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SpAcEWoman

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PROLOGUE

689. *A Triple Star System in the Tiger Claw Galaxy*

Above the thin white clouds in the bright-colored sky of Tringsun was an orbital station. Its disk-shaped primary hull was ringed by two circular sections. Six large spokes connected the primary hull and rings. Its docking arms jutted out from the main hull like the legs of a spider. The shadowed planet moved in a tidal-locked orbit around the station, where one side of it always faced the sun and the other side faced away. The sun's corona haloed the edge of the planet, turning the clouds bright orange, making it look as if the sky were afire.

Three Praloon battle cruisers orbited in tandem with the station, overshadowing it with their massive bulk. Security

was tight, and for good reason. Measures of precaution were in place for the Galactic conference.

Cowering in the shadows, the dastardliest villains of rag-tag mercenaries and insurgents disrupted the current Galactic sociopolitical order. The many planetary leaders desired to unite the resistance groups with diplomacy in the form of a governmental alliance between the planets.

The Council Chamber, behind a glass sliding door, just off the main corridor of the station, stood as a beacon of hope for a galaxy fraught with peril. It was here that government functionaries and the highest-ranking leaders of the galaxy gathered to hammer out an agreement.

Overhead, a crystalline glass dome framed in steel, revealed a cluster of stars, blinking coldly, like eyes watching this galaxy on the verge of fracture. The various alien species sat in concentric tiers supported by curved steel columns. In the center of the tiers, there was the stern Vexari, reptilian warlords with three sharp bones sticking up from their heads, making weird little grunts, accompanied by slide-whistle slithers. To the right, the Wixuns, brilliantly pale albinos with empathic people-reading skills, red eyes glowing beneath the shadow of their ornate hoods, sat facing them in ascending rows. To the left were the Hantavants, speaking in hushed tones with a mix of caution and hope. And behind them, tiers of seats occupied to overflowing with the Hantavants' distant cousins the Mayorfants of Sakros. And to the sides of the tiers, stood four armed Praloon Guards.

The veiled Grand Commander of the Supreme Grand Conclave of the Mayorfants rose to speak, determined, the geometric shape tattooed across his face twitching with habitual irritation.

“Guard, tell the Vexari to stop heckling us,” the Grand Commander acquiesced.

The discourse continued along those lines for a couple of increasingly tense minutes. The Vexari were unaccustomed to intellectual debate, being far more familiar with violent confrontation.

Even worse, there was a traitor among them. A hooded figure docked its three-legged, small spaceship at a section of the station without any security clearance whatsoever. Before exiting, the figure pressed a button and the viewscreen, spanning across the front wall of the spaceship, turned off. It was unfathomable that someone could bypass every security protocol and just waltz right in.

The question was — who was the mysterious intruder?

The two tense-looking Praloon Guards flanking the glass sliding door of the Council Chamber, reached for the large, double barreled laser rifles at their sides. Too late. The intruder threw a small, metal, razor-sharp star-shaped blade into each of their necks killing them.

The door blew open with a deafening crash. And the normal sense of peace was shattered. Smoke billowed in on the government leaders, thick and black, as the room’s lights flickered, casting erratic shadows.

The figure took down his hood as he stepped through the haze, revealing a droid, towering and imposing. The

mere sight of its malevolent, glowing eyes was sufficient to make the representatives tremble. The strides of the droid's mechanical legs creaked metallically as it moved forward and raised its arm, a small plutonium fusion bomb in the cradle of its hand. The bomb ticked. And ticked. The Praloon Guards muttered to each other and lowered their weapons.

“What is the meaning of this?” the Hantavant Chancellor demanded, as he surged to his feet. “How dare you disrupt our meeting! What do you want?”

“Peace in this galaxy?” the droid said, its voice flat. “An illusion. Death to all!”

With a grinding, mechanical sound, the droid tossed the bomb. For that moment, time seemed to slow down.

“Brace yourselves! Take cover!” yelled a voice.

The bomb exploded with a metallic roar and gave off cascades of sparks and black dust, knocking several representative backward, while killing others.

A shudder rippled through the station. Alerts flashed on displays.

Minutes passed in silence broken only by the harsh tones of the forms looming around what was left of the Council Chamber. The columns had collapsed and dragged a huge section of the ceiling down with it. Debris was bouncing, and the air thick with dust and ash.

As the dust settled, the insurgent droid's eyes, pulsing with light, flickered briefly toward the two Mayorfants crouched behind a section of tiers that had not been broken out. Then the droid turned and quickly dodged away only

to be blasted away by Praloon Guards as it ran rapidly toward the narrow corridor toward its ship.

The aftermath was devastating.

Blame was all around. The Praloons were certain the droid was a hired assassin of the Vexari. Where the Hantavants faulted the Praloons for their security breach. While the Wixuns were unclear about who was at fault, the ever-paranoid Vexari believed they were betrayed by the Mayorfants. Asking questions and not getting answers, the Mayorfants were suspicious of everyone and everything.

Back on their planet, the Supreme Grand Conclave of the Mayorfants issued a declaration of intent to withdraw from galactic interaction. No more contact with the many different species. No more exploration. They believed they would do better and could self-sustain indefinitely.

CHAPTER 1

309. the Non-Aligned Sector

In the star-filled distance from the sector's border, Lurai Sul's twin-engine ship had been lurking, alongside a small fleet of battleships, above the permanent suspension of volcanic ash in the upper atmosphere of the planet Pralus; she had been waiting, with all propulsion systems in auto-standby. She'd been tipped off by the commander of Patrol-Force United, the galaxy's peacekeepers, that Cragun Hobbs, a mercenary smuggler, had been spotted on the planet collaborating with dissident droids. According to Vitrana Security, with whom she had often worked, Hobbs was carrying information about their weapons factory, and if it were to fall into the hands of other insurgents who trafficked weapons, it could be damaging to them.

Essentially, Vitrana Security had put out a fat bounty on him, which she was only too happy to collect.

After a short wait, she spotted a small asteroid-scarred ship in the cockpit's forward viewport and recognized it as Hobbs' ship. The Patrol-Force United's battleships didn't budge. Their commander left the bounty hunting in her capable hands. Hobbs' ship quickly accelerated past her, and a chase was on.

Her hands darted to the targeting and firing controls on the weapons panel. Hobbs' shields had held so far. His ship bolted and tried to evade, darting erratically to throw off her targeting systems. Deeming a close-range attack to be best, there wasn't any time to dwell on anything except the chase.

Lurai Sul was a reddish-orange skinned Praloon and a bounty hunter with a fearsome reputation, the best in the galaxy. Fiercely beautiful, she was five-one, one-hundred-five pounds, with thick, wavy shoulder-length black hair and black eyes. She'd been alive twenty-six years and was very charismatic, sometimes funny, sometimes sarcastic.

In galactic history, her race had served as formidable defenders of peace. One of the catastrophic chain of events that resulted when peace talks went badly over three hundred years ago, was the dismantling of the orbital station above the Praloon planet of Tringsun. It marked a turning point in history because the structure, where planetary leaders could resolve political matters, had been a symbol of diplomacy for decades. It seemed that hope itself had died when the structure fell.

Hobbs' hooded watery eyes were anxious. The lanky albino worked frantically to plot coordinates. Enabled a fraction later, his ship leaped into hyperspace, its engine flare blinking out of sight.

Lurai's eyes narrowed slightly. "Bad move, Cragun."

The smuggler had made one mistake, taking his little ship into hyperspace. The tracker signals of her ship stayed locked-on his. She jerked in her seat as her ship plunged through the radial aurora. Ahead, the jagged silhouette of Hobb's ship flickered in and out of view, through the blue streaks of interdimensional travel. She kept her patience, figuring sooner or later, she'd project a tractor beam on his ship and drag it to the planet of Vitrana. Nobody escaped from her that easily. One way or another, she always got her man.

Her fingers tightened around the fire-control yoke as they burst out of hyperspace in the Annexed Confederacy. She was distracted by the alert on the communications panel and couldn't fire on his ship. Sensors examined the surrounding environment, alerting her to a ship behind her. She looked around in befuddlement and found a warship, armed to the teeth. Its metallic silver and red striped hull gleamed, and the angles and design were familiar.

A pit opened in her stomach.

She knew instantly who it was from the black spidery symbol etched into the side of its massive hull. It was the Arachtors, who operated like independent warlords. These arachnids with smuggling instincts enjoyed their gains from selling weapons and ammunition to insurgents.

She groaned. "This is not a good sign."

And that could only mean the Arachtors had known she was coming. She could only assume that Hobbs had contacted them to intercept her. Smugglers knew bounty hunters represented law and order, so that made her a target he wanted to kill.

Chittering voices crackled through the communications panel. Guttural clicking sounds, she couldn't understand anything being said. On instinct, she swept her hand across the communications panel, muting the sound.

Hobbs' ship's engines reversed and was docking inside the Arachtors' heavy warship, which stayed with her, trying to line up a shot. She clenched her teeth, anger and frustration boiling up inside her.

The warship let off a volley of green laser bursts. At the last possible moment, she jerked the controls, throwing the ship into a fast-rolling spiral. As the flurry of laser shots skimmed along the hull, she fought the ship out of the roll.

Lurai twisted the ship around, activated the over-and-under plasma cannons mounted on the sides, yanked on the fire-control yoke, and punched the green trigger, letting loose a barrage of shots. She thought she'd landed a hit. No such luck. The shots went wide, spraying toward the distant stars.

The warship's lasers were primed to fire again.

And her ship was directly in the line of fire.

The Arachtors ship decelerated and retaliated with a laser-cannon bolt. Her ship bucked as a laser bolt burned into the iridescent hull. Cracking and snapping echoed

through the cockpit. A very loud sounding, “kapow” rang through her ship as a small shower of sparks erupted from the console, forcing her to shield her eyes with her arms.

When she recovered, her vision blurred briefly. Her face was illuminated by the blinking warning systems light on the console. But she maintained speed and veered off, flying slightly erratically, attempting to shake their pursuit.

For a minute, there was only a tense silence. Then: The warship fired again. Streaks of light headed toward her. She dodged fire by veering hard to the right, her hands smooth and rapid on the controls, turning the ship. The shot sent a lightning storm skittering over her shields as it passed and caused the ship to veer to the left.

Locked in close combat with them, she had been unable to prepare her ship to run back toward hyperspace. With a steely determination in her eyes, she considered her next move, then transmitted a coded message to Vitrana Security.

Laser cannonfire exploded around her.

They were getting closer to her ship. Very, very fast.

She was out of time.

The realization hit her like a physical blow.

“I will not die this way,” the bounty hunter whispered with determination.

Her hands were shaking, trembling against the yoke. Concentrating her over-and-under plasma cannons on the center of their warship, she pressed the trigger. Their shields flared under the energy load. The distraction gave

her the opportunity she needed, a brief window for her to escape.

Her shields were down.

Holding her breath, she rerouted power from the damaged systems to the main thrusters. A fast dive. The Arachtors failed to get her in target lock.

“Start jump sequence,” Lurai said, pushing her ship to its limits. “Engage drive.”

A sudden roll and bank to the left had the ship accelerating at the maximum capacity of her drives, which reached a peak and streaked away into hyperspace. Despite the rough transition to light speed, she was grateful to have escaped death.

CHAPTER 2

Lurai Sul's ship reached a repair dock area built into the hull of Yograx. The armor-plated station was suspended in a synchronous orbit of the second-largest, blue gas-giant planet Ozarus, located at the Annexed Confederacy's outer edge. The huge, saucer-shaped station was in the layer of atmosphere capable of sustaining life above the thick bands of rock and ice particles that belted the bloated planet.

Perhaps calling Yograx a place to refuel was too grand, but it was more than a mere repair station. It served to facilitate commerce for all types, unsavory or otherwise. There were a maze of winding corridors and walkways, living quarters, storage rooms, and a cantina and gambling establishment of the type you might find the worst of the

galaxy — smugglers, mercenaries, slavers, freelance pilots, and even criminals.

Space credits was the form of cryptocurrency widely accepted throughout the galaxy. The digital currency credits utilized advanced cryptographic techniques to secure and verify transactions. Unfortunately, Lurai's meager amount of credits could barely finance the repairs to her ship's battered hull. Ruined components would be replaced, but the scorch marks on the hull would remain there. She left the maintenance crawlspace underneath the ship, feeling in a solemn mood.

At this point, she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a drink or some nutrients fully compatible with her biochemistry. She strode through what seemed like endless narrow corridors toward the cantina. The iron-walled metropolis was interrupted here and there by tall circular windows revealing Ozarus below. The metal beams and panels of every corridor resembled the previous ones she'd walked through. Having been there before helped a lot to sort out a direction to go.

The stale and smoky, dimly lit cantina was filled with a mix of disreputable beings — reptilian, horned, green-skinned, tentacles, all shapes and sizes gathered here for entertainment. Exhausted, Lurai leaned back, sipping her drink, plunking boots on the dark wooden table with gold inlay, hidden, as she liked to relax. The sight of the unsavory criminal element entering and exiting — a myriad of fierce and cutthroat types, fully armed transfixed her. A fight, or a bounty killing every so often was to be expected.

It was a full minute before a bulky alien strutted over as if he owned the place. She had recognized him, he knew, only by the fact that he was wearing a Vitrana Security emblem on his nondescript black robe with gold cords looping over his shoulder. Unlike her dull skin tone, the Velonians of Vitrana had a vibrant purple skin tone.

He had pushed his way through the crowd, right up to the side of her table. A server droid rolled by him just before he reached over to pull a chair out from the table. His tapered ears bent back as he gave an expressionless nod and sat down opposite her.

“Come to gloat, Rogaz?” she asked and slapped her now-empty tumbler down on the table. “I tried my best to get Cragun Hobbs, but I was ambushed by the Arachtors, who damaged by ship. And now, I have sunk three thousand credits into its repair.”

The acrid taste of bitterness was swirling within her. Lurai’s words hung in the air, as though she was clinging to the last threads of her dignity. None of them spoke for a long moment. She stared out at the tall, horned head thin-limbed alien prancing about the stage, playing a flute-like instrument.

“Things happen, and there are no guarantees,” Fazil Rogaz paused, looking down into her empty bowl. “What is good to eat here?”

“You did not come all this way to order food. Why are you here?” she couldn’t quite keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

“Your coded message was displayed to the Head of Vitrana Security, who divulged this space station as to where I could find you. Vitrana Security sent me to offer you a large amount of credits to bring in the most notorious smuggler in the galaxy,” he said in a serious voice.

Lurai felt a tickle of apprehension. She didn’t respond immediately, instead taking her time to study him, one finger tapping idly on the tumbler.

“How large?” she asked, trying to hide the smirk tugging at her lips.

“I can guarantee it will more than make up for what you lost on repairs.”

“That much, huh? Even though I failed to capture Hobbs?” she questioned, then added, after a moment’s thought. “Mind you, there is still a chance, a very slight one, that I will find him. And soon!”

“Set Cragun Hobbs aside for now. Your orders to bring him in unharmed are currently in debate with the Head of Vitrana Security.”

“Fine. Whatever. But why come here?” she asked. “You could have sent a text-based encrypted message over a secure link to me or transmitted a hologram of yourself to my ship’s transceiver.”

Rogaz shook his head then put on an earnest look. “No. We could not risk the rebel droids’ vengeance. The androids of Perennis Prime are very good at intercepting long-distance messages. Right now, information is currency. Dissident forces within the galaxy are offering plenty of credits for information helpful to smugglers.”

“Good point,” she said. “This is as good a place to talk as any.”

He reached inside his robe and took out a thumbnail-sized datachip and punched in some commands on its miniaturized input module. “The Head of Vitrana Security is certain that Hobbs has shared a datachip that contains details of every aspect and schematics of our largest weapons factory with Infiltrator, who we suspect to be planning a break-in.”

In light of the potential theft of the blueprints detailing their weapons designs put Velonians at every level on high alert and attracted the attention of Vitrana Security.

“I got it now. Infiltrator, an associate of Cragun Hobbs and the most notorious smuggler in the galaxy. And Vitrana Security has put a price on his head large enough that I just could not refuse.”

“Right! Which is why you want to find him first,” he agreed, handing her the datachip that contained intel on Infiltrator. “Insert this into your datapad. Then get to Vitrana as soon as you can.”

She slipped the datachip in her boot pocket. Without a word of farewell, he stood up and headed out of the cantina at a fast trot.

Six hours later, she was in the triangular cockpit of her ship. She was doing her preflight prep, checking systems one by one. Her thoughts were heavy with doubt. Even if she found Cragun Hobbs, she was beginning to have a bad feeling about her chances of collecting the bounty on him. And now, more than ever, she needed the credits.

Though she had less hope than ever, she checked the coordinates on her navigation console, throttled up and vectored away from the station.

“Vitrana, here I come,” she muttered.

CHAPTER 3

Against the dark velvet of space, the planet Vitrana lay in the midst of a cluster of brilliant stars, concealed by a bright, lacy mist, caused by an endless manufacturing. As Lurai Sul's ship descended, she didn't take her eyes off the viewport as the mist broke into sparkling particles that swirled around. Then the ship broke through a clear atmosphere. Glinting below was a planet covered in sprawling industrial properties important to the galaxy. The Velonians had contracts with security forces of many planets, supplying their armories with high tech weaponry including highly enriched uranium fission bombs, ammunition, and even infrared heat-sensing binoculars produced in their factories.

Planets, in this area of the galaxy known as the Industrial Consortium, scintillated with the lights of a

hundred factories, churning and rumbling. Slave labor and assembly-line droids turned out an unending supply of valuable industrial components.

Security was heavy.

Information had surfaced about the large stockpile of galactic superweapons by political leaders, who felt compelled to unite and rule the many. That was strategically relevant to the ongoing conflict. A conflict that had been aggravated by suspicions about the true nature of their leaders' intentions. Most troubling of all was this unrest facilitated the rise of independent warlords, fanning the flames of separatist movements, insurgents and smugglers like the infamous Infiltrator, who looked to profit in this unstable galaxy.

In the distance she could make out a massive structure that towered high above the arid landscape: Vitrana's largest weapons factory. Her ship descended toward a landing pad at the northwest corner, on the roof of the factory, which was built in a canyon that extended deep underground.

Before touching down, Rogaz's stressed voice came through the cockpit speaker.

"Good timing, Lurai," he said, through the live, crackling holocommunication transmission. "Infiltrator was detected in the main armory, which holds the master blueprints for a number of Velonian weapons. A guard in the adjacent monitoring chamber isolated his heat signature and the computer confirmed a match. At the command of the head of Vitrana Security, the factory is in complete

lockdown, and no one can enter or leave. Get down here and join the search for him. You are cleared to land.”

Before she had a chance to respond, the faint hiss of communication transmission vanished as Rogaz cut off abruptly.

She dropped into a vacant area near the edge of the platform, where a line of glowing red-yellow lights marked the border. After activating the landing ramp, she shut down her engines, unstrapped from her seat, and strode down the ramp. The dotted winking lights at the edge of the large, magnificently carved stone deck caught the iridescent threads in the white scarf wrapped around her hair. As the ramp closed behind her, she took the scarf from around her head and knotted the scarf around her arm. On her side, she packed a lethal-looking, large silver laser gun.

Entering the narrow corridor that linked to the complex, she had little trouble navigating the complex among the many security guards milling about. No one knew where Infiltrator was. His trail had grown cold. Was he hiding somewhere? Or had he simply left?

The smuggler at large, known as Infiltrator, ducked out of the T-junction corridor he'd been hiding in and sprinted ahead and down a corridor that ended in a staircase leading up. The maze of dark corridors frustrated him. He retreated back and crossed into another corridor and walked into a small but deserted chamber without seeing anyone. For that matter, he hadn't sensed anyone since his escape from the main armory. Sensors could detect his heat signature, but

his cloaking device was activated, which rendered him transparent.

A blaster rifle was slung over his shoulder, and a retractable armored mask covered his face, with a mess of thick, brown dreadlocks coming out the back. He was a tall and muscular Praloon, dressed in dark gray cargo pants and rugged boots.

His real name was Sky Rodenko. Nobody called him that any more. They called him “Infiltrator” because of the way he could break in and out of anywhere. Nothing was impenetrable to him. There was an unpredictable quality about every heist and hijacking he did.

Lurai wasn’t about to give up. But she was more than fatigued. Every time she thought she had come to the end of a corridor, it turned another direction or led to a stairwell.

A double complement of armed guards marched up and down the corridors. Crouching low beside a pile of weapons neatly arranged in a rack, Infiltrator could hear their footsteps now, coming toward the chamber.

Without warning, the invisible cloak around him malfunctioned. He couldn’t get the cloak to work and thought it was the worst sense of timing of any he’d ever known. Now he was completely exposed, and hiding was no longer sufficient.

When Lurai emerged from the shadows of a corridor, she heard lasers firing. Sparks were flying, as Infiltrator ran on a catwalk that extended from the platform across. A hail of laser fire scorched the air around him. She paused on the walkway and watched him leap and land on the back of a

large, bulky maintenance droid that looked like a gigantic clumsy tractor.

Infiltrator began firing his blaster rifle, and bolts of bright-green light shot out across the factory. Lurai removed the laser gun holstered around her waist and aimed it at him. Battling back his blaster bolts, she pulled the trigger in the same instant she felt a bolt scream above her head.

The maintenance droid moved forward and shifted from foot to foot, almost throwing Infiltrator off. Guards ran down the catwalk, firing at him and scorching whatever else was overhead. A rain of debris and steel fragments fell past him, crashing with explosive force on the bottom level of the factory. The falling debris didn't so much make a lot of damage as block the guards' view of Infiltrator, which prompted a temporary cease-fire.

And then Infiltrator was gone, jumping across and climbing an iron ladder fixed into the wall that led to an escape hatch, where he climbed into. This distraction allowed him to escape a dangerous situation.

Stumped by Infiltrator's escape, Vitrana Security and Lurai Sul assumed he must have reactivated his cloak. Before she left Vitrana, Lurai had a meeting with the head of Vitrana Security in the monitoring chamber, a room that boasted many computer stations with six viewing monitors mounted on a wall.

CHAPTER 4

Deceptively benign-looking, the Garynx Nebula twisting luminously through space located on the Annexed Confederacy border, was used as a cover by Perennis Prime, an android command station. Established decades earlier by a breakaway faction of dissident droids, its population was made up entirely of droids, who could think, and feel.

Hundreds of years ago, a resistance group's unprovoked attack on a political conference to establish a planetary alliance unwittingly caused the redistricting of territory. This collapse of the intergovernmental alliance between the planets was when the galactic powers divided the universe into sectors. This elliptical galaxy with a supermassive black hole at its nucleus, approximately one million light-years in diameter, and containing 20 million mostly older

stars on eccentric orbits, would no longer be carefully mapped out areas of space based on its elongated, football-like shape. Rather, segregation consisted of five territories based on industry, culture and politics. The Industrial Consortium was a protected zone, with planets engaged in manufacturing equipment for transportation and weapons for trade. Travel was restricted to all planets in the Autonomous District, because their inhabitants, some primitive, preferred anonymity which could not be intruded into without consent. The Non-Aligned Sector was a neutral zone of planets with indigenous life-forms and turbulent atmospheres. The oldest races in the galaxy were in the Inter-Colonial Zone. And the Annexed Confederacy was at the heart of insurgency movements.

Dividing the galaxy into sectors, where not every civilization had acquired technology for cultural exchanges and commercial trade, had an adversary effect on sentient droids and sophisticated artificial intelligence. All these droids, once loyal to political authority, had different reasons for rebelling and joined forces with insurgents, who put in motion a plan to take revenge against what they considered the tyrannical control of the galaxy.

The anomaly with high particle density was a spectacular sight due to its monstrous size of about 340 arcsec in diameter. Its purple-and-pink clouds of cosmic gases were brilliant against the surrounding supergiant stars, which were illuminated by the reflective veils of dust. Obviously the droids chose this nebula as a place for supplying top-secret intel to insurgents despite its unstable

nature. Better yet was the nebula blocked the view of a steady flow of ships going back and forth through the stable wormhole on the other side of it.

Floating in the beautiful astral, Perennis Prime consisted of three space stations built to withstand the nebula's static discharge and ionization effects. There were massive drives, pushing their orbit around each other at a distance of 5 kilometers, completing one entire orbit cycle every hour. The identical structures looked somewhat like gigantic upside-down spinning tops with three, ruby glass-domed observation bubbles. The saucer-shaped primary hull sat atop a long, tubular cigar-shaped section, which housed the facility's main power. The shield generator sat atop the primary hull and also harbored a complement of proton-torpedo launchers. And the docking doors were located in the center of the upper section, which had a docking port with supplies so a ship could make repairs.

The sound of metal footsteps on metal walkways echoed throughout the computer terminal filled command center in the primary hull of the main station. Scattered around were a dozen white armor-plated droids — which stood roughly six feet tall with glowing slits for eyes and humanoid arms-and-legs arrangement — each keying data into automated terminals. A droid, with his optical sensors glowing, unfolded from his seat and headed for the exit, while the other droids continued working, undisturbed.

Far up at the top, Golo-DEX had called a meeting in one of the domed observation bubbles, where eight six feet tall droids stood in a semicircle to either side of their station's

commander. These security droids wandered individually across the stations.

“Infiltrator had sent a stream of detailed design blueprints of several weapons, some of them prototypes, designed for stealth operation and intelligence data providing more evidence of the galactic government’s weapons buildup,” the commander said and turned to face his second in command, Syn Dat, who was standing beside him.

“Our intel shows that in the lower levels of Pralus, the planet that supplies Vitrana with fuel, are warehouse zones where one finds the prototype weapons from Vitrana, readied for distribution. Many of those weapons have high-velocity armor-piercing capability,” Syn Dat updated, his metal face somehow expressive.

One of the droids stepped forward, its motors whirring in his elongated neck.

“Commander,” the droid said in a metallic monotone and gave the captain an intense look, “we are but defenseless against the schemes of the enemy.”

There was unhappy murmuring.

Another droid’s head swiveled, its sensors flashing. “The seventy-five percenters on Vitrana achieved their wealth by selling weapons.”

“Free and unrestricted trade, invites competition,” a droid said in a silly-sounding voice, and even dared stealing a direct look at the commander’s face, eyes glowing a piercing blue.

Golo-DEX tilted his head and peered into his face, processing the comment. Then the commander looked disapprovingly at that droid, who began to feel nervous. The look said, *Has your programming been altered?*

The security droids tensed until the commander started talking.

A surge of fury rose in the commander, and he nearly threw his datapad at the observation dome. “Indeed, the Velonians are giving many planetary government leaders access to far too many weapons. Their perversion of the way the galaxy ought to be run could well lead to a galactic war — a war in which their own planet would be the target of opposing forces.”

“Commander,” Syn Dat whirred in anticipation. “What do you propose?”

“Send a squad of tactical droids in a vessel through the wormhole to Pralus, navigating past the forces there, to intercept that cache of prototype weapons and ammunition. And I want a full technical readout on that vessel before its departure,” replied Golo-DEX with considerable energy.

“Yes, commander,” Syn Dat said simply.

“The galaxy is slipping into anarchy. Hope for a better galaxy for everyone comes in the form of those who are willing to take action,” the commander said to his security team, bristled with righteous indignation.

The security droids strode out into a corridor of the observation bubbles. Syn Dat took the lead.

The commander turned his attention beyond the transparent crystal of the observation dome. A labyrinth of

golden energy radiated from the wormhole, while stars flickered and stretched into an opalescent blur at its outer edges. As if in a trance, he squeezed his metal hand into a fist and placed it against his armored chest, staring into the galactic phenomenon.

CHAPTER 5

Ecuamar hung in the black vastness of space like a scorched sphere with wisps of silvery-white clouds circling it. From time to time through a rift in the clouds, Infiltrator caught a glimpse out the viewport of the homeworld of the Vexari. The little planetoid, primarily composed of iron and nickel, was formed from a belt of asteroids which had collided with another body. As his chrome-hulled spacecraft descended to the planetoid's dark hemisphere, he was thankful to see that night had fallen over the several thriving, densely populated settlements. From experience, he had come to prefer night landings, to avoid drawing attention from spaceports' security officers.

Just a handful of years after the dismantling of the Praloon's orbital station, the galaxy was rocked by war and political convulsions triggered by suspicions between the

Praloons and their rival Vexari. Doomed from the start, the Vexari were no match against a battle-hardened Praloon army. As the war went on, more and more Vexari had died. Although, they would have fought the Praloons to the bitter end, to avoid further loss, the Vexari surrendered, which ended the war after two years. Now, all that was left of the them remained exiled on Ecuamar in the Inter-Colonial Zone.

Locked in the planetoid's unusually strong gravitational pull, he landed his spacecraft in a hangar in the abandoned munitions base, for a clandestine meeting with a comrade. The hangar was a cavernous building that had served at one time as a storage for weapons and ammunition year-round.

Now, standing at the bottom of the spacecraft's ramp waiting, he retracted his mask. His eyes fell on the catwalk that spanned the hangar's upper level. The silence was oppressive.

A door slid open. And there he was. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Vexari approaching, layers of overlapping gray scales armored his skin. His reptilian face slowly came into focus.

"Greetings, Val-Kul," Infiltrator intoned.

Val-Kul was a member of Vexari's underworld, privy to black-market deals and other crime. Infiltrator had those kind of connections. Ecuamar was no stranger to the underworld of bottom feeders lurking in its murky depths.

"The smuggler who penetrated the most secure weapons factory, on the most secure planet in the entire galaxy," Val-Kul said, in a high-pitched voice. "The

Vitrana Security armed guards at checkpoint must have their minds twisted over this. How did you do it?"

"My spacecraft's profile is altered. The drives produce a signature that makes the craft difficult to detect. I easily masked my craft from Vitrana's short-range sensors. Then I hid my craft in the southern rim of the canyon," Infiltrator said, pausing to think.

In his head, the Vexari went back over what he'd said and made a face. He looked like he was still waiting to hear more.

"So," Infiltrator continued, "I slipped inside the factory easily because I cloaked my body, shielding myself from the sight of any guards who happened to be around. Considering the levels of radiation I could be exposed to, it was something I did not get on the black market."

Infiltrator quaked with laughter. But Val-Kul didn't get the pun, didn't react. The Vexari seemed annoyed by his confidence and quickly moved the conversation back to focus.

"On to other matters," Val-Kul said, looking perturbed.

"You will set up a distraction high in the atmosphere of the planet Draxis. Your vessel will block the cargo transport's flight path, so I can take it," Infiltrator explained.

"You make it sound so simple," Val-Kul said with a shake of his head. "My vessel will be hiding behind the planet. I am unable to guarantee that the timing will be perfect."

To his surprise, the Vexari's yellow eyes, endowed with horizontal eyelids, flicked, glancing about him with seemingly no interest. But Infiltrator had spent a lot of time setting up this plan, and it was designed to go without a single problem.

Infiltrator leaned over to his ear. "There is no need to panic. When the cargo transport lifts off, I will transmit a message to you."

The smuggler patted Val-Kul on the back reassuringly. The three bones protruding like horns from the center of Val Kul's head twitched. A moment of hesitation passed between them. Then Val-Kul's head was twisting this way and that with nervous concern.

"It is time to take a risk. I need your vessel in on this. The payout will be more than worth it," Infiltrator added enticingly.

Val-Kul nodded and lowered his voice to a rumble. "Deal."

"Great! I have to go now," Infiltrator said, turned his back and started up the ramp. "I am taking the shortest and fastest route to Draxis."

His voice low and cynical, Val-Kul said with a crooked smile, "See you, Infiltrator."

Something didn't feel right about his meeting with the Vexari. A flutter of tension moved through Infiltrator as he walked down the short corridor toward the cockpit. The faint clang of his boots on the steel floor echoed through the craft. The beat did nothing to soothe the gnawing feeling inside of him that he couldn't ignore.

After tapping a code into the device on a wall, the door slid open before him, and he entered the cockpit. Inexplicably, he looked distinctly uncomfortable. Mulling it over in his head again and again, Val-Kul had seemed too distracted and uninterested. The Vexari was likely playing both sides as it suited him. A rather elusive species, it was difficult to trust the Vexari, who were loyal to no one but themselves. Humiliated by surrender, they still had a heck of a grudge against the war with the Praloons.

A flash of irritation flickered in Infiltrator's chest, but he took a slow breath and forced it down. Focus, he told himself, reminding himself that they had worked well together before.

As his spacecraft shot out of the hangar, he kept a sullen expression on his face. As the stars stretched out before him, he stared blankly out the viewport, trying not to let the worry he felt creep in any farther.

CHAPTER 6

To Lurai Sul's misfortune, she found herself back in the Yograx refueling and repair station. When she had left Vitrana space, she glanced down at the navigation console and saw rows of blue lights flickering in random bursts. Suddenly puzzled by the malfunction, she waited it out. But after a moment of observation, she realized that there was no improvement. There was no recourse for her but to fix the problem with the console. It goes without saying that the stationmaster was glad to make another thousand credits off of her.

Lurai sized up the two drunk, heavysset thugs standing awkwardly on either side of the door of the smoky cantina, each with a laser gun jammed down the side of his belt. Not the least bit intimidated, she stepped through the doorway. The edge of her black top, beneath the long brown coat that

swirled around her knees, shimmered against the fluorescent tubes flickering an eerie blue-green overhead. The place was almost filled with the lowest dregs of the galaxy deep in murmured conversation at small tables and hunched over drinks at the bar. Others might be frightened, but she tried not to be intimidated by the atmosphere.

Against the far wall was a gambling table, beside a roulette-like wheel, that hugged the shadows. Unbeknownst to her, Val-Kul was standing at that table and had been watching the entrance. Instantly alert, he recognized her as a bounty hunter. He wasn't trying his luck at the moment. In fact, he ducked behind a player standing next to him and kept an eye on her. While patrons jostled past behind him, cursing him for blocking their path.

To him, bounty hunters were a deadly breed. They could be a threat to any of his plans, especially where Infiltrator was involved. His face drew tight as he realized she was a Praloon, his least favorite species.

Ignoring the unwelcoming greeting, Lurai shoved through the crowd. A dozen cold eyes gave her the once-over as she passed the long bar in the back of the room. Her gloved hand brushed past a hissing group of Jarakan guards, with the olive-green skin common to their kind. All together like that, wearing their full-face gas masks needed to protect them from exposure to the elements on the mining colony Agrossa, they looked weird. But she didn't stop till she got to an empty table.

A blur of motion suddenly appeared out of the gloom. Before she could sit, her gaze froze on the Vexari who held

himself slightly hunched. From where she stood, she could see he had the kind of scared look that invited trouble.

Seeing she was watching him, Val-Kul raised up and bumped his glass so hard on the table that its contents spilled all over the place. Naturally this did not go over well with the players around the table.

In the interim, Lurai was sizing him up and deciding whether to approach. Her focus was solely on the horned Vexari, who was impossible to mistake. The datachip Rogaz had given her, packed with information about Infiltrator, was full of images of his smuggler associates, Val-Kul being one of them.

Her eyes raking him, she walked toward him. A few heads turned. Most turned away.

The Vexari wiped his hands with a rag viciously and studied her before making a sound in his throat. "You got no business here."

Her eyes squinted and her voice rose. "I will get right to the point, Val-Kul. Tell me where I can find Infiltrator."

