chin with the back of his hand and Alexandra knew she was looking into the eyes of someone not sane.

"Well Lady Montran..." He let his eyes roam her naked body picturing the agony he would inflict. His hand went to his forehead as pain laced his head. "When I get this chip removed...I have a future planned for you. A future that is meant to give me...great pleasure and you...a new purpose in life."

Alexandra could see his eyes cloud over as the chip sent another unpleasant stimulation to his brain. His eyes were glistening from the pain.

Alan was too hyped up to want the pain and he realized it could easily escalate causing him to become unconscious. They had a month of travel before they could stop at the illicit hospital ship. There he would have his chip removed and one implanted into his victim. Moreover, he didn't intend to let his captured Black Rose Spartan kill herself or sabotage the ship while he was incapacitated. He returned to his seat next to Vanster after he instructed the medibot to give a shot to his captive to prevent her from

Chapter 31

Major Zohra felt the air change around her and rolled to her feet on Alexandra's side dismayed when her ears caught the sound of a shower. Vanster was standing in the doorway looking around.

"What's going..." Major Zohra's words froze as she felt the stunner's impact. She fell to the ground a victim of paralysis that burned through her numbed limbs. As she fell, she saw Alexandra and heard her yell.

Agonizing through the return of feeling, she crawled to the sitting room to see what happened to their guards. Both lay on their backs, eyes opened to the ceiling shaking from the effects of the stunner. Metrasoldiers laid unconscious nearby. She kept pulling herself to the door where she could hear pounding on the walls. Suddenly the door opened and soldiers poured in...too late.

Lieutenant Malchi reached Major Zohra and pulled her into her lap stroking her forehead as the spasms ran up and down her limbs as the second stage of recovery started.

"Get her into some hot water," LaDea Gedaliaha ordered. "Move the others into the pool also. It will cut down on the pain and speed up the recovery."

LaDea Gedaliaha quickly moved into the bathing room pulling out of the cupboard some herbs and tossing them into the water. She turned up the heat regulator. Carol-Maa slid into the water and was handed the major's shaking body.

Tears rolled down the major's cheeks from the cry of pain her frozen voice cords couldn't shout. Fire shot up her limbs, burning, it seemed, every cell in her body. She closed her eyes and tried to center herself as Alexandra had been teaching her.

"Find your peaceful center, Gari," Alexandra instructed her.

"I don't have a peaceful center. I have a focused center," she returned, being a little upset that the general ordered her to light duty. The general laid out the facts: she had been working for nine years without a break and deserved some rest while there was quiet. She didn't need a break. She was fine. However, she was forced to admit, she enjoyed the private moments with Alexandra. So she gave it another try, paying closer attention to what her lover was telling her.

"Gari, it's there. Just a little beyond that focused center. Come on. All warriors need to find this place just as much as that focused center you use to fight from."

She breathed deep and let it out slowly. She opened one dark eye and peeked at Alexandra. Alexandra shook her head and with a smile, leaned forward until their foreheads touched. She closed her deep emerald green eyes and she could feel a stillness wash over her. It was...beautiful.

Finally Major Zohra rose from the hot water, furious. "Helgas bloody moon! That woman is dead!" She pushed against Carol-Maa's arms that had been supporting her. The arms around her tightened. Out of frustration, Major Zohra leaned back against the bare breasts shouting her anger and fear...for Alexandra. Major Zohra finally gave in to the hurt. She cried out the loss and the pain of being deceived by an old friend.

Her anger and hurt spent, she was helped out of the water. The guards already recovered, had left.

"Now...we can get to work!" General Aglauros nodded from the sitting room. Let's meet in five stan minutes in Com-C. That should give you time to dress, Daughter."



The meeting room in Com-C was filled with top officers and shamans.

General Aglauros began the meeting as soon as Major Zohra took her seat.

"This is how it stands now. On Merkers, we've got five sections that are under siege by soldiers...they are alowans. We're attempting to contain them. We have also stopped Alan's teams that were sent to destroy seven portals. Thank you brothers for your work on deciphering his black book." She nodded to the tall red headed Lord Hadrian DeMonte.

Major Zohra studied the man noting that there was only a slight resemblance to Alexandra until she noted the set of his shoulders. Stubborn.

"Now...we need to find Alan. Our spy has sent a message that they are in route to the *Shiae*, which is an illegal hospital ship that removes and implants chips. It's a month's travel and that is without taking evasive maneuvers. Thanks to Brother Regas we were also able to discover who was Alan's plant in the Black Rose, our sister Megan also known as Vanster."

Major Zohra clutched the arms of her chair and the shaman on the side of her touched her hand gently.

"Because of that...we were able to use Vanster." Aglauros shook her head sadly. "Lieutenant Ninian of the Black Rose, who is Brother Regas, knew that Vanster was under Alan's thumb for a long time and was monitoring her. We couldn't tell you, Daughter, in case it would change your relationship with her. Alan had a chip implanted in her that enhanced her prejudice for the upper class. We've dissolved it. Her quarters in the City was wired to give her hypnotic suggestions to hate Lady Alexandra in particular."

Aglauros held up her hand to forestall the comment on Major Zohra's lips. "Daughter, we dissolved the chip and countered the suggestion but...she had to continue to act her role, just as we had to let the Black Rose escape from their prison. In two days our counter suggestions should be overriding Alan's hateful program. Sister Megan is not as hateful toward the classes as one may think. She is resentful...but not hateful. She will rise to the occasion when she realizes how Alan had used her. I have faith in her."

Mother! I hope you are right for the woman I have bonded with in my heart...is at her mercy, Major Zohra prayed silently.

"We have a ship watching the *Shaie*. Alan will not get any help there."

General Aglauros continued with her summarizing and enlightening the others of the military and political goings on in the Galaxies.

The meeting seemed to go on for a long time and the calming effect of the touch on her hand was wearing off. The ache she was feeling left her empty and lost. It seemed the further Alexandra moved away from her the deeper her depression.

"Daughter," Major General Aglauros called again.

Major Zohra lifted her head and blinked a few times. She looked around startled that the room was empty with the exception of her mother.

"I think you need to keep busy."

