Destination Space Station Cronas - Calose

Chapter One



Hurrying out of Dysta Space Station's controlled climate through the warehouse facilities atmosphere, Calose felt her AIU activate with breathable air for her.

AIUs automatically activate a protective bubble around the wearer when they encounter a sudden atmosphere change alien to the wearer's biology. It was to give them time to put on an ENV mask, find a safer environment, or for the person's body to adapt if it wasn't too stressful.

The first AIUs, Auditory Intelligence Units, were a technology developed to allow non-telepathic beings to understand others. As technology improved it also provided a temporary respiratory reprieve for the wearer from suffocating from a sudden atmosphere change.

Currently all spacers travel with an AIU, a wrist comm and either an ENV suit or helmet in their travel kit. A complete travel kit is considered essential life-saving gear for space travelers. Without at least three of the essentials a visitor is denied permission to disembark onto space ports or tour foreign lands. It wasn't enough to have a wrist comm that was the wearers identification and location identifier if they were in trouble on a space station or planetside, but it was considered common sense to travel with the proper gear for most emergencies and suicide if not. No space port or planet authority wanted a suicidal visitor. It would entail copious reports for various agencies, and suicidal people could be terrorists or paid saboteurs and bad for trade as well as the tourist business.

Calose's visual form wavered when she passed through the transition field between public access and secured warehouse, but it didn't slow her momentum toward her docked shuttle. The warehouse was as busy as it was when she alighted from her shuttle days ago. She weaved around the scattered stacks of supplies being loaded and unloaded, ENV suited ship

maintenance workers moving to and from their jobs, ship owners, ship officers, crew and station security guards going about their business with some more solid than others. She spotted Belig, her last-minute passenger, standing with a sentient security guard. Both turned at the disturbance of her sudden entrance into the area.

Belig grabbed up her bag. “That's my ride,” she said with relief to the security guard.

Calose suspected her pursuers would attempt to breach the station's security field to stop her, however not even the most updated AIU would be able to breach DSS’s secured area. This area was only for those with a higher security privilege. What constituted privilege was what the station's owners determined. It was not a physical list that could be stolen or copied or a mental idea that beings skilled in telepathy could link into. It was something that over many lifetimes for hundreds of species comingling from three-dimensional beings and above in the metagalaxies that it was understood that some species had a secured gatekeeper of their business and thoughts that was impregnable… so far.

As she passed Belig, she tugged on her arm to follow closely. She didn’t know how Belig would react to an unexpected yank at her, but she was in a hurry. She ran up her shuttle’s boarding ramp as it was retracting. Belig gripped Calose’s elbow and held on least the ramp evaporate under her. Whatever business Calose had that she was in a rush to leave *she* was not going to miss her ride off DSS.

Disappearing boarding ramps were one of many safety features developed during centuries of war to prevent unauthorized personnel from boarding a shuttle or ship while it was docked. For the civilian population that purchased decommissioned ships from the Federations war fleet, many safety features were part of the ship's original hardware/software and remained when the Federation’s military removed what was theirs before the public auction sale.

In her shuttle her adrenalin rush continued to feed the excitement of the chase, and the need to leave DSS as soon as possible was intense. She slid into the pilot’s seat and a holographic console appeared before her. Her fingers tapped a request for departure from the harbor master’s traffic controller. Her request sent, permission was granted instantly. Her fingers continued to move quickly to message her ship to prepare for her arrival and for an immediate departure from DSS. Her ship's duty officer notified her via a telepathic link, the shuttle bay doors were open awaiting her arrival, and their ship’s position in the queue was pending on the traffic controller’s departure wait list.

"Anywhere you need to be?" Calose asked Belig as she took the navigator's seat next to her.

"Alban's Waystation or as near as possible. That's where my ship is docked," Belig said, sounding hopeful.

"My ship's navigation will plot a course to Alban's Waystation. Is time important?" Calose asked. Her duty officer affirmed a course to Alban's Waystation was set.

"I don't know until I contact the Harbor Master Office on Alban's. I'm in as much rush to leave DSS as you."

"Hmm," was Calose's acknowledgement.

Calose expertly guided the shuttle out of the warehouse's inner docks along the expressway toward her freighter, which as they drew closer blocked out most of the view of space. Once the shuttle settled in *Calypso IIs* landing bay, Calose was out the exit hatch and leading the way to the lift. The lift's door slid open, and she waved Belig to enter, stepping in after her.

"Deck two," Calose directed. She wanted to get Belig settled quickly so she could be on the bridge to monitor their departure.

What's the hurry? she thought to herself. *The game has ended.* But she was still flushed with the rush of the chase. She wasn't breathing heavily but her heart beats were above a normal rest pulse.

The lift's interior was spacious which had Belig guessing it was a primary lift for boarding crew and or passengers of varying sizes with their carry-on luggage. Belig dropped her bag on the floor and was startled by the rapid color changes of the bulkhead near her bag. Fascinated, she touched the bulkhead watching a myriad of colors swirl under her fingertips. She shut her third eye, finding the colors too strong.

A security scan for illegal weapons and identity verification, Belig guessed. Useful tools from the war years. Her smaller freighter had its share of leftover security features that came with her ship with its original software from the shipyard. The features weren't so obsolete that they made it high on her To Do List for removal or upgrade, though some were annoying. The more advanced updates required shipyard down time. Her uncle's suggestion was to buy what she would need and store it at his main repair shop until she could take the time off from her business to work on the upgrades. The advantage was that it would be done at her uncle's

spaceship maintenance and repair shop, and she would be part of the tech team. Of course, it meant she would also be working for her uncle on other ship repairs to help defray her costs and any cost to her uncle. Family didn't take advantage of family unless it was understood there was a pay it forward or an agreed upon tradeoff.

Belig smiled at the thought of her uncle and aunt. She would have to pay for rent and board at a hotel on the space station/ship repair depot since her uncle and aunt intentionally didn't have room in their home for guests. The invisible family telegraph would know if they made an exception and expect the same treatment of free room and board...for some, indefinitely. Not all family members believed in trade or pay it forward. There was an alternative of her staying aboard her ship if she wanted to save on expenses. And there was the cost of paying her crew either vacation pay or laying them off until the upgrades were finished. The problem of running a freighter business was how to juggle downtime and keeping a reliable crew. A problem she had kept putting off. Maybe once reclaiming her ship, she could take care of the installations before hiring a permanent crew. And then there was explaining why she was out of touch for so long with her aunt and uncle. It was an embarrassing experience she knew she would have to recount and had repeatedly rehearsed while on DSS.

However, her incarceration was over and now she could make plans to move on with her life. She felt relieved. She glanced at Calose wondering about her change of luck. There were seldom free rides even for a fellow freighter captain anxious to reclaim her ship. Independent freight captains hauling the belongings of others was a business that didn't provide large stashes of reserve credits to allow for free rides unless the passenger was going in the same direction as the freight delivery and wasn’t taking up possible income space. If asked about the lack of reserved credits in operating one's own business, Belig, along with most of her fellow captains would look at the questioner in distain. They were in business for the joy of captaining their own spacecraft and visiting spaceports that were mere dots in the dark matter of space with some ports well worth revisiting and meeting friends. Her aunt had counseled her that when the joy of captaining became a distant memory, and the worry of debts was a daily grind, it was time to find another career. She hadn’t reached that milestone yet, she thought fiercely.

“I didn't ask how far it was from DSS,” Belig said, bringing her attention back to her unexpected benefactor.

"My LS will look for business along the way," Calose said, to relieve Belig's guilt about not paying for passage. She suspected Commander Heru, duty officer while *Calypso II* was getting an upgrade, had already arranged with DSS's HMO to deliver freight once *Calypso's* work was complete.

"I appreciate you giving me a lift. As the wheel of life turns, there will be an opportunity for me to return the favor," Belig said with conviction.

Calose smiled, appreciating Belig not asking about the hunters that had been chasing her about DSS. A captain's private affairs on and off her ship were the captain's business. Since Belig was given a free ride to her ship, she knew Belig wouldn't breach that courtesy.

"I'll show you to your cabin so you can stow your belongings, then I'll give you a short tour of passenger amenities. As I tell all my passengers, this is a working ship with deck two set aside with berths for passengers and the only area passengers can wander. Your AIU will be blocked from any of the ship's business communications, a standard security protocol I'm sure you're familiar with. Should you forget, ship security will remind you politely, unlike a security dog," she laughed.

Belig laughed while trying to remember what a canine looked like. She hadn't been on a planet for years. "I have no AIU. My personal one was confiscated when I was arrested. I was issued one by DSS to be able to communicate with DSS residents, but I returned to DSS all their electronic property on my release. What I have here is my 4D scanner and Decar Reader. They're not the most UpToDate but just showing I had them kept me safe from the lower-level scum." She snorted. "DSS may not have residents from the lower levels of society, but visitors are sometimes from species that haven't learned manners in keeping their customs to themselves, like kidnapping or harming those they disapprove of. They all have been familiar with my DR and even if it's not a weapon of sorts, it has a siren that goes off if danger comes too close. Besides, if it ticks, I know to change direction or notify security."

"DSS isn't policing their visitors closely?"

"Yes, but some residents take their safety for granted. I don't."

"Are you okay with not having an AIU?"

"It's awkward, but it's not like I need a translator aboard your ship. We understand each other, yes?"

Calose nodded thinking it would be awkward when she landed at her next stop. Having a Decar Reader wasn't going to guarantee her safety, especially if it was an older model. Too many species from planets that should not be given Federation space travel status were ignoring the Federation's guidelines and laws and bursting into space. As for an AIU, there was always someone on a planet or space station that a translator was necessary to have and not having one was considered rude. She would look into fixing that so Belig was not left in a vulnerable situation as well as hers, since it was unlawful to allow a departing passenger NOT to have the required TK, travelers kit. How did DSS manage to let that happen?

"The rules for passengers sound familiar?" Calose asked.

"Unauthorized persons are to stay close to one's assigned berths, not interfere or mingle with crew and no skulking about into the ship's business. My very directions to passengers. Makes me feel at home."

Calose chuckled. "Skulking? I would normally use that for a haunted ship. There is no skulking on my ship," she said humorously.

Belig shivered. "Dreadful use of the word. I'm not sure why I used that word. DSS has its share of ghosts and spooks, being that the space station is considered by many to be ancient with a large enough mixture of species to be called a galactic society. They messed with my senses for my first cycle there until I got accustomed to their AIU and could shut it off when I wanted quiet. One of my techmates mercifully smudged my sleeping area, and put a protection spell around me to remain clear of negative energies, but still..."

"My ship is secure and free of mischievous or nasty trickster spirits or spooks," Calose reassured her. "If you feel you need a protection spell, there is a menu passengers have access to that has a long list of protection spells."

Belig glanced at Calose startled then laughed with Calose. "Am I being a bother and so soon? I'm a bit nervous about the strangeness of this ship."

"Strange?" Calose asked surprised. "Is it the air quality?" Reflexively, Calose sniffed taking in the familiar smell of her ship's slightly scented air that was known to be soothing for most species.

Belig sniffed the air. "No. The air is fine." She laughed again, embarrassed. "Strange in that I'm not used to having so much space around me. I haven't been in a freighter this size…since the war."

The lift stopped and the door slid open. Before them was an impenetrable darkness until Calose stepped out of the elevator. Lights came on quickly showing a passageway wide enough for four abreast to walk, provided they were their size.

Belig fell into step with Calose. Her eyes moved to study the overhead with geometric designs. She wondered about the original crew's taste in decorating, or was it the present? She glanced at Calose.

“I was fortunate to be able to acquire this freighter,” Calose said amused at Belig’s reaction to the overhead designs. Not all passengers noticed the overhead designs and those that did, like Belig, had mixed feelings about them. The intricate lines were part of the ID ships senses and depending on the ship’s reading of the passenger, became pronounced or bland. When their passengers were settlers being relocated it was the youth that needed the help of the AIs sensitive manipulation of the energy around them through the patterns above them, to ease their trepidation of moving to the unknown.

“You were a lot more daring than I in picking such a large freighter for your startup business,” Belig said.

“We were among the lucky to have a Federation loan guarantee that wasn’t cripplingly to repay, as well as our backpay honored,” Calose said.

They exchanged smiles as they both thought of how they came to own their freighters. They and thousands of others had purchased decommissioned military ships at military auctions after the war. Shipyards and military depots throughout the Meto galaxy were open for the war surplus auction, spreading the opportunity for planets and individuals to take advantage of what the Federation’s newly reformed council of planets and space stations ruling body no longer wanted on their inventory lists.

Calose successfully bid on a freighter that was for a larger species than herself. Its cargo bay and loading bots managed large machines and enormous bulks of supplies and equipment for establishing settlements on planets or meteorites that were being harvested. She liked the expansiveness of the ship and vastness of space to explore.

Freighters were managed differently in their decommissioning since they were not considered combat vessels. Only military codes from the ships' programing were removed, which were separate from the shipyard's programs for the ship's functioning, making the more recent ships launched from the shipyards the most sought after.

All ships from the yards came with their own bots that took care of the routine maintenance. Bots eliminated tasks the crew found inconvenient when they were focused on war duties and for civilian crews, the annoying tasks that the LS, logistics specialists, or a quartermaster would normally handle.

Those purchasing the decommissioned military ships had selections from small courier yachts to troop carriers or freighters. Various species crewed ships as well as other dimensional beings. Any changes that the new owners needed visited the swap convention, where new owners traded other owners for what they did and didn't want. Since the auctions were on shipyard platforms, the shipyards were looking forward to unloading excess military equipment for ships now out of date at a reasonable price. As the new owners wandered in a section of yard that displayed items for sale, shipyard personnel were available with helpful advice on what would fit and not fit in with their investments. The buyers were eager to spend their credits on the loans they took out with the WVETs Credit Union, and the shipyard managers were happy to move into a prosperous afterwar economy with redeemable Federation credits. War Veterans, WVETs, were encouraged by the Meta Galaxy's Federation to resume a productive life the long war had interrupted.

Belig's eyes kept returning to the intricate lines on the overhead. Blinking, she lowered her eyes to the deck, then moved to the bulkhead, where the colors were more to her liking. Looking closer at the bulkhead, she noticed there was nothing to indicate hatch covers for passenger cabins, storage, or exit hatches.

"Do you ever get lost or forget where you left something?" Belig asked as they moved along the passageway with no visuals to identify where they were.

"No."

Calose stopped in front of the first hatch cover Belig could see, with recognizable markings on it. It slid open. Lights came on revealing a passage with a high overhead.

"This is what the hatch cover indicates, sanitation or ablutions facilities. Here you'll find private showers adjacent to an exercise area, latrines, laundry needs, clean bedding, and towels. The exercise area is small for a large crew but the right size for passengers."

With the sizes and shapes of the unimagined variety of species that travel in space, Belig believed the cleaning facility was not small. "How large were the original crew members?"

“Different sizes of large, though there were some smaller than us.” Calose exited and led further down the passageway. “Your cabin until we reach your port of call.” She stood in front of the bulkhead where a hatch cover's outline appeared and Calose pushed the hatch open. Calose waited for Belig to step in.

Belig stepped past Calose into the cabin. Surprised, she dropped her bag at her feet and lifted her arms out from her sides and turned around without touching bulkhead.

On DSS, Belig had the choice of sharing a larger sleeping space with two species she wasn't familiar with or taking a single occupancy in a smaller space. She chose the smaller space. She hadn't shared quarters since she became captain of her own freighter and sleeping near strangers in an uncertain environment went against her survival instincts.

“The furniture is stored within the bulkhead which gives the impression you have a lot of room.” Calose opened a panel near the entrance. “The button icons show what they represent, desk, couch, chair, ensuite, and sleep pod. The space fills up quickly when everything is activated.”

“I’ve been hit with a dream stick,” Belig said.

“There is no attendant, robotic or otherwise to pick up after you, so if you like to drape your clothing over the chair it will be there for as long as you leave it, however, you have a cleaning closet for clothing but not for bedding. Should you like fresh bedding for each night, you know where to dump your used bedding and get a fresh set.”

“I feel so special, even if I have to pick up after myself and make my own sleep pod,” Belig mocked. “My captain's cabin isn't this roomy.” She didn't add that she did have an automated attendant on her ship that kept her cabin neat and her belongings in order. A gift from her uncle and aunt when she purchased her freighter.

“I'm ready for the rest of the tour so you can show me a mess with edible meals, perchance? And entertainment center so I don't become too needy for company.” She added, “Though I'm not a paying passenger, I know how PPs can get if they have nothing but a few exercise machines to occupy themselves with.”

“Bored passengers on a freighter are a downright iffy spaceflight risk,” Calose agreed wryly.

“So, what changes have you made since the auction?” Belig asked, as she joined Calose in the passageway.

“Not many. This was a well-cared for freighter. I didn't see you around the docks after the auction,” Calose remarked. She was sure Belig knew the cabin she was in had been upgraded with amenities that saved the occupants or occupant from having to use the communal facilities. She was among those captains that believed it wasn't courteous to brag to another captain about one's own ship's accommodations, nor was it wise considering the competitive disposition of some species. That information was something left for satisfied customers to pass on, without the ship’s details a pirate would find useful.

“My uncle gave me a short list of ships as good prospects to bid on. I did a flight test on each. *Galactic Star* was my choice. I liked the handling, the ease for one person to pilot, if necessary, due in part to the automation that came with it. Even if some of the automation was annoying, they didn't need an immediate change. I couldn't have asked for anything more... except a dependable crew,” she hastily added with a grimace.

Glancing back at her quarters they had just left she wondered how she would find it down the long passageway with nothing on the bulkhead to indicate entrances to cabins. Another security feature in case of hijacking she thought. However, the outline of the hatch cover remained with Occupied showing on the hatch. That was a feature her freighter thankfully did not have. Though it wasn't as large as this ship, the software for disappearing hatch covers would have been at the top of her To Do List to remove.

“I had my first paying customer, Commander A'le, waiting as I was signing my ownership documents. Uncle sent him my way,” Belig continued amiably.

Calose glanced at her, noticing her nervousness. Was she simply happy to be off DSS or was she always this chatty? She didn’t know Belig that well to remember if she was a nervous type, but then, Belig had been in a closely monitored environment for a year.

“He got a big promotion with a new uniform, creases as sharp as newly pressed can get, and a three-row ribbon bar lined up exactly right for a parade inspection, and his boots polished so a recruit could see her face reflected in them. He asked me to drop off his family and him at their new quarters along with their household items. They were packed and ready for pickup and delivery. They were anxious to leave for their new home, barracks fit for a commander's family, the good lady A'le said. I hired a crew of four on a short assignment with the understanding if we all worked well together, I would consider them on a permanent basis. They had their military papers for certification by the Space Merchant Bureau cleared so there wasn't any delay.

Commander A'le's new assignment was to remold bruised and battered soldiers into scrupulous space and planetside police agents at the Agenon Staging Ground planetside, with the space station Acheon above for advanced training."

Belig chuckled. "Can you imagine going through basic training again after you survived a long war? A whole new set of rules of behavior for those recruits to absorb in copious downloads. What a headache. Though, all the recording bots that accompany them certainly discourage unruly behavior. I thought there would be many failures in the first year on the job to retrain the impulse to be belligerent and reckless during downtime, and to overcome the pervasive species prejudice in many of the squads, and most of all the trigger happy to blast away, then assess later, but not so, or so the QT bulletin says. Dock scuttlebutt backs it up."

"And for us that made piloting spaceships our new occupation, it was a whole new life skill to adapt to, and quickly. Luckily, the war advanced ship automation, as well as the training downloads specific to your purchased ship with all the knowledge needed to fly and maintain your investment," Calose said. "The standards for running a spaceship business weren't so difficult to learn with the lesson downloads to access when needed and the automated programs of reminders. After all those years in military service and their method of teaching quickly via downloads it wasn't difficult, it was just the adapting to new responsibilities and life schedules."

"And approaching all spaceports their security buoys at the ports distance line let you know what the rules, laws and consequences of crossing that line is on their spaceport," Belig said, "besides asking your business and who is on board. It's still too soon after the long war so being cautious who is visiting your home is expected."

"Yes. A grand chance at a new life," Calose said, "There were a lot of WVETs that had a chance on captaining their own ships, or going into partnerships, a dream come true. Yes, there was a lot of work, but it was a choice in a new life. Their big mistake was they thought just the downloads would give them what being a captain, running a ship, a business, and managing a crew was about. I don't begrudge those that used their knowledge about their competitors' antics to get an upper hand, but I do hold those that used their war experiences as a weapon to destroy a rival as objectionable. There is enough business for us all."

Belig tightened her lips and nodded. "It's a shame so many WVETs went into pirating and smuggling after investing in their own ships and dragging their partners and crewmates down with them. It was a hurry-up year to learn new skills but no different than our time in

service and there were people to help us to succeed without breaking any laws or harming anyone. The Federations banks invested in us and wanted to see that we succeeded and pay off our loans. For those that made bad decisions, in the beginning, I felt sorry for them. But for all the chances they got after the first stumble and forgiveness by the lot of us that they did wrong to, they kept making the same bad choices. I avoided them like the plague because guilt by association is something that will spread like a virus on the docks and into space bars, especially among the WVETS clients. I don't want to be one of those untouchables. Bad for running a legit business," Belig said, then laughed embarrassed. "I hope my mistake doesn't lead to being seen as an untouchable or the target of nasty wags."

"Those that have an embarrassing wag told on them but can twist it to their advantage are the victors of that round but most importantly they know where they stand among their fellow haulers. An important source of information for us spacers are listening to the wag on space stations, docks and in bars, and developing the ability to pick out exaggerations and hear the understory that carries a trace of useful information. Since you troll the bars for business and galactic news, I'm sure you've had practice at telling your own wags, twisting an old story just a bit to keep it current."

"True as charged. I do enjoy visiting the WVET bars and exchanging sometimes outrageous stories. I'm not one to win drinks for my tales," Belig said. "But then again, I don't get many hisses, and enough laughs to not shy away from offering a tale or two when encouraged."

"We also have an active Federation department we can report untruthful rumors to, and they also monitor bar and dock wag that is meant to undermine a legitimate business. Those that spread unfounded rumors get fined and could get jail time, to say nothing of spending time with court appointed counselors," Calose said smiling. "If that doesn't work, they're returned to their planet of origin with their space passport relinquished."

"Thanks for the reminder. I forgot about that department. I hope I don't become familiar with them, to my embarrassment."

The hatch cover marked with well-known symbols to identify the mess and entertainment area slid open. It took Belig's breath away and brought back her nervousness at having so much open space around her.

"Nothing unusual about this mess which shares an entertainment holoplay area to keep what passengers I've taken on occupied. When you step in front of the food service area a menu will appear, or you can ask the automated chef for a meal you would like. For entertainment," she waved to the right of them where the holoplay area was.

Belig nodded.

"Do you feel comfortable enough for me to leave you?"

"Sure, sure. I don't want to keep you from your duties. It all looks familiar enough, just with more space."

"If you need assistance..." Calose started.

Belig pointed at the plainly marked communication link to the crew member appointed to oversee the passengers, usually falling to the LS's staff.

"Yes. Enjoy the voyage," Calose said.

Calose exited and hurried toward the lift. She had a ship to prepare for leaving Dista Space Station's shipyard area. While she was on DSS the third officer, Commander Heru, was in charge. Besides the usual formalities of leaving the harbor she had reports Heru would have written while she oversaw an upgrade made to *Calypso II* and hopefully messages from the crew members that were away on a special assignment. And then, there was her own report to write on her visit to DSS.

Chapter Two

"Captain Calose, on the bridge," Commander Heru greeted. She rose from her seat and straightened. Her reddish feathers settled smoothly along her neck and over her shoulders. Her alert golden eyes studied her captain who looked too relieved to be back on board their ship, *Calypso II.*

She had an adventure while off on her assignment, she thought amusedly. Heru cocked her head to the side; her eyes refocused to study the energy around the captain. Something had changed.

"Captain, on the bridge," Calose acknowledged. She picked up on the commander's amusement that she had a more than quiet visit to the space station. "How far are we along with departure readiness, Commander Heru?"

"Ship work completed and certified by DSS's Shipyard Commander AlSaTa an hour ago. All public and private accesses, hatches and comm channels closed and secured, contents in

all cargo bays checked, certified, and secured, and all loading bots locked and secured in their posts with maintenance checks running." She continued with the departure list quickly and then asked, "Is the passenger settled?"

"Note to log on passenger accommodations. Deck two, cabin nine. Assign basic comforts. Keep the passageway lighting up should she need to wander at odd hours."

"We wouldn't want her bumping her way in the dark to the mess. It may give her the impression we want her isolated in her cabin," Heru said dryly. "Unless she's a hybrid and can see in the dark?"

Calose glanced at her, catching humor glittering in her falcon golden eyes. Calose gave a short laugh. "No, we don't. And I don't know about her DNA. I'm honoring the wellness check assignment to the end by assuring she is safely delivered to her ship."

Heru nodded and resisted the impulse to click her beak at the thought that there was something more than what the captain was offering. There wasn't enough of an emotional coloring to the captain's energy when she spoke of the passenger to be responsible for the change she felt in the captain. She would think about it later when they were back in space.

"The harbor traffic controller has acknowledged our readiness for the autotugs to guide us out of the repair slip. The last of the mooring lines to the repair slip have been withdrawn by DSS dockbots and ship drift is prevented by the energy buffers of the autotugs," continued Heru, returning to her duty of monitoring their departure from DSS's harbor.

"Our destination to Alban's Waystation plotted and arranged in line with our other two stops," Heru added.

Calose's screen confirmed the check list. "Check list confirmed," Calose acknowledged. Calose noted that there were other stops. After her attention to their departure procedures was completed, she would see where the other two stops were. Hopefully, one would be picking up their absent crewmates.

"Our power is running at idle, anti-gravity buffer is up, and we're now waiting until traffic controller clears the corridor for the tugbots to move us forward." Heru paused a moment and then continued, "HTC communication directed to you, Captain, for final departure instructions."