Picking up her words over the music of the band, which was playing on the stage, wasn't easy. So, he chuckled until he felt a hollow ache in his chest that went hand in hand with resentment. He didn't like being so close to a Praloon. It made him angry.

The Vexari raised his voice to a bellow. "He is, from what I can see, not here."

She saw a smirk lurking around the corners of his lipless mouth, but she didn't flinch. "Bravo to you for pointing that out. You have to come up with something better than that."

“Go away. Find someone else to bother,” he said, the horns on his head twitching in anger. “I am not one to socialize with Praloons.”

“Still bitter about that ancient war? Even though you were not alive when it took place. Get over it, Val-Kul.”

Lurai saw a trace of unease in the Vexari’s face as he growled like some loathsome reptile and turned his head the other way. Though she noticed that he was watching her from the corner of his glossy bulging eye. *Probably waiting for her to leave*, she thought. He seemed keen to get away from her. Her eyes narrowed, and the music seemed to soften, as if the galaxy itself was waiting for her next move.

A sudden smattering of chatter and a violent smashing of glasses behind her made her jerk around. Two Jarakans seated on opposite sides of their table close to the bar bolted to their feet. Just as they came out of their chairs, their hands dropped to the polished black batons, approximately fifty centimeters long, clipped to the belts around the waists of their dark green pants with double white stripes. Their wide-set eyes glowered at each other fiercely beneath their masks.

Much to the bartender’s relief, the Jarakans backed down. For an added bit of reassurance and comfort, for another sixty seconds or so, the bartender looked around wildly, assessing the possibility of additional trouble.

Without another thought, she turned back around. She had been so engrossed that she didn’t notice that Val-Kul was no longer standing next to her. Where had he gone?

Her eyes searched the cantina for him. Behind her, she found him sitting at the bar, exchanging a remark with the bartender, whose bloodshot deep-set eyes gave him a fearsome appearance.

The bartender turned to the decanting system, filled a glass with a reddish-colored ale that steamed and slid the drink across the bar to Val-Kul. Right then, she decided to leave.

Val-Kul took a last long look at her as she strode out the entrance. Silence engulfed the cantina. The tension in the cantina eased in her wake, as if a pressure valve had been released. He turned his attention back to his glass, picked it up and took a whiff of the red mist swirling around it.

Midway down a corridor, Lurai stopped in a corner spot, two tubes above her spouting air. Temptation loomed before her. She could put a tracking device on Val-Kul's vessel. It wasn't part of her original plan. But it was the logical thing to do. What better way to find Infiltrator, than to follow one of his associates?

CHAPTER 7

Val-Kul was going to do just what Infiltrator had thought. He was going to betray him, which was commonplace in this galaxy. For reasons only he could explain, it was a risk he could not avoid taking.

When Val-Kul left the cantina, the sounds of chatter and music — tainted with the smell of alcohol — faded slowly behind him as he moved further down the corridor. At the end was another corridor, which split in two directions. He slowed his pace, noticing the light was softer, warm and diffused.

There were four directions that he could take. Was he lost? He moved all around, looking in different directions. Yes, he was in the wrong area of the station. The station, an oasis of steel, though an infinitesimal speck within an infinite expanse of the galaxy, was easy enough to get

turned around in. Now he thought he shouldn't have had that drink in the cantina, considering he had overwalked himself, he could admit that. There was no time to brood over it now; He had to get to the right place.

Backtracking a little bit, he passed through a familiar door and hurried down one long corridor. It was lit with bright light, casting long shadows that seemed to stretch endlessly across the polished metal floor.

Eventually, he stopped in the intersection of the corridor that sloped toward a narrower ceiling. There, under uneven light, his hand hovered over the communicator, waiting for the right moment to make contact. Another hesitation before he clicked his wrist communicator and initiated an encrypted channel to a fellow insurgent and set up a communications net that would allow him to coordinate with each other.

He opened the channel. "This is Val-Kul —"

Several seconds passed before an indicator light flicked to green on his communicator, which confirmed the receipt of a real-time subspace signal.

"Lars Vyx receiving."

The Vexari patched the reply into the communicator's holographic transceiver. An image of a Hantavant with an angular spiral symbol tattooed across his face, black against his white skin, appeared before him. His yellow eyes were saucer-wide but with vertical, cat-like slits for pupils. He was wearing a brown quilted jacket in the cockpit command seat of a single-seat starfighter snapped into view. While Vyx reached a gloved hand to the scar along his jaw, Val-

Kul made a couple of quick adjustments to the holographic image which made it appear three-dimensional, as if the alien was actually in the corridor with him.

A sinister plot was unfolding. Seemingly allies, the Vexari was in fact playing both sides of the conflict that had been raging in the galaxy for a long time — funneling useless information to Infiltrator, and vice versa. He saw Infiltrator as a threat to his ambitions. And so, he conceived a plan to eliminate him.

Val-Kul hesitated for a fraction of a second. An icy shiver ran down his back. He thought he had heard something like a hissing of opening a door. Taking a deep breath, he scrunched as low as he could and looked around, checking his surroundings. No one was watching that he could see. The possibility of his intoxicated mind playing tricks with him occurred to him.

He was dead wrong about that. Lurai Sul was watching him with narrowed eyes, pondering whether or not he was communicating with Infiltrator. She watched his face carefully, trying to read his expression. Clearly she wanted to believe that Val-Kul was talking with him. At the hexagonal corridor entrance to the intersecting corridor, her position gave her a line of sight to the corridor while keeping her completely hidden in the shadows.

The echo of footsteps approaching from the far side of the darkened station caught her attention. Yet, Val-Kul didn't interrupt his conversation. All she could tell was that he was jittery and seemingly a good deal in a hurry.

Lurai peered down the intersecting corridor towards the stairs first to find nothing there before moving her eyes in the direction of Val-Kul again. She didn't budge just yet.

More footfalls came, making Val-Kul glance around. That was when she started to worry about getting caught spying. She had to go. But before she left, she looked back at Val-Kul one more time for good measure.

The Vexari disconnected the transmission. He looked around one last time before heading toward his vessel. Which was exactly what Lurai was hoping for. If everything went to plan, she would bring Infiltrator into Vitrana Security within one day's time.

In the docking area, she simply stopped, staring at her ship, allowing herself to take it all in. The mechanics were finished with it. But the faint smell of exhaust and burnt metal hung in the air.

It wasn't but a moment later that she was in the cockpit. She had finished the preflight checkup. The station's repair workers appeared to have done a great job. The navigation console, which had been re-painted and buffed, checked out functionally optimally.

Her hand tapped a button on the communications console and typed in a message into Vitrana Security:

Rogaz. This is Lurai Sul. Confirm visual on Val-Kul. I will follow him at a distance, hoping he leads me to Infiltrator.

Then she said to herself, "Tracking systems online."

With the engines purring, she began a slow acceleration into a high orbit, emerging into a gleaming starfield. At a

safe distance, she followed Val-Kul's vessel, locking onto the tracking device she'd attached to it.

CHAPTER 8

On the edge of uncharted space between the Annexed Confederacy and an extensive, dense asteroid belt sat Pralus. This tiny fiery planet was one of the Non-Aligned Sector's only four non-allied terrestrial planets. Long before droids had established Perennis Prime, they had been used as worker droids and mined the lava flows on the planet's surface for precious minerals.

The lava planet was covered by jagged mountain peaks spouting fountains of fire. Molten rock stitched across the porphyritic basalt landscape. Its blackened atmosphere was scarcely anything to look at. Somewhat savage, but livable, its skies were filled with mephitic gases and black, dust clouds of thick smoke and ash from active volcanoes. Additionally, the bubbling rivers of magma radiating a

horrible heat, boiling lava pits and high winds made the air tough to breathe.

A high-pitched screech echoed through the tunnels of a cave. A rapid flapping of wings showed it was a young muklar, a dragon-like species native to the planet. It sped toward the entrance of its lair — a cavern within the dark cliff of the mountains. In a single, fluid motion, it gathered its hind-legs beneath it and burst into the sky, spreading its wings wide, casting its lengthened shadow grotesquely on the surface of the scorched ground. Its thick wings cut through the air, ascending with practiced grace.

In a whisper of wing beats, the creature flew past an antenna array, a powerful communications tower emitting low-intensity subspace signals. Thereafter, the creature slowed and circled the metal structure. It decided to land, its long tail flicking from side to side and swishing through the air.

After the muklar touched down on the land, it looked brightly about, turning its head with quick, precise motions. Seemingly unafraid of the extensive, red lava flows emerging from cracks in the crust, it hobbled forward on its clawed feet past puffs of steam drifting from the cracks.

That was until the sound of a rapidly approaching craft obliterated the silence and made it turn around. The distracted muklar's green reptilian eyes narrowed onto a large Patrol-Force United transport swooping in for a landing. A cloud of dust rose around the ship.

The muklar took to the air with a powerful beat of its wings. With the wind rushing past its face, it soared higher and higher into the dark ash sky.

Patrol-Force United, a separatist faction, was growing stronger in the wake of insurgents' activities. This current galactic conflict was one with which non-violence alone couldn't manage and the reason the faction was increasingly calling the shots.

Autonomous in every way, Patrol-Force United's small outpost called ISS Parthenon had been constructed in a remote area of the moon orbiting Z'arva, the homeworld of the Hantavants. The outpost, covered with weaponry, was manned by the bare minimum number of guards. More often than not, their battleships, armed with complement of quantum torpedoes primed and loaded, have been seen roaming — often for days — on missions throughout the galaxy.

They had arisen from the ashes of the war between the Praloons and the Vexari. Comprised mostly of Praloons and Hantavants, they were the finest warriors of their species. They saw themselves as the defenders of the galaxy, recognized themselves for military defense and prided themselves on being efficient. Their first and last allegiance was to the Industrial Consortium, whose industries were too precious to lose.

An orbiting team of battleships were monitoring Pralus from a great height. At a moment's notice, the Patrol-Force United armada might descend on the planet. Their mission was to function as a law enforcement arm of Vitrana

Security, dispatched to Pralus to protect the Velonians' stash of weapons in the lower levels.

And rightly so! For the fleet had been able to track the secret movements of a droid vessel from Perennis Prime, targeting the well-guarded warehouse zones in the lower levels of Pralus.

Just now, Patrol-Force United soldiers arrived to intercept a squad of tactical droids. With their faces pressed against the clear shield of their helmets, their white armor, with a red-and-white chest plate over a red body glove, gleamed. And their laser rifle weapons shone with machined care.

Crowding the passageway in front of the entrance to a warehouse were a dozen droids bunched together. They were dingbats for trying to enter all at the same time.

"Take out those droids," the lead soldier ordered, his finger tightening on the trigger of his laser rifle.

With all entrances and exits blocked, the small band of droids had no choice but to throw a small bomb at the soldiers. The tiny explosion sent the soldiers scrambling for cover, some dropping to the floor, others trying to find protection along the walls. With this diversion, the droids believed they could take advantage of the maze of passageways and connecting tunnels, which led to the lower levels. But three soldiers from the other end started forward, firing a storm of precision blue-white blasts, each one finding its target and cutting down ten tactical droids that dropped and burst to fragments.

Surviving droids were out there somewhere, lying low.

A muscular, broad-shouldered, tactical droid had taken a path through the maze of long, narrow passageways that ran behind the warehouses. After a while, he paused in a passageway, and looked over its shoulder, photoreceptors glowing red. He heard the clang of footsteps on the metal floor, emitted a mechanical sigh and dropped its weapon. Soon after, he began running as fast as his legs could carry him. Keeping his eyes on the droid, a white-armored soldier, with a yellow-and-white chest plate over a yellow body glove, hurried to the huge laser pistol, with its barrel smoking, on the floor and shoved it away with his boot.

“Cannot be countermanded. Forwards. Forwards,” boomed a voice from the droid’s armor-plated chest.

Meanwhile, the hangar of a warehouse hummed with a rapid series of beeps and whistles. A large battle droid was positioned in one corner, beside stacks of neatly arranged cargo containers.

There were soldiers at all entrances to the warehouse, protecting the cargoes stored there. The main door slid open, belching steam into the room. Incoming was a white-armored soldier, with an orange-and-white chest plate over an orange body glove, with one hand on his laser rifle on full auto. He stepped through the cloud into the hangar with another soldier following close behind. Moving forward with all guns blazing, the soldiers sprayed continuous chains of packeted photon beams.

The stream of laser fire hammered the very large killing machine, doing little damage to its movement sensors. The droid executed a series of evasive maneuvers, darting left

then right, to keep other shots from doing further damage. Then the droid fired back, a flurry of bolts from its rapid-fire, six-barreled cannons built directly into its wrists, zipping past the soldiers.

Simultaneously shifting left and right, dodging laser bolts, the droid tried to recalibrate its sensors. But so many bolts of bright-white light slammed into the droid's circuitry. Sparks flew. There was a high metallic screech as the droid crashed to the floor with a deafening bang. The hangar shook, a vibration rolling through it. A fluid from its frame sprayed in an brown oily mist onto the floor.

"Clean up that wreck and move out," a commanding voice said from behind them.

CHAPTER 9

Gigantic war machines, ferrying troops and looking out for any threats, cruised ominously in the silence of space above Pralus. The dark gray, titanium-reinforced hulls of their sleek, battleships shimmered under the protective shields surrounding them. During their years, Patrol-Force United had built up a considerable fleet. Quite immense, the flagship bristled with extra gun turrets and laser cannons. Numerous smaller battleships hovered and darted around the flagship, various kinds of medium transports and cargo vessels.

A lone, white-armored soldier, with a blue-and-white chest plate over a blue body glove, made his way up the cliff face of a mountain, climbing from foothold-to-foothold. Burning lava mixed with dirt and rocks was streaming down the steep slope.

Came the roar of a fleet of engines. Battleships had appeared in the sky. Standing atop the mountain, the wind picked up around the soldier intently watching the small armada at a distance. Awestruck, he was standing proud, a smile on his face behind the helmet's visor. Just having participated in a shootout that ended up with no casualties on his side, for him, it was all in a day's work.

There was a good feeling all around among the members of Patrol-Force United. The droid insurgency on the planet's surface had been stamped out. At least this time around, it felt like they were making headway in eliminating the droid threat. Most actions by disaffected, widely scattered insurgents involved runs against weapons manufacturers and distributors.

Aboard the flagship of the fleet, white-armored soldiers were at their stations, some with orange-and-white chest plates over orange body gloves, others with blue-and-white chest plates over blue body gloves. They kept their voices low, their conversations amounting to no more than a soft hum over the ship's systems.

The battleship was increasing altitude and a murmur of agreement rippled across the bridge, where fifteen crew members worked their consoles. It was slow moving forward through a patch of unstable space stressed by the gravitational tide of the planet rotating on its axis. Pralus and its moon Jima exerted a strong gravitational pull on one another, thereby generating tidal forces. It was a rough ride leaving the planet's atmosphere, which whirled at the point

of exit and resulted in a dark cloud that trailed away westerly from the ship.

At the central command console, the captain was doing two things at once. First, he was gazing out the viewport. He was watching Pralus disappear into the distance. The second simultaneous thing he was doing was scanning the strings of vertically scrolling data on his floating holographic display.

At the other end of a corridor, a white-armored soldier, with an orange-and-white chest plate over an orange body glove, was engaged in an active discussion with a fellow soldier, who had been on the ship during the battle.

“You should have seen it. It was an enormous battle droid. We had fired many times. The droid kept firing back right up until — bam! The droid went tumbling backwards, down, hitting the ground like a boulder. A series of spasms and twitches followed, and the hangar shuddered. It was awesome,” he said, his arms swinging at his sides to emphasize his point, as if he were formulating conclusions or unraveling problems.

The heads of some of the crew came up from their work, looks of curiosity on their faces. He had said the words too loudly. Wallowing in a mixture of pride and relief, he was too caught up in the heady sense of victory to suppress it. There was plenty to celebrate since his team had prevented weapons from being supplied to any of the dissident factions.

The white-armored soldier, with a blue-and-white chest plate over a blue body glove, he was talking to simply listened, nodded and looked at him curiously.

Exhilarated by it, the soldier continued talking to him in a lower tone. "The hijack attempt had not been random. They had gone straight to the warehouse in the lower level where the weapons cargo would be."

"That is something. I would liked to have been there," his comrade finally said, with a hint of longing in his voice.

Their voices trailed off as a faint hum echoed from further down the corridor. A crew member pointed to the display screen on a console, where a data-relay pattern of geometric shapes created by multicolored lines swirled.

"Inputting the override sequence," he said, fingers flying over the keypad.

Eyes fixed on the screen, he tried to find the strongest signal, keying in more data. There was a bleep, and words started scrolling across the display.

"Nice work," a white-armored soldier said, pacing behind him. "But we need to run a full systems check."

It was dark beyond the battleship's windows. The captain let out his breath with a sigh, turned in his command chair and flipped a switch, and they jumped to hyperspace, shortcutting across the galaxy. Once the battleship hit its maximum sublight speed, it seemed to him that the low rumble of the engines and the beeps of the controls were louder. But, almost as soon as he'd thought that, he realized it was because of the abrupt silence on the bridge.

Through the viewport, the captain watched as the multicolored knots of hyperspace dissolved into starlines. The sublight engines cranked, and the flagship streaked toward the ISS Parthenon outpost.

CHAPTER 10

In the cold darkness of space, far from the buzz of space traffic, the planet Sakros slowly rotated on its axis in the Autonomous District. Two different sized moons were high in the night sky of this trinary star system. One could readily see the outlines and silhouettes of the zoovas, indigenous to the land nestled in the provincial highlands, straddling the Danko Mountains, which delineate the border between the cities of Falfa and Vago.

The click of a rock falling and low growls came from a trio of zoovas that had crawled from a grotto of a rocky cliff face. The two red-skinned reptilian females had ridged backs, spidery legs attached to the chest, three on each side, and long, thick tails. The taller, thinner, four-legged male following behind them had a row of small sharp triangular bones fastened to its back, three clawed fingers and toes, and oily brown reptilian skin. They perched in the

moonlight near a ravine that cut its way down toward the valley of the sparse desert.

These night creatures played their orchestra on the periphery of the two cities. Nonetheless, much like their cohabitants, the Mayorfants, they sought out ambiguity from others for self-perseveration. But the young, petite, female Mayorfant aboard the small, mottled gray starship docked in the berth of Vago's withstanding mile-high, circular steel spaceport, on the other side of the Danko Mountains, wasn't keen on hearing their growling and heavy breathing as their claws pound the ground, drinking from the ravine.

"Noisy creatures," she said, as she rubbed the palm of a black-gloved hand over the metal knob under the oversized viewscreen.

Twisting until its scope had undergone a sixty-degree shift, the picture came into better focus.

That was it, she decided, taking a position in front of the viewscreen. The simple fact of not knowing what lay beyond gnawed at her. Somehow over the past few days she had become obsessed with perfection and slightly edgy about her upcoming journey. With her insistence, she had had her administrative droid checking and rechecking everything.

She had the typical pallid white complexion and geometric shape tattooed on her face of her species. The black shape covered her face like a mask and set off her dark eyes. She wore a tight-fitting black sheer top with a silver with black piping vest over it and black leggings,

under silver-belted black shorts, and it graced her slim figure to perfection.

Lost in thought, she stared at the viewscreen until the door hissed open and the scruff of metallic footfalls behind her pulled her out of her funk.

“The shield systems are fully operational,” the slim, silver-plated bipedal droid with a gleaming, glassy finish informed her.

Her head snapped around, and her shoulder-length, shimmering black veil spun around too. She squinted at its expressionless face with a sigh.

“Plug into the computer interface in here and continue with the systems check,” she directed. “And triple-check the fuel. It may take several more hours of preparing the ship before we can leave.”

The droid rotated its tube-shaped head in her direction. There was a momentary lapse, then it cheeped before an artificial gender-neutral voice rippled through her ears.

“Excellent,” the droid replied.

The droid waddled over to a panel that was embedded in a wall. It automatically popped open the panel to expose a diagnostics port and plugged two prongs into its neck. Its eye-lights flashed yellow as it exchanged data with the ship’s systems.

She turned to the navigation console and checked the coordinates for Z’arva one final time, her eyes taking in the stream of data. While the droid finished, closed the access panel, said nothing to her and left.

Moments later an orange hologram appeared in front of her of a tall, veiled female Mayorfant with a black, geometric shape tattooed on her face from ear to ear. Sharp lines of static were crossing her face every few seconds. The low resolution was to be expected as the ship was still being prepped.

“Will you join us at the table, Neruda? We must have a meal together before you leave.”

Neruda smoothed the back of her veil and sat down in the command chair at the helm console. For a moment she seemed to be reflecting again, perhaps on her ancestors. Exploration was in her blood. Had everyone forgotten that?

Then she said, “Mother, I just finished the final check-don on the bridge. I will get there soon enough.”

“Do I detect a certain reluctance in your voice, dear?”

“No. I ...”

Neruda tried to manage a smile, but the edge of her nervousness prevented it from looking genuine. She could not regret her decision to follow her dream of doing something different and important. The irony was that whenever she returned from the planet of a cousin-race of theirs, she would be going to back to her father and mother. Her mother would throw her arms around her and after an acceptable amount of time had passed, her voyage in space would be long forgotten. Rather than inspire others to follow in her footsteps, her journey through space would become what she’d thought it would be all along, seen by others as an adventure in her youth.

“Everything has to be right. I spent my whole life getting ready for this,” she said, her voice strong as ever.

Her mother shook her head with a sigh, then said, “Your father and I have indulged your wish to retrofit that old starship. To our astonishment it is a superb ship, and your mission will be successful. Still, you must understand. We are different now than who our ancestors once were, and how they lived their lives.”

“I am leaving now,” Neruda said, face pinched in a frown, and the hologram faded.

The hatch hissed aside, and the droid stepped inside.

“Watch over the ship,” she said congenially, hurrying past.

Feebly, the startled droid replied with a flurry of beeps as it peered at her.

The hatchway door slid shut behind her as her tall black boots clanged on the access ramp. Moving in rhythm of her stride, she entered the wide bend of the ringed corridor, passing by massive floor-to-ceiling windows.

CHAPTER 11

Another heavily-armed battleship threw on acceleration in orbit around Pralus. A white-armored soldier, aboard, sauntered down a narrow corridor that led toward the ship's stern. There were no overhead lights. Just a green glow that flooded into the corridor. Shadows in shades of gray and black danced across the steel floor and traced the contours of the soldier's form.

In a subtle manner, he turned to the control pad mounted on the wall, where he pressed a few buttons on the interface console. The blue glow of the viewscreen reflected off his helmet. At the console, he tapped several commands into the keypad. A three-dimensional star map hologram flashed, glittering distinctly. He studied it thoughtfully, his eyes focusing on one planet in particular.

Almost as promptly, his gloved hands flickered over the keypad, and his eyes narrowed in concentration as he watched the numerically encoded message blinking on the viewscreen.

He quickly read the message: "ISS Parthenon. Central Command. Setting a course for the planet Draxis. I will report back accordingly once I reach the rendezvous point."

A soft, chiming rang through the console as the message went out.

Time and time again, Patrol-Force United had been contracted by Vitrana Security. The Head of Vitrana Security had concluded that there was a need to handle some types of weapons shipments in a different fashion, particularly working more covertly. And this had a lot to do with the tactical droid infiltration on the planet Pralus.

Ten minutes later, the soldier on the battleship was inside the enclosed docking bay. His sleek, single-seat, wedge-shaped spacecraft stood on its landing legs in the middle. He went to his small, gray-white hull craft passing an assortment of spaceships parked under the bay's dome.

Strapping himself into the cockpit, he started up the engines. He flicked switches on the console and put in the coordinates of Draxis.

The heavy docking bay doors split open diagonally as he guided the spacecraft out. He shot the craft into a gray-walled access tunnel, dimly lit by blue illumination strips. Maintaining speed, the craft shot into the sheer emptiness of speckled space. Behind him, the doors closed, sealing access to the battleship.

As the spacecraft emerged and accelerated about to head into a wormhole, he'd felt himself swiveling along. Existing in a constant state of flux, this was the second stable wormhole in the galaxy, one end of which sat near Pralus, the other end sat near the planet Draxis. On approach, the wormhole opened displaying a brightly lit swirling mouth-like vortex. Inside, a blur of white flowed across and around the spacecraft.

To his shock, he came out of the subspace tunnel a bit farther out, beside a flurry of small meteorites, which happened to converge at that time and place. The particle shields crackled as a meteorite nicked it. He sailed on through with the hull intact, but he had sustained damage to primary thrusters.

The spacecraft moved through the atmosphere. Most of the lights were blinking or glowing in colors ranging from red to yellow. Alarms screamed. Worry cascaded through him, but he patched into the communications channel to send out a distress call to any ship in this sector and anyone on Draxis. Then he got on the communications link.

"I need help," he said, his voice crackling through the communications panel. "This is an emergency. My systems are failing."

His head throbbed with fear about what could be. Was he going to die? The unknown answer banged against his skull.

The spacecraft lurched and swayed, riding the currents. It spun downward and crash-landed with a bone-jarring thud. Skidding across the flat desert surface, it threw up a

storm of dust, and stone fragments. By some miracle, he managed to free himself from the wreckage.

The sensation of heat and the lack of humidity hit him. Without any prior preparation, he had a long walk ahead of him. And he was dressed in full tactical gear: white-armored suit over an orange body glove, helmet, boots. The wind was strong, driving the dust against his suit. Trekking though the high-desert region proved much more difficult than he had anticipated. Even though his suit had self-contained air supplies and temperature controls allowing survival in a wide range of environments. The worst part was he had no supply of water. The physical exertion that confronted him every step of the way caused him to lose fluid he couldn't replace.

Located in the Autonomous District, Draxis was habitable, though desolate. Heat storms in Draxis' thin atmosphere raged across the planet regularly and helped distribute warmth. Mountains and large craters abound the predominantly stony and gravelly surface.

Minutes seemed to stretch out in aggravating slowness as the sun beat down mercilessly on him. And just as his boots were starting to feel like lead weights dragging him down, he saw them. Three figures, suited up just like him, stood in front of the windows of the huge transport ship. Their protective stance suggested that the ship and its cargo were important. Cooing and chirping sounded from a cave that was carved into the mountain behind them.

“Over here. My ship crashed. I hope you have some water,” he called out. in the distance and the soldiers turned their eyes at him.

CHAPTER 12

A sack-shaped violet nebula composed of gas, dust and complex molecules could be seen in the night sky of the Agrossa mining colony. Situated near the planet's rugged moon, utility barges ferried its trash, unstable waste products and low-value scrap to the interstellar dust cloud, where it would disintegrate.

Thick bands of translucent mother-of-pearl gas clouds surrounded the spectacularly massive ringed planet. Agrossa played a huge role in its sector, as it accounted for a third of the Industrial Consortium's mineral output. Their mining operations processed valuable materials, and metals, supplying factories manufacturing a wide variety of weapons, starships, and more.

Uncannily flat with barren stretches of desert hardpan, the planet's yellow-hued landscape was bleak. Its surface

was marked by buttes and scarred by hip-deep craters and large crisscrossing indentations from the frequent disturbances of excavations. Particles lingered in the atmosphere. A tenuous film in the air blanketed valleys and crevices. And parched winds carried clouds of dust into the horizon. Under these conditions, the workmen had to wear full-face gas masks, that kept the particles and swirling desert sands out of their mouths, noses and eyes.

The labor was carried out by olive-green skinned, tall Jarakans who descended from the original inhabitants, which were primitive, aggressive nomadic desert dwellers. For the most part they generally used little words, preferring to communicate with grunts, snarls and hand gestures. The mine workers' job was to cut through the hard rock to remove chunks of ore in which various minerals were embedded. There were guards positioned around the complex armed with either a laser pistol or a fifty centimeters long black baton clipped to the belts around the waists of their dark green pants with double white stripes.

The mines were a massive, dull gray dome-shaped mining complex encompassing caves and tunnels. Including a refining and processing plant, the complex was nestled in a limestone cleft between the slopes of two hills in the southern hemisphere of the planet. Transports left daily with shipments of metals and ore usually bound for Vitrana or Z'arva, and incoming transports bringing a fresh batch of supplies to keep the mines running efficiently, day and night, arrived every ten days.

While the mine workers hammered and hauled broken rock, the commander left his post in the control room. He pushed his way through a steel door and started down a sterilized gray corridor, where an amber glow suffused the floor. The corridor led him to the maze of black concrete walled tunnels, which were supported by large steel beams, that delved deep into the interior of the planet.

A good while later, the commander walked out of a tunnel onto an underground platform. He stopped beside the railing and waited under the glow of winking red lights.

It wasn't long after that, a little droid, silver and round, with three antennae projecting from its metallic pate, jettisoned out of the tunnel, rotating as it went, slowing to a stop before him.

The droid chirped out a directive. "We must discuss the pickup and our agreement."

Under the secret orders of Vitrana Security, the commander of the mining complex had arranged a cargo transport to travel from Agrossa to the planet Draxis.

The Jarakan commander simply nodded at the droid's statement.

At that point, the droid reported that the transport would be manned by droids under the command of an organic alien pilot. They were to meet a lebur on Draxis. This native indigenous life form would bring them to a cave to pick up the cache of weapons stored there by the Patrol-Force United. The transport was going to ferry the cargo from Draxis to the Wixun homeworld of Attilun in the Inter-Colonial Zone.

The commander nodded a gesture of acknowledgment.

The droid, hovering in the air, tilted slightly forward, blinking its lights in a swirl.

“Relay all of this to the head of Vitrana Security when their transport arrives two days from now. Directly. No encrypted messages. No secure communications channel,” the droid instructed in an unemotional voice.

The commander folded his arms across his chest and nodded, projecting strength and confidence.

“I must return to the transport,” the droid said, and then flew into a tunnel.

The cargo transport was parked on the tiled surface of the massive landing platform. Designed to haul cargo, the transport had two side-opening cargo hatches for the two cargo areas nestled on either side. It was being prepped for takeoff under the gigantic sun hulked on the horizon, which cast long shadows across the sprawling complex. Mixed with the deeper whine of the transport engines was the muffled string of chirps and beeps from the large, two-legged big combat droid standing at the bottom of the ramp. Programmed to blindly obey orders, the large and very intimidating droid had a small head on top of a square, brawny body and a four-barreled blaster cannon built into one forearm. Essentially it was the transport’s security, one of the most tactically advanced-types of machines to be found anywhere.

An old, flat-nosed face former Wixun monk, with patches of pale skin flaking off his head and a diamond-shaped third eye in the center of his forehead, approached

the big combat droid and the transport. He was wearing a thread-bare, sleeveless ornate robe dating from more than a decade ago. An enigmatic look came to his emaciated face as he squinted into the sky and looked around like he wasn't so sure he even wanted to leave. Closing his red eyes to slits, he gave the droid, that was ticking quietly to itself, a glance before walking up the ramp.

A small, legless airborne droid with two arms, lights around its four cavernous eye sockets blinking green, swooped down the ramp. Its torso swiveled and its head rotated down to glare down at the combat droid. One of its arms signaled the large droid to come inside before it soared up the ramp.

“Weapons pickup on the planet Draxis. There can be no mistakes!” came the small droid’s voice from the rear of the transport as the ramp closed behind the combat droid.

CHAPTER 13

Small meteorites were beginning to hit the edge of the wispy atmosphere behind the planet Draxis. Through the cockpit window, Infiltrator watched the pieces of rock disintegrate from the friction, producing a flaming trail. Leaning forward slightly in anticipation, his gloved hand patted the glowing control panel for good luck. He had positioned his spacecraft in low orbit in the upper atmosphere, rendering his craft undetectable by sensors. This proved a useful hiding place while waiting for the weapons transport to work its way through the highest levels of the atmosphere. And Val-Kul would soon be blocking the transport with his vessel.

Where was Val-Kul? he wondered. The possibilities flew through his mind. Countless attempts to contact him

had failed. A combination of anger and suspicion began to churn inside him, but he shelved that line of thinking.

Out of nowhere, a starfighter soared up behind him and took a potshot at his craft. A green laser bolt lanced past his cockpit, making the hull boom and vibrate. Shields flared blue, accompanied by a shrill alarm.

It happened too fast. But he went into a barrel roll, then juked to the right and came around. The small starfighter was one he didn't recognize.

Looking through the small cockpit window, Lars Vyx sat motionless in the command seat. Infiltrator took a hard look at him from the distance, meeting his eyes steadily. His yellow eyes stared with a deep frown of bemusement at Infiltrator, who recognized the hired assassin. Of all the bad luck! One of the worst was Vyx, a mercenary, as vile and self-centered as they came.

Infiltrator's mind raced. Someone hired Vyx to kill him. But who? For more years than he cared to remember, he'd made his share of enemies. Need he remind himself that he was probably still being hunted by one bounty hunter or another. It had gotten so that he couldn't enter a space station or spaceport and not be recognized. So he had begun wearing his dreadlock hair pulled back into a topknot to avoid some of the attention. Frankly, it didn't matter Vyx had opened fire on him. He had to expect that at any moment there would be someone attempting to take a shot at him. Deep in these thoughts of a few short seconds of hesitation cost him the upper hand. Before he could fire, Vyx shot at him again.

The blast hit the astern of the spacecraft, lurching Infiltrator forward, knocking the wind out of him. The stars blurred. As an automatic response, he wove the craft and pulled into a tight spiral.

Vyx streaked after him, still firing. Laser bolts skimmed past Infiltrator's spacecraft, causing no damage.

"You want me dead, is that it?" Infiltrator screamed out into space.

Aft shields gone. Slight damage along the aft hull near the engines. That meant Infiltrator had to get out of there fast and couldn't afford to prolong this battle. Nor could he risk jumping into hyperspace with the wormhole so close at hand. Neither could he spare the time to do the calculations for the jump. He was deeply troubled about being caught between a rock and a hard place, not knowing what to do. But he hadn't given up yet.

Lasers fully charged, Infiltrator's spacecraft rammed its throttle forward and down, trying to line up a shot. Vyx saw that he was coming after him, relentless and poised to fire, and banked his starfighter away, turning into a sequence of swooping rolls.

This time, Infiltrator came up under him, firing at close range. The starfighter bucked under the impact of the assault, the shields failing under the energy load. The fourth shot hit the starfighter in the center of its spherical body, chopping all the way through it. Vyx's spaceship went into a dizzying rollover before it exploded right before Infiltrator's eyes.

The spacecraft lurched to the side. Infiltrator glanced at the cockpit indicators. Diagnostics boxes along the sides were flashing red. The craft needed repairs.

“The timing could not be any worse,” he said, in a whisper.

The reality of the situation hit him hard. He went over the logistics in his mind, knowing he had to abort the mission. There was no time left to waste. His only resort was to call up a replacement. Using the communications console, he swiftly entered a series of specific and intricate codes for the commander of Perennis Prime.

The wait seemed like an eternity but eventually it came. Commander Golo-DEX sent a message in response, confirming they could relay a highly encrypted message to the ally who had a vessel in the sector to participate in a smuggling operation.

With that out of the way, he leaned back in the seat to organize his thoughts momentarily. He replayed the attack in his mind over and over, fast-forwarding, freezing action, and rewinding. From out of this came a revelation that he quickly embraced. Val-Kul was the only one who knew where he would be. The Vexari, could have given away the coordinates of his whereabouts to any of his nefarious clients. The grinding inside him grew louder in his ears. What more proof did he need?

“Capable of just about anything, he is,” he said, staring at the cold stars. “I am going to kill him.”