Zohra shook her head trying not to cry. She couldn't believe how intense the pain of Alexandra's departure was.

"You have not danced the third dance, I take it."

Major Zohra shook her head, as she was unable to speak. "No...time," she finally got out.

Aglauros pulled her warrior daughter toward her and held her as she wept. Aglauros sighed. She knew she should not do it, but..."There's a ship leaving in a stan hour to check out Alan's abandoned ship. It's been monitored long enough to know he's not around, but it does have traps on it...and you are the specialist in that field..."

Major Zohra kissed her mother on the cheek, knowing she was stretching rules. "Thank you, Mother."



Chapter 32

"All right Ensign, come about easy. Over," Major Zohra was outside the hull of *Star Voucher*, dressed in a top of the line AEG suit that soldier's normally do not get. The Collective's Lieutenant Commander Planin, who was second to Captain Itk of the *Star Voucher*, provided it. They were the same height and stature.

"Coming about easy, Major. Over."

Major Zohra found one bomb trip at the portal opening for a life pod release. She pulled herself out of the way as the pilot eased the ship closer to the hatch opening. Though Captain Itk was the boss of his ship, she was the boss over this recon mission and had directed him not to order a coupling hull to hull. With the umbilical tube, they would be able to quickly break away if they should need to. As the tube slowly extended she grabbed the edge and pulled herself inside, tumbling and twisting, as the tube continued its progress to come up gently against the hatch.

"Contact....Seals are secured....Readings are good to go. Over." she reported in her com. She felt the breathable air rush around her and braced herself for the heaviness that would follow environmental stabilization within the umbilical tube.

Air inside the ship was breathable according to the readings, but one could never be sure what would happen.

The personnel from *Star Voucher* were to leech as much data from the ship, then let her go just in case Alan returned or the ship had other purposes.

"Corporal, don't step there." Major Zohra halted the young soldier before he placed his boot on a plate that could be rigged. Major Zohra was tense, but not from the job. This was everyday stuff for the Black Rose. She took a deep breath to bring focus back into herself, examining what was going on, separating personal issues from business.

Corporal Stik slowly withdrew his foot, sweat beading up on his upper lip. His eyes watched the major as her eyes stared at nothing in particular. As long as she remained still, he would too.

"Wait here...don't move or touch anything." She could hear an alarm going off. It wasn't reporting a ship problem but a...lifeform.

She found a body, nearly dead, in one of the staterooms.

"Corporal! We got a live one...barely, in the third state room on the right. Send in a medibot, stat! Major Zohra to *Star Voucher*. Over."

"I heard you Major. I'm sending a medibot over to assist with the victim."

"Captain, the less over here the safer. Over."

There was silence as the captain struggled with his command being challenged. "As you wish, Major. A medibot will be sent over. Over."

Major Zohra completed her meticulous inspection of the ship where the two communications experts were going to be working. She had vented the ship from the smell of the injured man and they were all enjoying the scented smell left behind.

"Do not go anywhere without telling me...that includes the can. Am I understood?"

The two nodded.

Something feels wrong about this ship. Why didn't he sabotage it when he left? Why just leave a body to rot with a few traps...it's like he doesn't want to damage the ship's hull integrity...why?

Standing in the cockpit, she looked around at the controls. It could be a four crewed ship or just one pilot. It was a luxury yacht that carried five small cabins, seating for eight and a cargo bay that could be packed with a months worth of trinkets bought on Centur I. Centur I's inhabitants were twice Zohra's height and everything on Centur I was big and cheap. Sighing she decided to check his call logs. She looked over the shoulder of the communication ensign.

"Now what do we have here? He deleted everything but the backup files. He must have been in a hurry to have forgotten," Ensign Hailal muttered to herself.

"Ensign Hailal, do you think we can get a dump of these files? Looks like they go back a while."

"Major. By these dates, he hasn't erased his backup files for six months....hmmm. Someone has been downloading these files and then erasing them when the download has completed...see, here is the logon."

Chapter 33

"Alan, leave her be," Vanster growled. She had left her pilot's seat to see why Alan wasn't answering her.

He was squatting next to the unconscious figure, tracing invisible lines along the bare body that had bruises and cuts from their rough ride out of Committee space. He wasn't acting harshly yet, since the chip would render him unconscious.

"Shut up, bitch!" he snarled at her and continued with his fascination of watching the skin of the partially conscious woman twitch from his touch.

He didn't hear Vanster as she lifted him off his feet and pinned him against the ship's bulkhead. She didn't say anything, just watched as Alan's eyes suddenly took on a look of fear.

"We're approaching the point your ship should be arriving at. I don't like the idea of dragging that ship here when we don't know if anyone's aboard or if there is a plant on it. So, I'm pretty testy right now and I am not in the mood to see you play when you should be up front getting ready to board your ship! Now, get dressed!"

She dropped him to his feet.

He struggled to stand up straight.

"And get her stored in the pod," Vanster ordered and turned to go up front.

"Why?" he demanded, his voice bouncing off surrounding bulkhead, reminding them they were in a small space.

Sergeant Vanster walked back toward him, schooling her voice into a reasonable, nonthreatening tone. "Because if this is a trap we'll want to get out of here quick. You said you have the pod set for that planet on the other side of this galaxy, right?"

He nodded.

"Well then, you have something to bargain with....knowledge of where she's headed. We see any trouble, I'll jettison her off and...there's your guarantee."

Alan nodded. "She's important. Her brother will want to save her. He'll want her back."

He hefted the body up and lumbered to the lifepod, dropping her unceremoniously into it. He checked the setting to make sure it was set for Arnica. One of his sisters had been sent there on a colony ship before it was revealed that it was already inhabited. No one wanted to pay for the colonists return and he doubted any of the colonists wanted to return. He smiled as he thought of their reunion and what he would do to her and her offspring.

He slammed the lid of the pod down. He contemplated whether to put her in stasis now or wait. "Alan! Get in you gear and get up here!"

He hit the activate button. He would not have much time to play with her anyway.

Vanster watched *Rouster* on autopilot, sail into view on her screen. Hiding behind the space debris, she plotted possible places a tail could be waiting for them to appear. Nothing. *Trojan Horses* systems were brought back online.