"Pass HTC through, Commander Heru. DSS Harbor Traffic Controller, this is Captain Calose of *Calypso II,* waiting for departure instructions, over."

"*Captain Calose of Calypso II this is Dysta Space Station's Harbor Traffic Controller Master Chilog. Mooring lines withdrawn from the repair slip completed. Tugs are in place to guide your ship out of our repair docket area. Please do not engage your main power until our tugs have disengaged and returned to harbor. Once you have reached the outer harbor buoys, engage full power with caution to respect incoming traffic. Acknowledge Communication."*

"Dysta Space Station Harbor Traffic Controller Master Chilog, this is Captain Calose of *Calypso II.* Acknowledging receipt of your directions. My ship's power is presently idle for harbor tug guidance out of your harbor and to your distance line. At your distance line we will engage power to a moderate speed. My navigator will accelerate to hyper speed outside of Dista Space Station's traffic. Over."

The DSS tugbots guided *Calypso II* slowly out of the busy area. Repair engineers in their ENV suits working on other ships, had lifelines connected to DSS power sources, or they were jetting about, so the expert guidance of the tugs was necessary for the large freighter to avoid any mishaps by keeping within the safe corridor. As they moved out of the area, the view on the outside screens changed to glittering stars and space dust, embedded in the multicolored gases of space highlighted by dark matter. The beauty of space did not go unnoticed by Calose. They passed an incoming yacht guided to a berth further down the space station's docket.

Once *Calypso II* was outside of the harbor area's security net, the tugs withdrew from contact with the ship's energy buffer and sailed back to DSS's inner shipyard harbor.

"Dista Space Station's Harbor Master Traffic Controller Master Chilog to Captain Calose of the freighter Calypso II*, space tugs have returned to port. You are cleared for a low velocity space launch to the outside of our distance line. Safe journey,* Calypso II*. End of Harbor Directions Communication."*

"This is Captain Calose of *Calypso II,* confirming your message that we are cleared for a safe speed launch once past the exit buoy," Calose said. "Thank you, Harbor Traffic Controller Master Chilog. It's been a pleasure doing business with you. May your station continue to be prosperous. *Calypso II* Out and About."

The harbor master's reply was a chirp and whistle in his own language which the AIU link translated to a pleasant acknowledgement, however, Calose understood his language without the AIU.

"Let's be away, *Calypso II*," Calose directed the ship.

"Speed increased and moving away from Dista Space Station, as Captain Calose ordered," Calypso II acknowledged.

"We are underway, Captain, ready to hit hyperspace. Energy buffer is up to maximum fully protecting ship's hull," Commander Heru confirmed, her pleasure at heading out to space evident in her voice.

The captain's screen also showed their ship picked up speed. Once past the distance line of DSS their speed would steadily increase to hyperspace speed of EFF7.

"It looks like DSS is extending her station's presence in order to accommodate more ship repairs," Heru mentioned.

"Yes. When we arrived, the platform for additional ship docking wasn't this extended. That's fast work. They'll have to stretch their security dome further away from the station to accommodate large ships like *Calypso II."*

"According to the chatty manager of the repair crew they ordered an extension to their security spacenet and additional warehouse security fittings from the labs on Space Station Merlota. It's an upgraded version of what the Federation's Space Forces used during the war to secure and hide isolated observation posts. That's where the program we had installed came from, Merlota's labs. We shall have to visit the space station Merlota sometime." Heru's voice sounded hopeful.

"Merlota?" Calose felt a ring of recognition. "To be able to visit their shops in person would be nice," Calose said. Was it another feeling of something to occur in the future? She would often get feelings like that but not all manifested. Of course, a lot of their security equipment and space wear came from the Merlota stores. That's probably where the recognition came from.

"Next time we visit DSS it will be a whole new space station, maybe even closer to space city status," Calose mused. "Though, from my skulking about I think a lot will have to be changed within the station as well as without to make the transition to space city consideration."

Heru made a non-translational sound; however, her thought was, that won't happen for a long time.

Calose's screen changed with reminders of what she needed to do. One was to verify her passenger was Belig of the Dulog tribe. She moved Belig's space passport information DSS updated to *Calypso II's* files so when they entered a planet or spaceport's distance line the

required ID information of her, her crew, what cargo she was carrying, and passenger information was available. She noted along with Belig's updated information a note from the HM informing her that Belig didn't want to wait for DSS to issue her the standard safety gear spacers carried with them. There was credit to *Calypso's* account for the ship's LS to provide Belig with a Federation required spacer's traveler's kit. So, the oversight wasn't a slip of DSS's but Belig's impatience to leave. Her bio information was provided so the AIU and wrist com could be programed to her biosettings.

Calose sent a copy of the note to Heru's station for her to provide Belig with the FSSTS, Federation Standard Spacers Travel Kit, or the abbreviated acronym TK, from their ship stores.

"What level, Captain?"

"The AIU upgradeable to captain status but not while on *Calypso.* And download to her wrist comm the passport information DSS has updated*."*

"She isn't wearing one or it's nonfunctional."

"I didn't notice one on her wrist. Add one to her kit," Calose said.

"A servicebot will deliver her TK to her cabin when it's ready. How were your days off? I noticed you left unhappy fans at the gate*,"* Heru said, hinting at Calose to say what she was up to on DSS to cause the agitated mix of species showing up on *Calypso IIs* monitor to be stopped by DSS security at the docks entrance. Since the HMO didn't mention anything improper with Calose's quick exit from DSS it had to be something not enough to raise a security flag with DSS security. Heru studied Calose's face that was a mixture of consternation and…was it pride?

"Yes. My keeping a low profile was a no go. I ended up playing keep away from a group of relic hunters."

Calose's tone caught Heru's attention. This is where the change in the captain may have come from. Keep away? With a relic? Heru picked up that Calose felt it as something similar to a child's game of hide and seek. Entertainment? Her eyes studied the energy around Calose and noticed this subject gave the electromagnetic field around her a different texture. What kind of relic? Religious? Cultural? On DSS?

"Meanwhile, I did locate Captain Belig and since I was partially responsible for her advance release from her obligation here, I offered her a ride to where her ship is docked."

Heru was amused at how Calose was trying to hide her excitement of the hunt. To Heru, when a relic was involved, it was a serious hunt not a child's game of hide and seek.

"Fate, Captain. There are no coincidences." She meant to remind her that it was necessary to consciously balance her spontaneity of helping another with her duties as captain with potential orders to be elsewhere on immediate receipt, however, the mix of a power object, an unknown relic at that, she knew intuitively was complicating what really was occurring in the ethers.

Calose evading relic hunters? She would have to read her report when she finished it. This is what changed the captain's energy. What relic was it? She would have to look up on the galactic relic hunter's newsies to see what the relic could be and put *Calypso's* investigating talents to work for the finer details.

"Fate?" Calose said, trying to hide her guilt from enjoying the unexpected excitement. "I can't see what the involvement with relic hunter's business and a wellness check of Captain Belig have to do with fate. I do see that this stop at DSS for the installation of a classified part was where Captain Belig was, so the wellness check that was requested could be completed. A neatly manipulated instance from an obscure Federation bureau that has no official name," Calose mocked. "So, without me having to read your copious notes, what were you up to while I was occupied portside?"

"DSS's HMO asked if we were available to haul supplies to Waystation PicaS4, a science station, after the completion of our ship work. I've verified credentials and it is a legitimate PD. DSS's cargo steward was happy to move the supplies out of her storage area. I understand we're going to make the scientists and their families incredibly happy with the supply delivery."

"What kind of supplies?" Even as she asked, she was accessing an itemized detail of the supplies.

"Repair and replacement parts for the overdue scheduled maintenances, and supplies and personal items ordered for the residents. Enough to fill cargo bay three. Their present supplies must be down to rations. Everything to the waystation is shipped through DSS but the previous management of PicaS4 didn't pay the vendors, so their supplies have been piling up at DSS as held property. PicaS4 is now under new management, their bills paid, payroll met, and business went on. While I locked down that contract PicaS4's HMO asked to contract us to transport a dozen crates from their station to off load at B74S, a space recycling dumpsite. I left their request open until cleared by B74S's administrator. When confirmed PicaS4 will deposit credit to our account. I didn't want to get in the middle of a workers' strike or unpaid bill with a load of space

trash in our cargo bay. All you need to do is officially acknowledge you know what I've been up to while you were cavorting with questionable characters."

Calose grinned at her. "I hadn't the chance to ask for identification of *those* characters, but they had cranky dispositions. I turned my AIU to low reception until I got to the docks."

At space dumpsites neutralized contents were turned into either re-useable chemicals or remolded into a renewable commodity auctioned off to planetside industries. It was a lucrative space business with the high possibility of competition of price wars and making sloppy handling likely, so the Federation's Space Bureau of Toxic Waste regulated all space waste dumps. One explosion of toxic material in space affected ALL planets near and far.

"Also, PicaS4 and B74S are closer than Berton Space Port where our crewmates were scheduled to wait for our pickup. I sent a message to Commander Kaving to meet us at PicaS4," Heru said. "They're still in transit from their assignment to Berton's."

"If Kaving's team can be at PicaS4 before our arrival, have them confirm the crates aren't something that the dumpsite won't accept or is more than the nominal fee we're to be paid," Calose said. After moment of thought she added, "PicaS4 may suspect that I sent our shuttle before our arrival to verify all is well on the waystation, and that there are no pirates or outlaws of any sort lurking about. I'm sure the Federation will appreciate a report on the station before the Federation's official inspection on the new management is arranged."

"Already done, Captain," Heru reported with a smile.

"You're so efficient," Calose mocked. "One day you'll be captain of your own ship."

"No thank you. Been there and done that. I did learn valuable lessons during the war, like avoiding being a captain or XO. The third Officer of *Calypso* is just the right fit, with *Calypso* and her robotic team doing most of the work. What better efficiency is there?"

Calose chuckled.

"PicaS4 is two days from Alban's Waystation making it an easy stop off. That waystation doesn't have a good reputation," Heru continued.

"They do appeal to the rough types. After we drop Belig off at Albans we'll hang around out of sight as much as we can, to make sure she's safely in space before we head to our next assignment. Since you have everything in hand, I'll be in my office writing my report." Calose headed out.

"Captain Calose has left the bridge. Commander Heru on bridge duty," Heru reported in her log.

Calose entered her quarters, shed her clothes, and looked forward to a refreshing sonic shower. Feeling renewed afterward, she dressed in her in-flight uniform and went into her office to record her visit to DSS. It was another chore she disliked, but it mattered. She needed to be honest and critical about why her attempt to keep a low profile had failed. What puzzled her most was why an outdated military bot had singled her out to help keep a relic away from relic hunters. The thought of becoming involved not only with relic hunters but also with a mortliege's business made her shake her head. Would there be consequences? Heru's comment that there were no coincidences left her uneasily agreeing. Her hands still tingled at the memory of holding the bundle. She had never heard of a relic that cried like a baby or could incapacitate those who meant it harm by forcing them to look at it. Or had she imagined that? It had been a strange adventure. She knew of sacred sites whose energy was so intense that only those of the right mind could enter their sphere. Anyone who insisted on invading such a place without respect would perish. Could a relic wield the same power as a sacred site?

Her thoughts moved to the mortliege, that most associated such a person as a trained assassin, however, rationally, she knew they were the most dependable messengers in the galaxy. Admittedly, messages delivered could be deadly to the recipient, and that gave them the reputation of assassins. Membership wasn't species specific, but no matter what their species there was a mystical quality to them, or an other-than-ness.

Why was she chosen to help a mortliege on her assignment? A mortliege and a sacred relic. She did enjoy the game.

"You worry about the wrong point," her ghostly friend admonished.

Calose turned to view the shadowy form of her ghostly visitor. "My point was to practice keeping a low profile while making a discreet checkup on Captain Belig. "Do you have pointers to help my next endeavor to mingle without attracting attention," she asked humorously.

"You're focusing on what isn't important. You adapted to situations. That was and is important."

Calose sighed. "I want to be able to disguise myself, move around unnoticed." Mentally she groaned thinking it sounded like she was whining.

Zooey laughed at her melodrama, then added seriously. *"You appeared as non-threatening and therefore, more approachable. So, your intention to be such a person while on DSS did work and you showed your inner strength by beating the relic hunters to their game, and without asking for my help!"* she teased. *"The fact that a mortleige allowed you a role in her assignment and with relic hunters, should be a proverbial feather in your captain's cap."*

"Zooey, where do you get those expressions? I'm sure Heru won't take offense, but just what type of feather would that be?"

"You can't see yourself as a Lonledue's captain, dressed as captain of the fleet standing tall on the bridge, all three feet with her platform shoes giving a lift to one more inch to her physical stature?"

Calose burst into laughter at the image of wearing the traditional Lonledue captain's hat surrounded with Ostrich feathers that a gust of wind would either launch the hat or the wearer, clutching it securely on her head, teetering on platform shoes, and still maintaining a haughty look of superiority. Lonledue adults were a uniform three feet in height and deadly if engaged in combat. Their speed was a blur to most people's vision even if they wore military goggles. They were another species whose appearance fooled an opponent and valuable to have on one's fighting team. They also trained the large birds on their planet, the Ostriches, to fight using their dew claws with deadly efficiency. Never challenge a Lonledue to a fight, no matter the age.

"I can feel your description of holding the relic is downplayed. Are you saying that when you held it up unveiled it affected the hunters but not you?"

"I didn't look at it. The mortliege told me not to."

"How many relics have you come across?"

"Enough to respect them as someone else's magical objects. So, how's it going with you, roaming the ethers like a restless ghost?" Calose asked.

"Busy. Some ask for help, and all complain to the end," Zooey said.

"Are you implying that you are being burdened with ungrateful supplicants?"

"Not all those I help are ungrateful, but there is a lot of noise about how much harder they have to work," Zooey said. *"I thought I would stop by and check to see how you're doing."*

"No ungratefulness here. I appreciate all your help. Is there something I should be worried about?"

"None that I haven't just pointed out. The other situation you adapted to was extending the wellness check to seeing her safely to reclaiming her freighter. It is a great expanding of heart energy." Zooey left chuckling.

Why was she extending Belig's wellness check to make sure she got to reclaim her ship safely? Did that come under the heading of seeing the assignment to its successful end? Or was it as her teachers reminded her to open all actions to be heart directed? When she first started on this heart journey, she didn't believe all situations could be heart centered. Yet slowly she was. She grinned. She was still judgmental and found a poorly performed job difficult not to say something scathing to the worker. The progress was that her critical response didn't have as much heat behind her thoughts that an AIU could pick up.

She closed her journal, deciding what she wrote would do. She cleared space in her quarters to ground herself and clear any negative energy she may have picked up. When she completed her caim she began a chant to create a peaceful energy around her. For an unmeasurable amount of time, she sat Padmasana, enjoying the connection to a loving energy.

"*Captain*," Commander Heru called on the comm. *"Sorry to disturb you. We have a message from Dysta Space Station marked immediate reading on receipt. They are forwarding with an attachment of their own for Captain Belig. The redirected message is from Federation Headquarters of Space Law Enforcement. How do you want to handle it?"* Heru asked.

Calose took a deep breath and brought her thoughts back to her ship duties. "I'll deliver the message in person. *Calypso* where is our passenger located?"

"*Captain, she has left her quarters and is returning to 2nd deck mess hall*," *Calypso* responded. *"She has found the TK in her cabin with directions and the AIU. She has not taken the AIU with her. It has successfully been programed for her bioreading and her wrist comm has been updated with her space passport ID information."*

In the mess she found Belig searching the music menu for recent concerts. She turned at Calose's entrance. Like Calose, Belig looked like she had taken time to change into leisure shipboard clothing, minus her 4D scanner and DR.

"Back so soon?" Belig asked. "I haven't had a chance to get bored. I want to thank you for delivering a TK. It looks like a first-rate kit." She looked embarrassed. "I know by space rules I should have had a full kit before I boarded your ship."

“It could have been a problem since you also didn’t have a wrist com with your passport identification information. DSS reported you didn’t want to wait around for them to issue you a kit.”

Belig nodded, looking uncomfortable. “I expected DSS would send you my updated information as required by galactic space law.”

“Also, they forwarded a message to you from Federation Headquarters of Space Law Enforcement with a tagged message of their own.”

Belig's expression froze and the energy around her shrunk making it difficult to pick up her feelings.

“It doesn't mean its terrible news. It would have flagged as dire news or something similar,” Calose said. “Shall I play it here?” She sent calming energy to Belig. “Take a deep breath and let it out. Do it again. You're safe here,” she added with a mental image reinforcing her message of protection. She wasn't sure her supporting thoughts and energy were getting through since Belig closed herself off. But after another long deep breath Belig's natural color returned to her face. She was still difficult to sense.

She asked, “Can you read it first?”

When Calose finished the message, she smiled encouragingly at Belig.

“It's notifying you that your spaceship, *Space Journeys,* previously registered as *Galactic Star* at the Idobon military auction docket, and before that, *Chppnsit,* from the shipyards at Cronon...I must say, they not only got your ship's identifier updated finally, but they traced it back to your ship's launch date from the shipyard too. I'll bet that's how Mda Marce Bruno was caught, creating fake ownership documents. His agent couldn't get the ship's original identifier register without setting off a red flag with the fraud division. Anyway, your freighter is at the Space Police Impound Docks in the space city of Cronas, at the request of DSS’s Leasing Department. They objected to your freighter docked at Alban’s Waystation too far from where the trial of Mda Marce Bruno will be held and on a Waystation with questionable security. They got that right,” Calose said.

Calose took both of Belig's clenched hands from her knees into her own hands. They were cold but Belig’s species wasn’t all that warm blooded. It was the tenseness in her hands that Calose sought to release. Belig relaxed her fists and when her fingers uncurled Calose gave a reassuring squeeze and released them.

"*Space Journeys?* I can now call him *Space Journeys.* Is that all?" Belig asked anxiously.

"Well, the court requires you to provide proof that the ship is yours, which it appears the court already knows that, but it wants you to make a statement under oath that you didn't authorize the sale to Mda Marce Bruno, business owner and resident of Cronas."

"I heard of him but haven't delivered anything knowingly to him or any of his businesses. He's not the type of customer I would do business with. I'm surprised he hasn't been relocated to his home planet." Her voice sounded lighter and the energy around her was calmer.

"Cronas is near the Heliope shipping corridor with a monitored exit point a few hours from the space city's outer perimeter." Calose turned the screen so Belig could see it if she wanted to. "He lists his occupations as gambler and business owner. It says here, his gambling and business offices are on a yacht that he purchases new each year. Oh, what a life," Calose said mockingly. "No doubt on a WL and I don't mean a Watch List for the rich and famous that got there with dealings above the law. This is a hologram of his previously owned yacht on the for sale listing a week ago."

Why would he risk attracting the attention of the authorities by stealing a small freighter? Calose wondered.

"As a captain I wouldn't want a new freighter each year just when I'm getting familiar with the present one's idiosyncrasies. My first officer would hate me!" Belig said.

Both women studied with interest the hologram of the yacht.

Belig gave Calose a sidelong glance. "He probably gets rid of them yearly because he's paranoid there are spy devices from various interested persons in his goings on about his ship."

"In his line of business if he's got the credits, it would be cheaper to buy a new ship loaded with the latest security system than installing additional ones on existing systems that need overrides for the two or three installations to work together," Calose said. "What could possibly go wrong with mixed security software?" she scoffed.

"Everything in a hot minute!" Belig said snickering. "That phrase takes me back to why the starfighters we were patching up ended up on our repair docks. Sabotage wasn't the only problem we were facing but replacement parts that did not synchronize properly with previous safeties! I'm surprised we didn't lose entire squadrons through inept and unqualified techs."

Calose's eyes hardened momentarily, unnoticed by Belig as she went on. "What would he want my freighter for? Transporting supplies? A shuttle could do that. Just what kind of supplies was he intending to freight? Do you think he was smuggling?"

The two women looked at each other and gave hums at their own mental lists of possibilities.

"The report says his previous yacht is pending sale to a buyer in the Quan Galaxy. The new owner may have to travel through Gossimer's Travel Corridor to pick up his purchase if it goes through. I'd like to travel to another galaxy," Belig said wistfully.

"Unless the person whose freight I'm carrying pays the gate tolls and a tidy sum of credits for my time, I'll keep my interests in this galaxy. It keeps me busy enough," Calose said. "Besides, it will take more than one month to travel just to get to the entrance. Or you can spend a very long time traveling through the empty space separating galaxies."

"The wag I heard on DSS from some of the pilots is that it's not as expensive if you're in a convoy and there are dozens of public travel corridors to Gossimer's to cut down on travel time."

"Right," Calose said skeptically. "For what species? Being safe for a designated class doesn't mean all species in that class will be immune to harmful energies of that travel tunnel, even individuals will have reactions others don't. And not all spaceship hulls were created for the multiple possibilities of energy radiation in all space corridors. There are too many biological entities from thousands of known and unknown planets that are traveling through space, and for all of us know, through private travel tunnels our technology can't identify. That thought tires me. With all the telepathic species in our galaxy alone, and the multitude of known and unknown densities brushing against ours, or overlapping, are there really any secrets? I'm perfectly content to let my navigator figure out the best possible routes to take that are good for my welfare and my crew, while my LS and I work on freight deliveries. And should you take on a freight delivery to another galaxy, what guarantees you a return haul that will pay for your venture, far, far, away," she teased. "It wouldn't just be your LS who is unhappy with you but the rest of your crew. Now, do you want to know what the DSS Law Office attached?"

"Since you took all the fun out of dreaming of visiting new frontiers, yes."

Calose grinned then turned her attention back to the DSS attachment. "You're tempting the Fates to drop interesting events into your life."

“A little adventure keeps the brain sharp...though I'm not interested in something that gets me arrested or is involved with relic hunters. Come to think of it, I should give it more thought.”

“A safe and tame adventure? You mean a holographic adventure with safeties fully engaged?” Calose teased.

Calose went back to reading what was on the screen. “Well, how proper of them.”

Belig burst out impatiently, “What?” She leaned over to read the screen.

“As their business promotions advertise. The DSS legal department is representing your interest in the theft of your ship that they leased out, which explains why they moved it to a safer dock. Your assigned lawyer is reminding you that according to Federation's Merchant Space rules, you are not to wear your OC uni, until after the court rules the ship *is* yours. He further added that if you don't have a uniform with you, one will be ordered for you and charged to Mda Marce Bruno. Did you bring a proper uniform, with the trim indicating owner captain and up-to-date ribbon bars?” she teased.

“No. On my arrest I was in my civies. I'm presuming my uniforms are in storage with the rest of my belongings on Sigma Space Station. I have a list of what is in storage, I just haven't had a chance to look it over. I was taking the word of the court clerk that all my personal belongings are stored until I paid my fine.”

“The benevolent forces are continuing to smile on you, or you can just say it's good luck,” Calose said. “The DSS lawyer anticipated your answer as no and has a tailor recommendation and will forward your measurements on your approval.”

“That Bruno Marce sure has a lot of arrogance to lead a notorious life so close to a space station that has a Federation Court and headquarters for the space police in that sector,” Belig commented.

“He’s a very shrewd businessperson that runs his gambling business outside of the space city’s distance line, therefore they have no legal authority to regulate him unless he breaks a Federation law, which in your case, he did. Marce does have a reputation for no debt is uncollected on his books. He's a gambler with confidence,” Calose added warningly.

“Done. My new uniform ordered. It will have my latest training ribbon added to my ribbon bar and my uniform made from the most expensive body protection material, since someone else is paying,” Belig said, tapping the screen to close the session.

“Well then, that concludes business.”

“If we're at the same port when you get your notification of your ship’s name change, perhaps we can celebrate our renaming together,” Belig said. “We purchased our freighters at the same time and put in our preferred name change then, so yours should be updating soon.”

“I don't mind celebrating together if it's not in a spacer bar. Gods but they haven't changed for being a den of trouble, poking at each other after too many drinks that dull one’s good senses.”

“They aren't all like that! When was the last time you've visited a spacer bar?”

Belig giggled at Calose's expression of mock horror, followed by a grin.

“If I have need to hear the latest wag, there are more reputable places for that,” Calose said. “I like the kind that I don't have to filter out the majority of the tale to get to the useful information.”

“Do you still dance?” Belig asked.

She was remembering Calose at space station Asamble's party, a long month after the war officially ended. The space station's commanding officer hosted it to show his appreciation for all those that voluntarily delayed their departures to make up the number required to be present in dress uniform for turning military management of Asamble's space platform to civilian ownership and management. She couldn't remember who Calose's partners were, but her all business Chief let herself relax, displaying natural talent and skill in cultural dances, and her laugh at the comments from her appreciative partners and audience was without embarrassment or self-depreciation. She couldn't remember ever seeing Chief Calose that happy...well, everyone was happy. It was the end of centuries of war that stretched across galaxies. Though no one knew what they were returning to or even if it was to a home, there was the anticipation of new beginnings with Federation credits to spend.

Calose smiled at the images she picked up from Belig, pleased she was relaxing enough to share her surface thoughts.

“That was a nice party,” Belig said. “I especially like the military's top commands show of appreciation by putting our names at the top of the military's auction list for a ship as well as a word in with the Federation Treasury for a loan.”

“They did owe us bonus credits as well as back pay. For the Federation's Treasury General, it was a better deal to trade equipment they wanted to get rid of rather than issue Federation credits. It meant they didn't have to pay storage fees or send usable ships to the

scrapyard. It would have been such a waste of equipment that could have been repaired and reused. Soldiers wanting to start their own farms, or manufacturing businesses planetside or space businesses were more than willing to swap," Calose said. "So, about this change of destination for your ship retrieval. Cronas is a better place than Alban's Waystation, which is more than likely a two-spacer bar port with both being a favorite for crooks and their spies. Chances would have been your freighter would have been stripped of anything that was removeable and then some. I don't know who thought of towing it there after it was seized but luckily it was moved. I don't think any waystation has a secure impound dock or has available decent spaceship personnel to hire from. We also have a better chance of picking up legitimate cargo for delivery with safer passenger business at the space city Cronas. There will be an employment board with applicants certified by the Space Merchants Bureau that you can interview for a crew."