His plans foiled, he punched in commands on the master console, started up the spacecraft's impulse engine, and nudged his craft toward the wormhole.

CHAPTER 14

On the opposite side of Draxis, a lebur popped out of a cave entrance in the cliffside of a mountain, with a variety of sage brush clustered in sections around its base. This grayish pale skin, hairless troll-like creature was native to the planet. A brown, ragged onesie graced his frame. Like all of his kind, he stood at an easy six feet and had a large head, bulked-up shoulders and no neck in between.

He trudged by the gray curve of a battle cruiser's hull embedded in the dense shrubbery of the hillside. Its circular primary hull was scarred by age and damage, its two nacelles lancing out in back. The cruiser hulked in the background, appearing like something out of history.

The planet was in part a vast junkyard of useless and damaged spaceships, seemingly the dumping ground for the entire sector. So, it was common to see an old spaceship

here and there. Most were in various stages of burial by sand storms.

Two miles later, the lebur pounded away across the desert flatland. There was a sleeping chilkan positioned near a mountain range. Reddish-brown in color, the eight-foot-tall creature was part arachnid, part crustacean with a scaled back and a fat, pointy tail.

The lebur stopped and looked at the chilkan. He didn't like what he saw. Out of anger, he kicked a rock unsteadily at the creature. He watched the rock fall directly in front of it. The impact on the ground and splash of sand on its body startled it awake.

The chilkan came up on its legs and roared, displaying its dark purple tongue and reptilian jaws lined with razor-sharp teeth that looked like curved blades. It was going after the lebur, who growled and had a what's-it-to-you expression on his face.

They charged at each other, and met head-to-head, like a couple of rams. One of the chilkan's powerful arms ending in a three clawed hand shot upward, outward, then down again, missing the lebur who jerked away instinctively.

The chilkan threw its head back, jaw stretched wide, and roared, rising in volume and echoing all around them. The lebur punched the creature in the head, knocking him off-balance; he hit the chilkan in the back again and again. The chilkan gurgled. The lebur growled.

In the end, the lebur had gotten the better of the creature. With an earsplitting screech, the chilkan collapsed to the

ground. That last hit by the lebur was hard enough to render the creature unconscious.

The lebur turned and hurried off. He had to stay on course to meet the incoming transport as planned. The chilkan slowly opened its reptilian eye, peering at him as he walked further through the desert. Sometime during the fight, the cargo transport had ended its trip through hyperspace, decelerating and dropping into real space near Draxis.

Making it just in time, the lebur stood in a patch of desert where the cargo transport slowly traveled through the air, hovering directly above him. He waved his hand in the air as the transport descended to land nearby.

The Wixun at the helm of the transport punched a few buttons. Between the overhead lighting and the glow of the viewscreen facing the circular-shaped helm station, his ornate robe was glistening with a multicolor effect.

“Prepare for landing,” the pilot announced, firmly over the communicator, red eyes twinkling.

The ship touched down, stopping in a swirl of dust and wind just in front of the lebur. As it settled on its landing struts, the hatch slid open, the boarding ramp lowered.

One of the cargo area doors slid up, revealing the large, two-legged big combat droid in standby mode, partially powered down, at the far wall of the bare room. The silver and round droid floated to one side of it, spun, its antennae quivering.

“Power up droid, we have landed,” said the little droid, hovering in front of it.

The hulking droid, with a copper plated torso and head, and a metallic arms and legs, trilled a long series of beeps. Soft yellow lights glowed from within its narrow optical slits as it powered up. It came out first. Protecting the crew and cargo was paramount.

The little round droid stayed behind in the corridor near the outer door of the starboard airlock. At the helm, the Wixsun pilot ran a hasty systems check, then plotted and locked in the coordinates of Attilun. And the legless, two-armed airborne droid flew down the ramp to meet the lebur.

The lebur pointed to a nearby cave, telling the airborne droid that was where the cache of weapons in three large metal crates were waiting.

“Get those crates out of the cave and load them now,” the airborne droid told the combat droid, its four cavernous eye sockets flashing white in unison with its words.

The big droid was a bulky automation with heavy armor and incredible strength. It began carrying the first crate toward the two side-opening cargo hatches of the transport. While the airborne droid took off flying toward the transport, where it hovered beside a cargo door.

A screech came from the hillside, where a two-legged creature, mostly gray and white, but with brown and red spots here and there, and eyes so red they almost seemed to glow, was approaching at a fast pace. A subra, native to Draxis. It scowled and roared something at the lebur, who had no idea what it was saying, but he got the impression it was angry.

The subra let out a series of screeches and hisses in the lebur's direction that caused him to growl back. With a surge of energy, the tall creature took an attack position, swiveled its torso, and swung one of its stilt-like arms like a club. The lebur saw it coming, leaned aside and held both arms up, like, "What is your problem with me?"

At this particular time, the combat droid emerged from the cave carrying the last crate, its head tilted, its infrared targeting system locked onto the subra's heat signature. As an immediate response, it set the large crate on the ground. The droid whistled a lengthy warning to no effect, as the creature remained primed to make another strike at the lebur.

With a metallic screech, the supersized droid raised its forearm-mounted four-barreled blaster cannon and fired several bursts. The subra screeched and fell backward with a thump. The creature expelled its last breath, a deep rattle that echoed over the desert plain.

The combat droid made its way over to the crumpled body, kicked it, and said in a mechanical voice. "The creature has been neutralized."

The droid pounced off to load the crate in the cargo area of the transport, its heavy footsteps sending tremors through the desert floor.

A hard wind tore through the air. The lebur looked up at the darkening sky, billowing clouds colliding against clouds and pulsating with energy. As the heat storm was coming in, the air hummed with tension and the atmosphere

became charged with a foreboding energy. The lebur ducked into the cave for cover.

The combat droid was already heading up the ramp, whirring and clicking. The inner cargo doors began closing automatically. Then the transport sealed their outer doors shut.

CHAPTER 15

The deep hum of Perennis Prime android command station chugged along surrounded by the Garynx Nebula. Its purple-and-pink clouds of ionized gases were illuminated by a haze of dust reflected off supergiant stars.

Flickering lights cast disorienting shadows across the interior metal walls of the station. Some walls were lined by observation windows. The command center, the heartbeat of Perennis Prime, in the primary hull of the main station was a hive of activity. A motley crew of white armor-plated droids hurried back and forth as other droids were seated around circular consoles with displays of detailed maps and schematics.

Commander Golo-DEX had intercepted the encrypted subspace message from Infiltrator. His second in command, Syn Dat, appeared in front of him within seconds of

walking into the command center. He explained the situation to Syn Dat, who was given orders to send a message to their smuggler allies. Because the commander wanted their closest ship there immediately.

Moments after, the commander turned and headed for the control room. He walked up a short flight of steps to the platform level, across the black steel floor and up to the thick door. Two battle droids stood ramrod straight at either side, their weapons drawn. Golo-DEX pushed a button on the security keypad on the wall next to the door, which slid open. It then closed with a quiet whoosh and click. He went to stand by the circular observation window that dominated the south side of the room. By the look of him, he was not in the best of moods. With an intense look on his face, he was sulking. He couldn't be more disappointed in losing a vessel of super battle droids who had failed their mission to steal weapons from the warehouse on Pralus. Hadn't seen that coming. That was, after all, the only explanation for why he was staring out at the nebula.

In the command center, Syn Dat pushed a series of buttons on the computer console. He swiftly deduced the location of the vessel of one of their allies in striking range of Draxis. Long-range scans had confirmed a spaceship's configuration: Arachtor warship, a command unit on a covert assignment near the border of the Autonomous District.

Wasting no time, Syn Dat sent a heavily encrypted message to the warship, giving them the details of the operation and requesting immediate assistance.

Within moments, the opening series of coded numbers scrolled across the screen telling him this was an Arachtors response. They had accepted the mission, and their warship was on their way to the planet Draxis.

The Arachtors occupied the large, cold, misshapen planet Garanay, located in the Annexed Confederacy. Its oblate spheroid shape was due to the bulge at its equator caused by its rotational speed of one cycle fourteen hours. Having to travel back and forth through the chaotic atmospheric storms of their planet, the Arachtors built their warships to withstand incredible punishment. Many of their cities had narrow winding cobblestoned paths between six- or seven-tiered hive megastructures, soaring spires that served as dwelling units.

The Arachtors were an arachnid species made up of an aggregate of five clans, (Beto, Ferro, Ladoo, Pintu, and Ugro), ruled by patriarchs called Sires and governed by a set of rules known as the Codes of Garanay. A different-colored stripe down the middle of their flat, bulbous foreheads represented which clan they represented. Their formidable military strength and a clan system based on heredity made them a source of intrigue, adversely shaping the galaxy's future with their support of insurgency movements.

The red-painted horizontal steel beam corridors of the Arachtors' fully armed warship, with short-range hyperspace capability, were wide with a number of crew members going back and forth. Frequent floor-to-ceiling

windows presented a panoramic view of the endless blackness of space that bordered the Autonomous District.

Under low-level lighting, the stone-faced, Captain Zelnid was positioned in the middle of the bridge and faced a viewscreen located on the opposite wall. The captain's responsibility was to command the warship, supported by a first and a second officer. A number of the crew manned consoles controlling and monitoring the bridge, weapons system, communications, engineering and structural integrity. The entire contingent had purple-black hued firm, but malleable exoskeletons and three long, spindly limbs.

About to enter hyperspace, the captain could feel a low vibration coursing through the steel floor. Leaning back on his one hind leg, he squinted his faceted side-mounted eyes and punched buttons on the adjacent console with his two forelimbs.

"Launch," said the captain.

He gave a nod and his first officer at a nearby touch-sensitive console tapped a sequence of commands, activating the engines, his spindly hind leg retracting as the warship zapped into hyperspace.

The bridge crew reared up on their hind leg and let out a series of chattering noises. With a sharp hiss, the captain pivoted swiftly toward them, made a gurgling sound, then pivoted back, focusing on the viewscreen. He stared at the blue-and-white shimmers of energy flowing past the ship.

Considering the short distance, the display blinked green signaling that the warship was approaching the hyper tunnel's exit. The ship shuddered with force as it exited

hyperspace so close to the planet that they would be able to hide before being spotted.

“Once they see our four photon torpedo ports aimed at the hull of their transport, they will surrender their cargo,” the second officer hissed proudly.

“There will be no firing,” the captain hissed back to him, exercising his authority. “If the transport was attacked, the damage could ignite the cargo. Have a boarding party on standby.”

“Affirmative, Captain,” the first officer responded.

CHAPTER 16

The engine on Infiltrator's spacecraft almost gave out as soon as he had emerged from the wormhole. The cockpits interior lighting shifted to an orange glow, followed by a faint high-pitched hum beginning to emanate from the consoles' control surfaces. The smooth, chrome-clad, tear-dropped craft whirled through the nebula around him. The viewscreen was filled with a static display of flashing streaks of light. The static discharge and ionization effects of the nebula made sensor resolution less than optimal.

In the heart of the Garynx Nebula, his craft rode the funnel of swirling light toward the Perennis Prime android command station. Angling the spacecraft sideways, he leaned closer to look out the cockpit window. Purple-and-

pink clouds of gases and shimmering dust particles whipped past him.

“This is spectacular,” he murmured to himself.

Infiltrator caught his breath as an electrical discharge of small threads of sizzling white electricity were leaping and spraying sparks across the surface of a panel. Cockpit indicators began to swing wildly at nearly the same time a low hum began. He flipped several switches to no avail.

He made a grumbling sound of dissatisfaction. It was imperative that he hurry the craft along.

The resonating hum rose to a swift crescendo the moment he guided the craft toward the upper section of the station. He docked the craft to one of the three honeycomb-pattern carved docking arms. The engine shut down with so little vibration and a strong smell hit him. There was a less than subtle undertone of burning circuitry. Something was malfunctioning. With a frustrated growl, he reached up, unstrapped his harness, and sat there in silence.

The air lock spun open, and he came out into a textured, white-walled corridor with sputtering glow rods overhead and a gray grip surface below. The tubelike metal corridor was empty except for a pair of technician droids, heading toward the beat-up jalopy of a starfighter parked in front of him.

He turned back to his spacecraft. “There is always some ship worse off than you. You have nothing to fear. The droids will have you fixed up in no time.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when he heard metallic footsteps behind him, and a droid’s voice sliced

through the air, its servomotors whirring in what almost sounded like eager anticipation. “You have disappointed me this time, Infiltrator! I expected better of you.”

Infiltrator turned to see Syn Dat, second in command of Perennis Prime, instantly recognizable from his stark white armor.

He pulled a face and gestured in the direction where his spacecraft was docked. “Stop your griping. Perhaps you have not noticed, but I was attacked by that notorious assassin Lars Vyx. My spacecraft suffered a malfunction. I am lucky to have survived the ordeal. Can not say the same for Vyx. What more can I say?”

Syn Dat made a deprecating gesture with one hand and viewed him with his optical sensors glowing. “Another one of your long-winded rationalizations. Heard it plenty of times.”

The conversation with Syn Dat disturbed him. He hadn’t realized Syn Dat disliked him so much. Staring at each other, the air between them felt thick with suspicion. The tantalizing feeling of recognition, he had seen the droids at Perennis Prime behave this way before. They were not happy. That is why he suspected that the fractures in the droids at the station were widening. Many had their own ideas of how things ought to be.

“Will you feel better if I apologize?” Infiltrator asked with condescending politeness. “In respect to our long-standing history of working together, I am trying to appeal to your better nature, by reminding you of that.”

The steadfast second in command cocked his head and scoffed. “Cynical smuggler! For the sake of the commander if for nothing else, I will put this unfortunate misstep behind us. I could not have selected a better replacement than the Arachtors for the heist. Thanks to them, the mission is still in play.”

“You are thinking with the right attitude,” he said joyfully, almost attempting to hug Syn Dat, and his look of delight confused him. “I, too, am certain that the Arachtors will go forward to victory. Now that we got that cleared up, mind if I relax here for a while the droids repair my craft?”

Syn Dat gave him a skeptical look. “The station is a big place.”

“There is just one more thing.”

“What is it now?” Syn Dat echoed, his metal face looking at him blankly.

Infiltrator leaned in closer to him and spoke in a mock-confidential whisper as if no one else should hear. “Will you send the droids to repair to my craft?”

Then, to Infiltrator’s relief, Syn Dat’s gaze flicked quickly around, until he signaled a technician droid and ordered it to repair the craft. The pretense of the outraged second in command faded from his face. But there was no further conversation. Syn Dat tilted his head in an attitude of sudden vigilance, turned and headed down the twisting corridor.

“The sooner he leaves here, the better,” Syn Dat said out of earshot as he turned the corner.

Focus, he told himself. There was more to this situation than worrying about Syn Dat not particularly liking him.

“The sooner I leave here the better,” he said with an exhausted sigh.

CHAPTER 17

In the same sector as Draxis, the twin moons synchronized with their orbit around Sakros and dipped low on the horizon. The sky showed the first faint signs of amber, giving the graceful architectural curves of Vago's mile-high spaceport an air of exotic mystery. Other than Neruda's starship, it was deserted except for a small number of old vessels parked in a neat row, relics of their original spacefaring civilization. There was a security system, but no personnel to check anybody in or out and no one to care. Quite obviously, there was no excitement of interstellar exploration among the Mayorfants today.

The time seemed to be just right for Neruda, whose small starship was still in the circular steel spaceport. Six hours earlier, a swirling ion storm had erupted over the

planet, and this affected the atmosphere on a global basis. The natural space phenomenon, characterized by intense bombardment of electrically charged particles called ions, was feared by space travelers as a hazard for spacecrafts, potentially causing damage or navigation problems.

The petite, female Mayorfant stepped through the hatch to the helm, her eyes filled with a fiery determination. She took a long slow look around the glowing displays, shadows falling across her eyes. It was ready for take-off. Nobody knew her ship better than she did — from the unscratched, bright floor plates to the communications panel. It wasn't made for speed and stealth, but long ago the Mayorfants had constructed this ship and many other well-crafted vessels known for toughness that travelled the galaxy. However old as it was, she was certain the starship would function properly. Plus, it had to, considering all the refits it had been through.

The door hissed open behind her. It sounded like a warning bell in the all-pervading quiet of the room. The bipedal, silver-plated administrative droid, who was to be her companion for the journey, came to a stop in front of her.

"My preflight checkup is complete, Captain Neruda," the droid said, pointedly, unable to keep the sharpness from her tone. "All systems are functioning optimally."

For an inexplicable reason, this model droid thought itself superior and garnished it a reputation for haughtiness. But it didn't have an attitude problem. It had something to do with its programming. The droid didn't just have built-

in behavioral inhibitors, allowing communication and interaction with organic beings. Its built-in diagnostic routines included the ability to sustain and repair itself.

Neruda stood lost in thought, her gaze so vacant, not sure she even understood what was being said to her. She couldn't get together a crew in time. Perhaps she should have felt antsy, but instead, she simply felt very alone. Her drifting thoughts only lasted a moment before she realized that the droid had just said something.

"I have dreamed about this my entire life," she said and shrugged, suddenly feeling melancholy. "I never imagined I would be taking this voyage alone."

"I am fully capable of a whole multitude of functions," the droid said promptly and emitted a strange, metallic sigh.

The droid stared at her for about fifteen seconds without moving, looking somehow grieve-stricken and showing by its posture how deeply its ego had been bruised.

Whereas, Neruda was unaccustomed to dealing with this kind of droid but was projecting an attitude of patience.

She speedily demurred with a smile. "I am grateful to have you aboard as my assistant. You are the most efficient droid. What I meant before was, I was hoping to find another Mayorfant like me that had a burning interest in space travel."

"Do not tell me you want to postpone the mission," the droid said in a brisk, no-nonsense tone, pondering. "Is that what you are trying to tell me?"

The droid's eye-lights flashed orange, and it fell into an unexpected silence. She ignored its snootiness but looked

at it quizzically. There were bigger things to worry about than a mere question of whether the droid understood her need for an organic crew, or lack thereof. She was way past that and all about captaining this starship. Very proudly, she slipped into the command chair at the helm console.

“No, I am not postponing the mission,” Neruda said with her chin tilted, projecting authority. “I am eager to get on with it.”

With that intent firmly stated, the droid paused, as if processing the comment. “I will go to the engine room. Prepare to lift off.”

The engine room contained all the control systems and power for the entire starship. That was where the droid would be stationed until the ship was far from the planet, a bit farther out in the sector.

Random beeps and whirs from the droid as it left. Straightening her shoulders, Neruda gave it a quick, tight smile and waved a gloved hand in the air as the door closed behind it. She sighed and settled back into her chair.

The mere thought of the time drawing close put a smile on her face. She couldn’t wait to fly through the darkness of space. There were no jitters about what to expect.

A signal chimed from the communications console in front of her seat. An orange hologram rapidly magnified to fill the space above the console on the bridge. She looked at the three-dimensional image of a veiled female Mayorfant and smiled under that warm gaze.

“Let me guess,” Neruda said. “You want to wish me luck in my mission for the umpteenth time.”

Her mother fixed her with a steady gaze, an emotional appeal of some sort. “What kind of mother would I be if I didn’t wish you a last-minute safe passage?”

“You have nothing to worry about,” Neruda, said somewhat distracted. “I will be back in no time with a great story to tell.”

Dealing with her mother made things a little nerve-racking, despite that her intentions were genuine. She was behind her all the way, cheering her daughter on her journey to the stars.

But soon sharp lines of static were crossing her mother’s face before her, signaling the conversation needed to be cut short and leaving her to sit there in silence. She turned toward the viewscreen as the last lines of the hologram faded away.

CHAPTER 18

Taking its first step in takeoff, the intergalactic starship lifted to hover a couple of meters above the spaceport's northern platform. Slightly lit by the instrument panel lights, Neruda sat at the helm console. She worked the controls with a confident hand. Her liquid black eyes were locked onto the viewscreen, looking out over the spaceport. The sleek starship spun around and began to rise in the air. It took only moments to guide it into the upper layers of the planet's atmosphere.

Nervous for a short duration, she had been holding her breath during that last part of reaching the atmosphere. Her hands had been shaking too. Trying to make it seem normal, she let her breath out and sat still a minute.

There was the slightest bump as the ship passed from the atmosphere into the cold vacuum of space. In awe, she

watched the stars lie static on the viewscreen ahead of her. She wasn't thinking about the bipedal administrative droid anymore. At this stage, she had every faith in its ability to operate the starship faultlessly. Though she expected the droid would be clambering out of engine room and into the corridor leading here at any minute. What lay ahead was so new and adventurous that it was hard to think about anything else. The void of space seemed to beckon to her. It took her an extra minute or so to realize that she'd become so mesmerized by the imagery.

Swiveling herself around, she curled over the easy-to-use navigation console, throwing back her veil slightly. She reviewed the course that would take the ship on autopilot mode to Draxis. After all, she was just going straight. From there, the small starship would enter hyperspace to the Industrial Consortium.

It would be a while before she had anything else to do. The slew of emotions coursing through her possessed an air of familiarity, from her excitement and determination to command a starship into the unknown to her earlier feelings of loneliness. And that nobody on her planet felt the way she did.

What a complex Mayorfant she was, she mused. She had never realized that about herself, until now.

The faint hum of the starship's engines within the walls soothed her mind, that was beginning to wander. Then, just for a fraction of time, she was a child again.

At half a decade old, on more than one occasion, she had been lying on her back in the canopy bed, with

swooping swags of see-through fabric draped across the top, in her sleeping quarters. When her parents and sister were sleeping at night she fantasized about flying to space. All the lights were off. Her small hands grasped the glowstick. Stretching beyond imagination, she saw the dark expanse of space. She pointed the glowstick upward at the fabric, its beam of light tracing a flight path around planets, and other things in outer space, heading somewhere that wasn't here.

Even now she could smell the scent of blossoming flowers outside the open window. Silvery light from the two moons and stars filtered through an opening in the fabric ceiling. She had cast a glance there. Each moon a silent sentinel, were like guardians of her, watching over her as she slept.

“When I grow up, I am going to be a famous explorer. I am going to command my own starship, just like my ancestors. This is my only dream, my only happiness,” a young Neruda said with a smile.

Then, she had giggled until she fell asleep.

It just so happened that the memory had resurfaced at the most appropriate time. She was captaining a ship. But it brought with it a glimmer of emotion, showing in her eyes. A dizzying wave of burning pride swirled through her body.

Neruda heard a door hiss open, and the moment of nostalgia quickly passed. And she felt a brief sense of dislocation as she returned to the present, watching with squinted eyes as the bipedal droid approached. Its mechanical joints whirled with each step it took.

“Captain Neruda, you seem distracted,” its synthetic voice chimed as it stopped beside her.

She had to hand it to this droid. It didn’t miss a step.

After a blink and a quick sideways glance at it, she slowly started to come out of her trance. “I was just thinking.”

The droid let out an electronic sigh.

“Thinking! I beg your pardon?” muttered the droid in a half-puzzled tone of voice, earning it a sharp look from her.

Unconsciously smoothing her veil, she said nothing to that. After a moment’s awkward silence, the droid continued.

“Autopilot is functioning at peak efficiency,” the droid reported, its voice more formal than usual. “I will keep a watch on the control display.”

“Noted,” she said and rose to her feet. “My body craves nourishment. I am retreating to the galley.”

“Affirmative,” it replied as she left the room.

All the way there, her boots click-clacked against the metal floor, echoing through the corridor. The space inside was fairly narrow, so she stretched out her arms to either side so she could touch the walls. She loved the feel of her ship. As far as she was concerned, she had not anticipated any problems at this stage of her mission.

Ahead was a door marked “Galley” in engraved letters. She pushed a button on a console and a door retracted, revealing a small room. Inside, she opened a glass door which opened into a small vestibule. Reaching inside, she picked up a straw-like tube with green liquid inside. She

eased her body onto a stool. She drew the tube up to her lips, lifted her head, tipped it into her mouth and took several swigs.

CHAPTER 19

The heat storm in the atmosphere of the planet Draxis was lessening with intensity and just about out of momentum. In space, the Arachtors' warship chugged in orbit. For far too long, they had remained in hover mode, exactly in place over the planet well beyond the range of sight. All they knew was that they were waiting longer than they had originally expected. The command unit knew nothing about the storm because they hadn't thought to check the weather. And the planet wasn't visible to them from their current distance.

"Are those droids playing us?" the captain said to himself, wondering if there was a weapons transport on the planet.

Captain Zelnid's mind was rolling. His side-mounted eyes went cold and hard as he glared at the viewscreen on

the opposite wall. The red-colored stripe down the middle of his flat, bulbous forehead was twitching.

“Was that a meteorite?” questioned a subordinate officer, positioned behind the captain.

“Where?” Zelnid asked, leaning his body forward for a better view. “I see nothing of the sort!”

“Neither do I see anything anymore,” the subordinate officer added. “Perhaps there is a glitch in the viewscreen, or some sort of technical problem.”

“There is no glitch,” the captain said with a fierce squint, a squint that gave him a ferocious expression.

Deep silence fell among them. And the Zelnid was back to brooding about the cargo transport’s no-show.

Where was the transport? So far sensors hadn’t detected any ship in the area. And that, in these conflicting times, was too much for the captain to believe.

No, it made no sense for the droids to lie to them. He had to fuse those impulses into clear thoughts. With an iron will, he cleared his mind of questions. He had to consider the nature of the transport. Other insurgents also wanted to get their hands on prototypes. It might have been that the pilot of the transport was being overly cautious. Like it or not, they simply had to hold their position.

He turned to his first officer, who was doing his duty with cold efficiency, and called out, “Report!”

“There are no ships in sight,” the officer said in a voice like wind chimes. “No ship of any type anywhere in our vicinity. No sign of any ship on the radar.”

“This has been the longest wait of my life,” the captain said in a voice like rocks cracking.

The captain cast a wary look back at the pitch black viewscreen, squinting, as if he wanted to sock it one. Nothing but the sea of endless empty, black space dotted with shimmering stars. Eyes locked intensely with disbelief and a desire to remain calm.

One of the bridge officers left his console, scuttled over to a panel on the wall, and manipulated a control interface. That was when a starship coming from the other side of the planet going full speed had slid onto their viewscreen. But it wasn't the cargo transport. It was the Mayorfant starship.

The bridge became quiet as the captain strained to make out some detail of the ship in the inky blackness of space. He realized the ship was an older model.

Clever disguise, Zelnid thought, a modified starship. He wanted to believe it was the ship all right, apparently out of frustration more than anything else. It made logical sense, too, that they'd want to camouflage their transport. Since their transport was carrying prototype weapons.

The shining-eyed captain turned to his helmsman. “Follow that transport.”

They gave chase. Yet, their massive bulk of a warship loaded with a bunch of torpedoes pointed at the starship had no impact. Neruda's deep-space ship didn't stop moving and continued drifting in space.

“Who is at the helm of that ship?” the captain asked, in a fierce tone.

Gravitating toward rule with authority, the captain leaned forward conspiratorially and made a quick rousing speech. The Arachtor contingent were going to attempt a boarding assault. And once they had the ship subdued, the cargo would be theirs for the taking.

The first officer had to agree.

At the weapons console, the second officer hunched over the readout from his scan, which painted his face with flickering blue light and shadows. He lifted his eyes with an expression of perplexity and an undercurrent of indignation, turning round to the captain as if seeking an explanation. The captain glared at him without turning his head, but with only his side-mounted eye shifted to the side.

There was a tense silence, just the hum of the machines. Captain Zelnid toggled a switch on his console, and turned a circle, stiff.

There was a sudden burst of skittering noises among the bridge crew. An excitement overcame the second officer, who raised a laser rifle and nodded to Zelnid. Adrenaline seized the captain, who nodded his flat, bulbous head in turn and skittered forward, his three long, spindly legs rising and falling.

With a harsh, gurgling retch the captain said, "Disable the shields and get within five meters of that transport!"

Per the captain's instructions, and five miles short of the jump point, the Mayorfant starship's shields were knocked out by the high-density interferometric pulse sent by their warship. The sudden throttling down of Neruda's ship's engines had shook it to the core.

With sheer satisfaction, Zelnid saw the Mayorfant starship on the viewscreen, floating in the depths of space. The Arachtors had the upper hand. The warship stopped to gaze out at the ship, waiting to make their next move.

CHAPTER 20

On the bridge of Neruda's starship, a buzzer sounded, and a light flashed onto the display, warning the droid that the preprogrammed course had been interrupted. It reached out with its metal fingers to switch off the autopilot.

"Switching to manual control," the droid announced to no one in particular.

The jolt of the stopping starship had thrown Neruda off-balance and almost sent her crashing into the wall of the galley. Rather quickly, she had gained her breath back and tossed away her nutrient-rich stick. It was time to return to the bridge.

A succession of three sonorous beeps emanated from the droid that needed to perform urgent maintenance checks on the starship's systems. As it headed for the door, the

viewscreen behind it lit up. The image that appeared on the screen was of the sleek Arachtor warship with a black spidery symbol etched into the side of its metallic silver and red striped massive hull. The ship was practically on top of them.

The well-armed warship did not hesitate. As soon as authorization was given by the Captain Zelnid, the Arachtor boarding posse drilled. It didn't take them long to pry open the hatch, which opened with a pop and a soft hiss.

"Disable their engines," the second officer said crisply and began to bring his blaster rifle up. "Secure the transport. Lock down all cargo holds."

All of them groaned. And in the next instant, they began to dart in.

The sudden blare of a warning siren and the flashing of red lights all around the droid disrupted its momentum.

"Intruders detected," the droid squeaked in alarm, walking down a corridor.

Its polished body shell glinted in the soft light. As the droid computed its options, it had yet to notice that an Arachtor was fast approaching from behind. The boarding party possessed the element of surprise.

Whack! Swinging with a purpose, the Arachtor hit the droid, delivering a savage blow to the nape of its neck. Its legs went out from under it, and the droid clunked to the metal floor in two pieces.

Elsewhere on the ship, Neruda felt the ambient tension creep up her neck and across the top of her head. She was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of it: Intruders.

Behind her, at the other end of the corridor, the door to the bridge. In panic mode, she craned over her shoulder, her head clicking side-to-side, but saw nothing. She spun, ready to rush inside.

Instead ... she heard voices. Unfortunately for her, three Arachtors entered the adjacent corridor floating side by side. She stepped backward and cast an inquisitive eye at them. Her facial ridge tensed with concern. Panic clear in her features, she wasn't so eager to confront them. *Who were they and what did they want*, she thought, caught up in the unreality of the moment.

"I don't recognize her species," growled one of the Arachtors. "We must search for others like her."

Neruda could not hide, but she crouched low and reached for her weightless, handheld laser weapon tucked in a sheath attached to her belt.

Her automatic reflexes kicked into gear. She came up firing, her finger moving from button to button on the rectangular device, one shot, two, three. But it made no difference; as each pulse of diamond light roared toward them, they managed to dodge to avoid being struck.

A long moment of silence followed during which the three Arachtors stared at her with unrestrained rage.

The situation was rapidly taking on shape for her. Mulling it over, she tried to imagine some way out of this. Anything to preclude destroying the starship. But no matter how many ways she considered it, she arrived at the same conclusion: the starship was going to have to be put in autodestruct mode and she was going to have to leave. With

a crew of only two, she had no need to use the shipwide intercom to make an announcement. Somehow, that seemed like a very logical decision at the moment.

For one last time she turned an anxious look towards the door to the bridge. Then she spun around and double-timed it.

“Where is that SpaceWoman going?” asked one of the Arachtors in the corridor.

By now, the second officer had searched the starship, and found no sign of weapon crates. He floated into the corridor to get a fuller status report from his comrades. Lifting his small, mobile communicator device, he felt the inclination to dispatch a message to the captain. All the while, Neruda had already jumped into an escape-pod and launched into space.

“Self-destruct sequence initiated,” came the Mayorfant starship’s computerized voice.

As her starship exploded in a burst of light, Neruda watched sadly from the porthole in the pod in a moment of quiet weightlessness. Its thruster igniting a steady droning, the escape-pod was gathering speed as it sailed through the darkness of space.

Frustrated beyond belief, the Arachtor captain relayed an audio message to Perennis Prime that they boarded a ship belonging to a ‘SpaceWoman.’ There was no weapons transport in the vicinity. Speaking in his barbaric manner, Zelnid declared the droids were incompetent, shouting insults into the communication systems, when, in mid-sentence the warship exploded. A cascade of sparks from

Neruda's starship had set the Arachtor warship ablaze, engulfing it in orange-white fire. Nothing at all left.

In an ironic twist, the Wixun piloted transport had begun its journey. At a moderate pace, the cargo transport lifted off the desert surface of Draxis in a swirl of sand. The lebur covered his eyes with one hand and blithely waved goodbye with his other hand.

The transport took to the sky, breaking the planet's atmosphere a few minutes later. The pilot weaved his way through the debris of the Mayorfant starship and the Arachtor warship until he was in clear space. Subsequently, he flipped the switch to make the jump to hyperspace.

CHAPTER 21

The sprawling Garynx Nebula, its dust and ionized gases dimly lit by a scattering of myriad stars, calmly surrounded the Perennis Prime stations drifting in space. The turbulence was inside the head of Syn Dat who was in the command center of the main station. He stood motionless at the control console, blinking his optical receptor from white to red. Echoes resounded with the echoes of metal footsteps coming and going on the metal walkway behind him. But for him, everything hung in silence except for the hum of machinery and electronics.

Just moments earlier, Syn Dat had received the emergency subspace transmission from the Arachtor captain. The message had lacked a video component, as it was a simple audio transmission. The insults he could ignore, because they had no basis. A warrior race, indeed.

Was this the same Arachtors who were reputedly ruthless and treacherous? Yet, the Arachtors could so easily board the wrong ship. Did they take him for a fool? Had he missed something? Was the Captain Zelnid lying to them, a ruse to make off with the weapons cargo for themselves? His optics fluttered with anger. Something wasn't right with his story.

The commander needed to hear the Arachtor's message, for it would signal either a continuation or an end to his suspicions. Not wasting another minute, he routed the message to the control room.

Immediately after, the second in command came to the doors that gave admittance to the control room. As he approached, one of the two battle droids stationed there saluted and pushed a button on the keypad on the wall causing the door to slide open.

He found Golo-DEX standing directly in front of his desk, facing the communications panel screen. The message was looping, the replayed words just as hot-tempered the second and third time through. The commander didn't seem to realized that he was standing there and stepping closer to his desk.

"The only ship seen coming or going in the vicinity of Draxis was a ship belonging to a 'SpaceWoman.' My tactical unit boarded that ship, not a weapons transport. It is about as embarrassing as it sounds. From my perspective, you droids are incompetent! The twisted metal of your minds. Passing us false information will not —" the Arachtor captain shouted in a gargled, gruff voice, his words edged with a subspace echo.

It cut off, mid-sentence with a thunderous boom, followed by the screech of static. Another burst of static, loud enough to make Syn Dat wince. Processing his anger, the commander's lowering eyes narrowed as he listened to the static until it cleared.

The message was about to replay, when the commander slammed his hand against the blinking button on the communications panel, stopping the message and turning his attention to his second in command. "Those Arachtors botched the heist and are casting blame where it suits. They are the incompetent ones."

Syn Dat, as always, was matter-of-fact and to the point. "There shouldn't have been any other spaceship in the vicinity of Draxis. Who is this SpaceWoman?"