Alan studied the security screen that the Black Rose soldier had tweaked in annoyance at its original settings. Grudgingly he admitted her changes gave more information than what he had. They both looked for anything that would show the ship was followed. If he had his stick people, he would have been able to ask them. Impatiently he turned to pace in the small area, but a glare from the Black Rose soldier had him reseal himself. He consoled himself that for now, their lives were in her hands...but he ultimately held hers in his hand or actually, on the back of his hand. Her life was dependent that he not send a transmission to the implanted chip that would cause her death...a painful death at that.

He was quite pleased with the things the metralab produced, though only the elite could afford the cost of the outlawed devices. They were manufactured at the prison colony on HinterWield, originally to keep the violent inmates subdued, until a scientist with another agenda took over the management of the colony. Through this contact, he finally found a scientist that knew how to remove his chip without the side effects. Inmates at the prison colony were his practice subjects. He had plenty of volunteers, as most wanted their chip removed.

"Don't touch that!" Vanster angrily hissed at Alan. He was about to send a life reading probe to the ship.

"If the ship's being followed they will sense our probes. Let me handle this!"

Alan withdrew his hand guiltily. He had not thought of that. He sighed and got up from the chair. He would pace in the anteroom. He was on half meds and felt himself strangely adrift, but he didn't want to be too tranquil.

Vanster ignored the man that had enslaved her and continued to study the ship and the surrounding area. Her instinct told her returning to *Rouster* was a bad idea, but she had no vote in the decision. After the slight bump from contact with the hull of *Rouster*, her fingers quickly verified that the hatches were lined up properly, and okayed the lock releases to allow for the opening up of the two hatches, while coaxing the sluggish controls to angle their combined bulk to stay near the center of the debris trail to avoid easy pickings should a patrol ship show up. She was disgusted that Alan had not purchased an umbilicus connector with his ship. Some private yacht owners thought to shave some of the cost off their toys by only buying what was standard, thinking they could get the better emergency equipment later.

"Alan, get your butt over there and back quick!" Sergeant Vanster ordered.

Alan hit a small button that deactivated the traps he had mined the ship with. He unlatched the opening of one ship and then the other. He regretted leaving *Rouster*, but too many people would recognize it as his and *Trojan Horse* was a newer and faster model.

What he wanted was left on his chair, which had probably slipped between the seat and chair back. Cautiously entering the bridge, he sniffed the air. The odor of Hemmitt's fear and body excrements were thick in the air. Breathing shallowly and working frantically to pull his precious box out from the crease of the pilot's chair, he looked up to a fist that slammed into his face. Alan's legs neatly buckled, dropping him onto the carpeted deck of his ship unconscious.

"Alan!"

A ship appeared on her screen, it was broad on *Trojan Horse's* port quarter. She hit the disengage switch. The moment the lights showed her the hatch was sealed and no longer connected, she dropped *Trojan Horse* beneath *Rouster's* belly and rolled her to the other side. She fired the ship behind debris. Alan not replying, not even with his death switch, meant trouble. She weaved in and out playing a dangerous game of hide and seek around the moving space junk until a reasonably good spot in a large asteroid appeared. She shut off all systems that could give away her location...and waited. She knew it would take a lot of time for one ship to do a search for her.

Vanstar leaned back in her chair and considered her options in the darkened bridge. She was still alive, that meant Alan was probably powerless at the moment. The need to move out of range of his device was overpowering, but she squelched it knowing it wasn't a good idea. Instead, she returned to the back of the ship and checked on her live cargo.

I could just release her. No, not yet. Then I'll have to listen to her mouth. Damn prissy class. They should just stick with their never-ending parties.

After what would pass as half a stan day, Vanster decided to make a break for it. She knew the patrol ship was still around, but she had an appointment to keep. Alan not returning made it easier to keep the appointment. She wasn't naive to believe that he would let her go, minus the implant, after she had helped him kidnap Lady Harriet Montran, so she had made her own arrangements. The ship's power came online quickly. *Trojan Horse* was the top of the line model, and it had a lot of extra do'dads that she guessed Alan didn't even understand. If she were going to steal a civilian ship, this would be her first choice.

The space eddy that the large asteroid was drifting in was nearing the jump gate. She read tactical to see when the gate's deflector would begin to exert its influence, gently pushing the flow around the gate. The autotrawlers would scoop up the space trash that was caught in the eddy and haul it away, while the real space debris, unless it was of value, would be left to drift. She intended to hit the gate with all the gs that could be mustered. Once through the gate, they would not know where she was headed. Before her break from the eddy, the sensors picked up a ship right on her tail.

"Bloody moon!" Just as *Trojan Horse* leaped forward, the ship suffered a shot dead astern. It was meant to disable her engines, but *Trojan Horse* was better protected than the average law abiding citizen's vessel would be. Instead, the impact sent *Trojan Horse* too far forward. It put her at the wrong angle to make it cleanly into the gate. The ships tactical immediately began to reposition the ship with abrupt and evasive maneuvers that Vanster had preprogrammed. The sudden moves caused her to miss hit the intended engage button... or so she thought. The ship went into hyperspace. Off-balance, she was jerked sideways and then crashed into the bulkhead, knocking her unconscious. *Trojan Horse* obediently moved forward through the jump gate and to a preset destination, without the help of its injured pilot.

It was days later that Vanster opened her eyes to a screen that showed stars streaking by. "Blazes!" she muttered in a daze. Breathing deeply a few times to get her bearings, she let the two days of subliminals sooth her conscious. Tears streaked down Sergeant Vanster's face as she lay on the deck, realizing her fears of retribution and of Alan's program of distrust and hate were no longer foremost in her mind...and most of all, that the chip had been removed. Her greatest fear was being controlled by another, unwillingly. After getting a close-up of Alan's madness, she felt she was justified in the panicked feeling that always was there. Once more composed, her military training kicked in and she rose to check the ship systems.

"So we're on our way to Alan's planet....and no overrides." She sighed. "Well, Commander Montran, it's you and me for eight months if all goes well. At least this vessel has more power behind it than the little pod he put you in. I had better send a message to the general, she's gonna want to know what the hell I've done with my passenger. What a mess."