"I was worried about Alban's Waystation. Space City Cronas is a better choice all around," Belig agreed relieved.

"As a city, it's more than likely there's five bars on each level, with their wealthier clientele on the higher levels that you and I are not likely to get a pass to visit. With all those bars to check on you'll have plenty of wag to catch up on while you put out feelers for contracts," Calose said.

"And dance halls for singles with excellent partners," Belig teased back.

"Unfortunately for you, we won't be getting there any faster. I can't increase speed since it's in the same controlled business corridor as the waystation."

"Don't pick up any infractions on my account. And I'll skip taking on passengers for a while. Just cargo cleared and certified at pickup and delivery point. Certified PDs only," she said firmly.

"A well learned lesson," Calose said, chuckling. "Come on now, why the sad face? You found out the name change of your ship has been finally certified. And if it's impounded in a police dock that means it's scanned to its bones for any contraband and you'll have that certified with the name of the station's officer and shift, and under its new name. Remember, Dysta Space Station advertises that any damage to property done during the rental or lease period of a ship in their inventory, they will fix. You can hire an energy cleanser if you need to or use your own choice of herbs for smudging. What a great new beginning for you and *Space Journeys*!"

“That's my worry. What's the condition it's returned to me? They leased it out to a gambler, who lost it to another gambler and a notorious one at that. What did either of them want with a freighter? Fortunately, he was caught illegally seizing a leased ship for an unpaid debt and renaming it as his legitimate property. Not such a good gamble, that.”

“DSS has a reputation of honesty to uphold,” Calose said. “Especially if they want to remain on the Federation's approval list for being part of their penitent work release program. None of their detainees on the station are dangerous, ah, except for a few that do ruin the 100% rate of nonviolent offenders. I wouldn't have landed there if I worried.”

“You didn't exactly have a peaceful stay,” Belig reminded her.

“I wasn't arrested, aggressive people were identified, I met some interesting people, and I found you, and all while my ship was worked on. Were you treated unfairly?”

“I've never been incarcerated before, so there's nothing to compare with!” Belig sighed. “Okay, so I should be thankful that the court ruled I was a 'dupe' in a conspiracy to defraud a salesperson and I didn't suffer anything more than embarrassment and confinement...and having to pay a small portion of the fine the group was charged with. How was I to know they were crooks? I didn’t see anything unlawful until it was too late.”

“Even a veteran LS can make a mistake.”

“I let my LS go a week earlier,” she admitted ruefully. “He wasn't following my rules for accepting freight and was using illegal telepathy taps with a bootlegged AIU. I won't be using the same company for hiring my next crew. My only concession was the port authorities picked him up as soon as I released him because he was on probation for the same infraction working for another business. He also wasn't cleared for spaceship duties due to his use of an illegal AIU. His credentials for employment were fake! I'm sure that company isn't hiring out until their staff goes through retraining and recertification.”

“Ah. A challenge to all captains no matter our species. How much information on the job application is true and how much has been left out? Besides listening to the local bar and dock wag, the age-old fallback is to consult a seer to see what the employment registrar missed. Some are worth their charge.” Calose smiled.

“I know a captain is supposed to take all responsibility for what goes wrong but...after the seizure of my ship and my arrest, I didn't even take notice to see what became of my remaining crew. I was more concerned with my ship and me.”

"That's understandable. I would imagine your crew had been questioned too since there's not much that goes on a ship without a crew knowing." *Especially since the crew's use of AIUs would have given them clues,* Calose thought.

"I've been trying not to think about what part they may have or had not in the fraud. I took full responsibility for my failure to verify the freight, the seller, and the destination's legitimacy. The bar speculation on DSS, I'll leave on DSS as wag with no lawful substance. I need to focus on my first priority, getting my freighter back. Hiring a crew, collecting my stored belongings, and signing contracts for business, and not necessarily in that order, are on my To Do list *after* I get my ship."

Calose nodded. Belig was also suspicious of her crew's knowledge that something shivy was going on with that shipment that their captain didn't know about. A loyal crew should make their captain's interest a priority. Calose wondered if potential employers were suspicious of Belig's ex-crew when they sought jobs.

"*Calypso, locate and report on Captain Belig's previous crew,"* Calose telepathically instructed her ship.

"Captain Belig has initiated an inquiry of her own on her past employees," Calypso noted.

I'm sure our inquiry will provide a deeper trove of information, Calose thought to herself. Calose was pleased Belig took the initiative. It showed she was aware that her mistake had repercussions not just with her life, but that her crew would also be tainted and looking for payback. Or not. She was curious and wasn't embarrassed by sticking her nose into Belig's business. Belig's uncle did ask her to look into her welfare.

She waited for Belig to select a beverage and biscuits to go with her soup before she selected her favorite Broko goulash. "Well, you were lucky you were sent to a station that treated its incarcerated population well and not like slaves."

"You didn't have to wear the necklace," Belig said grumpily.

"It was decorative, like a piece of jewelry. You are now free. When the HMO released you to my ship, he said to reassure you, your record has been expunged due to the requirements the court dictated. And you have your own clothes on, new clothes at that. Quite fashionable for most space stations, I will add. Were you abused? Assaulted? Threatened?"

"Oh, all right. I was frightened of a few of the other penitents."

"It's not all right. What bothers you so much that a message from space law enforcement gives you a fright?"

"A fright is right!" Belig took a deep breath and let it out. "I didn't feel free and some of the longer sentenced inmates could turn on me in a second. I felt as if I was walking a thin line of being accused of something and getting a longer sentence. There are a lot of species that are hard to read even with an AIU. And my living space, my place of safety, was so small sometimes I dreamed I was in an incubation chamber, waiting to hatch! Now, I worry about someone telling my Uncle I was arrested before I can explain it to him," she finished despondently. "Cashing in my biological parents' inheritance they'll know where the credits were sent."

"Did you ever send anyone a message you were all right during your time off the available freighter listings?"

"Well, sort of. Not in detail," she admitted, looking embarrassed. "It was listed as leased out."

"Leased. I'm sure they would like to know you're okay. The good news is that you were upgrading your skills on the newer ships, earning another ribbon on your skills bar, while your ship was leased out. Businesses like to know the freighter captain they hire knows her ship well, trusting she keeps up the maintenance so there's no preventable failures in shipping their merchandise."

"That's true. I did get good marks from the smaller businesses that couldn't afford to lose a shipment from a freighter's breakdown in space. But I'll wait and send a message to my Aunt Whin when we reach Cronos. It's a reputable space city that will ease any worry she has about my whereabouts." She let out an explosive sigh. "How do you stay so...so...calm? I mean, with those people chasing you, nearly killing you, you weren't that stressed. I thought you were enjoying yourself. Even during the war, no matter the pressure to get ships fixed and quickly back out, you were upbeat and kept us on course. In a better frame of mind than we were under our previous Chief – Burgen. I hope that guy retired to a happier life."

Calose laughed as if Belig was telling a joke. She was better at hiding her stress, however that wasn't something she wanted to share. Instead, she directed Belig's focus to Chief Burgen.

"What?"

"Chief Burgen was on limited-service status, too old to serve but not ready to retire when I arrived. It was the custom of his planet that if an elderly service member had no relatives to

care for them during a peaceful era, to let them serve in a limited capacity until their mental and physical needs required specialized care, then they were moved to a care facility planetside. However, he was forgotten by his planet's military command until Asamble, that small repair space station we served on, was assigned a key role in the Federation's war. As for me, I had complaints daily to our commanding officer of being cranky, blunt, and nosey and called dictatorial by a good many on the best of days. I was lucky our base CO thought I was just what was needed for station morale."

Belig chuckled. "Yeah. You were a hard one. It took four standard months for us to become a solid team with less lip flapping and threats by the *scaggets* on the station. It was like night and day. And there we were, earning achievement ribbons each year from then on!"

Calose waved a dismissive hand at the praise. "We all had a job to do. Once we were all going in the same direction, things worked out for everyone. Like Chief Di reminded the complainers, do it right or ship out. We were fortunate our commanding officers, as newly assigned to Asamble as Di and I were, were determined to get the entire station working to its highest level of operation. It wasn't just the mechanics squad that had an infestation of scaggets."

"It was tough to trust our superiors since the first group did little to protect anyone from bullying and sabotage to equipment, theft of tools, and our personal belongings. It was a shivy situation. What I remember is that you always took the time to notice who was down and who was about ready to do crazed stuff. You listened to us and kept an eye on us to see if we were all right. I don't know what it was about your style of command, but you stood out more than Chief Di, and he was exemplary. When I meet up with the others from our squad and we talk about the war times, no one knows anything about you, but they all are appreciative that you helped them through tough times, me included," she hurried to add.

"And you're still talking about it? Then, you had a mystery to wonder about instead of dwelling on the war," she said. "So, what brings this up now?"

Calose couldn't remember treating Belig any different than she had the rest of the crew she was responsible for. Once they received their EAOS, that is End of Active Obligated Service, the first year of learning the freighter trade as civilians, did have them seeing each other as they signed up for classes, but there were many others in the same situation as they shared tips and attended required classes testing to see if their downloads were being digested. Once the basics

were learned, and preferences of where to seek hauling jobs were made, they seldom saw each other, and when they did, their meetings were brief.

"During my time on DSS I worried about my reputation, reminisced about my past and stuff like that. Painful but it's part of the journey, as Monk Raazi would say. I remembered the help Monk Raazi gave me in facing something about myself that I was avoiding. I went through those exact steps he taught us while I was on DSS." Belig laughed embarrassed then added, "Do you see any of the squad on your port stops?"

"No." She didn't want to open any doors into conversations she would rather not have.

"Maybe because you don't visit bars where WVETs frequent," Belig said amusingly. "So, anyway, I don't know anything about you except for the last five years, we run into each other now and then, and we may have time for a shared meal, but whatever we talk about, I don't recall. This is the longest and the most we've ever talked, even in the first year when we attended classes and participated in hands on exercises about hauling freight in space and all the stuff that went with it."

"Not to be rude but put bluntly, I would rather not be part of a conversation."

"Okay."

This was the part of meeting up with war acquaintances that got awkward for Calose. She liked not having to relive someone's version of the good old days while they were in service or worse, the nightmare times. By Belig's feelings she understood her need for an explanation. Something simple should be fine.

"Those people on Asamble that had been reassigned off the space port had harsh reprimands in their files that may remain today. Their reassignments were not nice places, like the gulags on mining planets or servicing the frontlines with no leeway for misbehavior. We were at war and anyone with shivy affiliations or leanings to sabotage belongings of others they didn't like was not trusted by anyone, so isolation was the quick fix. Then, there were the ones with connections to violent gangs. I don't want to meet up with any of them in case they are out and about for revenge and a once lowly chief that's now a captain of her own freighter, will do on their long list of paybacks. Scaggets they were then and, sad to admit, in all probability, still are."

"Oh, right. That's a strong possibility. They were scary. I wonder where they are now," Belig said. Calose noted she shivered at the thought. For some of them, she would too if she

didn’t know the fate of the dangerous ones were no longer among the living. She kept track of those that were unreformable.

“Don't ask. Don't even talk about them or think of them. With all the finely tuned AIUs you'll be sending out a mental link and someone will sell the information. That reminds me, besides running into your cousins Colet and Mimie that told me about your inheritance, before that, I also met another family member of yours at the docks on Sagmans. He said Jabag's is your family's business in spaceship repair,” Calose said. “I hear a lot about the reputable Jabag's Spaceship Repairs or some that claim they're as reputable as Jabags. Jabag's?” she asked teasingly. She didn't add that the older man, asked her where his niece was. That hadn’t been a chance meeting. It started her on an official wellness-check on Belig, which was how she ran into Colet and Mimie on Station Sigmans, a port stop on *Calypso’s* voyage to DSS. It turned out to be a good meeting since it let her know Belig had credits coming.

“That's my uncle’s family on my mother's side, from the Dulog tribe.” Her face lit up at the mention. “To me, that's my real family. When my parents tossed my rebellious youthful unmanageable self out, that’s who I went to live with. Lucky me. As for the name Jabags, they’re a non-sentient bug on Boda, my planet of origin. It lives in the desert and rocky areas. It's a hard worker at building mounds for their underground cities. It also stinks and its bite, if the stink doesn't warn you off, hurts. It's a metaphor on Boda that turned into a family joke. So how does your family take your career as hauling freight among the stars and the owner of her own ship?” Belig blinked all three eyes at her. Her third eye was particularly penetrating, however, not enough to put Calose under any spell of admitting what she didn’t want to admit.

“Okay, okay. Enough of the blinking. I don't want this to be shared. Right?” She was thinking of what she could tell her, that if Belig did share something about her, it wouldn't put any lives in danger.

“Promise.” Belig's hands covered both her hearts. Getting her story together, Belig suspected rightly.

“I was drafted and after the war chose my destiny to remain in space. That simple. I wanted to be a spacer, and my own boss.” Saying the last part had her laughing at herself. In a sense, no one really was their own boss.

Belig leaned toward Calose, smiling to encourage her to say more. “What would you have done if you didn't get drafted?”

“Being a freighter captain is better than farm work. That, I'm sure of.”

“A farmer’s daughter? You have reached for the stars and then some! Do you stay connected to them?”

“No.”

“Is there a reason you don't?” Belig sat back, realizing she overstepped the boundaries of good manners. “I mean, I'm one of the odd ones that was born into a family of miners, raised with a family of ship mechanics but is much happier being a captain of my own freighter, sailing among the stars. I do keep my hand in mechanical repairs by doing maintenance of my ship's bots and tuning up my ship at one of uncle's shops. When I am in flight I stay in touch with my aunt. I have a wee one that I keep track of.” She stopped herself from saying anymore and asked, “It's not because you didn't marry the farmer next door, is it?” she joked.

Calose didn't comment on the sadness that showed in Belig's third eye, causing it to flutter, or the hitch in her voice at the mention of a child left behind. Since she didn't ask for details of her meeting with her uncle, Calose didn't tell her that *he* had contacted her. How he knew where to send the message, she didn't know, but his message was a request to meet him on the small space station Sagmans, with a note attached from someone higher up in her chain of command to follow the request through. *Calypso* conveniently had freight to deliver to a Space Police Compound, SPC41, an hour from Sagmans. It was the usual weapons, software, parts, new shuttles, but no passengers. Due to the specialized freight, few ships were authorized to carry Federation Space Police deliveries. While she took their small shuttle to meet with Belig’s uncle, her crew oversaw the delivery to SPC41.

Over lunch, he told her about Belig's bondmate's death, their child, still in its egg, that she left behind with another to raise. Her draft notice came at a blessed time for her. She could have served her conscripted time planetside surrounded by her family, but it would have been filled with memories of her deceased bondmate. Belig's species bonded for life with some spouses expiring from grief shortly after their mate's death. He told her the military's training away from their home planet gave her a new focus which helped her deal with her sorrow.

To love someone that deeply was frightening to Calose. It gave her a better understanding of Belig and why she couldn't see her child, who now as an adult, looked just like his father. That had a spiritual meaning to her clan. So, when she had missed sending messages for months that alarmed her aunt who the egg hatchling was left with to raise as her own. Belig's routine was to

send hellos at each of her stops or at kiosks, pass on jokes she heard that she thought her Aunt Whin would enjoy. Her uncle was afraid Belig may have done something terrible to herself on the anniversary of her deceased mate's death.

"Why have you brought this worry to me?" she had asked.

"Because during the war, as her NCO, you had given my niece, like a daughter to me, a desire to live."

"Me? Why do you think that?"

"Before your arrival communications from Belig were brief and despondent. I was aware of the weekly briefings on repair depots and Asamble Spaceship Repair Platform, ASRP, was at the bottom of the ratings with a blackmark. It was weeks after your arrival that her communications changed in tone. Asamble's ratings in six months had risen to something respectable. In a year they were on the Admiral's Listing and awarded the above and beyond ribbon. Belig attributed it to your leadership. Bragged about it, just so you know." He had grinned at that and blinked his third eye, like a wink. A tease it was.

Calose stifled a sigh. "You know well that a squad's success is not from one person's efforts. We had from top down a supportive command that turned Asamble's community around and with it, the people that worked in the mechanic's squad."

He had smiled and sipped his bitter beverage whose scent tickled Calose's nose. Calose didn't know what to say.

He added firmly, "You saved her life."

And then he leaned forward. "I want you to make sure she's doing all right." His third eye opened wide, searching her face for what he hoped to see. She paused too long, for he slid a token toward her. Calose recognized the piece as an authorization from someone in the Federation's high command. In the command list of who she still took orders from, that was way above her immediate chain of command. She nodded, the token discreetly picked up and deposited in her sleeve.

It would be discussed with her crew and PO.

However, when her shuttle settled in the shuttle bay of her freighter, the larger shuttle was missing. Three of her crew had been ordered on an immediate covert assignment, leaving her and Commander Heru with the wellness check of Belig on DSS under the guise of installing

a part on their ship. Commander Heru would oversee the installation while she would do the wellness check.

Calose hadn't realized that Belig held her sadness that deep. After the first year of struggling to set up their businesses, they saw little of each other. She prided herself that she was able to read people's emotional states, and yet there was a person she served time with on a space station, that she didn't sense the profound injury to her psyche. Was it because she was healing from her own injuries from a previous assignment?

"My family and I have nothing to discuss," Calose said flatly.

Belig caught the finality in her tone and realized that was all she was going to get about Calose's personal life. Did that make them more than casual friends? Or just war cronies that crossed paths now and again? And the next thought was, what a coincidence that Calose stopped at DSS and supplied her with information to pay off her fine early and offered taxi service to retrieve her ship without asking for a fare. She didn't believe in coincidences. Who did either of them owe a favor to?

"The Dulog clan was and still is considered valuable assets as mechanics," Belig continued proudly, to keep a sharing connection open. "Our knowledge and work ethic are strong with the Dulog Clan. Following our time at basic training planetside, with all that slopping around in muck, repairing, and lifting equipment under miserable conditions, climbing hills, jumping out of troop ships in the dark, and dangling in space, we were issued our assignments. So, with our faces scrubbed and a bootcamp completion ribbon bar on our uniforms, we were assigned to where mechanics were needed, some planetside and some to spaceship repair platforms. For those of us fortunate enough NOT to end up planetside, we were highly skilled mechanics that knew how to clean and fire four types of infantry weapons that have no business on a spaceship or space station and received additional training in space fighter repairs using the latest technology. I can tell you from my viewpoint, I was grateful at no more having to spend hours we didn't have cleaning the muck off us and our equipment and jumping into space with a backpack filled with hope and prayers, moving from one base camp to another, as often as the battlefront was prone to move."

She shrugged her shoulders and went on in a lighter tone. "Even Uncle Zac who taught all us youngsters, got a draft notice to oversee enlistees in the mechanics corps. Lucky him, he was spared the draftees training. He didn't want to have a rank to boss people around. He wanted

to turn broken ships into flying better than their shipyard stats and the most rewarding part, he was going to be working in space." She leaned back and smiled. "He's still teaching and fixing, with a small army of AIHs that clean the shop and make sure everyone is doing the work right." She pointed a finger at Calose humorously and added, "Not all good mechanical work can be done by those Accelerated Intelligent Helpers. Just like AIUs can't adequately translate telepathic thought with all species or erect a protective biosphere around all wearers. A biological intuitive mechanic can read the driver or pilot and know when the user has bad habits that shorten the life of a power plant or parts. AIHs only do assessments and specs on the equipment, not the whole team."

"True, those without AIUs learn to naturally read body language and gauge the energy a person is putting out to assess a person, but the AIUs do validate what a naturally intuitive can read," Calose reasoned. For herself, her AIU wasn't always active. Like Belig, she relied on her own abilities to read others.

"When it comes to a ship and its pilot, I don't need an AIU. The one issued to me on DSS had been more advanced than my previous one but still, if I wasn't learning about new ships, I would have relied on my own intuition. I haven't looked over the one you left me in the TK bag but the date on it shows it's a new version and from Merlota Labs. The ENV mask and suit also show they're from Merlota Labs. That's top quality. Thanks again. Since I'm the only passenger, I don't see a reason why I need to use the AIU. It's odd but interesting to be relying on my own senses for a while."

"I understand." She didn't share with Belig she had turned her own down while she was on DSS as part of her exercise. Besides practicing in closing her thoughts from being read by others with AIUs, she was also utilizing her own abilities to read others and block others from reading her thoughts.

"Zac. Yes, that's who I met. I was surprised that he knew who I was but then he said he was your uncle. He seems young," Calose said instead.

"Yes. Grandmother's last egg and it was fertile. It surprised everyone but them. You should meet my Aunt Whin, his bondmate. She's unforgettable! She's taken to living in space better than others of our clan."

"Does she wear her hair something like yours only stacked higher like this?" Calose showed on her head how high the hair stood.

“Oh, my goodness!” Belig broke into laughter. Light colors shot from her head raising the energy in the lounge. “You met her too! I love that woman beyond expression. It's a hair style the elders still like. They used to hide things in their hair. On our home planet, women alone could be attacked by wild animals or the mentally bent, so a weapon was kept in easy reach in their bun. I keep a lesser bun because I hate wasting time on keeping up a fashion long gone.”

“Well, no, I didn't meet her in person. Your uncle showed me a hologram of her. She was standing next to the first business they opened after the war.” Calose smiled widely, as she remembered Whin's life energy emanating from the hologram. Some souls were able to imprint a part of themselves in things, like images of themselves, which was why some were suspicious of pictures of themselves and others, and the belief in ghostly hauntings.

Belig reflected her smile with a big one of her own. “When Uncle Zac got his EAOS, the mechanics that worked in his squad, wanted to work for him as civilians, probably thinking his laid-back manner would be the same in his shop. He no doubt let the NCOs do the disciplinary stuff and he went about his business, repairing ships for the war and teaching those that wanted to learn. As a youth that trained in his shop, I can tell you, he ran a tight work schedule over us young ones and sloppy work was not tolerated. Whatever Aunt Whin saw in those WVETs, that were looking for a handout, she informed them she would find them a job suited to their skills, but it was up to them to apply for it and keep it. Aunt Whin is one of those people that can size most people up in a glance and know if they're a slouch or an industrious worker and without the use of an AIU.”

Belig was beaming with her emotional connection to her aunt. Calose wondered if she was aware of that. Since she didn’t ask what her uncle and her meeting was about, she must have suspected too many coincidences of running into different relatives of hers in a short expanse of time. Telepathy had its advantages, like avoiding if not painful topics, then uncomfortable ones.

“During the war, Aunt Whin chose to be part of the militia for our town. She managed the family's mechanic shops planetside, in four towns! She was a hard task master like Uncle Zac. She placed each family member where they fit. The elders too old for the draft came out of retirement and helped her keep the family businesses going and trained those too young for the draft if they were serious in following the family trade. She and the elders kept a firm hand on the young ones and made sure they didn't join the draft if they weren't suited for it. Best to wait

until they were old enough to be conscripted, they felt. The war went on long enough for them to get their notices. You know how some enlistees had unreal ideas of what being in a war was like. We all were so naive and wild in our youth," she said laughing nervously.

"Anyway, like you and I," she continued, "Uncle Zac used his WVETs status to bid on military surplus, only for something larger than a ship and smaller than a space city. He put a bid on Space Station Suet's military spaceship repair shop and its properties and supplies. The space station was constructed around the ship repair depot during the third year of the war. It was a mini shipyard. Uncle Zac served on Suet as soon as construction was completed, so he knew what he was getting AND he became good friends with the commander of the military operations there. Due to Suet's position in space, my suspicion is that the Federation had an interest in making sure ownership from military to civilian was by a person without a blemish and that was Uncle Zac. If the Federation put their own credits in the purchase, I wouldn't be surprised."

Now Calose knew where Zac got his information on her. Connections to people in places of importance changed the fortunes of those on the periphery. Her uncle's influence would make sure small errors of judgement brought before a court wouldn't besmirch Belig's reputation and would be expunged, exactly what the court had ordered at the completion of her time spent paying off her fine.

"Aunt Whin moved onto station Suet as soon as she received her space passport. Those two had business contracts to sign and get their shop up and running ASAP! Aunt Whin said ships were already lining up for safety checks and maintenance before they officially opened for business. Those two are in their version of bliss, working together again. It didn't take the new investors of Suet long to have new residences constructed to attract business owners and their families with exceptional deals for housing, and affordable housing for employees. Aunt Whin insisted on designing their home with no guest rooms, or large dining space for family or friends to stay or meet. A single unit for just enough space for two. There are hotels, hostels, and plenty of eateries for visitors, as she points out." Belig laughed at that. "When space travel opened for anyone with a passport every relative with little or no funds sought out every relation, distant or close, that lived in space, owned a business in space or owned a spaceship to spend time with. Do you know how many relatives showed up at space docks and expected me to taxi them somewhere for nothing or at a family discount? I wouldn't have had a problem with an

occasional request, but some of them sent me messages from space stations way off my trade routes with a message of, if you're out my way, I need a ride to such-and-such space station, and they gave me a time to be there! It wasn't just the young ones but also our elders! The elders were the worst since tradition holds us younger ones to honor their demands. They wanted me to take them to places they have no business going to and they weren't wearing AIUs to get a clue of the danger they were asking to visit. They heard in an advertisement that it was a great vacation place to visit. Who was going to provide them with guides or FT kits and wait while they wander about or drink a bar dry? And some of them could very well drink a bar dry." Belig took a few deep breaths between giggling at her images of some of her old relatives in a drinking contest.

Calose smiled at the images Belig shared.

"Aunt Whin told me to ignore the elders demands. She would manage them. That left me with my cousins, two of whom you met. I was lucky to have met another flyer with the same problem. He said he sent a message back to his family saying his insurance didn't cover transporting family members due to the considerable risk of injury they posed on a working ship. He then redirected them to a tour company which itemized costs and described the advantage of having tour guides, so they do not get kidnapped or robbed at the different port stops and that they are not violating any culture taboos, due to the consequences foreign places impose on violators."