Knowing Infiltrator had been ambushed, it occurred to the commander that perhaps it was an act of sabotage.

"The 'SpaceWoman's' ship could have been a decoy," Golo-DEX said, and folded his arms, "meant to thwart smugglers. That no cargo transport had ever been on Draxis — from the beginning."

Syn Dat was so suspicious of the Arachtors, that he hadn't considered that possibility.

"It looks as if someone has gone through a great deal of trouble to trick us," said Syn Dat, through his knife-slit of a mouth. "What would you have me do?"

The commander tilted his head, his optics flashing. "Send a subspace message to Infiltrator, immediately. Warn him about what the Arachtors had encountered. The SpaceWoman."

His second in command shook his head sharply. “I do not trust Infiltrator.”

The comment stung but hadn’t Golo-DEX thought the very same thing? He had felt uneasy about this smuggler of sorts on more than enough occasions to never rule out the possibility that Infiltrator could betray them.

A cold, metallic frown spread across the commander’s white metal face. “Nor do I trust him. After sending out the message, get a spy on him. Let us see how this plays out.”

At once, Syn Dat left to carry out the commander’s instructions. Golo-DEX watched him go, his eyes drawn toward the circular observation window where he saw the glowing entrance of the looming wormhole in the distance.

Unquestionably, the news was a blow to Infiltrator, who thought, too, it might have been a setup. And the worst of it was that his heist plot was foiled at the last suspenseful minute by a ‘SpaceWoman?’ Was she aligned with Val-Kul? As it was, he already had it in for the Vexari. His mind was still processing this awful revelation when he cut off the message.

His spacecraft was parked at a huge and airy spaceport. He had stopped for refueling and to wait for the Arachtor warship, if they had successfully carried out their heist. When the message came in from Perennis Prime, he had been loading supplies onto the craft. What a shock it had been to hear Syn Dat’s voice, and he found it difficult to keep his temper from flaring listening to his condescending tone.

The remarkably clean but crowded spaceport, right at the edge of the Annexed Confederacy, was built at a high altitude on the small planet Tiero, near Garanay, a planet inhabited by the Arachtors. Below it were repair hangars and accesses, and spaceport employee edifices. The mostly uninhabited planet was speckled with brown mountains and green plains.

Ten minutes later, he scanned the airspace above the spaceport. He tapped his fingers against the cockpit instrument panel. This was going to be insane, he thought to himself, as he set a course for the Autonomous District. Instincts were telling him that if he was going to get answers, the answers lay there. He had to find the ‘SpaceWoman.’

CHAPTER 22

Lurai Sul was back on the planet of Vitrana inside the largest weapons factory in the galaxy. She fumbled her way along a corridor, a belt bag slung over her shoulder, her laser gun beneath her long, black coat. Her eyes glinted, following a strip of small yellow lights along the smooth black metal floor. With a sigh, she passed a couple of doors symmetrically arranged along the corridor before it rounded a corner to the right. The glowing lights led her to a door on the left side before it came to an end, joining a corridor crossing from left to right.

After that long walk, she had reached the oval-shaped, high-ceilinged monitoring chamber. The door slid open, and she stepped inside. Her point of contact, Rogaz, stood to the left of the central chair the Velonian head of Vitrana Security was sitting in. The sparkling blue crystal pendants

with the Vitrana Security emblem engraved on it were pinned on their nondescript black robe uniforms with gold cords looping over their shoulders.

“Greetings, Rogaz, Cyrok,” she said, coming farther into the room, the black scarf around her neck flowing down the front of her coat. “I came as soon as I got your message.”

Rogaz acknowledged her with a polite nod.

“Lurai Sul,” Cyrok, the head of Vitrana Security, said with an anxious edge to his voice. “I will get to the point. Where are you at with your search for Infiltrator?”

Seemingly apolitical, the narrow-faced Cyrok Mor had no aspirations to a seat on the Velonian Ruling Council. But he was often outspoken and expressed controversial ideas about the galactic insurgency. And right now, he presented himself in a manner possessed, if not obsessed, with the singular goal of finding Infiltrator.

“The Vexari, Val-Kul was a dead end,” she said, unable to keep the frustration from her voice. “The tracking device I had planted on his vessel led me to Ecuamar, setting down on the pitted and scarred landing platform below the dull steel dome of the spaceport complex. From what I saw, Val-Kul remained on the planetoid, the whole time I was there. There was no sign of Infiltrator.”

Watching her as she spoke, Rogaz noted how her eyes moved to look at one of the monitoring screens. Very clearly she could see worker droids packaging a substantial amount of weaponry in large crates to be ferried off world.

Casting them with short glances, she didn't like being here without the bounty, and Rogaz could not fault her.

The head of Vitrana Security stirred and shook his head. "It is possible that Val-Kul detected your tracking device. And that would explain why he was laying low in order to smoke out who was behind the spying on him. Destroying the device alone would have tipped his hand entirely."

Mor turned his head as if to seek approval from Rogaz, who nodded in agreement. As a high-ranking member of Vitrana Security, he was required to attend all meetings and functions where the head of security was present. Moreover, he advised Mor on daily security matters of operations and administration.

"Or he was not communicating with Infiltrator at that moment," she shot back in a disgruntled tone. "There is no way of knowing for certain what Val-Kul —"

Lifting up slightly from the chair, Mor's purple skin shimmered in the incandescent lighting, interrupting her mid-sentence. "The intel on the data-chip was clearly very helpful to you for finding and bringing Infiltrator to us. Your efforts are commendable."

If she was concerned about the fact that he had ignored what she had said, she didn't let on. Only her face projected a slight sense of shock, standing still in front of him.

"Given the recent situations abroad in the galaxy, where Patrol-Force United are concerned, we're taking all necessary precautions," Mor continued and sat back in the chair. "A face-to-face meeting was required, because I have

sensitive news to report. I didn't want to risk broadcasting, even on a secure channel."

He looked at Rogaz to continue.

"We received a message from the Wixun pilot of the cargo transport reporting that the mission was a success," Rogaz said in a drone voice. "And that when the transport had passed through the atmosphere of the planet Draxis, there was spaceship debris consistent with an explosion."

"By chance, Cragun Hobbs is back on his homeworld of Attilun," Mor added. "With increasing security concerns from Patrol-Force United, we need you to continue tracking Hobbs' movements and activities."

The mere mention of Hobbs' name made her chest tight. The Arachtors' assault on her ship was still fresh on her mind. Despite how badly she wanted to make Hobbs' pay for that, she had no desire to rehash the information. More importantly she had a fairly clear idea where Mor's thoughts were headed, for she had been considering somewhat of the same possibilities.

Though the Annexed Confederacy was a good place for a smuggler to hide, she also knew smugglers didn't like to stay in one spot for long. "So, you think Hobbs might get wind of the cargo transport on his planet and lure Infiltrator there for a heist?"

Mor was silent a long moment, as if confused by her question. "Yes and no. Circling back to Hobbs. Keep a tab on him, but do not bring him in. It is not a sure bet to getting Infiltrator, but you could get a good lead on him."

That earned him a look tinged with frustration. With a strong moral compass, she had an unwavering conviction about her ideas. But she was prepared to do what Mor told her. Because she wanted to bring Infiltrator in. Bottom line, she needed the credits they were offering.

“I will fly over to the Inter-Colonial Zone,” she said with a compliant nod in Mor’s direction.

“Stay in contact with me,” Rogaz reminded, as she left the monitoring chamber.

Back inside her twin-engine ship, Lurai fired up the engines and lifted from the landing pad of the roof of the factory. From this vantage point, she could see the canyon in the distance as her ship penetrated the hazy atmosphere of Vitrana.

CHAPTER 23

The autopilot was in operation and the escape-pod drifted and drifted in the vast emptiness of space. Neruda didn't know how to disengage the autopilot and get onto the manual mode. Despite her meticulous preflight checks, she neglected to learn how to operate the escape-pod of her starship. Simply, she hadn't thought about danger, or the unexpected.

Inside the pod, her fingers tapped against the small porthole window. She couldn't see anything but a few stars. There were no planets in sight and judging by the endless void of space ahead of her, this wasn't the way to her planet. Unbelievable to her that she was still soaring at a fast pace into the deep trenches of outer space.

Stuck in a cramped pod that wasn't built with passenger comfort in mind, she felt stiff. Neither was she accustomed

to the dim light inside of it. The lights from the monitor screen and the instrument panels cast an eerie glow against her veil.

Neruda had completely lost track of time. She had no idea how long she had been traveling. Nor did she know how long it had been since she used the pod's emergency transmitter to send an automated long-range subspace distress signal to Vago's spaceport communication systems on Sakros. The signal was sent blaring on all frequencies at the maximum levels, thereby increasing her chances of rescue.

What she did know was that she wasn't suffering from space sickness. All her cognitive faculties were functioning properly.

Would one of their few spaceport pilots even bother to put together a rescue mission? Neruda thought glumly. Especially considering what she knew about her people's current cultural ways. She hated imagining what it would be like to be marooned for the rest of her life on some alien planet.

Why had those hostile aliens invaded her starship? There had been nothing of value on her ship to attract their attention. Not that she wasn't grateful to be alive, but for how long? She had only one or two days' emergency ration nutrient sticks aboard with her. Let alone the escape-pod's fuel cells had a short life span of a day or so.

Pushing the thought from her mind, she concentrated on figuring out how to override the autopilot and maneuver the

pod to a planet's surface. And that was when, and if, she did find a planet.

But in the back of her mind, she was thinking of how the mission ended in disaster. She had grown up believing that one day she would inspire countless Mayorfants all around Sakros with her successful space flight. The mission to Z'arva — she always referred to it that way — had taken her years to plan. But after what happened all the Mayorfants would think her a buffoon. She could just imagine the look on their faces when she returned to Sakros. In spite of knowing that, she hoped to return to her homeworld. Each minute spend in the pod made her want to be on Sakros even more.

It baffled her how easily one long-ago incident could affect the galaxy community. Planets in the Autonomous District, she had been taught, had a strict policy of non-interference in other cultures. Interstellar travel was forbidden, but not illegal. To that idea, Mayorfants everywhere chose not to explore the issue. It always seemed so unfair to her, having communication with other beings taken away when there was still so many worlds for the Mayorfants to explore. One thing was for certain; if time travel was a reality, and the pod got caught in a vortex, and it was swept back to that time in history, she thought how she would do all she could to prevent the Mayorfants from halting space exploration.

Was she still in the Autonomous District? She had no idea what direction the pod was heading. It seemed to her

that it was flying through space in the opposite direction of Sakros.

Bored beyond belief, she twisted her body so she could fiddle with the silver-and-black scarf tied tightly around her knee above her shining black boot. But then she was getting drowsy from the vibration of the engine beneath her feet. It seemed like seconds later, she fell into a nap.

Sleep was short-lived. The escape-pod had suddenly accelerated forward. She was crumpled up with the veil pinned to her hair, although the end of the veil was caught in a wide crack between a panel and the porthole. As she tugged on the veil she braced herself, feeling as though she were dangling upside down by her feet.

Long seconds passed; then inertial dampeners kicked in, and the pod righted itself. The veil broke free of the crack without a tear. Once again she was floating right-side-up. If anything, her reflexes had always been her saving grace.

The fuel exhaustion warning light was blinking at her.

A flash of dull, translucent light suddenly strobed through the porthole. Was it her imagination? Looking anxiously out the window, she saw a massive ringed planet, rotating lazily. Not her imagination. She was in another sector of the galaxy entirely.

From what she could tell, the pod was caught in an intense gravitational pull of the rings. Looking down showed her the edge of a moon. Behind, in the distance, a nebula was radiating energy.

Much to her alarm, the low vibrating hum of the pod was fading in the background and being replaced by the audible signals emitted by the charged particles of the rings.

Everything was about to change. She had to land somewhere on the planet. And once she did, she would make first contact with an alien race.

CHAPTER 24

Smacking the control panel with the palm of her gloved hand, Neruda smiled, believing she was going to be able to land the escape-pod. Granted, she was worried about the pressurized fuel cells. With stealth and determination, she kept one hand on the controls, eyes possessed with passion.

Before she could think, she'd overridden the autopilot and seized flight control. She always was a quick learner. But there was still a long way to go to get to the planet's surface.

As she guided the pod, putting it into a descent pattern, a shudder ran down the length of it. There was no smooth glide. She was feeling the pounding of the engine vibrating through her whole body. Emergency lights started flashing on, a different one every few seconds. Already she could

tell there wasn't going to be a smooth landing. The gravity of the planet was pulling as well.

The fast-moving pod suddenly inverted and lurched sideways violently as it penetrated the particle-dense atmosphere. Through the porthole, the land beneath was a wash of heat and light.

This is it, Neruda thought, several seconds passing as the pod cleared the atmosphere. It was so intense that her hands rose to cover her eyes as if by their own volition. When she lowered them, she could glimpse the slopes of two hills below.

Tiny blue sparks sputtered directly above the Jarakan guard, in the yellow-tinted sky. He was standing at his post outside the dome-shaped mining complex burrowed in those hills. After glancing up, for one bleak moment, he thought initially the lights were unburned meteorites. That was until the bean-shaped escape-pod, its metal glinting in the sunlight, came into focus, silver, sleek, and hurtling fast toward the ground.

Depleted fuel cells. The monitor screen went dark. All lights shut off. Twirling gracefully, the pod plunged toward the planet's surface in a trail of smoke. With a supple twist of her body, she braced herself for the impact.

The Jarakan guard watched the escape-pod as it landed with a metallic clunk on the barren desert, sending plumes of dust into the air. The distant disturbance caused the ground to tremble beneath his boots. He turned, and took off running toward the crash site, snarling as he went.

No sooner had the pod settled onto the ground than the sparks flew from crippled instrument panels, and the smell of burnt metal filled the air. Sharp cracking noises were followed by a vast cloud of vapor which looked like ejected gases. The pod's systems were obviously damaged beyond repair. When the steam cleared, she exhaled and stared through the cracked porthole at the land she had never seen before. She saw an arid desert and some hills.

The hatch popped open and released a hiss of stale air from within. There was a long pause before she unstrapped herself from the pilot's seat. But she was eager to find intelligent life. At least, she hoped to as she spilled out onto the indentation crisscrossing the desert floor, her legs wobbly after so much sitting. She shook out her legs, stretching them. Her thighs rippled. She took a few spins around herself and stretched her arms high over her head.

Her expression puzzled, she didn't know if there were any other life-forms within the vicinity. Directly above her, sunlight penetrated the billowing formless cloudy horizon easily and before her was a barren stretch of desert. The dry air stung her eyes. And the hot weather was making her parched. She had never felt this kind of heat before.

From the side of her eye, she thought she saw something move. She tilted her head and looked to the left. A tall, masked figure took a knee on the ground and bowed respectfully. She took this as a good sign.

The olive-green skinned Jarakan lifted his head, slowly. She could see his sympathetic eyes behind the full-face gas

mask fastened on her. His breathing was heavy, punctuated by the rhythmic hiss of the air filtration device.

A moment of silence hung in the air, as the guard gave her a long stare. He hadn't seen any others like her in the galaxy ... pallid white complexion ... dark eyes, which seemed to absorb all the light around her. Certainly, the veil made her mysterious. Yet, she bore a resemblance to a Hantavant, but she was shorter, and the geometric shape tattooed on her face was larger.

Not much for words, the Jarakan rose up, and slightly bowed with both arms sweeping low to the side as a gesture of welcome.

"I am a Mayorfant," she rambled. "I am from the planet Sakros in the Autonomous District. No one travels to that sector of space, except for some ships visit Draxis. So, I have heard. I am the first member of my species to leave my homeworld since interstellar travel was banned by the Supreme Grand Conclave following a terrorist incident hundreds of years ago. I was on a mission that ended in disaster after aliens attacked my starship, but ... What planet am I on?"

Despite the long-drawn-out speech, she sounded ... breathless. Worn. The Jarakan looked at her with a mixture of awe and disbelief. His gloved hands were on the hips of his dark green pants with double white stripes.

He pointed to the ground. "Agrossa."

The guard circled the pod, scrutinizing it as closely as he could. He shook his head wearily.

“Commander,” he said and pointed toward the mining complex set in a crevice between the slopes of two hills. “We help you.”

This wasn’t just a first contact; it was a rescue. Her eyes didn’t leave him as he gestured for her to go with him.

CHAPTER 25

Mid-flight Infiltrator changed his mind. Sure, for an irrational flash he considered searching for that mysterious “SpaceWoman,” but thinking about it, it didn’t make sense. When he’d thought again about the ambush he’d barely escaped, and whether or not it could possibly be connected to Val-Kul hiring an assassin to kill him, revenge rushed into his mind. He had a personal score to settle with ... Val-Kul that took precedence over everything else. There was always the possibility that the “SpaceWoman” was another one of his assassins that he’d sent to sabotage the mission. He assumed that when he found Val-Kul, he’d also find the “SpaceWoman.” The big questions were: why would Val-Kul want to prevent the heist from going down? Had he been planning all along to run the heist without him? Did he consider him a liability?

“Changing course,” he said, charged up. “New course set for the outer edge of the Annexed Confederacy.”

It was a given that Val-Kul, could only stay hidden for so long. His best guess was that he was holed up somewhere on his home planetoid. But he knew it wouldn’t be long before the Vexari gave into the compulsion to gamble. Sooner than later (he hoped). And it was a good bet he’d find him in the cantina of the Yograx refueling and repair station.

His spacecraft bounced out of hyperspace not far from Ozarus. From space, the planet looked beautiful. But up close, the gas-giant appeared unstable.

In the distance, he saw a pod-shaped ship on a course away from Yograx station. He eyed the ship, which was now coming right at him. Immersed in thought, he stared ahead a few moments, remembering the last time a ship was coming up behind him. It was a déjà vu moment.

His forehead furrowed. “Not again.”

Before the words had cleared his mouth, the pod-shaped ship’s engines flared, and the distance between them shrank rapidly. A sick suspicion rose in him. The image of Val-Kul shot into his mind again.

That assumption changed when he leaned toward the viewport to have a closer look at the ship. He could see its distinctive shape, and he recognized the marks and dents all over the silver hull. Scanning onto the cockpit window, he caught sight of the pilot seated in the chair.

“Reece Dagmar!” he said, eyes blazing.

It was one of the many bounty hunters out there looking for him. Dagmar, a Velonian and former member of Vitrana Security, had been after him for some time now. The up-and-coming bounty hunter was hired by Patrol-Force United. The so-called peacekeepers of this galaxy had their own grudges against him. It was inevitable that he would cross paths in one place or the other with the bounty hunter, whose ship was perfectly suited for a high speed chase.

A laser bolt shot upward — missed. The bounty hunter fired again. Another laser bolt shot past the curve of the viewport, but without hitting the spacecraft's hull. But it was close enough. Infiltrator fired a burst in response, missing completely.

"He is persistent," A faint tinge of amusement show in his voice. "Is he trying to kill me? Oh, sometimes I forget that Patrol-Force United offered a ten-thousand credit reward for my head, specifying the bounty is dead or alive."

His leather-gloved fingers moved swiftly across the controls. He spun the craft into an evasive pattern, throwing it into a spin. It was during this maneuver that he sensed the intense concentration of Dagmar trying to line up a shot. A hail of laser bolts flashed past, closer this time, but all of it missing and rippling across space.

The bounty hunter did not hesitate. Another bolt shot and scored a direct hit, spattering off his spacecraft's deflector shield, which held. Infiltrator's spacecraft barrel-rolled with its engines flaring, buying time for his shields to recover.

The noise of the skirmish had attracted quite a bit of attention. Murmurs drifted through the crowd watching from the circular windows of the Yograx station. A large, boxlike shape freighter had docked at the station just a short while earlier. There had been no other ship traffic since then.

“This is really interfering with my schedule,” Infiltrator muttered in frustration.

He was too close to the station to turn around and leave. Dagmar was blocking his way and had no intention of veering away. Infiltrator flipped a few switches and punched the throttle, steering the spacecraft into a steep dive toward Yograx. Regardless of lurching into Dagmar’s line of fire, he was no match for Infiltrator’s fast flying, spiraling from one direction to another.

With a scream of rage, he pulled back on the yoke and looped the craft toward Dagmar, coming head-on.

“Not today, sorry,” Infiltrator said in a breath.

Tense seconds passed, and then he fired and fired and fired, bolt after bolt hitting the ship’s forcefields hard, visibly weakening them with each shot. Two of the hits punched through Dagmar’s shields. The bounty hunter’s ship shook.

“One less bounty hunter in this galaxy,” he said, eyes narrowing in satisfaction as the ship exploded right before his eyes.

In a jiffy, Dagmar’s ship disintegrated into a fiery ball. Infiltrator felt a rush of pure unadulterated pleasure. How glorious it was to face one’s enemy and utterly destroy him.

With his newfound confidence, he made a half circle before he turned at an angle toward the huge, saucer-shaped station.

CHAPTER 26

By a quirk of fate, Val-Kul had been among the crowd watching the firefight in space from the tall windows of the station. He had recognized Infiltrator's spacecraft. Infiltrator had been right to believe he was gambling at the cantina. An assassin arrived instead of him at the designated coordinates, to hijack a weapons transport leaving Draxis. Val-Kul knew he considered him a prime suspect. He just knew he had it in for him. Worst of all, if he found him, there was no telling what he would do to him.

The Vexari's vessel was on the docking level, where, at any given moment, Infiltrator was going to dock his spacecraft. This circumstance forced him to arrange a ride to his homeworld. It was happenstance that his best gambling buddy, a fellow Vexari, was here, with his starship. His excuse was that his vessel was in need of

repairs that would be impossible to complete in less than three days.

Clad in a dark gray jacket over a black knit long sleeved shirt, black cargo pants and black leather boots, Infiltrator stepped through the cantina's doorway, light reflecting off of his smooth metal mask. He looked every bit the part of a smuggler. He pushed a button and his mask retracted. His eyes darted about, seemingly on the lookout for Val-Kul. At first glance, he didn't see him at the gambling tables. What were the odds indeed?

The idle chitchat, clink of glasses and the clatter of chairs had been tuned out. He glanced around the cantina again. Strangers of various species were discussing less than reputable dealings. Lucky for Val-Kul that he wasn't here.

He'd have to stick around the station for the next couple of days at least. There was no other recourse, assuming Val-Kul turned up.

A deafening crash echoed through the air, followed by a yelp. A heavysset, Vexari was gasping for breath. He had collided with a passerby and then crashed into a pile of crates filled with metal cans of ale.

Infiltrator turned, shot him a look, eyes narrowed. *A Vexari. Some coincidence*, he thought, watching him. There was a disapproving murmur from the crowd as he snaked through to take a closer look at him.

"You better watch your step, or I will rip your head off!" the Vexari said to the server droid that rolled by him and it cheeped something.

“JoJo Arens,” Infiltrator said, remembering him. “You are Val-Kul’s friend.”

“What if I am?” Arens remarked.

From what he’d been told by Val-Kul, Arens was a gambler who cheated all the time but lost enough to deflate such suspicions to avoid ending up face down in a corridor in the lower level of station. With his clumsy mannerisms, he didn’t fit the part. But looks could be deceiving.

“The one and only Infiltrator,” he said, playing all nice and turning around himself. “I trust that you remember me from the business in which Val-Kul and I did, days back. Where is he? I have so much to tell him.”

The disorientated Vexari studied him like a specimen and like he’d forgotten what he was going to say. *More than likely, he was drunk*, Infiltrator thought.

As Arens struggled to his feet, a low chuckle escaped from his thin-lipped mouth, sounding like rattling rocks. “Val-Kul is here for emergency repairs to his vessel. He is hitching a ride on my starship to Ecuamar. He is waiting in the docking port, where my starship is parked. I need time to sober up before I can pilot the ship.”

“Just great!” Infiltrator exclaimed, patting him on the back before walking backwards towards the exit.

The wobbling Arens slinked into the background, and Infiltrator hurried out the doorway and into a brightly lit corridor lined by viewing ports. It seemed like a mile later that he stepped into another corridor with walls that curved upward and illuminated by the phosphorescent sulfide. After a half a mile of walking, he reached the docking port.

Arens hadn't steered him wrong. Turning around, he'd seen a figure in the distance. There was Val-Kul watching the stars through the airlock viewport. And there was, he assumed to be, Arens starship berthed at one of the upper docking pylons.

"You sold me out Val-Kul!"

The sudden unexpected arrival of Infiltrator came as a surprise to him. His eyes flared red. But he turned around, feigning innocence.

"Infiltrator," Val-Kul's slimy voice slithered through the air, his face knitting in false concern. "I was hoping to find you here. Inexplicitly my vessel has suffered systemic failures. With the communication systems knocked out, I couldn't contact you."

It was no use. Val-Kul's words fell on deaf ears. Infiltrator approached, stopping just short of arm's reach. He looked the Vexari challengingly, and recklessly, in the eye.

"Who do you think you are fooling? You sent an assassin after me," Infiltrator said, in a maddening way.

Infiltrator saw a faint flicker of unease in the depths of his eyes.

"For all the time we have known each other, you know me too well to believe that I would do that," Val-Kul said, his hand slowly reaching for his laser gun holstered at his thigh.

One of Infiltrator's hands knocked him hard to the floor with one strike. The other grabbed the laser gun from his holster.

“Who is this SpaceWoman?” Infiltrator asked in a demanding, harsh tone and aimed the gun at his chest. “Did you hire her, too?”

“I do not know any SpaceWoman.”

Looking in his eyes, Infiltrator believed him. “That is the first truthful thing you have said. Now get up!”

As Val-Kul staggered to his feet, the expression on his face reeked of desperation. “Would it not be easier for us to just part ways amicably?”

Barely listening and pointing the gun at him, Infiltrator ran a hand over the console on the wall. The airlock gauge blinked orange.

“What are you going to do?” the Vexari asked, his cheeks tight with tension. “Eject me out of a docking ring airlock?”

“Precisely,” Infiltrator replied and laughed, the sound complemented by the harsh hiss of the inner door of the airlock sliding open.

The airlock warning signal pulsed in the utility cabinet atop the upper docking pylon. With a single push, Infiltrator hurled him out of the airlock and into space. The last thing he heard was the clang of the airlock snapping into place.

CHAPTER 27

The heels of a Jarakan miner's boots clicked noisily against the metal floor as he crossed the vestibule of the single-room barracks. Neruda had been provided quarters with lodgings, where the workers were housed. The stone barracks were built underground twenty feet below the control room of the six-kilometer-long mining complex on Agrossa. Her room wasn't anything fancy, but it was cozy and quiet, from a twin-size bed flanked by a pair of metal end tables to the matching metal chair that sat at an angle.

She was sitting up on the bed. Only two days had passed, yet it might as well have been a year. Time moved sluggishly slow. She had toured the facility, twice already. There wasn't a whole lot to do.

As she sat there contemplating what to do next, she picked up one of the small rocks on an end table and looked

at it. The rocks were ore samples a miner had given her to examine in her spare time. And she had lots of spare time.

The mining facility's commander mentioned to her that he had been in communications with the maintenance officer of the spaceport on Vago. The Mayorfants were sorry to hear she was stranded in the Industrial Consortium. And that a rescue operation was in place, but there was no date set to get her. This made her feel like a small child who'd been waiting for her parents to pick her up from school.

Sakros wasn't that far away. The journey would take two days at the most. Transports flew in and out of Agrossa, ferrying supplies back and forth to neighboring planets in the sector. But the flight pattern of the transports was always the same. Neither was the option to lend her a spaceship to command off-planet made available to her.

Come to think of it, the situation could have been worse. She could have landed on a planet whose inhabitants would attempt to dissect and study her. She tried not to think of all of the could-haves.

Rising from the bed, the overhead lighting caught the shadows of her face, casting shadowy angles on the gray wall on her left side. Tilting her head back, she straightened her veil. She scooped up the rocks then walked out of the room.

She strolled down the middle of a gray, curved corridor, passing the control room, two cross tunnels and three doorways. One of the doors was open, and she couldn't resist a glance inside.

One side of the granite quarry had tables and steps carved into the tiers of rock. A cluster of Jarakan miners sorted through rocks. She wondered at the diverse metallurgical pieces made mainly of gold displayed out on a table on the other side of the tiers. She could see shiny things, unrecognizable goods. But she did recognize one of the miners standing off to the side of the table.

After stepping inside, she walked up to the miner and tapped him on the arm. He grunted and turned toward her. She placed the rocks in his hand, and added a nod of gratitude, before wandering over to the edge of the table with unusual objects. She hadn't seen anything of that nature. Some were like bubbles of glass.

Neruda lifted her hand to straighten her glove. When she reached to touch one of the pieces, the mining foreman, a Jarakan unusually short for his species, intercepted her hand.

After a polite bow, he gestured a hand around at the table. Then he pointed upward. So, she gathered that he meant the objects were things they traded in exchange for other goods. Despite the short amount of time she had spent with the Jarakans, she had learned to interpret their gestures and body language. There was a level of respect there; she understood their culture and their nonverbal ways of communicating.

With a quick hand, he grabbed two bejeweled objects, comprising primarily large gemstones with a wonderfully detailed finish, from the table and handed them to her. He

gestured that it was a gift. She understood it was some kind of friendship offering.

“These are beautiful,” she said, holding up the objects and scrutinizing them under the light.

Somehow the crystal ball wristband, and crystal pendant in the shape of a teardrop encased in a silver circle hanging from a silver chain shimmered under her touch.

There was something unquestionably kind about him, she thought, as she watched him stalk off to another area of the quarry. They had never seen a Mayorfant and knew nothing of the race. And she was just as fascinated with the Jarakans as they were with her. There had been plenty of times she’d had a glimpse of their olive-green complexion. But she didn’t know what any of them looked like under their gas masks.

A distraction came when two Jarakan guards entered the quarry. The black batons affixed to the belts around the waists of their dark green pants with double white stripes, stood out to her. One of them blew a whistle with a loud shrill, summoning everyone to the commissary for a meal. The two guards exited the quarry. The miners followed them out the door and down the corridor. But she had been so engrossed in her private thoughts that she ended up being the last to leave.

That night before bed, Neruda went up to the enclosed observation deck which extended out from the landing platform that cut into the side of the hill. There was an impressive view of the ring of gas clouds surrounding the

planet. Near the planet's moon, a utility barge turned away from the violet nebula. It was heading toward the planet.

The beauty in the sky couldn't stop her from wondering how long did she have to wait to get rescued?

CHAPTER 28

As the distant sun set, an accumulation of heavy gray clouds in hues of oranges and reds across the horizon cast a fiery glow over the jagged rock formations. In another ten minutes, the night sky of the planet Garanay would be plunged into a darkness. And a sudden change in the wind's direction indicated the first wave of a plasma storm. In these turbulent weather conditions, the planet in the middle of the Annexed Confederacy, was where the Arachtors thrived.

The Sire of the Ugro clan had arrived fashionably early at the meeting space in the main hive, a megastructure complex and the clans' headquarters, that sat on the edge of a cliff. Under flitting phosphorescent light, Lev-Vak stood by the top-floor window overlooking the city of Ovirmar. He was staring at the faded twilight's glow with an uncertain mind.

Why hadn't he heard from his brother in a while? As the question surfaced, he sighed an agonizing sigh because he couldn't answer his own question. Reflecting to a couple of days ago, he had received a subspace message from his brother Zelnid, marked personal. He couldn't really tell him what he was doing other than that his assignment was somewhere near the border of the Autonomous District. He wished his brother had been able to tell him more details about the mission.

A soft sound made him flinch and he whipped his head sideways, glaring at the purple-black hued exoskeleton of Skig, the Sire of the Ladoo clan, daring to disturb his thoughts. He gave a nod of acknowledgement to the Sire of Ladoo as he glided into the room. All at once, the other three Sires slinked inside, their moments uniform.

Lev-Vak, who was in charge of the Clans at this time, asked the Sires gathered in a circle around him. "What news you bring to me?"

"There has been a terrible incident," said Skig, who reported to him. "The second in command at Perennis Prime transmitted a message to our command center. One of our warships was recruited by the android station for a covert smuggling operation in the Autonomous District. The warship, captained by your older brother Zelnid, was destroyed during its encounter with the SpaceWoman starship."

It was what Lev-Vak had been waiting for. His question was answered as to why he hadn't heard from his brother.

First and foremost, he was angry because he didn't like the answer.

"My brother and his crew were killed?" Lev-Vak asked scornfully. "What do you mean, 'SpaceWoman'?"

Skig looked at his comrades to see if they recognized this name, then explained, "Spacewoman appears to be a code name for a traitor in our midst."

Unease snaked through the Sires of the Beto and Pintu clans, who looked at each other. An Arachtor warship was destroyed? The news was unsettling to say the least. And, more importantly, that just wasn't possible. Something was out of place.

Furthermore, Skig went on to explain that Infiltrator's spacecraft was attacked and damaged by an assassin. And that a weapons transport, leaving Draxis, had been his main objective. The smuggler needed a substitute to carry out the mission.

Tuning into the conversation, the Sire of the Pintu clan snorted. "Infiltrator is the one to blame for maneuvering our warship into a trap."

Lev-Vak noted, squinted with displeasure at the thought. His mind was on a journey of its own, fragmented thoughts swirling like fog inside his head. The Sires edged forward. Heated murmurs began, tight glances between the five.

"Infiltrator's track record is less than perfect," the Sire of the Beto clan said in a gurgle. "Neither do I trust those droids on Perennis Prime."

“I know that SpaceWoman is somehow connected to Infiltrator,” the Ladoo Sire said persuasively.

A high-pitched hiss came from Lev-Vak as he waved a silencing spindly limb before anyone else could shoot out a reply. He knew what he had to do.

With eyes cast down, the Sire of the Pintu couldn't help but add a little bitterly. “Infiltrator should never have been trusted.”

“Infiltrator’s claim of an attack on his ship is most likely false,” Lev-Vak said and turned to Skig. “We need a trace on his ship. Hire a bounty hunter to find him and bring him to me. He is going to give SpaceWoman up to us.”

“Sire Lev-Vak,” said the Sire of the Ferro clan, who was in charge of covert operations. “In our last meeting, we discussed working to expand our territory. What about mission to explore the Farath Cluster in a warship to scout for habitable planets?”

“Why let one incident disrupt our plans?” asked the Sire of the Beto.

Murmurs erupted from some of them. While Skig was scrunching the green-colored-stripe down the middle of his bulbous forehead as if he had an itch.

“Sire Skig,” Lev-Vak gasped out. “Send out a warship to explore the Farath Cluster.”

Before leaving, the four Arachtor Sires huddled, chittering sounds among them. Lev-Vak sidled away from them and turned his large, side-mounted eyes to look out the window. A rumble echoed somewhere in the distance, a sound that left him with no doubt that an impending

plasma storm was quickening on the horizon. The chaotic sky mimicked the turmoil in his own mind. The Sire of the Ugro felt vulnerable, and he hated feeling vulnerable. He bent his head down. A single tear slipped from an eye. How he missed his brother Zelnid!

CHAPTER 29

The commander of the mining operations had paid Neruda a visit in her quarters, late in the afternoon. He had brought good news. A Mayorfant cruiser was in orbit around the planet, doing nothing, and waiting. He seemed to hint that they weren't the brightest beings in the galaxy. To expedite things, he transmitted a message giving them permission to land and received a reply they would descend to the surface soon.