Finished with that she turned to his databanks, wondering what she was going to have to bear for the next eight months. The program was easy to access. "This guy is sick. I Got to pull her outta that pod until I can clear the program buffer and put something else in there."

I hope she's not going to wake up swinging. This will be a hell of a time to see who has a meaner punch.

The lid cleared her forehead and she waited as the pale body in the lifepod gradually began to take on some color.



Alexandra could feel the menace around her though she couldn't move away from it. The touch of Alan running his fingers over her bare body would have had her trembling if her body was able to respond. He must have injected her with something after Vanster brought her aboard.

She heard the harsh voice of Vanster ordering him back to his seat after securing her. That was nice of her considering who was responsible for her being here.

She is frightened.

You're here!

Yes. I wish to go to this place that the other had imagined. It is a place where my ancestors had once been.

Alan dumped her unceremoniously into the lifepod. She couldn't move any limbs, or rearrange herself to make herself more comfortable. She didn't have any more time to speak with the Sha'Kar as the pod's deep sleep program started immediately. The images coming from the subliminal began their terrorist program. When the sentient realized the images were causing Alexandra discomfort, it interfered with the program, and halted transmission to her.

It seemed only moments later that Alexandra saw a life form that was like a shapeless cloud of millions of tiny cells letting off sparks of energy, and giving an outline of the form.

You are being awakened by the one you refer to as Vanster. She is worried you will hurt her.

Alexandra's waking mind placed her in a sleeping pod, in Alan Fermin's ship. No telling how much time had passed. *Do I have reason to?* Alexandra meant it to be sarcastic but the sentient form didn't seem to notice.

No. She is no longer angry. She is worried about your health.

Where is the other one, the male that was with her?

Gone.

Alexandra's eyes blinked with the subdued light overhead. The life pod's nurturing bed adjusted as her bios picked up, and then the lid folded out of the way.

"What's..." her voice cracked as her dry throat tightened.

Water was offered with a long straw that flexed to her supine angle.

Even though her wits were still a bit scattered, she could feel the difference in Vanster. For that, she was grateful. She wasn't in any position to defend herself.

"What's going on?" she asked in a stronger voice.

Vanster took a deep breath....

"The short version would do for now...like where are we?" Alexandra suggested.

"On our way to Arnica, a planet Alan was setting up as his empire."

"I take it an override is not possible," she returned hoarsely.

"Not unless you want the whole life support system to shut down, and even then, the ship will continue on its flight path."

"He sure was determined to reach this place. Does he have some clothes on this yacht?"

"Yes. In one of the quarters, he has all sorts of uniforms for himself and clothing. I guess he couldn't make up his mind just what he was going to model his uniform after."

"Can you give me a hand? We'll go take a look."

Alexandra chose military fatigues that were loose enough for her to fit and didn't have Alan's energy clinging to it. From there they moved to his supplies where they exhausted themselves. He had up-to-date weapons of various designs, ammunition, games from the handheld to the holographic, and seeds.

"Wonder why he picked these seeds?" Alexandra asked puzzled.

Two stomachs growled at the same time. Both women looked up at each other and gave a short laugh.

"Let's hope his choice of food stuffs is better than some of his other choices."

While the two sat in the cockpit eating a small meal, Alexandra tried to figure out what they were going to do for eight months.

"I suggest we ride the eight months out in the pods. Boredom in this small craft can do some nasty things to your mind. But first, we need to check his data banks. I know I'm not going to like Alan's form of entertainment," Alexandra mumbled around her sandwich.

"Uhhuh." Vanster nodded with her mouth full. "You're right. While I was waiting for you to wake up...I went through his program files. They are not for the normal person. However, the original pod program is in the backup files. We could look at it and see if that's going to give us less nightmares and then add some stuff from the ship's library."

"Have you ever been in one of these lifepods?"

"No, ma'am. We trained in their use and how to do some minor repair work on them and run diags...but there is no way I wanted to be stuck in one of those..."

"Are you going to be okay with getting in it?"

Vanster laughed abruptly. Alexandra watched the colors of her energy field change, grateful that she was seeing another side of this soldier. She had entertained Alexandra during lunch, with stories of Major Zohra. They were funny stories, and Alexandra was aware she was keeping the scary ones back. That was okay with her. She didn't want any more scary thoughts to go with her when she went back into the sleeping pod.

"I trust you, Lady Alexandra, but with the Black Rose, we never knew who was the enemy or who had a contract out on any one of us. We were lucky Lord Chaney didn't want us out of action for any length of time. He wasn't a nice guy and treated those that worked for him as expendables...with the exception of the Black Rose. I guess the few of us that lasted as long as we did, he saw us as some kind of warrior class. Didn't stop him from sending us into some pretty messy situations, though. Once your troop, the Degas, was gone, the Central Command found they liked the idea of dropping a trained group in the center of the enemy's camp, and letting them work their way out...just as you trained the Degas. The Black Rose felt honored to take up the role and felt strongly obligated to succeed."

"Why ever for? We didn't kill anyone. We just stole whatever supplies we could, set off alarms and pretty much left them in a panic before we ran like hell back to where our ship was supposed to be waiting for us."

Vanster laughed ruefully. "Your troop made us look bad. We were supposed to be the meanest and the most daring...and here was the Degas troop, a group of misfits no one wanted, doing the impossible...fighting their way out of the enemies' camp, creating havoc and dismay within enemies lines...and surviving. We admired you. Did you know the Black Rose tip their first drink to the memory of the Degas troop...not just because of you, but for what the troop represented. Against all odds." She took a deep breath. "I'm really sorry about the last drop, Commander."

Alexandra nodded. She waited expectantly for the tightness and the heavy feeling of guilt that often accompanied the memory but it never came.

"They were great soldiers, Vanster. It is good of you to remember them and I hope you continue doing so."

"Yes, ma'am."

Alexandra studied Vanster, looking for any of the old insubordination or distrust but there was none. She only saw an embarrassed smile. It was going to take some getting use to this changed person.

Both rose without anymore said, and headed for the communications closet.