Calose gave a hearty laugh along with Belig. "Good advice. I stay away from anything related to family. There were too many convoluted relationships damaged by generations of ill will when I lived there. The thought of those now familiar with the use of military weapons and the use of AIUs that would turn generations of grudges into violent clashes is scary." Calose waved her hand and Belig got the impression she didn't want to talk about it anymore.

"Aunt Whin said Suet is aspiring to be a city of many business interests, a galaxy minded meeting hub, though I'm not sure how they're going to build around the ship repair facilities."

"Hire the right architect and builders and it can be done," Calose said. "Do they have a nearby travel corridor already in operation?"

"They do," Belig nodded. "About twenty standard hours away if traveling at regulated speed in a commercial corridor. It's just the right distance to monitor and manage space and nearby planet traffic, which made it an ideal ship repair station during the war."

Both were quiet for a few moments.

“Calose, I want to thank you for spending this time with me. I know this isn’t your usual practice with passengers, especially nonpaying. I hope this doesn’t put you in an uncomfortable spot with your crew.”

Calose smiled. “Not a problem. It's been a long day for me. Whatever watch this is, I would like to end my day. I usually meditate before turning in. Would you like to join me?” Calose asked.

“I would. I've gotten out of the habit.”

“Where would you like to be, that you feel safe in, but not so distracting you can't meditate?” Calose asked.

“That suggestion takes me back to Monk Raazi's sessions you ordered us all to attend. Mt. Vate. There's a cabin up there that gives a view of the entire region below, through wisps of clouds. It's on one of my favorite hologram travel programs, only you can leave off the arduous hike to the top.”

“Mt. Vate it is. Holly Hologram, Mountain Vate program. Start with our arrival on the mountain top.”

“Holly? And you laughed at my calling mine Goddess of a Thousand Lives,” Belig said.

“You called yours by its acronym GTL only it came out Geetill,” Calose said. “That translated to a Wortbug’s reproductive part.”

“Well, we were still eating, and my mouth was full of that delicious dessert you brought! Besides, you just wanted to see if it was voice activated and it did come on.”

“Yes, to a very large holographic view of a Wortbug's private parts best left for a biology class.”

Calose remembered the one time she had stepped aboard Belig's freighter. Belig had been too inebriated to walk safely to her ship, and her crew was off-ship doing whatever crew members did when their ship docked. It was one of the few times they shared lunch, and Belig tried a new beverage. The effects didn't hit her until they were outside the eatery. There were no warnings on the label about what species may become intoxicated.

Their shared memory had both giggling, which stopped as their holographic environment changed with them on top of a mountain with a breathtaking view of the landscape below them. Birds larger than them slowly glided past. They slowed their breaths to match the bird's leisurely

soar. Since it was on a planet that both would need ENV suits, only the sight and sounds with no smells from the planet were part of the program. Calose began a chant that Belig followed until Calose could feel the energy around them changed enough that Belig would be able to meditate in silence.

By the time Belig retired to her cabin to sleep, her thoughts had quieted, and she was able to drop into a deep sleep, something she hadn't been able to do since her arrest, or longer. Her shared so much of her story she attributed it to the relief of being in a safe environment. She hadn't realized the loneliness she had bottled up. If she had said something about so much of her being a chatter box to Calose, Calose silently would have attributed it to *Calypso's* putting Belig at ease. Soundwaves, much like drugs gave Belig the comfort she hadn't had for a while.

Calose took the lift to the bridge to check to see how their flight was going. She wanted to unwind from her lengthy conversation with Belig, before retiring to her quarters.

Heru nodded to Calose continuing a conversation with someone over a comm channel.

"*Calypso II*, out." She rose from her station and joined Calose.

"That was Commander Kaving's call back," she said. "They were inflight so no problem with changing their destination. They will check on the crates we were asked to deliver and get a feel for the new management. We'll also be taking on two additional passengers."

"PPs?"

"Yes. The Temple of Peace is paying for their passage. She didn't want to say too much since the passengers were within hearing. She gave the code for orders from higher up, so it's probably connected to their assignment on Dray Soc."

"Dray Soc is now officially closed to any visits due to a virus outbreak?" Heru gave a nod. "So, these two passengers must be special. Any further information on them?" Calose asked.

"No telling until the team returns in three days. I can see you're looking tired from all that commiserating with our passenger," Heru teased, knowing Calose disliked reminiscing and meeting with acquaintances from her past since it could lead to people wanting to know about her present. It took a lot of energy to keep secrets from intuitives and changing roles for their varying assignments required a lot of secrets. Maybe what had bothered Calose when she returned to the ship was her anticipation of talking about their shared past. It was in Calose's nature to offer help when she was able. Heru smiled at the complications it sometimes caused in

their assignments. But that was why she had other crew members that helped to uncomplicate matters. Calose's nature was why she was captain of this ID ship, *Calypso II.* But then again, the religious relic could also be added to her reflections. She hadn't received any information yet on recently sought after religious relics that cried like a baby.

"Oddly enough, it's driven any sleepiness away. Any traffic or interesting readings?" Calose asked.

"It's a busy commercial corridor. Of the ships we've passed, they had nothing unusual to report. *Calypso* did flag two observations, however."

Calose read *Calypso's* unidentified anomalies. No further information. She then went over the ship's logs to see what ships had passed them and that had acknowledged or initiated a passing hail in the courteous response to a fellow ship in space. The galaxy was vast, even with travel corridors shortening the distances between its countless planets and space stations. Still, captains rarely ignored a courteous hail from another spacecraft within range. With so many species sharing the same stretches of space, captains wanted to know who traveled nearby. Private yachts and small freighters, especially, took comfort in the courtesies exchanged among fellow spacefarers.

After reviewing the ship's logs Calose did not feel ready to retire, as her thoughts kept returning to her own youthful rebelliousness that when drafted opted to serve off planet. In her mind's eye she again faced her father's rage that usually had her frightened to near panic. However, the recruiting agent was beside her when she returned to his house to collect her belongings and to notify him she was leaving whether he liked it or not. He forbade her to take anything with her and would have taken the clothes off her back had not the recruit agent took issue with that.

"What is it, Calose?" Heru asked her gently.

Calose straightened in her chair. "I was just remembering something from my childhood. I haven't thought of that life since I left the village."

"Perhaps sharing memories with Belig has you remembering things you would like to forget," Heru noted. "From your thoughts I picked up you didn't leave your family on good terms."

Calose took a deep breath and let it out in a puff. "To me, that is another life I gladly forget. Military training was the beginning of a new life." Calose glanced at Heru grimacing. "I

had a temper as a child and spent a lot of time paying for it by doing the not so nice chores around the farm, with isolation and no meals to enforce obedience. The usual punishments of an untrainable child. When the draft came, I signed up for off planet service unbeknownst to my father. He tried to annul it, but I was old enough to make the decision. He cursed me and banned me from ever returning. I was overjoyed at that and surprised myself and everyone within hearing what I thought of the village and everything else I could think of. The recruit agent was in shock at my vitriol but managed to get me onto the bus before I was struck dead by my father," Calose chuckled. "I don't think about my childhood. It's a waste of my time and serves no purpose."

"And your temper? I noticed sometimes you are too hard on yourself."

"Well, my temper is what got me through my training. I managed to get into space fighter pilot training and directed a lot of that anger on the targets. I got to be out in a vast space darting about and shooting down the enemy," Calose mocked.

"You did well in your military service."

"Heru, I got myself shot down and wounded a lot due to my obsession with taking out enemy targets. It took a lot of years for me to finally get my anger in check and to be more…contained. Fortunately, the enormous amount of time I spent with monks during my injury recovery times gave me a different view of my life, eventually."

"And all that from talking with Belig," Heru teased.

"Yes. I'm not sure I want to look back."

"Issues you haven't resolved will remind you they are there," Heru said, tapping her beak.

"The remedy for injuries is not to remember them. If meeting up with people from my past is going to bring up what I've been thinking is done and finished, I'm going to become a recluse," she said dryly. "I think I'm ready for a good rest."

Calose left the bridge feeling unsettled. Before sleeping she said prayers and chants to change her energy. Instead of thinking of her childhood, Calose's thoughts went to how she came about bidding on the freighter that was obviously built for a significantly larger species as well as beings extremely sensitive to energies not all species were aware of. Zooey had informed her there were thirty-two different types of energy in their galaxy and that there could be more.

Zooey, being an arachnid, a species sensitive to different forms of energy in her physical mortal form would know that and now in spirit form would know more than that.

She, along with other potential buyers, with their loans from the Federations military's bank guaranteed, walked the docks weeks before the auction would start, looking over the available merchandise. Laughs and competitiveness from conversations as interested parties passed each other inside ships they were viewing and in the mess hall of the shipyard were electrifying the atmosphere. The shipyard still had the semblance of being under military control with the obvious and hidden security bots and AIHs making sure everyone was not wandering into areas closed for public viewing.

Competition among shipbuilders and their advanced technology since the last battleship launched, was still going on. Wealthy merchants and those with enough credits to gamble on their business futures, ordered the new space yachts and freighters with luxuries and defensive firepower, should pirate, attempted hijacking and smuggler activities threaten their gamble before the new Galaxy Federation's Space Police were ready for patrols.

After the long war, depending on how time was measured on some planets, from one hundred years to thirty galaxy standard years, the Space Police, the new space law enforcement, and the Special Forces, the planetside law enforcement of the Federation, were swollen with hopeful galaxy recruits from the military ranks. The equipment of both groups wasn't going to be using old weapons and technology but instead trained in fast-developing technology to challenge the cartels and other gangs that had been operating amid the Federation's battling troops against the Gepaks and their allies.

To get away from the crowd tensions and heavy doses of unpleasant energy she was picking up from her AIU, which nearly all space travelers had to enable them to communicate with any species, and her own sensitivities, Calose sought peace at the further end of the docks where the larger ships built for species that needed more space about them were docked. There were seven of them. Only one had its ramp down for viewing. *Quen,* was its previous name, but all decommissioned military ships were given new civilian names and new identity numbers by the Federation’s official auctioneer. It was now *Calypso II*. Stepping on board, Calose held her breath a moment as the interior was nothing like she had ever seen, or was it more of feeling? Lights came on when she stepped inside, and it was a cleverly designed entrance. It appeared to open with enough space for her, but considering the previous occupants, its capacity would have

to open up far more. It was a security design for illegal boarding so only one person could enter at a time.

The overhead had beautiful patterns of lines that gave the appearance of depth and... For a long moment she stood lost in the intricacies of the patterns, feeling the energy of something she found comforting.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" The question was telepathic.

Calose turned slightly at the motion above her. She recognized the shipyard's commander.

"Commander Zooey," she acknowledged via her AIU. "It is like having one's own art gallery in space."

"I'm no longer a commander," Zooey replied. "I'm a civilian now. Ready to go home. Look around. The *Quen* isn't from this part of the galaxy. She was constructed under the direction of the Lycosidae's Captain Oorowo. His clan's duty was to protect all spaces and dimensions around the Trai and Meto galaxy boundary from negative assaults. This freighter was part of the Leoteto Fleet. It deserves a better name than what the auctioneer has dubbed it. They have so many ships that have to be registered for civilian ownership they left it to a computer to generate names. I like the original name, *Quen.* It means clan friend in Captain Oorowo's language."

"You have interest in purchasing it?" Calose asked, not wanting to bid against an Araneae that was a master builder.

Zooey had dropped onto the deck. Even on the deck her eight eyes were above Calose's head. It occurred to Calose's sleeping mind that in Zooey's spirit form, now her eyes were level with hers.

"I was hoping to influence you into purchasing it. I can put in a good word for you to get a favorable deal. Then, as a thank you for my help, you can drop me off at my home planet."

Zooey waved at her to follow her further inside the ship.

"Come along. I'll take you on a tour like a good spaceship salesperson. I don't have to tell you to dip your head because any ship an arachnid captained or crewed has high overheads. Now, the lines on the overheads aren't just beautiful artwork, but also have a vital purpose. They are living lines built into the architecture, like a web of our primitive ancestors, giving the crew an intimate feel for their spaceship. It was their home away from home. Anyone with enough

sensitivity can also feel this. For that reason, you will know more about your passengers and crew than a trained telepath, for the lines pick up all energy within and without the ship and translate it for the captain. It is an intelligent design or ID. Few species will be given the chance to captain one. You're one of the lucky ones."

"Why?" Calose asked surprised.

"Because you're vibrating at an elevated level, as an empath and with other psychic skills still in development. Your life potential is extraordinary, putting you in a unique position to put this ship back into doing what it was designed to do. Work for peace in the galaxy," she added. "With the right crew providing guidance, that can be accomplished."

For a moment Calose felt alarmed, but as Zooey went on with her sales pitch, her anxiety faded. Zooey spoke with certainty that with spaceports now open for commercial businesses, there would be small businesses not able to afford the costs of most commercial space freighter fees. She could carry all sizes of cargo as an independent freighter captain. It would also fulfill her obligation to a department in the Federation's Administration to lend assistance under the guise of a civilian freighter captain. How did Zooey know about that agreement Calose had made with her CO at the end of the war?

Zooey also offered to help Calose understand the ship on her passage home. What made it a winning deal was Zooey's influence over the previous owners on the price. It could be described as a grand deal, but there were obligations to commanding a MDCLR ship, an ID, designed by the Lycosidae's Captain Oorowo, which her Federation handlers were part of why the offer was made to her. Zooey and the Federation recommended four bridge officers to mentor her in her assignments as captain of this MDCLR ship.

Her first lesson was to sit as captain on the command dais. The download felt like invisible threads connecting her to every part of the ship, giving her an immediate sense of each system's role in its upkeep and operation. She would need to guard her thoughts and intentions carefully. She learned sooner than expected to distinguish between levels of thought and to know which level would prompt the ship to obey. Fortunately, she mastered that quickly enough to avoid firing a hidden weapon at an irritating competitor. The trip to Zooey's home planet was an exciting lesson in becoming a team with her ship and crew and coming to understand the Federation's interest in the ship and her team as an asset to keeping peace among the galaxy families, while operating as a civilian freighter.

And so began Calose's friendship with Zooey. The relationship extended to Zooey's clan, who, in exchange for rides, helped Calose and her crew upgrade the ship and train them to utilize its enhanced capabilities.

As Calose slept she dreamed of Zooey and their continued friendship even after Zooey's mortal body ceased to exist in the corporeal world and moved into spirit. Arachnids had very elaborate rituals regarding the physical death of a member and each clan had their secrets about how they honored their memory. In her sleep, Calose touched the talisman Zooey's clan had given her that contained something of Zooey's essence, a blessing that transcended realities. Her dreams became intermingled with memories of her own family and the incompatible flow had her waking, entangled in her sleeping cover.

"Calypso, play something that will put me in a restful sleep."

Chapter Three

Her ship alarm woke her, and Calose mentally linked to *Calypso's* log. *Calypso* was still monitoring phenomena her algorithms could not explain. There were two anomalies, and neither resembled the other. Was that possible? When Commander Moya returned, his species would be ideal for puzzling over phenomena that fascinated ID ships, making him well suited as chief engineer, among other duties. His assignment to *Calypso* had been Zooey's first recommendation after Calose became the freighter's registered owner. His species had no gender identification, and shades of blue indicated only age, not gender. For Calose's reference, he chose to be male.

With her physical presence on the bridge unnecessary, Calose began her morning rituals, starting with salutations to a deity of no form that she experienced as pure love and sometimes saw as a soft light vibrating different colors. It was the Source of All, the Creator Being, her teachers in her frequent stays at military recovery hospices taught her. The lessons finally sunk in and helped her through her depression in her last hospice recovery, which lasted two long years. Though she didn't see herself as a monk she became a serious student in studying the Way of Light, learning dances to exercise on her repaired limbs, and chants to strengthen her damaged throat and lungs. She learned to harness the energy that was all around her and part of her, to heal herself physically and emotionally, though dealing with some memories she saw no reason to deal with.

When she was cleared to return to duty, her medical team gave the restriction of not returning to the battlefront as a space starfighter pilot but reassigned a position of support. She

returned to active duty in a lower rank sent to a space station that repaired spaceship fighters. It had criminal elements undermining the management of the station and needed a team of trained agents to remove the problems. As an ex-space fighter pilot, her intimate knowledge of spaceship fighters was an advantage her CO did not want to waste.

Her hands drew signs as she danced to music making a stronger connection to a higher energy. When she finished her dance and chants, she sat Padmasana and enjoyed the peaceful energy.

"Captain, it is time for you to move on to your next workout," Calypso reminded her.

"Is there anything that needs my immediate attention on the bridge or elsewhere, *Calypso*?"

"No, Captain."

She headed to the exercise chamber.

Heru was stepping out of the EC as she arrived. She looked exhausted and her feathers were ruffled, giving her the appearance of having been in a wind tunnel. Calose shifted her sight to study the energy field around her. It had blank spaces which Calose knew meant her brain didn't have translations to those vibrations. Around her was also a deep crimson blending into a dark violet. Not her usual coloring.

The EC enabled a user to experience a situation on multiple energetic levels of conscious and subconscious. The chamber calibrated a program for the individual so that through regular use, whatever natural senses the person had were enhanced, and others were awakened to solve problems the user faced in traveling in the galactic space community. It wasn't like a hologram exercise that was available on most ships to train crew with hands-on lessons to reinforce a downloaded lesson, or to keep passengers entertained. The EC involved the occupant's wholistic metaphysical self, reaching many energetic levels of their existence.

"I lost my wits in that session," she told Calose, sounding exhausted. "I wanted to peck the fellow's head to knock sense into him. I don't know how you can cope with another's negative energy and be positive in accomplishing the mission. Not a rational approach to be used on that one. I'm going to rest, and I imagine my dreams will show me what I missed in the lesson." Heru poked at the air in front of her making irritating squawks and then laughed.

Calose laughed with her knowing exactly what she meant. "I noticed nothing was flagged during your watch."

"Nothing new. When Moya returns, he'll love solving what *Calypso* finds so fascinating about two nonsensical anomalies," Heru said. "When you're finished here, have a peaceful watch, Captain."

"Be at peace yourself. May you dream of sleeping among the clouds in the cliffs of your homeland, Heru."

Heru laughed. "I rather NOT. I would worry about tourists climbing the tribes' mountain cliffs, ignoring the keep out postings disturbing my nest." She grinned. "When I was younger, we used to drop unpleasant surprises on the trespassers heads."

"I bet your group became good shots."

"It was a skill well-used during the war."

In the exercise box, Calose was given a new lesson to experience. Like Heru, she had difficulties with negative energy. Sending positive thoughts and wrapping those involved in love and light, wasn't always clearing the issue. The issue was, she became nauseated by the negative energy, making it difficult to protect herself. What was she missing? In this exercise she performed miserably. Was it the species involved? Not a well-known species. Nor friendly. And not part of the galaxy's legal spacers. They were a banned species to travel beyond their planet's atmosphere with satellites monitoring the entire planet on its practices with the optimistic view that they would become eventual members of the space family. Why did they come up in her lesson? Was it a premonition?

Two hours later, an irritated Calose sat in a heated bath of bubbles and herbs to soothe her frustration. There had to be a reason why she couldn't penetrate the reason for the stomach-turning reactions. Sighing, she dressed and decided to distract herself with host duties. She was hungry and wanted to share a meal with Belig. Conversations on unimportant subjects were her intent.

"Calypso, *is Belig awake*?"

"*She is dressed and heading to the mess hall."*

"Is there anything new to report?"

"No, Captain."

Calose met Belig in the mess hall.

"Good day," Calose said. "Care to share a meal?"

"I don't mind at all. I was thinking about a workout program afterwards. I may be gaining weight if I keep eating a full meal every time I dine here. My second day aboard and I'm worried about weight gain."

"If you want to participate in a holographic sporting exercise with partners, you have a wide range of hologram participants."

After the shared meal and small talk, Calose took her leave.

On the bridge Calose read the ship's reports and signed off that she had read on *Calypso's* checks of her systems and what her scans of space revealed on their journey. In space, the same phenomenon flagged as outside of *Calypso's* knowledge to judge what they were, was listed. Whatever they were remained just out of a normal scan range but near enough for *Calypso's* enhanced scans to register. Did it have to do with their newly installed software/hardware? Uneasiness had her recheck the scans to see if she could detect anything with her own senses, but it only increased her feelings of something unpleasant…well, to be truthful, one was the feeling she was being hunted and the other was not the same feeling, but not a good feeling.

Calose reviewed her downloaded information of the hardware upgrade and what programs it would affect when in operation. It was a short information packet. CS340, nicknamed the Shroud, made some species sick if on a ship that activated it. It hid a ship from radar scans and most visual sightings. When employed it was recommended not to keep activated for more than eight Galactic Standard Days, GSD. Older models had shorter usage recommendations. Calose went down the list of species that it was counter indicative to their health. Moya, Chief Engineer, most likely had a complete list of older ship models that did have the Shroud software installed, if they had been updated, and ALL ships with the capability. So why wasn't she finding it? Where would he tuck that information away? Since he left before *Calypso* was dispatched to DSS to have Shroud installed, and it wasn't normally installed in civilian ships, perhaps it was higher security than she as a civilian had authorization for. Except, *Calypso* performed many assignments for the Federations unnamed security bureaus.

This was annoying.

"Calypso, do you have a complete file on all ship models with Shroud capability?"

"It is under a separate file Commander Moya has that is for study upon his return. It will need to be translated which I haven't been given access to the language. It is highly confidential I was informed."

"Oh, great. You and I share a need-to-know reminder. I feel so much better," Calose mocked. She was still learning about the incredible vastness of space in the Meta Galaxy and known and unknown species that traveled in and between the dimensions of the galaxy. The four different species that were her mentors and guides in the physical were reminders that she was a captain in training. *Patience*, Zooey would tell her. *You need to learn patience with yourself and what you need to know will come from others you meet on your journey. We are here to help you understand there is a greater purpose for your training.*

That always scared her and then she would meditate and let go of her fear of the future and live day by day. Since she got glimpses of future probabilities and knew probabilities were just that and not actual happenings, it left her feeling more secure with living day-to-day.

What was curious, that she had not taken much note of at the time, was that Zooey had spoken of a version of the Shroud that had once been part of *Calypso's* security systems during the war but was removed as not appropriate for a civilian ship. Something must have changed. Zooey was no longer physically present to badger anyone in a position to authorize the reinstallation, though even if she were alive in physical form, what business would it be for Zooey to suggest installing security software that would make the Space Police suspicious and therefore signal *Calypso* out for inspections? What made her think Zooey would have anything to do with *Calypso II's* assignments? Was it because she was instrumental in getting Calose to purchase the freighter and personally responsible for assigning a crew to mentor her in becoming knowledgeable in the intricacies of captaining an ID ship?

Studying her monitor Calose didn't see any proof that the hardware or software was installed.

"You won't see it until it's hooked up to the ship's main boards," Zooey said.

"Did you hang around while they installed it?" Calose asked, smiling at her friendly ghost.

"No. Not necessary. This is the newest version of the shroud. When activated it's not as troublesome to as many species as the original version and it can be active for a longer length of period without lowering the protective shield around the ship or diminishing the crew's energy."

"Commander Moya is going to be excited activating it and testing it. I don't think any of us will hear from him until he's ready to demonstrate it."

"Hopefully, your passenger isn't the odd species that does get motion sickness when it's activated. It does make use of beaming objects about inoperable during activation. Once the Shroud is up and the protective shield around the hull of the ship is active, nothing can penetrate the armed shield that the ship can normally repel."

"I don't think we've used *Calypso's* ability to beam objects more than a dozen times, and that was when we delivered the large harvesters to asteroids with supplies, housing domes, Security Guards and their what nots and when we transported new settlements their equipment planetside that the shuttles and barges couldn't handle. I think it's going to be a while before spaceports and spaceships trust beaming people and things to them. It's too soon after the war. I personally would rather we station keep away from the spaceport's busy harbor and use our barges to move freight to and from. If we need to make a fast exit, it's easier to have a fast shuttle while *Calypso* is powering up outside of the harbor master's authority."

"Spoken like a true pirate!" Zooey teased.

"We are legitimate and honorable," Calose protested grinning. "So, what do you suppose or know what *Calypso* has flagged as puzzling?"

"Nothing that needs immediate attention."

"I'm getting a feeling it's something that will need attention sometime in the future," Calose accused mildly. "And I'm not going to lose sleep over it until my feeling gets more intense."

"That's a sensible attitude," Zooey said.

Instead of puzzling about what it could be, Calose caught up on the galaxy news such as information on new laws from the Federation regarding the handling of freight and people to and from space ports and planetside, and changes in visitation laws. It was getting to be a real nuisance that shipping businesses had not only new taxes to pay but rules on purchasing business licenses whose costs were also rising. If it were up to her, she would stop doing business at those ports, but a part of the Federations secretive bureaus wanted a firsthand assessment of what those space ports were up to, and that was part of *Calypso's* job when delivering freight and picking up for delivery elsewhere.

Her thoughts drifted to her childhood. *Now what brought that on?* She demanded impatiently, halting anymore unproductive thoughts of her past. Did listening to Belig's thoughts of her past influence her own wandering thoughts? There was no purpose to think of a past that had nothing to do with her life presently.

However, she went on wondering how many of her siblings and cousins were either aged or deceased and then there were the casualties of war. For her to return for even a visit, it would be like visiting a strange planet. It would be too bothersome to remember the politics of who she could talk to and who she couldn't and find out that she was one of those that was banned because she chose to become something more than an indentured laborer. She would rather continue not knowing about her family. The military use of rank and given name rather than rank, given name and surname helped her ignore family memories. During the war, not using surnames was to cut down on clan associations and with it the years of clan hostilities many planets shared within their populations.

Zooey had teased her that she would be surprised at how much her home planet Mo'da'ho had changed. Even her village Caribrie is no longer remote from larger cities and roads, no longer supported forced marriages and indentured labor. People had machines to do most of the labor, classes were offered via transmission on any subject, and medicine had made great improvements to all citizens of Mo'da'ho. Education was for everyone, so Zooey informed her. Zooey had several times brought up that her planet Mo'da'ho was an inclusive society as a result of their participation in the war. Calose was sure her dark feelings on the subject caused Zooey to not mention her family again. Her gut reactions to the mention of Caribrie or Mo'da'ho surprised herself.