The rescue had come sooner than expected. But she hadn't yet made the move to leave. She was sitting at the edge of the bed. Gazing at the bejeweled gifts in her hand, she was thinking about how she was going to miss the Jarakans. She had been there for a total of seven days. But something about these charitable individuals had moved her profoundly.

The moment grew tense, and after another second's hesitation she left the room.

The door opened on the long, narrow, well-lit gray stone corridor on the top level. And before her eyes could adjust to the change in light levels, she heard murmurs from the Jarakan miners huddled with a purpose in front of the metal stairs to the landing platform. She had to wonder what non-verbal conversations were taking place.

One of the miners came forward. He pulled her to the side.

"Come back and visit," said the miner, ever so briefly, taking off his gas mask to look at her with his own eyes with a gesture of farewell.

All her feeling welled up in her, and she giggled. The Jarakans were odd looking in an amusing way, with large eyes, and a big, bulging nose streamlining into a small mouth with a truncated jaw.

As the miner turned away, she impulsively sprang forward and put her hand on his arm. She opened her arms and gave him a long embrace. That twinge of emotion she'd felt at that moment had caught her by surprise.

She left him there, went along the corridor passing the other miners on the way, and hurried up the flight of stairs to the platform. The hum of the huge blade-shaped cruiser's engines filled the air as it settled down easily. She took a sharp right turn and walked the length of the platform. As the Jarakan commander and two guards waited for the entrance ramp to be lowered, she moved forward and stood next to them.

The ramp opened. The pilot and engineer Mayorfants disembarked, where they were greeted warmly by the commander and guards of the facility. After a quick and uneventful conversation, the Jarakans stalked off as if they had something important to do. Suffice to say the parties involved were no longer interested in further contact.

Whereas Neruda had humbly lowered her head, uninvolved in the conversation. What she could've done without was the engineer glaring malignantly at her. He looked as though he was disappointed in her, which made her feel embarrassed. And he searched her face for a reaction, but she'd turned her eyes toward the old cruiser. After some scrutinizing, she concluded that the ship had been completely refurbished and retrofitted to the point where it was practically unrecognizable. A lot of work had been put into making the cruiser operational for the mission to rescue her. For that she was grateful.

Neruda kept her head down and tiptoed around the engineer, making her way up the boarding ramp. Inside the cruiser, everything was clean and tidy. The all-male crew were at their stations as the ramp slid closed. They all wore black with veils on their heads and had different geometric shapes stamped across one side of their faces.

The cruiser lifted off the platform. Neruda went to her cabin along the port bow and peered out through the eye-shaped window at the planet below. A few miners stood atop the hill, watching the sky, hands waving farewell. And she couldn't resist waving in return, even if they couldn't see her.

The cruiser made orbit and went to hyperspace. Nobody spoke for a while. Neruda positioned herself comfortably on the bed and fell asleep in a few minutes.

Almost a day had gone by when Neruda awoke, straightened her veil and stepped through the hissing door of her cabin and into the corridor. No sooner did she reach the bridge than the crew members stationed there looked up at the unexpected arrival. Off to the right, she stood staring at the blur of white displayed across the viewscreen facing the pilot's chair.

When she started fidgeting with the crystal ball wristband on her wrist, the pilot's head spun with confusion. It was an over-the-top reaction. Noticing his expression, she showed off her gift.

"A Jarakan gave this to me," she said.

She slipped the bejeweled wristband off her wrist to examine it more closely, stretched it with both hands, then put it back on her wrist. The pilot's eyes were enchanted and it seemed he had a liking for it. The rest of the crew didn't act interested. Considering the weirdness, she felt the urge to flee back to her cabin.

They dropped out of hyperspace near Draxis, white and glowing stars dotting the blackness. The cruiser sped along through space. It wasn't long after that, Sakros' two moons could be seen on the viewscreen, seemingly to increase in size as the distance between them shrank.

The cruiser descended through the cloudy atmosphere of the planet toward Vago. Lights shaped like arrows on the roofs of the hangars around the spaceport pointed a specific

landing platform. The cruiser touched down smoothly on one of the platforms and the pilot killed the engines. Now that the ship was settled, the hangar doors slid closed.

After a virtually awkward voyage, they were more than ready to part ways. The cruiser's ramp extended, and Neruda was the first to dash out, followed quickly by the four crew members and the pilot.

Not far off to the left, stood her parents and her sister. Seeing them there gave her a reason to smile.

"I have missed all of you so very much," Neruda said as she sauntered over to them.

"Welcome back," her father and mother said in unison, nodding.

Her sister pointed to the crystal pendant, hanging from a silver chain around her neck. She couldn't help wondering what it was. Her parents exchanged a look. Then her father glanced at it, thinking he had to see it, too.

"What is it?" questioned her mother.

Neruda's smile faded as she faced them, the good feelings seeping away quickly. Astonishingly to her, they were in awe of the bejeweled object and uninterested in talking about the ordeal she had gone through.

CHAPTER 30

On Attilun, Cragun Hobbs was leaving the same seedy bar he frequented when he was in the central district of the city of Zygora. Over the past days, Lurai Sul had been shadowing him, trailing his every movement. Despite his notorious criminal reputation from heists in previous years, he wasn't up to any mischief that she had witnessed. The large bounty the head of Vitrana Security had placed on his head was in dispute. So, he didn't want her to take Hobbs in. Not just yet, at least for now her job was to watch him closely.

Having nothing better to do, she headed down a narrow passage to the hangar, on the outskirts of the city, where her ship was docked. She tucked a string of hair behind one ear, a nervous, quick gesture, as she walked toward the hangar's open doors.

Moodily, she slumped in the pilot's seat, her hand pressing against the console, her mind busy. Gradually her mind tuned into the little, meaningless noises, the random noises a spaceship makes, such as the hiss of recycling air.

Her gaze was fixed on the viewport in front of her. Maybe she'd grown impatient, or maybe she'd realized her time was being wasted, but she knew, she didn't want to watch Hobbs anymore. This wasn't leading to anything fruitful for Vitrana Security. Her best chance was to locate Infiltrator. But where was he now? There was that appalling feeling that Infiltrator was somewhere out there in the galaxy. He was dangerous and he was planning something.

Rather abruptly, a red indicator light began flashing on the communications panel. Just as fast, she sat up and faced the communicator's screen. After tapping a button, she turned on a video feed, and Rogaz' voice bounced on.

"Have you anything to report from the Wixun homeworld?" Rogaz asked.

"Nice to hear from you, too," she said, a glint of sarcasm flashing in her eyes. "No, nothing to report but a strong case of deadly boredom. Hobbs is not engaged in anything but sulking in a bar. He is laying low and possibly waiting for Infiltrator to contact him."

"Perhaps Hobbs is on to you."

"I have heard that before, from your boss," she said with a bite to her voice. "Not at all. If he had gotten wind of me, he would have taken off, just like the last time."

"You have to stay on him," Rogaz said. "That needs to be your only concern. Those are Cyrok's orders."

“I had a feeling you were going to say that,” Lurai said and grimaced, though she understood that Cyrok must have had a very good reason for issuing those orders.

“What is the problem,” he asked, his voice edgy with concern.

“I am not getting anywhere here,” she huffed.

A long silence from the communications panel. Rogaz seemed perplexed and processed that for a moment. When at last, he spoke.

“I am sure Cyrok would understand if you need to pursue a lead somewhere else,” he said bluntly.

“Are you suggesting I leave?” asked Lurai, both hopeful for and anxious about his answer.

Traveling from the Wixun homeworld to Tringsun was her hope. She had a contact there who had provided her confidential information in the past. If he had any relevant information about any planned smuggling operations, he would only give it to her in person.

Evidently Rogaz felt the same and said immediate departure was fine with him.

“I will contact you as soon as I have something for you,” she said, mellowing a little and a feeling content.

“Just one thing before you go.”

“Go ahead,” she said.

“While you are on Tringsun, take a little personal time and relax,” he said. “You have been working too hard.”

Shutting off the communicator’s screen, she ended with evident relief; but the comment had confused her, being still

in her mind, her face was lost in wonder. True, she spent a fair amount of time tracking men. That was fine.

And it was why she was alone.

The last time she had made herself vulnerable to a romantic relationship it ended in betrayal and pain. She had gotten involved with the wrong person and consequently was scarred. She found herself thinking, unaccountably, about the Velonian she had gotten involved with. He was a member of Vitrana Security, who had been secretly involved with dissident forces within the Annexed Confederacy.

He was found out, and he knew it. He was killed during a chaotic firefight with some of the members of Vitrana Security. When it happened, she took the news of the fatality with a feeling of regret. Ironically, he was replaced by Rogaz.

With that thought in mind, she fired up the engines, zoomed out of the hangar and shot up into the atmosphere at top speed. The ship climbed at a wide angle. Briefly, she studied the rearview monitor, which showed a magnified view of the Wixun planet. She slid across space toward the coordinates of a short hyperspace jump.

About four hours later, the ship exited hyperspace and passed through a cluster of myriad stars in the Industrial Consortium, near the border of the Non-Aligned Sector.

A Praloon battle cruiser had entered orbit around Tringsun. The angle of the bright yellow sun cast a hazy, soft orange glow surrounding the planet. Maybe somewhere inside her all along, she loved Tringsun, but her

work as a bounty hunter had taken her off the planet enough times that she was too used to being in space.

CHAPTER 31

It had only been seventeen days since Neruda's return to Sakros — and something unexpected had happened in that time. To start with, a high-level government planner pushed to invest in manufacturing custom-designed flashy, eye-catching bejeweled accessories for sale to the population. And an old spaceship manufacturing facility in the neighboring city of Falfa's upper atmosphere, would be converted into making bejeweled metallurgical objects with materials that had once been used for crafting the finest starships in Mayorfant history.

Nothing could have been more opportune, for Neruda had been in a predicament for many days wondering how she was going to finance a starship. Already she had sprung the worst news imaginable to her parents, that she had decided to return to space. They could patronize her all they

liked; but they chose not to. They could tell that her mind was made up.

That became clear when Neruda made the difficult decision to trade the bejeweled gifts she received from the Jarakan on Agrossa to the government planner for a starship. Those objects would serve as samples for replication according to the planner, whose main concerns were long-term interests of the population as a whole, and whether the government would benefit commercially from this undertaking. She could understand the reasoning behind it: more money and resources flowing into the economy; a new source of jobs for designers who needed them.

The day after she'd given the planner the objects, the Mayorfant government arranged to provide her with any sort of old spaceship she wanted from the shipyards. There she chose the starship at random. It was a typical Mayorfant configuration — designed for deep-space flight, with two engines, an angular golden-hued hull, and an equally angular stern. Maybe it looked antique, but it was tougher, slightly larger, and packed more speed and firepower than her last starship. The way she saw it, the trade was a sacrifice well made.

Now there she was, she had gone back to the drawing board again, prepping the starship for the upcoming flight to Z'arva. Sitting in the captain's chair on the bridge, she began sweeping her gloved fingers back and forth, tapping commands into its control panel, thinking hard. She was deeply involved in the mission planning.

The ambient chirps and beeps permeated the still air in the starship parked in Vago's spaceport. She tilted her head and ran a hand through her silvery-black veil. Her mind wandered to the events of the last two weeks. She dreaded that everyone she encountered talked about ornate accessories to transform their esoteric black outfits. She could blame her sister, who mentioned the crystal ball wristband to her friends, who told their friends, until eventually someone told the government planner.

Unique as she was, no one seemed to care for her bravery, courage, and flinty determination. Everyone recognized she had journeyed into space, but the mission had been counted a failure. So, no one brought it up with her.

What Neruda couldn't possibly know was that someone was actually interested in her excursion through the Autonomous District to Draxis. Infiltrator was more than interested in her.

Across the galaxy in the Annexed Confederacy, where anything was possible, Infiltrator walked out of the cantina on Yograx station with a twisted smile on his face.

Heading down the corridor, a lot of his mind was going over everything the bartender had told him about the female Mayorfant, an ancient species that had long been shrouded in obscurity. All he knew about the Mayorfants was that they had once reigned supreme over the galaxy with technologically advanced starships. There was a lot of talk around the bar because no one had seen a Mayorfant before.

The bartender had made his ears burn with what he in turn had heard from a Jarakan miner: *that the female Mayorfant from the planet Sakros had been marooned on Agrossa for a matter of days. She had crash-landed on the planet in an escape-pod ejected from her starship just before it self-destructed soon after intruders had boarded.*

By the time he'd finished his Z'arva Red, a crisp and bubbly wine, Infiltrator was starting to suspect the female Mayorfant was the mysterious "SpaceWoman." In general, the logic of deductive reasoning did not lie.

Now he wondered whether at all she was tied to Val-Kul, who he believed was somehow behind sabotaging the heist, purposely orchestrating power plays among the smugglers and insurgents in the galaxy. With Val-Kul dead at his hand, and assuming the Vexari had no connection with the "SpaceWoman," there was no way to unravel the mystery of her identity. The story of the rescued female Mayorfant was considered the best possibility.

He had to confront her. But this meant he had to pay a visit to Sakros. And yet, the Mayorfants wanted no contact with other species.

More largely, he would simply not accept that. He stepped from the corridor and looked at his spacecraft in the docking port and contemplated the task before him with a feeling of excitement. His was no nimble spacecraft. The way he masked his craft from sensors and penetrated Vitrana's atmosphere, would be the same way his craft would descend to the surface of Sakros.

But he had to hurry. There wasn't any more thinking to do about this. He got into the cockpit and started punching in the launch sequence. The spacecraft lurched upward. He glided it out of the docking port and into space. Once he was a good distance away from the station, he hit a switch, and the craft launched into hyperspace, on course for the Autonomous District.

CHAPTER 32

Every little clink of a tool against metal echoed, earsplitting decibels tearing through the old ship-building facility in geostationary orbit above the city of Falga. The sprawling government-owned contractor-operated facility, which started production of unique bejeweled accessories only a day ago, was an impenetrable complex, but no! — it wasn't impenetrable to Infiltrator.

Infiltrator's body was cloaked, shielding him from the sight of any guards, which were always the chief danger of detection he often faced. He walked past the ramp leading to the grand entrance of the facility, before hesitating at a corridor intersection. Bright light illuminated the low rafter, casting shadows all around.

He looked over his shoulder and saw a faint, orange-colored light bounding down one of the corridors. That

seemed the logical route. With silent precision he made his way down the labyrinthine corridor toward flashes of light in the cross-corridor, cutting across his path some meters ahead of him.

After arriving on Sakros, Infiltrator left his spacecraft in an inconspicuous spot between the Danko Mountains and a sheer drop on one side. He had walked the short distance to the capital city of Vago. Upon arriving there, he'd learned of the newly established bejeweled accessories factory above the neighboring city of Falfa. He knew the Jarakans crafted ornate objects from metals from the processed mined ores from Agrossa. For an assumption, it made kind of good sense to believe the "SpaceWoman" had some involvement in that. But he hadn't factored in when he went there, that Neruda a.k.a. the "SpaceWoman" wasn't interested in the factory.

From a few feet away, he heard faint voices coming from the cross-corridor that led to the other side of the facility and where the corridor split right and continued. Glancing in both directions, he ducked into the curve of the corridor in a way without being detected. When he chanced a look, his eyes never left the four Mayorfants deep in discussion as they crossed the cross-corridor and walked through an open door to a large storage room cluttered with crates and containers.

"There are only two samples of the material present," the government planner said, standing in the doorway as everyone else filed in. "With such a high demand, we plan to replicate much more."

One of the Mayorfants pointed to a repair shaft of some sort, and two others were taking notes on clipboards. Based on the way they carried themselves, he guessed they were supervisors engrossed in an inspection.

“What about this Neruda?” one of them asked inquisitively. “I want to meet her.”

Another one asked him. “When is she going to visit this facility?”

The three of them crowded around the government planner, anxiously waiting for his response.

The planner was caught off guard and hesitated before replying, “Neruda is consumed with space exploration. She has been prepping her starship berthed at Vago’s spaceport. She has no plans to visit anytime soon.”

The entourage left the storage room and entered a corridor, talking as they went. And Infiltrator was left to wonder if this Neruda and the “SpaceWoman” were one and the same Mayorfant. When he questioned her, he would know for certain.

Several footsteps somewhere in the corridor interrupted his thoughts. Infiltrator ducked around the corner and saw a faintly lit corridor stretched out before him, completely empty. He rushed through the entry, inching along the rear and crouched down.

A guard moved quickly and silently down the metal-walled corridor, patrolling the grounds. At first, he didn’t see the guard approaching him. The guard’s small form blended into the darkness, broken only by the blinking fluorescent lights overhead.

His eyes roamed the guard as he crouched even lower, trying to keep as still as possible. *Any second now*, he thought. He was charged, ready to spring and attack.

The guard moved closer to him, casting deeper shadows across the floor. He came within inches of Infiltrator, who was pulling a small blade from his boot and beginning to rise. In one quick move, he took advantage and shoved the knife into the neck of the guard, who went down on his face on the floor.

After straightening, Infiltrator listened with anxious anticipation as heavy footsteps were heard approaching from the cross-corridor. He stepped over the body without a backward glance and raced down the corridor. Clearly, escape was a priority for him.

After three hundred paces of running through corridor to corridor, he paused in front of a door beside a narrow, spiraling staircase that would allow him to reach any level of the facility, including the higher level, orbital platform, constructed in the shape of an “L,” with large hangars.

After some quick thinking, he went through the door leading to the rooftop staircase. Taking the metal stairs, two steps at a time, the soles of his boots made impressive, heavy stomping sounds.

Standing at the edge of the roof, the Falga skyline stretched out in front of him. Shrouded in a light mist as dusk drew near, gave the city a unique, eerie quality. From here he could see the city streets below clearly. He raised his gaze only a fraction. Vago’s spaceport was right in his line of vision. He clenched and unclenched his hands.

It was late in the day, and he was tired. For tonight he would eat rations and sleep in his spacecraft. First thing tomorrow morning he would scope out the lay of the Vago Spaceport and find Neruda's starship. And confront that so-called "SpaceWoman" he would, sooner than later. The day after tomorrow he was certain to have a plan in place to sneak aboard her ship.

CHAPTER 33

No matter its age and historic significance, the spaceport of Vago was a vital example of intricate construction. The Mayorfants' extraordinary and innovative architecture had left an enduring legacy through this structure. Its towering presence reminded anyone of orbits, and flight time in space even without traffic controllers in the two watchtowers connected to the large hangars containing landing platforms.

Tattered posters hung from lampposts on the backstreet outside the spaceport. One such poster flapped loosely in the morning breeze:

"CREW NEEDED" was the top line of text, in all caps, on white paper. Below the title it read, "Exploratory voyage to the planet Z'arva." Below that, "Apply at the starship in the Vago spaceport — Neruda."

Tomorrow morning was the big day, the one Neruda had longed for. An upsetting thought hit her: She had no crew or a helpful droid. Not wanting to accept things as they were, she was in a pensive mood this morning.

“Running engine diagnostics,” she said to nobody, sitting in the captain’s chair on the bridge of her starship.

Gradually an orange hologram image of her mother wavered before her. Every second or so, static crawled erratically across her face because a sequence of preflight checks were running. A moment passed before the image was slightly clearer.

“I just wanted to wish you the best of luck again,” her mother said. “I know how much this mission means to you. We said our goodbyes yesterday. And you will be spending the night on your ship, which left me without a way to see you.”

“Thank you, Mother,” she said, sitting up in her chair.

The hangar where her ship was docked had exceptional lighting. A figure in black rushed up the boarding ramp. It wasn’t a moment later that knocking on the rectangular hatch interrupted Neruda’s conversation.

After perhaps a minute the hatch opened with a hiss. On the top of the ramp in front of her stood a female Mayorfant, a little younger and shorter than her. Her black, geometric shape, tattooed across her face, was triangular.

“I have come about this,” she said in a trembling voice and held up the “CREW NEEDED” poster. “My name is Welby. I read a lot about Z’arva when I was younger. My

ancestors immigrated there. I want to come aboard and be your bridge assistant.”

The fire in her black eyes seemed to pass into her voice. Her grip tightened around the poster, still holding it up in front of her face. The eagerness was genuine on her part. In a way, her take-charge attitude reminded her of herself — yearning for something more.

“You claim to be familiar with the planet Z’arva, do you?” Neruda asked, her eyes meeting hers without flinching.

“It is the place where my cousins live,” Welby paused, then added, as an afterthought. “I am not afraid of the risks.”

Her serious expression faded, and a soft smile broke through. “I have no doubt you will prove yourself useful in many things, Welby. Welcome aboard. By the way, you will be my First Officer or the second-in-command, whichever you prefer to be called?”

The tightness of Welby’s jaw lessened with an intense feeling of relief.

“First Officer Welby, at your service,” she said and threw her an excited glance as she stepped into the starship with a hundred questions in her eyes.

“Before you say anything else, your first assignment is to procure an administrative droid, or any protocol droid. And preferably cheap. Time is crucial, because we leave tomorrow,” Neruda said as they moved down the corridor toward the bridge.

Something just occurred to Welby, who suddenly had a thought and couldn't wait to explain it to her. “My uncle has

an old, dented maintenance droid, he doesn't use anymore that we could fix up. Practically an antique, it was only programmed to do general-purpose repairs. But we can reprogram it not just to work and blindly obey orders, but to perform a majority of functions."

"Can we go get it now?" Neruda asked.

Roughly four hours later, Welby was roaming the starship's bridge, familiarizing herself with it. While Neruda was checking over the droid's parts in the engine room. Piece by piece. Welby had been telling the truth when she'd said that the gunmetal-gray, stumpy-legged droid was an antique. It had two long, slender mechanical arms, a boxy body, and a scanner-dome head with rounded corners and a set of bright optical sensors mounted. Exposed wires ran along its neck caked with dust. It was clear the droid wasn't in the best shape. She set to work on doing whatever she could to get the droid perfectly functional.

A tinker here, a tinker there. Almost two hours later, she had modified her quite a bit. The droid shuddered awake and clicked loudly, releasing a high-pitched whine of confusion.

The droid spoke in a curt male voice. "Error! Error! Service — initiating — sequence."

It froze in midmotion. Slightly afterward, its status light lit, and its head tilted to one side and fastened its gaze on her.

"Ready for instructions," the droid said with emphasis on the last word.

“You need to exchange data with the ship’s systems,” she said. “Follow me to bridge.”

The droid continued to look at her — then abruptly moved toward her.

Neruda walked out of the engine room, the maintenance droid a shadow skulking behind her, puttering down the corridor on padded metal feet. The droid beeped and scraped, moseying along, and muttering to itself in binary.

CHAPTER 34

At daybreak, all was ready and all was as it should be. Gazing straight at the forward viewscreen, she was intrigued by the process of getting her starship in tip-top shape for a long voyage. *The starship was all hers*, she thought proudly. At the touch of her fingers — resting on buttons set into the arms of the captain's chair — she could bring it to life.

“Beep bop beep-beep.”

The maintenance droid interrupted her thoughts. From her chair, she surveyed the bridge. Off to the side, she noticed the droid's electronic eyes were set in a fixed stare on her.

Leaning slightly forward, she gave the droid a long, considering look and demanded tightly. “Preflight the starship. Then go to the engine room. We will depart soon.”

The droid whistled in acknowledgment.

She sat back in her chair and smiled at the droid. It seemed to her that piloting a starship was a lot less nerve-racking than interacting with that droid. But she managed it with grace and aplomb. Beyond that, she was satisfied with her small crew's performance.

The bridge door parted to let Welby in, and the droid, without even turning around started to carry out a swift but thorough inspection.

Welby backed away from the droid, who stepped in her path and positioned herself to look over Neruda's shoulder with an eager face. She turned in her chair and gave Welby a lingering look that made her painfully aware of the fact that she had been grinning since she'd stepped onto the bridge.

"I need you to access the engineering consoles in the back," Neruda instructed her. "Open an intercom channel to the engine room, where the droid will be stationed."

Welby gave an energetic bow. "At your command."

Outside the starship, Infiltrator was already very well hidden. Faint light glistened on his mask and his eyes were shaded. If he wanted to break into the ship, he would need to know everything about the spaceport security or, rather, lack of security. Notably there were no roars from galactic traffic arrivals and departures, and neither were there announcements over intercom systems. But it was clear nobody expected any intruders.

Here goes nothing! he thought. What a waste of energy and time and fuel it would have been if he had flown out here and then discovered she wasn't the "SpaceWoman."

But he couldn't allow himself to think like that. Because this was something he would soon find out.

In his eyes appeared the art of simple calculation. Satisfaction had him smiling as he approached the starship attached to a docking berth on the landing platform. His intention was to pry open the access hatch door on its port side, set into the hull.

Eyes darting right and left and scanning around, he crouched. With nimble fingers, he shoved a heavy-duty wrench under the rim of the armored hatch door to unseal it, several times. A soft click was heard as the latch came undone. He pushed at the circular hatch door with his hands.

"All aboard," he said, glancing over his shoulder. "No one in sight."

It was all too easy, he thought, and gingerly slipped through the hatch. Something caught his senses, and he stopped halfway, a miniature tracking device in his hand. No alarm sounded.

"Intruder alert!" Infiltrator heard a voice call out from somewhere in the darkness. "Halt!"

Leaning forward as far as he could, he looked over to see the maintenance droid's head bobbing up and down, eye-lights flashing red. The droid had heard the clamps latch on the hatch and detoured to take a look. With one glance he had the droid sized up, and the warning glint in its eyes made him want to back away.

It stepped to within a few feet of him. "Unauthorized entry."

The droid went after him, put its metal foot against the adjacent wall and knocked into him hard enough to push him out of the hatch. But not before Infiltrator stuck a tracer beacon onto the same wall.

Infiltrator tumbled out of the hatch and fell facedown against his metal mask on the platform. It had all happened so fast that it took a moment to register on him.

Fumbling around inside, the droid gave a huff of annoyance and turned to pull the hatch door shut. With a thud it sealed out the dim light, leaving it in a dark corridor. The droid pivoted around to the other corridor and started to walk toward the engine room.

Neruda who was oblivious to the efforts by the droid on her behalf, was drumming fingers on a chair arm, programming the departure sequence.

Thereafter, she turned to her first officer. “We will be facing the unknown. There is no turning back now.”

Welby observed the viewscreen, nodded fiercely. “I am ready.”

Outside, on the platform, Infiltrator rolled over, sat up and gave a shake of his head. “What just happened?”

Blowing out a breath, he was trying to get his bearings. Blinking in disbelief, he heard the whine of the starship’s faster-than-light engines coming to life. The heavily armored exhaust ports that jutted from the hull flared, blasting fumes. His frustrations boiled over. If it weren’t for the mask, the fumes would have stung his nostrils.

Once the hangar door had retracted, the starship lifted out of its berth. Rising slowly at first, then with increasing speed, the ship zipped away into the sky.

With the tracer beacon activated, his spacecraft would lock on the tracker aboard the SpaceWoman's starship to receive signals, which pinpointed its exact location. A wry grin crept across his face at the thought. No worries on his part, even if the ship had a good head start. In any case, he took off to set a course for it from his spacecraft.

CHAPTER 35

The moons in their irregular orbits over Sakros receded as Neruda's refitted starship got farther away. Everything looked good. Starlight filtered down from the window in the top of the bridge. Shooting past bright stars that lit up the blackness, she turned in her chair. She looked patiently at her first officer, who was smiling into the view of space.

Mesmerized by all of it, Welby let out a long breath. She didn't take her eyes off the stars visible through the viewscreen. The real thing could not be compared to the holographic images she had seen of space. Not to mention the countless simulations in space which she had worked out in Falfa's museum of history. And it hit her that they were going boldly into a place her people hadn't gone in centuries, following the footsteps of their ancestors.

“It feels great to be back in space again,” Neruda said, shaking her out of her musing.

Welby blinked, as if she had said something confusing, but quickly disguised the look. “The view of space is magnificent.”

Neruda smiled her appreciation to fight back a yawn. Tiredness was creeping in, in the form of respite. Dazed, she sat back in her chair to clear her head and remained quiet all of the way to the space around the planet Draxis.

Images came flooding back, mental snapshots she had been trying to suppress. The firefight she had with intruders on the starship. Stuffed into an escape-pod and blasted off from the ship, which exploded before her eyes.

This starship was laid out much like her last one, so she knew where the escape-pods were. In the event of a disaster threatening the crew, the ship was fully equipped with 8 durable escape-pods. The relatively small pilotless pods were located on the upper forward hull, each with a capacity to carry at least two crew members.

But she couldn't allow herself to think of that anymore. The jump point was relatively close. Lights flashed on her command console. So, she touched a control on the chair and maintained a steady vector aimed at the jump point from Draxis' elliptical orbit, grimly determined to get to Z'arva this time.

“Destination: Z'arva,” Welby said, as if her captain needed to be reminded.

The ship increased velocity. Welby felt like she could almost reach out and touch the stars as they flew past. The

stars outside went from points of brilliant, white light and elongated into blurry streaks as the ship entered hyperspace.

Neruda scanned the instrument panel. The starship was cruising at approximately .35 lightspeed on the planned navigational vector of the planet Z'arva.

The sudden tension in Neruda's shoulders eased, knowing they were traveling on autopilot. She straightened up and tried to blink away the fatigue. A yawn escaped before she could stop it. She hadn't slept well over the last two nights. It was catching up to her.

"Check on the maintenance droid in the engine room," Neruda said, and stood upright into a command posture. "Then report to the helm and monitor the autopilot."

"Yes, Captain."

"You have the bridge," Neruda said, fingering a button on the arm of the chair. "I will be retiring to my quarters."

Neruda followed the curved walls of the bridge to the exit. The automatic door hissed open. Without a look behind her, she stepped out, boots shuffling on the gray metal floor of the corridor. With every step, she could feel the dull throb of the engine beneath the soles of her boots. Some of the glow rods that ran the length of the corridor were inactive, casting gray shadows across the polished walls.

She entered her captain's quarters, and the lights came on from the motion sensor. The soft hiss of the atmosphere regulators filling the cabin with fresh air filled the silence.

As she stretched out languorously on a circular bed, she barely had the energy to move her veil away. Light erupted

into her eyes, and she cradled her body, gazing out of the broad window across. The galaxy was swirling past her in a hypnotic cascade of light.

Her eyes fluttered closed. She thought back to when she was a child and receiving her education. In a school, the teacher explained the whole thing.

“Little ones,” he had said, “the Hantavants have a mixed cultural heritage and are not that different from us. After many centuries, the vast majority of Hantavants have half Mayorfant blood. We acknowledge them as our cousin species. Before the galaxy was divided into sectors, we traded starships, with the most sophisticated systems, with them, sharing our most advanced technology. They visited the planet, and one thing led to another.”

Back then, she listened with a neutral face expression. But inside she was fascinated. Her ears were twitching to every word.

As she was growing up, her only wish was to commandeer a ship to Z’arva to establish a connection with the Hantavants again. The Mayorfants needed an ally who they could trust. Who better to understand the Mayorfants than a distant relative?

Yes, the teacher had said, they were her cousins. *Things have changed so much in this galaxy, she thought, and how will the Hantavants react to her arrival?* Would they treat her like family or foe? Only time would tell.

Her eyelids were heavy with sleep. In a comforting way, she felt the vibrations of the ship pulsing through her body.

This made her easily slip into the meditative state she needed to be in. At a slow pace, her mind slipped into sleep.

CHAPTER 36

Why had the maintenance droid suddenly stopped moving in the engine room? Welby, who stood at the entrance, was wondering that very thing. The room's lights, at half power, created an eerie glow around the droid, who stood at a console where the buttons flashed with amber. It had its kinks, but this was something else. Panic welled in her, but she carefully looked it over, her brow raised in a perpetual question. Had it frozen up for good? Maybe it shorted out.

Now that she had time to assess the situation, she paused for a breather, her mind reaching for solutions. The air was bland. Appearing unsettled, she looked around the room at the many openings and exits bathed in shadows. Should she just leave the droid altogether? She lifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug.

On second thought, she didn't want to make any hasty decisions that would have irrevocable consequences on the flight dynamic operations, let alone on this mission.

And then, suddenly, it let out a series of piercing beeps and started to back up. Disbelieving her eyes, her startled first reaction was to want to leave, again. It was, without question, the oddest thing about this droid.

It looked at the amber indicator lights on the console to its left — and then its head rotated up to glare at her. “First Officer Welby, what are your instructions?”

She opened her mouth in shock, then closed it, unsure of what to say in that moment. And she tried not to show how she felt at the droid's behavior.

“Is something wrong?” the droid asked, an edge of frustration sharpening its tone.

“Of course,” she said, her black eyes reflecting the console's blinking lights. “See to those lights.”

The droid stared languidly on the console before it pressed a button. “Some sort of interference with the stability in our passage through hyperspace. Do not fret, the problem has been corrected.”

“All right then, well done,” Welby said, seemingly impressed.

Not knowing what to do next, the droid juddered around his station. Several awkward moments passed as they stood in silence, regarding each other.

“Stay on duty here, monitoring the ship's course,” she added pointedly and made a vague gesture to the console.

“Per your instructions,” came the droid’s synthetic voice, sounding slightly chastising.

“The captain and I are anxious to get to Z’arva,” she said.

It was a slim chance that the maintenance droid had rebooted itself, she reminded herself. Things like that happened with older-model droids. She frowned in sudden revelation, making a mental note to tell Neruda to get the droid tuned up.

Her own thoughts over what had just happened would have to wait. There were things on the bridge that required her full attention.

“I advise not to exit hyperspace too close to a planet,” the droid suggested and fixed her with a stern regard. “If I press this button, I can lengthen our time in hyperspace so we will come out at a farther distance from the planet.”

With a nod, she agreed.

The affirmative beeps from the droid suggested that it would proceed.

With that, she gave a deep sigh and strode out of the room, leaving the droid alone once more. She reached the bridge a moment later and paused to admire its elegant curves and smooth, streamlined design. Spinning around herself in delight, it was moments like these that she couldn’t believe this was her life. How far things had come in such a short period of time.

Gratefully, she sank into the command chair, her veil falling down one shoulder slightly past the armrest. The look on her face spoke volumes. Her eyes shining, she was

in a state of happiness such as she'd never in her life before experienced. Not in her wildest dreams had Welby ever imagined that one day she would be commanding a starship. It was a great feeling, even if she was just filling in for the captain. Temporarily.

Beyond her primary role as first officer, she had a great deal of knowledge about the Hantavants. In this way, she was a valuable member of Neruda's crew. She leaned back in the chair, smiling, staring at the forward viewscreen. The stars were mere streaks light across the infinite darkness of space.

After a span of a couple of hours, Captain Neruda, who was well-rested and bright-eyed, returned to the bridge. She stopped and faced her first officer.

"Report," Neruda said.

Welby stood from the command chair. "We are making excellent time to Z'arva. Only a couple of hours earlier, the maintenance droid malfunctioned but returned to normal operation."

"Thank you, First Officer Welby," she said. "Take your station across the bridge. And thanks for keeping the chair warm for me."

"Aye, Captain," she said and walked over there.

Neruda allowed herself a smile, grateful for Welby's dedication. Taking her seat, she eyed the viewscreen and changed her posture. Her finger remained pressed to the button on the arm of the chair.

After almost two days in hyperspace, a tone sounded from the console. They were approaching the hyperspace gate, coming up on the planet Z'arva.