"Well, let's see what he has in this library that is not obnoxious, violent and or repugnant." Alexandra tapped one title on her screen, "Arnica. Hm, this can be useful. Then again, by the lack of content info, I think this is not going to be in my selections." Her finger moved to another, while Vanster was keeping up on her screen. "You know," Alexandra continued, after glancing at Vanster, "there is no way for us to know what he tampered with even if we put it through a sieve. I would rather have a quiet ride for those eight months."

"Here, here," Vanster agreed. "The guy is too creepy. I'm sure he would have something with a sick twist to it on all this stuff. So far, from the warning labels the system is putting out they have 'not recommended for sleep pods' tags on them."

"That settles it then. We'll have silence for our trip. Let's move to his log records. I want to know the pods specs and maintenance records to be able to decide whether it's safe for us to use the pods. And while the diags run, we'll take a look at just where this trip is taking us."

Running diags on the pods took less time, since it only needed Vanster to program the ship's computer to run diags and test various scenarios on each pod to determine how safe they were. While Vanster set the program up, Alexandra went through the database looking for all the information she could find on their destination.

Alexandra could feel Vanster leaning over her shoulders.

"That's a castle," she stated in awe. "Just how primitive is this place?"

"Ah, but this is a castle with the latest and greatest gadgets of two years ago, when they headed out there."

"Two years?"

Alexandra pointed at the small date stamped on the right corner. "It's got a moat with nightmares running around it. I noticed he doesn't have any small villages surrounding his retreat, but there is a river right here...a lake nearby." She didn't want to think about what may have become of anyone that was there first. Alan would not pick just anywhere to place his new home. "I think I need some physical activity about now. Would you care to join me?"

Vanster gave her a tentative smile and nodded. "I could use some myself. I'm going a bit buggy in this small space."



"Incoming message." The computer's voice announced as they circled each other, both tired after only thirty stan minutes of aggressive testing of each others defenses.

Both women scurried to the bridge, plopping in the chairs expectantly.

"Go ahead," Alexandra commanded when both were sitting in their chairs.

Rear Admiral JoCastao's face came on the screen.

"I am glad to see the two of you doing well. We received your transmission Lieutenant Vanster..."

Alexandra could feel Vanster's discomfort and then remembered she had been busted down to sergeant due to her repeated displays of insubordination. Yet she knew the admiral, a stickler for details, would not have called her lieutenant unless that was her ranking.

"Admiral JoCastao," Alexandra acknowledged.

"As you know, once you are into the slipstream we can't pluck you out of there and I won't ask you to do anything that crazy when the situation doesn't warrant it."

Alexandra nodded. She had no intention of being in a life pod and ejected into the wake of a larger ship, even if ordered. The lifepods didn't have the capability of protecting a life form during the sudden drop of forward motion.

"We're sending a ship to back you up, *Catching Butterflies*, though it has not left the ship yard yet. Since it will be traveling a lot faster than that yacht you're on, we have enough time to assemble an appropriate crew. They are being sent to assist *Emperor's Last Chance* that was sent to Arnica a year ago to find out what Alan was up to. The two ships will subdue Alan's soldiers, assess the damage they have done to the inhabitants and see if something needs to be done. Within this data flow is the latest information on the planet sent by *Emperor's Last Chance*. It was received a few weeks ago, so by the time you arrive, it will be stale, but it's something. *Catching Butterflies* and *Emperor's Last Chance* have official duties...and limitations; therefore, we need you two to do some information gathering."

Here's the catch, the two thought.

Chapter 34

"There she is. Now don't do anything rash. She still thinks she's working for Alan," Major Zohra cautioned. The major was standing on the bridge of *Rouster*, keeping an eye on Alan who was safely restrained in a police energy net and at the same time watching the Collective's ship as it moved to intercept *Trojan Horse*. She could feel Alexandra's presence but not the familiar feelings when their thoughts were able to touch.

When *Trojan Horse* took off, Major Zohra's cry of dismay surprised Alan. The medication he was on kept him mellow and quiet.

Major Zohra grabbed him by the collar and shook him. "Where are they headed?"

He shrugged his shoulders smiling oafishly. "I don't know. Maybe it's going to keep my appointment, or..." he shrugged his shoulders again, "maybe it's going home."

Major Zohra sped their vessel to the rouge hospital ship. It was a month's travel, but on their second day to their destination they received a message from Megan Vanster.

Major Zohra was furious. Alan couldn't understand her frustration.

"If you want you can follow her."

"I don't have a ship!" Major Zohra fumed. "It would be great if this ship didn't sustain damage to her life support. In case you didn't notice we're on backup life support."

"This is a Deluxe Belton. The backup is just as strong as the primary."

"I know what a D-Belt is!" Then Major Zohra suddenly understood. "Of course! But they have to be prepped....this is your backup ship." Major Zohra felt like slapping her head. Alan always had backup plans and his ships would have backup capabilities.

"*Trojan Horse* is my back up, though it's newer and faster. We can take *Rouster* to the shipyard and get her upgraded. I've meant to... just haven't had the time," he informed her with the idiotic grin on his face of someone that was high on drugs.

"In case you've missed it. There is a small war going on and personal ships do not have priority. Let's go take a look at the stasis pod."

Major Zohra stomped back to the small cargo area to look it over with the others and Alan following in her wake. The supply log showed it had been serviced recently for up to a ten stan year trip. "Goddess! How far is this planet?"

Alan shrugged his shoulders. "In *Trojan Horse*, eight months, in *Rouster* about a year. If you just go by pod, its short of two stan years."

"Corporal, run tests on this system and set it up to my bios. While you're doing that, I'm going to dump whatever he has in his database for the trip and download the information from *Zip*. I don't trust anything he has set up here."

"Major, are you sure about this?"

"Yes. Let's move on it. I've got some catching up to do!" *Goddess, JG. What happens if she's not there? She's getting there months ahead of you and lots of things can happen.*

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded.

You, Ensign...Halsey. Send a message to command of my intentions. Get it off as soon as possible. You there, move the prisoner to *Zip*."

In three stans hours the computer's database was reloaded and Alan and the Corporal had been transferred over to *Zip*. The admiral gave her the okay and an assignment.