However, Zooey and her clan welcomed her to their gatherings, as if to show her not all families were unwelcoming. She missed Zooey's clan's musical gatherings, which was where she learned she had musical talents. Did she always know that and that was part of her anger, to be punished for being caught playing a reed flute better than her male cousin? She shook her head at the threat of the darkness she felt lurking below the surface in childhood memories.

After Heru relieved her, Calose stopped at the mess to check on Belig and wondered whether she was catching up on shipping news. Instead, Belig was deep in a holoprogram murder mystery, dressed for the part. The story ended with a bang: Belig's character suffered a messy assassination. The program had once been popular with young passengers whose families

were relocating to a new settlement on a foreign planet. The holoprograms were meant to help them adjust to change, but one group had tried to alter a program to injure another passenger. Commander Moya caught them at once, isolated each child from the others, and assigned corrective lessons. All the children already had colony teachers, but Moya and *Calypso* created additional lessons for youths prone to defiance and fear of an uncertain future, followed by daily quizzes. Calose smiled, remembering how cleverly Moya had designed lessons suited to what they would need in their new home. Teens could be difficult to transport, especially when facing a life they had not chosen, but *Calypso II's* systems handled their unsettled emotions skillfully, with Moya serving as the visible teacher.

"Well, that's one job I can say I have no talent in," Belig said on spotting her when the program ended. Calose was sitting at a table sipping a beverage.

"I would rather be climbing a mountain or falling asleep near a creek without getting sunburned or bitten by bugs, than play detective," Calose said.

"What do you do for excitement, to get your adrenaline going?"

"Are you an adrenaline junkie?" Calose teased.

"More like wanting to kick something around legitimately, like kick boxing or hand-to-hand fighting. Nothing with pistols or using fire sticks. I get no satisfaction with blowing someone up like in that play I was just in."

Calose laughed. "It is unlawful on the majority of spaceports. It's better to learn to defend yourself mentally and or with your hands and feet. Make the first hit count, then escape the situation. There are a few species that like to bait their victim for the pleasure of seeing another in distress. They aren't welcomed at many gatherings, and it keeps law enforcement on their guard. Or one can just ignore the irritant until law enforcement arrives."

"Since the war ended the only place, I've met a species like that is at DSS. That's why I bought a DR. I gathered from the wag on DSS that the local constabulary is getting tough on those who are not being nice, as they call it. With AIUs it's hard not to know who is going to be troubled before you get sucked into their drama and most residents have various versions of the DR to sound the alarm. So how do you relax?" Belig asked.

"Music, walks in scenic places, martial arts, dance, and share life with my crewmates. I follow the 'life is good' saying, so I don't get crushed with the daily newsies on the politics of space ports that change with every visit," Calose said.

Belig smiled. “And play tag with relic hunters. I was going to have a light meal. Would you join me?”

“A light meal is what I had in mind.”

After their meal they took a hologram stroll through a planetside city as the sun was setting, discussing news on the new laws and tax increases on some space stations which are passed onto the freighters. Calose left Belig, agreeing some ports weren’t worth continuing doing business with. It meant before accepting a job checking the pickup point and delivery point’s business license pricing would be part of deciding what job to take on. Both agreed businesses on many of the space ports would be pressuring the administrators of the port to lower their taxes as tourists and visitors besides transportation, would dry up. Citizens affected by the overcharging felt only inexperienced financial planners would need to keep raising taxes, or those interested in lining their pockets with riches. If it became an issue with enough citizens, the Federations Administration Bureau of Businesses could be called in to negotiate the needs of all sides.

Calose met the ship’s master trainer in the training facility. She sat before the master to begin her session.

“You are troubled with your recent session in the exercise chamber,” the master observed.

“Yes.”

“What troubles you?”

“I still am having problems with how to manage anger directed at me. It…sickens me. It’s frightening how it affects me.”

“What do you fear?”

The image of a species too readily came to mind. It took her breath away and with it some of the nauseating feeling came back to her.

“What would you need to learn should you face this again?”

“I won’t face them! They are banned to travel in space.” Calose said quickly.

“Yet you still fear them.”

The master gestured for her to rise.

His image morphed into the species she feared. As one opponent she didn’t fear it. For an hour the master worked with her on defending herself against physical attacks with various

weapons she was sure were used by that species. Towards the end of the hour two images of her feared opponent appeared. More confidently, she was able to defend herself from the feared species, the Knab.

However, the negative energy, a low ugly energy, that made her nauseous was missing from her exercise. Would she be able to face the experience in the EC, knowing that physically she could defend herself, and find a spiritual way to block out their energy that made her feel ill? Maybe the EC would come up with another low life entity that projected similar energy. Where did the Knab fit in with her war experience? She wasn't sure, since she didn't like revisiting war battles that were over and done with. She had become skilled in forgetting a lot of her war experiences.

Chapter Four

The next day Heru and Calose were looking forward to their arrival at the science waystation to pick up their crew members. Due to *Calypso's* size the Waystation didn't have a dock for *Calypso,* so they parked outside of the station's distance line. Once the cargo was verified as safely delivered and unloaded, *Calypso's* barges returned and the shuttle with her returning crew and their PPs settled in *Calypso's* shuttle bay next to their smaller shuttle. Her XO, Commander Kaving had arranged family quarters, connected by a sitting room, for the pair. It was further down the corridor from Belig's quarters, on the other side of the mess hall.

Calose waited for the air inside the shuttle bay to normalize. Zooey's spirit joined her at the hatch cover.

"Visiting for a particular reason?" Calose asked.

"Did they tell you about your passengers?" Zooey asked.

"No."

"One is a diplomat from the Dara sect, known by some as space gypsies."

Calose chuckled knowing the reference was a misnomer. The diplomats were rumored to be from many galaxies acting as peace negotiators traveling to planets or space stations through portals few knew about.

"The other is an unattached hybrid. Her attributes are not yet established. It's hard to tell with young hybrids which way they will develop, and no respectable fortune reader would predict so young a child's path. Be firm with the rules or you will be miserable," Zooey said then left.

That was her message - no respectable fortune reader would predict a child's path, especially when entrusted to the care of a Dara. Calose chuckled. This was going to be an interesting assignment.

The shuttle's hatch cover slid open, and the first out was Commander Kaving, her feline XO. Her soft white fur accented her bright blue eyes, and the black curve of her mouth was in a smile. She gave a hand signal for everything was secured. Her clothing and jewelry were part of her persona as a respectable representative of one of the many Lyran species and XO of *Calypso II*. She must have changed out of her travel clothing before arriving at the outpost. That would fit in with her checking the qualifications of the outpost to transport their toxic business, since she was representing *Calypso IIs* captain.

Another figure followed her at the respectful seven steps behind. He dressed as a traveler in nondescript clothing with his robe's cowl covering his head. She wondered how high he was in the Dara hierarchy and from which Temple he was affiliated with. Would it matter? Did diplomats have a specific Temple they were affiliated with when their responsibilities took them across many galaxies?

A smaller figure, female, dressed in rough clothing not meant for space travel, unhappily lagged behind the elder. Her shoulder length hair was absently brushed back behind her pointed ears. She wore a well-worn coat. Calose felt it was her favorite piece of covering. Her pockets looked full and well fastened over the contents.

Behind her, Commanders Bout and Moya followed, as if herding her. Bout, her security officer was still dressed in his official travel armor with his golden eyes shining from behind the helmet protector. His long nose twitched from the change in the atmosphere.

Moya, her engineer, shorter than the child followed behind Bout, swinging his pouch to his shoulder that he always carried. His blue face was all smiles at the thought of doing what he loved most, fiddling with *Calypso's* new installation. Calose suspected *Calypso* enjoyed Moya's tests and adjusting what the ship may have purposely put out of balance to have Moya humming a strange tune as he put things back in balance.

The elder, once out of the shuttle, waited for the young girl to join him at the bottom of the ramp.

Shuttle bay security bots moved into the shuttle to remove cargo or personal luggage that would be taken to their quarters. Contents would be inspected by the bots for contraband, like

weapons or drugs, in her crews' luggage as well as the passengers. Cleaning and maintenance bots would then move through the shuttle and prepare it for its next use.

"The barges with their trash are secured in bay four," Commander Heru reported, via her comm. *"We are resuming our heading to B74S."*

Calose stepped into the bay, feeling *Calypso's* protective energy around her. Kaving joined her, with Moya and Bout remaining with the passengers until she had a word with her XO.

"They've been on the run from native hunters on Dray Soc for a month Dray Soc time. The new government issued an ultimatum that all foreigners leave within a winter's season or perish. Sasha is the young girl's name. Her village was evacuated a month ago on Federation ships, but Sasha missed the evacuation shuttles," Kaving explained. "I'm not sure if she was intentionally left or by her own will. That village was the only home she's known and from what the Honorable JenMoc says, she was an outsider by her choice."

Kaving nodded at the ambassador to join them.

"Captain Calose, this is Honorable Ambassador JenMoc and his ward Sasha. Honorable JenMoc and Ward Sasha, this is Captain Calose. You are under her regulations until we reach your destination, a Temple of Peace," Kaving introduced.

The ambassador nodded, pulling his cowl back to show a dark blue face with tattoo markings across his forehead. He made a gesture Calose took for acceptance. From the young girl Calose picked up a suspicious and challenging glare, before she lowered her eyes. Calose didn't recognize her species but if she was young, Calose suspected by adulthood she would be over six feet. Her eyes appeared to be multicolored, however, it could have been from the overhead lighting. Her skin coloring was changing, as if her emotions were responsible for her chameleon hues. An emotional unsettled youth.

They had transported many emotional youths to new settlements, with *Calypso* managing to soothe most with sounds and colors. The more difficult were visited by Chief of Security, Commander Bout. His method was training them in arduous tasks that demanded discipline. If any failed Calose never heard about it and the mischief ceased.

"Greetings Honorable Ambassador JenMoc and Ward Sasha," Calose said, aware that the fluctuating energy around the girl Honorable JenMoc had encapsulated in a protective bubble. She wondered who he intended the protection to be for.

"You all look tired. Commander Bout will show you to your guest accommodations on deck two and give you a list of dos and don'ts, called a code of conduct for passengers to follow, which you are expected to adhere to. Should you forget them the ship's automated attendant will remind you. This is a freighter, a working ship, and just as we have protocols to follow, so do those we take on as passengers. I don't want anyone injured through misunderstandings. At a later time, when you both are rested and fed, we will meet again. Rest in Divine Peace."

The Honorable JenMoc gave a smile and a slight bow, touching his forehead, throat and where his heart was located, which was symbolic for acknowledgement of the Divine in All things. Sasha kept her eyes lowered. Calose felt she was exhausted mentally and physically and did not want to be in *Calypso*. Could she feel *Calypso's* intelligence? There was something more about his Ward that the Honorable JenMoc was preventing an intuitive's touch to read.

Bout gestured at the exit hatch and escorted the ambassador and his charge out of the shuttle bay with the bots following, carrying two travel-stained camping packs.

"So, how was your planetside trip?" Calose asked her XO.

"It brought back a lot of war memories," Kaving said, stroking her whiskers that twitched at that memory. "I feel so much better back in *Calypso*. It's a safe harbor and home with peace and harmony rather than all the chaos we experienced on the planet."

Calose's eyes rested on her chief engineer, Moya. His red eyes were studying the deck as if something was on his mind. His blue skin was darker than usual, due in part because of the specialized bodysuit he wore on the planet. He usually felt more comfortable in strange environments wearing his suit just in case something happened. He obviously wasn't taking chances on the space port or in the shuttle.

"*Calypso* will be happy to have you back poking in her business to make sure there has been no unauthorized tampering with her. AND there are questions about unrecognized objects following us. Unidentified by *Calypso* and not given a name by Zooey. Our friendly ghostly guardian says it's not critical to identify at this time."

"A mystery." His red eyes looked up at her. "That will be fun. It will have to wait until I do the last part of the installment of the Shroud, and run tests," Moya said thoughtfully. Calose guessed he was already planning his work. "Part of the software boosts scanning range. That will help get the unidentified tails recognized."

"Did you have any problems on this assignment?" Calose asked Kaving.

"A bit. We avoided hunting parties by shape shifting, which didn't surprise Ward Sasha. The Ambassador used his own energy to shield the Ward when we came close to being spotted. Moya had difficulties finding a safe place to land the shuttle to drop us off and pick us up. The affected species wasn't the only danger. Carnivores that at one time were kept at bay with the inhabitants of the cities and villages now had their lands back to roam at will. Some of them hunted in packs, and Bout wouldn't have won a battle without weapons on the shuttle. Luckily those made so much noise we were prewarned of their presence. We had to return to a burnt-out city where Moya remotely landed the shuttle to pick us up in the dark surrounded by what may love to have us for a meal." She laughed at that with Moya chuckling.

"The Ward is something more than what she presents herself as. She is very in tune with those around her. I felt the Honorable JenMoc kept her restrained or protected. Though that may not be a realistic observation on my part," Kaving said smiling. "Not all is as it appears when a Dara is involved."

"Something you foresee as a potential problem?" Calose said.

Kaving's ears twitched as if someone pulled on a tuff of fur over her pink ears. "No. Ward Sasha is at that difficult age of sullenness and believes she knows it all. Our reports may not be all that interesting, Captain," Kaving said.

Kaving was exceptionally skillful at reading people and situations, so Calose was wondering what Kaving was leaving for her own intuitive readings of Ward Sasha.

"On the shuttle on the way to the outpost I changed into something a respectable representative of *Calypso II* would wear." She grinned. "I checked out their facilities while discussing the toxic waste packages we were to haul with the new manager. Nice staff and for an outpost that just went through a management change, I didn't see any evidence of slacking on maintenance or unhappy feelings. They were all present to help with the arrival of the supply barges to their warehouse and very excited. I think they were on their last bit of stored emergency food. Their molecular food synthesizer was waiting for a part. I asked if they would need assistance in installing the part and was told they have five able hands ready and more than willing to work on it as soon as they unpack the part. I'll send my observations to you and a copy to the Federations Inspection Bureau."

"Good. We have reports for you all to review before our scheduled meeting. Is four hours too soon?"

"No. We had plenty of rest while waiting for you to pick us up. We did take the most comfortable shuttle with sleep pods, and plenty of room for passengers, though the next shuttle we purchase will be with better cleaning accommodations."

"And more games to keep us occupied for the longer voyages," Moya complained good naturedly.

"Ok, a faster long-distance shuttle with luxurious accommodations," Calose teased. "I'll put that on order."

Kaving gave him a poke. "We'll manage without the games. Can't you remember the last family with three teens we had to do a quick pick-up for a conference their parents had to be at? It makes me shudder to have to go through that again. If it weren't for *Calypso's* program to put to sleep difficult people, I would have tossed them out the hatch." Kaving grinned, laughing as she and Moya left.

Calose went to the Briefing Room adjacent to the bridge where she would have privacy. Her intuition told her there was more to transporting Ward Sasha to a Temple of Peace for training. Even with the ambassador shielding her from being read, Calose felt something more than a child's energy, as had Kaving. A Dara Ambassador sent to escort her to a monastery meant there was something special about Ward Sasha.

Calose read the three reports of her returned officers about their search for the pair and of avoiding native soldiers' hunting parties. The soldiers were burning the towns, fields, and forests where non-Indigenous people had resided. Wisely, non- Indigenous residents had been evacuated off the planet. Each of her returned officers made observations that were reflections of their personalities. Kaving had been observant of the Ambassador's treatment of the Ward and the interaction between the two. Moya was responsible for the shuttle and decided when to access the autopilot to have it fetch them. Bout's focus was on the group's safety, noticing when it was necessary to change direction when hunting parties got too close.

Calose didn't know much about viruses in other species, so she accessed the Federation's Medical information on virus BCD. It was contagion to a specific species marker in Dray Soc indigenous higher life forms. Unfortunately, an archeologist's team from a university with a mix of species composed of first year students and graduates, investigated an ancient underground city. They forced open a sealed vault and became sickened by a gas cloud that was released. The Indigenous workers didn't recover from the vapors and within a week they hallucinated and

paranoid turning to violence even against their own species. There was no record on the planet of such a virus so there were no red flags for archeologists to look for. The Federation's Scientific Bureau was immediately made aware when the team became sick, but by the time the seriousness of the virus was determined to be airborne the virus had rapidly spread to all the continents. The planet became quarantined until the virus could be brought under control. Energy readers and healers were employed immediately, working from a safe distance, above the planet or on other planets away from any direct contamination.

Calose closed the files. The crew's special assignment wasn't officially over until Ward Sasha and her escort left *Calypso II* at their destination, a Temple of Peace. All space cities and ports had a Temple of Peace and the space city Cronas had an impressive Temple with a healer's hall and school attached.

Calose decided to energetically investigate the energy of the virus. She wanted to know for sure that it wasn't brought onto her ship in any form. With protective spells and prayers Calose encircled her and asked Zooey and her other protective guides to watch over her and give her warning if she got too close to danger.

The energy was not vengeful. Long before the Federation recognized Dray Soc as a galactic planet during the generations-long war, its dominant sentient species had lived with little regard for any life it considered lesser. One trait in their DNA became their downfall. Those who carried it destroyed people and habitats alike, ignoring balance. Nature—or something greater—answered with a virus that killed every carrier. The survivors prospered, but when the species' violent faction again threatened the planet's evolving life, the virus returned and swept through cities and towns. The last chieftain with the marker was buried in an unmarked grave within the sealed underground city, which remained blocked off for decades. The survivors passed down the tale, but each retelling altered it, and officials slowly erased the violent past from their libraries. Now the virus spreading across Dray Soc served as a warning to its Indigenous leaders: they must confront their weaknesses and shame, then seek help from those who could remove the marker from future generations through gene editing. Not all Indigenous inhabitants carried the marker, and as before, enough citizens would survive if they stayed hidden.

"Calypso, scan all our biological systems and see if any of us could be a potential carrier. Especially in the belongings brought aboard."

"Yes, Captain."

Calose returned to her quarters. In the space that she designated for her meditation she began her preparation with prayers and then began a chant. As the energy rose, she danced to clear any negative energy on the ship.

Chapter Five

Belig woke from something that had her hearts beating frantically. Her movements brought up her quarters lights to a soft glow, revealing unfamiliar surroundings. It wasn't her sleeping cubicle of nearly a Universal Year, or her captain's sleep pod on her freighter. The air was unusual, the bedding felt different - firmer, and there wasn't any vibration that she detected. Looking out from her cozy sleeping compartment, the bulkhead was a neutral color she couldn't identify, and the overhead had strange art with geometric lines that faded when the lights in her quarters got brighter.

Chief Calose. Calose. Captain Calose. She was on Calose's freighter *Calypso II*.

"It's those weird lines on the overhead that I went to sleep staring at. I'm sure they're responsible for the strange dream I had," she thought annoyed.

At Dysta Space Station her dreams were of her birth family before she went to live with her uncle and aunt. At her parents' home, days were spent digging in the dry dirt and gritty sand, looking for profitable minerals to earn her place in a family she felt no emotional connection to. Her early years were about survival and competition for recognition in her family unit. Survival and competition were what she felt her life on DSS was about. On DSS there were too many nights of unrestful dreams.

But this dream was different. She couldn't remember the details and when she tried to remember the gist of it, she got a sense of...unfinished business and gratefully, not so unpleasant that she felt unrested. In fact, since coming on board she has been getting the best sleep she could remember in a long time.

She swung her legs out of the sleep pod and the lights in her quarters came up brighter. Her clothes from the previous day lay neatly on a chair within easy reach, and her boots were near, in case she had to get up quickly. She stood on the pleasantly cool deck in her bare feet and tried to get a feeling for the ship. Nothing. She wiggled her toes and regripped the deck. Still, she only felt the coolness of the deck. All bodies and structures vibrated - individually and

collectively. Dysta Space Station had what she identified as an annoying hum, due in part because of the mixture of vibes residents gave off, not all pleasant.

What time is it, middle watch when spacer bars close?

Her sense of timing was off in this unfamiliar environment. It was one of the disadvantages of adjusting to this new situation, however, with access to the ship's computer that allowed her to connect to the outside, she located her four ex-crew members. She didn't have authority to delve into their records deeper, until she was officially a captain looking for crew, but it was enough to let her know they were not finding permanent jobs. Unemployed/Available was listed after each name. Was it by choice or because their last job was on a ship that was caught with contraband? She would leave this search for later when she had more authority to delve into their psych and skill level evals. Maybe they had taken advantage of their downtime and took classes, though, their skills hadn't been updated.

Outside the shower stall, a light flashed it identified her species and was ready. Her dead cells sloughed off with a pleasant sonic energy massage over her shoulders and back relieving tension she had been carrying. She had been working hard on the exercise equipment and on the holoplay visits along hiking trails with mountain climbing thrown in, tiring out her body so she didn't become bored from not having any ship duties. Being a passenger gave her an appreciation of cruise ship pursers whose job it was to keep the paying passengers occupied. Surely, she was intelligent enough to keep herself occupied and not become a burden to Calose. Captains were always busy; she knew that from her own experience. This up and down of her emotions was annoying. She needed to get a grip on herself.

Dressed in a fresh outfit she moved her previous day's clothing into the cleaning closet along with her sleeping wear. Taking a quick glance at herself in a mirror, she decided she looked better than she had on DSS and headed to the mess. As she walked along the passageway she wondered if she would be able to hear past the quietness of the ship before her taxi ride was over. It was far better than the constant murmur that was everywhere on DSS.

In the mess she studied the menu looking over the possibilities of mixing food groups for something palatably familiar. Her grumbling stomach had her selecting what she had at her previous meals. She didn't trust an automated chef on someone else's freighter. She picked something sweet and added a strong bitter beverage that would cut down on the sweetness. While her food was warming, she took another look around the area. Like most spaceship mess

halls and spaceport eateries, the eating facilities had options to activate privacy domes blocking the view of the occupants, allowing them to eat without offending others by their way of consuming food.

Her hunger satisfied; she thought about seeing what a cargo bay on a large freighter looked like. That was one place where freighter captains placed their ships worth. It was bad manners to nose around, especially after Calose had given her the places she could roam - her cabin, the cleaning facilities, the exercise area, and the mess. However, after days of entertaining herself, she was curious about the ship's security and the cargo bay.

The lights in the passageway lit up, showing a neutral coloring for the bulkhead and the same annoying geometric lines on the overhead. She was sure along the passageway were additional guest cabins and or elevators, however, not even an outline gave away their presence. At the end of the passageway, where she felt either an elevator or entrance to a cargo bay would be, she found a solid bulkhead.

Returning to the lounge she reviewed the holoplay programs. She was looking for an exciting new selection. She chose a hike that was over Ingrad, a hostile planet to any off-worlders visit. She read the story line. Her spaceship crash lands. Her rescuers have given her one hour to reach a place where they can safely extricate her. A weapon is issued that has three settings, to stun, disable, or kill. Points awarded for situations rated by good and bad decisions, based on Federation Regulations dealing with visits to various planets. Her goal is to reach a safe place with minimal contact with the natives. Various images of neutral and dangerous characters with the value of each to stun, disable or kill showed at the beginning.

The program could start when her ship malfunctioned or when she landed. If she started when her ship malfunctioned, it requested information on her ship not allowing her to default to Calose's ship. Smart that it did not give that information out, and she didn't want to add her own freighter’s information either. Instead, she picked from the ship selections the menu offered and chose to begin when she crashed on the planet.

The degree of hardship was by how easy or bad her landing was and then went on from there. She chose the easiest to get a feel for the program. The game was exciting, and her level of skill kept rising as she added more difficult tasks to her mission at each restart of the program.

“Don't shoot,” Calose said. “I'm the rescue party of one.”

"Are you real or a character?" Belig demanded suspiciously, hyped up on the excitement of the game.

"Well, if you shoot me, the game ends," Calose said.

Belig shot her and the program ended.

"You're real!" Belig said.

"I would NOT put myself as a character in a holoplay. Are you hungry?"

Belig took a moment. "Actually, I'm tired."

"You've been running the holoplay for four hours. There is a warning light to protect the player from becoming addicted to the chemical rush of violence or hypervigilance. Two hours is the suggested time limit. If you go over the time limit, a ship official is called to intercede. By the luck of the draw, you got me. I apologize for not being here sooner to rescue you," she said dryly. "You should be tired and hungry."

"Now that you mention it, I am hungry. I did ignore the warnings," she admitted not looking guilty. "The Ingrad game is engaging. I can understand how people get addicted to holoplays. I have been a good passenger, until now," she teased.

"Holoplays are great for those that seek adventures without any serious injuries or training in a skill worth spending time on. The Ingrad Series is a collection of adventures, covering different cultures, including closed planets. They are reality based, and the rules of engagement are Federation directives. It helps to know the rules for landing on closed planets, so your playtime is a mix of fun and expanding your education."

Belig looked thoughtful. "Is there a reason you have programs like these?"

"You don't?"

"None that I'm aware of. My interest in holoplays is limited to a few subjects regarding business, reinforcing the downloads, and relaxation, involving play. Crash landing or abandoned on a hostile planet isn't something I think about, especially as entertainment during my free time." She frowned. "But it is a possibility in our business, isn't it?"

"Sticking to the safe routes doesn't guarantee a safe journey," Calose said. "I think it's also necessary for my crew and I to know how to behave in such situations. Gods, but to have a Federation JAG officer investigate an unplanned crash landing on a closed planet is not what I want in my future," Calose said, over dramatizing. "It would put an unwelcomed halt in our business until the investigation is completed."

“That would be an unfortunate hitch to one's business,” Belig agreed. “How would they investigate when it's a closed planet? I'll have to check and see if I have any training programs like this in my holoplay menu,” she said. “What do your passengers say about your holoplay selections?”