CHAPTER 37

The stars flying by in streaks of white light suddenly became points as the starship dropped out of hyperspace. Seated in her chair at the center of the bridge, Neruda disengaged the autopilot and felt the shift from lightspeed to realspace. The starship began decelerating smoothly. She studied the instrument panel closest to her and discovered they were nearly one hundred miles from Z'arva.

Her eyes shifted toward the viewscreen. Directly ahead of them was what looked like an outpost on the moon in orbit around Z'arva. A distant convoy traveling in front. Observing this, her demeanor changed. She cocked her neck and stared at her first officer for a response but got none at first.

Welby appeared nervous at the sight of the battleships, which were approaching in a loose V-formation and closing

in on them. She had never seen ships like the ones before her.

All Welby did was shrug and ask, “Can we go around them?”

From this point forward, Neruda fell into a thoughtful silence, trying to figure out the same thing she was. Was it possible to maneuver the starship around them? She twisted around to look at the seven battleships that were static and now close enough to be seen in much greater detail than before on the viewscreen. They were twice the size of their starship and blocking the way to Z’arva.

“I have to be a captain all the time, even in space traffic. Adjust our course, Welby.”

Simply put, Neruda had the matter well in hand when she’d said that with a smile she hoped didn’t look as worried as she felt.

A faint crease appeared on Neruda’s forehead as she navigated, keeping the starship on course for Z’arva. She needed to get out of range of the battleships fast, but they weren’t going to let her pass. When she had pushed the throttle on the engines, a swarm of battleships moved lightning fast to surround them.

“Our shields are up,” Welby announced in a shaky voice.

“Full stop,” she ordered, shifting in her chair uneasily. “First Officer Welby, alert our droid to stop engines.”

The maintenance droid launched into a stream of frantic beeps and slowed the engines. And that easily the starship’s velocity dropped to zero.

Somehow the Patrol-Force United had tapped into their communications. The captain on their flagship appeared on the viewscreen, his gaze steady on Neruda. Standing in front of the central command console, he was flanked by two white-armored soldiers, with blue-and-white chest plates over their blue body gloves. A bitter expression touched his face, which took up the viewscreen. He looked rather like a Hantavant, but with a ridged forehead, which was a possible genetic variation.

He started talking right away and his first question to Neruda was “Who are you?”

The commander of Central Command of the ISS Parthenon outpost hadn’t recognized the starship. So, their space convoy reacted in turn, scrambling around them like insects.

The situation was as tense as she was, if not more, so she answered his anxious question with a trembling voice. “I am Neruda, the captain of this starship. Standing across from me is my first officer, Welby. We are Mayorfants.”

“What brings you to this part of the Industrial Consortium?” came his next question.

“Our mission here is a peaceful one,” Neruda informed him. “We hope to rebuild a relationship with our cousin race, the Hantavants.”

Abruptly the viewscreen changed. Neruda found she was no longer looking at the captain of the Patrol-Force United, but rather a black screen fizzled over with static.

The Patrol-Force United Captain had turned off the communications channel. He looked totally baffled and

went on to explain that he'd always believed he was a variation of the Hantavant species, differing in body type.

"I joined up with Patrol-Force United at age twelve, skipping out on education," he told his second-in-command. "So, I never knew I had any cousins."

He ordered the officer at the science station to search the computer database for any mention of this Mayorfant race along with any references to the Hantavants. The science officer acted with speed and efficiency. He pressed a button, then quickly began keying in a sequence of commands. Data scrolled up the left-hand side of the screen on the console, and the officer quickly announced the information to the captain.

On the viewscreen, Neruda saw the Patrol-Force United Captain materialize, talking as his features filled it. "As a show of good faith, you are granted safe passage for your mission to Z'arva."

Welby glanced up at the sound of the captain's voice. On further scrutiny, she was certain he was a Hantavant.

Neruda was about to respond, but he spoke before she could form any words. "Captain Dirgus out!"

The captain vanished from the viewscreen. Unsatisfied with this encounter, the Hantavant captain turned to the viewport in anticipation, watching their hulking battleships peel off to allow Neruda's starship to pass.

"The Mayorfants picked an odd time to come back to space exploration," he said with a stiff formality, which had an undertone of sarcasm. "Something does not feel right about this whole thing."

“A little too convenient, in the scheme of things,” his second-in-command replied with an icy fierceness. “Just could be connected with all this insurgency garbage.”

For the briefest of moments, they paused to look at each other suspiciously.

“Very well indeed,” the captain said agreeingly. “Keep a close watch on that ship.”

CHAPTER 38

With growing anticipation, Neruda grew restless, knowing that she and her first officer were the first of their generation to see the Hantavant homeworld close up. Filling the viewscreen was the spherical shape of Z'arva — brown and green. She regarded the planet raptly out of awestruck eyes.

It was a proud moment for them. She and Welby were the first of their generation to pursue exploration. But she didn't need to remind herself of that.

Her mind flew back over their transition from hyperspace to the normal universe. Snippets of the conversation she'd had with the Captain of the Patrol-Force United resurfaced from the depths of her subconscious. What she had not liked from her first encounter with a Hantavant was the constant suspicious behavior he had

projected onto her. But perhaps it had to do with these Patrol-Force United, who seemed to serve as guards against unwanted intrusion, though she was not quite sure.

An image popped onto the viewscreen. But this time it was a Hantavant flight-control officer of Maroni's security heavy spaceport. Maroni was the planet's capital city. There was a mixture of tension and elation coursing through Neruda's body before they were allowed to land and given the berth coordinates.

Welby was monitoring the starship's status from a console on the opposite side of the bridge. She moved over to the communications panel and touched a control. There was a moment's pause, then the droid's voice came through with clear resonance.

"Readings are steady," the maintenance droid reported from the engine room.

"We are going in," Welby said, quite ecstatic.

The engines adjusted for a slow descent as Z'arva rotated beneath them. Welby fell in love with the Hantavant's homeworld the moment they had flown over it. She gazed down at the city of Maroni, its modern glass complexes reflecting sunlight. Then she looked down out the window that stretched seamlessly along one side and saw the spaceport far below.

The busy spaceport was a main takeoff point for supply ships transporting food and medicine to other planets in the system. A seventy-meter-long, mottled gray transport bit into the atmosphere leaving the planet behind. More spaceships were lined up on a runway.

The Maroni City Spaceport was an arrangement of four circular open-air landing pads constructed atop a large, flat-roofed building that housed the strategic command center. The building's bubble-shaped tower, used for traffic control, rose on its thick metal stem two hundred meters above the roofs of the city.

The starship touched down with a slight thump on one of the open air landing pads of the extensive spaceport. Neruda slid the ship into a slot.

Per her captain's orders, Welby directed the droid to remain on the ship rather than accompany them. Then she took her place beside Neruda, who palmed the hatch open. They came down the boarding ramp with their veils rustling in the air-filtering system.

A Hantavant posse of officials were waiting patiently at the bottom of the ramp. A nervous hush fell over them. They had their unusual shade of yellow vertical slit eyes on the newcomers. An angular, black spiral shape was tattooed across their pale-skinned faces. Some were tall, some stocky, and some wore all black.

All of them bowed low to Neruda and Welby, and they returned the gesture.

The oldest looking Hantavant male stepped closer with a smile that showed nothing but friendliness. "Pleased to meet you, my distant cousins. Over the years, we had heard many things about the Mayorfants."

Neruda put on her best air of authority and greeted them. It was an electric sensation, and she felt it stimulate Welby the same way.

It was an odd situation at the Maroni City Spaceport, which was thrown into a mess of confusion in seconds due to the presence of the Mayorfants. Security officers stood outside the doorway of the command center trying to get a glimpse of them. Armed guards, carrying laser rifles, stationed in front of the corridor outside the docking port for the Mayorfants' starship, looked for every possible excuse to toss a glance in their direction. Low-level functionaries, such as mechanics, stayed discreetly in the background, quietly observing them with a look of helpless bewilderment.

As a result of that, the spaceport got stalled. The pilots and freighter captains began complaining to the spaceport traffic control about being held up from leaving.

"I am called Oshudis, the ruling Chancellor of Z'arva," the older male said. "I am flanked by four council members. We were all taken aback when we received a message from Captain Dirgus of the Patrol-Force United that a Mayorfant starship was in our space. We were not exactly expecting your arrival."

Beeps sounded behind them and Neruda spun to it. The maintenance droid was standing in the hatch at the top of the ramp.

Maybe the Hantavants can correct its kinks, she thought, as she turned back around, and heard the hatch seal.

The Chancellor graciously offered them a tour of the city. All the Hantavants, along with a half dozen security officers, gathered around them as they walked. Smiling and

agreeing. They strode through the hangar, heading for the short stairway that linked the landing pad to the main floor, which led to the surface of the planet.

CHAPTER 39

Neruda and her shipmate were shown around the technologically advanced city of Maroni. As they went along, they were introduced to civilians and officials alike. Several Hantavants stopped to gawk at them as they walked through the various edifices. It seemed that the Hantavants took this as a diplomatic mission. Not just a return to space for the Mayorfants but a return to interspecies relations.

The tour was lengthy. It looked like the last place they took them to was the city's largest museum of history on the planet. A wide variety of ancient artifacts, antiques, sculptures and collage constructions were on display. By the time the Mayorfants had walked all the wide hallways, they stood beneath a vaulted ceiling teetering with

exhaustion, listening to the Chancellor Oshudis talk about the unusual objects in a display case.

Just when Neruda thought she'd seen everything, the Chancellor informed them. "We have got one more stop on this pleasant tour of Maroni."

She exchanged a tired look with Welby, who shrugged, and gave the Chancellor a big smile. But she couldn't quite summon up genuine enthusiasm.

"Please lead the way," Neruda said, barely able to turn her frown upside down.

The long day was taking its toll on Neruda — more than once she had to rub the weariness from her face as the afternoon progressed. All she could do to keep her mind focused was hope that they would soon be escorted to their lodgings.

Maroni was well-noted for its spaceship building facilities. In recent years, as much as sixty percent of the entire government budget was assigned to manufacturing spaceships in most of the factories. They were taken to the outskirts of the capital, where, at the largest factory, they viewed some of the enormous starships, fastest cruisers and powerful battleships with superior engineering prowess that traveled the galaxy. Compared to Z'arva, the Mayorfants had only two dozen old starships at its disposal. When you broke it down, there really was no comparison between the two races whatsoever.

After introductions were made, the Chancellor spent a couple of minutes giving the Mayorfants his informal tour of the hangar and maintenance bay, clearly the heart of the

facility. Laborers in brown jumpsuits worked on various ships. And engineers and designers were traipsing back and forth from the central corridor to the areas where the laborers were working.

Like everything the Mayorfants had seen thus far, this was worthy of admiration. As expected, shipbuilding had come a long way in the past three hundred years. Neruda and her first officer were impressed by the more advanced Hantavants. It wasn't so much so that Neruda and Welby felt humiliated by their lesser status. They remained proud Mayorfants in regarding their own achievements and didn't think any less of themselves.

On the way out, the Chancellor entertained Neruda with the story of the Industrial Consortium's dependency on them, which came across as egotistical ramblings, an attempt at an untrue vision of their society. Listening intently, First Officer Welby walked behind them, beside a council member, with the rest of the council bringing up the rear.

"Do the Patrol-Force United work for the Hantavants?" Welby asked casually, interrupting the discussion.

Neruda compressed her lips but said nothing. Alternatively, she gave her a sideways look, worrying about her asking questions.

The entourage of council members all turned to look at their Mayorfant guests. Not a second later, they erupted in laughter. The question reminded them that the Mayorfants were behind on critical events in the galaxy by a good three hundred years.

Blissfully ignorant, Neruda and Welby laughed in response. Chancellor Oshudis opened his mouth to have a go but had second thoughts.

“In a way yes, and in a way no,” the Chancellor said when they quieted down a bit. “They are our protectors. This sector is filled with valuable resources. While we design and construct spaceships, the Velonians of Vitrana manufacture the most advanced weaponry.”

As far as the council members were concerned, they viewed the Mayorfants as little more than a humorous and slightly backward ancient cousin. As these Hantavants moved into the central corridor, they had wasted no time amongst themselves in debating their comparisons, concluding with conviction of their superiority. Neither did they realize that Neruda and Welby seemed unaware of the fact that they had engaged in that line of thinking.

“This way,” the Chancellor said in front of them. “We must not be late for our special meal.”

That evening, they all passed through a crystal archway only a few feet from an ornate fountain cascading pink water and descended several black marble steps to the groundlevel of a modern eatery in the heart of the city. A grand banquet had been prepared in the Mayorfants’ honor, hosted by none other than Chancellor Oshudis.

Laid out before her, Welby salivated over the various smells of the displayed sumptuous delicacies. By the time the night was over, the Mayorfants had eaten more than they thought possible and were aching for some rest.

The Chancellor insisted that the Mayorfants be put up somewhere during their visit to the planet, rather than sleeping on their starship. Neruda and Welby were provided with luxurious accommodations at a government building.

CHAPTER 40

Over the past hours Infiltrator had begun familiarizing himself with the layout of the Maroni City Spaceport. Late yesterday, he had taken his spacecraft in a steeper descent, flying low enough to avoid radar-based scanners, to penetrate the atmosphere as fast as possible. His craft reached the surface of Maroni undetected, landing in a vacant area on the far side of the bridge that spanned the river over to the side of the picturesque city of Maroni, not far from the spaceport.

On a number of occasions, he had been to the planet. He had actually only been to the Maroni City Spaceport once, to meet a contact for a weapons deal. So, he was acquainted with some Hantavants there. But he didn't want them to know he was there, considering the nature of his visit.

There he was at this very instant — he sat in the pilot’s seat of the cockpit. Just minutes ago, he’d woke up in the bunk in his craft’s single sleeping chamber. At present he was watching the blinking beacon and listening to its beeps. His dark gray leather-gloved fingers were tracing the surface of the control panel.

A map of the spaceport appeared on the monitor in front of him, and he leaned forward to take a closer look. He was trying to orient himself to make good use of the early morning.

The insatiable smuggler had already devised a plan to sneak aboard Neruda’s starship and hope to run into her. In order to accomplish this, he needed to avoid the spaceport authorities. The plan wasn’t a lot different than his last one. It may have been crazy, but he believed that in some ways this plan was better. In other ways, he was determined to confront that “SpaceWoman,” one way or another.

With a squint, he pulled on his dark gray boots and stalked out. He made his way through the little crooked streets, some filled with people, and maze of narrow brick alleys that led, eventually, to the spaceport.

As he tried to concentrate on what lay ahead, he found his attention drawn to that idiotic maintenance droid. He was going to be ready for it this time. The element of surprise would be on his side. It was an impossibility that the droid knew about the tracking beacon.

A few kilometers later, he ducked into a dark, narrow alley that led to the spaceport, opened a back door and snuck inside. Hurrying along the corridors, and walkways,

he had almost reached the landing platform when two uniformed armed guards stepped out from the shadows to block his path. Both guards had laser rifles slung over their shoulders.

Just as he was about to turn around and go another way, his luck turned for the better. A Velonian in a pilot's uniform, carrying a helmet, came into view. Walking toward the landing platform, he could have been on another planet, so preoccupied was he, his eyes were cast down as he passed the armed guards. He didn't bother to look up until the very moment he was eclipsed by the shadows of the guards.

"Are you carrying any weapons?" one of the guards snarled, aiming a hard look at the Velonian indicating he was prepared to use his rifle if necessary.

Their conversation was of no interest to Infiltrator. The distraction gave him the opportunity to turn and flee in another direction.

Low and behold, there it sat. He studied Neruda's ship through his compact binoculars. How could he forget it? He'd seen his share of retrofitted spaceships before. This one was a type that hadn't been built in hundreds of years.

"Could it be that easy?" he asked himself softly.

The airlock was half-open, and he squeezed inside. The dimmed interior lights made everything look mysterious. He slithered down corridor after corridor. He could tell the 'SpaceWoman' wasn't there. There was no saying whether the Mayorfant would return anytime soon.

The idea came the he could hide in an escape-pod. After takeoff, he would carry out a surprise attack on Neruda and hijack the ship. Why not? He could make some easy credits for this ship, selling it on the black market. Yograx Station was just the sort of place where he could do that.

A metallic clunk echoed from somewhere close at hand. He suddenly tensed and twisted around, scanning his surroundings as if searching for evidence that droid was there.

A stirring to his left drew his attention. As it happened, the maintenance droid slid open a panel in the side hull to gain access to him. The rogue smuggler saw the droid's mechanical hand coming toward him through the darkness. His eyes looked at it in a cold, hard way as he attempted to raise his laser gun. But the droid was quicker and knocked the weapon from his hand, sending it clattering across the metal floor.

To top that off, the droid's voice shattered his calm. "Intruder, leave this ship at once!"

The droid picked up his gun from the floor! It raised the gun and started to point it at him. Of all the things that could've gone wrong, this seemed among the worst.

The last thing Infiltrator could do was the one thing he desperately didn't want to do. He took off running down the corridor.

The droid followed after him. But Infiltrator ran so fast and left out through the nearest hatch.

"Don't let me catch you here again!" the droid said, thrusting the laser gun out at him.

The lights, confusion of sounds — all the stimuli — totally overwhelmed him. In those situations, he couldn't think anymore. In this specific instance he worried that if he didn't leave right away, he could be discovered. With bounty hunters on his back, a voice of reason reminded him that he couldn't take too many risks.

CHAPTER 41

Sunlight reflected on the windows of the opulent foyer of the tower of the Maroni Educational Institute. Welby remained close behind her captain who squinted momentarily, as she moved slowly toward a pair of open double doors. The docent in charge of the institution was escorting them to a small, lavish screening room to watch a holographic video. He wore a long tunic of brown velvet over white pants, and long boots on his feet.

They just had a long morning meal with the most important members of the Hantavant government, who made an effort to acquaint themselves with their Mayorfant guests. As a result, Neruda felt bloated from overeating. Another result was that Chancellor Oshudis and his council decided the Mayorfants needed to be informed about the important events of their history.

“Take your seats,” the docent said with a gesture of his hand and a tilt of his head in a snooty way. “You can both think yourselves lucky that you are here. This presentation is a fascinating walk through history, from the Hantavant perspective.”

A large wall screen dominated the front of the rectangular-shaped room. Neruda adjusted her posture to try to be more comfortable in one of the twenty-two, heavy black leather armchairs spaced comfortably apart.

Feeling the rush of anticipation, Welby had always been spellbound by the myths of the Hantavants. She looked up from her seat at the docent in amazement but succeeded only in looking ridiculous. It didn't fare well with him at all and didn't alter the flat expression on his face.

“Stand by,” the docent said, his unnerving voice setting Neruda's digestive tract on edge.

The screen sprang to life. The first images displayed in three-dimensional animation were of vast clouds of gas and dust depicting the birth of the galaxy. As the planet Z'arva was forming, the gas and dust was thrown outward. It was a zoom-in close-up.

“To better understand the essence of the Hantavants, we must think of the start of our civilization,” a melodic voice said, rising above the instrumental music, cutting through it. “The early Hantavants looked to the stars, plotting courses to unknown lands for colonization against the rising and setting points of stars.”

After a lengthy part about the design and construction of their first spaceships, they got the big flashback of their

first encounter with the Mayorfants, who they deemed simple and unsophisticated.

Did it happen that way? Neruda thought, surprised by their depiction of her people. The makers of this video seemed to have known nothing about the exchange of technology between them and the Mayorfants. Their story centered more around their curiosity in each other and engaging in deep personal relationships. As emphasized over and over on her homeworld, the event of first contact with the Hantavants was a crucial turning point in Mayorfant history. Welby had nevertheless found their story to be engrossing and a bit on the whimsical side.

The video next showed conflicts between structured governing bodies of planets and dissidents. During that period, the Hantavants were noted for their resilience to adverse situations and their perseverance to thrive. The Mayorfants were said to have drifted away from the principles of their society when they segregated themselves from everyone else in the whole universe. The tone of the exhibition was triumphant, yet there was an undercurrent of Hantavant superiority over the Mayorfants.

The docent walked inside and regarded them with a vacant stare. Not a moment too soon, he leered at them before walking right back out, letting the door close behind him with a whoosh.

Was it a coincidence, Neruda wondered, that the docent walked in and walked out at the particular moment.

The story shifted again, the Hantavants' campaign of propaganda. The narrator carried on and on, detailing

themselves as pioneers in space exploration with their innovative shipbuilding. They were seen working closely with the Patrol-Force United. Quite naturally from their point of view, the Hantavants were a leading authority in such matters of diplomatic relations with many species in the galaxy.

As the holographic video ended, they were left with a feeling of profound puzzlement at the absurdity of the way the Hantavants portrayed themselves. At first neither spoke, as their brains were on overdrive just processing everything they had seen. Then they rolled their eyes at each other.

The docent entered the room and asked right off the bat. “Are you impressed, or what?”

“It was ... interesting,” Welby replied with a shrug of her shoulders.

The shape tattooed across his face crinkled like an old newspaper. Based on her response, he looked at her in a condescending way as if he had expected her to say something else. She held his gaze a few seconds too long, as if she wanted to say more, but didn’t. Overall, she had found the presentation boring and on the contrary not impressive at all.

“There are parts that make me cry, no matter how many times I have seen it,” the docent remarked dryly, casting a look at Neruda, who just smiled. “And now you have a great story to share back home.”

Neruda couldn’t help snickering. “I look forward to their reaction when we tell them about our experience here.”

“I must attend a lecture,” he said. “Wait in here for Chancellor Oshudis and his subordinates to collect you.”

Within seconds, the docent was already striding down the aisle. *That was family for you*, Neruda thought, as she watched him walk out the door.

CHAPTER 42

All the time Lurai Sul spent on Tringsun represented time well spent. The first thing she had done was meet her contact being the dedicated bounty hunter that she was. The informant told her that Val-Kul had disappeared, and his vessel was berthed where he had left it at Yograx Station. The rumor on the station was that he had been killed. And that no one was certain of this, but a rogue insurgent, who uses the code name “SpaceWoman,” was responsible for the destruction of an Arachtor warship.

Aside from that meeting, she used the downtime as an opportunity to rest and reenergize, reflecting on what she wanted to do next, and how she wanted to do it. As an end result, she was itching to get back to outer space.

Now she planned to pay a visit to the cantina on Yograx Station to check on the authenticity of the information about Val-Kul and this “SpaceWoman.” In the hangar in the

docking port bay in the city of Bruxdar, she hoisted herself into her ship and set off.

After docking her ship at one of the pylons, she weaved her way through the crowds on the back of the berthing deck. As it often was, the wide corridor was lit with a distinct orange cast to it. This corridor led her quickly to a maze of intersecting corridors which were designed to move a lot of foot traffic. Two times she was forced to slow down as she wended her way farther along.

It was hard to keep track of all the turnings that brought her to the open doorway of the cantina. As she crossed the room, a server droid whizzed past her. Though she couldn't say for certain, she could sense a familiar presence close by. Before she could look around, someone shouted, and off to her left was the circular gambling table with a roulette-like wheel in the cantina's farthest corner.

A game was in progress. As she observed the table, taking in each player surrounding the red felt playing surface, a familiar face came into view: Cragun Hobbs, whose black hooded robe, pants and tall black boots made him appear taller than his actual height. With a boxy nose and a grave, pale face deeply lined with thought, she recognized the albino who had a vested interest in the game.

Just by way of coincidence, Hobbs had left his homeworld for Yograx and arrived here only a day ago. His patience had worn thin more than once, because Infiltrator had been keeping him waiting too long.

Undaunted, she sidled up toward Hobbs, planning to shake him down for information. The only problem was, he

happened to glance in her direction, took a step backward, and then took off toward the cantina's back exit. At which point she immediately followed after him.

At the end of a short, narrow corridor, a handful of Jarakan mine workers were headed towards him, blocking his path. This slowed him down. Behind him, he could hear Lurai approaching fast, following, catching up. She seemed to glide across the floor. Hobbs was unable to get around the Jarakans and was forced to stop. He whipped around and found her standing there, laser gun in hand, just watching him.

He regarded her somberly, narrow-eyed, suspicious. "If you have come to take me in, let us get to it."

All the Jarakans hurried to get away from them. She backed him against the wall of the corridor with the gun sighted on him. The feral smuggler smirked, his albino-red eyes glaring hatefully at her.

Lurai's head tilted slightly, a sign of either confusion or amusement. "Actually, I have come for information, and I intend to have it."

"What kind of information?" he asked, faintly unsettled by her words.

"Are you reading my thoughts?" she asked with a tinge of sarcasm. "Like, where is Val-Kul? Did you kill him? Or did Infiltrator have him killed?"

"I just happen to represent the small percent of Wixuns with a low aptitude for reading others."

A highly concentrated electromagnetic energy field surrounded the Wixun home planet of Attilun, which was

subject to electromagnetic ion storms. This space weather event was characterized by the intense flow of ions and the presence of electromagnetic ion cyclotron waves. All this energy in the atmosphere affected the Wixun population, who were largely empathic.

“Just stick to the questions about Val-Kul and give me the answers,” she said.

“How could I know where he is or what happened to him?” he said, trying to maintain his cool even as his mind raced. “Or even care for that matter. I only came to the station the day before yesterday.”

“You had to have heard something.”

As they talked, his eyes slid smoothly from side to side. He couldn’t help but notice the occasional passerby. Most hurried past without giving them a second glance, their gazes fixed forward.

Hobbs bit back a groan. “I have nothing to tell you.”

“Oh, you have something to tell me,” she said with calm authority. “You know how to find Infiltrator.”

At that, he didn’t want to say anything and turned his head away from the gun.

Realizing this, she moved the gun closer. “Start talking or I will bring you in, right now, regardless of my orders.”

“All right,” he said, restraining a gasp and forcing his voice to remain steady. “I received a subspace message recently. The encryption made the source of the message undetectable, but I could tell it was from Infiltrator.”

Pausing there, Hobbs hesitated to continue, thinking whatever he told her could come back to haunt him.

“What did the message say?” she asked, getting impatient.

He looked straight in her eyes for the first time since the conversation began. “As Vitrana Security probably already knows, we were supposed to set up our next heist. But in that message Infiltrator told me he wouldn’t contact me about where to meet until after he took care of something vital to his plan.”

Lurai stepped closer. “How is he connected to this “SpaceWoman?”

Cragun Hobbs went on to reveal that he was told the same story, but with an additional detail. That this “SpaceWoman,” who he knew nothing about, had caused the explosion of an Arachtor warship involved in Infiltrator’s meticulously planned heist. After learning this, she lowered the weapon and nudged him. She let him go, knowing there was nothing else she could get out of him.

Her eyes never left him. She hated watching him leave, disappearing around the end of the corridor. But after much deliberation the head of Vitrana Security had recently lifted the bounty on him. She holstered the laser gun in the black sash around the waist of her dark brown pants under her black trench-style, mid-thigh length coat. Then she turned and walked away in a different direction from that in which Hobbs had gone.

CHAPTER 43

Going after the “SpaceWoman” was a big mistake. Infiltrator was about to find that out. But as things were, he was one mistake away from being dead meat anyway. It wasn’t enough that he had to contend with Vitrona Security having a bounty on his head, now, unbeknownst to him, the Arachtors had hired a bounty hunter, who had yet to find him. No one knew how to find him. But that was about to change.

Cooling his heels overnight in his spacecraft, he had already devised another plan to capture Neruda. He’d wait for her to return to the starship, kidnap her, take her back to his craft and interrogate her. If her answers didn’t appease him, he’d sell her into slavery to a ruthless gangster at an auction on Yograx Station.

This morning, he rose from his bunk and dressed to leave.

The monitor screen snapped to life. A chime sounded from the cockpit speakers, and an encrypted subspace message scrolled across the display screen. The message was short, simply a screen of white text on a black background — and a terse subject line. Standing behind the pilot's seat, he leaned forward to read it.

Bounty hunter Lurai Sul at Yograx Station. Asking questions about you. Be careful.

He hit the controls that relayed the encoded identifiers attached to the message. "From Cragun Hobbs," who he considered his only loyal ally. At this moment in time, there was no reason to believe anything else but that. The screen darkened instantly.

Perhaps he was overconfident, but he was completely safe on Z'arva. He had come this far — he had to see this through. It was a calculated risk, so he headed back to the Maroni City Spaceport.

It took some waiting and more waiting, but eventually the Mayorfant did arrive. He caught sight of her through the binoculars. A soft light bathed her. His thin mouth was frozen in an odd half smirk. At first glimpse, the petite wimpy-looking female had shocked him. *How could that Mayorfant have possibly took out an Arachtor warship?* he thought as he lowered the binoculars. *Was it possible someone had helped her?* he asked himself. Of course, by someone, he meant the late Vexari Val-Kul.

She didn't look like a hired assassin, he thought, but looks could be extremely deceiving here in this unsettling galaxy.

He knew he had to question her today. His eyes glowing orange behind the diagonal eye slits of the metal mask covering his face gave him a viperish glance. Time to do it. He was going to grab her and pull her away, get her out of there, forcing her at gunpoint onto his spacecraft.

Just when he thought he was in the clear and beginning to follow her, the two Hantavant guards who stood in front of the corridor outside the docking port for Neruda's starship watched him through the polarized visors of their helmets.

Just minutes earlier, two Patrol-Force United soldiers, who had been spying on Neruda's starship, had seen Infiltrator peering through binoculars in that direction. They had sensed his presence, as if the air temperature had changed. Something about Infiltrator just didn't fit here in the spaceport. As if he didn't belong. They pointed him out to the Hantavant armed guards for further investigation.

In another twist, the Mayorfant that Infiltrator was following was Welby, who the guards ignored. Every now and then, he paused to observe the armed guards but saw no sign that they were aware of his presence.

One of the armed guards removed a handheld scanner from his belt and pointed it at Infiltrator's body. Checking the screen, his expression shifted from curious to alarm.

Immediately, the guard spoke into his circular wrist communications device. "Command Center we have a

trespasser. Infiltrator, the most wanted smuggler in the galaxy. We are going to take him into custody.”

The guards, clad in graphite armor worn over black insulated body gloves with laser rifles slung over their shoulders, began their approach of him.

The thud of boots, moving with a purpose, behind Infiltrator, made him stop midstride. He turned around to see a couple of Hantavant guards holding laser rifles aimed at him. When he started backward, one of the guards yelled at him.

“Welcome to Z’arva, Infiltrator — Raise your arms above your head. Down on your knees!”

Infiltrator’s eyes flashed panic. He wanted to make a run for it. But that wasn’t going to happen.

When he failed to kneel down before them, a guard moved closer to him. He struck Infiltrator in the back of the neck with the butt of his rifle, sending him sprawling down to the floor.

The same guard knelt, and slapped metal clamps around his wrists. The two guards lifted Infiltrator off the floor and proceeded to escort him away.

The Hantavant authorities were going to send Infiltrator to prison on a sparsely populated water planet. In the Non-Aligned Sector, the planet Talazar was actually about 94 percent ocean and only 6 percent land. The planet revolves around its prison — handy for locking up the most dangerous criminals in the galaxy. Guarded by a heavily armed paramilitary branch of Patrol-Force United, the impregnable fortress was encased in double stone walls and

razor wire. It rose from a sea-floor of unfathomable depth, approximately 41,000 feet deep with huge hungry things in it.

CHAPTER 44

By the end of the day, the Mayorfants would no longer be on the planet Z'arva. The dutiful statespeople they were, Chancellor Oshudis and his council gave them an emotional farewell reception. There were hugs all around, accompanied by an unusual tearful goodbye. Much as Neruda enjoyed the attention, she couldn't help thinking it was all a bit over the top. Be that as it may, the Mayorfants understood their snobbish cousins.

As a parting gift, the Chancellor had so graciously offered to give their maintenance droid the latest and best available upgrade. If they could do that, Neruda was certain they could smooth out its kinks. She had sent Welby to collect the droid and bring it to a droid repair shop at the spaceport. Welby did just that, unaware what had transpired between the armed guards and Infiltrator.

Originally, the Chancellor offered to give them a droid that was clearly state-of-the-art, free of charge, the kind that cost tens of thousands in credits, much less what it cost to produce. But the Mayorfants had become rather fond of their maintenance droid and convinced them to give it an upgrade. The council felt, that was the very least they could offer them, considering they believed the Mayorfants needed all the help they could get to catch up with everyone else in the galaxy.

After dropping off the droid, Welby went back to the starship to conduct preflight checks, her captain had assigned her to save them time. Because Neruda planned to hang around during the upgrades.

The elaborate equipment and tools centered on a table of the shop were all advanced. Droid parts such as arms, legs and heads were arranged neatly on metal racks lining the walls of the room — some of them in boxes.

“Over there,” the Hantavant technician said, pointing to the diagnostic station.

Neruda walked the droid over to one of the four artificial intelligence modules which were linked together. She knelt beside it and deactivated it.

She raised up and stepped back, feeling somewhat skeptical of his abilities. “Can you really fix this old droid?”

“It is a most unusual model,” the technician said with an air of addressing an inferior. “I have never seen one like it. But I can fix any droid. I know droid circuits better than most anyone else on this planet.”

After inspecting it, the tech informed her that the droid would take four standard hours to upgrade.

“Did you modify this unit or was this model built this way?” he asked and tilted his head at her.

Neruda explained the work she had performed on the droid. That she had done her best to reprogram its circuitry and replace parts.

“Your droid will not be the same after this tune-up,” he said, sounding nasally as he stood back in his burnt orange smock over brown pants.

“Can you explain further?” she asked.

“Your droid will be much more efficient than now, with exceptional skills,” the tech said in what sounded like a more congenial tone. “Like, data access skills, capable of pulling an enormous amount of information without a plug-in. But there is no telling how this will affect its memory banks.”

“I understand,” she said. “Proceed as planned.”

“You made the right decision, and you came to the right place,” the Hantavant said in a confident voice. “I will get this antique bucket of bolts running at the highest level of efficiency with the latest technology.”

Neruda nodded and strolled around the shop, running a gloved finger over various objects to acquaint herself with them.

“To start off, I will elevate its auditory sensors to maximum,” the tech said, and assessed the droid’s neural pathways.

Noticing what she was doing, he ambled over to her. “These are sophisticated items of equipment. Stand near me and observe. You Mayorfants have so much to learn.”

She cocked her head in a puzzled pose, then stood where he told her to go.

Working carefully, the tech ran a tool across the seam under the droid’s scanner-dome head, granting access to its construction. He replaced its redundant neural processor.

Much later, after all the work was finished, the tech reactivated the droid. Its optics brightened. It had come back online. Its exterior had been polished smoothly, its surface entirely free of scratches, or dents of any kind.

Back aboard the starship, Neruda returned to her chair on the bridge and settled back. “Welby, take the droid to the engine room and come back here, to secure for lift-off.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” she said, and stepped through the space in the railing around the helm platform and stood by the droid. “Come this way. You must get acquainted with the workings of the engine room, where you will be stationed.”

It beeped an affirmative and spun on his heel to follow her.

As they soared through the atmosphere as smoothly as usual, Neruda dodged the air traffic. Her gaze was fixed on the viewscreen. Once they got into space, she saw a cluster of Patrol-Force United battle cruisers congregating in orbit of the nearby moon.

At her post, Welby was a bit apprehensive. But this time around, the battle cruisers remained stationary. And their formation didn't appear to be threatening.

Neruda put some distance between themselves and Z'arva. She remained quiet all the way to the jump point. A short moment later, they entered hyperspace in a stream of stars. It would be a couple of day's journey to Sakros.