"You're going to like this, Major." The ensign walked over to her smiling. "We can shut the life support down completely on this ship, letting you survive in the pod. That way the ship can cruise faster...get you there maybe a month earlier...say nine months. But, before you pop open the pod hatch, remember to check out the settings in the ship. I'm putting an AEG in your pod just in case."

"Hell of small space to dress," Major Zohra muttered, but she was pleased. She was also cleared to chase after Alexandra. If they found the portal, and they were able to use it, maybe they would be home sooner than planned.

Before she slid into the hibernation chamber, she whispered to the corporal, "Tell the general, I'll miss her, and I'll be home as soon as I can."

The corporal nodded then sealed her in the pod located in the reinforced cargo bay. He waited for the console to signal she was in deep sleep, then again rechecked the bios, running diagnostics for a life form in stasis. Satisfied, he returned to *Zip*.

From the bridge of *Zip*, Captain Basla watched the ship engage on autopilot and head for a planet named Arnica, in another star system.

"Encrypt and transmit, the major is safely in transit. Now, let's go home troops. We've got one dead-beat fugitive to hand over to the judicial magistrate and then we're back to patrolling in our own sector."

Five small ships appeared on *Zip's* screen before they engaged thrusters. Shots from the ships started the moment they appeared on their screens.

Captain Basla was a fighter and the smuggler's intent was clear.

"Send out another bot, Ensign. We may not get out of this alive."

Chapter 35

Rear Admiral JoCastao slammed her hand on the arm of the chair in agitation, as the reports kept coming in on attacks on strategic military and commercial sites by smuggler ships. The attacks started on civilian ships, but soon the real targets were made known.

"Admiral, I have a message from LaDea Gedaliaha."

"Yes!" JoCastao tapped the small button on her console. After a few moments she tapped the button again and slid out of her command chair. She nodded at her first officer.

First Officer Wing Commander BenWai smiled and whispered into what seemed like thin air. "It's a go."

Those on the bridge gave silent gestures of approval with fists pumping in the air or rubbing their lucky stones with anticipation. Silence, even on the bridge, was practiced as if their quarry, the unsuspecting smugglers would pick up any loud noise they made. It was time to close the well-planned trap.

"Drop the weapons net array and bring it online as soon it's ready. Call me in my ready room. You have the bridge, Commander."

Rear Admiral JoCastao hurried into her ready room to read the 'for her eyes only' reports that would be pouring in from others that were sent out on 'protect at all cost' deployments. Her assignment was Merkers Outpost, to prevent the alowans from taking it over.



"Lieutenant, Major General Aglauros reported the seal over the planet is in place."

Lieutenant Malchi nodded as she returned her attention to the screens in Com-C. "Move into phase five, and notify the captains and shamans. Sergeant Major, notify Commander Hyes of that bottleneck on screen Omega. Lieutenant Menja."

A thin figure that was resting her bones on a wall near the entrance to the Command Center was quickly at Lieutenant Malchi's side.

"Time to move out," she informed in a soft voice to the translucent face that nearly towered over her when the lieutenant stood up straight.

The lieutenant wasted no time in farewells as she quickly left the room, gathering other thin translucent figures as she made her way to the elevator.



"Sir, we have a message of a bottleneck in the outer city."

"Send Company C. It's time for them to prove whether their reputation was earned in a bar or in the mud."

Commander Hyes sat in the main chair, watching the screens in Century City's Com-C. His officers were effectively deploying troops where the invaders appeared, keeping them contained, and when able, sending them back through their transporting devices and destroying the grounder so they would no longer be able to get a homing fix.

"Sir, Rear Admiral JoCastao on a secured line."

The commander nodded and closed his eyes for a moment, closing out the distracting businesses as he telepathically linked with his lifemate.

"Greetings, husband." A warm feeling wrapped around his skull then moved to his body as the connection completed.

"Greetings, my beloved wife. Good news?"

"It's going well. All the portal planets have the new array in place and attacks against them, both inside and outside, are being repelled. The smaller smuggler ships are doing damage, but the cadets are hanging tough and ferreting them out."

"It's going too well, my love. We must not let our troops be deceived by our victories."

"Ahh. Your point is well taken, husband. There are members of my crew who are already celebrating this war as won by us. It seems for such a well-planned attack by the outlawed planets and their agents, that they would not have spies in the right places. Do you not think also?"

"Exactly."

"Stay safe in the Circle, my beloved husband. I wish to take that vacation to Celone IV with you before the end of this month."

"And I too, my beloved wife. I look forward to the baths at Falls Shed."

"Beware of the Miten's Bark."

"And you too, my love."

Commander Hayes opened his eyes and let the presence of his lifemate slowly seep out of his pores as his eyes focused on the screens in front of him. The image of the dog of death, the Miten, faded away as well.

"Evens! What is that group doing?"

Ensign Evens moved to the screen his commander was staring at and responded horrified. "Easy Seven! Come in! Easy Seven....."

Before their eyes the team was overwhelmed and run-over by a well-prepared invading force that moved quickly out of sight of the cameras.

The ensign looked back at his commander. "I...I'm sorry Sir. I was watching this other monitor." The ensign looked pale, and he should be, though there may have been nothing he could have done had he seen the vortex opening before the invaders entered and scattered. It was part of war, but there was still a suspicion in the commander's mind, as he knew they were winning too many skirmishes to call it luck. The commander waved him to silence as he looked over the other screens. The other soldiers looked back at their assigned monitors uneasily.

"Lieutenant XeMxx, report to Com-C," the commander softly ordered from his chair.

Ensign Evens, returned to his assigned screens nervously ordering a replacement group out to the area that was just lost.

The hiss of the door opening and entrance of a young soldier went mostly unnoticed as everyone was pouring their attention on their assignments.

"Ensign Evens, you are relieved of duty until a proper investigation can be made. Lieutenant XeMxx, you are to take his place. Guards, escort the ensign to his quarters where he is to remain until called for." Commander Hayes held up his hand at Evens' expected objection. "It's standard procedure, you know that ensign. When I get a chance, we'll talk. Now quickly, we don't have time for this."