“They are privy to the mess and lounge but no longer the holoplay. One bored PP tried to upload a virus to see if it could be done and another tried to remove safety in a role play to injure another. Usually, my PPs are responsible salespeople that are traveling with their equipment to train their customer on its uses. They spend their waking time having group sessions in the mess, working on how they're going to train their new customer who probably never had experience with the type of equipment they are being delivered and how to sell the customer more supplies, an insurance plan, and a contract for services on the equipment. Can you imagine an untrained person using a meteorite harvester? You know how it goes. A family run business purchases a new machine and instead of sending the people that are going to operate it for training classes, they send a relative that needs something to do that makes them look good in the eyes of the head of the business. Thankfully, their HQ takes our strong suggestion that their salespeople return to their HQ on an actual passenger liner, so we are spared experiencing their boredom and the need to monitor their activities while they amuse themselves on their trip home. We don’t want them to think since their job is done, they no longer must behave themselves and do foolish things that my SSO uses as a teaching story for our next passenger or passengers, like interfering with the ship's running.”

Belig sighed. “I've run into a few of them. My policy is, we drop them off as quickly as possible, at a safe station, mind you, and keep their fare as payment for damages and time spent undoing their mess up. Then my crew and I pass the word around the docks and in the bars about them so only a foolish LS or captain takes them on as a passenger.”

“While you're wandering around this deck you may meet up with two additional passengers we picked up during early watch, and then maybe not,” Calose said.

“Ahh. A break in my solitude. Anyone I would know?”

Calose picked up Belig’s surprise at not noticing additional cabins activated occupied on the outside of the hatch cover along the bulkhead in the passageway. She didn’t bother to point out that the occupants made the decision to activate whether they are present or whether they wanted isolation.

“I don't know but I didn't want you to be unprepared. As you know, captains' To Do Lists are forever long, so I'm off to whittle away at mine.”

“No need to chaperone me. I'm an adult that knows the rules of a non-crew member,” Belig said. “And I'm sure your other passengers are no danger to anyone on board.”

Calose could see that Belig was thinking about returning to her holoplay adventure.

“As a captain, do you remember chapter seven of the ship's officers' manual that points out that the engagement of excessive aggressive activities in closed living spaces, such as spaceships, encourages poor impulse control when dealing with others on the ship? The medical safety will block you from certain holoplays until a bioscan shows your adrenaline level for your species is back to normal.”

“Yes,” Belig cleared her throat at being caught. “I'm sure in your library of distractions there is something else I can entertain myself with that will lower my excitement level,” she joked.

“If you want to practice your skill in telling a good wag, there is a menu that can help you with some interesting ones, that cover all sorts of subjects and species and meant to entertain at a spacer bar to earn you some free drinks.”

Belig laughed. “Right, right. Something to put me to sleep?”

“Are you having problems going to sleep?”

“No. I’m sleeping very well. Thank you.”

Calose left for the Briefing Room where she had interrupted her meeting with her returned crew members and Heru. She had ignored the holoplay alarm for as long as she could responsibly. The new passengers were still resting so it was her three returned crew members and Zooey who were exchanging information while she and Heru listened.

“So where were we?” she continued with her crew.

“The situation on Dray Soc, Captain,” Kaving reminded her. “As you probably read the entire planet is under quarantine, due to a virus that uniquely affects only those with a specific DNA marker. Those infected hallucinate, become violent, then die. The mindless madness and the killings are a genuine reason to isolate the planet and let the citizens handle the problem. The most recent information from the Federations rep was his feeling that Dray Soc may choose to remain isolated from space travel for the next few generations. This time, there is a record of the

virus and that there are scientists throughout the galaxy interested in studying the DNA marker and asking what necessitated its presence before making the decision to eradicate it."

"So, why does our PO want us to personally transport these two from Dray Soc, one being an enigmatic child? We're you given a reason?"

Kaving's lips turned up and she smoothed her whiskers that didn't need to be put in place. So, Calose thought she didn't know. She glanced at Zooey's apparition and was startled at the image of a spider creating a web or was it repairing one.

"Our orders didn't cover why, just it was imperative to pick up and deliver safely a pair of special people to a large space city that will have a Temple of Peace."

Calose returned her attention to Kaving wondering about the symbolism Zooey was imparting. Later she would think more about it. Zooey could be so mysterious in her perplexing explanations, though a blunt 'figure it out' would sometimes accompany her not so helpful drop ins.

"Enigmatic is a good description," Kaving said amused. "According to the Ambassador, the child's parents were members of a village of immigrants that during the war were removed from their own planet that the invading hoards poisoned. The child is a hybrid with Dara tendencies but no training. Her père was killed in a siege, and since tribal lineage is followed on the mère's side, it's most unusual that the grand- mère and mère wish for the père's lineage to be honored. He was a seer. The Honorable JenMoc, a Dara, is an ambassador that was in the area when the Most High and Honorable Leader Rusak asked him to escort Ward Sasha to a teaching temple for her internship in the healing arts. That was before the planet was quarantined by the Federation's Galaxy Committee of Health. Since the war ended hybrids are not welcomed in many clans or tribal villages and her mère feels she is safer in a monastery of the Temple of Peace rather than with a Shaman elder of their village, who was a rival to Sasha's father. Ward Sasha has shown remarkable skills in manipulating adults and other children to get what she wants, which is usually for her to be alone. The Honorable JenMoc arrived in the village which was preparing to evacuate to a medical facility to make sure that none were carriers of the virus then to either their planet of origin which has recovered enough to welcome back small groups, or to another planet. Ward Sasha had disappeared in defiance of moving to a boarding school rather than living on a planet she had never been on. Over ninety percent of the village didn't want to return to their planet of origin since the old political parties were trying to reestablish

themselves via the old rulers' surviving kin. Frankly speaking, they won't last. They don't have enough returning citizens willing to be slaves to dead beliefs and if they wish for the Federations continued support in rebuilding their villages they'll comply with Federation's rules. Too many that survived the war found what it's like to be more than a slave. Anyway, Honorable JenMoc went in search of her while the village was leaving on transports. He found her days later meditating. On their way back to the village where Honorable JenMoc left his transportation, they witnessed native hunters burning the surrounding fields and the village. Since then, they've been hiding from native trackers until we arrived."

Moya added, "From afar we witnessed a mindless madness, worse than what I've witnessed during the war."

"Once we located our targets and traveled with them to a safe pickup point, the Honorable JenMoc has been keeping a strong influence over Ward Sasha. She may feel rebellious, but her thoughts have been civil and followed directions," Kaving said.

"So, knowing why their immediate extraction is so important, is another I don't need to know," Calose said.

"You're not alone. Considering the Honorable JenMoc being her escort and not just any ship providing the taxi service…it must be especially important to someone."

"I found traipsing around in dirt, sand and mud while avoiding roaming wild animals was a respite from ship duty," Bout said, effectively changing the subject. "But on returning, I think I've caught up on my hours of missed sleep and I'm ready to catch up reading everyone's exciting reports of what went on while we were gone."

Heru laughed. "A respite. Ship duty is boring. The captain must have felt the same. She goes ashore and creates her own excitement, getting involved with relic hunters, and denying their assertion to fame, which was to claim the possession of a relic a mortleige was to deliver elsewhere." She ruffled her feathers with mirth.

"No!" Bout and Moya said in unison.

"Yes, she did," laughed Zooey. *"And she didn't even need my help or* Calypso II."

"And she completed her assignment of finding the missing niece of an important person," Heru added.

Kaving studied Calose intently. "I've read your report on ensuring her safe delivery to her ship. I'm sure her clan parents will be impressed with your thoroughness in executing the

request for a wellness check. I also read your exercise in playing keep away with the relic hunters. You said you carried the relic wrapped in cloth. Did you come in physical contact with the object?"

"No. It was wrapped up. Why?"

"Just asking," Kaving said. She glanced at Zooey's apparition. Zooey didn't seem to grasp the possibility of a foreign relic with a gaggle of hunters to boot, putting a twist into their lives. How would a spirit in another dimension see a relic as? Odd that nothing seemed to have changed. She was sure no timeline was jumped, no change of assignment, nothing unusual in Captain Calose's demeanor or energy, and no hoard of hunters chasing them. Relics that hunters usually chase were power objects that highly evolved species long ago created to end a war or start one and a lot of unusual things in between. They were what the superstitious called magical. What category could this one fall under? Perhaps she should just be happy because it left no mysterious aftereffects on the captain or *Calypso.* She needed to do a deeper questioning of Calose. Her eyes moved to Heru. Her eyes glinted at Kaving that she too had thoughts about their captain's experience. Later they would compare their thoughts.

"A PP? Who is it?" Bout asked, tapping his screen to read what he had not had time to catch up on.

"She's not a PP. She's a favor to someone the PO sent us off to do a wellness check on DSS and get a hardware upgrade while we were there. You know her, Bout. Captain Belig."

"Oh, yes. She had a good judge who saw it for what it was at the beginning of the trial," Bout said. "You did over and beyond in your execution of a wellness check," Bout said, grinning with his canines showing.

"How did you get her sentence reduced?" Kaving asked.

"Through a substantial change in her circumstances. She was able to pay off her fine with a family inheritance. Nothing magical or twist of truth," Calose said, thinking the relic had nothing to do with that. Her eyes caught the thoughtful look on Kaving's face. Surely, she didn't believe there was a connection. "Though, sometimes the way circumstances change or mix with other issues is always surprising me," Calose said as an offering to Kaving's beliefs.

"It's easier to accept what is and do what's necessary, rather than understand the layered plots," Bout said.

"Too many complications, with too many active participants with their focus on their own goal. A challenge to a leader to help build character," Heru teased, grinning at Kaving.

"Are the passengers supposed to be isolated?" Calose asked to change the subject.

"No, but people are superstitious about being around a Dara and Ward Sasha is an unknown. I can feel her rebellious spirit close to the surface. She's at that age where most parents wish they could send them away until they grow older, which is probably why her mère wanted her in a school run by the Temple of Peace. Parents aren't offered a residence nearby while their child is educated or tamed," Bout chuckled.

"Much like bootcamp, aye?" Heru said.

"Belig has enough experience as a space freighter captain to know how to protect herself from a mind reader and she can put Ward Sasha in her place if she acts out. However, so far Belig isn't wearing an AIU and feels she doesn't need one on board. *Calypso* doesn't hide the overhead lines from her sight. At first, she was nervous about them, but she's adapted. How are our guests doing? Will we need to issue them each an FT?"

"We may for Ward Sasha. I don't know what they have in their travel bags, but neither is wearing an AIU," Kaving replied.

"Ambassador JenMoc doesn't need an AIU or an FT. If the child is in training, she will not wear one to enable her to develop her own telepathic abilities. They slept well and have finished their meal," Zooey said.

Bout nodded. "I'll escort them here."

Zooey left as Bout exited.

"We felt the energy of your chant earlier. Is there a reason for concern about the virus?" Kaving asked.

"Precaution. It also makes me feel better about protecting the ship and all of us." Calose frowned annoyed. "I didn't read anything about its effect on other species only on a specific DNA marker. Do I trust their limited knowledge of the virus? No. I'm irritated our PO didn't alert us beforehand, or did he and the information wasn't shared with me?"

"You weren't here when the message came for us. You were on your own assignment to pick up a message. Seems our PO had not told us about your assignment as you weren't told about ours. I don't believe our project officer knew of the virus when we were assigned the urgent extraction request," Kaving said. "We were simply told when you left for a meeting the

PO arranged, that we needed to leave immediately. The resettlement of non-native inhabitants began months before the virus escaped due to planets damaged by the war being rewilded, restored and cleared for habitation. Some displaced inhabitants were offered free transportation and other incentives for the war evacs to return to their home planets. Four of the resettlements on Dray Soc didn't want to return to their home planets. Sound familiar? It was more than what the Bureau of Resettlement expected. The virus complicated things. The FBR had to quickly find alternative resettling for those the Dray Soc's leaders gave the ultimatum of leave or die. It's to be expected. I've been hearing on the docks for some time many planets' original inhabitants that had taken in refugees during and after the war from different cultures and species were getting restless and started to elect leaders that were speaking out against anyone different than them, including of their own species that had different ideas of what inclusion meant. It wasn't until days before our arrival that a full evacuation due to the virus and political backlash reached our local handler. She wasn't long on directions as she had her own staff to worry about in making sure they were checked for the virus and airlifted off the planet. She was like you, not trusting the scant knowledge of the virus on all dimensional beings."

Tapping on the entrance to the meeting room had them clearing their thoughts.

"Enter," Calose invited.

The Honorable JenMoc and Ward Sasha were escorted in and offered seats by Bout at the meeting table. Both dressed in the same clothing as they had arrived in but noticeably cleaned and their energy refreshed.

"Greetings, Guests," Calose began. "Were you able to rest well?"

Honorable JenMoc smiled broadly. "That we were able to, honorable Captain. Commander Bout showed us how to use the cabin's facilities, so we had clean clothing after our respite, a bathing unit to freshen in, and palatable refreshments. Much roomier than your shuttle's facilities. Your ship's service is a refreshing break from our last month of little rest and much fasting."

"That is good to hear. Your cabin also has educational holoprograms to help you both prepare for the rules and culture of your port of call, the Space City Cronas, and additional programs you may see as helpful to your ward. I don't know if either of you are receptive to downloads. We have a rich collection on many subjects so if you wish more in-depth information, they are available to you."

JenMoc nodded. “We have found a few that will keep us both occupied.” His eyes moved to the silent Ward Sasha who was studying the overhead with interest.

She could see the energy lines. Kaving exchanged glances with Calose, then with the others. Was it *Calypso II’s* decision or Sasha’s, they all wondered.

“Sasha's grand-mère and mère have requested our Temple to mentor her. Her evaluation scored quite high in skills leading to what a student in the arts of healing need to pursue if they wish a galactic future among the stars and not be planetbound which is Ward Sasha’s desire.” He smiled at Sasha.

“I'm to test at the Rock of SaGon,” Sasha said self-importantly, directing her statement directly at Calose. “Have you heard of it?” She expected Calose to say no.

“It's on the planet Griffin, in a cave on Mt. Alfin,” Calose said. “That is a vision quest that would be a test of great fortitude.”

Sasha turned suddenly to JenMoc with accusation, “Its location is a secret only the initiated should know of!”

Calose glanced at Bout with amusement. If it were a secret, why did Sasha mention it to them?

“It was one of the most traveled to spots during the war by many a soldier for a blessing and hoping the myth of its reward was true,” Kaving said soothingly.

“No!” Sasha said in horror. “The unworthy contaminating a holy site? How was that allowed?”

“The site protects itself like all sacred sites do. It’s one thing to know where it is and admire it from a safe distance and another to be able to cross the bridge to experience its blessing,” Calose said. “Right mind will allow access, is what is written on the bridge.”

“If you want to know about all the myths and stories of visitors, there is a menu with sacred sites listed and personal stories from visitors who left immensely affected no matter their energy level,” Kaving said, sending peaceful energy to Sasha.

“As with all sacred sites, some species, due to their energy, can't physically enter the site, but in their dream state or in spirit can,” Heru said, intending to further enlighten the child about what sacredness meant to the mundane.

For a few moments JenMoc was silent before he raised his eyes to Calose's. “This sacred site was spoken about by Ward Sasha's mère, as something Ward Sasha can use as her final test

in her training to see if she is worthy to gain admission as a healer. It was where her père received his mission as a seer."

"Have you been there?" Ward Sasha demanded Calose, leaning toward her as if to force something from her.

Calose returned her stare with an image that appeared in her mind's eye. It was enough to get Ward Sasha to sit back in her chair as if slapped.

"It is rude on my ship to challenge me or any of my crew with a mental command," Calose said quietly. "On this ship as with any place you visit, it is morally wrong to infringe on another's free will."

JenMoc had risen from his seat alarmed. It wasn't behavior he expected from his Ward.

"There is a code of conduct in your cabin that I suggest you study and abide by for the remainder of your journey. You are to remain in your quarters until ships security officer Commander Bout, feels you understand and will follow the code or until we reach your destination a Temple of Peace on Cronas," Calose said firmly.

"Honorable Captain, I am ashamed of her rude behavior. She will remain in our quarters until we reach our destination, Cronas." JenMoc looked at his Ward sternly.

"Commander Bout will be available to you should you need something," Calose said.

Honorable JenMoc nodded. Ward Sasha looked subdued. Whatever *Calypso* had sent to Sasha it had taken her arrogance down more than a notch.

"Can you think of anything to ask me now, Ward Sasha?" Calose asked her.

"How long until we reach Cronas…Captain?" Ward Sasha asked in a low voice.

"I don't know precisely. We are a working freighter and have stops to make before we reach Cronas." Calose stared hard at her. "If you're thinking of getting off before Cronas, don't bother attempting to act on it. The consequences of not following the rules on any ship can be more burdensome than obeying them.

JenMoc gave Calose a nod.

When Bout and the passengers left Calose, Heru, Moya and Kaving returned to the bridge.

"How soon until we reach the space dumpsite, Commander Heru?" Calose asked.

"Two hours."

"Did you pick up any further information on B74S from Waystation PicaS4, XO Kaving?"

"Yes. From a warning by the manager about the barges we're delivering to B74S. B74S halted their services until all their barges were scanned for unauthorized spybots. Someone was interested in the stations that use their services. I was assured the freight we are carrying has been scanned and cleared. We did our own scanning and no spybots," Kaving said. "I was hoping we could get one of those illegal spybots and study it ourselves but, Space Force HQ was notified and is on it like a magnet to iron filings."

"One less problem to solve," Heru said.

Zooey's ghost was in her chair looking smug. It was the only chair Calose didn't replace when she took ownership of the freighter.

"Do you think Ward Sasha is going to be trouble?" Calose asked her.

"No. What you projected to her had her too surprised for words," Zooey said.

"What image was that?" Calose asked as she took her seat.

"It felt like her fear of failure," Kaving said. "Nothing like nipping the adolescent attitude in the bud."

"Exactly," Zooey said.

"Failure?" Calose said surprised. That did sound familiar but the image she had mentally sent Ward Sasha was unclear, so it must have been a metaphor. "I'm not really sure what thought I sent her. It just happened." Calose laughed nervously. "I better be more mindful of what my subconscious is up to."

"Let's move on to other things we need to focus on," Commander Heru said.

"Like what?"

"A tail or two somewhere out there and so far, all *Calypso,* and Zooey can say is that there are two somethings out there. The feathers on the back of my neck are standing up like there is danger following us," Heru said. "I would feel better knowing what they are about."

"What have you found, Commander Moya?"

"My focus and time since I've returned is working on the new installation. I'm sure you all will let me know if they are more than annoying tails. What do *you* think, Captain?"

"I'm not picking up anything solid, just an unsettled feeling. It must be a potential problem if *Calypso* finds it out of place." She turned to look at her XO. "Do you think it has anything to do with our passengers or previous assignments?"

"No offense, but there are some assignments you need to NOT know about so you can be mentally clear when a HMO's security scans you," Kaving reminded her. "Some of those mind scans will be illegal and aimed at specific minds. They can't reach ours, which is why we were chosen to mentor you in learning to captain this ID ship. Eventually, you'll build your own mental wall." She grinned at Calose's frown. "You're getting there. Be patient with yourself."

"It gives my intuition strange vibes when I can't get a clear reading on premonitions. Who could be following us?" Calose asked. "I sound like a whining child."

"I can't tell you everything. How else are you going to learn to stretch and touch the unknown?" Zooey said.

Commander Bout returned and took his seat on the bridge, looking amused. "I believe our defiant youth has been put in her place and won't be acting too self-importantly toward any of us. I showed them the menu on sacred sites throughout our galaxy that are available to visitors. It will keep her occupied."

"We have a week until we reach Cronas after we stop at the waste dump. We've got a possible cargo pickup along the way. The merchant verified the cargo as legitimate and I'm in the process of getting it certified by their HMO," Commander Heru said. "The list of contents is what I'm waiting for the HMO to sign off on. It's a huge haul worthy of our freight bays." Heru beamed.

"Anything questionable about the merchant or the HMO? What port?" Calose asked.

"Tinzel. All points passed the Federation's A list," Commander Heru reported.

"Tinzel? Didn't they move from waystation status to business intersection hub recently?" XO Kaving asked.

"The construction work was completed by members of my Clan," Zooey said proudly.

"They didn't do any of that new type of construction where it's shaped like a broken toy, did they?" teased Calose.

"Don't you like modern architecture?" mocked Commander Moya.

"You may mock the looks, but with an Arachnida heading the building project and most of the workers arachnids, you'll know it's safe and can be added to without compromising the structure."

Calose laughed. "It *is* one of those weird looking structures they're putting in space! Is there an image? Put it on the screen," Calose ordered.

They were all speechless when the screen filled with the image of Tinzel in its finished enlarged structure.

"It is remarkable," Zooey said admiringly.

"It looks like a creature I haven't met before," XO Kaving said.

"It takes after the species that bought the waystation and enlarged it," Commander Moya said admiringly. "They're from Amande."

"Amande was made inhabitable at the beginning of the war, wasn't it?" Commander Bout asked.

"The survivors brought their architecture to space. They will not be forgotten with that spacestation," Moya said.

"Do a bio report on Tinzel just to make sure with all this newness we aren't going to run into any surprises, Commander Heru," Calose said. "*Calypso,* has your instrumentation been changed where I need to request to see dimensional differences?"

"Ah. That was me." Moya said embarrassed. "I was running tests to see what had changed with the new hardware installed. I had forgotten to default back to our original settings."

"Are your tests complete?" Calose asked.

"I have another to run, Captain. It won't affect our passengers, which is what the previous test was about."

"And what systems do you have to disable in order to evaluate?"

The others chuckled when Moya looked uncomfortable. "Well, a security run that Commander Bout and I need to monitor."

"Will XO Kaving need to be included as a monitor of your fiddling?"

Moya glanced at Kaving. "It would make the test go quicker to have more helping minds that know what it should be doing," Moya gave an embarrassed smile to Kaving then Calose.

Calose nodded. "There is always the chance that *Calypso's* security missed something. Intelligent Designed ships are not immune to sabotage with hardware that is designed

specifically for them." She looked over at Heru. "Well, it looks like you and I will be covering the shifts while they play with the final phase of evaluating the reliability of our new hardware and software. And mind you Moya, don't forget *Calypso* will be multitasking to make sure we don't run into a structure that isn't on our star chart." She glanced at the chair Zooey usually occupied in her spirit form. She was gone.

"Right, you are, Captain."

"Let me know when I can download the full information on the Shroud, Moya," Calose said.

"I'll let you know and everyone else, Captain. *Calypso* said you were looking for the files on the Shroud." He grinned. "All will be available when the time is right."

Chapter Six

At their stop at the dump site, Bout, Kaving and Moya did an inspection while the toxic waste was transferred to the holding tanks on B74S. Calose and Heru monitored what *Calypso IIs* scans were revealing. A tag from the Space Police was on its HMOs board, showing it had been recently investigated by the SP for charges of using unsanctioned spybots to scan their customers' traffic and business patterns. Kaving's report on their inspection resulted in a crew of twelve OS trained officers that did a clean sweep of the privately owned business a day after the complaint was filed. Kaving thought it was a good training exercise since there were trainees assigned to do most of the grunt work with their own spybots verifying their work. SPHQ was not letting illegal activities go unchallenged.

After the stop at the dump site, *B74S,* Calose decided to see what Belig was up to.

Belig was involved in a holoplay stretched between two fingertip edges with a toe grip saving her from a drop from a sheer climb up a mountain. On Calose's entrance into the holoplay area, a notification announced her arrival so the person enjoying a holoplay would know they weren't alone. Calose sat and enjoyed a beverage as she watched Belig dangle when her one finger grip crumbled, and her weight shifted her off balance, and that was the end of her climb.

Belig ended the program and nodded to Calose. "You have some interesting holograms in your library."

"Thank you. Are you hungry? Do you want to share a meal?"

Belig nodded. “I am working up an appetite with...” she looked over the number of programs she had gone through. “Experiencing seven wonders of the climbing world, level two. There's a dozen more to go before I can start level three. I’ll be a moment. I need to clean up,” Belig said.

While she was gone a short report from *Calypso* and then Heru from the bridge of their progress to their next destination. They had two definite tails that the enhanced scans from the installation of Shroud spotted. *Calypso’s* scan and Heru didn’t get an identification on the closest for as soon as it was noticed, it vanished. Did it employ a Shroud? According to her download on the software, even the old versions could detect scans directed at them. The other was still too far away to get definite readings.

“Notify the others,” Calose directed. Done, was Heru’s reply. Calose grinned. Of course.

Belig’s return had Calose amused. She had small cuts on her fingertips that under a medical light would be healed. Belig smiled and waved her four fingers on each hand as battle scars. “With enough climbs I’ll have toughened up my hands and feet. Climbing requires skills I’m not used to. Who said hologram adventures are without injuries?”

“It all depends on what you select for intensity of the experience. Wait until you get to levels three and four. They are more adventurous with the choice to add climbers to your group. You’ll have more potential slips and saves and the decision to climb alone or with a team. The menu gives a short bio on the climbers to choose from. That will make it an adventure with who will be the weak link,” Calose said. “You may want to rethink the intensity of the experience as you move up the skill level.”

Their dinner conversation was on the general aspects of hauling freight and comparing notes on companies to avoid due to their shorting independent freight haulers of their agreed upon credits, and the time and credits it took to go through the space courts. It became a lively conversation as they spoke of wild rumors about space station docks and what to believe and not. Nothing was said about the other passengers.

Calose could feel Belig wanted to ask about the other passengers that weren’t making an appearance in the mess or holographic area so following supper Calose suggested they take a holographic walk on an easy path through fields on a planet neither had visited because they would both have to wear full body ENV suits. It was a pastoral view of bright colored flowers on either side of the path with bright green irrigation canals carrying liquid food for the flowers.

"So, about the other passengers?" Belig began.

"What do you want to know?"

"I can feel inquiring minds wondering about me," Belig said. "Daras?"

"I see you're wearing your AIU set to block inquiring minds. Are you worried?"