CHAPTER 45

Neruda's starship shot out of hyperspace, emerging close to Draxis, since there was no safe exit or jump point near Sakros. This was the closest exit and jump point in the Autonomous District. The starship continued to travel in normal space toward Sakros.

Their homeworld lay straight ahead. Neruda stared at the viewscreen and watched as the starship approached the planet Sakros and breached its atmosphere. Twin milky moons shimmered on the horizon, their pale light casting long shadows over the Vago Spaceport. And the Danko Mountains loomed in the far distance. She followed the arrow-shaped lights on the hangar roofs and touched down on the landing platform with a slight thump. For the time being, the starship was back in its home port.

The engines were cut, and Welby went to the engine room to deactivate the droid.

When they walked down the ramp, they were surprised to find a crowd waiting. It looked as if the entire city had come out to greet them. But, in reality, it was their family members, and behind them were the spaceport's skeleton crew of essential personnel.

Welby and her captain pressed their faces together lightly as a gesture of farewell. Neruda was truly going to miss her first officer and at that moment she wanted nothing more than to press her face tighter against her.

It should have felt like a homecoming. But it didn't. Something was off about the crowd — something Neruda couldn't place. Her eyes raced over them. The gatherers were dressed in their usual black, boots, veiled heads and all. But this time their attire was adorned with enough flashy and eye-catching, bejeweled accessories to do a freaky circus sideshow proud. Her eyes went wide from the glint of gold, so rich and precious stones in shades of sapphire blue, shining emerald green, and a gentle ruby-red, which almost blinded her. The variety of heavy, intricate designs, some with vibrant pearlescent metallic enamels, were ridiculously extravagant.

"Welcome back, Neruda!" her mother's voice boomed so loudly the entire spaceport seemed to vibrate.

Neruda's eyes stopped on the large hoop earrings in gold with pearls dangling from the lobes of her mother's ears. Every two seconds or so she tossed her silvery-black veil back over her shoulders. The earrings brushed against her thin neck. She laughed, liking that, liking the way they felt.

“Neruda, you must see the new precious stones and metallurgical objects district in Falfa. It is made up mostly of small shops spread out over Wahbon Street and Khorat Street. And it was spearheaded by the government planner. This is a piece I got from over there,” her sister said and lifted the heavy gold chain a few inches off her chest.

Squinting, Neruda bent toward the exquisite chain, in which was stored a blaze of small diamonds. She noticed that her sister was wearing a matching wristband too. All put together, her sibling’s ornate accessories were quite impressive, seemingly the perfect complement to her black outfit.

Something in the very core of her being cried out that she had to turn around, get back on the starship and leave. She wasn’t the least bit fascinated by this. They weren’t there to celebrate her return from Z’arva. Her arrival gave them an excuse to show off their accessories. During her absence, the Mayorfant society had become crazed about wearing these objects in public gatherings at every possible turn.

In any case, she was tired from the interstellar flight through hyperspace that it hardly seemed to matter. Happily, she went home with her family.

The next day, Neruda ventured out into the city, shopping for a new oxygenator for her starship. She came to the conclusion that the current oxygenator had been malfunctioning. Which explained why she had felt sleepy on the bridge during the last few hours in hyperspace.

When she walked into the merchant's shop she usually went to, she had to place a gloved hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. The used parts dealer behind the counter was struggling to balance the headpiece made of metal and precious stones. Doing her best, she put on her best serious face and approached him. He was amicable and told her he had a contact who could get her a refurbished oxygenator. She agreed to look at it over.

When she turned around to leave, he surprised her with a comment that had nothing to do with used spaceship parts. "I hear you met our cousins, the Hantavants."

There was a faint glimmer of excitement in her eyes. She turned around to face him, eager to share her story of her encounter with the Hantavants. But the look on his face stopped her. His gaze was raking over her outfit from top to bottom. He stared at her for a while, and it was like he was trying to find something.

Finally, he asked. "Did you forget something?"

"Not that I am aware of," she said.

He gave her a strange look. "You are not wearing any ___"

By any, he meant metallurgical accessories. The dealer made a gesture with his hand circling around her body. The sincerity in his dark eyes and the earnestness of his expression told her he was serious about his comment.

"I am not interested in that stuff," she said plainly.

She saw the flicker of surprise in his eyes. He grimaced at that and looked away, pondering her words. And he didn't respond to her answer.

“I will contact you once I get the oxygenator in the shop,” he said and waved her off.

The Mayorfants were going through a cultural movement of sorts, and nothing could stop them. Accessorizing their outfits with objects had become a means of personal expression for them. The popularity of these accessories were even symbolic, reflecting a broad shift in their attitudes.

CHAPTER 46

Lying restless most of the night, Neruda had spent some of the evening, gazing through the open window, far away into the sky, looking at the stars. Not enough time had passed between her last mission and being on Sakros. Still fresh on her mind, she had all the more reason to be longing for the day she could return to space.

After much quiet sulking, at a little after 6:00 a.m., she left her quarters and came to the Vago Spaceport. This was in part because she longed above all else to see her starship, but also to reflect.

Boots scuffling as she walked across the spaceport, she looked around. On a very noticeable level, she was wearing an entirely different expression than the one she had arrived here with three weeks ago. Her gloved hands curled and uncurled in an agitated fashion. For all her resolve, she could not help but be depressed by the emptiness. There

was no movement around at all. She glimpsed the lonely, tiled passageway leading between her starship and a staircase down to the lower levels. Her arms hung limp by her sides. And her head sagged, with one section of her veil tumbling free across her shoulder.

Consumed in thought, her expression was changing into something else, something transfixed. Searching the depths of her mind, where her vivid imagination was like a window to the past, she was able to see the Vago Spaceport in a whole new light. This historic structure that had housed alien vessels from all over the galaxy sprang to life inside her mind. Eyes closed, she was picturing the way it had been more than three hundred years ago. Exactly the way she wished it was today and hoping that one day it might return to that bright prospect.

The busy spaceport had welcomed travelers from across the galaxy. Spaceships of all types and sizes were lined up for takeoff. Incoming traffic buzzed overhead. A stream of passersby who filled the corridors, such as spaceport security, mechanics, pilots, and shopkeepers, intermixed. The sound of footsteps on the stairs and the murmur of voices all around.

The vision didn't last. As her eyes opened, she shook herself free of the lingering daydream. To her, this had been more than a memory of what the Mayorfant race was. But a reminder of things that shouldn't be forgotten by the next generation.

That glimpse back in time put a small smile on her face — which didn't last either. Her head was still lowered, and the sadness crept back in. This was just how she felt.

Her eyes were laden with a complex dissatisfaction. She lifted her chin and looked up through the polarized ceiling glass, skylight windows so old that they had lost their glint. Blinking into the bright morning light, she could barely see the distant stars through the atmospheric haze of the planet.

The more she thought about the Hantavants perception of the Mayorfants, the more logical they seemed. A pragmatic female who dealt in reality, she was certain their cousins' portrayal of them was right on target. It was hard admitting that and thinking like that. As a matter of respect, the Hantavants had earned their place among the most advanced beings in the galaxy. And who was to say the Hantavants had rewritten history?

Neither did she have illusions about her predecessors, who, she felt had defined for all time the role of the Mayorfants in this universe as explorers. Even if today very few shared her sentiment.

Her eyes turned toward her starship, which had become an essential part of her life. More than anything, it was what brought her the most joy.

The revelation hit her like a thunderbolt. She couldn't take it anymore. Not. Another. Day.

Not without crying. There would be no reform. She couldn't allow herself to change direction. Because she loved interstellar travel! Cliché as this was, she was who she was, at the core of her DNA.

Where she would go next almost didn't matter. Almost anywhere in the galaxy would please her.

"Maybe a completely different sector of space," she whispered to herself. "Nothing risky."

She knew she would have to talk about this to her parents again. But later, of course. Her mother was bound to ask some questions and then make an emotional plea about it. She could just hear her mother asking her why she wanted to leave. *Another mission? To where?*

Envisioned her mother's reaction caused a bout of laughter that continued for several minutes. She laughed so hard, tears rolled down her cheeks.

Flash forward, one hour later she was trekking across the city to get to Welby's home. For all she knew, her former crewmate understood her. Well, at one time she did.

With no concern for the hour, she pounded on the door of Welby's home until she was aroused and came forth.

"What is going on, Neruda?" she asked, standing in the doorway.

"Will you be my first officer again?" she asked with an eager expression.

In the interim silence, her mother awoke and called out to Welby. "I have to see who is at the door at this hour!"

Welby didn't acknowledge what she had said, but she could hear her mother stirring about inside their home, and fast approaching.

Blinking the sleep from her eyes, it took Welby a few more seconds to think it over. "Um, when do we leave?"

Happily returning to the stars, Captain Neruda had a new mission. Fortunately, she had the same first officer. Everything was as it should be.

CHAPTER 47

Orbiting a distant Sun-like star, the penal planet Talazar was mostly covered in oceans, with only a half a dozen scattered landmasses that divide the waters into its different parts. Dark gray clouds covered the sky, and billowing clouds of cold, damp fog drifted up from the sea below.

Centered in the ocean, the Myanpour prison fortress was encased in reinforced, barnacle-crusting concrete and steel. Designed to hold the most hardened inmates, this edifice was constantly battered by powerful winds, salt spray, waves, and violent storms.

The prison was run by ruthless branch of the Patrol-Force United. The over one hundred guards were equipped with red body gloves worn under their black armored uniforms, Taser-like batons, as well as laser pistols. Horseplay of any kind among the inmates had no part or place

here. wasn't tolerated. The guards were straightforward, tough, threatening enough, and nonsense wasn't tolerated.

Breaching the prison meant death and only death. There were huge, hungry predators hunting for their next meal in the oceans — megasharks, stingrays, and large electric eels. No prisoner dared to escape for fear of an attack from a sea creature.

The man formerly known as Infiltrator was in the laundry room in the lowest level of the prison. It was as dimly lit as the rest of the facility. His job was to put clean prison uniforms on a cart. Another inmate would deliver the clothes to each cell block before returning the cart to the laundry room.

In here, he was just another criminal. He was no longer called Infiltrator and became known instead as Sky Rodenko. This name could not convey the right connotation of his character, but he accepted it in stride. Time moved differently in prison. A lot had changed for him in the past thirty days, and he realized that life was not what it used to be.

To start with, his appearance had changed. Though he maintained a strong physique, his brown dreadlocks that hung to his shoulders had been cut short, in a crew-cut style, and he was clean shaven. His dramatic reddish-orange skin tone stood out against the somber clothing. He wore a white thermal long-sleeve top with a number stamped on its chest in a ring of black digits and brown pants, easily fitting in with the inmates. The only difference was that he used his time to always clean and press his uniform. No one seemed

to notice he wore his uniform with a certain elegance, seemingly tailored to his muscular figure.

His day was long over. He left the laundry room and trudged across the gloomy corridor, almost bumping into an inmate who'd walked in from another corridor. Rodenko gave him a withering stare.

"Get out of my way or—," the inmate demanded, then spit on the floor.

"Or what?" Rodenko asked with a leer, figuring it was getting pretty close to a fight.

A staring match ensued, the two of them standing with arms folded across their chests, a murderous look in their eyes, and chins thrust forward.

"Sky Rodenko," shouted a guard. "Better not be your voice I am hearing."

Not one to back down, Rodenko remained in his stance, watchful of any sudden movement from the guards.

"Stopping talking in that corridor," said another guard. "You do not want us to go there!"

Armed guards were at every corner. There was to be no funny business between them. Fearing the worst, the inmate turned around and went back where he had come from.

"Another time, another place," Rodenko whispered at that inmate as he disappeared in a fever of relief and scorn and apprehensiveness. "This is not over."

Alone in the semi-darkness he stood, his wistful gaze turned towards another direction. He took a sharp right turn, then took a tunnel, which spiraled up and around, until he came to his cell-block door.

Just for an instant he hesitated before he stepped through the door and shut it behind himself. Barred cells flanked both sides of the corridor. Water dripped from overhead pipes, making walking tricky on the cracked stone floor. It had started raining, hard patter hitting sideways against the fortress.

A stern-faced guard who'd been standing by watching him, opened his cell, gave him a dirty look and motioned him inside. A foul odor whooshed out, a stench of a latrine that was nearby. The antique iron door slid shut on protesting hinges.

He laid down on the cot. His head hit the cold pillow. Despite the short amount of time he'd spent inside, he couldn't get past the smell of rust and seawater.

What was he doing here? How did he let this happen? He had asked himself those same questions so many times — and didn't like any of the answers.

The Praloon now calling himself Rodenko ran his own finger across his scarred face, with a distracted look. An escape plan was in the works, if only in his mind. Since the day he had arrived, he had thought of nothing else. If anybody could slip through the cracks unnoticed, he could. And he had a great ability to change his mannerisms to turn a situation to his advantage.

The wire mesh-enclosed cell lights and the corridor lights were off. It was so dark that he couldn't see a thing. All were sleeping or pretending to sleep. The occasional sound of boots scuffing the floor came from the armed guards patrolling the corridors.

His eyes were nearly closed. He wanted to sleep now and dream of these things. Just before sleep claimed him, always his thoughts were the same, always thinking about escaping.

CHAPTER 48

Like a cannonball being shot out of a cannon, Cragun Hobbs' small scarred ship spit out of the stable wormhole and entered normal space near Perennis Prime. Within less than a minute it passed through a cosmic cloud of gas of the Garynx Nebula. After docking, the albino white skin Wixun exited the ship, and the air lock clacked and rolled open.

Carrying himself like some kind of dignitary, here he opened the front of his cloak and threw back the hood. The glow rods overhead cast a shadow over him, except on his forehead — smooth and broad, interrupted by a pronounced, diamond-shaped third eye at its center. At the end of the white-walled tubelike metal corridor, much to his distaste, the station's second in command was waiting. The droid's glowing photoreceptor eyes were almost hypnotic.

For a moment neither one moved. There was history between them and Hobbs could see the awareness of it in

his eyes when he looked at him. He didn't like droids. Because he would never be comfortable with technology that could be judgmental and vindictive. In Syn Dat's case, he didn't trust organic life forms, specifically the greedy smuggler-types.

The droid nodded at him. Hobbs began walking toward him.

As the smuggler came to a stop, Syn Dat stepped forward a couple of steps and folded his arms, servomotors whirring. "Cragun Hobbs, you received my message."

"I am here because you summoned me here," Hobbs said in a seething tone.

"That was nearly thirty days ago," the droid said with a scathing glance.

"I am here now!" Hobbs said, sounding irritated. "What was this urgent message?"

"A subspace message came through our command center's secure communications channel," the droid stated in a methodical and clear manner. "The message was addressed to you."

Who had sent the message? Hobbs thought. The answer to that was important.

"Show it to me."

Syn Dat nodded, gesturing with a metallic hand for him to follow him to the command center of the main station. Along the corridors they went, past white armor-plated droids who shot back and forth at every turn. When Syn Dat arrived at the computer console, he typed in a password. An encrypted message appeared on the screen.

“Upon review of the intercepted message, we can neither decipher nor interpret it,” Syn Dat said. “It is protected by a sophisticated encryption algorithm.”

“The message is for my eyes only,” Hobbs said in a scathing way.

Slyly, Syn Dat exposed his mouth in a metallic smirk. “It is a shame Infiltrator is locked away in a Patrol-Force United run prison.”

“He made a mistake and got caught,” Hobbs scoffed. “What is it to you?”

The droid tilted his head at him with a satisfied air about him, which suggested the fact that he was well satisfied with what he’d just said to him. “Remember what happens to smugglers who get sloppy.”

The answer made Hobbs pause.

“I want to read the message in private,” he said with a malicious grin, and slowly glanced the droid from top to bottom.

“Indeed, I reckon you will,” Syn Dat replied, turned on his heel and headed down the aisle.

Syn Dat walked up a flight of steps to the platform level. He ignored the battle droids stationed at either side of the doors and turned to the wall. There, he pressed a button on the security keypad. A metallic clank came from the doors when they glided open.

Once inside the control room, he found Commander Golo-DEX at his desk, staring at the communications panel screen.

“Cragun Hobbs is translating the message as we speak,” Golo-DEX said with hurried anticipation.

“Excellent news, Commander,” Syn Dat said, with a faint nod.

“Just seconds from now we will know who sent the message and what it is about,” Golo-DEX said, quickly and more anxiously.

A surveillance camera was focused on the computer console Hobbs was accessing now. He hadn’t noticed the camera mounted on the ceiling. With his moody temper preoccupying him, the thought of such a thing as a spy camera had not occurred to him.

The funny thing was he had gotten carried away in the moment. The moment he knew the message was sent from Infiltrator. He thought the droids were “stupid” for not figuring that out.

This encryption algorithm was familiar to him but required substantial effort to bypass. It was just Infiltrator’s luck that Perennis Prime was too good at intercepting long-distance messages. He tapped a few buttons and a message appeared.

Up in the control room, Golo-DEX glanced at the translation on his screen. The commander and his second in command looked at each other. Golo-DEX began laughing. Syn Dat erupted in laughter as well, optics flashing.

“Infiltrator asking Cragun Hobbs to help him escape from Talazar,” the commander said, his voice heavy with irony.

“There is no chance of escape from that fortress,” Syn
Dat whirred in agreement and walked out of the room.

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CHAPTER 49

When he arrived at Yograx Sation, Cragun Hobbs docked his spaceship smoothly at one of the towering upper docking pylons of the base. The hatch opened and he emerged. The hood of his black cloak, which hung heavily from his shoulders, shadowed his face. The last thing he needed was to be recognized. It was a risk coming here. Always was for him, but he had to do this for his old pal Infiltrator's sake. He owed him this much, after him, saving his life on countless occasions. The most recent occasion was weeks ago when he fled Vitrana in his ship, with Lurai Sul on his trail. He had contacted Infiltrator, who in turn had coordinated the perfect ambush by an Arachtor warship to intercept the bounty hunter. All things considered, he needed Infiltrator around to watch his back. Most of all, he was pleased to know that Vitrana Security had lifted the bounty on him, even if it was temporary.

Infiltrator had a contact, who worked as a mechanic on the station. This mechanic was going to change his ship's ID profile to one that would make it difficult to detect. Once the work was completed, he could mask the presence of his ship, hiding it from Talazar's short-range sensors.

While this work was being done, he went to another one of Yograx's upper pylon docking ports to watch the incoming and outgoing traffic through the airlock viewport. The breathtaking view made him want to reach out and touch the bright stars. He had no way of knowing that he was standing not far from the spot at which Infiltrator had pushed Val-Kul out the airlock and into space.

A mild creak betrayed someone's movement. Then came the sound of footfalls against metal — a noise alarmingly growing sharper, closer, louder — until he was forced to swivel his head back toward it. A pair of tall black boots appeared at the top of a flight of stairs leading to the room atop the docking pylon.

As the boots descended, he turned his head back around and retracted his face into the hood of his cloak.

"Lurai Sul," he said with a dragging reluctance. "I knew it was you by your smell, From bitter experience, I can tell you Praloons all smell the same."

Lurai stepped into the dull light, and he glanced over his shoulder to see the amused smile she wasn't even trying to suppress. His face softened for a couple of seconds, then sharpened.

"Sarcasm becomes you," she retorted and took two steps forward before stopping, as if she had been about to

charge and attack. "I apologize for interrupting your busy schedule. Realizing all these smuggling jobs you have on your plate now that Infiltrator is out of the picture for good. That is why you are here, right?"

"Straight to the point as always," he said and pivoted to face her, throwing back his hood and revealing a grinning face. "My ship needs some repairs. Bugger off!"

"I will not bugger off," she said, thinking that he was lying. "What kind of repairs?"

"I do not have to answer your questions," he said, chuckling deep, a throaty sound that made her skin crawl with irritation. "How did you know I was here? Do you have a tracking device on my ship?"

Good guess, she thought. Maybe he did have empathic skills, after all.

He sensed that she had no comeback to that and began to hum tunelessly. That made her very upset. Her hand dropped to the hilt of her laser gun so hard that she felt her fingers loosen around the handle. He went dead quiet.

She removed her holstered gun. "Look here, I have a hunch, that Infiltrator has a plan. A plan to escape, and a mindset to get the plan working with you helping him."

"Hold off on pointing that gun at me," he said, with a snip of impatience in his voice. "I do not disagree with you in thinking that. As I would not put it past Infiltrator to try to escape. He has plenty of allies and enough mercenaries on his side to carry out some kind of a scheme which would set him free."

She wasn't convinced by what he'd said, because his eyes told another story.

"But he trusts you the most, especially where his life is concerned."

His face tightened. And she knew from the frown that crossed his face that her hunch had been right.

"There is no escape from Talazar," he said, in a nervous way.

Now, she pointed the gun at him and stepped closer. "I have a deal for you. Let me map it out for you. I will not prevent you from getting Infiltrator off that planet. Because I want you to deliver him to me."

"Why would I do that?" he asked, the tension in his voice heightened.

Hobbs wasn't going to give into her. His lips curled in that familiar look of disdain.

"Vittrana Security will triple the bounty offered for his capture," she said enticingly. "I really need the credits. You have my word, my promise, to give you a hefty amount of those credits."

The lights above them had snapped off, and then on again. Images were flashing through his mind, which was bouncing all over the place, and in the process causing electrical malfunctioning. He had never betrayed his friend before but would probably start now. Lurai Sul was right. The bounty placed on Infiltrator's head would surpass all expectations. And he sensed she would deliver on her promise.

His look softened and a weird smile passed over his face. “What do you mean by hefty?”

Lurai Sul regarded him for a long moment, before she lowered the gun.

CHAPTER 50

Days later, the weather intervened in Sky Rodenko's favor. Thunder rolled and clapped. Outside the fortress, a flash of jagged lightning split the dark, heavily-clouded sky with a bright horizontal line illuminating the waves of the storm-tossed sea. If Hobbs stuck to the plan he had laid out for him, he would rescue him on the first stormy night, which would provide the perfect cover.

Rodenko had little time and much to do. He rose quietly from his cot bed attached to the wall. On the wall under the sink, he pried open the vent's cover with his fingers, revealing a map scratched into the wall — fortress passageways. In all his time there, he had snuck around, studying every nook and cranny of the institution.

He knew the layout of the prison — and memorized the route on the map, knowing he could handle whatever might happen. Even he was prepared to die.

His fingers wrapped around the tool in his hand — a metal fragment he had stolen from the infirmary, his own skeleton key.

His face grew ghastly white when he heard something like boots drumming down the corridor — or was it a distant roll of thunder? He prayed it was the latter; the last thing he wanted to do was cancel his plan for tonight and proceed another night. The ever-present threat of an armed guard catching him in the act wasn't paranoia. A shudder ran through him from head to foot,. But he wouldn't allow himself to lose control, although he was tempted to throw his skeleton key across the room.

The storm grew more furious. The wind outside howled louder, rattling the fortress walls, and he could hear the distant thunder. He hoped it had been thunder.

With the weather being the way it was, visibility outside was poor. The Patrol-Force United armed guards would be distracted by the weather, rain pattering all around them and the water leaking through the ceiling and walls. Their attention would shift from the cells, and from the sleeping inmates. That was what he was betting on.

There were no sounds in the corridor. It was nearly four o'clock in the morning. He had to get out of here. It was bad enough that the stench of the latrine hung heavy in the air.

The time to move was now. He inserted the crude tool into the lock of his cell door. wriggling it gently until he felt the distinctive click of the lock give in.

The iron, grated door unlocked and swung open with a soft groan. He slipped out. All was quiet and still. No

guards in sight. Moving quickly, he headed for the nearest, adjacent passageway. He crept down the corridor, and concealed himself in the shadows, hugging the wall.

It didn't take him long to get outside the fortress. The air was thick with rain showers and mist, and a more miserable storm could hardly be imagined. He was already drenched and freezing. Clinging to the edge of the cliff, he wondering if he slipped, was he going to drown or be torn to pieces by the sea creatures in the ocean.

The wind continued to strengthen. Gusts of wind swept up and pushed against his face. Waves crashed relentlessly against the fortress with mighty roars, sending ocean spray high into the air. By the sheer force of the water smashing into him, he inhaled deep shuddering breaths, wondering if the next one would be the last.

His body low, he pushed himself up to his knees. Below his feet, barely visible, floating at the surface of the ocean, was an oxygenated pod no larger than a coffin. From his ship, Hobbs had ejected the underwater pod into a long trajectory that sent it into the ocean. His good old smuggling buddy had followed his instructions to the letter.

Rain and wind pelting him in the face, he stooped down and flipped open a panel. His wet fingers tapped some buttons, and then he scrunched himself into the narrow pod. It launched seconds later, rocketing into the writhing sea, darkness swallowing him.

Somewhere in the black depths of the sea, megasharks stirred, attracted to the heat produced by the fast moving pod. The huge creatures were swimming in packs alongside

one another. One of the creatures slammed its body against the pod — razor-sharp teeth scraped across the hull. Warning lights flashed.

I am going to be eaten alive, Rodenko thought glumly, but stayed on course.

The megasharks roared, circling around, joined by electric eels, which were using their electric signals to communicate. Jittery beyond belief, he gritted his teeth, rerouting power, shielding the crucial components. And the pod dove deeper, evading their pursuit.

“Land Ho!” he exclaimed with joy.

One of Talazar’s few landmasses, at four-square-kilometers in length, loomed ahead of him.

Rodenko was almost there, and he felt a spout of adrenaline rising through him. He tapped buttons, trying to improve the navigational system. The pod burst out of the water, soaring toward the land. It crashed into a rocky shore, cracking the hull from stem to stern.

He strode from the wreckage, bleeding from a cut on his leg. Filled with a sense of triumph, his mind was ignoring the chill. He circled around himself, then paused to take in the uninhabited, jagged island.

There was a moment of disorientation; then his chest suddenly felt tight with emotion because he was here. Sucking in a quick breath, he was counting himself lucky to be alive. All he had to do was wait for Hobbs to come to him.

“Where is that no-good louse, anyhow?” he roared, suddenly feeling ungrateful.

The onslaught of the rain had the effect of a cold shower, that was for certain. *Cragun Hobbs better high-tail it here if he values his life*, he thought.

CHAPTER 51

A still shivering Sky Rodenko was slouched in the copilot's seat behind the pilot Cragun Hobbs, arms and shoulders stiff. His skin leached of color, he was wearing a long-sleeved white thermal shirt, faded brown pants, and dark brown boots. Hobbs, who had given him a change of clothes, was adjusting switches on a control panel, monitoring. Against the brutal downpour, the ship accelerated hard, ascending into the sky.

Clear of the atmosphere and away from Equello, Hobbs switched to autopilot just as the storm did manage to drop the ship a little. His red eyes, shadowed by starlight, were flicking between the space outside the viewport and his so-called best mate behind him.

"We are less than half an hour from reaching the jump point," Hobbs chimed and handed him a metal flask filled

with ale. “To new beginnings, Sky Rodenko. It is not easy getting used to calling you that.”

His thoughts, betraying him, Cragun Hobbs turned to him, offering a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. He was trying to get inside Rodenko’s head with his charming, deceptive ways.

Innocently enough, Rodenko accepted the flask, but with a wary glint in his eyes. He examined it closely and turned it in his weathered hands. His fingers brushed the rim, feeling the polished metal.

“It is too early to celebrate,” Rodenko said with a cautious smile.

He laughed, more of a forced laugh. “Take a sip. Kick back a little, Sky. I want you to enjoy. You earned it. You are the first to escape Talazar.”

Something seemed to warn Rodenko that he shouldn’t drink. There was a feeling that he was in a very serious predicament. His calculating eyes darted to the console.

Those aren’t the right coordinates, he thought.

Quickly his mind flipped through possibilities, his nerves flaring. Betrayal?

His face twisted into a frown as he set the flask between his legs and leaned forward confidently, eyes never leaving him. “Where were you taking me? Who got to you, Cragun? How much are they offering you?”

Hobbs’ face, pop-eyed with fear, turned quickly toward the side panel where a laser gun was hidden.

Rodenko threw the whole contents of the flask over his hoodless head; remarking as he did so, "Our friendship is over, Cragun."

In this attitude, they grappled silently for a couple of moments, glaring wildly on each other. Not a word. Only loud breathing and the dull thuds of their arms locked around the other.

Hobbs wrenched his left arm free and punched buttons on a keypad in the split seconds he had to work with. Because with frightening speed, Rodenko managed to stick a razor-sharp steel object into the throat of this dreadful former friend. But not before Hobbs programmed the ship's autopilot to crash into the small, brown-and-green planet ahead.

Not too far from the colossal prison world of Talazar, in the same sector, was a wasteland planet called Equello. It was home to a monstrous, cannibalistic, alien people. Throughout the galaxy, talk abounded with stories about crews that never returned from the planet. Like most everyone else, Rodenko had been caught up in the whirlwind of these reports but bitterly dismissed these reports as superstitious nonsense.

Hobbs sat slumped in his seat, forehead resting on his fingertips, bleeding profusely from the neck.

"See the viewport," Hobbs said, speaking his last words as he realized he was dying. "You, too, are going to die. A terrible death on Equello, mauled by cannibal creatures."

"You are a fool to believe in myths," Rodenko said, attempting to unstrap himself and failing.

Moving in desperation and panic, Rodenko checked the viewport, as the ship angled into the misty atmosphere of the planet. He banged out commands, wrestling with the controls. But he couldn't disengage the autopilot.

Alarms screamed out with alerts flashing. The engines made disconcerting grinding sounds. He had only seconds to push a button and the cockpit popped open. The copilot's seat ejected at 280 knots into a cloudy sky and the parachute successfully opening at 160 feet, lowering him gently toward the ground. On this planet, there was no storm, but it was raining softly.

More and more old, lost and abandoned spaceships came into view. Despite the slight drizzle of rain falling around him, he felt a growing excitement, knowing he could get one of them in the air. And he watched Hobbs' ship lope toward the surface and crash in flames.

The parachute got caught in a tree with heavy, wet foliage and large limbs, and he had to pull the straps from the seat off of him. He slowly climbed down the tree, and great was his surprise to find a cluster of dark figures that were grouped around some trees a dozen yards away from him. More figures flashed between other trees in the distance. He couldn't make out their faces, or their features.

The air was thick with the scent of decay. Staring hatefully out into the rain, he hadn't been there that long, and the smell of something rotten was already getting to him.

As he walked, the branches creaked and groaned as if in agony. Almost as if he were a mirror, the shadowed

figures were mimicking his movements, slowly drifting toward him. He could hear them smelling the air and smelling his scent with sonorous gusts of breath. At every sound, he was whispering to himself that there was nothing to be afraid of.

Some came into view, but he had to struggle to see through the patches of mist. But soon the drifting clouds of mist cleared a space and permitted him to see loony, distorted faces twitching their noses. Big loose-limbed bodies with long hair hanging back in a wild, disheveled mass was a ghastly sight.

“Stay back,” he hollered, shaking his head in disbelief.

It turned out he was a fool for not believing such things about Equello before, he thought.

Defenseless against the many, he increased his already frantic pace. And then he started running toward the nearby rusty, bulk freighter with brown blotches over the cargo bay doors that was half buried in the jungle underbrush. As he neared the vessel, the surrounding bushes tore at his wet clothes and whipped his face.

CHAPTER 52

On Vitrana, an irritated Lurai Sul exited the narrow corridor of the massive weapons factory and stepped onto the carved stone deck on the roof. Her pretty features had looked more petulant than angry as she walked past the blinking lights on the edge of the deck heading toward her ship.

Her mood was less than affable, and for a good reason. She had just had it out with the head of Vitrana Security at a meeting in the monitoring chamber. Cyrok Mor had told her a few things and had greatly upset her. The alarming thing was that he told her straight out she hadn't been thorough enough in her search for Infiltrator and Cragun Hobbs. And that there was no evidence proving those no-good smugglers were dead. She didn't like being on the other end of the questioning. It was already bad enough she

wouldn't be compensated at all for her labors, not for her time and not for her trouble.

These stains, on her otherwise excellent record as a reputable bounty hunter, had taken a toll on her confidence. The bounty hunter life suited her most days, but she had to question it, as it could be fruitless and frustrating at times.

Somewhere behind her, she could hear Fazil Rogaz's voice calling out from the narrow corridor, trying to catch up with her. This whole time he had been trailing her, just waiting to get her attention, she had done her best to ignore him.

In spite of her reluctance to dwell upon the conversation between the head of Vitrana Security and herself, she slowed her pace to the landing pad. Ultimately, she stopped feet away from where her ship was berthed. Drawing in a deep breath, she subtly forced herself to turn around and acknowledge him. Rogaz was striding toward her with his black robe with gold cords looping over his shoulders swaying around his long legs.

"This is not a good time," Lurai said, which wasn't a stretch of the truth. "In case you have not noticed, I am not in the sweetest of tempers."

"I noticed, all right," he said, met her eye, nodded and smiled. "It was hard not to, with you storming out of meeting and giving me the cold shoulder. I am sorry Cyrok was so tough on you."

To her frustration, Rogaz didn't seem put off by her attitude. Including that, there was no hint of the submissive subordinate she had seen in the meeting as he stood there

under the rays of the sun, which was glinting off the blue crystal pendant with the Vitrana Security emblem engraved pinned on his robe into his face.

Firming her resolve, she shook her head. "I am unable to prove it; but this much I know, that Cragun Hobbs and Infiltrator are both dead. The tracking device went dead somewhere between Equello and Talazar. Hobbs' ship must have crashed somewhere, possibly because of the stormy weather. There is no other explanation."

Lurai looked adamant, and definite as she spoke. The last words she'd said were barely audible. The sound of engines started up somewhere above, making it almost impossible to hear anything else. A large, beat up transport was dropping down from orbit. The sound getting louder, they watched as the transport set down on the landing pad on the far side of the deck. The garbled noise of the ship's shut-down hydraulics made Lurai's head pound for a brief second.

"I do not disagree with you," Rogaz said in the quiet. "I believe they are dead too. But I could not admit that in front of him. Regardless of what Cyrok thinks, I know you have done everything you could since you came on board with this mission to find these smugglers."

"Yeah, but I still need to find a job that pays," she said with a tone of gratitude in her voice. "Until we meet again, dear friend."

He grinned broadly. "Keep your chin up."

Her energy higher, than she had felt earlier, she wanted to hug him from the euphoria she felt, but she held herself

and walked up the ramp. In the biggest way possible, he had helped calm her nerves.

It was just a moment later when Lurai was inside the ship, with the hatchway door sliding shut behind her. The landing ramp closed with a hiss, and the engines started up. The ship rose abruptly and climbed at a steep angle.

Rogaz stood there blissfully in a swirl of wind whistling around him. He tilted his head back, watching the ship ascend swiftly into the Vitrana sky.

The indicator light flicked to green on his wrist communicator. He had an idea who it was as he pressed a button on the side of it.

An image of Cyrok Mor seated in the central chair in the monitoring room appeared before him. Just as he'd imagined, it was his boss, and seeing his face made his brain whir.

"Fazil Rogaz," the head of Vitrana Security said with a sharp, resonating voice where each syllable stood out clearly, landing with precision. "Where are you? How dare you leave like that! What were you thinking, chasing after that bounty hunter? Return to the monitoring chamber at once!"

He blurted back the first thing that sprang to his mind. "Go stuff yourself, Cyrok!"