Commander Hayes returned his attention to the monitors, letting his mind take in the mistake, the timing, and what a group of enemy soldiers in that part of the city meant. Under standard procedure, to minimize the damage of the mistake, he would send out the Spartans who had been cleared as clean agents. He would also send out the team that Evens sent out...no, if Evens is under suspicion, he would counter any commands the ensign issued. Commander Hayes tapped the button on his console that brought up the personnel files. He remembered reading about one soldier who had specialized in search and destroy missions on his own home planet.

He was one of the kidnapped bodies Alan had procured to make into one of his metrasoldiers. He was lucky that a group of undercover operatives had rescued him and several others from a smuggler ship destined for an illegal laboratory ship. By then knowledge of the planned invasion was known to HQ of the Counsel of Rings, and a line officer made the decision to enlist Carl McHenry's assistance. In return, he was given a barter chip to petition for placement on a planet that was suitable for his lifestyle after the invading forces were subdued or in three stan years, whichever came first.

"McHenry," a soft voice returned his summons.

"You heard?" Commander Hyes asked, knowing the answer.

"Yes."

"Take care of the problem."

Commander Hyes leaned back in his chair feeling confident of the outcome.

His attention went back to the screens noting the team sent to replace Easy Seven had eliminated the possibility of any more troops coming through at that point. However, all it took was one team of highly skilled killers to put a big dent in their defense operations. Killing wasn't what they wanted to have happen on Merkers Outpost. Guardian of the portal was firm on his conditions of engagement. Rendering them unconscious or inactive was their aim. McHenry, to his credit, was willing to work within those parameters.

He looked at the alarm console. One was amber, indicating they were under siege; one was red, indicating there was a breach in their defense line; and one was green, showing they were in active combat mode. Everyone should be on the look out for....

"Captain Shi?"

"Yes, sir?"

"What do you think about Evens?" Commander Hayes asked quietly over his throat mic.

"Well, if he is part of the conspiracy, he would if he could, try to help them further...like set up a diversion."

"Hmm. Sounds right. Is there anyone that Evens avoided?"

"Sir?"

"I'm thinking, the second spy would have to be someone he has not come into contact with, so that we couldn't pin him with guilt by association."

"Right you are, Sir. We're checking out his pals, we'll also run a report on different angles for his counterpart."

"Hmm. Try the innocuous, like the cook or maintenance personnel. Lock out any further changes to the system. Change to another code."

"It will put us out of sync with the Lair, sir."

"That's okay. It will be expected. Get the Spartans with an empath out to the Southern Ridge. I think there may be more surprises over there."

"Right, Sir. Should I notify the Lair before...?"

"Yes. Give them a coded update. And Captain? Handle this yourself."

"Understood, sir."

Commander Hayes tapped his fingers on the console watching the scenes unfold before his eyes.
Well, Evens...let's see what you've set into motion here.



Lieutenant Malchi read the 'YEO' message again. A breach in Century City.

She turned to face the screens to her left studying Ensign 'Elga, who was in charge of monitoring the section that Major General Aglauros felt would be an ideal place for an invading army to hide out and gather before striking the Lair. Few of the line officers knew that she had taken her elite guard and a few others to that part of the planet. Her ship with a skeleton crew was hovering with the planet monitoring the array, as Rear Admiral JoCastao in *Star Jumper*, moved to their next assignment, containing the flow of traffic at the jump gate near Merkers Outpost.

At shift change as the new members moved to their assigned screens, Lieutenant Malchi noted the young woman who took Corporal JeFe's place. He nodded to her as he gave her an update and answered to any questions.

Lieutenant Malchi exchanged looks with Lieutenant Mi,u. Both were curious why the roster they had prepared was changed.

Lieutenant Mi,u moved to the young woman who was wearing the badge of the Centurion.

"Corporal...Jen."

Lieutenant Mi,u had beckoned Corporal JeFe back to watch the screens as she talked with Corporal JeFe.

"Yes, ma'am. I know I'm not on the roster, but Bumper isn't feeling well...so I volunteered to take her shift. I'm certified, ma'am."

Lieutenant Malchi kept her eyes moving around the screens watching for anything that may happen while their attention was being diverted.

Screen Zed had a slight flicker, which went unnoticed by the technician.

"Captain Raizel, we may have a hit," she whispered softly in the mic Guardian had provided them.

"I see it. We're on it, out."

Lieutenant Mi,u checked out her credentials then nodded to Corporal JeFe he could leave.

What a coincidence that she has all the qualifications of a communications tech, yet she was assigned to kitchen detail. Lieutenant Malchi raised her eyebrow at Lieutenant Mi,u.

"She reported the only opening left for duty on the outpost was kitchen and she wanted to be in on the action so she took it. She started out in the Corps as cook's assistance then studied communications."

Lieutenant Malchi nodded. "Check out the soldier at Zed."

Lieutenant Mi,u walked over to the person in question.

"Soldier, where is your relief?"

"Don't know, ma'am." The soldier didn't take her eyes off the screens she was assigned to.

The door behind them swished open and an embarrassed ensign came rushing in.

"Ensign Ho reporting late for duty, ma'am. I...my alarm didn't go off. I'm sorry, ma'am."

Lieutenant Mi,u returned the salute and nodded for her to replace the other soldier.

The shamans were edgy. They had yet to find the group that was acting as spies. They could only tell Major General Aglauros there were five of them. Captain Raizel's job was ferreting them out. Her ability to take unconnected events and see commonalities made her one of the best line officers in covert operations.

The small events that were happening around the Lair, odd inconsistencies, were telling Raizel that whoever was the leader of the invaders, knew what would confuse sensitives, and what would distract the energy flow of a group. Captain Raizel suspected someone trusted was either tampered with or working for the other side.

Captain Raizel pulled up the screen with the information on Lieutenant Vanster and Major Zohra. Both had chip implants. There had to be a pattern in their disappearances from their group and area. If she could pin point where it happened, she would have a better idea of who would have enabled their disappearances for the time needed for their surgery.



"Lieutenant Malchi?"

"Malchi, here."

"Ma'am, Captain Raizel has requested your immediate presence at a meeting with the shamans."