"No. I shall be able to take care of myself. Are they looking to hook up with a space circus? The only Daras I know of travel with galaxy circuses to not cause some people from being paranoid of their presence." She grinned. "I like galaxy circuses. They're a respite from my work."

"I am not transporting a circus." How many Daras had Belig met to know to identify who was curious about her. Was that without the AIU?

"Daras without a circus," Belig repeated thoughtfully.

"You will drive them crazy with your speculations. I have something that will give your thoughts a rest."

Calose introduced Belig to her collection of musical instruments.

The music room was on the second level but behind an unmarked hatch cover.

"You have a lot of musical instruments," Belig said.

"Most members of *Calypso's* crew play more than one instrument," Calose said.

Calose chose a stringed instrument that Belig recognized and brought it to the lounge. "The acoustics are better in here," Calose explained.

Belig got comfortable on the couch while Calose sat on the deck with a pillow under her and the instrument cradled in her lap. At the end of Calose's play Belig found herself profoundly at peace.

"I forgot how much it meant to us when Corporal Tinker played her flute at the end of our shifts." Both women smiled at the memory. "I wonder what Tinker's doing these days. She was a good board tester. After all our reconnecting hardware to software she could spot a short in record time."

"She was the most skilled inspector in the shop and is inspiring in her music," Calose said.

"She taught you?" Belig asked, misinterpreting what she picked up from Calose.

Calose laughed. "Not even close. I've been watching her public performances on transmissions of galaxy concerts. About a month ago was her most recent concert. At the end of

the war, she returned home. She promised her clan elders she would return as the master musician to continue with the clan tradition of running a musical school. She and her husband manage the school. *They* don't travel off-planet. However, their school has a splendid reputation for training teachers and students around the galaxy who can't afford tuition but show musical talent. Her recordings raise credits and advance the cause for educating children around the galaxy in music. Have you ever wanted to play a musical instrument?"

"Me!" Belig shook her head ruefully, then added thoughtfully, "Though, there is plenty of flight time to learn." For a moment, she had a memory of her younger days. She had played an instrument with a group of friends. They sounded terrible, but it was her excuse to meet up with the wild boys, as they were called. The rebellious youth that went to impromptu socials posed as more mature than they were and having a bit of brag, played music on instruments many hadn't quite mastered. Childhood was so confusing between biological desires and parental rules that was guidance through the pitfalls of unwise bonding. She and her group didn't see it as guidance. Her rebellious nature's consequence was to be sent to her uncle and aunt until adulthood.

She stood abruptly to interrupt the memory of her young friends. She didn't want to wonder where they were now. She had done enough reminiscing on DSS with too many regrets about her youthful indiscretions. Though, living with her uncle and aunt was a blessing for all of them. She loved them as if they were her parents.

"Your music is beautiful and relaxing. I'm off to sleep," Belig said. "Thanks for the information on Tinker. I'm happy for her."

"Sleep well," Calose said. Calose remained behind, beginning another piece of music she had recently learned. The lines overhead glowed from the music, adding energy to what her instrument vibrated. Closing her eyes, she immersed herself in the ambiance that filled the mess and radiated throughout the ship, its vibrations soothing living cells. Her thoughts wandered as her fingers played cords she had memorized.

Abruptly, she opened her eyes to see Ward Sasha staring at her. Her previous attitude of suspicion and defiance was replaced with surprise. Music was a powerful force to break down barriers as it was to influence others on more than emotional levels, since not all species were emotional.

"Would you like to play?" Calose asked.

Ward Sasha's face was radiant, as she nodded.

"She is a musical healer who lost her instrument in her family's packing," JenMoc said.

Calose rose from the pillow she sat on and offered Ward Sasha her seat and when she settled, handed her the stringed instrument that was nearly larger than her.

Ward Sasha touched the strings listening to the notes and tuning them. Her eyes were closed as the sounds she played, just in plucking the strings, were a sacred moment she shared with the instrument.

Calose sat on the couch with Honorable JenMoc and watched Sasha as the beautiful tune she played sent shivers through Calose. She could feel something within her, a bitterness perhaps that she had pushed aside as petty and didn't deal with, dissolve. Was it? It was a thought to follow up with in her own meditations.

Ward Sasha played two more tunes with the final one a playful tune with Honorable JenMoc singing along. Calose didn't understand the language, but the emotions were strong that they invoked.

Zooey hovered overhead.

When the last of the melody faded Ward Sasha nodded to Calose she had finished playing. Calose took the instrument from her so she could rise.

"Thank you for sharing your musical gift. It's been a while since I heard the music of the desert nomads from Pondeu," Calose said.

"You know of the people of Pondeu?" Honorable JenMoc asked startled.

Zooey sent Calose a warning not to speak knowingly of the people.

"I collect music from around the galaxy, knowing of who originated it but not knowing where the exact location the creators live."

"Ah." He sounded disappointed. Was it because he knew she had lied?

Commander Bout chose that moment to enter the mess. She glanced at Calose asking if there was anything needed.

"Commander Bout, show them to our music room. Ward Sasha and Honorable JenMoc can see our assortment of instruments and pick what they would like to borrow for the duration of their passage with us."

Bout nodded. "Will do, Captain." He took the musical instrument from Calose and led their passengers to the music room.

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Belig's dreams were of her deceased bondmate and how they had met in an unlikely place for a respectable meeting of one's lifelong partner. Their bond was divined as genuine and therefore their relationship was honored by both clans. Why he had gotten sick and not her, left her with questions that in her grief she had not been able to emotionally pursue in depth. Her hatchling had been immediately scanned for the virus at the insistence of her aunt, and there was no evidence of it. Belig went into the ritual grief stage of losing a bondmate, which was to guide the surviving mate through the depths of loss without their own death from the grief. Rather than finish with the ritual she had joined the Federation's Space Military where she would be too busy in a new life to deal with the loss, instead of the Home Guard where she would be reminded of what she had lost.

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In her quarters Calose formed a sacred caim with crystals, creating a protective bubble around her physical form, then drew before her a vesia piscis, that represented a portal opening to a place, somewhere in the galaxy that her spirit resonated with. She felt the need to connect to her sacred group. On her arrival, others were seated in spirit form around a sacred fire of energy that was always there. Some appeared as balls of light while others, like herself, appeared as wisps of space matter.

*Chapter Seven

On the return of her spirit, Calose felt the change in vibration as she reconnected to her ship. Breathing deeper her senses synchronized to the present. Gently, energy moved through her as it awakened her physical self to a more active role. Rising, she cleared her space and put away her crystals.

Calypso reminded her that she had captain duties to deal with, and she had a guest, Belig, that wanted to see her, and they were hours away from reaching Tenzel where they would be picking up cargo destined for Cronas. She took a sonic energy shower, changed into her uni and went to the second deck to locate Belig. As expected, she ran into Belig pacing in the passageway, looking tired. It was a long passageway, so Belig was probably hungry, she thought.

“I was asking for you and your ship’s LS kept saying you were occupied.”

“I was. What do you need?”

"Company!" she said, then looked embarrassed. "It's just ...I don't get this ship!"

Calose grinned. "Ah. It's a mystery to your mechanical expertise. I was on my way to sit for a meal; would you like to join me?"

"I would. You can tell me what some of your food selections are without me having to try them. I'm tired of picking the only few dishes I recognize."

"So what selections are you curious about? All you need to do is ask for a taste. I don't want my passengers selecting a meal only to dump it because the taste doesn't suit them. I for one dislike waste, no matter where the meal comes from or where the leftovers are recycled."

Belig leaned toward Calose as a meal appeared from the dispenser onto their table. Calose pulled it toward her and was about to eat when she noticed Belig staring at her food selection.

"What?" Calose asked.

"Isn't that Borean slop?"

"It's my version. Less hot spices, less meat protein, and more plant foods. It's all chemicals molded into something appetizing. Do you want a taste?"

"Hm." She made a face and gestured to other selections. "I was wondering about some of these dishes."

"There is an input screen where you can tell the auto-chef what your preferences are. All chemical nutrients made will give you your favorite foods shaped like you remember, hopefully," Calose teased.

"By the size of your ship and the passenger quarters, I'll make a guess your usual passengers are among the larger species. How many crew your ship?"

"As many as needed," Calose said. "Have you met the other passengers?"

Belig smiled over her food and then grinned. "Well, that's what I wanted to talk about or share my experience with someone, you, since you're the only one I've been seeing. I hadn't seen a Dara ambassador in person until earlier this morning. He has a tattoo showing his high status. I guess he's not looking for a circus. I introduced myself and he, well, it was the most fascinating experience to have someone so focused on what I say. I asked all sorts of questions, which he answered without making me feel foolish! It was so amazing. I don't know for how long our conversation was but…" she sighed. "Then he excused himself as he had studies to get

back to. He wished me a good day, and it wasn't the usual off-hand wish. I could feel he really meant it." Belig sighed again then asked, "Are they hiding out or something?"

"Studying does require isolation and quiet," Calose said.

After they finished their meal, they both relaxed on the couch listening to music. Belig's eyes were drooping and Calose wasn't sure if it was the subliminal message in the music or that she was tired, but she was going to take advantage of Belig's relaxed state to help her with her anxiety about receiving messages from law enforcement.

"Do you mind talking about your arrest and experience on DSS?" Calose asked.

Belig sighed softly. "I know it's necessary for me to speak of it to get over the embarrassment, or shudder I feel when I get a message from thinking of law enforcement. I dread visiting my uncle to explain my error in judgement that caused me to go before the Federation Court. With Aunt Whin I can do no wrong but..." She was quiet for a few moments and then said. "It's something I hope not to experience again." She repositioned two pillows, then leaned further back on the couch, her eyes searching for something in the design on the overhead.

"I was so sure that I could spot a crook and know what was a shivy deal when one was offered to me. In addition, it's my habit to validate what cargo I sign a contract from seller all the way to the port of delivery. PDs. With all those precautions, I didn't believe I could be drawn into anything illegal. I can't blame anyone but myself for that mistake. That was the second time I didn't follow my usual precautions. I had fired my LS for not being careful about validating certificates and using illegal AIUs, then I go and skip validating the PDs."

Belig relived her arrest, going through the court system and her fear that she would lose her ship. However, Federation Courts didn't want its citizens to become unemployed or lose their means of earning a living for a small mistake or infraction. All the players in the incident were fined. The court divided the fine between those involved, with how involved the participants were in the scheme, to determine the amount. Thankfully, the court did not allow the defendants to sue her for her ship since she was not aware of what the perpetrators were up to. She was to work off her part of the fine, which was the court costs, as a laborer since she didn't have the funds. In addition, her ship was leased out toward paying off her fine. The officials on DSS oversaw the payment of her fine.

DSS spaceship technicians trained interns in spaceship repairs as well as experienced people taking classes to upgrade their skills, like Belig. The ship repair supervisors taught her about the new ships, and she passed on tips she learned working for her uncle in her youth and during her war years.

“I was lucky the Federation Space Police picked me up instead of the Space Constabulary. Otherwise, there’s no telling what might have happened to my ship.”

“They are notorious for unlawfully impounding ships before a person is brought before a magistrate of a Federation court.”

“Or planting evidence! Why are they still operating in space?” Belig demanded.

“I stay out of their area of patrols as much as I can until the Federations Court rules whether they can hold themselves as a legit space law enforcement agency. Until then, we can refuse their intrusions in our business and demand the Federation's space police to intervene.”

Belig chuckled wearily. “Yeah. The Federation Courts have ruled that if any military or law enforcement agent acts in an unprofessional way to a citizen in the Meto Galaxy that the agent or agents are subject to suspension or arrest until a formal inquiry and investigation is completed, which must be done within a given reasonable time, as written by a Federation Law Court. Which I wonder about that; however, recording devices must be active during all policing shifts and available for viewing by the charged civilian and their assigned council,” she recited. “I'm getting all worked up about something that's not really a problem.”

“We've survived for the last five years with all the new and old space pilots, merchants good and bad, raiders, pirates, dingbats, shifty hires for crew, and the crazies on the docks. Right?” Calose said encouragingly.

Belig let out a short laugh. “Right. I feel better already just talking about it,” she said in mock humor. “I got sloppy with picking up cargo from one vendor and not sticking to my check list and because I was lucky the first time, I thought it would be fine the second time,” she sighed. “I regret losing my crew. They weren't perfect, but, well. Anyway, on Cronas I'll start a search for a new crew. Their Merchant Bureau should have a lengthy list of certified prospects.”

“Yes. You may also find your previous crew want their jobs back. Will they harbor resentment? If you hire new, then how trustworthy will they be?” Calose smiled. “Those will be painful interviews to look forward to. I'm sure between bar wag, the dock wag and a visit to a reader you'll make good choices.”

"My brain is tired already just thinking about it. Do you want to partner up in a holoplay?"

"Sure. What do you have in mind? Adventure, travel to foreign lands..."

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Zooey's synopsis of Belig's insecurity was that she was uncomfortable with the ship's energy.

"I'm not going to interrupt my daily schedule just to provide her company," Calose told Zooey impatiently. "She can deal with her insecurities with holoplay adventures."

"A captain has her own business and endless training to deal with," Zooey agreed in a humorous tone. *"The ship will soothe her and holoplays will distract her with entertainment. Or, she'll meet Ward Sasha and realize just what Sasha is. All Sasha has to do is connect to her and play an instrument."* Zooey's ghostly form leaned close to Calose. *"You experienced her ability to sense what strings to play to root out and dissolve a well buried issue with you, and she doesn't know you."*

"So, it removed a bit of sadness within me that my own playing hasn't," Calose reluctantly admitted. "It's not made a shattering change in my life! What are you seeing?"

"The adage of don't poke a sleeping monster applies here. Instead, I will say that change doesn't occur overnight. There are so many levels of energy fields in a person. Let's skip you for a moment. You know of a deep wound in Belig. What would happen to Belig should Sasha dissolve that wound?"

"I don't know. Maybe Belig will give up cruising the galaxy and take up a hobby that's planetside."

Zooey looked at her with her eight eyes, seemingly disappointed. Even in spirit form, they could be unnerving if they were meant to scare her. Some species in spirit form could be a frightful haunt. However, Calose knew Zooey too well.

"I know you have more depth than that. Think about it and keep in mind the consequences that that has for both of you," Zooey thought in a disapproving tone.

"Both of us?" Calose asked incredulously. "Let's get back to Belig. So, what **if** it's the deep hurt from losing a bondmate that's dissolved. Do you think she's going to suddenly become a seducer at each port to find a bondmate, or go and kidnap her child, who is an adult now, and

force herself into his life? Are you insinuating I should become her chaperon, or a mentor?" she asked in alarm.

Zooey sighed. All eight eyes were dramatically lifted and then fixed again on Calose. "*Interesting imagination you have. How do you know she doesn't have love interests at different ports? She's a very sociable being. I'll let you sleep on the consequences of what being relieved of a burden will have on decisions made from an enlightened point of view. For now, focus on your captain's duties."*

Calose glared at her. Was she laughing at her?

She hated these puzzle games when she had lousy clues. What shared experience that dealt in a hurt could have them reacting to something in the future? Was it during the war? Their shared experience was at a spaceship repair station. It was far from the battle front and nothing traumatic occurred at the space station. The last five years after the war brought nothing up either. It must have be a shared experience that hadn't happened yet. Would she get a premonition?

"Enough of this poking at what hasn't happened," Calose muttered.

Commander Heru managed the loading bots as they locked down the cargo at the strange spaceport of Tinzel with Calose signing off as receiving the cargo and verifying it had been cleared by the harbor master itself, looking very nice in an ENV suit Calose was envious of. The HM reading her thoughts told her it was a new model from the shops at space station Merlota. Tailored to the wearer as most quality ENV suits were.

Calose avoided training with the Master that day and opted for a physical workout with Commander Bout, who was having fun finding vulnerabilities in Calose's attacks and defenses. Bout knew how far he could push Calose whose species wasn't known for strength and speed in physical combat with a wolf master even without military armor's enhancements.

"So, what did you learn in our workout?" Bout asked Calose as they sipped a refreshment at the end of training.

"That against a superior opponent I shall need better weapons," Calose replied lightly.

Bout waited in silence to let Calose consider what she had said. By now Calose should know that her off-hand remarks in a training situation were important points for Calose's insight into her own awareness.

"Is that what you think Ward Sasha felt when you sent her a thought to stand down in her aggression toward you?"

Calose was surprised at the question. She hadn't thought about that encounter. Suddenly Calose sat up taller as she understood what Bout was implying. "It wasn't about *her* failing," Calose said. "Sasha is a healer, and I challenged her ability to heal by showing her *my* fear of failing." Calose groaned. "I can't believe I missed that, even with my meditations."

"You are very hard on yourself. What is it that you fear you will fail at?"

"I think sometimes that if it weren't for the four of you, and Zooey," she added embarrassed, "that I won't be able to be what you envision me to be as captain of this ship."

"It is a big responsibility," Bout said. "But we're not here for you to understand the ship. The ship will let you know what it needs. We're here for you to understand yourself. Fear oftentimes translates into anger, to meet the emotional challenges fear presents."

"In my meditations, I experience great love and joy and to me that is being at peace within myself, so I don't understand this fear of failing."

"When you are facing an opponent, it is yourself that you are facing. Fear takes on many physical manifestations to enable you to understand where it is coming from."

"So, what did Sasha heal in me with her music? Why can't I see it?"

"Healing is done on many levels. Perhaps seeing isn't the awareness of what healed but a feeling of hurt that has angered you for a long time, but because you don't want to address it it manifests in other situations."

Bout rose and left the exercise area. Calose sat and thought about what would hurt her most, enough to get her angry. There were a lot of things. Surely she outgrew her childhood hurts. But, maybe not. Perhaps it was time she forgave herself for not being what her family wanted her to be. Sighing, Calose returned to her cabin and melted her weariness and worries in an herbed bath to music and soft lights.

Calose spent more time with Belig the next day. Belig surprised her in that she was able to hold her own on unusual holoplay meetings with species neither would want to meet in real life. Waiting for Ward Sasha to meet with Belig was inevitable because a natural healer always finds the injured. Maybe she didn't have to do anything more than she had, which was to provide a place for the healing to occur. She wished Belig good thoughts for what would be best for her.

She was still processing what Bout had pointed out to her. Her dreams were not as easy to recall when she awoke. She took that to mean her subconscious was busy. Whatever burden or memory Ward Sasha had healed in her, though she was sure it did happen, she busied herself with downloads of new information on business in the galaxy and scheduled a meeting with her crew to discuss the changes in the politics of some ports they may be stopping at to avoid further dwelling on her recollections.

Chapter Eight

Calose rolled out of her cot wide awake from something her subconscious picked up. Seconds later *Calypso II's* ship wide security lights flashed. Calose was dressing in her uni when Commander Bout called her.

"Captain. We have a situation. You're needed on the bridge suited up," he said.

"Acknowledged." Over her uni she dressed in her armored ENV suit. She jammed her feet into her boots, feeling them fasten immediately. Calose hurried out of her quarters and to the lift where the commanders, Kaving and Moya joined her. They were also dressed in their armored ENV suits.

"Captain on deck," Bout reported, as the three entered the bridge. Bout was fastening his own armor in place.

Calose noted that Heru also dressed in her armored ENV suit, was busy at her station sending out what looked like tests.

"Captain on deck," Calose acknowledged. "What is the situation, Commander Bout?" The fine hair at the back of Calose's neck stood up before Bout spoke. XO Kaving glanced at her, her normally cerulean, blue eyes darkened to nearly black as her pupils widened with the same foreboding sense.

"To start with, this is not a drill, Captain," Commander Bout said. "Commander Heru notified me I was needed on the bridge to assess a situation." He nodded to Heru to continue.

"It *appears* to be a ship in distress," Commander Heru reported. "*Calypso* had released bots to investigate a ship she had been tracking for twelve standard hours. She notified me of her change of course. I verified the ship she was tracking has been switching tact from one direction to another and varying speed. I notified Commander Bout, Chief of Security."

"I checked navigation maps and there's nothing out there that a ship would be sailing to or from. It's off the shipping route and there are no habitable planets or space stations in the area. Very suspicious, Captain. However, *Calypso* has judged it to be a genuine ship needing assistance. We've changed our direction and increased speed toward the ship's location. We've picked up the ship identifier as *Umbliqu,* once a military courier ship and now a civilian transport ship. According to Commander Heru we're an hour away."

"I'm getting mixed feelings about this situation," Commander Moya said. His blue head bobbed as he studied monitors going from one screen to another. "A good place for a hijacking."

"I agree with you, Commander Moya. *Calypso's* data shows evidence of damage to the ship's navigational system and it's leaving a trail of debris," Commander Bout said. "But there are no ships in the vicinity. Due to protocol we're in our armored ENV suits and, two people on the bridge verified there is suspicion enough to sound the alarm."

"Commander Heru?" Calose asked.

"I've traced the distress call that set *Calypso* to investigate," Heru said. "It's been turned on then off and then the ship changes direction and the call transmits again. I notified Commander Bout to assist, and he suggested following protocol of suiting up. We initiated ship alert when both of us picked up from *Calypso's* scan this is not a reading from our previous unidentified followers."

"Can *Calypso* identify if another ship has a Shroud activated?" Calose asked, "The download on the software didn't mention how to spot a ship when it's activated."

"No. However, there is evidence that a shuttle had departed over 24 UT hours ago. No report of problems from the shuttle that *Calypso's* sensors have picked up," Heru said.

"Whoever has been following us," XO Kaving said, "It's not this ship that's out of control." She tapped her screen calling for more information. "There is something about this ship that's familiar. *Umbliqu.* According to the information I'm pulling up it's a civilian passenger ship with long range capability, crew of two, and it can carry up to 25 passengers. It's previous military life was a courier ship."

They all sat at their stations waiting in anticipation as the bots sent more information back. As *Calypso* neared their target, the image of a battered spaceship showed rescue of life forms on board would be necessary and immediately. Fires from open holes in the ship's hull looked dangerously ready to explode from heated internal lines. The advanced bots fed detailed

readings of the ship and its interior and where living beings were. There are twelve life signs on board and six species identified.

"Can we get a reading of what those aboard breathe?" Calose asked.

"Captain, the Ambassador wants to speak with you. He said it's important before you deal with that ship," Kaving said.

"Commander Heru, can you escort him to the…"

"Captain, your guest, Belig would also like to speak with you," Commander Bout reported.

"Using an energy beam to pull them out isn't advisable. We could use Belig's experience for shuttle rescues," her XO suggested.

"Escort them to the briefing room, Commander Heru. Commander Bout, keep updating us with what you find as we get close enough for a shuttle rescue."

"I'll send the updates to the briefing room, Captain."

It wasn't just the Ambassador but also his Ward Sasha along with Belig that stepped off the lift. Belig was in an animated conversation with the Ambassador. Ward Sasha was clutching a flute to her chest, looking nervous and Commander Heru looked thoughtful. Was it the conversation she was overhearing between the Ambassador and Belig?

On the briefing room's large screen was a view of the damaged ship. Open holes exposed to space made it look like it had been attacked from inside.

When everyone took their seats, Calose nodded to the Ambassador. "Ambassador JenMoc, you have some information on this ship in distress."

"Yes, Captain. I have been receiving telepathic images from passengers on the ship. The ship is *Umbliqu.* It left the planet Dray Soc as I arrived. I don't personally know anyone on the ship except what I've been picking up telepathically from the passengers for the last few hours."

Calose's breath caught. Did one of the passengers go mad?

"Yes," the Ambassador said in answer to her thought. "One of the monks did go mad, but the destruction is from five other passengers who are not monks, that attempted to hijack the shuttle while under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs."

"Monk Josta an Indigenous student from Dray Soc, was in training as a healer at the Blinkham Monastery on another planet. While he was in meditation, he saw a virus decimating the citizens on his home planet Dray Soc. He petitioned his proctor to return to administer aid to

his people. At that time there was no news from the Federation's Health Council on any health issues on Dray Soc. However, other healers in the monastery also had visions of a sickness encompassing the planet. Monk Josta, accompanied by seven student healers arrived. They sought residence at a hospice facility. A day later the Federation's Health Council ordered an evacuation of all non-Indigenous people. The ship *Umbliqu* that the monastery had hired was still available, so the eight monks including Monk Josta and five residents of the hospice boarded it to leave Dray Soc. Monk Josta, as I understand from what I have picked up from the messages from the monks, died a few days into their return journey to their monastery."

"Monk Josta became infected in that one day?" Kaving asked in surprise.

"Yes. However, when I attempted to telepathically reach the five hospice residents that took refuge on the *Umbliqu*, I received disturbing images from them which had to do with the hallucinogens they ingested. I don't recognize the species. The monks' telepathic messages to me are their lives are in danger from the five hospice residents that claim to be friars of some order."

"What images?" XO Kaving asked.

"It's fear of something I don't recognize, and it's not the virus."

"*Calypso*'s interpretation of the events from the captain of *Umbliqu's* last log is the violence from the attempted hijacking made the pilot and copilot to program the ship to the middle of nowhere and set the emergency beacon before they left with the only shuttle. Neither felt they were equipped to handle the violence with the weapons the hijackers had with them. They felt the monks were safe until help arrived since they were locked in their quarters," Kaving reported.

"What do you know about the monks?" Calose asked the Ambassador.

"The monks that accompanied Monk Josta are initiates who came along out of boredom. They are naïve about the violence that others can inflict, which is why they all quickly left the planet when a Federation representative informed them of the consequences of remaining. They are in shock from witnessing Monk Josta's madness and the five strangers' violence in reaction to the monks illness. One of the monks feels Monk Josta's illness was the fives excuse to take over the ship."

"Captain, we're close enough to send out a rescue team," Commander Bout announced.

"We have information of where everyone is located," Moya said. "The ship has only one cargo hold, which luckily is open to space. The fire from the cargo area is diminishing as the fuel that's feeding it is running out."

"We'll work in pairs in case extraction from a cabin or part of the ship will need more than one person and have security bots to protect us should there be any personnel trouble, which if those five are running from someone, means we're taking on their trouble," Calose said looking at XO Kaving.