Rogaz was deeply satisfied by the look of profound confusion on Mor's face. In a frenzied fit of anger, he tore the wrist communicator off and the projection of Mor vanished. He threw the communicator to the floor and crushed it under a boot.

“Consider this my resignation,” he said, walking away from the landing pad. “Now I need to find a job too.”

CHAPTER 53

Evidently, the head of Vitrana Security was right not to believe that Cragun Hobbs and Infiltrator were dead. Though Hobbs was very much dead, Sky Rodenko was very much alive. And he was very busy trying to stay alive.

Night had fallen on the forest. The darkness deepened around the freighter, Sky Rodenko was holed up in. This, for him, was the worst time of day.

Twenty days ago, he had successfully snuck onto this Vitrana freighter without the creatures seeing him. In the course of searching around he came upon what was left of seven or eight Velonians that the creatures had killed and eaten. It was a grotesque sight. And the thick smell made it even worse. He gagged and clenched a fist to keep his nausea down as he dragged their remains to the empty cargo hold.

In the time he'd been there, he tidied up the vessel and just yesterday he replaced the depleted fuel cells with the ones he'd found in a storage compartment. There was more than enough power in the cells to run the freighter, but the expected duration was uncertain because of to their age, which couldn't be calculated.

Keeping his eyes wide awake, he lay under a brown blanket on a cabin's single bed, listening to the whistling wind in the shrubbery mixed with the grunts, snarls, snaps, and thumps. Every night it was the same thing over again. The creatures made the most horrible sounds. He could hardly sleep at all, tossing about all the time, for fear they would detect him.

Meanwhile, he had other concerns, like running out of the dried rations. It was imperative that he leave tomorrow.

As the night progressed, he listened to those lurking, flesh-eating savages for just about as long as he could stand it; then completely zonked out. For the few hours he'd slept, the dreamless slumber soothed his weary mind and body.

Dawn came, and he awoke with a feeling of suffocation. There was an urgency in him to get this ship running and in the air.

Gaunt, dirty, and, with bloodshot eyes, he was seated at the helm position of the freighter. There was a small light flickering above his head like a candle.

An indicator flared for a moment right next to him, jarring him out of his concentration. His expression fell. A blanket of melancholy descended upon him as he tapped controls on the helm console with a trembling hand. It was

the constant frustration and the growing fear that the engines wouldn't start. But that feeling changed when the freighter shuddered violently as the engines roared to life.

Silence followed a gathering outside, and the worst: he tried to focus on breathing calmly, ignoring the many hands pounding against the hull.

The freighter hadn't lifted off. Catching himself looking out the dusty window in the corner of the main viewer, the creatures' shadows threw the perspective off and made him nervous.

He stood, paced and whispered to himself in a pressured manner. "Come on, get up in the air."

With a surge of adrenaline, he slammed his palm down on the console. "Time to go!"

The ship jerked forward and lifted off the ground with a jolt. Dazed for an instant, he skidded backward a few inches before coming to a halt.

Rodenko took the chance that the alien creatures might be distracted and move away from the ship and out in the open. So, he turned to the tactical console and prepared to fire. He felt the floor shudder beneath his feet as laser bolts slammed into some of those creatures, and he placed a hand on the panel to steady himself.

With a loud, angry screech, the freighter lurched up toward the sky, soaring through the air. The ground receded below. He stopped firing just as the nearby cannibal aliens were knocked over in a gust of exhaust fumes-filled wind.

Studiously he examined the images on the cracked main viewer. An orbital view of Equello's small moon took over most of the screen.

As the freighter glided into black space, he tapped into the communications panel so that he could record a subspace message.

After a short sequence of electronic tones, he touched a control surface and said, "Computer, record a message to Devro Ramsy of the Yograx Station. Encode the message for his eyes only."

"Recording," announced the computer.

"Hello, Devro," began Rodenko, his manner cordial, "I escaped that prison on Talazar. Yes, me. Infiltrator, the one and only. Alive and in need of help. Need I remind you that you owe me at least one concession. I am in an old Velonian freighter on a direct course for Yograx. It would be less than a two day's journey flying through hyperspace. And one more thing, Devro. Tell no one I am alive. I will see you when I see you. Infiltrator out."

In an effortless way, he deactivated the recording with a touch to the communications panel controls. A soft ping from the console informed him that the message was sent.

He leaned back in the helm seat and thought about his future, one that could be different.

I know I can convince that Yograx mechanic not tell about his encounter with me, he thought. If he did tell, nobody would believe him at all. And if someone did believe him, what would happen? The bounty hunters would be looking for Infiltrator, who he didn't look like

anymore. Nobody would be looking for Sky Rodenko. And if they did, he would kill them.

CHAPTER 54

Somewhere in the Non-Aligned Sector, the Vitrana freighter drifted with almost no motion near a sun and a cluster of white dwarf stars, which were nearing their death and glittering in the blackness of space. The jump into hyperspace had been impossible for Sky Rodenko. After the ship had gotten knocked out of hyperspace, he ran a diagnostic test of the hyperdrive generator. The freighter needed a new hyperdrive generator and possibly a new navigational computer too.

The lights in the helm were dark save for the ominous red spotlight above him. A growl of frustration rumbled deep in his throat as he pressed buttons on the panels. The freighter, pockmarked with age, felt like a floating coffin. A sense of inevitability washed over him. He'd known this was coming, but that didn't make it any easier to face.

Records showed there were some who'd survived long periods of time adrift in space. The problem was that it wasn't with their bodies, but neurologically their minds couldn't survive. Or was that vice versa? He couldn't concentrate on anything except that he was going to die. His face drained of its reddish-orange color, and he grimaced, slightly overwhelmed as that truth hit him soundly. He suppressed a shudder, closed his eyes, and leaned back in this seat. He wanted more time.

The maddening, lonely isolation of deep space was consuming him until a sound rumbled through the darkness. Has someone answered the distress call broadcast on all emergency frequencies? His eyes flew open and he turned his attention to the cracked main viewer. At this distance, squinting at the starry backdrop, he wasn't celebrating just yet.

"Why does that spaceship look familiar?" he asked himself aloud, his fingers drumming idly against the metal panel next to him in impatient rhythm. "Was he dreaming or suffering from space sickness?"

The freighter's sensors could do no more than doll out the minimum of details of spaceship shape and size; but that small bit was enough to make him seem enormous. He knew he was not dreaming.

That ship belongs to the "SpaceWoman," he thought. The shape of that ship was burned into his memory.

The hatch to the helm opened in front of him. He turned his head for a sideways look at the Mayorfant who climbed

through. Her long shadow fell across the floor. He didn't bother to rise.

There, right before his eyes stood the "SpaceWoman." Up close and personal, there was something strange about her, quick eyes taking in everything in sight with a kind of wonder and awe. Yet she looked like the personification of femininity in her mostly black outfit. Her veil cascaded down onto her shoulders, while her wistful expression was touched by a profound curiosity. It was not touched by or mingled with fear. Whatever he'd expected, it wasn't what he was seeing.

Why was she feverishly waving at him? Did she think he couldn't see? Despite her edgy reaction to him, he was glad that she had come to rescue him. He'd been alone for so long, which had left him more desperate than he cared to admit. The bottom line was he needed her, he was convinced, he needed the help that only she could provide.

Then, she stopped waving and said: "I am a Captain Neruda. A Mayorfant. I picked up your distress signal and realized you were close by. I am prepared to assist you."

Rodenko let out an audible breath, eyes narrowing just a little, unsure if he should thank her. "The hyperdrive of this freighter was damaged beyond repair, and other systems were subject to malfunctions, and burnouts, leaving me unable to continue and drifting helplessly. It is only a matter of time before a dwarf star will smash into it."

"I am on a routine flight survey mission to the Farath Cluster," she said. "There is no rush to get there. Come onto my starship. I will take you wherever you want to go."

He settled for a nod, stood and followed Neruda out of the freighter, and onto the starship. The maintenance droid escorted him to guest quarters.

“I hope you have some spare clothes,” he said in an anxious tone. “It is about time I change out of this Vitrana Security, ridiculous black robe with gold cords looping over my shoulder. These were the only clothes I could find that would fit.”

The droid gestured over toward the cabin, a questioning expression on its face, then left.

Seated on the bridge, Captain Neruda eased the controls to move the ship forward. Easing back in the chair, she still felt the thrill that came with the command of a starship.

The door opened and Rodenko came onto the bridge. He wore all black, which included a long-sleeved top, tight fitted pants and boots.

“I am not ready to sleep just yet,” he said, piercing the silence. “My name is Sky Rodenko, and it is a pleasure to know you.”

Captain Neruda turned in her chair, tilted her head with a compassionate glint in her eyes. “The pleasure is all mine. Speaking of sleep, my first officer is asleep in her quarters. You will meet Welby soon enough, but your main focus needs to be on deciding where I should take you.”

Now, standing only feet from her, clasping his hands together, looking at her with an impassive face, not saying a word. What was he supposed to say? If only she knew that he had once planned to interrogate her. Would she be frightened that he’d spent time in prison? All those days on

Talazar — those long, empty stretches of time he asked himself what was he doing there? He had searched for the mistakes he was certain that he had made, replaying the decisions he had made and the actions he had taken that had brought him there.

Searching her face, the knot of tension in him loosened as the silence stretched between them. He experienced a peculiar sensation, and a warmth filled him. It was as though he had always known her; as though he knew everything that was necessary to know about her.

He ran a hand over his clean-shaven face and nodded to her. “I am out of a job. And I am clueless about where to go next.”

“Z’arva is the perfect place for someone like you,” she said with a twinkle. “Have you heard of the Hantavants?”

A chill washed over him. “What?”

There was no way he was going to admit that Z’arva was the planet where he had been arrested by Hantavants. He didn’t want to jeopardize the prospect of them becoming friends. Above all else, he liked the way her eyes reflected him, and the way her voice reached out to him. It put him at ease and filled up the emptiness inside of him.

“Most Mayorfants prefer not to travel beyond Sakros, unlike our cousin race the Hantavants who are industrial pioneers and welcoming to visitors. As a favor to me, they would give you a job building spaceships.”

“Then Z’arva it is,” replied Rodenko with an answering twinkle.

“I have entered the coordinates,” said Neruda. “When we get there I will introduce you to Chancellor Oshudis.”

The bridge door slid open, and Welby entered the deck, staring at Sky Rodenko, confused. “Who might you be?”

CHAPTER 55

Several days later Neruda's starship leveled out high above the planet Z'arva, ascending through the atmosphere. She was in her accustomed high-backed seat at the center of a dimly lit bridge, listening to the deep thrumming of the engines.

The image of the receding planet on the viewscreen faded, to be replaced by a figure — a Praloon — standing in what to Neruda looked to be a hangar full of spaceships. Sky Rodenko's intense eyes were on her, to the point that he seemed livid about something.

"Greetings, Captain," he crackled, cutting through all the buzz of the atmospheric static. "I just laid down credits for the fastest spacecraft likely to be found on Z'arva, perhaps one of only a select few that had been designed especially for me."

She curled her lips into a half-smile. “That is wonderful news.”

He felt the urge to say. “And I owe it all to you. The automatic piloting system alone is beyond anything I ever imagined. I have never owned something so fancy before.”

“Once I am back on Sakros’ soil, I will take you on a massive tour of Vago and introduce you to my family,” she said. “You could come over in your new spacecraft — that would be good, yes?”

“You can definitely count on that!” Rodenko answered gleefully. “I am sure we would have a grand time.”

“Until then,” she said, sighing contentedly.

“Sky Rodenko out.”

The viewscreen crackled with static and then went blank.

First Officer Welby strode onto the bridge. Her sleek black veil was loose in the back. She descended to the center of the bridge to stand behind the captain’s seat, which stood up in a point like that of a papal chair, yet not so high that Neruda couldn’t tilt her head back.

“The droid tore a small hole in my veil after getting its hand stuck in it,” Welby said, and turned her head. “See for yourself.”

After a quick glance over her shoulder, Neruda had to stifle a laugh with her hands. “My, how did that happen?”

“It is a long story, my captain,” she said and strutted confidently across the floor to her station.

The viewscreen lit up as they cruised quietly in space. In the far distance they could see three Patrol-Force United

battleships. The captain and her first officer ignored them altogether. Neruda's fingers tapped against the control panel and made the turn toward the jump point.

A day and a half later, the reverberating sound of the engines shook the walls of the bridge as the starship came out of hyperspace. The Mayorfant starship drifted into the uncharted Farath Cluster, passing a small uninhabitable planet, without the appearance of an atmosphere, orbiting a low mass red dwarf star.

A millennia ago, this system was the site of a storm of almost inconceivable proportions. Prior to their arrival here, they knew a couple of planets had been vaporized, while the remaining planets were deadly radioactive wastelands. In short, Neruda had designed this limited duration, scientific discovery mission of a research-oriented nature of this galaxy. The maintenance droid was to collect all images and data from the Farath Cluster and transmit it back to the Sakros Institute of Science and Space Technology located in the city of Falfa.

Neruda was staring intently at the viewscreen, a quirky expression on her face. Additionally, she was tapping her hand on a status indicator button, blinking her eyes open.

"Radioactive turbulence is causing a few navigational glitches," reported Welby, leaning over a terminal.

"Noted, but no cause for alarm," said her captain.

Neruda's eyes were glued to the viewscreen. Something was moving in the distance, far off to left. From her vantage point, it had to be a spaceship, not a star. For the second

time, she was staring down at her console. Sensors didn't pick up anything, possibly because of the cosmic radiation.

An electrical flash discharged in the corner of the viewscreen and made Neruda do a double take. Another shaft of light withdrew from a stealth warship, just like the one that had ruined her first mission. Nervously, she leaned forward then back in her chair, as she remembered the time she'd encountered those intruders. One day, maybe, she'd find out who they were.

One day, but not this day. The captain didn't want to stick around and find out.

Terror gripped Welby's captain. She could not help but notice the oddly troubled, worried look on her face. Before she could say anything to snap her out of her trance, Neruda spoke in a rambling, conversational style.

"I must say that we have seen all there is to see here. Take the starship out of here, immediately! I plan to live longer than the twenty-four years I have already lived."

Studying the viewscreen, Welby completely understood her reasons and opened an intercom channel to the engine room. "Turn the ship around, away from that warship."

A whistle came back affirmative as the droid typed in commands.

To Neruda's great relief, there wasn't any pursuit. The Arachtors had either not seen them at all or didn't care to engage. Her breathing slowed and returned to a calm demeanor.

All in all, Neruda chalked this up as a daunting lesson. One that was crucial to her evolution, understanding of the

galaxy and her place within it. Life had a way of presenting challenges to push her limits. Physically and mentally, it took a lot of work to put a strong face on for her first officer. The decisions she made on this determined exactly what kind of captain she was going to be.

“Very good, then,” Neruda said, her teeth gleaming in the low light of the bridge. “Set a course for the Yograx Station in the Annexed Confederacy at maximum speed. We could use a little break.”

“As you wish, my Captain,” Welby said, smiling at her with sincerity.

CHAPTER 56

The Arachtor warship was idle in space. They had seen Neruda's starship after all, though they had pretended not to. By the same token, they had moved in perfect step with the Mayorfants' ship, watching from a reasonable distance.

Apparently stirred by this incomprehensible starship, Captain Bohk was lost in thought, staring straight at the viewscreen opposite him. It was easy to tell by his face that something was wrong in his perception about that ship.

"What do you make of that starship?" the captain asked, projecting hard, his purple-black exoskeleton illuminated by the light of his control panel.

"I have never seen anything like it," the first officer said, looking rather uncertain.

"Indeed, this is puzzling how the ship emerged out of nowhere," said the captain. "To my knowledge, no one

knows we are exploring the Farath Cluster? And yet ... someone knows? And that someone was watching us.”

“Who is that someone?” the helmsman asked, which earned him a stunned look from everyone on the bridge.

“My captain, if I may add,” said the second officer, as though the answer was obvious. “If my eyes are not failing me, I saw what looked like a spy ship. The flight pattern looked suspect to anyone who knows protocol droids.”

After a moment’s reflection, the green-colored stripe down the middle of the captain’s flat, bulbous forehead was trembling.

“I do not put it past the droids of Perennis Prime to commit a vile unhallowed thing such as this,” the captain groaned out.

“Who else would be capable of such treachery?” the second officer asked, leaning forward impulsively.

“That ship is out of range of our weapons,” Bohk said to his helmsman. “Follow the ship and destroy it! We will teach those foolish droids the dangers of poking around in our business.”

Then something improbable happened. Warning lights blinked on and off just as they were going to follow after them. And just as abruptly, the warship’s engines had gone offline, leaving them powerless with all weapons offline too. They couldn’t give chase.

The captain stood there with his mouth hanging open, watching the warning lights fade with dissatisfaction. And the warship began to drift within the atmosphere of a red dwarf star being orbited by a radioactive wasteland of a

planet completely devoid of all life. The gravitational pull dislodged hydrogen from the outer layers of the red dwarf star.

“Why is the ship moving backward? What happened to the engines? Can anyone still operate the controls?” Captain Bohk snarled at them, his side-mounted eyes in a state of alarm.

The first officer groaned and punched buttons on his console with his two forelimbs. There was nothing more frustrating than to lose control of their warship.

Waiting for a response, the captain was met with blank stares and silence. His mind was in a state of paralysis. Not to mention, his three-limbed body posture was like that when one is preparing to engage in a battle of sorts.

“What is wrong with all of you?” the Arachtor captain asked his crew and reared up on his hind leg. “Get this ship under control!”

At this crucial juncture, the first officer sought the captain’s gaze, who met his eyes with a stunned and anguished gaze. “We are flooded by sensor radiation. The ship is caught in that small planet’s gravitational flux.”

The helmsman grunted.

It took the captain a moment to realize what this meant. Wordlessly, he looked around the bridge.

Then he understood, sighed and looked away, as if he expected to find something there, then he turned back around toward his bridge crew, glancing at the blank faces around him.

In the face of inevitable doom, knowing that his time was short, Bohk relayed an audio message to the command center in the clans' Ovirmar headquarters on Garanay. The Arachtor captain explained how their mission had been compromised. Even he speculated that there was a droid spy ship tracking them in the Farath Cluster. And, lastly, that their warship was on a collision course with a red dwarf star.

The first officer read from his instruments. "The engines are coming back online."

"Full speed ahead," the captain said, overly anxious. "Get ready with a torpedo. Hit that starship with everything we have."

And still a vague, but persistent fear, troubled the first officer. It seemed to him that the warship could ride out the turbulence.

"Captain, I suggest—," the first officer said in an emotion-laden voice, which added to the Bohk's agony.

The captain's face flushed with anger. "No suggestions. No more wasting time! Maximum speed!"

Chittering noises came from the contingent of Arachtors on the bridge.

With its engines whining, the force of sudden bursts of acceleration and deceleration of the warship, loaded with a bunch of torpedoes, was placing a great stress on its hull. The engines were overloading.

And so, the warship continued to drift.

What happened next was beyond the Arachtors' wildest imagination. The hydrogen in the surrounding space was

ignited by engine flare. Then, with a flash, the Arachtor warship exploded in a blaze of particles and was gone.

CHAPTER 57

In the Yograx Station cantina, Lurai Sul sat alone at a wooden table with gold inlay closest to the bar. She was wallowing in her own self-pity, brooding over the credits she had spent to pay for removing the scorch marks off the hull of her spaceship. Here she was torturing herself, because she had tapped into her savings when she needed credits. It would be another couple of hours before the mechanic working on her ship would be finished.

Preoccupied again, she took a sip of her ale, looking too into the smoky air around the cantina.

Sky Rodenko felt eyes on him as he moved through the crowd. He blinked rapidly to focus — the room had been shrouded in shadows.

It was a bit of serendipity that he had taken a three-day leave from his work on Z'arva. He was looking for a little fun to counter the seriousness of his duties working

alongside engineers of spaceships. From experience, he felt that this was the best place for that.

Before Lurai had finished her meal she had begun to wonder why she was drawn to this Praloon. Something about him — he seemed familiar. He was looking at her and coming toward her table, smiling. Did she know him?

“Sky Rodenko,” he admitted freely, gave her a level look, looked around, then back to her. “The place is pretty crowded.”

She wore only the hint of a smile, narrowed her eyes, taking in Rodenko standing in front of her table. The man who was once Infiltrator had changed so much over the past weeks. His long sleeves were rolled up above his elbows, exposing reddish-orange skin baked to a golden tan from working under the sun’s glare. And his mouth was hard to see past his scruffy stubble. In a way, it was her fault she didn’t recognize him. Too quickly, she had written him off as dead.

“Lurai Sul,” she said. “You are welcome to take a seat.”

His face froze. That stung him, making him unsure of his next move. So, this was the famous bounty hunter, and he couldn’t believe how attractive she was. Who in the galaxy didn’t know her name? He had heard plenty about her, too, but had never seen her face before.

“Are you going to sit, or not?” she asked, startling him out of his thoughts.

“Yes,” he said, and seated himself at the table. “I would like that very much.”

The server droid beeped, signaling the completion of his order, then rolled away. They talked over drinks and food about lots of things. Not knowing how he'd react, she wasn't ready to tell him she was a bounty hunter. Except that the occasional glance told her Rodenko had more on his mind than revealing much about himself. What they did talk about was how being Praloon was important to them. And their love of their planet Tringsun.

Then, for a long time, their plates and tumblers were empty and she was just noticing. More than that, she could see that he was enjoying her adulation, but she had only just met him. After so short an acquaintance, she wasn't rushing into any relationship with him.

"Why, where has the time gone?" she asked, and stuck her hand across the table. "It was a real pleasure to have met you."

They clasped hands momentarily.

"You didn't tell me what you did for a living," she said and rose, about to turn away.

"Neither did you tell me what you did for a living," he countered mildly.

"True," she said. "Then we will save that conversation for another time."

He slumped back into his seat, watching her disappear into the crowd. His expression grew somber. He was aware that he had fallen for her too easily. What was the matter with him to think such a thing? It was quite clear that he could have no part in her life. If she ever found out who he

was, what he had been — he didn't want to be there to see the disgust in her eyes. He didn't want to hurt her.

Face it, Sky, a small voice whispered. *You would get hurt, too.*

“Let her go,” he whispered to himself. “You are no good for her.”

He took his eyes off his empty tumbler and glanced at her empty chair. There was a piece of fabric draped over the back of the chair. She had left her scarf behind! He picked it off for souvenir.

Settling back into his seat, he caught a perplexing glance from the Mayorfants who strolled into the cantina. Much to his surprise, it was Neruda and Welby. What was not surprising was that three Jarakans convinced Neruda, Welby, and Rodenko to gamble with them. At that, they happily took their seats at a circular gambling table with a roulette-like wheel.

When their game was wrapping up, Rodenko sensed a presence behind him. Before he could turn to look, woman's voice spoke.

“Sky Rodenko,” she said, interrupting from the back of them. “Give me my scarf.”

Lurai Sul was eyeing the scarf, which was folded neatly on the table beside him.

“I held onto it, expecting you to come back,” he said, grabbing her scarf and giving it to her. “And you did.”

Thoughts about leaving vanished when she caught his eye. Something told her to stay put.

It might be wrong of him, but something told him not to let her go.

With a wave Rodenko indicated that she should take the empty seat beside him. “Another game is about to start.”

“Deal me in,” she said with a sweet smile. “I have time for a game, or two.”

CHAPTER 58

All the fun had been exhausted from the Mayorfants first time in the cantina at Yograx Station. Practically three days after this, Captain Neruda's starship was approaching Sakros. Ahead of them, she eyed the planet's twin moons on the viewscreen. As the starship soared through the atmosphere and into the thin layer of clouds, the view of the sprawling city of Vago through the windows of the bridge gradually materialized. The sun had begun to sink below the horizon, its reflected rays filtering through the glass rooftop windows of the iconic spaceport in a warm, amber hue. The starship slowed now, followed the arrow-shaped lights on the hangar roofs from the north, then curled in to dock with a soft bump on the landing platform.

The landing ramp descended. Welby came trotting down, her veil flowing with each step. She was followed by Neruda, who had no one waiting to greet her.

“Sometime tomorrow I will bring you that spare part for the starship,” Welby yelled from the distance as she continued on her way to greet her family.

True to her word, on the following day Welby delivered the part to her at the Vago Spaceport and left right after that. She paused to look it over. It looked brand-new.

Neruda began to make her way to where the starship was when the sound of boots caught her attention. She turned around, wondering who could be coming up behind her. Beyond her, at the junction at the other end of a corridor, a Mayorfant child seemed to stand still, watching her intently. Not thinking anything of it, Neruda turned back the other way and started walking.

An instant later, again, came the sound of boot footfalls thudding on the floor. She stopped walking. And then she felt a light shove on her leg. Her soft chuckle had Neruda glancing her way.

“Are you Neruda?” her snappy voice was kind enough.

What was going on with her? She was standing right in front of the child now, looking down at a veiled Mayorfant no older than eight years, tiny black boots on her tiny feet.

“Yes, that is me,” Neruda said, and knelt down. “Are you lost? I can help you to find your parents.”

The child stepped back, as if she were nervous by their closeness. “Thank you, but no, I am not lost. My father is a maintenance worker of the spaceport. He keeps this place clean, tidy and beautiful. Every time I visit here, he lets me roam around, —”

“How can I be of help to you?” Neruda raised up and interrupted with a grin.

The child’s expression showed there was so much more she wanted to say, determination in the stubborn tilt of her jaw. “I have heard so much about you. And I wanted to tell you something.”

“What is it you want to tell me?” Neruda asked, ending with hesitation, noticing the way she looked at her.

“When I grow older, I want to be a SpaceWoman, just like you,” the child said, ending with a big smile, then closed her mouth with a peculiar compression of her lips.

Neruda’s eyes narrowed in thought as she contemplated the child’s tiny, pale white face with a rectangular shape imprinted on it. Her long, angular neck beneath her veil, which shimmered faintly under the spaceport’s lights. Under her gaze, she felt a sudden warmth flush through her body. Moreover, she could see the longing for the stars in the child’s eyes.

“SpaceWoman?” Neruda asked, seeming to like being called that. “I believe you meant to say, space traveler.”

“Oh, yes,” the child said with a giggle.

As she thought more on it, it became apparent to her that she’d taken a liking to being called SpaceWoman, and she continued carrying on about it. “No one, that I know of, has ever called me that before. But I think I could get used to being called Neruda the SpaceWoman. Or simply call me SpaceWoman. Which name do you prefer? Neruda the SpaceWoman or SpaceWoman?”

“SpaceWoman,” she exclaimed and half laughed rather loudly.

The child stifled another laugh and then looked around awkwardly in embarrassment at her outburst.

“You may call me SpaceWoman,” Neruda said. “What is your name?”

“My name is Tarsha.”

“I will be honest with you,” she said in a serious voice. “Deep space exploration can be deadly. How come you are not scared?”

“Well, I am not scared,” Tarsha replied as though fear was something she had never experienced before but then thought it through. “Maybe just a little scared. But I am willing to risk a lot when it comes to space travel. I am up for it. As long as I have an amazing crew backing me up.”

Neruda glanced at the starship docked in the distance. She turned her eyes back to the child.

“I must give this part to the maintenance droid aboard my starship,” Neruda said. “How about I give you a quick tour of my ship?”

“Definitely,” the child drew the word out purposefully, slowly, her half smile twitching at the corner with every lengthened syllable.

“Follow me,” Neruda said, nodding her understanding. “I will introduce you to the droid. And hurry along before your father finishes his shift. I will take you by a certain time to your designated meeting area. He will find you there and not worry about you.”

Tarsha nodded fervently. Her small hands were balled in fists as if she were showing her readiness to conquer the galaxy for herself.

CHAPTER 59

Android Commander Golo-DEX was in the control room, standing in back of his desk checking a couple of readouts on a console.

Shockwaves rippled through the Garynx Nebula and shook the station forcefully. Seven Arachtor warships streamed through the wormhole and headed straight for the station. The commander's knife-slit mouth turned into a frown of outrage across his white metal face.

"What is this?" the commander asked, coming around his desk and hurrying to the circular observation window.

Syn Dat interrupted his rounds in the command center and headed straight for the control room. The moment the doors slid open and he stepped inside, the commander pointed to the window, added with a sharp glance in his direction.

“Look there,” the commander said. “Are you seeing what I am seeing?”

In a most unusual way, Syn-Dat was awed by the sheer presence of the fleet. Each metallic silver and red striped massive hull ship in attack formation had a black spidery symbol painted on their underbellies.

“The Arachtors have a flair for the dramatic,” Syn Dat said, his photoreceptor eyes glowing sharply.

The wide viewer on the wall at the front of the room filled with a little burst of static. Golo-DEX eyed the image now captured on it. The Arachtor captain, positioned on the bridge of the flagship right in the center of the fleet arranged in a circular formation, filled it completely.

“I am Captain Lev-Vak, the Sire of the Ugro clan and brother of Zelnid, commanding this warship,” he said with a sardonic harrumph. “Give SpaceWoman up to us or we will open fire. Golo-DEX, you have ten minutes to consider these terms.”

The viewer cut back to a black screen.

This was no ordinary Arachtor warship captain. This arachnid was nefarious, as admired as he was feared. This was personal. Only revenge for his brother would bring him consolation.

It seemed like ages ago that Syn Dat believed Captain Zelnid and his crew had made off with the weapons of the transport that had left Draxis, taking control of the heist for themselves. Now he wasn't sure what to think.

Golo-Dex was genuinely furious now. He scowled and tapped commands on the console on his desk.

The commander made an announcement over the station's public-address system: "Red alert. Keep the stations locked down. Bring the shield generator up to full power. Target the flagship. If those warships come any closer to the station than necessary, their answer is going to be a proton-torpedo."

On the bridge of the Arachtor flagship, Lev-Vak's large, side-mounted eyes could plainly see proton-torpedo launchers, atop the primary hull of the main station, pointed at his warship. That sent his mind reeling with a paralyzing jumble of thoughts. And he couldn't hide his rising anxiety.

To even the odds, the Arachtor fleet moved up to a higher orbit.

"Stand by with torpedoes!" said the Arachtor captain.

On the bridge of the flagship, Lev-Vak paused for a moment until his second officer, beside the tactical console, signaled his readiness to proceed.

The viewer in the control room of Perennis Primes' main station came alive. Captain Lev-Vak appeared. Before he could say anything Golo-DEX interrupted.

"Captain, you have made a fatal mistake," the android commander's voice was laced with anger, but nervous at the same time. "We droids had no part in this sabotaging 'SpaceWoman' business. Did it ever occur to your tiny mind that the SpaceWoman's ship was a decoy maneuver of some type? That there never was a weapons cargo transport leaving Draxis. If there had been a transport, it left from another planet. You have five minutes to turn your warships around and leave our space!"

“Time is running out for you, commander,” Lev-Vak glowered, resentful and ordered. “An android vessel was spotted spying on our warship in the Farath Cluster before it exploded. Another one of our warships was inexplicably destroyed! How easy was it to rendezvous with the agent operating under the code-name ‘SpaceWoman?’ Give her to us, or we will fire!”

Arachtor Captain Lev-Vak squinted his side-mounted eyes, punched a button and the viewer went dark.

“No question about it, the Arachtors have lost their minds,” Syn Dat said, blinking his optical receptor.

“If the Arachtors want war, they can have that,” Golo-Dex announced over the station’s PA system. “Remain on standby to fire at my command.”

Aboard the Arachtor flagship, the captain gave a nod and his first officer tapped commands into a touch-sensitive console, which beeped as he entered the data.

The warships moved deeper into the purple-and-pink clouds of the nebula, closer to the stations.

“Fire on my command,” the Arachtor captain said, his spindly hind leg retracting.

The standoff had grown extraordinarily tense. There was no talk or hope of a diplomatic solution. Conflict was unavoidable.

“Time is up,” said Lev-Vak.

A proton-torpedo shot out from the launcher atop the primary hull of Perennis Prime’s main station and guided itself with precision toward the Arachtor flagship, where it struck their shields, not doing enough damage to suit Golo-

DEX. In doing this, the commander hoped the Arachtor contingent would make a hasty exit and return to Garanay.

Instead, the battle had begun. How well would Perennis Prime hold up against six Arachtor warships? Rocked by explosions, the galaxy was full of surprises like these.

Epilogue

The Sun had just dipped beneath the horizon of Sakros, casting the planet's surface in long, violet shadows. The sky was streaked with a silken haze of pink and orange as the twin moons, slowly climbed toward their zenith. The moons — one silver, the other tinged with a faint golden hue — lazily orbited, the symbiotic pull of their orbits.

Outside their home, Neruda was walking away until her mother's voice stopped her.

Turning around herself, Neruda's eyes narrowed as she glanced at her. "Farewell, mother."

"Your excursion into space, connecting with our cousins, the Hantavants again, has truly opened my mind. And now with your joining this expedition, I want you to tell me all about them when you return," her mother said, talking as they were walking along.

Her mother's sudden interest in her visits to the planet Z'arva really made her glad to be back on Sakros. She couldn't wait to fill her and the rest of her family in on her encounters with the Hantavants. Noticeably, her mother was wearing less accessories. It appeared her obsession with decorating their clothing with ornate objects was dissipating. As she left for the Vago Spaceport, she thought this was the right step of direction for her mother and hopefully the rest of the Mayorfant population.

Later that evening, Neruda's mother stood at the edge of the stone terrace of their home, a high perch overlooking the city of Vago. The air was thin here, clear and crisp, and she took in the cool evening air, her black veil catching the soft light of the two moons, her sharp eyes squinting slightly as she gazed upward. There was something in the sky — an unusual disturbance in the night's stillness.

Her pride caught in her throat as the realization hit her, that her daughter Neruda was part of this movement. A flutter of excitement, fear, and wonder all at once.

Three Mayorfant starships were in orbit. One of those ships was being commanded by Neruda. This was going to be the first long range diplomatic mission by the Mayorfants in hundreds of years. It was the mission to bring their civilization back in touch with members of the galaxy. And she couldn't be any prouder knowing her daughter was part of this.

Her breath caught as the fleet came into sharper focus. They glided silently, moving out of orbits and she headed back into her home.

“Course laid in for the jump point,” Neruda said from the captain’s chair.

On the flagship were members of the Grand Conclave of the Mayorfants, including their Grand Commander.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANN GREYSON is a multi-award-winning author whose recent novels include *Birdwatcher 2* and *Cowgirls & Indians*. She primarily writes science fiction and horror fiction novels, which are: *Birdwatcher*, *Gotham Kitty*, *The Lonely Vampire*, and *Never-DEAD*. Her binge-worthy novels, which are packed with memorable characters, drawing inspirations from her acting and dance background.

Ann portrayed the SpaceWoman character in the *SpaceWoman: Light-years Apart* short television program broadcast on Manhattan Neighborhood Network's Lifestyle Channel 2 in 2019. Among the short TV programs, she acts in include: a series of annosaur jewelry commercials featuring the SpaceWoman story; and the Super CRAZY Fan series for which she is the creator.

Characters she has portrayed can be seen in many cinematic book trailers advertising her books: *Birdwatcher 2*, *Birdwatcher*, *Gotham Kitty*, *The Lonely Vampire* and *Never-DEAD*, all of which have exploded into multimedia franchises. Additionally, she sings and acts in the music videos: *Shine*, *O Christmas Tree*, *House of the Rising Sun*, *Motherless Child*, and *Buffalo Gals*.

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