"I'm on my way. Out." Lieutenant Malchi was just off her shift and was looking forward to a nice soak in a tub, alone, with soft music, and a massage from the bot.

Muttering curses under her breath, Lieutenant Malchi slipped her boots back on and was thinking about why Captain Raizel didn't call her over the small throat mics.

"Speak on. Maddi?" she whispered softly.

"Bian?"

"Did you call for me?"

"No. I was just thinking of retiring to a nice warm bath with Sula. Is something the matter?"

"I got a message that you requested me to a meeting with the shamans. Now."

"All right. Who notified you?"

"I didn't recognize the voice, nor asked a name." *What a time to get slack.*

"Well...this seems to be part of the war, having us question motives, orders, calls. Let's go see what is happening there. Meanwhile, I'll alert the others to keep an eye on where we're not."

"I'm on my way. Out."

The two women's arrival to the meeting room, a young shaman held up his hand in greeting.

"You're on time."

"Is there something going on that we need to know about?" Captain Raizel asked concerned.

The door slid open and Shaman Bu,tom leaned out the door. "Would you care to join us?"

The two women entered and found twelve sitting in a circle and four on the outside. Some were apprentices, but in name only, for many made a lifetime of apprenticing to various shamans of different species to insure in their next life they would return in a higher state.

"We have news that Major Zohra and Lady Alexandra are safe...however...we believe they are in stasis." LaDea Gedaliaha informed the two women.

"Stasis! Life-pods? Where are they headed?"

"And why?" Captain Raziel added.

"It's one of those unforeseen things that happens. They are safe. We don't know where they are headed until they reach their destination," another offered.

"Wait a moment. Major Zohra was going to investigate Alan's ship. Where would Alan's ship go if programmed for long distance travel but to that planet Naboths Vine said he was setting up for his escape." Captain Raziel slapped her thigh.

"Sounds like it. What was your meeting called for?" Lieutenant Malchi asked curious.

LaDea Gedaliaha smiled for a moment than nodded to the moridian.

"There is a presence that is wandering here. I have felt it and on occasion heard it's thoughts. It is looking for a friend."

"A..." Captain Raziel stopped.

Chapter 36

"Come!"

The door made a sibilant hiss as it slid open. The group that entered shared a suppressed excitement that Lord DeMonte recognized. It was the excitement of exploring the unexplored and interacting with new species. The political powers in the known galaxies were still adjusting to their own expanding borders and had not set out any long distant explorations, aside from companies that wished to make a profit on frontier settlement.

Forty-seven officers stood before him. They represented the crew of over a thousand that were from both Collective and what had once been called Committee space. The new organization had not voted on a name yet nor completed selecting new members. Some of the members Lord DeMonte didn't trust while others he felt he knew too little to be trusting the life of his cousin/sister with. Lord DeMonte had little experience with the Collective except through intermediaries and his brief meetings recently on Merkers Outpost.

The crew for *Catching Butterflies* was in their last stages of preparation. This meeting was merely a formality with the security officers, to reaffirm the purpose of the mission. The crew was composed of military and nonmilitary personal, to report on the condition of Arnica, halt Alan's soldiers and see if any damage control measures would have to be made.

"Reporting for duty, High Counsel." Newly promoted Captain Malchi, head of the infantry security team, moved one step forward from the others then stepped back in line.

Si'en from the Counsel of the Rings rose from the table. It was agreed he would represent all parties that had interests in this ship's business. The Counsel of Rings was the highest authority in dealing with matters between the various galaxy political parties.

"You have your orders, Captain Malchi. Render Alan Fermin's metrasoldiers harmless and bring back as many as you can, clean up whatever mess you can without creating a worse problem...and return safely. My heart to your hearts."

The group moved out of the room. Their excited talk was cut off as the counsel doors closed behind them.

Lord DeMonte didn't want any more continued talk with Lady Varina whose presence made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, nor to be cornered by C'hi A from another group that he didn't trust. Their doubled efforts of cornering him before the meeting, thus preventing him from talking to Lady Ja,uma, made him suspicious. He escaped quickly behind the departing crew and moved in the opposite direction down the hall. He closed the emergency stairwell door behind him, and grabbing the banister, took the stairs down, two at a time.

He was on the next level waiting for the elevator. The door opened and Captain Malchi, her first and second officers and a few of her crew were standing in the elevator silent, as if the stopping of the elevator halted their conversation.

Lord DeMonte stepped in and inserted a key. The car resumed its movement to the next stop. The group got off and crowded into a small room.

"Well, what did you find?"

"There are twelve spies among the officers and about fifty-six among the crew. However we don't know if they are along to do harm."

"Was everyone checked for chips?"

Captain Malchi nodded. "With the new information we have, we can scan for them easily. Those members will all be replaced tonight." She frowned. "I sure hope those officers haven't figured out yet that this ship is more than a deep space science vessel."

Lord DeMonte shook his head. "The Collective has been working on it for only a short time. The added technology is donated by L'uenbeng, the guardian of Merkers Outpost. It's a thank you for cleaning up his planet. We haven't seen the likes of this stuff so you shall be testing it too."

Captain Malchi nodded.

"It's time I left. May you ride the tides safely and good health to you all."

"We shall bring her back safely, Lord DeMonte."

A quick grin appeared on his face. "Likely it will be that she brings herself back."

The others laughed.



That night, the ship took off early, leaving behind the unwanted members and stopping off after a few gate hops, to pick up their replacements.

After a month of doing a shake-down and getting acquainted with their new ship the entire crew was put in sleep pods for the rest of the ride. The Sha'Kar moved alone in the corridors and rooms, pinning for a friend. They would be in stasis for six stan months, slower than what they would have liked to go, but the Sha'Kar may be harmed moving faster.

Behind them, they left Merkers Outpost secured and back into private hands, with a new group of scientists arriving to work on moving metrapeople back into their own productive lives. Dr. Sharon Teal headed the team. There was still a scattering of fighting going on around what once was called Committee space. They were planning on reassembling in three stan months as the United Cooperative. One of the first big issues on the table was reviewing the requirements of closed planets to become members of interstellar travel.

END

To be continued in ARNICA.