"Yes. Take repair bots with you too. They can do heavy labor." Kaving added.

All of them were thinking of the five passengers. Calose didn't like the feeling of violence around them.

"Can I be of assistance with the rescue?" Belig asked.

"Yes. XO Kaving will make sure we have an armored ENV suit for you. Commander Bout will join your team, XO. No weapons. Remember to let the security bots manage any problems dealing with anything deemed a threat to life," she ordered. "Ambassador, I'll need you here to see to those we rescue and Ward Sasha," she turned to the young woman. "Can you play something to help calm everyone?"

"Calypso, monitor closely the five and immobilize them, if necessary," Calose ordered the ship.

Calose believed the Ambassador understood her reason in the monitoring of those they were rescuing, and he would inform his Ward of the type of music to mesmerize the rescued passengers. If not, *Calypso* would subdue them into passiveness, and their docility would be attributed to Ward Sasha's playing. There was a sense of darkness with five of them and if they caused damage to their rescue shuttle, causing the captain and co-captain of the shuttle to escape, she needed to control them before the five got to their shuttle. The security bots, under *Calypso's* control, would stop any attempt the five made to hijack the shuttle or harm her crew.

It was well into late shift the rescue teams finally were able to free up the last of the passengers. The monks had been locked in their cabins by the five who were huddled in the ship's mess hall high on drugs they found in the medical kits. Either it was their drugged state that made their handling easier, or it was Commander Bout's fierce looking presence in his armored ENV suit that scared them to sit quietly on-board *Calypso's* shuttle.

Before a tired Belig returned to her quarters she gave Calose an additional warning. "Those five fellows call themselves Friars of Gregory. I heard on DSS wag, they're part of a small cartel trying to establish a hold on planets not strong on policing. I don't know what they call their species, but they're trouble, Calose. I don't need an AIU to confirm they mean harm to your crew and ship. Most of the damage on that ship was done by the five not the sick monk. They killed the monk, claiming to save everyone, according to one of the monks. My question is, why did the captain and co-captain flee for their lives?"

"Self-preservation is the first law of nature," Calose said. "Perhaps they too didn't recognize their species, but they looked frightening enough to hijack their shuttle."

"If the damage is any indication of what violence the captain and copilot were facing, I don't blame them fleeing for fear of losing their lives," Belig said. "Luckily they got into the drug cabinet and were too befuddled to offer a challenge to your security bots."

Calose, Kaving, Moya and Bout returned to the briefing room with the Ambassador.

"It seems your sense of the five passengers we rescued with the monks was correct, Ambassador. Belig identified the group they belong to as a cartel posing as members of a religious sect."

"Their leader in this group is dedicated to his path as an outlaw. I gathered from his drunken bravado, he's been through more than one re-education system but likes the rush of stealing, lying and bullying others. He was disappointed their attempt to hijack the shuttle failed and blamed it on their inability to unlock an armory locker."

Calose smiled. "The security bots secured their weapons, and the armory locker was more of the captain's private stash for liquor. Luckily, they ran out of ammo from what weapons they brought with them. You have a plan about the monks."

"Yes. The monks wish to have a death ceremony for the rite of passage for Monk Josta's soul into the next realm," the Ambassador explained. "Due to the nature of the deceased's death, though he was ill, they feel the ceremony must be done as soon as possible out of their fear Monk Josta's spirit will come back with them."

"Oh?" Calose said.

The Ambassador smiled. "I've been in contact with the Proctor Jema of the Blinkham Monastery the moment I received the monks' distressed messages. It's not that the proctor is lacking in leadership that she sent innocent initiates to accompany Monk Josta. They are

apprentices and were excited as the bored young often do get, for an adventure. In her wisdom, the proctor allowed the small group to make this pilgrimage to learn a lesson in futility. She divined that they would be of no help to the situation, and that they would be overwhelmed with their inability to make a difference. The troubled five are willing to go along with it out of curiosity and to learn more of your ship. I will lead the ceremony so that they all learn something profoundly life changing. I trust you and your crew will keep the five from doing physical damage to anyone or the ship." The Ambassador smiled widely. "It will also be a good lesson for my Ward Sasha."

"Just what are you going to need for this ceremony?" Calose asked suspiciously. Zooey's apparition, not within view of the Ambassador, was wearing a smirk larger than the Ambassador's smile.

"I sense you and two of your crew are acolytes in the Rite of Pau."

Calose sighed. In her younger years as a soldier, it seemed right to learn the various ceremonies surrounding death since in the war, someone had to honor the deceased. But it was more than that. Many times, she found herself recovering from war wounds under the care of monks. She found a great deal of peace in their rituals and sacred dances. Their mentoring continued after she left the military hospice on her last injury and returned to active duty. She practiced the lessons she learned by helping others without being officious.

Kaving nodded, "In my regiment it became a necessity. The monk that served our regiment needed assistance. Members in the regiment found it difficult to accept the sudden death of loved ones. A ritual gave them solace with a profound meaning to the life and death cycle of a loved one when words weren't enough."

Bout's answer was a deep rumble of consent.

"When are you planning this ceremony?" Calose asked.

"I'm thinking after everyone has at least a good sleep, one meal eaten, and are schooled in what the rite will require from all participants. By then the drugs the five are high on will have worn off."

"I take it you don't believe even the monks know what to expect," Kaving said.

"No. They are students who haven't participated in the more meaningful rites and ceremonies. As for the five, on a higher level, they will be in awe of what they are missing in their dark lives. It will help them in the future on making decisions of where they wish to go."

"While the passengers sleep, they would have dreams of the ceremony and the importance of attitude, compliments of *Calypso's* subliminal storytelling," Calose said.

The Ambassador smiled.

"Anything else?" Calose asked.

"No. For now we can sleep on it." The Ambassador nodded to everyone and left.

"I'll check in with the bridge to see if all appropriate lights are blinking on the command console, then I'm off to my quarters for some sleep," Calose said to the others.

When she returned to her quarters, Calose meditated asking for guidance from her guides on what part she would play in the ritual.

Chapter Nine

The Ambassador utilized the holographic program creating a replica of the inside of the Temple of AbaYan. It was magnificent, colorful, and lined with statues of past masters when they were in a physical body. Calose stood with Kaving studying the creation in awe of how a replica could encompass the spiritual energy of a temple. Was it possible for a hologram to include the energy of what it replicated? The Ambassador wasn't present for them to ask so they left to prepare for their part in the ceremony.

Calose stood in front of her closet of neatly arranged clothing of ritual attire, from martial arts to spiritual ceremonies her lessons encompassed. She touched the robe she would be wearing with reverence, remembering the last time she had participated in a transition ceremony. It was for Zooey. Zooey's was not complicated and didn't require her to wear the channelers sash, whereas the ambassador asked Calose to channel a being that would be meaningful to those assembled for the rite of passage for the deceased's soul into an afterlife. For someone as high ranking as the Ambassador to see her as being skillful enough to channel someone he would be calling for their presence was an honor. She had thought either Bout or Kaving to be more advanced in the Rite of Pau, however, they weren't open about the degree of their own practices, so she accepted the judgement of the Ambassador on her skills. It was interesting that Bout and Kaving never spoke of their beliefs, nor Heru or Moya. She just understood on another level that they were spiritually more advanced than she due in part to their species practices and the reason they were chosen to mentor her in this role someone thought she was to be in.

Gently she touched the robe she was to wear, its colors rippling into a rainbow of soft tones.

"*It brings back memories for me too,"* Zooey said.

She turned to look at Zooey's apparition which was more solid than it usually was.

"The Ambassador has requested my presence."

"Why?" Calose asked bewildered.

"Well, I am more than a casual run of the mill spook." Zooey responded surprised at Calose's tone. "*How many trance channels have you experienced?"* she challenged.

"Enough that I earned a channeler's sash," Calose answered embarrassed.

"It is good that my clan didn't ask you to channel any of our ancestors," Zooey teased.

Calose stared at her startled. It would have been interesting on one level and another not so. What spirit form do disembodied Arachnids take?

"I come to you in a form you're familiar with."

"Yes, of course," Calose said. She wondered if Zooey came as a ball of energy, would she recognize it as Zooey?

"Everything is energy," Zooey mocked.

"Right, right. Basic beginner's course in healing," Calose said impatiently.

"You were such a good student," Zooey continued to tease.

"I was immobilized in a hospital bed with nothing else to do, Zooey." She sighed exasperated. Was that what she was referring to or was it her continuing lessons with Zooey?
"I need to prepare myself."

"I can take a hint. I can't thank you enough for your participation in my send off. It was a wonderful transition ceremony," Zooey said then left.

In her meditation area she prepared her space for prayers of guidance and incantations to protect her and those present for the ceremony. In the air she traced symbols taught by the holy ones for bringing her own being into correct vibrational presence. She didn't know who she would channel. She trusted the leader of the ceremony, Ambassador JenMoc and of course her guardians, with one of them being Zooey.

She smudged her quarters and took a cleansing bath of herbs. Then said more ceremonial prayers for the beneficial outcome for all those participating. As she dressed in her ritual garb, each piece of clothing represented life in the physical and the jewels the

metaphysical. Her green sash had bright red and blue symbols. She waited in quiet meditation for her crew members participating in the ritual to arrive. Kaving and Bout arrived dressed in their ceremonial robes to accompany her to the second deck where the ceremony was to take place. In the lift as they descended to the second deck, Calose could feel the sacred energy surrounding the three of them with their combined focus. Bout, head of security, was a master teacher in his own right of the art of the Que, a mental and physical discipline of knowing oneself. His grasp of the various rites of transition for different species had Calose in awe with only Kaving coming near to his knowledge. The nuances in rites, particular to not just one species but also to their different clans, was something Calose thought only a Dara would know through a life of study, yet the Ambassador requested her to be the channeler. That meant something to her in her continuous studies of being aware of others, the good and those struggling.

When they arrived the three took a moment to gaze at the hologram of the Temple of AbaYan's prayer hall with bright posts and prayers carved around them. It was more impressive as they stood in their own higher energy. Images of tall statues of venerated masters of various species in their mortal life lined the hall with the monks and the five passengers sitting along the wall beneath the statues. Calose was vaguely aware that Belig was present.

The three of them stepped into the entrance of the prayer hall, at the narthex. When Ambassador JenMoc raised his arm, Sasha began her music, and JenMoc began a sutra, spoken in a deep voice that echoed in the building. Then a chant that was easy to follow began and Kaving, Bout and she began a dance that worked with the energy in the hall, cleansing it. For those that could see the energy it was moving around the holographic image of the deceased monk. JenMoc signaled when it was time for Calose to bring a channeled messenger into the ceremonies. Calose could feel the spirit looking through her eyes. It saw Zooey and there seemed to be an understanding between the two. The soul was related to Monk Josta, an uncle. There were other spirits present, including Proctor Jema of the monks' school. Ambassador JenMoc moved to Calose's side as he and the Proctor stood in front of each monk for a few moments and drew symbols that were meaningful to them. Though she was standing aside for the channeled being, she could feel the effect the symbols had on each monk. Their faces became blissful and radiant. Proctor Jema's figure bowed to JenMoc and Calose and left after the last monk was blessed.

Then, JenMoc and Calose moved on to the five friars. Their features looked more rodent than before. The presence of the channel changed. It wasn't something to fear. Zooey was close to Calose, protecting her from whatever had changed places. In front of the first friar the image of a head and heart appeared then they split asunder with a dark blade by an unseen wielder that wore black gloves. In front of the second friar was the image of a dandy but on closer view, his clothes faded and tattered, with his shoes covered in mud hiding gaping holes. The third friar had the image of a shiny ring appearing before him; however, the metal was so soft when fitted on the finger of the friar it split. The fourth friar, the image of a mirror appeared but cracked in places so when the friar looked into it, it was difficult to see his image. The last friar was the most disturbing image. It was a coin, with blood on it. The hand that was holding it was bloody and as it was given to the friar; his hands became bloodied.

After the final friar, the channeled being left her, Zooey and the guides Calose felt near her, moved away. Calose turned and danced to the image of the deceased monk where she could see his spirit form with his relative who Calose first channeled. She picked up a bunch of herbs that was smoking. She whirled around with it, smudging and signed above and around the image with it. Colors of energy came from her hands as JenMoc chanted blessings for a safe journey to the spirit of the deceased. The entire ceremony lasted hours and when the hall became silent, the energy continued to be felt by all those present. Calose could tell the monks were reverently sending their own energy to their deceased friend. However, the five friars were like a dark cloud that JenMoc held in a containment field, or was it, *Calypso?* Whatever JenMoc had planned for the friars to benefit in a positive way appeared to NOT be received with a welcoming heart from them.

Slowly the holographic temple evaporated and left those attending with a few minutes to settle in their own thoughts. Zooey's spirit left and whatever Calose had channeled for the five hung for a few moments in a corner, then vanished.

Calose and her crew exited and returned to their quarters to change. They had duties to see to. The security bots escorted the friars to their shared berth, where they were isolated from mingling with the other passengers.

"Calypso, do not let the five out of their quarters," Calose directed.

"Yes, captain."

The monks were left in silent repose with Ambassador JenMoc while Ward Sasha played her flute in an inspiring melody.

Chapter Ten

It was in the early hours of the third shift when Calose, unable to sleep, joined Heru on the bridge. Both were studying a ship *Calypso* flagged that was on a course that was following them. She didn't like the feeling she received from the tiny blip on her screen. The energy was too much like the five they had pulled off the remains of *Umbliqu*. While she waited for it to get closer for *Calypso* to get a clearer scan of it, she listened to a message Bout had sent her earlier while she was resting.

*"*Calypso's *monitoring of those five friars showed they were intending on hijacking the shuttle after kidnapping the Ward for safe passage. They are under induced sleep. When you get a chance, we'll need to question them on just what their business is and when we can turn them over to law enforcement. I checked their belongings, and they have no space passports or travel IDs and no FT kits. I've sent a message to the nearest Space Police HQ for information on the images I've sent of the five."*

"Calypso, what is the status of the passengers?"

"They are immobilized in a deep dreamless slumber."

"Commander Heru, do you think that ship out there has anything to do with our rescued passengers?"

"I'll not be surprised if it's the five passengers that are under deep sleep. That ship tailing us is not good energy, Captain."

"Yes. I feel that too. They're not a friendly tail."

As the ship drew nearer *Calypso's* scans brought up a holographic scan of a ship that looked like a mixture of parts from a spaceship scrapyard. Its identifier wasn't a Federation registration.

"Captain, the ship is now within scanning range. It identifies itself as the *Anacou* from the Zed Galaxy. They must have used travel corridors to reach our part of Meto galaxy. Commander Moya should look at that ship." Heru reported. "I'm not sure how it's moving at the

speed it is at the way it's put together. It's running hot and will injure its occupants if ignored. NOT a ship I would rescue."

"They look like they're four hours away from us if we continue at our present speed. Are they hailing us?"

"Yes. It's about *their* minions, those friars that were on Dray Soc. They are anxious to know about their health," Heru said. She glanced at Calose with a frown. "Or I should say, about the possessions they have with them. They found the remains of *Umbliqu* and traced us as having picked up survivors. Interesting that they were able to get anything from the wrecked ship. Telepathic?"

"That is interesting. What's their message again?"

"Their transmitted message is 'Do you have our minions. Return them and their belongings at once.' I don't equate their hail as a friendly hello," Heru said.

"Calypso, can you tell us about the occupants of that ship?"

"It's one species. Koku they call themselves. They are not interested in being part of a community other than their own kind. They have a very structured hierarchy. Their ship is made up of many parts of other ships, put together by a hobbyist working on a scrapyard on Delfore IV. It is not a registered ship in Federation space. Nor are they or the ship from the Zed Galaxy."

"What information do you have on the Friars of Gregory, *Calypso*?" Heru asked.

"Not a recognized religious or spiritual group. The Federation's representative cautioned the group on Drey Soc that they were too aggressive about seeking donations and were to cease and desist or leave. The Federation's Criminal Oversight Bureau labels them as an unlawful cartel, passing themselves off as a religious sect. Suspicion is they are from a star constellation with a planet of dense matter. Anyone meeting up with any members is to notify the nearest law enforcement bureau or send a message to any Space Force Headquarters. They have not been cleared for space travel by the Federation's Security Council."

"Bout and *Calypso* sent messages to the nearest SFHQ hours ago. We should be getting a reply soon," Heru reported.

"It seems the arrival of the monks with an available spaceship and the Federation's Health order for all non-Indigenous residents to evacuate came at a beneficial time for these five to leave. I want to know what they had when they left Dray Soc that would have members of

their group hunt them down with such intensity. Also, scan *Anacou* for the exact type of weapons they have mounted and let me know if they attempt to beam any of their members on board or beam any of their members off this ship. No beaming allowed." Calose added, "Where's Zooey?"

"Here and I'm not going to spy on that ship for you," Zooey said.

"I thought you were fearless and curious about threats to *Calypso."*

"They are what I describe as lower energy three dimensional beings, exactly what you and JenMoc are sensing. No threat to Calypso. Superstitious, brutal, and they have their own practices of protection that I prefer not to interfere with. Let them suffer the consequences as it would be a better lesson. You can, though. They understand brute force and take no prisoners. And don't believe a word they say," Zooey finished with a wave of one of her legs.

"Calypso, keep a secure lock on the friars. I'm not going to have outlaws causing trouble on board while I figure out what to do with those on the outside."

"They have odd myths that they hold to be true. They are after a prize that lost its value generations ago and from a long-gone society," Zooey said. *"Possession of it carries prestige for these beings."*

"What is the prize?"

"A medallion," Zooey said.

"A medallion?"

"It doesn't happen to be something like this, is it?" Kaving asked, joining the crew.

Kaving tossed a bag onto the table and from it a shiny disk slid out and to the center of the table. When it came to rest Calose held her breath as she had a vision of nine bloody swords of various lengths. Tips were broken off of four, one blade was split as if made from poor metal, three dissolved into smoke and the one that remained intact, was bloody up to its hilt. As the vision faded, the bloodied sword pointed at her. For a long moment they were all silent and as Calose let her breath out, she heard Bout's incredulous voice.

"That medallion is bad luck to whoever possess it and people still want it?"

"It's the story behind it that makes it valuable and the metal it's made from. A naïve want-to-be relic hunter could use it as a passable introduction to that group. It's from the planet Marathonie. One of the stories is the royal family of Mobotun, not liked by their subjects or neighbors, created nine medallions that used collectively could open the treasury vault which

has mountains of valuable jewels and coins they taxed and stole from their subjects and neighbors. So, the rumor is that a very unfortunate end came to that bloodline as their subjects revolted and some of their neighboring wronged fellows joined in to get back what they believed was theirs. The medallions that were removed from the corpses of the original owners by their slayers, had the misfortune of dying in an unnatural way," Kaving explained. "The story goes on about all those that had taken possession of any of the medallions, lost it and their lives. All the medallions hold low energy and attracts the same dense energy types to possess it."

"I can't feel its dense energy. That's one of the medallions for sure?" Heru asked.

"I can smell something rotten," Bout said, covering his nose.

"This one is called the Kobak. See the symbol? This is the only one that had no crystals embedded in it, but the metal is still valuable on some planets and spaceports. Valuable enough to kill for those with lower energy. So, what do we do with it?" Kaving waved dismissively at it.

"Who had it?"

"The monk that recently died," Kaving said.

"You found it in his belongings?" Calose asked.

"No. One of the other monks gave it to me when I asked if they received anything from the friars," Kaving said. "He said one of the friars gave it to Jocasta for safe keeping or more likely for passage off the planet. Jocasta, didn't like the feel of it and intended to give it to his proctor to see what to do with it."

"So, should we jettison off the friars and the medallion with a barnacle, a location tag, for the ship following us?" Heru asked humorously.

"Have we gotten any word from the Federation Space Enforcement HQ about the information we sent on the five friars?" Kaving asked.

"Yes. It's coming through now. It's a message from the outer watch of Cronas," Bout said thoughtfully. "Commander Eliot of the Federation Space Police. She wants to know where we're heading. I gave her Space City Cronas. She would like us to do her a favor and deliver the friars to a police depot *outside* of Cronas along their distance line. Do not let the friars disembark on Cronas, was her order."

"She sent a message and not a video?" Calose asked.

"It's a red alert and no video. Some HQ officials don't put their faces on videos since they may frighten the receiver. Not all species are nice looking like us," Bout said smiling. "According to the information from Commander Eliot, they are a new mass of immigrants to this side of our galaxy and labeled the dark hoard by those they've had the displeasure of meeting. Their own star system has labeled them as unwanted because they are survivors from a destroyed planet CFer101." He paused in thought. "They are recreated beings from what some have labeled blackholes that they caused by their destruction of planets and suns during a war."

"Recreated as in what some call reincarnated?" Calose asked.

"Yes. Their consciousness needs to evolve out of their present denseness."

"How are they able to travel in space?"

"They were given a ship and told to leave their galaxy."

"Hopefully, a planet is found that can accommodate them before we have another Gepak sort of disruption in our galaxy."

"So, should be leave a trail to Cronas so the ship follows?" Heru asked.

"Inform Commander Eliot we have a ship of theirs following us and it does have weapons. Maintain our speed to keep a four-hour distance from that ship."

"Will do, Captain," Heru said.

"Meantime, what do we do with this?" Bout asked.

"It was freely given to you, Kaving?"

"I would say gladly given," she replied.

"Then we'll surround it with protection signs and store it until we can turn it and the friars over to Commander Eliot," Calose said, making a protection motion over the medal.

Chapter Eleven

Calose's morning reports on the passengers, prisoners and pursuing ship were a relief at how well it all was going. They had two days until the troublesome five, and their interested followers could be handed over to Commander Eliot. The monks had been taken in hand by Ambassador JenMoc so their mentoring was continuing and she was relieved that Belig, the Ambassador and Sasha spent time together.

Calose had a meeting with Kaving on her progress covering her sessions with the master teacher and her discussion with Bout on her fear.

"Calose, since your discussion with Bout about your fear from childhood, what have you been doing to process it?"

"A darkness in my soul," Calose mocked. "Sasha played for me, and the darkness diminished. I didn't know at the time just what it was that changed in me, but my dreams have changed as well. I know she healed what I feared."

Kaving nodded for her to go on.

"In the past when I faced a species that projected their dark energy at me it made me so sick I could barely defend myself. I now realize the fear was of my own darkness that I was not dealing with."

"Tell me about this darkness," Kaving said.

"I feared my father and as a child I couldn't defend myself against his darkness. I kept that fear inside and it turned into a dark rage. I no longer feel the darkness of anger or resentment, which is nice to be free of."

Kaving smiled. "Intuitive and sensitive people, like yourself, are susceptible to being overwhelmed by others' darkness that is directed at them. I think you've made great progress in being able to protect yourself from being susceptible to succumbing to the paralyzing fear many intuitive beings experience when meeting with dark beings. This species that you particularly singled out, the Knab, do you know why you picked them as an example with the master teacher?"

"No. I'm not that familiar with the Knab. I may have heard of them in the military. I did hear that the Federation identified them as too dangerous to be allowed to be part of the space community. They've been isolated on their planet."

Kaving nodded, looking thoughtful. Calose picked up on her thoughts that she wanted to bring up another subject, but *Calypso* notified them they were approaching the meeting place Commander Elliot arranged.

Relieved, Calose headed to the shuttle bay with Kaving.

Calose watched Ambassador JenMoc as he entered the shuttle bay.

"Greetings Honorable JenMoc, are you here to send off the five with blessings?" Calose asked.

"I am. Their life lessons will continue to be difficult, and they will need a powerful ally to overcome the darkness in their lives. For that I have given them subconscious reminders that there will always be choices to take another path with less violence," he said.

Calose chuckled, remembering that her first mentor had said a similar thing to her and sure enough, when she began to be more aware of coincidences of a small, winged creature that appeared when she became angry for various reasons, it stopped her anger as she turned her thoughts to the winged creature no one else noticed.

"I see you are making progress in your lessons of self-forgiveness."

Calose smiled and nodded. *"It is nice to feel progress,"* she replied. *"I owe Sasha an apology for not understanding fully her healing gift."*

"You reminded her of her responsibility in a way that I wouldn't have been able to teach her. You both have done each other a service."

The police shuttle entered *Calypso's* shuttle bay and smoothly settled near *Calypso's* shuttles. Commander Elliot and her team all wore special ops armored uniforms with helmets covering their faces. Her team was composed of different species and different sizes. Commander Elliot, whom Calose recognized as reptilian, handed a pad to Calose for her and Kaving who joined them, to sign turning over the five prisoners and that the event was closed to discussion. The Commander may have glanced at the Ambassador, but it was impossible to see with her helmet's darkened face cover.

The prisoners walked stiffly, guided by *Calypso's* security bots into police custody. Their possessions were handed over via the ship's bots. It was with relief that the Police Shuttle left with the five that still had a dark cloud over them. Calose intended to smudge everywhere the five had been. It would make her feel a lot better.

Chapter Twelve

The space city Cronas was in its late watch when normal business hours of the law courts were closed. Belig's court business would have to wait until the next day. *Calypso II* was stationed two hours away from the busy city. They were within sight of space cruise liners, yachts and freighters that either used shuttles to taxi their passengers to the docks, or like Calose, were waiting for an available berth to unload cargo via their ship's barges.

The resident Proctor of the Monks of Peace sent a private shuttle for the Honorable JenMoc and Sasha as well as the monks from Dray Soc. Sasha looked tired, which JenMoc explained was due to a continued use of protection around her. Sasha had never been in a busy city and needed to slowly acclimate to the chaotic energies or be moved to a quieter place planetside. JenMoc was optimistic about the experience with the monks and friars, believing it would give Sasha a better grasp of some of the beings she would be meeting.

Since Belig had a court date and if a civilian shuttle berth didn't become available by the morning shift, Calose would be given a berth at the court docks to make Belig's court appointment on time. Calose preferred the visitor's berth since she wouldn't have to worry about the time limitation if using the law enforcement reserved docks.

End of this 2nd Part to Calose Part 3 will be Journey To Merlota